

ON  
HEAVEN'S  
DOORSTEP

ANDREA JO RODGERS



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## ON HEAVEN'S DOORSTEP

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This book is dedicated in memory of our beloved niece, Amanda "Dada" Rodgers, who unselfishly put others' needs before her own.

It is also dedicated in memory of my dear friend Lorraine "Lori" McBride, who was one of the kindest, most thoughtful people I have ever had the honor and privilege to know. Her light shines on through her husband, Kerry, and her six wonderful children, Orla, Eden, Erin, Emma, Abby, and Ryan.

Lastly, this book is dedicated in loving memory of my dear friend and fellow first aid squad volunteer, Andrea Raffetto. Andrea's kindness, compassion, and tremendous strength and courage in the face of adversity were a beacon of light to all those who knew her.

.....

*We wait in hope for the LORD; he is our help and our shield.  
In him our hearts rejoice, for we trust in his holy name.  
May your unfailing love be with us, LORD,  
even as we put our hope in you.*

PSALM 33:20-22

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## Preface

**D**uring times of crisis, many of us turn to the Lord for help. At these moments, the volunteer EMS (emergency medical services) community is blessed to be able to serve as instruments of Jesus. In these frightening times, as we perch on heaven's doorstep, we may unexpectedly find inspiration.

## Volunteer Members of the Pine Cove First Aid Squad

**Flynn Adams**—high school student

**Jessie Barnes**—optometrist

**Dillon Chapman**—college student  
studying to become a high school  
teacher

**Mason Chapman**—auto mechanic

**Jillian DeMarco**—library volunteer

**Barry Evans**—waiter

**Colleen Harper**—college student  
studying to become a speech  
therapist

**Archie Harris**—retired state employee

**Helen McGuire**—nurse

**Gary Meyers**—college student  
planning to become a stock broker

**Chris Nicholson**—computer analyst;  
also, a volunteer member of the fire  
department

**Ted O'Malley**—retired from a career  
in the national park system

**Meg Potter**—social worker

**Andrea Jo Rodgers** (the author)—  
a thirty-year volunteer reflecting  
on first aid calls from her early  
years on the rescue squad; physical  
therapist

**Jose Sanchez**—recently retired from  
a career in politics

**Buddy Stone**—retired  
pharmaceutical salesman

**Alec Waters**—special officer for the  
police department (summers);  
college student planning to  
become a veterinarian

**Kevin Wong**—graduate student  
planning to become a  
psychologist

## Members of the Pine Cove Police Department

Officer Jack Endicott

Officer Mitchell McNair

Sergeant Derrick Flint

Officer Brad Sims

Dispatcher Jerome Franklin

Officer Fred Smith

Officer Vinnie McGovern

## Paramedics

Rose Anderson

Paula Pritchard

Ty Fleming

Kennisha Smythe

William Moore

Arthur Williamson



## The Wedding Gift

*I will give thanks to you, LORD, with all my heart;  
I will tell of all your wonderful deeds.  
I will be glad and rejoice in you;  
I will sing the praises of your name, O Most High.*

PSALM 9:1-2

**H**oney, I feel lousy,” J.J. Fisher said to Cherice, his wife of 50 years. “I’m going to lie down in bed for a bit and see if that helps.” From the moment he first opened his eyes that morning, J.J. didn’t feel quite right. He thought a bowl of warm oatmeal and a cup of coffee would help, but it didn’t. Then he thought some fresh air might do the trick, so he walked their German shepherd, Juno, around the block. Unfortunately, that didn’t help much either. In fact, if anything, he felt a little worse. *Maybe I’ll lie down for an hour and try to rest.*

“Are you all right, J.J.? What’s wrong?” Cherice asked with concern. J.J. and Cherice had been friends since childhood. In high school, their friendship unexpectedly blossomed into love. The dewy-eyed pair got married when they were 21, and J.J. began working in the family shoe business. He had finally retired a year ago, at age 70. Now his son, Geoff, ran the store.

“I don’t think last night’s dinner is sitting right with me,” J.J. answered as he sat down heavily on the edge of his bed. “I’m going to take an antacid pill and put my feet up for a bit.”

