

## Part Five

### The Light

Did the dripping water sing new life into Rachel, or was she dead? She couldn't open her eyes. She groped and pushed open the shack door while still lying on her side. The filtered light partially blinded her. This may be the bright light people talk about when they die. Has she gone from viewing the heavenly story to Heaven itself? She pried her frozen lashes open with her fingers, and raised onto one hand blocking the light with her other arm.

The dripping rhythm increased, tapping the shed roof like a novice percussionist. Tree limbs released pieces of snow, crashing into the moist ground outside the doorway. Her toes, she couldn't feel her toes, and her knee still ached from smacking it on the rock last night. Rachel forced herself up on her limp, but painful legs. She was alive, at Ponderosa, and had to get into the warm sunlight. The menacing large boulder this time invited her to rest. She stumbled to it and lay down, closing her eyes again.

A noise startled her. She turned, roaming with her eyes for a bear. An outline of a man, one strangely dressed, stood among the trees.

"Hello, Rachelle," spoke Angelo, or was it Angelo? The diction sounded the same, but the tone sounded harmonic, almost like a multitude.

Rachelle sat up, and shielded her eyes. Did he reflect the morning sun, or contribute to it? She couldn't be sure.

"Why did you want to leave us?" Angelo walked forward, no longer dressed in hiking clothes, but in white. His grey beard had melted to white, his glowing white hair falling over his shoulder framing his bronze face. He was anything but an old man. He was an angel.

"You see, we know about your thoughts of suicide."

Rachelle's eyes teared. She told no one of this, how did he know? So many times she fought the grip of depression. Sure, she had a great life, full of privileges and opportunities. But depression always haunted her.

"We know Rachelle. We know about your uncle when you were a little girl, and you are not to blame."

Rachelle tried to stand, her toes awakening to a life of pain. She dropped off the rock to her knees.

“I didn’t know what to do!” She buried her face in her hands. “I pretended I was asleep.”

“I know Rachelle. When you feel pain, God feels pain.”

Rachelle raised her head to the sky and yelled, “God! Why did you let him?”

Angelo stooped down and fondled the needled branch of a baby cedar. “Rachelle, I know you trusted your uncle, and he betrayed you. I know you trusted Mark, and he betrayed you.” Angelo looked up at the trees. He closed his eyes and released a tear as he extended his arms. “God is here, and he will never betray you.”

“But I wanted to die!” Rachelle shook her head. She couldn’t look at Angelo. She defiled herself, and let others defile her. Rachel felt impure.

“Rachel, do you remember Janet?”

Rachel nodded, but stared at the ground.

“Did you remember when Janet choked on that tortilla chip at the picnic?”

Rachel had almost forgotten about this.

“Well, at sixteen, you performed the Heimlich maneuver that you learned in your Red Cross CPR class.”

“Yes,” sniffed Rachel. “So, what?”

“Well, if you were not there, Janet would have died. The event would have happened whether you were there or not.”

“How do you know that?” Sneered Rachel.

“Actually, Rachel, there are hundreds, no thousands of people you have touched who have changed because of your influence. You just can’t see it from where you are.”

Two blue jays found a patch of grass and landed near her feet. “You see that little jay? God knows everything that little jay does and thinks. Don’t you think He would know your thoughts? You are so much more precious to Him.”

Angelo stood up and walked to a tree. He pried ice off the bark. He manipulated it between his thumb and forefinger and turned to Rachelle. “You see this ice?” He cracked a smile. “Molecules in the universe do not disappear. They always were and always will be. What do you think happens to this ice when it melts?”

Rachel cleared her throat. “It turns to water, a liquid, and then sinks into the ground into an aquifer, or evaporates into vapor which may become a cloud.”

“Very good,” said Angelo. “So, as a set of molecules, it never disappears, correct?”

“I guess so.”

