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A SOLOMON'S GATE CHRISTMAS STORY



LEA'S
GIFT

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Lea's Gift

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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, 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," and decided I should maybe 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 again 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 bunny 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 triphammered 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, Rhys Palmer, 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 these 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 it.

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.

Lea Dale. 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, aren't you?"

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