“Do you think you’ll be all right to go to Tiana’s wedding?” Cherice asked. Their grandniece Tiana was getting married at the Good Shepherd Church in Pine Cove at one o’clock, with a reception to follow at Pennington Manor.

“Are you kidding? I wouldn’t miss it for the world,” J.J. responded emphatically. *Family is everything to me. It’s the foundation of my life. I love each and every one of them dearly!*

J.J. lay down, closed his eyes, and drifted off into a restless sleep. Two hours later, he awoke when Cherice gently shook his shoulder. His daughter, Jasmine, the spitting-image of his wife, stood next to her. “J.J., I tried to let you rest for as long as possible,” Cherice said. “But it’s time to get up and get ready for the wedding if you still want to go.”

“I’m afraid I’m going to have to pass after all,” J.J. said, closing his eyes again. “I’m going to stay home and rest. You go ahead without me.”

Cherice and Jasmine immediately grew alarmed. “Now, Dad,” Jasmine said, “I know you must feel truly awful to even consider missing Tiana’s wedding. The thing is, I don’t feel comfortable leaving you here alone like this. I’ll make you a deal. Come with us. If you feel at any point that it’s too much, I promise to drive you home and stay with you.”

J.J. scratched his head indecisively, but then he caught the pleading looks both his wife and his daughter gave him. “Okay, okay. Just give me a few minutes to get dressed.” J.J. saw the relief in their eyes. *Family first. If it puts their minds at ease for me to go, then I’ll go.*

Although J.J. normally liked to drive, he wasn’t feeling up to it today. Instead, Jasmine drove the three of them to the church. Once J.J. stepped through the welcoming doors of the old building, he knew he’d made the right decision to come. *Everything will be fine. I’m surrounded by my family, and it’s such a joyous occasion.* The wedding, a beautiful and heartwarming affair, brought tears to his eyes. Tiana looked positively radiant, reminding him of the day when he and Cherice celebrated their own special wedding so many decades ago. *Thank you, Lord, for so many wonderful years. I wish the very same blessing, a wedding gift if you will, for my niece Tiana.*

After the wedding, Jasmine drove the trio across Pine Cove to

Pennington Manor, a banquet hall known for its festive decor and fine cuisine. “Are you feeling any better, Dad?” she asked, gently patting him on the forearm.

“Well, I truly wish I could say I was feeling better, but I just don’t feel right. Perhaps the appetizers will help settle my stomach,” J.J. answered. He had begun feeling rather queasy toward the end of the ceremony.

“Do you want to go to the hospital? Should we call for an ambulance?” Cherice asked. She placed her hand on J.J.’s forehead to see if it felt warm.

“No, no. It hasn’t gotten to that point yet,” he answered, reaching for a mini quiche.

“Do you promise to tell us if it does get to that point?” Cherice asked, concerned that her husband might not want to say anything for fear of interrupting the festivities.

“Yes, I promise. Now you girls stop your worrying, and let’s enjoy this reception,” he said, trying his best to muster up a smile.

The cocktail hour passed quickly. J.J. munched on a bite-size crab cake, but it tasted like sawdust. Next, he sampled a jumbo shrimp, normally one of his favorite things. However, even the shrimp held no appeal for him today. He decided to focus on sipping a glass of ginger ale to calm his upset stomach. *I’m glad it’s time to sit down.* He took Cherice’s arm, and they slowly made their way to their table. His son, Geoff, and daughter-in-law, Crystal, were already seated, but they quickly stood up as J.J. and Cherice approached.

“Feeling any better, Dad?” Geoff asked, a frown clouding his face. “You look tired.”

“I do feel tired right now, son. But I’m going to put it out of my mind and enjoy the afternoon.” *I’m not going to let a little fatigue mar this special day.*

After the salad was served, the band began playing a slow number. Normally, J.J. jumped at the chance to dance with his wife. But today his body was simply not up to it. He felt beads of cold sweat erupt on his forehead, and he started getting a tight feeling in his chest. *Are they still playing music? It’s getting really hard to hear.* He turned and tapped his wife on the forearm. “Honey, do you remember when I promised I

would tell you if I need an ambulance?" he asked, his hand trembling slightly.

