



# GIRL IN THE SONG

THE TRUE STORY

*of a young woman who lost her way—  
and the miracle that led her home*

CHRISSY CYMBALA TOLEDO

Over the years I have had the honor not only to participate in the Brooklyn Tabernacle's services but to enjoy the kindness, inspiring friendship, and love of the Cymbalas. They are a unique family. I wholeheartedly commend their daughter Chrissy for her courage and desire to share her tender and difficult story. Yet, as she writes, it is not really her story—but rather God's story. He is the Grand Weaver who knows our frayed threads that we seek to hide and unravel, which He alone is able to knit together into a beautiful tapestry as we surrender to Him. I believe you will be both touched and challenged by her deeply moving book. I truly believe it can be a life changer for many.

DR. RAVI ZACHARIAS

Author and speaker

In *Girl in the Song*, Chrissy Cymbala Toledo engages us with a transformative truth: The purpose of God is greater than the brokenness of man. As her journey depicts, God does great things with broken pieces.

REV. DR. SAMUEL RODRIGUEZ

President, NHCLC/Conela Hispanic Evangelical Association

Beautiful girl, beautiful story! I respect Chrissy's parents, Jim and Carol, and I wholeheartedly believe in the power of prayer and good parents. I am so proud of Chrissy, and I believe that many ministers should tune in to how their kids view God and the church!

NICKY CRUZ

Evangelist and author of *Run, Baby, Run*

An amazing tale of redemption and light breaking through darkness. Chrissy Cymbala Toledo's story of spiritual transformation is an inspiration to us all.

**DR. ROBERT JEFFRESS**

Senior pastor, First Baptist Church, Dallas, TX

*Girl in the Song* is a book for anyone who has ever yearned for true love and acceptance. As you experience the music God is writing through Chrissy's story and yours, you'll sense His hand on your own life and draw closer to His heart.

**LIONEL HOLLINS**

Head coach, Brooklyn Nets

*Girl in the Song* offers much-needed hope and encouragement. It's the story of what happens when God moves people to pray. It's a story of redemption, grace, and love. Chrissy's journey will bless you, and in the process, God may prompt you to get another copy for someone else who has lost their way.

**MICHAEL CATT**

Senior pastor, Sherwood Baptist Church, and executive producer,  
Sherwood Pictures

A compelling, must-read story that will touch your heart. With beauty and vulnerability, Chrissy Cymbala Toledo shares what it means to be lost and found again, and how the power of grace can redeem any situation.

**DARLENE ZSCHECH**

Senior pastor, Hope Unlimited Church

We all have chapters in our lives we'd rather not disclose. Everybody has to contend with his or her own personal version of a sinful heart. Everybody. Chrissy Toledo combines great courage and humble transparency in sharing her story. She offers hope to people who want to exchange theirs for a new heart from God.

**PAUL WESTPHAL**

Assistant coach, Brooklyn Nets

In this book Chrissy Cymbala Toledo details her “run away from God” days and the faithful love of her parents. They never gave up and neither did the church! Chrissy found her way back and now she and her husband have been instrumental in helping to lead a spiritual turnaround for thousands of people. All of us find a piece of ourselves in Chrissy's story.

**RICH WILKERSON SR.**

Lead pastor, TrinityChurch.TV, Miami, FL

Intimate and emotionally compelling, *Girl in the Song* is the page-turning story of one woman's journey to discover her true self—and the God who loved her through it all.

**DR. TONY EVANS**

Senior pastor, Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship, and president,  
The Urban Alternative



## **GIRL IN THE SONG**



# GIRL IN THE SONG

THE TRUE STORY  
*of a young woman who lost her way—  
and the miracle that led her home*

**CHRISSY CYMBALA TOLEDO**



**TYNDALE®  
MOMENTUM**

*An Imprint of  
Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.*

Visit Tyndale online at [www.tyndale.com](http://www.tyndale.com).

