

PRAISE FOR
Maria's Scarf

“Sometimes, we need to see how someone overcomes the obstacles in their life to muster up the courage necessary to meet our own. *Maria's Scarf* is a portrait of courage that will inspire dreamers, both young and old. A timely immigrant story of a family pursuing the American dream. You'll be thinking about these heartbreaking, hilarious, and harrowing adventures long after you put the book down!”

—JOYCE MEYER, *New York Times* bestselling author

“Both Zoro and I were blessed to live our dreams. *Maria's Scarf* will inspire you to never give up on yours.”

—FRANKIE VALLI,
lead vocalist of Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons
and cocreator of *Jersey Boys*, the Broadway musical

“I can't recall ever reading a book when I just wanted to stand up and cheer again and again, but that's how Zoro's memoir affected me. If I could, I would give this book to every young person in the world.”

—HOMER HICKAM,
New York Times bestselling author of *October Sky*

“Zoro's beautiful and touching memoir, *Maria's Scarf*, is a testament to the strength and tenacity of the human spirit.”

—COUNTESS LUANN DE LESSEPS,
original cast member of *The Real Housewives of New York City*

**“Captivating . . . exhilarating . . . inspiring . . . riveting . . .
An eight-course meal with dessert! Bravo, Zoro!”**

—DYAN CANNON,
three-time Academy Award–nominated actress

“Engaging and evocative, *Maria’s Scarf* is a glorious portrayal of the poignancy of love, one that kept me turning each page. A magical story filled with surprise and delight, this unforgettable memoir serves as a testament to the power of a mother’s love and one boy’s sheer determination. Every mother who has dreams for her children needs to read this!”

–MELISSA RIVERS,

actress, producer, and television host of *Fashion Police* on E!

“Filled with wit, wisdom, grit, and glory, *Maria’s Scarf* will leave you with a hopeful sense of possibility and the desire to rock the world in your own way!”

–ALEX VAN HALEN,

drummer and cofounder of the rock band Van Halen

“Zoro’s memoir will make you smile. The story captures what it means to love hard, stay true to a dream, overcome huge obstacles, and reach for the stars. Like the author himself, *Maria’s Scarf* is triumphant in spirit, full of heart.”

–MARCUS BROTHERTON,

New York Times bestselling author of *The Long March Home*

“Zoro and our lifelong customer, Elvis Presley, were cut from the same cloth . . . Zoro’s book pays tribute to the heroes who shaped his life in such a beautiful and honoring way that you can feel the love seeping off the pages. Elvis would have loved Zoro and this book!”

–HAL LANSKY,

third-generation owner of Lansky Bros.,
known as the Clothier to the King

“This inspiring story will open hearts, fuel hopes, and restore faith for readers across multiple generations, backgrounds, and beliefs . . . *Maria’s Scarf* is the kind of uplifting story you’ll want to read and discuss with everyone you know. The absolute must-read of the year.”

—JULIE CANTRELL,

New York Times and *USA Today* bestselling author

“With whip-smart prose and a talent for telling stories, *Zoro* catapults us into the world of music, but he also takes us on a journey of growing up and what it means to be a family. He captures his childhood as a dreamer that is authentic and pulses like a pattern of drum beats. *Maria’s Scarf* is a generous and moving story of sacrifice, family, and hope.”

—MELISSA CISTARO,

award-winning author of *Pieces of My Mother*

“*Maria’s Scarf* is the funny, touching, and inspiring story of a mother whose unending love . . . gave her son the faith and courage to relentlessly pursue his impossible dream.”

—MICHAEL HAUGE,

author of *Writing Screenplays That Sell* and *Storytelling Made Easy*

“*Zoro’s* memoir reads like compelling fiction—a living testament to how love can nurture the soul for triumph amid life’s deep difficulties.”

