

AT
HEAVEN'S
EDGE

ANDREA JO RODGERS



HARVEST HOUSE PUBLISHERS
EUGENE, OREGON

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AT HEAVEN'S EDGE

Copyright © 2015 Andrea Jo Rodgers
Published by Harvest House Publishers
Eugene, Oregon 97402
www.harvesthousepublishers.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Rodgers, Andrea, 1970-
At heaven's edge / Andrea Rodgers.
pages cm

ISBN 978-0-7369-6459-3 (pbk.)
ISBN 978-0-7369-6460-9 (eBook)

1. Emergency medical services—Anecdotes. 2. Rodgers, Andrea, 1970—Anecdotes. 3. Rodgers, Andrea, 1970—Religion. 4. Emergency medical technicians—United States—Anecdotes. 5. Near-death experiences—Religious aspects—Christianity—Anecdotes. 6. Accident victims—United States—Anecdotes. I Title.

RA645.5.R64A3 2015
616.02'5—dc23

2014038260

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Printed in the United States of America

15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 / BP-JH / 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*Dedicated to
the loving memory of my parents,
Andrew and Annemarie.*

Acknowledgments

A special thanks to my husband, Rick, my sister, Thea, and my friends Katy and Colleen for their time and encouragement. Thanks to Reverend David Cotton and Bishop David O'Connell for their support and prayers, and to my literary agent, Leslie Stobbe, for his wisdom and guidance. Also, thank you to the staff at Harvest House Publishers and especially my editor, Kathleen Kerr, for her professional assistance.

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Preface

911 emergencies catch us at our most vulnerable. In our darkest, most frightening moments, when we are forced to face our mortality head-on, many of us turn to the Lord. In these times of crisis, He hears our pleas for help. Sometimes, the assistance may be a direct intervention from God. Other times, He may help us indirectly through the efforts of first responders. During these times, the volunteer EMS community is blessed to be able to serve as instruments of Jesus. In these moments of despair, we often unexpectedly find inspiration.

The Elevator Accident

Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.

DEUTERONOMY 31:6

The force of the crash nearly knocked my young son, John, and me off our feet. The elevator jerked violently and I grabbed for the wall to steady myself. A loud noise, reminiscent of the time I rode on the Maid of the Mist at Niagara Falls, filled the air. *But why in the world am I hearing the sound of gushing water?* I felt my heart begin to thump unnaturally in my chest and instinctively tightened my grip on John's hand.

It was ten o'clock in the morning on a beautiful October day—my seventh wedding anniversary, to be exact. Outside, the warm early autumn sun kissed the colorful golden and crimson leaves. In sharp contrast to the outdoors, the elevator was quickly morphing into a chamber of terrors for John and me.

The morning started with an ordinary visit to John's eye doctor, Dr. Mendel. John, a two-year-old toddler, had gotten glasses six weeks earlier because he is farsighted. Today was a follow-up visit to see how he was doing. The visit didn't take more than a half hour. The receptionist, Louise, handed me an appointment card on my way out. "We'll see John again in four weeks, Mrs. Rodgers."

Smiling, I put the card in my pocket and waved goodbye. I was already planning the rest of my day off: picnicking at the playground

by our home, reading together at the library, apple picking at a local farm. Later that evening, my husband, Rick, and I wanted to rewatch our wedding video, one of our favorite anniversary traditions. *This is going to be a picture-perfect anniversary.*

When we stepped out into the hallway, I decided on the spur of the moment to take the elevator. Usually I prefer the stairs, but I figured an elevator ride would be a fun adventure for John. Just like most toddlers, he was eager to discover new and exciting things.

“Do you want to take the elevator?” I asked him, although I already knew what his answer would be.

“Yes, yes,” John answered, a 1000-megawatt smile lighting up his trusting face. Wriggling with excitement, he rushed ahead into the elevator.

“Press the button with the *one* on it,” I said to him, holding his small hand in my own.

“One,” John said softly, pressing the button with me.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, it dimly registered that the ride seemed to be taking a little bit longer than it should have. I brushed the thought aside. But within seconds, the elevator crashed and made a terrifying grinding metallic noise unlike anything I had ever heard before in my life. A sick feeling erupted in the pit of my stomach. *What's going on? What's happening to us? I want to get out now!*

Suddenly, I realized why the noise I was hearing sounded like running water. It *was* running water! To my horror, it began rushing under the bottom of the elevator door with a vengeance. *I absolutely cannot believe this is happening to us!*

For a split second, I stared in shocked disbelief. Then my brain clicked into gear and I hoisted John into my arms as the water rushed up and over his ankles. I frantically pressed the *door open* button a dozen times. When that didn't work, I began pushing at the door in a desperate attempt to open it. *Help me, Lord. Tell me what to do! Please get us out of here!*

Have you ever had an experience that lasts a few moments but seems to go on for a lifetime? When your mind desperately tries to grasp exactly what is going on?

