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Ever After

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ONE

Two blue and gray fighter jets raced low over the neighborhood and looped toward the barren mountains in the west. Lauren Gibbs heard the vibration in the subtle rattle of picture frames on the mantel, sensed it in the wood floor of the old house, felt it all the way to her soul. Training drills, same as most days. She froze long enough to watch them, long enough to catch her fiancé's attention.

"They still bug you."

It wasn't a question. Shane Galanter doled out the stack of plates in his hand one at a time onto the white linen tablecloth.

"Not really." Lauren grabbed the napkins and followed behind him, setting one at each place. She caught his eye and hesitated. No fooling him, not when he knew all the back roads of her heart. She released a slow breath. "Okay, yes." She set a napkin down on the next plate. "They bother me."

Shane didn't ask if her frustration was with the noise of the jets, or with the fact that they flew training maneuvers over the neighborhood where he lived, a few blocks from the navy's Top Gun facility in Fallon, Nevada. Or if it was something bigger. Like the fact that these were the very jets and pilots that would be used in battle if necessary.

He didn't have to ask. He already knew.

Because long ago he'd learned to know her mind, back when they first fell in love as kids. Yes, time and circumstances had separated them for nearly two decades, and now that they were in their midthirties, they'd both changed. But even so, ever since

they'd found each other again, Shane could still look into her eyes and know what she was thinking.

"Sometimes, Lauren." He crooked his finger and placed it gently beneath her chin. His eyes looked more tired than usual. "Sometimes I wonder about us."

Panic stirred and she felt her world tilt. She shouldn't have hesitated at the noise, shouldn't have looked out the window. "It's no big deal." An anxious laugh sounded in her throat. "This is your life. I can handle it."

He didn't look away. "It's about to be your life too." His tone was kind, careful. "Remember?"

"I know." She put her hand alongside his cheek and kissed him. "By then I'll be used to it."

He searched her eyes. "It's been six months, Lauren."

She refused to give fear a foothold. Instead she kissed him again, slower this time. "I'm trying." She breathed the words against his lips. "Give me that, at least."

The wedding was set for Christmas Eve—not by her choosing. She would've had them married by now. Every conflict resolved and nothing but a bright future ahead of them. Their nineteen-year-old daughter Emily felt the same, especially since her fall figured to be crazy-busy. She had accepted a soccer scholarship to Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Washington, and she was about to start work in the public information office of the army base at nearby Fort Lewis. Following in her father's footsteps. "Make it a summer wedding," Emily had pleaded with them. "Before school starts."

But Lauren figured Emily wasn't worried about her schedule as much as she was worried about her parents working things out. Even so, Shane wouldn't budge. He wanted to wait and work through some of the issues that stood in their way. Faith, his career choice, their politics, and nearly twenty years between the first time they fell in love and this second chance ...

That was fine. Lauren would wait. She'd do whatever it took to prove to Shane that she could deal with all this. The smallness of Fallon, Nevada; the hour's drive west to the Fallon Airport every time her editors at *Time* magazine sent her on an assignment. And the incessant sound of fighter jets overhead. She could learn to deal with all of it, right? Even if there were days when being so close to a military base threatened her sanity.

Shane set the plates down and turned into her arms. "So you're saying—" he wove his fingers through her straight blonde hair—"I have nothing to wonder about."

At his touch, the warm tone in his voice, Lauren's world righted itself. She relaxed in his embrace. "Nothing."

"Alright, then." He kissed the tip of her nose. "I'll get the lasagna."

As long as Shane responded to her this way, as long as it took only her kiss to send him into her arms, then she could find a way to live here. She had to find a way. Yes, she was still writing military features for the magazine and flying around the country for interviews several times each month. Most of the time that was enough. So what if some days she wanted to jump on a plane and head back to Afghanistan, to her work as a *Time* magazine war correspondent. Never mind that she still mistrusted the government and the military and their roles in the Iraqi war. Never mind that her fiancé's political views were on the other end of the hemisphere from hers ...

As long as she had Shane, she could look past all of it.

The doorbell rang, and Lauren took a step back from the table. Their company had arrived. Three couples, none of whom she knew. Not really. Two of the guys worked with Shane in the training department, and the third was a pilot they were considering as an addition to the instruction staff. Each was bringing his wife.

