

A man with a beard, wearing a red Santa hat with white pom-poms and a dark blue sweater over a white collared shirt, is smiling and holding a wrapped gift. The gift is light blue with a dark red ribbon. A woman with long blonde hair, wearing a white knit hat, is looking at him from the side. 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 ornaments, and a string of warm white lights. The background is a soft, glowing gradient.

A SOLOMON'S GATE CHRISTMAS STORY

A large, white, snow-covered gazebo stands in a snowy winter landscape. The scene is softly lit with bokeh lights and snowflakes. The gazebo has a white roof and wooden railings.

LEA'S
GIFT

Excerpt from *Lea's Gift* by Tanya Stowe

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."

"Oh!" 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 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.