I began screaming, but the scream sounded oddly disconnected from my body. My mind flashed to Rick. He is my rock, my true love, my best friend. Next, my mind swept to my sweet daughter, Anna. *Will I ever see them again?*

The water quickly rose above my knees. At that moment, I was forced to face my mortality. My heart was thumping so hard in my chest that I felt like it could explode at any moment. *Are we going to die? I don't want to die. I'm not ready to die! We're both too young to die! Dear Lord, please save us!*

John's terrified silence stood in stark contrast to my screams for help. The water continued rising higher and higher. If I hadn't lifted John up, the water would now be over his head. *If the water keeps coming in, will we float up to the ceiling? Will we be able to get out that way? Will I be able to tread water while holding on to John? Or will we both go under? Are we going to drown?*

I've been a volunteer on my town's first aid squad for 26 years and have answered over 6500 calls for help. This was the very first time that the tables were turned. Rather than responding to a 911 emergency, I *was* the 911 emergency.

Water continued to rush underneath the elevator doors. I pressed the alarm button over and over again but didn't hear any sort of audible alarm. *Is the button working? Does anyone know that John and I are trapped in this elevator?*

"Help!" I screamed as loudly as I could. *I don't want to die in this elevator! I don't want my husband to be a widower! I don't want my daughter to grow up without John and me!* But as the water continued to rise, I feared that John and I would surely drown.

And then, in that incredibly dark moment, God answered my prayer. Miraculously, the elevator doors slowly opened! *Our guardian angels are working overtime to rescue us!*

With John still in my arms, I staggered out of the elevator into a dark basement filled with water. I could hear water running all around us, the sound echoing eerily off the cement walls. Dim light filtered through a small basement window. Across the room, I thought I could make out the outline of a door. *Please, please let that be a way out of here!*

I was crying so hard that it made it even harder to see. Clutching John tightly to me, I waded through the water. I yanked the door open and, to my relief, saw a flight of stairs directly in front of me. I staggered up the stairs, sobbing uncontrollably. At the time John weighed about 35 pounds, but there was no way I was going to let go of my precious child. I clung to him as though he was my life preserver.

John, in sharp contrast to me, was ominously silent. His tiny arms clung around my neck. His eyes were wide open, fear reflecting in their depths. I wanted to tell him that everything would be okay, but I couldn't get any words out. *Jesus saved us. We're going to live!*

I was crying so hard that I missed the door to the first floor. I opened the first door that I saw and stepped out into a hallway. After a moment, I realized that I was back on the second floor again.

Almost in a daze, I worked my way back to Dr. Mendel's office. As I entered the waiting room, I was sobbing so much that I couldn't speak. I was trembling all over but couldn't seem to stop myself. *Try to get a grip on yourself, girl! You're okay! You're both safe! You're out of the elevator!*

Louise, the receptionist, rushed out from behind her desk to help me. "Mrs. Rodgers, what's wrong?" she asked. She knew I had left a mere ten minutes ago with a cheery goodbye. Now suddenly I was back, sobbing for some unknown reason.

"The elevator," I managed to say.

The rest of the office staff came out from behind the counter and crowded around me. Louise led me to a seat. "Stay right here. I'm going to get Dr. Mendel."

A few seconds later, Dr. Mendel came to my side. "Call 911," he directed Louise. "Tell them we need the fire department and first aid squad right away."

A young man holding a baby in an infant carrier stepped forward. "I already did. When I was downstairs, I was trying to get into the elevator. I heard your screams but I couldn't tell where they were coming from. I went into one of the offices down there and told them to call 911."

Louise kindly brought John and me glasses of water. I tried to stop crying so I could explain what had happened. I knew I was frightening John. He stared at me with his big blue eyes and said not a word.

The fire department and emergency medical technicians arrived a few minutes later. *I can't believe that they are here for me! It's usually the other way around!*

"The fire chief is checking the basement and the elevator," Louise said. "Just sit right here and rest, sweetie."

Several minutes later, the fire chief returned. "We're going to have to evacuate this entire building," he said. "It's going to need to be closed for the rest of the day. We have a very severe electrical hazard in the basement."