Lauren took a deep breath. The conversation would be predictable, but she would smile through every minute. She headed for the door, glancing over her shoulder. “I’ll get it.”

“Thanks.” Shane didn’t sound at all concerned. His opinionated fiancée was about to share an evening with three couples whose viewpoints didn’t line up with hers, but he wasn’t uptight. He trusted her.

The thought eased her tension. She smiled, opened the door, and found all three couples waiting. One of the guys was small and compact, with bright, laughing eyes. His exaggerated shrug was full of good humor. “We all showed up at the same time.” He looked at the others. “Imagine that.”

The others laughed, and a beat later, Lauren did too. “Yes. Imagine that.” When everyone was inside, she shut the door and introduced herself. One of the guys—the heavysset one—she’d seen before. But she hadn’t met the smaller guy, nor the pilot, nor any of their wives. Lauren felt better once they were past the introductions. The wives—Becky, a redhead; Sally, a blonde; and Ann, a petite brunette—seemed friendly enough. Becky noticed Lauren’s colorful beaded necklace.

“I haven’t seen anything like it.” The woman looked a little too well put together. She moved in closer and studied the beads. “Macy’s?”

“No.” Lauren kept her tone even. She paused. “Afghanistan.” She measured their reaction. “A local woman made it for me.”

“Oh—” Becky smiled—“How interesting.”

“Yes.” Ann, the brunette wife of the shorter pilot nodded. “When we’ve spent time overseas I always buy from the locals.” She looked at the others. “Very vogue.”

“The economy in Afghanistan is in a shambles.” Lauren touched her necklace. “I try to support the people as much as possible.” As soon as she said the words, she chided herself. The explanation wasn’t necessary. The redhead was only trying to be kind, trying to find common ground by giving her the compliment.

A silence fell over the group, an awkward silence. Buying a necklace overseas was one thing, but from Afghanistan? As a way of supporting the country's economy? Suddenly it was as if all of them were remembering that Lauren was different. Certainly one or another of them had heard about her, Shane Galanter's liberal fiancée. The one person in their midst who didn't feel a sense of pride and purpose every time she passed a military base, who made her living writing for *Time* magazine.

Finally Ann smiled. "Those Afghani women must cherish the freedom to make and sell their wares."

Touché. Lauren gritted her teeth and kept herself from responding. The brunette was right. If Afghanistan hadn't been liberated, the women couldn't have presented themselves or their jewelry in public. But there were other problems, life-threatening issues that faced the Afghani people and the Iraqis. What was the United States doing about that?

Shane found them in the entryway. He seemed to sense that things were a bit tense. "Well—" he clapped his hands—"Lauren and I made our best lasagna." He gestured down the hall toward the dining room and kitchen. "Let's move in and we can get started."

The others were happy to follow him. As he walked down the hall, Shane grinned at the guys and nodded at their wives. "I'll tell you what," he shook the pilot's hand, "that was some fancy flying you did the other day."

"No doubt." The heavier guy took the spot on the other side of Shane. "Best flying I've seen in years."

The women formed a small cluster as they headed into the dining room. "Speaking of Macy's," Becky tossed her red hair, "It's their big sale this week."

"I *thought* it was coming up." Ann eased her designer purse onto her shoulder and laughed. "Sounds like a date night, ladies."

They rounded the corner and spilled into the dining room. Country music played from the living room, something slow and

crooning. Shane took the pitcher of iced tea and held it up. “Anyone thirsty?”

The guys each reached for a glass, but the women kept talking. Lauren hung back in the hallway, pretending to arrange the vase of flowers Shane had bought for the evening.

“Any night but Wednesday.” Sally pulled a face that made the other women smile. “Youth group meets at our house on Wednesdays.”

“And Chad wouldn’t miss that.” Ann poked her finger in the air. “The kid hated church until high school. Now you can’t keep him away from youth group.”

“I think maybe Chad’s noticing the girls more than the gospel.” Becky raised an eyebrow.

“Whatever.” Ann moved toward the guys and the iced tea. “As long as he’s going.”

“Okay, so Macy’s any night but Wednesday.” Becky pretended to jot a note. “Let’s aim for Tuesday.”

Nods of approval followed, and the plan seemed set.

