

Love
like there's no
TOMORROW

HOW A CARDIAC ARREST
BROUGHT MY HEART TO LIFE

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How a Cardiac Arrest Brought My Heart to Life

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Dedication

This book is for my Ben, who watched his mom die.
I pray you'll always know the love of Christ.
I love you like there's no tomorrow.

*Not to us, O Lord, not to us,
but to your name give glory for the sake of
your steadfast love and your faithfulness!*
(Psalm 115:1)

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- The 911 operator, who talked Michael through CPR.
- The paramedics, who rushed to my home in minutes and used their skills and equipment to resuscitate me.
- Jesus, the Lord of life, who by his kind providence allowed me to experience death and resurrection. I give my life forever in thanks to you.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Although events and people in this book are real, names and some minor details have been changed. In one case (with the pastor in the third chapter) I combined two characters into one to avoid confusion. Every emotion in this book is absolutely real.

Part One

MICHAEL'S STORY



Chapter One

THE MIDNIGHT HOUR

*The snares of death encompassed me;
the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me.*
(Psalm 116:3)

That Saturday in January, the day my wife died, was the best day our family had experienced in months. It was relaxing, fun, and family centered. I loved it, a pocket of peace between the holidays and the return to life's heavy busyness.

The scent of bacon and pancakes lingered through our home as we broke out the longed-for Wii that Ben, our ten-year-old, got for Christmas. We jumped around our messy family room playing tennis, boxing, and bowling.

Well, *I* didn't jump. I hobbled like a peg-legged pirate on my broken ankle. Three months before, I had slipped on wet grass in a sloped parking lot. Yeah, not that dramatic, but it sure impacted our life. Since I'd been laid off, I'd taken a commission-only job. Not bringing home income for three months—not good.

Gabrielle, my nine-year-old daughter, slammed her winning shot, then punched the air. “Ha! I beat you again.”

I grabbed her and tickled her. “Hey, cut me some slack for my broken ankle.”

Gabrielle donned a sassy grin. "That's not why you lost. You lost because I'm awesome!"

Ocieanna watched from the couch, with Christian, six, and Abigail, four, cuddled next to her.

"Okay, let me give it a try." Ocieanna broke away from the little ones and commandeered the controller. "But I want to bowl. C'mon, Ben."

"You're going to play? Cool!" Ben offered an excited grin. "I always love beating you, Mom."

"Hey, I was a master bowler in my day, I'll have you know."

"Yeah, right." Ben switched the game.

"But it's my turn!" Abigail protested.

"No, it's not," Christian said. "You played twice. I had only one turn. Gabby beat Papa twice. And Ben gets to play because it's his game."

"Whatever, Christian." Abigail's chin quivered. Tears sprouted from her eyes. "I never get to play."

"Don't worry, honey." I scooped in next to her. She climbed onto my lap and popped her thumb in her mouth, content.

Ben beat Ocieanna at bowling, and then pizza around the kitchen table bookended the memorable day. I offered thanks for the food. "Heavenly Father, thank you for my family. Thank you for this time together."

As Ocieanna tucked the kids into bed, I heard her singing, and I paused, listening to my wife shower love on our children. I'd spied a light in her hazel eyes today, a joy I hadn't seen in a long time. Normally she wore stress like a leaden coat, wearing her down. I parked on the bed and my broken ankle throbbed as I slid off the medical "boot" that kept my bones in line. The cool air made my wrinkled, damp skin tingle. I hated that Ocieanna had to work so hard, but what could we do? We couldn't possibly survive without her income.

Ocieanna shut the door to Christian's room as I stretched the ball of my foot as far forward as the implanted metal posts would allow. Then I twisted it back, cringing at the pain but enjoying the freedom of movement. Gingerly, I lobbed my still-swollen hoof onto the bed. On Monday, I'd have a quick surgery to remove the metal pins. Then life would get back to normal. As soon as I could catch up with the work I'd missed.

She walked in and unclasped her hair from its ponytail. It spilled down her back and I marveled again at how beautiful she was. I longed for her to hurry. Get ready for bed. Be with me. But I kept my hopes to myself. Work constantly pressured her. She might have to retreat to her computer tonight. I lay back, waiting.

"Hey," she softly said.

My heart wavered as she moved toward me, sat on the edge of the bed, and massaged the muscles around my sore ankle. She tilted her head and snagged my eyes with her gaze. "Do you want to watch something tonight?"

"Really? You don't have to work?"

At the word *work*, gloominess fell over her face, but only momentarily. "I will have to get back to editing on Monday, but tonight I want to be with you."