A severe electrical hazard in the basement! I had thought John and I were going to drown. It hadn't even occurred to me that we were nearly electrocuted. I had walked through that electrical hazard! I had waded through that deep water with little John in my arms! And by the grace of God we didn't "fry." By the grace of God we lived! I cried even harder. But this time, they were tears of relief rather than terror. And in that moment, I knew in my heart of hearts that John and I were not alone in that elevator. Jesus was with us the whole time.

During the accident, I injured my neck, back, and knee. Afterward, I was plagued by flashbacks and an uneasy feeling. I had trouble concentrating and was worried because I was in a doctoral program. I needed to be able to concentrate to do well in my classes. I also developed a fear of enclosed spaces. I knew I needed help.

John started having nightmares; he would wake up screaming "Mommy!" For many months, he would say, "The elevator had water and Mommy cried." Upon our pastor's recommendation, John and I both went to a social worker specializing in Christian-focused counseling. These sessions helped start the healing process.

Over the following weeks, I began to pull myself together as I experienced the loving and healing presence of Jesus through the outpouring of love and support from friends and family. About a week after the accident, I arrived home from work and discovered a gift bag on our front porch. Inside was a beautiful wall hanging decorated with Easter lilies. It read, "If God brings you to it, He will bring you through it." There was no card or clue with the gift to indicate who it might be from. Several days later, I learned it was from the ten-year-old daughter of a

coworker. Her mother had told her the story about our accident, and the child was so moved that she told her mother she wanted to buy us a present. The words on the plaque and the thoughtfulness behind the gift brought me immeasurable comfort. The present continues to hold a special place of honor on our dining room wall.

I began answering first aid calls as a volunteer emergency medical technician with my local rescue squad again. At first, it brought tears of pain to my eyes to carry the heavy first aid bag. It was difficult to climb stairs and to kneel down next to patients because my knee kept buckling. But I persevered. I refused to give in to the pain and, through prayer and God's grace, I was able to move on. *Thank You, Lord, for walking beside me.*

Answering first aid calls helped me take the focus off my own problems and redirect it onto someone else. It was a balm to my soul to know that I was doing something positive instead of just focusing on the negative.

I am forever grateful that John and I lived that day. The good Lord gave John and me a second chance by helping us to miraculously survive the elevator accident. Thank You, Jesus, for answering my cry for help and for allowing me to experience firsthand Your loving and healing presence in my life.

Buried Alive!

*He performs wonders that cannot be fathomed,
miracles that cannot be counted.*

JOB 5:9

T*his is the best day ever!* Morgan Zuckerman arrived at the beach early in the morning with her grandfather. Morgan's parents were away for a long weekend, so she was spending three days with her grandpa. On Saturday, the pair spent the day at an amusement park. Sunday, they went to a movie and then ate dinner at Morgan's favorite restaurant. Now today, Grandpa promised they could spend the entire day at the beach.

Morgan paused to take a rest from shoveling sand. *This is going to be the biggest, best hole in the whole world!* Morgan studied her handiwork. So far, the hole was about three feet wide, three feet long, and five feet deep. *Another foot should do the trick!* Humming her favorite tune, Morgan resumed shoveling.

A half hour later or so, Morgan took another rest. Now the hole was so deep, she could no longer see the volleyball players who were playing a short distance away. But she could still hear their occasional yells and cheers when someone scored a point. *Maybe I'll climb out for a little while and ask Grandpa if we can go to the snack stand and get an ice cream cone.*

Morgan reached up toward the top of the hole, but her fingers fell about six inches short. *Wow—it's even deeper than I thought! I guess I can just climb out using my legs.* Morgan carefully dug one foot in the sandy

wall and then reached up toward the top. To her dismay, her foot slid down and a bit of sand came with it.

I hope when I climb out I don't mess up my hole. Once more, Morgan dug her right foot into the wall and stretched up with her hands. But once again, her foot slid back down with a small pile of sand landing on top of it.

Oh, well. I want to get out and get that ice cream. If some sand caves in, I can always dig it out again later. This time, Morgan dug her foot in more vigorously and jumped up toward the top of the hole. But it was no use. Morgan landed back down at the bottom of the hole. Again.

"Grandpa?" Morgan said tentatively. But Grandpa did not reply. Now Morgan found herself wishing that she had dug the hole closer to where her grandfather was sitting. She felt the beginnings of fear stir deep in the pit of her tummy. *What if I can't get out? Should I yell for help? Will Grandpa hear me? Or will the volleyball players hear me? Maybe I should try jumping one more time...*

With a mighty heave, Morgan leaped up toward the top of the hole. Sand began raining down on her in a torrent. Morgan tried to scream, but her mouth quickly filled up with sand.