Visit Tyndale Momentum online at [www.tyndalemomentum.com](http://www.tyndalemomentum.com).

*Tyndale Momentum* and the Tyndale Momentum logo are registered trademarks of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc. Tyndale Momentum is an imprint of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois.

*Girl in the Song: The True Story of a Young Woman Who Lost Her Way—and the Miracle That Led Her Home*

Copyright © 2015 by Chrissy Cymbala Toledo. All rights reserved.

Cover photograph copyright © Jovana Rikalo/Stocksy.com. All rights reserved.

Author photograph copyright © Ozzy Cardenas. All rights reserved.

Designed by Jennifer Ghionzoli

Edited by Bonne Steffen

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

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from the *Holy Bible*, King James Version.

Scripture quotations marked NLT are taken from the *Holy Bible*, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2007, 2013 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

Some names have been changed for the privacy of the individuals involved.

---

### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Toledo, Chrissy Cymbala.

Girl in the song : the true story of a young woman who lost her way—and the miracle that led her home / Chrissy Cymbala Toledo.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-4143-7863-3 (sc : alk. paper) 1. Toledo, Chrissy Cymbala. 2. Christian biography—United States. I. Title.

BR1725.T58A3 2015

277.3'083092—dc23

[B]

2015013279

---

Printed in the United States of America

21 20 19 18 17 16 15  
7 6 5 4 3 2 1



## FOREWORD

**EVERY LIFE HAS ITS SHARE OF TWISTS AND TURNS.** I was a young businessman working for an airline company, newly married with my first child, when I answered the call to full-time ministry. With neither formal training nor ministry experience, my wife Carol and I took over a struggling church in downtown Brooklyn. For the next twenty years we spent our lives helping people, many of whom were ravaged by pain and bound by inner turmoil.

How that pain surfaces in the midst of life's emotional storms can often be ugly and difficult to deal with. Though it felt like an uphill struggle, we soon began to see remarkable breakthroughs as people's lives were transformed by the power of Jesus. Witnessing such changes encouraged us to keep going.

In the midst of helping others, we were taken by surprise the moment a chaotic storm engulfed our own family. Though I touched on my experience with our daughter Chrissy in my book *Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire*, I didn't feel at liberty to disclose everything that occurred during those tumultuous years.

What you are about to read is Chrissy's story, a behind-the-scenes look at a young girl who was surrounded by people

## GIRL IN THE SONG

who loved her, yet fell prey to influences that threatened to tear her apart.

As a pastor, I would like to encourage anyone who wonders whether there is something more to life than the latest relationship to open her heart as she reads the story Chrissy has to tell. As a father, I want to urge parents who are tempted to lose hope for a child to read Chrissy's story before concluding there are limits to what God can do.

Whatever your situation, whether it is hard or easy right now, I hope *Girl in the Song* will help you face life's storms in ways that will bring you peace and make you strong.

*Pastor Jim Cymbala*  
*Brooklyn Tabernacle*

## PROLOGUE

I DIDN'T WANT TO LOOK IN THE MIRROR—I loathed the person who stared back. She was selfish and ungrateful and had blown it over and over again. Her decisions over these past years had created a deep crevasse between her and the people who loved her.

*Will there ever be peace between us again?* I wondered. As I hurried to finish in the bathroom and get ready for bed, I tried to forget what had happened with my parents. There were moments when I could push it all out of my mind, but then I would be squeezed by such loneliness that I wanted to cry out.

I was certainly grateful for one thing—I had a safe place to live, a generous offer from a dear friend. Before leaving this evening, Lorna had made sure I had everything I needed, mentioning that there was plenty of food in the kitchen. The house was so quiet without her lively personality filling the rooms.

I lay in bed, trying to sleep, but my emotions wouldn't let me, cresting and plunging like a roller coaster. When I finally closed my eyes, it seemed that something changed in the room, but I couldn't say exactly what. I reopened my eyes and glanced around to my right, my left . . . and then there, at the foot of

## GIRL IN THE SONG

the bed, I spied something shadowy. It didn't have a body like a person or any facial features that I could make out. Standing there in the bedroom, the shape was so much blacker than the darkness of the room that it was visible. I sensed it was looking at me.

