Part One
Meet Rachel and Mark

Her laugh serenaded the trees like a tropical bird.

But Mark wanted so much more than her voice.

"You're so slow!" She yelled back.

Mark's side ache trumped his burning, dry throat for attention. "No kidding, Rachel." He dragged his feet to a stop, leaning his shoulder against a cedar tree, its sharp aroma assaulting him. Normally, he would welcome the redwood scent, but not now. The Dome Land Wilderness in the California Southern Sierras seemed like a good idea to get away for a long weekend with Rachel. Certainly he would get to know her *much* better now. But that was this morning. The drive seemed a lot longer than two hours from Kernville. He remembered it being shorter with the other girls. Maybe Rachel's continuous chatter warped time. Maybe she was nervous. They've only known each other for three months.

"See, this is why I wanted you to run with me every week," Rachel giggled, her smile cutting through the shadows of the trees. She stood only a short distance away up the huge granite rock.

"I am not…" he sucked wind, "…a triathlete like you. I think it's the altitude." Mark collapsed his head into his forearm using the tree for support. He watched his belly move in and out; blocking the view of his feet. He turned, and slid down the tree, peeling little pieces of bark with the back of his sweatshirt. He didn't care. He had to sit.

Why did God design him to be such a lug? He struggled in high school sports, never attracting the girls' attention like the real athletes did. At least he had money from his family's trust. That, he hoped, would attract the right attention.

Rachel jogged down to him and slid to a stop, throwing twigs across Mark's legs. "Ok, I guess you earned it.

We've been at this for…" she looked at her watch, "…oh, twenty minutes!" She laughed, and braced her hands on her knees, catching her breath.

Mark didn't laugh. He did enjoy the view, though. Her long legs reached all the way up to her running shorts. Her olive skin contrasted with the white UCLA shorts, and crimson USC sweat shirt. Even with those two rivals, she was always one for fairness, taking the middle ground. He focused on her blonde ponytail falling over her shoulder. Awesome. If he only had any energy he'd caress her now while they were alone, discovering nature so to speak. But that will have to wait until he had the energy to enjoy it.

She plopped down next to him as if she hadn't just outrun him, her breath normal.

How irritating.

Leaning over, she energized him with a deep, long kiss.

Mark's frustration melted in his lips.

Rachel opened her brilliant blue eyes. "There is more where that comes from, if you can get off your butt."

She jumped up and ran up the slope to the dome's ridge.

Rachel stopped and turned. She slowly pulled off her sweatshirt exposing her slender, though muscular body under an old Mira Costa High School track shirt. Her swimmer's shoulders set her apart from most twenty year-old-women. She tied the sweatshirt around her waist and beckoned with her index finger. "Come on big boy, if you have the energy. The view is great from up here."

She vanished over the granite ridge.

Mark had hiked domes before. These huge boulders stood as mountains where glaciers had scraped them into monolithic bowling balls thousands of years ago.

He staggered to his feet. This may kill him. He exhaled and sprinted up the slope towards the ridge. He would surprise her. She would never believe that he got a second wind, no matter how short-lived.

Mark tried to catch his breath– the ridge seemed farther

that he'd imagined. He stopped, again placing his hands on his knees. He knew he had to lose weight, closing in at a soft two hundred pounds. That didn't sit too well with a medium 6'0" frame.

One last burst, that's all he would need. He would clear the ridge and cross the dome's face where he'd catch her before she circled around the other side. He pumped his arms like a locomotive, puffing out air.

Yes, he was closing the gap.

He cleared the ridge, his lungs straining for air.

The valley spread out five hundred feet below him, miniature trees scattered as undisciplined soldiers among the sloping plane. The dome's smooth sparkling granite dropped off sharply, leading down to its face.

He stopped, stones skidding out from under his feet, racing each other in all directions to the great beyond.

Where was Rachel? The rock sloped away in all directions as if he were standing on a large granite bowling ball.

He controlled his breathing and listened. Nothing. "Rachel!"

Could she have run too far? No, she wasn't not that stupid.