—LAURA MUNSON,

New York Times and *USA Today* bestselling author

“Much like his drumming, Zoro’s memoir is filled with heart and soul and captures the rhythm of a life filled with adversity, adventure, and ascension. Through his unforgettable journey, he shows us all how to become a shining star. A deeply affecting book about overcoming the odds that will make your heart sing.”

—VERDINE WHITE,
founding member and bassist of Earth, Wind & Fire

“One of the best books I’ve read in years. Uplifting, hilarious, heartbreaking, and heartwarming, *Maria’s Scarf* is a revelation. A love letter to those who love us unconditionally.”

—TOSCA LEE,
New York Times bestselling author

“*Maria’s Scarf* is an overcoming family saga of epic proportions, brimming with heart and soul, joy and pain, tribulation and triumph. The book is real at every level.”

—JAY SEKULOW,
Chief Counsel for the American Center for Law & Justice

“This book had me laughing and crying, sometimes on the same page, but is more than a memoir. With its cinematic splendor, *Maria’s Scarf* is a movie that calls to be made—one that will inspire millions.”

—JIMMY STEINFELDT, legendary rock photographer

“You quickly fall in love with these characters. All the elements of a visual story leap off the page at you with every turn. It’s *Whiplash* meets *Rocky* meets *The Blindside* . . . with the heart of *Forrest Gump*. A must-read . . . and hopefully soon a must-see as well.”

—RICK ELDRIDGE,
CEO/producer, ReelWorks Studios

“Although I make my living with words, I find myself at a loss for words to express how amazing *Zoro’s* story is. At times, it is hilarious; at other times, heartbreaking; at all times, deeply and beautifully human. I have never read anything like it.”

—KEN GIRE, author of *Windows of the Soul*

“*Maria’s Scarf* is emotional and inspiring. I couldn’t put it down!”

—GARY BRYAN,
K-EARTH 101 Radio, Los Angeles

“If you have ever doubted the power to become what you dream despite your circumstances, then read *Maria’s Scarf*. The American dream comes alive in this wonderfully poignant and exquisitely written account of how an immigrant mother’s faith and fortitude transforms the lives of her children. You’ll be singing the Hallelujah chorus at the end!”

—JOE BATTAGLIA,
president of Renaissance Communications
and author of *Make America Good Again*

“A must-read for anyone who has lived, loved, lost, and knew there was something greater waiting for them.”

—CATHY RICH,
vocalist, producer, and daughter of Buddy Rich,
the world’s greatest drummer

“This story is for all who dream. It’s for all who have felt shut out and let down; it’s for all who have been buoyed up by someone who unrelentingly kept a candle of faith and hope lit.”

—KIM DORR-TILLEY,
Hollywood agent

“These pages aren’t just about how to live a beautiful life when it’s easy, but how to press forward with tenacity and courage and love when life is hard. If you’ve got a pulse, you are going to be touched by this book.”

—**BOB GOFF**, *New York Times* bestselling author
of *Love Does*; *Everybody*; *Always*; and *Dream Big*

“Zoro’s memoir portrays a boy who is rich with faith, tenacity, resiliency, and drive! He reminds us that sometimes we just have to fake it ’til we make it! My whole-hearted applause for *Maria’s Scarf*!”

—**YVONNE VOLLERT NOBLITT**,
writer/producer

“*Maria’s Scarf* proves how becoming one of the world’s greatest drummers is not only about technique, but it’s also about the forging of a man’s soul so that each time he lays down a beat, you can feel the pain, joy, and love of Zoro’s improbable and incredible story.”

—**TONY R. ABRAMS**,
screenwriter/director

“The rich and colorful details that are woven into every story make his book come alive. If ever there was a story about God making way for one of His own, this is it. Highly recommended!”

—**BOB KILPATRICK**,
author, musician, inventor

“Belief is powerful. It can cause us to persevere against all odds and do great things . . . An extraordinary example of how a mother’s faith in God and steadfast belief in her son can make all the difference. It will restore your hope even in the hardest of times.”