Lauren was still in the hallway, staring at the women. Was this what Shane wanted her to be? Someone whose greatest challenge in a given week was whether Tuesday or Wednesday would be better for shopping at Macy’s? Whether the kids liked youth group because of the gospel or the girls?

Then, as if a switch had been flipped, she caught herself. What was she doing, being silently critical of these women? Critical and judgmental and mean-spirited? Were her views against the war so entrenched that she would dislike a group of military wives simply for who they married? Regret and sorrow came over her in a rush. She had no right to judge these women or challenge them. They played both father and mother to their kids much of the time, and during wartime, they faced losses other people couldn’t understand.

She drew a slow breath. She would change her mood now, before they thought she was a terrible person. Before Shane saw how she was acting. She could hardly be a supporter of peace and then hurry into conflict right here in Shane's living room. At that moment, Sally tucked a piece of her blonde hair behind her ears, turned toward Lauren, and came a few steps closer. Her slim shoulders lifted in a dainty shrug. "Anything I can do to help?"

Lauren looked across the room. Ann and Becky were lost in another conversation. In addition to everything else they thought about her, now they would think she was rude. She'd have to make it up to them later. She turned her attention to Sally. The woman had compassionate eyes. Lauren gave her a sheepish smile and nodded toward the kitchen. "Help me slice the bread?"

"Sure." When they reached the counter where two hot loaves were sitting on separate cutting boards, Sally tilted her head. "Ann and Becky don't mean any harm."

"I know." Lauren reached into the nearest drawer for a couple knives and handed one to Sally. "I need to remember that everyone isn't an enemy. Just because my views are different from everyone else's in Fallon."

"I know you think so, but you're not that different." Sally shrugged. "War's complicated." Sally washed her hands and dried them on a nearby towel. "We might be married to military guys, but we wonder, we question." She reached for one of the loaves of bread and began slicing it. "We believe in the cause of the war in the Middle East, and we support our troops and the president. But we wouldn't be breathing if we didn't have concerns." Something deep and sad filled her eyes. "Our husbands' lives are at stake."

Lauren washed and dried her hands too and reached for one of the loaves of bread. She hadn't thought about that. Even military people might not see things in entirely black and white. Something stirred in her heart, an unsettling thought that if she'd

been wrong about the women she was sharing dinner with, maybe she'd been wrong about other aspects of the war. Maybe some of the things military information officers had told her hadn't been so exaggerated or distorted after all. She ran the knife through her loaf and banished the thought. She could be wrong on some things. Tonight she was, and she was sorry. But she wasn't wrong in her passion to see the war ended, to have the president admit that the loss of life and resources was all for naught and that nothing had been gained in the process.

Sally finished slicing her loaf. She lifted her eyes to Lauren. "I'm a Christian." She looked across the room at Becky and Ann. "We moved here from the Northwest. Most of the women I've met here, navy or married to navy, are Christians too. That defines them more than their politics." She was quiet for a minute. "Seems that peace is a lot more about kindness and sacrifice than any kind of international political paradise."

Peace. There it was again. The idea that peace could come through more than one course of action. Shane had tried to convince her of that since they reunited just after Christmas, back in Illinois. Peace comes from the inside, he would tell her. Lauren wanted to believe it was true, but she couldn't. Not yet, anyway. Sally was waiting for a response. Lauren moved the sliced bread from the cutting board to a wooden bowl. "Peace is complicated, I guess." She kept her eyes on the bread. "Just like war."

"Hmm." Sally added in her bread. "I guess."

Lauren wanted to let the subject go. Talking to Sally—to someone who didn't see her as a freak of nature—was nice. If she stopped now, they could at least have the beginning of a friendship. But she couldn't let it go. "What I want is a peace that'll send our kids home where they belong." Her tone was gentle, with a subtle pleading. Maybe if she explained herself well enough, they could be friends despite their fundamental differences. She sighed. "I keep thinking of all those young people who've lost

their lives. That's why I'm against the war." Lauren looked over her shoulder at the chatty women in the dining room. "If any of you lost a husband or brother or daughter, you'd switch sides in a heartbeat, don't you think, Sally?"

