Part Four

Darkness

How could she have been so stupid? She and Mark had something special. Rachel gave everything to him. Yes, foolishness played a part, especially her fantasy that Mark may have arranged this weekend in the Sierras to propose to her. Sitting around in this lodge with him during a snowstorm blackout, and of course with Angelo the talking angel, was not part of her imagination.

Stephanie. Stephanie Anderson. Rachel couldn't get that picture out of her mind. How could her roommate do this to her? All of this time Stephanie and Mark were hooking up behind her back, laughing at her. All she wanted was to get home.

"Rachel?" The voice stabbed her mind. It was Angelo, the "nipp-less" angel. Maybe Mark was right. What a tale he told about the angels fighting before time began. Did he really think she'd believe it? Good angels, bad angels fighting in Heaven…He should get a life.

"Rachel, are you alright?" Angelo muttered, his voice punctuated by the crackling fire.

Rachel didn't respond. No, she wasn't all right. What she really wanted to do was throw those hot embers in Mark's face.

Why should she answer Angelo? Even if he was an angel, what was he doing down here? Did he abandon God? God sure had abandoned her during her life. Still, she accomplished everything herself without His help.

Assuming He even existed.

"Rachel, you're in a dark space, aren't you?" said Angelo. His velvet voice annoyed her, the same voice that exposed her purging to Mark.

Rachel looked up, but Angelo continued to stare at the fluid flames, his right hand stroking his chin.

"Angelo," Rachel spoke, her jaw tightening. "I really don't think that is your concern. I am trapped here in a snowstorm with a nut and slut and want to sleep in this chair until help comes in the morning. I will ignore anything you ask or tell me."

Again, God had abandoned her. This time in the mountains, crushing what happiness she could have, no, was entitled to have.

"Rachel, Mark has betrayed you, not God." Angelo swung his staff onto his lap and inspected the handle. "Sometimes when I use this staff in the ice, I slip. I blame the cane, but the staff really didn't betray me. The staff was the same as it has always been, steady and predictable. I just used it wrong, or ignored its presence, and fell."

Angelo pointed the staff at her, handle first. "Rachel, your crutch is your preoccupation with your body, and the resulting bulimia."

"That's enough!" Rachel jumped out of the chair wrapping herself in her heavy coat. "That's enough about my purging." She caught Mark's gaze. He looked shocked. She could feel her neck veins bulging. "I hate you and Mark. My life was fine without you judging me!" She turned and ran, only pausing to swing the door open.

"Rachel!" Mark cried. "You can't go out there! It is too cold and dark. There are wild animals!"

Rachel ran out, crying into the darkness. The cold bit her feet as she darted blindly for the tree silhouettes. She didn't care. She didn't want to live. Mark could live with that guilt if she doesn't return. She heard his feet crunching in snow. His steps sounded softer as she ran further and faster. There was no way he could catch her. She ducked into the forest, and kept running. The snow had stopped falling. The full moon had appeared to guide her to nowhere.

The cold air burned Rachel's throat. Her skin strained to release her body heat from under her heavy jacket. The sky had cleared allowing the stars to stare down on one of the many lost souls on earth.

She slowed to a walk. "God, I don't know you, and I'm sure you don't know me," she whispered. The cold air numbed her face.

"Why did you make me give in to purging? Why can't I find a guy that likes me for who and what I am? I gave him my whole body, and it wasn't enough."

A gentle breeze called her through the forest trees. But it couldn't be God. He didn't know her, and certainly didn't love her.

"So, God," she pressed her lips, "Are you paying me back for hooking up with him? Is that it? Was our whole

relationship just a game to you?"

"Oh, let me teach Rachel a lesson," She closed her fists. "I will show Rachel that if she were to hook up with Mark, I will turn on her, and abandon her. She's a loser, always been a loser."

Rachel could feel the warm tears etching her cheeks, then the cold chapping her skin. She stumbled into a boulder hitting her knee. She sat and wept.

Rachel looked up, thrusting her fists into the air. "I don't want to die. I don't want to die. Please save me from myself. The doctor warned me that the purging will kill me, hurt my heart. I thought I beat it years ago. But today…" Her voice trailed off.

She could feel the cold, wet snow seep through her pants. She started to shiver, but didn't care. "Was I a bad person for purging? I didn't hurt anyone else." What was good? What was evil? She didn't know anymore.