I didn't know what was going to happen next. My life had once been wonderful, with so much to look forward to. How had things gone so terribly wrong?

## CHAPTER

# 1

IT WAS 9 P.M. and I looked up at my dad as we walked down a dark, dismal block of Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn, New York. Even at four years old, I noticed that he looked much different from most of the people we passed—Dad was clean-shaven, well dressed, with nice-smelling cologne. I was oblivious to the sadness that surrounded me.

“Daddy, wait a minute. One of my shoes got unbuckled.”

My dad apprehensively let my hand go but didn’t take his eyes off of me, not even for a second. I bent down over my dark blue kneesocks, smiling as I reached for my shoes. They were bright red, and they were my favorite thing, more important than any doll or toy I had. I took my time buckling the strap, admiring the shoes for just a bit too long.

Dad gently pulled me by the hand. “Ready?”

“Yes, Daddy, I did it myself. See?”

We continued down the street, and I giggled as he squeezed my hand three times. It was our secret way of saying I. LOVE. YOU. I would squeeze his hand three times too. Back and forth, back and forth, we’d talk in our special code. The concrete pavement was cracked and bumpy under my feet, and I made a game out of trying not to step on the cracks.

The rumbling sound of the subway under my red shoes was, in part, the music of the streets. A strong burst of air whooshed up through the grate as a train passed underground, blowing my fine blonde hair over my eyes. Dad gently swept my hair off my face so that I could see.

At that moment, I caught a whiff of the odor that always made me wrinkle my nose. I didn’t know that the pungent smell was mostly from urine. I didn’t think much about why there was loose, smelly garbage on the sidewalk. I just made sure I didn’t step on anything. The sights and sounds of the city were just an indication to me that we were close . . . close to the center of my world.

I looked across the street and saw the lady who always stood in the same place under the streetlight. She wore lots of makeup and sparkly clothes and was always talking to a man through the window of his car. When I turned to look back and saw her get into the car, I wondered, *Where is she always going?*

Before I could ask my dad, someone shouted from farther down the block. I recognized his voice right away, but I couldn’t understand what he was saying.

“Oh no, Daddy, *he’s* waiting for you again!”

We continued down the street, and I pulled on Dad’s arm.

“What do you think he wants tonight, Daddy?”

As we got closer, I could see the man struggling to get up from the cardboard mat that was sliding underneath him.

“Father, Father!” he shouted, his words seeming to mush together.

He had a bottle clutched tightly in one hand while he tried to raise the other, hoping to get my dad’s attention

*Father?* I thought.

“Daddy, *you’re* not his father!” I exclaimed.

He looked at me and just smiled.

Kneeling down next to the man, Dad laughed and said, “I’m a pastor, not a priest.” Even though it wasn’t cold out, the man was shaking. Daddy talked quietly to him. “Hey, my friend, you’re not looking so good tonight.”

Dad’s blue eyes filled with tenderness met the man’s blood-shot gaze. He reached over and touched the man’s shoulder, which I thought looked really dirty.

“Would you come see me in the morning?”

The man didn’t respond. Instead, he laid his head back down on his paper bag pillow, holding the empty bottle to his chest. I could see that Daddy was really sad, and it made me sad too. He was kind to everyone, especially people that others wanted to hurry by. Dad always looked at hurting people with so much love in his eyes. Maybe it was because he grew up in a home watching his own father’s hands tremble.

“Come here, Chrissy,” Grandpa would say with his arms out, unable to keep from shaking because of his drunkenness.

I never wanted to be near Grandpa, and I surely didn’t want

to give him a hug. I cringed when he would set me on his knee, trying to still himself enough to talk to me. He would lean his face close to mine, and I would squirm and turn my head away because I didn't like the smell of his breath.

