

A man with a beard, wearing a dark blue sweater over a white collared shirt and a red Santa hat with white pom-poms, is smiling and holding a wrapped gift. The gift is wrapped in light blue paper with a red ribbon. A woman with long blonde hair, wearing a white knit hat, is partially visible next to him. The background is a soft-focus winter scene with snow and lights.

DELIA LATHAM
TANYA STOWE

A decorative horizontal border featuring pinecones, gold and silver tinsel, and warm white lights. The background of the border is a gradient of soft colors.

A SOLOMON'S GATE CHRISTMAS STORY

A large, white, snow-covered gazebo stands in a snowy landscape. The gazebo has a peaked roof and is surrounded by snow-covered trees and bushes. The scene is lit with soft, warm lights, creating a cozy winter atmosphere. Snowflakes are visible in the foreground.

LEA'S
GIFT

Lea's Gift

Delia Latham and
Tanya Stowe

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

Lea's Gift

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Dedication

To Aunt Lottie (Lottie-dah) and Uncle Ray Stacy...for your constant support, unconditional love and unfailing confidence in my abilities. There's a special place in my heart that belongs entirely to the two of you. Thank you for being exactly who you are...

1

The scars on my face have never bothered me.

I've always known—*always*—how fortunate I am to have made it through the fire that could have taken my life as an infant. Sure, people can be cruel...sometimes intentionally, but most often not. They just don't know how to react when they see a face like mine. The right side didn't get touched by the flames, but the left side is...well, it's pretty bad.

But I have people who love me and see beyond my disfigurement to who I am inside. That's a pretty big blessing, and I am endlessly grateful.

Doctors refused to try any kind of corrective procedures until after my eighteenth birthday. That was three years ago, and still I haven't started the grueling series of surgeries that might improve my appearance. Needless to say, it isn't going to be a fun experience, but that's not why I haven't taken that first step, despite my dad's constant reminders that I can start any time. I know it's probably hard for most people to believe, but I simply haven't felt the need.

Until today.

I woke up this morning the same Lea Dale I've been all my life...a scarred but completely happy girl who talks to angels and tries to find some good in everybody. My besties, Eva Kate and Savannah, say I'm a bit of a Pollyanna, but that's okay. I like being who I am.

Or at least, I did until now.

Probably should have known things were going to get sticky when my old friend Solomon showed up just as I finished getting ready for the day and headed for my bedroom door. I was already running a little late, and had a feeling Auntie Shay—that's my mom's beautiful sister, who once was a famous actress—would be wondering where I was.

I spun away from the bathroom mirror after doing what I could to make myself presentable, and rounded the corner into my bedroom, rushing to grab my tote before heading off to work. For me, that means walking down a little hill just east of my parent's house and showing up at Looking Glass Ranch, my family's therapeutic campground for scarred and disfigured teens. It's been going strong since I was a kid, and I never questioned whether I'd be a part of its operation as an adult—I always knew it was what I wanted to do. But, family-operated or not, I'm expected to be there every day, and on time, just like everyone else. Most of the time, I am, but I'd been up really late the night before, getting my Christmas list together. I'm a real stickler for lists and plans and schedules. Orderliness is important to me.

So I'd overslept a little and the crystal clock on a wall shelf in my bathroom said I should've been down the hill five minutes ago. I jammed around the corner at full blast and nearly barreled smack into Solomon, who reached out to steady me without saying a word.

"Solomon!" I shrieked and rushed over for a hug. It'd been at least a year since his last visit, and it was nice to see that he still looked exactly the same. He wore a long white robe, sashed at the waist with a shiny belt that gleamed like real gold. Maybe it is gold,

I don't know. His sandals match the belt, but then, so do his eyes, and his hair, which hangs past his shoulders and flows freely around his face.

He's beautiful. Oh...did I mention that Solomon's an angel? He's the first of God's winged messengers I ever met, and the only one who seems to be a permanent fixture in my life. It's not like he's an everyday part of things, but he shows up now and then, when there's a reason. I love him with a very special, holy kind of love. He's never said it, but I'm pretty sure Solomon loves me, too.