What did Angelo say? …That the spirit world was all around us, that our deepest secrets were open scandal to them. She looked at her watch. 1:00 AM, still a long time until she would see the sun. She pushed the thin veil of snow off the rock and laid down, drawing her legs to her chest, hands in her armpits.

But she couldn't sleep, not out here. Rachel opened her eyes and stared into the dark woods, glowing from the full moon that had peeked over the ridge. Odd, very odd. A tall, slender object caught her glance. She sat up and rubbed her wet eyes, a streak of fear charging her spine.

A shack? Was it a shack? She stood and crouched down. What if there was an animal in there? A bear? Rachel sat back on the rock. If she stayed outside, she may freeze, or at least catch frostbite. She stood again and walked to the shed, straining her eyes and ears for any sound.

Nothing.

Rachel opened the door. Darkness assaulted her, but the moon lit up the shallow dwelling. Shovels, chain saws, and ropes claimed the floor space. She may be able to find her way back to her room, or maybe get lost. Anyway, Mark would find her. She'll stay here.

Rachel tossed the tools into the thin carpet of snow. Crawling inside, she closed the door and curled up on the floor.

The darkness enveloped her, and she fell into sleep. The darkness became a cold menacing evil, and she became a part of its setting. She could see and hear the angels now in Angelo's story. He had answered her plea. She now observed the events as they happened in Heaven so long ago.

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Mark ran back inside blowing warmth into his fists. "Angelo! Do something." He couldn't leave her out there. She may not survive the cold, the animals. She might run off a cliff!

Angelo hadn't moved. Mark charged in front of the chair and grabbed his collar. "You did this. You interrupted our lives and cast her into the darkness."

Angelo furrowed his brow. "No Mark, you did this. Don't you realize the repercussions of your secret actions?"

Mark tightened his grip. "You crashed into our lives, exposing our most inner thoughts and personalities. We were fine! All you had to do was walk away after helping me, not expose our secrets. Now look what you have done. Rachel may have gotten lost in the snow."

"Mark, she was already lost, and so were you."

Mark backhanded him across his face. The thought didn't occur to him when they grabbed hands on the rock, but his skin felt soft like a fuzzy peach.

Angelo's eyes remained fixed. "You pushed her back into bulimia, Mark. Do you remember staring at those sexy women in the Kernville River Park? You didn't say anything as you visually removed their bikinis, but you were telling her that she was too fat. Why do you think she put on her sweatshirt?

Do you think she was cold?"

Mark dropped Angelo back into the chair. He faced the door. The River Park? He didn't mean anything by that. He didn't know the girls, he just looked.

"No, Mark, she wasn't cold, she was ashamed. Even though she has a wonderful athletic body, your behavior told her that she was undesirable, so she purged again. She hadn't done it for quite a while. You brought back all of her insecurities."

Tears spilled from Mark's eyes. He didn't know he could have such an impact on someone else's fragile personality. Did he do this to other girls he dated?

Angelo tapped his staff on the floor. "You see, she conquered her bulimia years ago, but your wandering eyes and comments brought back her darkness."

"So, it's my fault, all my fault," Mark looked to the ceiling with open hands. "It's all my fault that she acts the way she does." Mark spun on his heels. "That's it, blame me all over again. Just like when my parents died, it was all my fault."

Mark covered his face with his hands. "I never should have told him that I hated him."

"Who, Mark?"

"My father. When I was fourteen, I told him I hated him and wished he was dead." Marked wiped his eyes, but it was no use. The tears filled his face. "And within a year, he died in the military."

Mark walked to the fireplace. He placed his hand on the mantel and searched the flames. "His death killed my mother. She never recovered and didn't want to live. Sure they said it was cancer, but she died of a broken heart. She loved him so much." He sniffed. "I killed them both, and now I may kill Rachel."

Angelo stood. "Mark, you and Rachel have been dead a long time."

Mark fell into a chair, weeping. He was exhausted and afraid. Maybe Rachel doubled back into her room. That was why he couldn't find her. His mind drifted into the light coming from the fire. Angelo resumed his story and this light became brighter as he fell asleep. He found himself in Angelo's story. He watched as good and evil battled for the control of Heaven. Mark felt warmth for the angels who fought for God and frigid fear for those who fought against Him.