"Grandma, where are you?" I would call out, hoping she would come get me. But my attempt at a rescue only seemed to make Grandpa hold me tighter.

No matter what Grandpa said or did, Grandma's response was always caring and considerate. When he raised his voice, she would answer him quietly. Year after year, she saw beyond what things were and believed that change would come. What I didn't know at that age was that sometimes Grandma had to call my dad in the middle of the night because Grandpa had struck her and she was hurt badly. My dad had grown up living with an abusive father and watching his mother endure through the hardest times without becoming bitter. Even though she had every reason to leave Grandpa, she never did.

As an escape from the turmoil at home, Dad spent the majority of his days on some of the worst playgrounds in the city because that's where the best basketball was. Playing ball in the fifties, he quickly learned how to get along with all kinds of people and ended up creating a whole new world outside of his home. Little did he know that he was being shaped to have a heart for the people in the neighborhood that his little church would be in one day.

It looked to me as though the man on the ground had fallen asleep, so I tugged at Dad's sleeve. He slowly stepped away and pulled keys out of his pocket. The dim light above the sign that

read BROOKLYN GOSPEL TABERNACLE cast a long shadow on the sidewalk that I loved to step on. *Click, click* . . . the first and second locks opened and Dad switched on the light. I reached down to scoop up the scattered envelopes that had been pushed through the slot in the door.

“I’ve got the mail, Daddy!” I said and ran up the stairs, leaving him behind.

“I’ll turn on the lights in your office, too!” I shouted through the railing.

Running my hands along the faded light blue walls, I inhaled the mouthwatering aroma that lingered from dinners that had been cooked that night in the apartments above our small church sanctuary. I loved those meals just as much as the ones Mom made for us. One of the tenants, Rina, was Filipino and made egg rolls, and the Ali family, who were from Trinidad, ate delicious roti stuffed with curried chicken. I reached the second floor, wondering who might be awake.

Skipping loudly through the hallway and into Dad’s office, I was hoping someone would peek out of an apartment door and notice I was there. I flipped on the light switch, set the mail on my dad’s desk, then plopped onto the green vinyl chair against the paneled wall, noticing that my red shoes were a bit scuffed from skipping on the sidewalk.

When Dad came in, he dropped our overnight bags on the floor and sat in his desk chair, shuffling through the pile of envelopes. For whatever reason, he always looked worried when he opened the mail. I licked my fingers and was trying to rub the scuff marks off my shoes when the picture hanging on the wall caught my attention, just as it always did.

It was a painting of Jesus standing next to a building as tall as a skyscraper. Jesus was as big as the building and was knocking on the windows. I had talked about it several times with Dad.

“Daddy, that looks like Jesus knocking on a building in New York.”

“It does. Jesus really cares for the people in this city,” he said, opening one envelope after another.

My gaze wandered from the painting to Dad. I loved him so much, and he made me feel so special when I was with him. I never wanted to be anywhere but by his side.

“Where’s my *lee-tal* girl?” I heard Rina call out in her heavy Filipino accent from the apartment down the hall.

“Rina!” I jumped up from my chair and ran out to greet her. Wrapping my arms around her hips, I hugged her tightly as she pulled me into her kitchen.

“Come in, I will give you some snacks.” Barely five feet tall, she wore a floral print housedress and slippers, and her thick dark brown hair was tied up in a bun. As usual, her kitchen counter was filled with cookies and other treats she’d bought in Chinatown.

“Ooh, can I have some pineapple juice with my cookies, Rina?”

“Of course, my leetal princess,” she answered.

Rina and her husband always kept a guest room ready for us, with a bed for Dad to sleep in as well as a makeshift bed for me on the floor. I loved staying overnight at Rina’s when Dad decided to work late because it was such an adventure. I would run all over the building, exploring every corner. And even better, I got to be with Rina, a person I adored.