"No." The blonde woman covered Lauren's hand with her own. She exuded patience and her eyes shone in a way that Lauren had seen before—with Shane and their daughter Emily. "That's not how it works."

Something tightened in Lauren's gut. She didn't want to hear about patriotism and courage. Patriotic, why? Courageous over what? Sacrifice for whom? Dying for the sake of dying? Wasn't that all any of them could say about a convoy of American kids being killed by a roadside bomb? Or being struck down by an insurgent sniper?

Lauren sighed. "I'm sorry, Sally. I sort of have my mind made up on all that." She smiled. "But tell me about the Northwest. Our daughter's moving to Tacoma to play soccer for Pacific Lutheran University. I've always wanted to visit."

A sad smile tugged at the corners of Sally's lips. "We lived in the Portland area." She breathed in. "It's beautiful. Water runs through much of the city, and the trees are ..."

Lauren felt herself drift. In her mind's eye, she was no longer in her kitchen, but standing among the orphans in a dusty, hot little structure where forty kids lived. She could almost feel herself handing out lollipops and then being called out into the courtyard. Hear someone say her name and then the sound of children running out behind her, following her ...

Hear the scream of bullets spraying from snipers' guns a dozen yards behind the building ... hear the little girl crying out as she hit the ground ...

No!

Heart pounding, Lauren tried to focus on Sally's words, to let her description of Portland push the ugly images from her mind.

She succeeded for a while, but during dinner, when the guys discussed the Fallon base and upkeep of older fighter jets, her mind drifted again. Back to the orphanage, the attack. The little boy and girl who lost their lives. The women wailing as they knelt over their bodies, crying out for an answer, a reason.

Midway through dinner, Dan, the heavier guy, set down his fork and looked at her. “You and Shane grew up together, is that right?”

Lauren was caught off guard, but she smiled. Maybe this was when she could show them she was capable of compassion. “Yes. Our families were friends.”

Dan pointed at her and then at Shane. “You were apart for twenty years, Shane told me.”

“Right.” Shane wiped his mouth with a napkin. He had a take-charge tone, as if he wanted to protect her from whatever direction the conversation might go. “Our daughter Emily brought us back together.”

Lauren’s heart warmed. She loved that Shane was quick to come to her defense. Even before there was any actual need. “I decided to move from Afghanistan to Fallon.” She looked at Shane, and for a moment there seemed to be no differences between them whatsoever. Just her and Shane and a love that would stay between them until they died.

“So you’re not covering the war anymore?” Becky adjusted her chair so that she could see to the far end of the table where Lauren was sitting.

“Not as much.” Lauren fought the uneasiness that rose within her. *Come on. Just because they’re asking about my writing doesn’t mean they’re ready to attack.* She forced herself to relax. “Most of my stories still involve some aspect of the war, but usually with interviews of politicians in Washington, D.C., or some other major city.”

“I wanted to be a writer when I was in college,” Sally took a sip of her water. “I still do sometimes. The travel must be hard for you and Shane.”

“It is.” She thought about her last trip, how she had dreaded coming home to Fallon but missed Shane all at the same time.

“Bet you were surprised when you heard about Shane studying world issues and peace in college.” Dan leaned back and pushed his empty plate aside. “If anyone understands this war, it’s Shane Galanter.”

Shane straightened and reached for the salad bowl. “Lauren understands it too.” He smiled, his tone a little strained. “Just from a different angle.”

The conversation switched gears, but Lauren’s heart was dizzy with wonder. No matter what their struggles privately, Shane would defend her to the ground in public. Just the way he’d done here. Dan had tried to make a point that Shane’s opinions were based on years of education. But Shane was more concerned with how people saw Lauren.

With that kind of love, how could they have any problems at all?

Later, when dinner was over and the guests had gone home, Shane found her on the back patio. He came up behind her, eased his hands beneath her arms and slipped them around her waist. “Tonight was hard?”

“No.” The stars shone from every corner of the sky—the one thing she loved about Fallon. She leaned her head back against his chest. “Not after I stopped being a jerk.”

“You mean that was the *nice* you?” He took hold of her shoulders and gently turned her around so she was facing him. His voice held a hint of humor, but his eyes showed his frustration. “It was hard. For both of us. For everyone at the table. We’re talking about renovating the naval fleet, and you ask if anyone has

any idea how many homeless people could find housing for that kind of taxpayer money?"