"Lea." Solomon's smile is rare, but it always fills me with an amazing joy, and makes me want to do something to make someone else feel that same way. "I am happy to see you, young friend."

"Me, too!" I bounced up and down on my tiptoes like a child, so excited to see him. Why hadn't I realized how long it had been, and how much I missed my friend? Then I remembered that Solomon never shows up "just because." Maybe I should dampen the enthusiasm until I had the skinny on his reason for being there. "Um...is something wrong?"

He shook his head, and the gentle movement of silky hair made me never want to look away. It's beauty can be mesmerizing. "No, child. I bring good news."

"Really?" I grinned. This was turning out to be the best kind of visit. "So tell me already."

"I will." He reached out with one long finger and touched my cheek. The left one, with all the scars. "You've seen a lot in your lifetime, Lea Dale. Much pain, but a great deal of joy, as well. You've been happy when others received special blessings of love and happiness, prosperity, and success."

I shrugged. "I'd be a pretty awful person otherwise, wouldn't I?"

Solomon shook his head. "Few people on this earth are able to truly be happy when good things happen to others. Most humans harbor at least some small measure of envy. But not you, Lea. Your selflessness is pleasing to the Master."

"Well, I'm glad. I want to please the Lord."

"You do. And now, Lea, it's your turn."

Sometimes Solomon spoke in circles, or just slightly above my head. "My turn?" I had no clue what he meant. "What do you mean?"

He smiled again, and my heart jumped with pure joy, which I deliberately put a lid on for the moment. I wanted to understand Solomon's message. His being here meant something big was in the air.

"It's your turn to be blessed, Lea. Your life is about to change, starting today."

Now my heart jumped with something other than joy. Change has never been my favorite thing, and a little ball of uneasiness bounced around in my tummy like a kitten on catnip. "Ch- change? How?"

"Do not fear. The Father wants only the best for you. But you must accept His gift with your whole heart and be willing to risk the comfort of the familiar to find your way to something new and better."

"New and better." I murmured the repetition of his words, while my heart hammered like crazy. Why new and better? The status quo was working just fine for me.

Solomon smiled and touched my cheek once more. "Your future begins today, little one."

"Wait!" I recognized the glow that pulsed around him now. His visit was already over. "Wait, I need to

know—”

But he was gone.

“Grrrr!” I stood there in the middle of the floor, watching the second hand make another half turn around the face of my clock. Then I blew out my breath, rolled my eyes, and headed downstairs, taking the steps two at a time.

Solomon, or no Solomon, Auntie Shay was going to read me the riot act.

She did, too, but she was in the middle of something pressing, so it wasn't a lengthy lecture—thank God! Within a few minutes of arriving at the Looking Glass, I was deep into documenting a new shipment of supplies. We get an astounding number of donations from wonderful people who want to help us help others. I hadn't thought it would be possible to get my mind off Solomon's rather cryptic message, but we were crazy busy all morning, and somehow I forgot all about it in the rush of things.

Until just after one o'clock.

I had swallowed half a sandwich almost whole and poured a cup of soup down my throat for good measure, all in the space of about ten minutes. Then I hurried into the restroom, where I brushed my teeth and pulled a comb through my hair before heading off to cover the front desk for Molly, our receptionist, during her lunch hour.

She was already waiting by the door, purse in hand. The moment she saw me, she waved and slipped outside. Most of the time her husband takes her to lunch in Castle Creek. They're still newlyweds—another successful coupling for my “Aunt” Destiny's dating agency, Solomon's Gate. Molly and her hubby spend every possible moment together. Grinning at her

eagerness to be out the door and by his side, I slid behind her desk and glanced at the appointment calendar to see if we were expecting anyone during the time I'd be up front.

We were. I didn't recognize the name, but according to Molly's notes, my dad was seeing someone named Laren Meadows at one fifteen. I glanced at the clock on the opposite wall. Mr. Meadows had exactly eleven minutes remaining before he'd be officially late. Um...not that I had any business judging him for that, today of all days.