I finished up my snacks, changed into my cozy pajamas, and lay down on the fluffy blanket that was spread out on the worn shag carpet. Rina shuffled into the room and kissed me good-night, turning off the lights so that I could settle in. I lay there in the dark listening to the noise coming through the slightly opened window—far-off sirens, honking horns, and blaring music blended together, sounding like a crazy song. Starting to doze off, I heard laughter—Rina and her husband were talking in the kitchen. I loved my world.

As I slept, Dad would usually work late, sitting alone in his office down the hall. The reality of what he faced every day as the pastor of this church must have crowded his mind. The problems seemed somehow veiled when I was with him—his distraction, a four-year-old girl who loved being with her daddy. But now, in the stillness, pangs of doubt must have entered his thoughts. It had been almost a year since he'd resigned from a promising career at American Airlines to take this church in an area where heroin was as easy to buy as a carton of milk.

There was absolutely nothing appealing about the neighborhood or the building that might draw people to this place. The Brooklyn Tabernacle was not in a good situation. Collections taken on Sundays were sometimes stolen before they could be counted and the few people who attended could barely support themselves, let alone a struggling church. The wood-like paneled walls of that second floor office must have felt like they were closing in on Dad that night. To me this was an adventure; not so for him.

Suddenly on this night I woke up, startled by screaming

## GIRL IN THE SONG

sirens speeding by the building. I looked toward the empty guest bed. *Where's Daddy?* I got up and tiptoed through the kitchen, then out into the hallway. A small light shone from the office, the door slightly ajar. I quietly approached, peeked through the opening, and saw something that was not unusual to me. Dad was praying. But he was not just praying . . . he was listening. Even as a little girl, I knew that's what he was doing because his eyes were closed and his face looked like someone who was looking at something beautiful.

## MESSAGE FROM CHRISSEY TO YOU . . .

Sitting in a softly lit coffee shop a few miles from my home right now, I can almost hear the music and worship from that concert so many years ago. As I come to the end of my story, I am so excited to finally be able to talk to you. I wish we were face to face. Although I don't know your name, I have been praying for you. I've been praying not just because I love you but because of how precious you are to God.

It's not an accident that you read this story . . . whether someone gave it to you as a gift, or you purchased it yourself. I believe God wanted your attention. You see, this really isn't my story—it's God's story . . . of how He can step into a person's life and make a transformation so great that the person will never be the same again. It's amazing to think that God is the one who created us and He knew us before we even came into this world. He formed us even in the darkness of our mother's womb.

I don't know where this finds you today, but if you feel something gripping your heart right now, it's not the book. It's not me. It's God's Holy Spirit. He's reaching toward you and He's calling your name, wanting to draw close to you. Maybe you've been running for so long, trying so many different things, in and out of bad relationships, and you find yourself like I was . . . with a tired heart.

Jesus wants to enter your tired heart today, and He wants you to experience a love unlike anything you've ever known. His love is faithful, His love is unconditional, and His love tells you every day that you're good enough for Him. If you feel right now that this book was God's note to you—just like the note that was given to my dad at that Tuesday night prayer meeting—and you want to see a miracle happen in your life, I want you to pray with me. I'm going to start the prayer and you can finish it, but if it's at all possible, go someplace where you can be alone. I'll wait. Go now.

I'm going to start the prayer with you right now, and then I want you to finish it. Whether you are on your knees or sitting in a chair, I want you to talk to God out loud and tell Him how you're feeling, the same way I did when I prayed that morning with Lorna. It's okay to cry because God wants you to come to Him just the way you are. Pray with me . . .

*Dear Jesus, I'm coming to you because I really need you right now. If you are real, please do a miracle for me just like You did for Chrissy. I invite You into my heart. I need You to come into my heart and . . .*

I'm praising God right now because if you prayed that prayer, I just know that He's already doing far beyond what you could ever imagine. He loves you. Remember, nothing is impossible with God.

*If you just prayed that prayer,  
go to [chrissytoledo.com](http://chrissytoledo.com) for next steps.*