Part Three
Darkness Invades

The Dome Rock had become Mark's "fun house." First, he tumbled down the face to a certain death, only to be saved by a tree and a psycho old man. Then, this psycho somehow divulged Mark's previous visit with Stephanie, Rachel's roommate. Lastly, this guy convinced Rachel that he was an angel, destroying what plans Mark had secured to hook up with her.

The desert winds whistled their song through the deep canyons. Was it really the wind, or "spirits" cackling at the two humans?Rachel had calmed down, but still kept her distance from Mark. What a travesty this had turned out to be. Of course, the only consolation is learning of her bulimia. How could she? He didn't understand but would try to.

Mark's mind returned to Angelo's story. Angelo intrigued Mark with the angelic confrontations and band of seven angels commissioned by God to save Heaven. Yeah, right. Maybe it should be a movie. A"B" movie.

Angelo paused. It has been about two hours, now. Rachelle had not moved or talked from her little boulder. She looked enthralled.

Mark ran his hand over a smooth granite rock. It provided some comfort, but like life, rocks were hard. The sun moved toward the Greenhorn Mountain Range in the southwest, dueling with the breeze and dancing shadows. "Mark," Angelo called down from a large boulder toward the ridge, "you look as if you are in another world."

Cute. Mark stood up, stretched, and walked over to Rachel. Her jaw tightened has he inched closer. She refused to return his gaze. "Look, I know I'm a jerk," he whispered. She didn't budge.

Mark felt like someone dropped an anvil on his stomach. Was that weekend with Rachel's friend worth this?

Maybe he did care for Rachel more than the other girls. He had hurt her, and probably lost a good friend. She used to always look up to him for advice. Now, his recent relationship, no matter how brief, had driven a wedge between them.

And this Angelo guy. All of this God talk. He has a way with stories that was for sure. But Mark had preferred that Angelo save his stories for someone else instead of using them to drive Rachel farther away. How was he going to get her back?

The breeze cooled, and the dusk crept in. Mark and Rachel continued to listen to the story, but Mark knew they had to leave. He couldn't drive to Kernville on the narrow Kern River Highway in the dark. Some parts had steep cliffs, and frankly, he needed to get her away from Angelo. He had to convince Rachel that this guy was a fraud and take her up the road to the town of Ponderosa.

He leapt to his feet. "This has gone far enough, Angelo." He pointed his finger in Angelo's face. "I've figured you out, my so-called winged friend."

"Oh really?" Angelo smiled. He sat on his boulder, one knee up to his chest, and the staff to his left.

Mark turned to Rachel. "Please answer this question. When you ran up before me and onto the dome, did you do that to purge your food?"

Rachel didn't look at him. She sat there with her knees up to her chest, rocking.

Mark jumped up. He ran to the area where he last saw Rachel before his last gallant sprint. He reached the dome face. The shadow of the Needles Peak grew on the valley floor below. Next to it was a fire lookout. Was Angelo possibly the lone fire spotter who crossed the valley? He looked around the crevices. If she purged, it was after she kissed him. Over on the side next to the rock was a wet spot in a sandy crevice. Could it be? He had to play his hand.

Mark loped down the dome. "Well, I found it, right in the little ditch, Rachel."

She looked up at him, eyes tearing. For a second, he felt bad for her, but he had to make his point. “So, Angelo, my fine psychic phony, you didn’t know about Rachel’s bulimia before hand, you just spied while she performed her nasty ritual.”

Angelo’s face lit up. “Well, Mark, you do have a gift. I was beginning to think God forgot you.” He laughed. “Well, if what you are saying is true, then how did I know about Stephanie Anderson?”

“Simple, Angelo,” Mark pranced up to the elder’s face. “Stephanie and I were hiking all over the wilderness and Kernville. During that time, the area had a heat wave. She wore bikinis the whole time showing off her dove tramp stamp. You could have easily seen us in town, or spying on us in Ponderosa.”

He paused and looked back at Rachel, whose mouth had parted slightly.

Angelo shook his head. “Well, if more authors wrote like you think, we’d be selling more fiction in the bookstores.”

Mark looked at Rachel. She looked puzzled. He had to make his move.

“Come on, Rachel, we’ve got to talk, but not in the company of this perverted voyeur.”