"Yes," Cherice replied with alarm. "J.J., what's wrong?"

"Call 911," he replied, before slumping forward in his chair and surrendering to a world of darkness.

.....

**DISPATCHER:** "Request for first aid at Pennington Manor for a 71-year-old male who is unresponsive."

I'd recently finished graduate school and was busy studying for my physical therapy state board licensure exam. I initially joined the first aid squad when I was in high school. (I hate to admit it, but that was 30 years ago.) At that time, I spent summers working as an office clerk at the beach. One hot summer day, a special officer (that is, beach cop) who was a volunteer with the squad convinced me to join. I've been blessed to serve my community ever since. I'm fortunate that I've been able to respond to more than 7,000 first aid and fire calls.

When I heard the tones go off on my pager, I tossed aside my textbooks and rushed out the door. Because Pine Cove is a small town, our volunteers respond to emergency aid calls from our homes. When our pagers are activated by the police dispatcher, we drive to the first aid building to get the ambulance. Our building, which is next door to the police and fire departments, houses three ambulances and has a few meeting rooms. Once we have a crew ready, we proceed to the scene.

Jessie Barnes climbed into the driver's seat and pulled the rig onto the concrete apron in front of our first aid building. Jessie, a dedicated volunteer, tended to answer first aid calls on nights and weekends when he wasn't working his paying job as an optometrist.

Gary Meyers, Flynn Adams, and I piled into the back of the ambulance. Gary was taking business courses in hopes of becoming a stock broker in New York City, but he still managed to find time to answer first aid calls. "Andrea, grab the defibrillator in case we need it," he

suggested to me as we pulled up at the scene. “I’ll get the suction. Flynn, get the first aid kit. Jessie can bring in the stretcher.”

“I’m on it,” Flynn said. Flynn, a high school senior, was hoping to go into a career in law enforcement. His mother had told him to go to college first and take some courses in criminal justice to make sure that was what he wanted to do with his life. She also suggested he volunteer with the local rescue squad to gain experience in crisis response.

We grabbed the necessary first aid equipment from the rig and hurried up a light gray stone path to the main entrance of Pennington Manor. A young hostess stood at the front door, pointing anxiously toward the main dining hall. “You’d better hurry,” she said urgently. “I heard he collapsed.”

We stepped into a crowded dining area. It was obvious that a wedding reception was in full swing. I spotted two police officers kneeling on the ground, close to a large round table by the dance floor. “It looks like they’re doing CPR,” I said.

“It sure does,” Gary said. “Let’s get that defibrillator on him right away.” At that time, defibrillators, which are used to defibrillate (shock) patients who are in ventricular fibrillation, were new to our squad, and the police department was not yet carrying them. If a patient is in ventricular fibrillation, his heart quivers ineffectively (like a pile of worms), instead of contracting and relaxing as it normally does. Left untreated, ventricular fibrillation, or v-fib, quickly leads to death.

I’d responded to numerous calls in which we’d used the defibrillator, but I’d operated the machine myself only a couple of times.

I spotted our patient lying flat on his back on the navy-blue carpet, his fingertips resting on the wooden dance floor. Many couples stood anxiously close by. Officer Brad Sims was kneeling over the victim and performing vigorous chest compressions. Officer Sims, an imposing figure at six feet three and 220 pounds, had been on our local police department for about five years. Confident and self-assured, I believed he would make a fine police sergeant one day. “We’re going to need some suction,” he said.

I knelt next to Officer Sims and started preparing the defibrillator. I noticed that a petite woman was kneeling on the other side of the

patient, urgently shaking his shoulder. "Dad! Dad, wake up," she said, her voice trembling with emotion. "Please, Dad. Wake up."

Officer Jack Endicott, who was squeezing a bag valve mask (BVM) hooked up to a portable oxygen tank once every five seconds to breathe for the gentleman on the floor, was one of the youngest members of the police department. Passionate about his work, he was following in the footsteps of his father and grandfather before him.

