

The Stranger's Gift by Helen Bea Kirk

1 Darkness

Ten years after Jack Sheldon began his flooring business thirty-five years ago, his younger brother Mike was in the army fighting for our freedom. The Sheldon men are not known for their mild-mannered style or sensitivity. Those traits, coupled with their physical size made for an imposing hulk of a man, well suited for battle. Without a specific direction in mind, Mike became a career military man; never marrying but never missing an opportunity with a willing woman either.

Retiring from the Army at the age of thirty-eight, Mike was at a loss as to what to do with his time, at first. He moped around his apartment in Florida for several months and spent hours on the beach doing nothing. Feeble attempts at writing a book produced nothing but irritation which caused him to work out his frustration in a gym, pushing iron. That had always been Mike's go-to cure all—a ball-buster weight workout.

He was at the gym giving one hundred and ten percent effort to his extreme work-out when a woman strolled over to him. She began asking him questions about his routine and admiring his muscles. Andrea Bell was a talent scout tasked with finding the right person for a fitness equipment commercial. The moment she laid eyes on Mike Sheldon she knew he would be perfect for the role and she convinced him.

In a matter of weeks, Mike was on an afternoon television ad for the ‘Proplexus One Thousand.’ It was billed as the only workout machine you’ll ever need to get the job done. The pay was a nice surprise and allowed him to buy the top of the line, loaded Ford truck he had always admired. Fame was fleeting and he was itching to do something ... anything.

His parents called him several times a month to say hi and ask too many questions. The last couple of years, he hadn’t been avoiding them like he used to. The last conversation he had with them was still niggling at his brain. They mentioned Jack was looking for help at his flooring company and that Mike’s name came up as a possibility.

Having spent his entire youth being called “Jack’s little brother,” it was great to be his own man in the Army. No Jack to be compared to.

“Jack got married; when are you going to marry?” Dad had asked. There was never a shortage of questions about measuring up. “Jack started a company. Mike, when are you going to settle down in one spot?” With the birth of each of Jack’s children would come the “legacy” questions. “So, Mike, don’t you want kids so you can leave your mark? A man has got to have a kid.”

It got old.

Mike knew the day would come. The day he would have to choose his path; stay Jack’s little brother or man up to see himself as Jack’s equal and help him out with his business. There were definite perks to the idea of going back to Texas and being near his parents. Nothing could compare to a Texas woman in Mike’s imagination because one of them took a chunk of his heart in high school, then married a football buddy of his. His broken heart had been the added incentive which drove him to enlist. The Army could thank a skinny, flirtatious, seventeen-year-old redhead for Mike’s service.

Being in Texas meant he could live at his parent’s house and save thousands of dollars in rent. Knowing his mom and dad wanted him at Jack’s company made moving in with them a sure bet.

The call came.

Jack’s voice was older, more mature and wiser sounding which caught Mike off guard. What happened to the cocky, demeaning guy who never let you get a word in? This Jack was technically a stranger, and Mike was okay with working for a stranger, especially with what Jack offered him.

The deal was, Jack wanted to retire and spend more time with his wife and grandchild. Not wanting to choose between his grown children for the position of CEO, he went to Mike. “My three boys are each very good at what they do in the company and I don’t want to upset the apple cart. Mike, if you’ll come in and learn from each of them, it would be great. Then you and I will meet periodically for discussions, I believe you’ll do fine as CEO of Sheldon’s Flooring.”

The job description sounded fine to Mike. His comfort at trying this new direction was due in large part to the fact that he could survive just fine without a Sheldon Flooring paycheck. Worst case scenario; in the event Jack pissed him off, he could quit and be fine.



“Sarah’s vision is extremely poor in both eyes,” Dr. Dabney explained to the O’Brien family. “Sarah has a corneal disease called Keratoconus, often referred to as ‘KC.’ Her cornea is becoming progressively thinner and is assuming an incorrect corneal shape. It’s a bit unusual to see this level of deterioration in a teenager. Glasses will work for a while. For now, we’ll monitor her KC closely. My associate, Dr. Labreck will do the surgery when the time comes.”

To help her parents pay for the expensive glasses, she accepted a cash paying job tutoring high school and college students in math; her favorite subject. Every day after school, Sarah walked a mile to teach at ‘Excel in Math,’ a math tutoring business in the Applegate shopping center in Newtown, Arkansas. She loved teaching and only became frustrated with it when she grew exceptionally tired. Her vision blurred worse, then. Occasionally, Sarah required a student to describe how they worked a math problem so she could visualize it in her head. No amount of squinting could clear her visual blanket of fog in those moments.

The eye appointments had been gaining in frequency since Sarah graduated high school. She was grateful her sight allowed her to reach her educational goals. To her surprise and disgust, she was infamous. She was the first Valedictorian of her high school to miss the steps to the platform and fall on her face. During graduation practice, no one mentioned steps or how many. As Sarah accepted multiple awards and her diploma that day, she wondered what her parent’s expressions were. It would have been amazing to see their faces.

When numerous parents revealed their child’s marked improvement in Math class, Sarah was given an award for excellence in teaching from Excel in Math. The owners increased her pay which encouraged Sarah to continue tutoring—even through her college years. When glasses no longer provided Sarah vision, Dr. Dabney outfitted her with special contacts to combat her corneal distortion. The contacts had been sufficient however lately, they only added to her eye pain. The last several years had been marked with visual ‘blackout’ periods and increasing pain. Sarah imagined the dark god of blindness was teasing her with spells of blackness. It seemed she had become a pawn in a terrible game.



“What’s the next step?” she asked knowing it would take a miracle to restore her sight.

Doctor Dabney’s expression was bleak. “Sarah, you have battled a long time with the disease,” he said empathetically. “I have watched you struggle through high school and college. I don’t know how you did it. What you have accomplished is truly impressive. You are more than legally blind. The next step is a corneal transplant. Nurse Ellis will set you up with a beeper for immediate notification when we get a cornea donor. That is the only answer.”

The looming question in Sarah’s mind made it to her lips, “Am I waiting for someone to die so I can see?”

“Yes, unfortunately. Someday technology will replace the human cornea but not yet.”

Never a victim, Sarah popped up from the complicated eye exam contraption and smoothed her dress. “Thank you, Dr. Dabney. I appreciate your straight talk and look forward to the transplant.” They shook hands as was their habit. Nurse Ellis entered the exam room moments later with paperwork and a beeper.

“Think of this beeper as your key to a normal life, Sarah,” said Nurse Ellis. “Good luck.”

Sarah went home to cry for her donor and wait.

End of chapter 1.

The author encourages you to go to Amazon and download the book free on Amazon Kindle Unlimited.