Panic and terror consumed her. *I can't see anything! I can't hear anything! How will I ever get out of here?* Morgan Zuckerman had been buried alive!

.....

The volleyball sailed high over Martha Frederick's head.

"Hey," her friend Jed said. "Are you daydreaming out there?"

"Sorry," Martha laughed. "I'll go get it!" *I guess I was daydreaming... thinking about how nice it is to play volleyball again with all my old college friends.* Wiping sweat from her forehead, she turned and began jogging along the sand toward where the ball landed.

When Martha reached the ball, she froze. Something didn't feel quite right. Something was different. And then she realized... the hole the little girl had been digging all morning was gone! But where was

the girl? Had she gotten bored and filled the hole back in? Had she gone home for the day?

Martha glanced around. She spotted the little girl's relative, an older man with short gray hair, standing about twenty feet away. She noticed a pair of empty beach chairs close beside him. She assumed the man was the child's grandfather. Martha got a funny feeling...

Jed jogged up beside Martha. "What's wrong?" he asked. "Did you turn into a sand sculpture? You seem frozen to the spot," he joked.

"Do you remember seeing that girl digging the hole?" Martha asked.

"Of course," Jed replied. He turned toward where the hole used to be, and a shadow crossed his face. "Martha, you don't think that..."

"I don't know. I'm going over and asking her grandfather where she is."

"I'll go with you," Jed offered.

The pair approached Morgan's grandfather, Mr. Zuckerman. "Excuse me," Martha began. "This may seem like a really strange question, but where is the little girl who was with you earlier? The one who was digging that big hole."

"I was just looking for her. I saw her about four or five minutes ago, but now I can't seem to see her. She was right over there," Mr. Zuckerman said, pointing toward the area where the hole used to be. "Have you seen her?"

"No, I'm afraid not," Jed said. "And the hole is gone."

"Do you think she may have gone up to the bathroom or to the water fountain?" Mr. Zuckerman asked, concern evident on his face.

"I don't know. Wouldn't she have told you she was going?" Martha asked. It still didn't feel right to her.

"Well, not necessarily. I'm not sure," Mr. Zuckerman said slowly, the full horrible insinuation of what Martha and Jed were hinting at starting to dawn on him. "She couldn't possibly be..."

"When did you say was the last time you saw her?" Martha asked.

"I'm not exactly sure. Maybe four or five minutes ago," Mr. Zuckerman, now visibly frightened, replied.

Martha and Jed exchanged looks. "Jed, notify the lifeguards and tell them to call 911!"

"I'm on it," he answered, already running toward the lifeguard stand.

Martha ran over to the approximate area where she had seen Morgan digging the hole. *I wish I had paid more attention to exactly where she was digging.* She estimated the hole could have been anywhere in about a fifteen-foot radius.

Martha waved for her volleyball friends to come over. "Listen, I think there may be a young girl under the sand somewhere around here," she said, her voice catching with emotion. "We need to start digging."

Martha didn't have to say another word. Her friends had also seen the child digging and now put two and two together. They frantically began digging in the hot sand with their bare hands.

"Jed's getting the lifeguards," Martha said. "Let's hope we find her right away!" *Is she even under the sand? Could she have gone down to the bathroom like her grandfather suggested? And if she is under the sand, is it futile? Will we ever find her? And if we do, will she still be alive?*

.....

It was a typical hot and sunny summer day. The beach was packed with sun worshippers who were trying to beat the heat. At the time, I was working as a special officer (better known as a beach cop). I spent the morning checking beach badges, responding to a first aid call for a fall victim, and picking a boardwalk splinter out of a teenage boy's big toe. Nothing too exciting. I had just returned from my lunch break and was riding my police bike along the boardwalk when my first aid pager beeped.

DISPATCHER: "First aid requested at the Shelton Avenue Beach for a girl buried alive."

What? Buried alive? Did I just hear that correctly? I was only one block away from the location of the call. Swerving around numerous pedestrians, I began biking as fast as I could.

When I reached Shelton Avenue, I quickly ditched my bike and jumped the boardwalk railing onto the beach. A small crowd was forming about thirty feet past the boardwalk, behind the lifeguard stand. I could see that several lifeguards and a group of volleyball players were digging frantically.

I spotted Officer Vinnie McGovern in the midst of the group of people. Officer McGovern had been on the police force for about a dozen years. I edged my way through the crowd to him.

“Andrea, we may have a young girl under here somewhere. Start digging!” he said.

