

## No Greater Love

Afternoon light filtered through the living room, streaking a glare across Michael's picture. As I stood in my dress blacks, cap tucked under my arm, the guests' low chatter at his visitation swarmed in my ears. My eyes caught the folded flag next to his battered helmet. *Had it only been a week since the fire?* My head was still tender to the touch, and the crimson splotches from the burns on my legs were starting to fade, but I didn't think my heart would ever heal. God had allowed my wife to leave me five years ago and He'd now taken my partner. My best friend. What did I do to deserve this? Tears blurred my eyes. What little I had eaten for breakfast threatened to crawl back up my throat. How could I go on? Michael had a wife and three-year-old son. I had nothing. I was alone in life. It should have been me. *Why, Michael? Why?* I drifted back to that day.

Flames danced in the windows of the old house. The glow of the full moon illuminated the sky, adding a halo across the landscape. Trees swayed in the light breeze, but the heat radiating from the entryway made me feel as though I was entering the gates of Hell.

The family stood in the street huddled together. Their six year old, Abby, was missing.

Captain Jacobs' voice crackled in my ear. "Make it fast, guys. Do your sweep and get out. This old house is like a tinderbox."

I clapped Michael on the shoulder and leaned in so he could hear me. "Quick sweep, clockwise, and pray to that god of yours we find her."

He slapped my hand and took the lead.

"Abby."

"Abby." Michael's voice echoed mine.

Flames licked the walls as waves of smoke rolled across the ceiling. My turnout coat took the brunt of the heat, but my skin prickled and stung beneath. I knew our time was limited. Where was that little girl? The thick smoke made seeing nearly impossible. It would take a miracle to find her.

The hiss of breath through my mask resonated in my ears, blocking out everything around me. Captain Jacobs' voice boomed in my ear. It took me a second to register what he had said. "The girl is safe. The house is unstable. Get out now."

Michael spun and together we took off for the entrance to escape the inferno that threatened to devour us.

Ten seconds and we would be at the door. Six seconds...we could do it in four. We needed to do it in four.

A crack reverberated through the house.

Pressure came from behind. Something shoved me through the opening. No, not something, someone. Michael.

Smacking onto the wooden porch, my air tank slammed into me as I hit the ground. My helmet went flying and my mask shifted. I lifted my head and turned to see Michael lying motionless under the remains of the ceiling. A wooden beam laid across his head.

"No!"

Red, yellow, and orange tendrils reached out the door for the back of my legs. Their touch stung.

Smoke curled around me and the noxious stench snuck under my mask. My throat constricted as it tried to block the deadly fumes. How poetic. I would die just a few feet from safety.

“God, help me.”

What was I saying? He didn’t care. He never had.

My head thumped back down.

Two hands grabbed me under my arms and carried me from the lethal dragon as darkness seized me and pulled me under.

A hand lay on my shoulder. I blinked and Michael’s picture came back into focus. My memory of that night faded away. I didn’t turn to face my comforter. By his touch I already knew who it was. Chaplain Torres had visited me multiple times over the last week. I hadn’t wanted to talk, so he spent hours sitting with me in silence. I didn’t want to admit how much it had helped to know he was there.

Chaps’ hand tightened. “He’s in God’s hands now, Jeremy. Michael’s home.”

All I could do was nod. Why would I want to know a God who took my partner? But for some reason that night I had called out to Him.

“Jeremy, I’ll be gone for a few days with my family, but when I get back please come over anytime. I’m always here for you.”

“Thanks.” With that, I pulled away and rushed out to my car.

I didn’t want to live. How could I go on knowing my best friend gave his life to save mine?

As I drove through town, I was more certain than ever that living wasn’t an option. But Michael had sacrificed himself for me. How could I ignore that? I’d give God one chance to prove He was there.

Moments later, I found myself sitting on the porch swing of Chaplain Torres’ house. The sweet fragrance of peonies drifted on the breeze. Birds chirped as they flew from branch to

branch. Life went on around me. I would miss the little things. The smell of baked lasagna at the firehouse. The half-court basketball games with the guys. Even my neighbor's obnoxious terrier. But I just couldn't go on anymore. Life was too lonely, especially now with Michael gone.

The sound of a car door caught my attention.

Chaplain Torres walked up the sidewalk with his eyebrows raised and sat beside me, but he didn't say a word.

I focused on the small knot in the wooden porch rail. "I thought you were leaving town."

"So did I. Apparently, God had other plans."

I closed my eyes. Was it really God who sent Chaps back? I glanced over at him.

He pinched his lips together before continuing. "I was in a hurry and left my cell phone on the kitchen table. I came back to get it. Jeremy, you knew I was leaving town. You want to tell me what's going on?"

I let out a sigh. "Chaps, I planned to end my life today. I didn't want to live with the loneliness anymore. The hurt and guilt are just too much."

I could feel his eyes on me, yet he said nothing.

"I told myself, if you showed up God really did care, and I wouldn't go home and take my own life."

We sat in silence. I didn't think Chaps would ever speak.

"Jeremy, you and Michael were partners. You were best friends. Is there anything you wouldn't have done for him?"

I rubbed the back of my neck. "You know I'd have done *anything* for him."

“According to the greatest book of all times, there is no greater love than to lay down your life for a friend, and that’s exactly what Michael did for you. He knew you weren’t ready to die, so he chose to save your life. He loved you, Jeremy.”

My eyes burned and my heart ached. Michael had died for me. He had taken that extra second to shove me out of the house knowing he would die.

Chaplain Torres sat in silence leaving me to my thoughts.

Several minutes later, he patted my knee. “You know, someone else loved you that much too. But that’s a conversation for another day. Now, I’m going to get my phone and be on my way. I’m glad you were waiting on me. We’ll talk more later.”

I watched Chaps pull out of the driveway. Yes, I would be here later. A deal was a deal. God had answered my prayer with a stupid forgotten cell phone. It was time to hold up my side of the bargain and give life another chance.

I understood the idea of laying your life down for a friend. I’m willing to do that every day for my brothers at the fire station. But Michael had gone one step farther and had actually done it. Not just for my life, but for my soul. Warmth seeped through my body as Michael’s love filled the empty places of my heart. Maybe one day God’s love would fill the empty places in my soul.

*John 15:13 (NLT) “There is no greater love than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”*

Dedicated to Chaplain Bruce Mentzer, LCDR, USN Ret.