—**DAVE RAMSEY**,
bestselling author and radio host

Contents

PROLOGUE	1
INTRODUCTION WIND BENEATH MY WINGS	5
CHAPTER 1 STRAIGHT OUTTA COMPTON.....	9
CHAPTER 2 LIVING FOR THE CITY.....	17
CHAPTER 3 LOVES ME LIKE A ROCK.....	21
CHAPTER 4 HOW CAN YOU MEND A BROKEN HEART	28
CHAPTER 5 SOUL MAN	36
CHAPTER 6 BEYOND THE SEA.....	43
CHAPTER 7 HIGH HOPES.....	51
CHAPTER 8 I FEEL THE EARTH MOVE.....	58
CHAPTER 9 FOOD, GLORIOUS FOOD.....	64
CHAPTER 10 THE LITTLE DRUMMER BOY.....	71
CHAPTER 11 WE ARE FAMILY.....	78
CHAPTER 12 LIVIN' ON A PRAYER.....	83
CHAPTER 13 KUNG FU FIGHTING.....	90
CHAPTER 14 ROCK 'N' ROLL FANTASY.....	97
CHAPTER 15 GET UP, STAND UP.....	103
CHAPTER 16 WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM MY FRIENDS.....	110
CHAPTER 17 ANOTHER BRICK IN THE WALL	120
CHAPTER 18 THE HUSTLE.....	130
CHAPTER 19 HOUND DOG.....	135
CHAPTER 20 LISTEN TO THE MUSIC.....	143
CHAPTER 21 COME FLY WITH ME.....	147
CHAPTER 22 TAKE ME HOME, COUNTRY ROADS.....	156
CHAPTER 23 A CHANGE IS GONNA COME	166
CHAPTER 24 I'LL BE HOME FOR CHRISTMAS	170
CHAPTER 25 AIN'T NOBODY HERE BUT US CHICKENS.....	203
CHAPTER 26 TAKE THE MONEY AND RUN	209
CHAPTER 27 I WILL SURVIVE	215
CHAPTER 28 GONNA FLY NOW	220
CHAPTER 29 BANG THE DRUM ALL DAY.....	225

CHAPTER 30	NEW KID IN TOWN.....	232
CHAPTER 31	STAYIN' ALIVE.....	237
CHAPTER 32	I JUST CALLED TO SAY I LOVE YOU.....	241
CHAPTER 33	I'M GONNA MAKE YOU LOVE ME.....	247
CHAPTER 34	CALIFORNIA DREAMIN'.....	254
CHAPTER 35	DAZED AND CONFUSED.....	262
CHAPTER 36	THE GREAT PRETENDER.....	267
CHAPTER 37	HOLLYWOOD SWINGING.....	277
CHAPTER 38	DON'T STOP BELIEVIN'.....	283
CHAPTER 39	HEROES.....	290
CHAPTER 40	DREAM ON.....	297
CHAPTER 41	EYE OF THE TIGER.....	311
CHAPTER 42	WHEN YOU WISH UPON A STAR.....	318
CHAPTER 43	IT WAS A VERY GOOD YEAR.....	325
CHAPTER 44	LIFE IN THE FAST LANE.....	334
CHAPTER 45	CAN'T TAKE MY EYES OFF YOU.....	340
CHAPTER 46	MAMA LIKED THE ROSES.....	347
EPILOGUE	357
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	363
READING GROUP GUIDE	371

Prologue

Every great dream begins with a dreamer. Always remember, you have within you the strength, the patience, and the passion to reach for the stars, to change the world.

—Author unknown

Maria was my mother, and the scarf around my neck was hers. Here is the story behind it.

I remember the day before my second-grade school pictures were to be taken, when I asked if I could wear her orange scarf. She tried to dissuade me, certain that my classmates would make fun of me. I persisted; she relented. The next morning, she knelt down to tie the scarf around my neck and whispered something in my ear that I will never forget. Something that would change the trajectory of my life.