“Just like you, Rachel.” Angelo inched closer and placed his hand on her shoulder. “You will always be Rachel to God, even after you leave this Earth, but in a different form. You are precious in His sight, and ever present in His heart.”

“But I am so flawed!” She slapped her hand on the ground. “You know me better than anyone. I am damaged and not worthy to be loved by anyone.” She lowered her voice to a whisper, “Mark just proved it again.”

“Rachel!” Mark’s voice cut through the trees. “Rachel, where are you?” She could hear him rustling through the forest like a moose. Should she answer him? He was her ride home, whenever that would come.

Mark plunged through the branches of a small fir and stopped. “Rachel.” He wiped his brow. “You’re alive, thank God.” Mark looked terrible, like he hadn’t slept a second. Hair mussed, clothes wrinkled, unshaven.

“I don’t think God is listening to you today, Mark.” Rachel looked away towards the rising sun.

“Rachel, Angelo exposed the real me to myself. I now realize that I am trying to find love the wrong ways. Please forgive me.” Mark sloshed over to a boulder.

Rachel tore her eyes away from the purple mountains towards Angelo. He was gone. The trees dropped more snow, this time crashing down on the small cedar that he had just felt. The limbs wavered.

Rachel longed for home. She didn’t want to be up here listening to this pitiful person begging for her forgiveness. Maybe she can find a ride when the ranger escort showed up, and then take a bus or train back to LA.

Rachelle stood, feeling life back in her legs. “Mark, I don’t need you, and I don’t want you.”

She tore off toward the lodge.

“Rachel!” Mark’s voice turned desperate, but not as desperate as last night. “Please, can we talk?” Mark’s voice strained as it faded. Rachel had to find another ride back. Maybe this was the time where she can find her way out of the darkness of her life. Just like these big trees, she was lost in the world of colossal problems with no way out; she had nobody to talk to.

Rachel found the trail and stepped onto the road in front of the lodge. Her breath had not kept up with her pace at this altitude, and she gulped in air.

The door opened.

“Hello, young lady,” the old clerk greeted her. “We were worried about you. Mark told me this morning that you had run out into the darkness. I hoped you went back into your room. These darn brownouts hit us with early winter storms sometimes. That is why we close in the fall.”

“I’m ok.” Rachel brushed her hair out of her eyes.

A Sherriff’s vehicle turned into the driveway. Finally, some sense of normalcy. “Hello?” Rachel waved. The Sherriff stopped and stepped out of his vehicle placing his hat on his head.

“Hello, is everyone all right here?”

“Yes sir.” Rachel’s voice cracked. Mark appeared from the trees. “Sir, can you give me a ride out off

the mountain, to a bus station or something?”

“Sorry,” said the Sherriff, his hands brushing some loose snow off his windshield. “I’m not going that far. I have to search these smaller streets for any disabled vehicles or emergencies.”

Rachel turned to Mark. “Come on, I guess we have no choice. But keep your mouth shut and just take me home.”



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Mark drove Rachel up the grapevine highway toward home in Los Angeles. They could have been two strangers on a Greyhound bus lost in their own worlds. Mark had to say something. The silent hours had gnawed at him.

“Rachelle, I know you don’t want to talk, but I have just one thing to say.”

Rachelle did not respond, a good sign.

“I know I hurt you, and I am sorry. I know that doesn’t mean anything…”

“You’re damn right, Mark. It means nothing.”

“...but I wanted to tell you that I plan to seek help for my sex addiction, pride, and guilt.”

Rachelle stared out her window.

“I learned a lot about evil, Rachelle, and that has been the choice of my life.” He stopped for her to talk, but she didn’t.

“I am not asking you to stay with me any longer, but to just someday find it in your heart to forgive me.”

Rachelle released a long sigh, but said nothing. She knew that she had changed also. God had sent an angel to save her from herself. Now, she must find her faith to entrust in Him.

Mark returned his eyes to the long steep Highway I-5, climbing out of the San Joaquin Valley. He, too, had quite a road to climb.

