

The BLIND
WOMAN

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LOVE SEES LIGHT, NOT DARK

The Blind Woman

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Prologue

Richmond Hill 1991

ONE-MINUTE BOB and Mary Taylor, with their thirteen-year-old daughter Celeste, were on their way home after a night of merry celebration with family and friends to welcome 1991, and the next...

Their world turned upside down.

The impact of metal against metal, the grating, and the screams came when the oncoming Mercedes slid on black ice and careened into Bob's Ford head-on. Celeste's ears pulsed under the agonizing volume. Nausea rose so fast so sharp it stole her breath. Celeste screamed as the wave of panic swelled inside her, pushed up into her throat, choking her. Then...

Bob lost control of the car.

The car spiraled, zigzagged across both lanes. Celeste saw her parents' body fling back and forth like a lifeless rag doll in the front seat. Mary's piercing screams filled the car as her husband's bloodied head bounced off the steering wheel. Blood spurted from the gash on his head, spraying his wife's face red.

"No, Mom, don't take your seatbelt off," Celeste shouted when a dazed Mary started to unbuckle herself to grab hold of her passed out husband. "Brace your head with

your arms. Do it, Mom. Now.” Celeste’s words tinged with the terror choking her compelled Mary to do as told.

Next thing, the car cut across the banks of Lake Wilcox and became airborne. The high-pitched cracking sound that filled the silence when the front end of the car hit the smooth sheet of frozen lake water was as stunning as it was frightening. In one quick, ugly moment, Celeste drowned in fear so great that it numbed her body. Terror and fear punched Celeste in the stomach harder when the car’s nose fell through the crack in the ice and began to sink to the muddy bottom of Lake Wilcox.

It was dark, so very dark. Sinister shadows lurked in its blackness. The coldness of the lake penetrated the walls of the car. Focused on surviving, neither woman felt it.

Celeste’s headache was expanding inside her skull, and her vision was becoming blurred.

She tried to thrust the car door open, but the force of the water pressing against it made it impossible.

The front half of the car filled with water. Celeste could feel her choked gasps wanting to rise into shouts, screams, and prayers she’d never prayed. Nothing came out.

Celeste heard her mother gasp for air then... Silence.

The silence was eerie.

A fear so sharp curled in Celeste’s gut, snaked down to the soles of her feet. She called out to her mother but was sidetracked by the wall of water rising, filling the back half of the car. Struggling for air, Celeste frantically slammed fists against the window. Nothing happened. Then...

The darkness came.

CELESTE LAY ON THE COLD, SNOW-COVERED ground. A wind, cold enough to pierce bone, swept over

her. Raw with wet, the chill dug deep into her. She was cold, so cold, and she began to shiver. The man covered her with his coat, and the warmth came over her.

Celeste thought she heard the muffled sound of a man's raspy voice come at her. Exhaling a breath of relief, she heard him thank God she was breathing. In the distance, she thought she heard the wail of an ambulance. Maybe it was the wind. She wasn't sure.

The man's raspy voice encouraged her to hang on. Just hang on, she heard him repeat and assure her she was going to be okay.

Celeste asked the raspy voice where she was, but he didn't answer. Celeste thought of her parents, asked where they were if they were okay.

The man she sensed was standing watchful over her said nothing.

Celeste shouted the question at the man again, but he wouldn't answer. Instead, he took his coat back, and she thought she heard the crunch of ice—one person, two, maybe three—underfoot as he walked away.

One

Seven Years Later

STANDING BY THE water's edge, silent tears coursed down Celeste's face. Her breathing was short and shallow, and even under a blazing June heat, a cold sweat swept over her. Celeste's face sheened with it and nerves and nausea swirled in her knotted stomach as the thought she couldn't go on living in the darkness that was her life swirled in her head.

Thoughts of her parents flashed in her mind. They'd been gone for seven years, but not a day went by when she didn't think of them. When Celeste did, she felt so alone, empty, and guilty for having survived the accident. She should have died with them. They'd be together if she had.