I stared at her, studying her. Her eyes seemed relaxed, loving. A thrill coursed through me. She hadn't looked at me like that in a long time. She didn't allow herself time to feel. Maybe that was my fault, for pushing her to work so much.

After changing into her nightgown, she snuck to the bed and laid her head against my chest. Her breathing slowed to a rhythmic pace as she relaxed. I felt her heart beating next to mine. I cherished her soft hand on my skin, the smell of her hair.

About a half hour passed, and she wormed to her side of the bed. Still engrossed in the show, she reached for my hand, caressed my arm.

We watched together, in silence. Weariness lingered nearby, pulling me toward blissful sleep. Ocieanna's eyes drooped.

Thank you, Lord.

But then as a character in the show gasped as if dying, Ocieanna made a similar sound. Ha. Maybe she wasn't so near to falling asleep. I thought she was mocking the character.

But she didn't stop.

"Darlin'?"

Within half a moment, I knew something was wrong, but what? A seizure?

Her labored breathing increased until it was a gravelly rasping. My heart raced. Her back arched, her mouth opened, and her eyes rolled up. The subtle birthmark on her neck glowed a violent purple. What was happening? Her face was turning pale. She reached for her throat, her fingers curling like stiff branches.

Fear lit and blazed through me, igniting me to action.

"Ocieanna!" I tried to wake her, but she wasn't responding. I slapped her face, once, twice. It didn't work. She kept gasping. I veered toward surrendering to an overpowering panic, but the kids in their bedrooms—I couldn't freak out. I had to stay strong for them.

And Ocieanna—her life seemed to be in my hands. Could I save her? What should I do? This question pounded on the door of my thoughts as snarled emotions stormed, tossing me on a sea with no way to steer.

And then her raspy wheezing stopped.

The silence was much worse. Alarm coursed through every cell in my body, but I fought it. I had to save my wife. She would die if I didn't act. She was already dead.

"Darlin'!" I yelled again, now more of a begging than expecting her to respond. I did what I'd learned as a child and strove to breathe life back into her, an attempt at mouth to mouth. Nothing.

Sometime in the midst of this Ben faltered in. My boy stood motionless, staring at his mom who wasn't moving.

I yelled at him, shocking him alert. "Get the phone!"

Ben raced down the stairs and then charged back up to our bedroom. Terror engraved his face, which was pale despite his spurt of exercise.

I grabbed the phone from Ben and dialed 911. While I waited, I ordered, "Make sure the kids' doors are closed. Unlock the front door."

Ben's blue eyes, full of panic, focused on his mission. Then he rushed away.

The 911 operator answered. "What's your emergency?"

"My wife. She's not breathing."

After taking more information, she asked, "Are you giving her CPR?"

"I'm trying."

"Okay, an ambulance is on the way. Here's what you need to do ..."

She talked me through CPR. She said not to do the mouth to mouth, but to focus on chest compressions. One, two, three, four, five ... to one hundred. With every pump, I begged, *Please God. Please. Please. Please.*

"Okay, I got it," I said. "I'm going to hang up."

But she wanted to stay on the line with me. I struggled to pump and count and hold the phone. It felt insane. *Let me hang up!* I didn't care about the woman on the phone. I needed to focus on Ocieanna.

We finished one hundred compresses. "Okay, start over," she said. "You're doing great." Her words furnished no comfort.

"Don't go, darlin'. Don't leave me."

The operator stayed on the line as we counted together to two hundred, three hundred, four hundred. Still no response

in Ocieanna's body. She was limp, not moving. The intense fear blended with sharp pangs of grief. *She's slipping from me.*

Her face turned blueish white.

Five hundred pumps.

“Oh, darlin', come back to me!”

Minutes after I called, though it seemed like forever, the lights from ambulances glowed through our window. I heard Ben let the paramedics in. They stormed up the stairs and into my room, carrying machines, bags, a gurney.

A frigid January chill entered with them.

A tall, thin man asked, “How old is she?” He didn't look at me, but focused on Ocieanna.

“Forty-two.” I stepped back as another man and a woman lifted her from the bed and laid her on the floor.

“Any medications?”

“None that I know of.”

A man kicked open the bathroom door to make room. Another set up a defibrillator.

The first man spoke into a radio. “Forty-two-year-old woman. No known medications. Apparent cardiac arrest.”

More paramedics rushed in.

Cardiac arrest? Ocieanna had a cardiac arrest? What did that even mean? I stepped back, out of the fray, and in those short moments, sobs clawed at my throat. I wanted to weep, to scream, to cling to my wife. But I held it all back. I wouldn't lose it. The kids. The kids. The kids.