"Our patient is a seventy-one-year-old named J.J. Fisher," he explained. "Family reports that he hasn't been feeling well all day. He collapsed a few minutes ago. We started CPR as soon as we arrived. This is his daughter, Jasmine; his wife, Cherice; and his son, Geoff."

"Please, help him," Cherice whispered softly from where she sat at a table, just a few feet away, tears sliding down her cheeks. Geoff stood behind her, placing his hand on her shoulder to comfort her.

"Is the suction unit ready?" Officer Endicott asked. "I'm starting to have a tough time getting the air in."

"Got it," Gary said, quickly suctioning some debris from Mr. Fisher's airway.

"Much better," Officer Endicott nodded. "It's going in easier now."

I attached the defibrillator electrodes to Mr. Fisher, placing one pad on his upper right chest just below his clavicle, and the other pad on his lower left ribcage.

"I still don't think he's breathing," Jasmine said, looking terrified. She moved closer to her mother. "Oh, Mom, what are we going to do?"

"Pray," I heard Mrs. Fisher whisper to her daughter, grabbing her hand and squeezing it tightly. "We're going to pray."

"Everyone clear," I directed, waving my arm over Mr. Fisher's body to make sure that no one touched the patient lest they also be inadvertently shocked by the defibrillator. Holding my breath, I carefully pressed the analyze button.

"Shock advised," the machine said. This meant that Mr. Fisher's heart must be in ventricular fibrillation (v-fib). The electrical activity of his heart had gone haywire, so his heart could no longer pump blood effectively. If a person is in v-fib, rescuers can try to restart the heart by shocking it with joules of energy from a defibrillator. However, if

the person is in asystole (also called “flatline”), his or her heart has no electrical activity at all and so cannot be shocked. If a person is in asystole, paramedics can administer epinephrine (adrenalin) in an effort to either convert the person to a normal heart rhythm or into v-fib, at which point he could be shocked with a defibrillator. Asystole is often irreversible. *People saw Mr. Fisher collapse, so I know it's a witnessed cardiac arrest. That means he has a chance.*

“Everyone clear,” I directed once more. I was dimly aware that the bride was standing off to the left side of me, sobbing softly.

“Uncle J.J., please be okay,” she cried. “Just wake up and be okay.”

The music stopped and the wedding party lapsed into an uneasy silence. I figured that by now, word must have spread through the entire crowd that Mr. Fisher had collapsed. Gingerly, I pressed the defibrillator’s red shock button. J.J.’s body jerked in response to the joules of energy that coursed through his chest.

“Check for a pulse,” the machine directed.

Gary slid his fingers into the groove along the left side of Mr. Fisher’s neck to feel for a pulse. “I have a definite carotid,” he said. “Nice and strong!”

I touched Mr. Fisher’s wrist to check for a radial pulse. “Good radial too,” I said. “Flynn, why don’t you try to get a blood pressure on that side.”

“J.J. didn’t feel well today,” Mrs. Fisher said. “In fact, he wasn’t going to attend the wedding. He wanted to stay home and sleep, but Jasmine and I talked him into coming with us.”

“Good thing you did,” Gary said.

If Mr. Fisher had been alone at home, he would not have had such rapid access to defibrillation. Instead, his family may have come home from the wedding to discover that J.J. had passed away in his bed. At least now he had a fighting chance for survival.

“Tiana, dear, please stop crying. It’s going to be okay,” Mrs. Fisher said kindly to the bride. She stood up and walked over to her. “You know how much your uncle loves family weddings.” The two clung together in an embrace of love and hope.

We carefully rolled Mr. Fisher onto a backboard, and then Officers

Sims and Endicott lifted him onto our stretcher. Gary kept squeezing the bag valve mask once every five seconds to ensure that Mr. Fisher received enough oxygen. Although his heart had started beating again, he still wasn't breathing on his own.

"The paramedics aren't available," Jessie said. "I'll radio ahead to the hospital so they know we're coming." Paramedics provide advanced life support (ALS) such as intubating the patient, establishing an intravenous line, and giving life-saving medications such as epinephrine.