The tears welled in Celeste's eyes.

Taking a step closer toward the murky water, air redolent with pine, wet peat, and grass flowed around Celeste. Above her, she heard a flock of birds flitting, tweeting in song. Celeste listened to the soft wind fluttering through tree leaves she pictured shaded in deep summer green, felt the shafts of sunlight beaming from a cloudless sky.

In Celeste's mind, she saw the lush, green carpet at her feet stretching for acres around her. She smelled horses and

grain and hay coming from the school's stable. She pictured the still, murky water of Heart Lake mirroring everything around it as tall clusters of reeds swayed in the wind.

Tears glimmered in her eyes, and Celeste covered her face with her hands. She would never get used to the darkness. She couldn't settle to visualizing in her mind what she couldn't see anymore. She would never—what was it the doctor called it?—conform to her new blind life.

It had been seven years since Celeste watched her parents' car plunged into the icy waters of Lake Wilcox to their death. Seven-years since Celeste, as the sole survivor, had to deal with the consuming guilt that corroded her soul. It had been seven-years of undergoing therapy and coaching on how to live in a blind world alone. It had been that long since Celeste was thrust into the complete blackness that was her life now.

Celeste wanted to see again. She wanted to be able to cast her eyes on the low rolling hills, enjoy the majestic pines that scented the air. She wanted to see the bright rays of the burning sun she felt on her skin, the blue sky, and follow the flight of birds she heard wildly chirping with her eyes.

Goddamnit, she wanted her eyesight back. She wanted her parents back.

Alone and in total darkness weren't how Celeste wanted to face the world when she opened her eyes every morning. It was a huge dark place with hidden obstacles, with voices coming out of nowhere, with beauty around her she couldn't see. She couldn't do it anymore.

Her palms damp, her heart hammering in her ears. Celeste drew in a breath and started to walk into the murky waters of Lake Wilcox—the same waters that took her parents' life and her sight.

It wouldn't take long before the water became deep enough to sink to its depths and fall into permanent darkness with her parents. It wouldn't be long until she'd be able to shed the smothering guilt that made her chest constrict, as if there was a massive boulder pressing down every hour of every day for surviving.

"You don't want to do that," he said, staring at her.

She was long, lean, and leggy in intriguingly snug jeans and a pomegranate-pink shirt. She had an illustrious cascade of chestnut hair that spilled down to her shoulders. She was stunning.

Startled by the unexpected voice that came at her, Celeste tumbled back, tripped, and fell on her butt. A scream rose in her throat to drown in a flood of panic. On instinct, Celeste looked around her but saw only darkness.

"Who are you? Leave me alone." Celeste's voice was shaky, jumping with nerves.

"You from the school up the way? St. Lucy's is it?" he said, low-voiced to calm her panicked mind.

"Please don't hurt me? I have no money, nothing of value to give you." Celeste frantically felt her way around her for what he gathered was something to protect herself.

He flicked the cigarette into the water, walked closer to her. "Why would I want to hurt you when I just saved your life?"

The look of fear in Celeste's eyes turned into hardened defiance, and she bolted to her feet. "Don't flatter yourself. I wasn't planning on doing ... whatever that tiny brain of yours is thinking." She knuckled tears from her eyes.

"Good to know." Her eyes, a rich green set in a delicate face, glared defensively. A good sign of survival, he thought.

“Don’t touch me.” Celeste pulled away when she felt his hand clamp around her arm.

“I’m sorry. I just wanted to draw you away from the water’s edge. My name is Matthew.”

“I don’t care.” Celeste’s eyes glinted with a rage so sharp they would have lit him on fire.

“Are you all right?”

“I was until you scared the shit out of me. Jesus, the sickness is still circling in my belly.”

“I’m sorry I startled you,” Matthew said, and seeing shaky hands brush the strands of chestnut hair from her face, added, “And I’ll have you know my brain is not small. I’d say more average size,” to infuse levity to the moment. Her answer was an icy smile. Still, Matthew considered it a small victory.