Each medic performed a vital task—all geared toward reviving my darlin's dead body. One ripped off her pajama top. Another inserted an IV.

Two paramedics hooked her up to monitors. Erratic spikes and drops on the monitor displayed the only sign she'd been alive. I had felt her limp body. She was gone. How long? Five minutes?

The Midnight Hour

Ten minutes? I couldn't be sure. In a moment, even these residual electrical impulses slowed, stilled to a flatline.

Overcome with shock, I felt numb. I couldn't believe the reality screaming at me. I studied her still body. It was almost peaceful, like a body in a casket. *She's dead. Ocieanna's gone.*

My thoughts flashed to the idea of being a single dad. What would we do without her? How would I tell the little ones? Thank God they weren't seeing this.

The paramedics stuck the tabs of the defibrillator onto her chest. After a moment, the machine spoke. "Please stand clear." A feminine mechanical voice. "Push button."

I held my breath. This would get her heart going again. It had to. Everything would be okay.

The woman pushed the button, then we collectively waited in stilted silence as the machine shocked my wife. Her arms flinched, her torso jerked upward, but she didn't cough and start breathing like in the movies.

No change in the monitor. Still a flatline.

My heart sank to my stomach.

The tall paramedic instructed them to reset the defibrillator. His eyes—all their eyes—showed intense focus.

After less than a second the machine beeped, and again the mechanical voice said, "Please stand clear. Push button."

Every muscle in me tensed. *Come back, darlin'.*

The machine shocked her. The same jerking.

Still no response. No change.

The paramedics, still so focused, also displayed worry. I couldn't wake her. Neither could they. Was that it? Was this over? Would they give up now?

The room around me became a blur. I heard rustling, footsteps, and muffled words, but couldn't focus. Outwardly I remained calm, but inside, torrents of panic raged. All I could think was I'd lost her.

Ocieanna's gone. My wife. My best friend. My girl.

They tried again.

The machine spoke a third time. "Please stand clear. Push button."

Her torso jerked. Her arms twitched, like before. And like before, she didn't cough and wake up. I saw no signs of breathing. No signs of life. My legs felt weak. A rancid heat rose from my stomach to my aching head. I almost collapsed, but then ...

"I have a pulse!" the tall man shouted, and immediately the room burst with activity.

"Oh my God," I cried out. Through tears, I inspected the monitor. The line now moved with small jagged rises and falls, but it was moving.

I stumbled over my broken ankle and had to grab the wall to steady myself. Was she really okay? Her heart beat again. I battled to hold onto that, but uncertainty crept in. I wanted to feel relieved, but fear—so strong—brought doubt. Her body had lain still for so long.

In quick moments, they inserted a respiratory bag to manually breathe for her, secured her body, and loaded her onto the gurney. I found security in the paramedics' decisive speed, such a contrast to my earlier confusion.

Less than a half hour after I first heard her gasping, they rushed her down the stairwell. My mind and emotions raced to catch up with reality. *Did this really happen?* As they transported her through our sage-green living room, I scrutinized Ocieanna—long waves of light-brown hair, bunched behind her head, eyes closed, arms and legs motionless, respiratory bag disfiguring her mouth. Was this really my beautiful, vibrant wife? I yearned to retreat to the moments when she caressed my arm as we watched TV. When our gazes linked as she crawled into bed. Could my life fall apart this quickly? How could it be true?

The Midnight Hour

I posted myself at the bottom of the stairs. Ben found me. He was crying, spewing sobs. I enclosed him next to me.

The team of medics didn't pause for us to say good-bye, to touch her. We observed helplessly as she passed through the door and into the ambulance. One by one the first responders climbed into their vehicles, turned off their flashing lights, and disappeared into the darkness. The head paramedic remained—the tall, thin one who had asked the questions.

“Well, we've got a heartbeat. For now.”

I clutched Ben to my side. “What do you mean, ‘for now’?”

“Not many people survive the trauma she's been through.” He looked at Ben. “You need to be prepared. Your mom may not come home.”

Ben and I gawked at the man. *Why would you tell him that?* I thought, already powerless to comfort my son.

“I'm sorry. You may want to follow us in a few minutes. We'll be taking her to Valley.”

I nodded, appreciating him and his crew but at the same time wanting the last intruder to leave my home. I shut the door behind him, and with Ben beside me, I watched as Ocieanna was driven away, not certain if I'd spent my last moments with my wife.