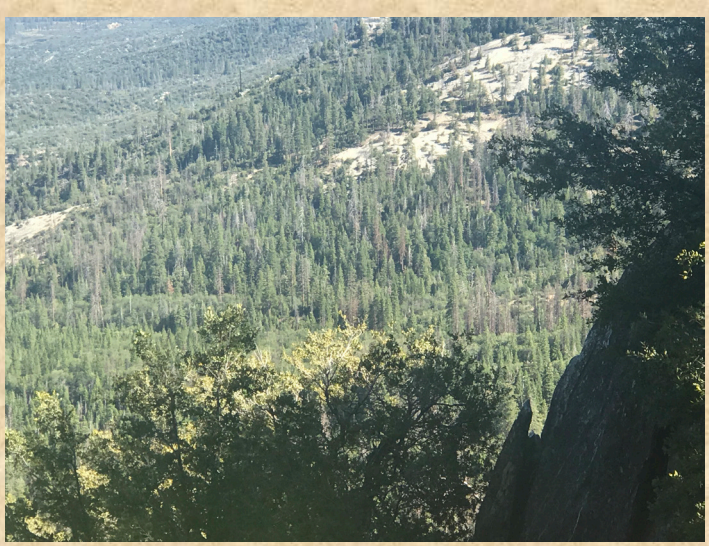
A lump of dread filled his stomach. He inched slowly down the face, afraid of what he may see. If she did fall, he'd never find her from up here. No, he couldn't think that way.

Maybe she was…

"Mark!"He jumped.

His feet caught some loose sand and pebbles, taking his balance away.

Mark slammed to the ground on his side and started to roll sideways.



He tried to grab for something, anything, but the granite was too slick.

Mark tumbled down the steep, right slope of the dome.

Stories flashed in his mind of people falling off Half Dome in Yosemite Valley.

Oh no!

Sky flashed by him.

He was air-borne, falling backwards.

Thump!

Mark landed on his back in a tree, needles cutting his neck.

He was alive, but pain seared his elbow. It felt scraped and shaking.

The bright sun blurred his tear-filled eyes.

“Mark!”

“Mark!” Rachel scurried down to a cleft in the rock only a few feet away.

“Mark, oh thank God you’re alive! Are you alright?” she sobbed. “I didn’t mean to scare you. I was just hiding from you in that little ditch. I am so sorry, please forgive me. I could have killed you.”

Mark glanced downward. The cedar tree stood about twenty-five feet tall on a thin rocky ledge. One step off the ledge was the canyon floor, hundreds of feet down. He tried to untangle himself. The tree swayed. He caught his breath and froze. “Rachel, I can’t move. I might fall through the tree. I need you to hold my arm as I step into the cleft.”

She extended her arm, watching her footing, which slid on the sandy boulder. Gravel jumped off the ledge bouncing down the granite slope to nowhere. She stopped.

What was he thinking? She couldn’t hold his weight. He was too heavy. He’d just take her down with him.

“Wait Rachel! Don’t do it! We’ll both fall!”

“No, I can do it, I’m strong.” She slid a little on the sand and then stepped back, they locked eyes. “Ok, I’ll go for help.”

Help? Where could she go? They were miles from any lodge or ranger station.

“Rachel, wait. I have the keys.” He tried to reach into his pocket, the tree swayed, and he slipped through the branches a bit.

Mark stopped and sighed. “I can’t risk throwing you the keys, they may fall.”

Mark heard a distant rumble. Puffy thunderheads climbed into the sky over the Mojave Desert, about fifty miles away. Were they coming this way? A humid breeze brushed across his face. If she were to run and get help, she may not be back until dark, and if a storm moved in…

Rachel turned from the sound and shot a fearful glance at him. She scurried up to the Dome and stopped,

cupping both hands over her mouth. “Help! Somebody? Help!” Panic seemed to take her hostage. She took out her phone, looked at it, and then dropped it to her side. She raised her head apparently pleading to the invisible God.

“Rachel, do you have *any* bars on your phone?”

She shook her head and sat down. Mark could hear her sniffling out apologies.

He rifled through his options. He couldn’t just stay here – not with the storm coming.

Should he take the chance and try to jump to the ledge

He’d never make the leap from his back. “Please God,” he whispered.

Maybe God was punishing him for hooking up with the other girls up here. God must hate him. Why had he thought he could just live his life spending his trust account money while trying to bed the next available woman?

Rachel sat on the dome rock cradling her head. The guilt of placing him in this position probably wrenched her stomach. Mark wanted to help her, but there was nothing he could do now. Her screams for help went unanswered for the last five minutes. It seemed like an hour.

Suddenly, she jerked her head up, looked around, and stumbled to her feet. Did she hear someone? “Hello? Help! Help us!” She waved her arms.

Who was it? Another hiker? Or better yet, a Ranger? Any man could help him.

Rachel ran over the ridge, out of his sight yelling. Mark’s heart raced. Who did she find?

A figure limped over the dome horizon with Rachel.

Oh no. An old man supported by a walking stick. Mark’s heart sank into his stomach. The old grey hiker wore khaki pants, a Hawaiian shirt, and sandals. He boasted an average height and weight but leaned on his staff with each step; hardly the picture of a rescuer.

The old hiker stopped and waved a little. What did the old guy think he was going to do? Save him? Mark’s heart fought for hope. He couldn’t endanger this old man, but what alternative did he have?