“That’s up for debate,” she shot back.

“Would you like a bottle of water? I have an extra one in my backpack.”

“No. Leave me alone.”

“I can’t do that. Take the water,” he said, drawing the bottle from his bag.

For a moment, Celeste willed him to combust. When she resigned to the fact it wasn’t possible, she said, “Fine, but none of that fizzy designer stuff.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it. Here you go.” Matthew was glad Celeste couldn’t see the confusion in his eyes when she reached out for the bottle where it wasn’t.

On a windy sigh, she held her hand out, palm up. “It’s St. Lucy’s School For The Blind you simp.” Celeste gave no indication she was blind, and his stunned look came with shock. A stretch of silence followed as he digested that. “You better not be waving your hand in front of my face.”

Matthew pulled his hand back, set the water bottle into her upturned palm, and tucked idle hands in his jeans pockets. "Of course not."

"Mmm-hmm." Uncapping the bottle, Celeste dropped straight down on the cushion of grass.

"May I join you?"

"Can I stop you?" Hearing Matthew plop down next to her, she said, "Didn't think so. Are you always this annoying?"

"I'll have you know I'm very popular with the ladies." Matthew reached into his shirt pocket for the pack of cigarettes. "Would you like one? Sorry, it's a cigarette."

"Yes, I would." Holding her hand out, she waited for the pack to be set in her hand.

"What'd you do that for?" Matthew cried out, watching the cigarette pack disappear below coffee-colored water. "Are you always this irritating?"

"You should be thanking me. Those things will kill you."

"I wanted one," Matthew mumbled under his breath before turning to her. "Are you all right? You're not going to do this again, are you? Well, are you?" Matthew prodded when she didn't answer him.

On a long breath, Celeste rested her chin on her knees, hugging them tightly to her body. "No, I'm not. I, ah, guess I should thank you."

"There's no need for thanks." Matthew didn't tell her he had one shocking moment when he'd been sure she meant to walk straight into the water.

"All right then, I take it back." Celeste looked up to let the sun bathe her face.

Matthew stretched out next to her. Looking up to a blue sky, he let the sunshine pour over his face. "Why did you want to do it?"

Drawing in a deep breath, she took in the scent of grass, heat, and summer. "God, I love that smell."

Dodging, he thought and joined in breathing in air with her hoping to gain her confidence. "Nature does provide us with the best fragrances." He lapsed into momentary silence. "You may as well answer my question because I'm not leaving you alone anytime soon, and I want to know how you feel right now."

"You sound like a shrink."

"That's because I am. A recent practicing one and I'd like to know why you wanted to do it. Until you tell me, I'm not going anywhere, and neither are you."

"Fine. I'm scared, okay. There, you happy?" Celeste hissed impatiently.

Matthew waded over the anger he recognized as a manifestation of her fear. "What are you scared of?"

"Why do you care so much? You don't even know me."

"It's what human beings do for one another. I'm sure it's what you'd do if the roles were reversed."

"I guess." Silently Celeste slid tall, wild grass through her fingers as she debated telling him. Pillowing his head on his hands, Matthew fell into the silence she left to give her the time to drum up the courage to open up to him. "The last person I trusted with my life recently died," Celeste finally said with genuine grief and sadness in her voice.

He qualified that as the trigger that made her want to do the unthinkable. "I'm sorry." Matthew's thoughtful eyes studied Celeste. "It sounds as if he was a special part of your life."

Celeste listened to the flock of mallard ducks, happily quacking their way along across a blue sky. Their sound soothed every ache, filled her with calm.

Feeling more at ease, she rested her head on her updrawn knees. "He was special to me," she admitted.

Something so sad resonating in her voice made Matthew's heart sink deep in his chest. "I'm so sorry."

"Wait, how did you know it was a he?"

"A fifty-fifty guess."