I rested my head on the back of Molly's chair and closed my eyes. The non-stop blur of the morning, after my late night, was starting to make itself felt. Did I doze off, or just take a little mental vacation? Heaven only knows, but either way, I nearly flew right out of my skin when Dad's visitor spoke softly into the silence.

"I hope I'm not interrupting your beauty sleep."

I sat up so fast I had to brace my hand on the desk to keep from catapulting right over the top and into a broad chest that strained against the soft fabric of a dark blue button-up shirt. Mortified to have been caught off guard, I moved my gaze slowly upward, past a neatly knotted ivory tone-on-tone tie and over the slight cleft in a strong chin. I noted a pair of full lips curved into an appealing grin, swallowed hard, and took in a single, impossibly deep dimple and a straight, aquiline nose. By the time my searching gaze reached a pair of eyes bluer than any sky I'd ever seen in my admittedly short life, I was already head over heels in love with Laren Meadows.

My hand jerked upward to cover my left cheek. To hide the scars. Because the man standing in front of me

personified "perfect," and for the first time in my life, I *felt* my own lack of perfection.

Solomon had said my life would change, starting today, and every nerve in my body told me he'd been right, as always. But he'd sure messed up part of his message. Because this was not a blessing. It was the worst thing that could possibly happen to me.

Daddy's little princess of propriety, who insisted everything be done in an orderly fashion. The girl who had a place for everything, and kept everything in its place...who'd always followed every rule, never caused problems, never stepped outside her own perfectly drawn lines.

That girl had fallen heart over head over heels in love. At first sight.

My heart thudded like a heavy stone against my rib cage. I opened my mouth, desperate to reclaim some semblance of normality and extend a proper greeting.

But then I realized that oh-so-perfect blue gaze had gone wide and was fixed on my face. My left cheek, to be precise. I spread my fingers, desperately wishing for bigger hands, and trying hard not to burst into tears.

"*Oh.*" That's all I could manage in response to his greeting. I've always loved deep, distinctly individual male voices. Think Sean Connery and James Earl Jones. Or, to bring the idea into my own generation, think Jensen Ackles.

And Laren Meadows.

"You're Lea Dale, aren't you?"

2

How...?

I searched for and found my voice, though it came out sounding anything but normal. “Y—yes, I—I’m Lea.”

Seriously? You’re stuttering? Way to impress, Princess.

This behavior simply would not do. I had to maintain some degree of professionalism. Take it from me, that’s not easy when the man of your dreams catches you snoozing on the job—even when you’ve only that moment discovered who he is. Nevertheless, determined to reclaim my equilibrium, I visualized a steel rod running the length of my spine, and it gave me the *oomph* to stand up and straighten my shoulders. Convincing my reluctant fingers to remove themselves from my face required another few seconds, but I finally managed to plant my left hand on the desktop and offer the other one in a handshake. “It’s nice to meet you...Mr. Meadows?”

He nodded. “Yes, but please make it Laren.”

“Well, Laren, it seems you have the advantage. I assume I can thank my dad for that.” I smiled, relieved to find my voice had made a sheepish return. “I hope he left me with *some* secrets.”

The hunk’s hearty laughter made me relax enough to attempt a smile, despite the rabble of butterflies dancing a ballet in my stomach. (And yes, that’s a

word...rabble. Trust me. I'm one of those word nuts who actually enjoys reading the dictionary. I have a blast trying new words out on Eva Kate and Savannah. They won't admit it—especially Eva Kate—but they get a real kick out of piecing together definitions for my frequent verbal gymnastics.) Tummy flutters aside, the moment of merriment twinkled in his azure eyes, highlighting a startling ring of a much deeper blue—bordering on sapphire—around the outer edge. I have to say, the varying shades created a captivating pair of peepers.

“Secrets? Well, I'm not sure, since I don't know how many you had to begin with.” He slanted a comical glance sideways and upwards. Well-shaped lips followed the same path—and he still looked too good to be true. “Tell you what, though, Lea Dale. Even if you don't have a single secret left, I promise they're all safe with me.”

It was my turn to laugh. “Thank you, kind sir. Now if you'll give me about half a minute, I'll see if my dad's in his office.”