I joined in and started clawing at the sand as fast as I could. But I quickly realized that as fast as we dug the sand, some of it would slide right back again. I could feel my heart beginning to thump unnaturally hard in my chest. *This is a total nightmare. We need help, Lord!*

As I dug, I caught snatches of conversations going on around me.

“She dug a six-foot hole. I heard she was digging it all day...”

“One of the volleyball players noticed the hole wasn’t there anymore...”

“Her grandfather said he’s hoping she just wandered off to the bathroom, but he isn’t sure where she is...”

“We started digging where we saw her digging earlier today...”

“Someone is running down to the bathroom to look for her...”

“We figured we better start digging just in case...”

“We think the hole was around here somewhere, but we’re not exactly sure...”

“She’s only twelve years old...”

“Her name is Morgan...”

It was quickly turning into a mob scene. More people joined in the digging. I was glad to see a few of them had shovels. *Morgan, where are you? Will we ever find you?*

“Someone just got back from checking the bathroom. She’s not in there,” one of the lifeguards said. “We need to keep digging!”

The girl’s grandfather stood close by. His face was ashen and he looked as though he might faint. A kindly bystander tried to comfort him. *I can’t imagine what must be running through that poor man’s*

head. What will he say to Morgan's parents if he comes home without their daughter?

One minute...two minutes...three minutes...With each minute that ticked by, I knew the risk of Morgan sustaining brain damage grew. *Dear Lord, we need to find her!*

The hole gradually grew bigger, but there was still no sign of Morgan. More and more people joined in to help. Several of the lifeguards called out directions to better organize the effort.

We dug and dug. My arms burned. My eyes stung. My adrenalin surged. *We need to find Morgan. And we need to do it really fast.*

I could hear people crying behind me. I didn't look at them. I focused on one thing: digging. The people close around me did the same thing. And as I dug, I sent up a silent prayer that we would find Morgan. *Alive.*

Four minutes...five minutes passed. We kept digging.

"I think I see something! I think I see hair!" a man two feet in front of me shouted. Our digging efforts zeroed in on the spot where the man pointed.

I squinted in the sunlight. The man was correct; I could see that there was definitely something there in the sand. *Dear God, please let it be Morgan!*

First, I saw some dark brown hair emerge. Then a forehead, nose, mouth, and a chin. By the grace of God, we had found her!

Morgan's eyes were closed and her face was completely blue. Officer McGovern opened her mouth to try to open her airway, but her mouth was filled with sand. A lifeguard held Morgan's head steady while Officer McGovern scooped the sand out of her mouth. I could clearly see that she was unconscious, but I wasn't sure whether or not she had a pulse. *Is she alive? Will she make it? Can she survive?*

Several of us kept carefully digging to free the rest of Morgan's body. One of our members, Colleen Harper, held an oxygen mask to Morgan's face. I marveled at how Morgan's small body was absolutely vertical in the sand. It appeared as though she had been literally buried alive. The six-foot hole she had dug must have suddenly caved in on her while she was standing in it.

The crowd buzzed with excitement as word spread. “We’ve found her! We’ve found her!”

After we finished digging Morgan out, we carefully hoisted her up out of the hole. Suddenly, her eyes snapped open and she took a big breath. *She’s alive!*

Morgan blinked, her eyes glazed with confusion. Coughing, she reached toward her mouth to brush out more sand.

“Oh, my precious child. Oh, my beautiful Morgan,” her grandfather sobbed, kneeling down next to her. “I love you so much!” Tears of relief streamed down his face.

Morgan nodded her head and reached toward Grandpa. The two embraced, rocking back and forth as they tightly hugged each other. “Time to take you to the hospital to get checked out, sweetie,” he said gently.

We transferred Morgan onto a backboard and carried her off the beach to our first aid stretcher, which was set up on the boardwalk. As we walked by, the crowd of bystanders clapped and cheered wildly.

I knew Morgan wasn’t totally out of the woods. I realized that she may have aspirated sand into her lungs, which could cause complications such as pneumonia. There was also a risk that she may have suffered an anoxic brain injury. But for now, I rejoiced that she was alive!

On that day, God acted through many people, including volleyball players, police, EMS, lifeguards, and bystanders to miraculously rescue Morgan. That day stands out in my memory as one in which many people joined together to form a patchwork team that quickly formed a cohesive unit. A cohesive unit that, with the divine intervention of the Lord, saved the life of a little girl.

Morgan made a full recovery. She did not suffer any ill consequences and was released from the hospital the next day. A true miracle!