She had been the daughter of a supreme court justice in Mexico City. Their house was graced with diplomats, aristocrats, politicians, and a steady flow of people from the film industry—producers and directors, actors and actresses. Mesmerized by the magic of the movies, my mother dreamed of becoming a star on the silver screen. And she was on the road to becoming one.

As fate would have it, though, her dream was shattered by a sudden reversal of her family's fortunes. So she left her dream behind in Mexico and immigrated to America. There, she dedicated herself instead to nurturing the dreams of her children.

She was a woman. A single mother. Now with seven children. And

she was a Mexican immigrant. You can imagine how hard that was. But she had an indomitable spirit.

She saw America as an adventure, like when the eight of us piled onto a city bus destined for the beach. Afterward, we'd shower the sand off and change clothes for a trip to the grand Crest Theatre. And it was grand indeed, built during Hollywood's golden era. Sinking into the plush seats, we'd watch as larger-than-life characters flickered across the screen and found their way into our imaginations. When the movie was over, we'd take up a row of spinning stools at the diner, where my mother would order a couple of grilled cheese sandwiches and a chocolate malt to be split between us.

She had a phonograph, and music always filled whatever tenement we were living in. Albums by Frank Sinatra, Elvis, and music from her beloved homeland formed much of the soundtrack of our lives. We all danced, not just with her but with each other.

I've always loved a good story, especially one where the underdog goes on to victory. I was that underdog, and I found great hope in those stories, which helped to fuel my dreams. Given the difficult circumstances of my childhood, however, it would have been easy to give up. But I discovered a voice—a voice that was superior to circumstance. It was my mother's voice. *Maria's Scarf* tells how I followed that voice through the darkness and into the light.

In a world filled with turmoil and despair, finding significance can seem impossible, pointless even. This book is a ticket. A ticket to a fantastical excursion that I hope will lift your spirits, inspire you to reach for the stars, and remind you that, even in the face of great travails, we must never abandon hope. As a young boy, I took my name from a masked hero. My life story is about the hero that lives in all of us—a hero with the power to dream, believe, and overcome. You have a stage waiting for you to command, but there are obstacles you'll need to conquer before you can take your place on it. These pages can revive your resolve to fight through them. Dreams are important, and I was rescued by mine. This memoir is yet another dream come true, and I've poured my heart and soul into every word.

My true-life tale is filled with twists and turns—trauma and triumph, love and hate, adventures and misadventures, and great acts of sacrifice. It is a story for both the young and the old—the sinner and the saint—the dreamer and the schemer. I was blessed to live it. I hope it blesses you to read it.



INTRODUCTION:
**Wind beneath
My Wings**

JULY 4, 1985

From backstage, I peered out at nearly a million concertgoers on the National Mall in Washington, DC. People of all ages filled every inch of space between Constitution and Independence Avenues. I was about to play for the masses that had gathered to celebrate our nation's founding principles—the very principles that enabled me to dream the impossible dream I was now living, and the same principles that had enabled my mother, Maria Islas-Bravo, to come to the United States from Mexico to rear her family here in the land of opportunity.

As the Stars and Stripes swept across my view, I thought of the many sacrifices my mother had made so I could perform on this stage. This was no small moment for either of us. In fact, it was everything.

Hoping to slow my pulse, I focused on the Lincoln Memorial Reflecting Pool stretching out behind me. In front, a sea of red, white, and blue flags waved in the wind. My nerves were getting the best of me, and I had to keep reminding myself: *breathe*.

The heat had formed a thick haze as the noon sun beat down on us. I wiped sweat from my brow and pulled a pair of worn drumsticks from my bag. Hands clammy and shaking, I paced the side of the stage,

rolling my fingers around the familiar wooden sticks like a baseball player swinging his favorite bat. This was the biggest concert I had ever played, and I couldn't afford to miss a beat. But it wasn't just the crowd that was making me nervous. The Sea to Shining Sea concert was airing live on national television, and Mama would be watching from home in Los Angeles.