Rachel raised her hand. “Wait, I want to learn just a little more, please tell me before we leave.

Mark half dragged her down the hill and yanked her into the car. “It’s too late to drive off the mountain. We have to stay in Ponderosa.”

The short drive to Ponderosa seemed like the last few steps to the gallows. Rachel’s silence bored into Mark’s mind. He couldn’t turn around and drive home, the narrow road scared him enough in the daytime. They had to keep to their plans and spend the night in the lodge. He hoped the lodge rented movies -- it was going to be a long, lonely night. Mark hated this empty feeling, and now it was here to accompany him during this late October weekend in the Southern Sierras.

He pulled off the main road and saw the lodge on the left. Mark hoped they had vacant rooms; he was bushed, and a little shaken. The bright red rafters reminded him of the old log cabin set that his dad passed down to him as a kid. The kit offered assorted, notched logs with roofing slats that he perched up on plastic supports. It bored him. He would have rather had an erector set.

Mark and Rachael entered the mountain lodge.

A small frail man stood behind the counter engrossed in the local newspaper.

"Hello, sir, do you have a vacant room?"

"Two rooms please," interrupted Rachel, a voice laced with icicles.

The old man looked up. Apparently he didn't recognize Mark from the time he visited with Stephanie. The man adjusted his reading glasses. "Certainly. We're at the tail end of the fall before the road closes. There's a slim chance of snow tonight."

"Snow?" cried Rachel. "You mean we could get snowed in?"

"Well, ma'am, at least until they open the road north to Springville. A ranger can escort you once the road is open."

Rachel's eyes rolled. Mark didn't feel much better about it. He wanted this disaster to end.

"Why don't you get some food at the highway where you turned in? You can walk there, if you want, but I never recommend it at night, unless you have your guardian angel with you. There are bears and mountain lions up here."

Mark caught Rachel's gaze as she spoke. "Yeah, we met one already, but Mark didn't think we needed his protection anymore."

Mark picked up the room keys. "Thanks, I've been there before. We'll drive to the restaurant."

At the café, Mark couldn't decide what was colder, Rachel's demeanor, or his chicken fried steak.

Some wild weekend this turned out to be.

After dinner, they drove back to the lodge. He could feel Rachel's frustration boiling when the first snow started to fall. By the time they entered their rooms, the wind had picked up. The night was going to be a cold one.

Mark stared at the television, but didn't see it. His thoughts traced the day. He wished that he and Rachel could have experienced what so many do in the mountains, God's country. Instead, he just stewed in his own personal hell of despair.

Fifteen channels. The stupid TV only had fifteen channels and most of those showed old movies with actors smoking themselves to death. How could these people live up here? There were no bars, no theaters, nowhere to go at night except that little store on the highway corner.

Mark could not decide which was darker, the forest outside, or his mood. He could feel Rachel's rage seeping through the wall from the room next door.

How did he get into this situation? He knew, it was the women, always the women. He didn't need a sign from God, like Rachel had asked for, only another girl. God had abandoned him at fifteen when his dad died in the military. His mother's eyes turned empty after that, and she died of cancer when he was nineteen. He was alone. He needed someone, any girl that could fill the gap in his heart, and that was with sex. But, the practice of using them sickened him.

He thought maybe Rachel would be different from the other girls. She was bright, but fun. The last three months have been a challenge to keep up with her, but he knew it was good for him. She seemed to really like him, up until today.

Then darkness overtook him. The power went out. The storm must have knocked down some power lines. He fumbled for his jacket, tripping over his shoes. Mark removed the flashlight from his jacket pocket. The room grew colder.

He walked to Rachel's room who answered the door fully dressed and shivering.

Mark took her hand. "Come on. Let's go to the main lodge. I remember a fireplace."

Luckily, a roof covered the walkway, but that didn't stop the wind from chafing his face. They reached the door and opened it. The room warmed him. Mark could see a figure sitting in a chair facing the fire.

"Boy, are we glad you have a fire here," said Mark.

Mark and Rachel sat in the chairs to the side of the gentlemen. The figure leaned forward and turned brandishing a smile. "Well, hello Mark and Rachel," said Angelo. "I see you found me. Now where were we, Rachel?"