*That's not good. It sounds like we'll have to transport J.J. without the ALS unit to help us.*

I helped Mrs. Fisher climb into the front seat of our ambulance, and then I quickly joined Gary and Flynn in the back of the rig. Flynn was switching the oxygen from the portable tank to the onboard unit while Gary continued to perform rescue breathing. Mr. Fisher remained unresponsive, his frail body motionless on the stretcher.

I sat down on the bench next to Mr. Fisher and peered closely at his face. "I think his color is improving," I said. His previously pale cheeks were now a warm shade of pink.

"I think so too," Gary agreed. "It looks as though he's starting to try to take breaths on his own. Hey, did he just move his foot?"

The three of us looked toward the far end of the stretcher, and I pulled the white cotton blanket up a bit so that we could see Mr. Fisher's feet better. At first...nothing. And then, after a long moment, we saw Mr. Fisher's right ankle wiggle ever so slightly.

"He's definitely starting to move," Flynn said. "It's a great sign!"

A moment later, Mr. Fisher's right arm reached up and began swatting at the bag valve mask. He simultaneously flexed his right hip and knee as much as he could, within the confines of the backboard straps.

I placed my fingers in Mr. Fisher's hand. "Squeeze my hand, Mr. Fisher," I said, and then I held my breath. I wasn't sure, but I thought I felt a gentle squeeze on my hand. "Squeeze it again, Mr. Fisher." This time, there was no mistaking it. He squeezed my hand! *Thank you, Jesus! He just squeezed my hand!*

Suddenly, as if a light turned on within him, Mr. Fisher began



taking deep breaths on his own. Gary switched the BVM to a non-rebreather mask. “Open your eyes, Mr. Fisher,” Gary said.

I wasn’t expecting Mr. Fisher to open his eyes. After all, he’d been clinically dead without a pulse for several minutes before CPR was started. Although he was breathing now, he hadn’t taken a breath on his own for at least 25 minutes before that. We’d breathed for him, supplying his brain with oxygen by squeezing the BVM.

To my joyous surprise, J.J.’s eyes flickered open, and he looked at our unfamiliar faces with bewilderment. “What happened?” he asked. “Did I pass out?”

*What a great question! What a wonderful, thoughtful question. Mr. Fisher is really thinking. He’s making sense.* “Yes, you could say that you passed out,” I replied. I decided that now was not the best time to tell him that he had been in full-blown cardiac arrest. *There’s plenty of time for the doctors and his family to tell him all about that later.*

“That’s funny. I don’t remember passing out at all. What about Tiana’s wedding? Where’s my wife?” He tried to turn his head to look for her, but the backboard straps limited him.

“Your wife is in the front seat,” Flynn answered. “We’re pulling up to the hospital right now, Mr. Fisher.”

Things happened quickly when we entered the emergency room. The staff sedated J.J., and then the respiratory therapist intubated him and hooked him up to a ventilator. *I’m afraid Mr. Fisher is going to have to save the rest of his questions for later.*

The next evening, several of our squad members attended a training course at the hospital. After the course, as I was leaving, I spotted Mr. Fisher’s son in the main lobby of the hospital and went over to find out how his father was doing. I tapped Geoff on the shoulder, and when he turned around, his face lit up with recognition.

“You’re one of the first aid squad members,” he said. “I’d like to thank all of you for everything you did for my father.”

“How is he?” I asked eagerly, hoping for good news.

“Fantastic!” Geoff replied, radiating with happiness. “He’s alert and oriented. The doc is already starting to wean him off the ventilator.”

“Wow, that’s wonderful news! You made my day!” I said, beaming back at him.

“My father’s cardiologist said that without early defibrillation yesterday, he would not have made it.”

*Thank goodness Mr. Fisher went to the wedding and didn’t stay home.* It was truly a blessing that he was in the right place at the right time. Through the power of prayer, combined with early defibrillation and CPR, Mr. Fisher would be able to enjoy many more years with his family. *A wedding gift to remember!*