A few moments later, Dad appeared from down the hall. I couldn't help smiling when he looked my way. He winked and smiled back, and then hurried forward, hand extended. “Laren! It's wonderful to see you.”

The men shook hands, and Dad gave Laren's shoulder a couple of over-zealous slams with what I still say are the biggest, strongest hands I've ever seen. I rolled my eyes. That vicious pounding was supposed to be a welcome? And yet men have the nerve to refer to us females as contradictory creatures.

“You, too, Mr. Dale.” Laren offered my father what had to be *the* most engaging smile ever. That

lonely dimple flashed in his right cheek, further sealing the claim he was unaware he held on to my poor heart.

"I'm so glad you could make it, Laren. Christmas is one of our best times here at Looking Glass Ranch."

Happy to let my dad take over, I eased down in my chair, hoping the two men would forget about me, leaving me free to sort through my jumbled feelings. But that was not to be the case. I listened in trepidation as Dad told our visitor about Looking Glass—he touched on just about everything, from the grounds to the special decorations for the holiday season. As always, he became quite exuberant explaining the gigantic Advent Calendar that would go on display in the Great Hall today.

"Advent calendar?" Laren repeated.

"Yes, it's actually a count-down calendar, starting twenty-four days before Christmas. We have a large three-dimensional box in the shape of a house. Twenty-four small drawers are built into the structure—one for each day of Advent. We place scripture readings and special surprises for our therapy guests inside those little drawers—usually the surprise is some kind of event for that day." A little smile tugged my dad's lips upward, and his eyes took on a familiar gentle, caring expression—one I've always loved. "Opening the box, reading each day's scripture and revealing its surprise is our first activity each day in December. It helps keep our young people focused on the reason for the season."

Laren appeared appropriately impressed. "Sounds like fun. What kind of activities do you schedule?"

"Well, we have a Christmas movie day in the great hall, complete with popcorn. We have a cookie exchange day—and a gift exchange, of course." Dad's

enthusiasm for the project shone in his eyes and deepened the timbre of his voice. "We try to keep it fun all the way through, but the highlight of the Advent, for our guests, is almost always the special tree decorating day, when we do the honors on a twelve-foot tree."

"*Twelve foot?*" Laren's eyes widened, and he shook his head. "That must take all day—and every pair of hands on the ranch."

Dad's rich laughter warmed my heart...because it was so genuine. He loved this time of the year as much as the guests did. "We get it done though, and then we celebrate with eggnog."

Laren smiled. "Sounds like Looking Glass Ranch is where I want to be this holiday."

"You're welcome to come here for Christmas, even if you decide our ranch isn't where you want to send your company's money."

So that's why Mr. Oh-so-handsome was here. His company needed a non-profit into which they could dump some of their excess proceeds. Well, they wouldn't find a more upstanding, aboveboard organization to invest in. Dad ran a ship-shape establishment, worthy of steady support. A healthy, well-heeled benefactor would certainly take a load off his mind.

"From what I've seen, my family couldn't find a better place to send their money."

His family? Oh, heavens. Handsome and rich. My stomach started that fluttery, jumpy thing again. If Laren's family became a benefactor of the ranch, would that mean he'd be around a lot more?

Almost as if he'd heard my question, our visitor turned to me. He did it without a second's warning,

and I didn't have the chance to turn away. His gaze locked on my scarred cheek and traveled over it. The way he looked at me, his gaze loving and tender, made me feel almost as if my scars were beautiful.

Now, I'm nothing, if not practical. Having a gorgeous, rich, too-wonderful-to-believe guy look at my face like it's pretty...well, it should have made me feel great. Instead, I wanted to run away and hide. I know the truth about my scars and they are not pretty or easy to look at. Deep inside me, a warning signal jangled a quiet warning.

But just as I heard it, Laren smiled—and I was lost in the blinding flash of white, combined with sky blue eyes and that impossible dimple. Whatever warning was trying to be heard slipped away, while the flutter in my tummy returned, along with a tingling that started in my fingertips and worked its way up to my cheeks. How could he do that to me with just one glance?