As the starting time neared, the teeming crowd began to clap as one, coaxing us to take the stage. From somewhere near the back, a chant began: "New E-di-tion! New E-di-tion!"

Even the more seasoned band members looked wide-eyed at one another, amazed by the magnitude of what was taking place around us. Our stage manager gave us the go-ahead to take our positions. As we entered, the droning chants turned to deafening cheers. My heart raced.

Perched at the top of my drum riser, I peered through my cymbals. With the sun glaring off the golden disks, I squinted toward the crowd, remembering the words my mother had whispered to me as a young boy when she had leaned close and tied her orange silk scarf around my neck: "One day, my precious son, you will do something *fantazmical* with your life." It was her own word—a mix of *fantastic* and *amazing*—one she coined to indicate the level of success she hoped all her children would achieve. Something so enormous it would be too wonderful for any ordinary superlative.

The musical director gave the green light, pulling me back to the moment. I took one last deep breath, signaled a thumbs-up to my fellow musicians, and started counting us in. It proved impossible for them to hear my count over the screams of teenage girls, so at the last second, I gave a visual cue instead, clicking my sticks four times loudly above my head. Away we went into our hit single, "Mr. Telephone Man."

The five vocalists of New Edition strode single file to the front of the stage, microphones in hand. Dressed in matching amethyst lamé jackets, bow ties, and cummerbunds, the dynamic showmen dazzled the audience with their perfectly choreographed moves. In crisp white pants and patent leather loafers, Bobby Brown and Ralph Tresvant took front and center. Behind them, Ricky Bell, Michael Bivins, and Ronnie

DeVoe provided harmony as Bobby and Ralph slid and shimmied across the stage, sharing the lead.

Sitting high on my drum throne, I was adorned with as much bling as an ancient prince. Wearing my signature black gaucho hat, silver sequined vest, and rhinestone tie, I laid down the groove as beads of sweat trickled down my back. The entire song became a blur as adrenaline surged and my body took over, working instinctively after countless hours of intense practice.

As the song neared its end, it was my time to shine. The rest of the band stopped, and I threw myself into a rousing drum solo, imagining my mother sitting in her living room with tears in her eyes as she smiled at the TV. I glanced toward the crowd, hoping to give a nod to the camera, showing Mama I had made it and it was all because of her.

That's when the audience began to sway hypnotically, waving their arms in tandem and moving in sync to the beat. People in every direction were clapping to the rhythm. The sight overwhelmed me. The crowd could not have been more diverse. Different races and religions, different educational and economic backgrounds, different genders, different dreams, different heartaches. Countless factors could have divided us, but when they all joined with the beat of my drums, the many became one. At that moment of synchronicity, I experienced an epiphany. Deep in my soul I could feel what Mama had always told me. I had been given the gift of bringing happiness to others through the power of rhythm. And here was proof! Music really could overcome the many fears, prejudices, and tensions that divide us. Music—*my* music—had the power to unite.

I also realized, once and for all, that Mama had been right about something else too: “Anything is possible when we refuse to give up.”

Against all odds, my wishes had come true. Amid the backdrop of that musical splendor, I forgot that I had scrounged through Salvation Army donation bins as a kid, that my family was once homeless, reduced to living in our dilapidated 1962 Chevy Nova, and that my father had deserted me when I was six months old, leaving me nothing but a set of bongos. No one here could have guessed my true identity, not even

my bandmates. They had never heard of a Mexican Irish American kid named Danny Donnelly. They knew me only as Zoro, their enthusiastic twenty-three-year-old drummer.

I had worked so hard to conceal the shame and brokenness of my past, and now I was doing something truly fantasmical with my life, exactly as Mama had predicted. That's when I knew. This was just the beginning!

The world said I would never amount to anything.

My mother said that all things are possible to those who believe.

I believed my mother.

This is our story.