"Anyway, this morning, I found out I've been accepted to the universities I applied to with full scholarship to two."

"That is cause for concern."

Celeste's head snapped up. "Do you want to hear this or not?"

"Of course I do. What I meant is that's a big adjustment to make after suffering the shock of your friend's death."

"Well, yeah, you got that right. Those letters made the fact that this is my last year at St. Lucy's so real and so final. You know. I've never lived anywhere but at St. Lucy's."

"You've lived at St. Lucy's your whole life?"

"You didn't let me finish. I thought you were a shrink. Shouldn't you be more of a listener than a talker?"

"Sorry. Go on."

Celeste lay flat on the grass. "As I was saying, I've lived at St. Lucy's for seven years since I became blind after a car accident. It was late, dark. The roads were icy. My dad didn't see the oncoming car. He slid on black ice. The oncoming car, I mean. They're not sure if he was going too fast or drunk or a combination of both. Either way, he couldn't stop. To avoid him, my dad swerved. It was seconds before we catapulted into the air and the car

plunged into this very lake. Everything seemed to move in slow motion, yet it all happened so fast, you know.”

Seeing the solitary tear trickle down her cheek made his heart hurt.

“My parents drowned. Someone, I don’t know who or even how, pulled me out of the sinking car. From what I was told, the paramedics found me unconscious by the lake’s edge, and I didn’t come to until two years later. When I slipped out of my coma, I couldn’t see. They went on and on about retinal detachment, and head trauma and lots of other medical gibberish were lobbed at me. Bottom line, I was blind, and I couldn’t remember much about the incident.” She’d never forget the injustice of being mowed down by a coward who left the scene, who didn’t stick around to own up to his mistake. Who took two innocent lives.

“I’m so sorry.” They were feeble words, but it was all Matthew could say.

Celeste let out a bitter laugh. “Yeah, so am I. Worse part is I can’t remember anything after the car plunged into the water. I can’t remember anything,” she repeated.

Matthew was glad Celeste allowed him to see past the aloof shell into the real woman, and to say he was shocked and moved by her story was an understatement. He tilted the water bottle back and drank deep to wet a sandpaper-dry mouth.

Matthew’s gaze dropped. “Is your blindness permanent?”

“They’re not sure. It may not be. Only time will tell.”

“Don’t lose hope. You survived, and you seem to have adapted well. It seems to me you can make your way back from anything.”

Celeste dug into her jeans pocket and turned the photograph over to Matthew. “My parents, they’re the ones who give me hope.”

Matthew could hear the loss in her tone, sensed the tightness in her chest that talking about them caused. “They look like great people.”

“They are—were.” Celeste traced her fingertips over the photograph when he set it in her hands. “And wonderful parents.” Her eyes turned soft and damp with emotion.

Her resilience for coming out of such a dark situation whole was admirable, Matthew thought. Despite her limitations, with everything she’d had to deal with, she’d come out whole. “You’re the bravest person I know. You can make it to university and pursue... What are you planning to study?”

“Law,” Celeste said, surprising herself. “Yes, I’m going to study law. I want to become a lawyer so I can take the sonofabitch who killed my parents down.” The purpose was back in her eyes.

“But I thought you didn’t see who it was.”

“I didn’t, but I’m not giving up. I’m going to find him, and when I do, I’m making sure he pays for what he did. I’m going to destroy him and his life as he did mine.” Celeste’s eyes held a contemplative, dangerous look. “So, yeah, I’m going to uni. You, Slick, are good juju.”

“Ah, you’re welcome?”

“I don’t know about you, but I’m starving. I’m thinking burgers and greasy fries.” Celeste got to her feet. “You’re not a murderer, are you?”

Matthew’s lips, firm and full, curved. “No, I’m not.”

“All right then, your treat. Come on, Slick, you’re driving. I’m Celeste, by the way.”

I know who you are, Celeste Taylor, and you're not at all, what I expected.

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