"Let's not rush into anything," Dad said, oblivious to my scattered state. "I'd like the relationship between Meadows Enterprises and Looking Glass Ranch to be long and profitable. I want you to be very sure before you make a commitment."

"Trust me," Laren said, sending a sidelong glance in my direction. "I plan to do plenty of research."

3

Dad gave that research a kick start by having me escort Laren around the complex. I tried to get out of it with the excuse that I was watching the front desk, but Molly walked in. Ducking my head, I turned my scars away and headed to the bunkhouses with our potential investor in tow.

"We're proud of our little 'havens.' I jumped headlong into tour-guide mode. Maybe the practiced spiel would balance my emotions and help me get past my unexpected, overwhelming attraction to our visitor. At the very least, I might be able to keep from blurting out, 'I love you,' and ruining any chance we had of getting Meadows Enterprises on our team. "Auntie Shay was determined that they should have a homey, comfortable feel, so only four students are assigned per cabin, each of which contains two bunk sets, a bathroom...and its own biblical theme. My personal favorite has always been the angel cabin with painted blue walls and feathery white wings here and there. The beds all have cloud-patterned blue spreads."

Laren gave an exaggerated eye roll. Well, OK, I could get into more masculine things, if that's what he wanted.

"Of course, Noah's ark is included in the mix of themes, along with a cabin for boys that features David and Goliath and is equipped with a supply of very popular slingshots. My friend Eva Kate's dad painted

the wall murals, surprising all of us with his hidden talent. Then he showed up a couple of weeks later with a stack of hand-made slingshots, all beautifully painted with some element of the familiar Bible story."

Laren seemed impressed...especially with the sling-shots.

"I'm not sure I trust that mischievous sparkle in your eyes." I closed the door on the David and Goliath cabin and offered my grinning tag-along a suspicious look.

"Aw, come on. Tell me when you were younger, you didn't have the urge to wrap a rock in leather and sling it as far as you could."

Something wonderful and magical swept over me at the image of a young Laren doing just that, and I couldn't keep from smiling. Striving for a stern voice, I said, "I was more into the animals on Noah's ark, like baby lambs."

Laren kept me laughing all the way to the grand hall. The large room was empty, half a dozen long, wooden tables already cleaned from the mid-day meal. Carlos, our maintenance man, had just finished sweeping. I waved as he scooted out the door with his dustpan full of crumbs.

"So where's this Advent Calendar your dad described?"

I gestured toward a couple of boxes sitting on a table near the stage. "Still packed. It's my job to set it up, but...I've been otherwise occupied."

"Tomorrow's the first of December. Isn't it supposed to be up by then?"

"I'll come back later and finish."

"Let me help you?"

"I couldn't..."

He fixed his gaze on me, and whatever I meant to say flew right out of my head. I hadn't known eyes like those existed...so blue, so perfect and so sincere.

"Listen, Lea, my office slows to a crawl this time of year. That's why I chose December to make these visits to different locations. I have all the time in the world and what better way to get to know Looking Glass Ranch than to jump right in? Come on."

He took my hand and tugged me forward. His fingers were firm and warm. I didn't seem to have a choice and was a little overwhelmed by Laren's strong personality—in a good way. Frankly, being caught up in the current of his energy and enthusiasm was a nice change for me, and I liked it. Usually, I'm the rocket around here. Having someone just as forceful to contend with was new and a little exciting.

"What's this?" Laren patted the rope-wrapped tarp next to the boxes.

"That's the frame for the calendar."

"It's huge."

"Six-inches deep. Five-feet tall. Four-and-a-half-foot wide." I grinned. "We wanted it to stand out."

"Well, it sure ought to do that! I guess we should start there." He tackled the knots on the rope.

"I'll run to the kitchen and get a damp cloth to wipe it down."

By the time I returned, Laren had the tarp off and folded up.

He smiled. "It's perfect. A snow-covered Swiss chalet complete with shingles and gingerbread trim around the eaves."

"It is perfect," I agreed. His obvious approval sent a rush of pure pleasure coursing through my veins. "And it really sets the Christmas mood. Each box has a