"I was curious." She searched his eyes, willing him to see her sincerity. "I smiled, I was pleasant. I'm not trying to be difficult, Shane. Really."

"Okay, but Lauren, have you ever considered how you sound to these people? These women's husbands ... their lives are on the line." His voice was low and so sad. Sadder than she'd heard him in a long time.

"Yes. I've thought about it." She winced and brushed her knuckles against his cheeks. "Shane" She groaned. "I'm sorry. I don't want to be mean or critical. Sometimes I just can't help what I say."

He studied her. "Yes, you can. You meant everything you said tonight. It drove you crazy to sit at the same table with those women."

"I liked Sally." She bit her lip. "But the other two treated me like I was from a different planet."

"Because you act like you are." He linked fingers with hers. "Because you want to be different."

"Shane"

"No, it's true." Again his tone was kind, but his eyes told her he was serious. "One of the guys pulled me aside in the kitchen after dinner." Shane sighed, and the sound seemed to come from deep in his heart. "He said you were very interesting, intelligent, but he wondered how we'd ever work out together." Shane's tone grew resigned. "He was worried for me, Lauren."

"So" Her heart pounded. She hated when their conversations went this way—which they did more and more often. "I love you." She took a step closer and brought her lips to his. "Did you tell him that?"

"He knows." Shane looked like he wanted to kiss her longer, but he resisted. "I told him the whole story a few weeks ago. About our early years and how we just found each other again."

“Exactly. And that’s enough, Shane. We found each other again for a reason. We both believe that. We don’t need to agree about everything.” She looped her arms up around his neck. “Every couple has differences.”

“But ours define us. Not just our politics, but our faith.”

Lauren stiffened. He was more than a little troubled if he was bringing up faith again. “I said I’m trying.” Her words were small and quiet, but they were the truth. Their daughter Emily was doing everything she could to help Lauren understand the faith she and her father shared. But something deep inside held Lauren back. *What’s wrong with me? Why can’t I think like everyone else? Why do I have to make everything so hard?*

She turned and walked out into the yard, her back to Shane. He didn’t follow.

Lauren sank into a lawn chair. She and Emily talked at least twice a week. At nineteen, with her second year of college on the horizon, there was so much for Emily to talk about. Still, the conversation always turned to faith. Lauren agreed with everything her daughter said—in theory anyway. Since reconnecting with Shane and with her family, it only felt right to reconnect with the beliefs she’d held as a child.

But believing in God and having a relationship with Him were two different things. When her thoughts turned to her Creator, she couldn’t bring herself to ask the questions Emily wanted her to ask. *What is my purpose, God, what are the plans You have for me? What do You want from me?* No, instead she found herself asking more practical questions. *Why do You allow wars? And how could so many Christians support the U.S. involvement in the Middle East? Didn’t fighting go against the very principles of the Christian faith? And why did so many soldiers have to die?*

So far she wasn’t hearing much response from God, but that was understandable. The questions were hard, and Emily had said that some things won’t make sense this side of heaven.

Period. No, what Lauren really hated was when anyone questioned her faith. When they wanted some kind of simplistic capitulation from her, as though the entire issue weren't painfully complicated. She sighed. Like everything else about her new life.

Footsteps sounded from behind her, and Shane came up by her side. "I'm sorry." He leaned close and kissed her cheek. "I love you, Lauren."

Her anger dissipated. She stood and turned into his arms, exhaling long and slow. "I spent all my growing up years looking for you, Shane." Her voice was a desperate whisper. "You're the only one I've ever loved."

"So—" he brushed aside a stray lock of her hair — "why does it seem so hard, right?"

"Right." They held each other for a long time, swaying as the high desert breeze whistled through the nearby canyons. The temperature had dropped into the fifties, and Lauren would've been cold if not for Shane's arms. She eased back and kissed him. "I have to go."

"I know." He took her hand and led her inside, his steps slow and measured. "We don't need all the answers today."

She hugged him once more before she left, but the moment she climbed into her car and started the engine, fury assaulted her. Not at Shane, but at herself. She was the one making their relationship so difficult. Why couldn't she look the other way or just put her questions aside? Did every discussion have to be a platform for her politics? And what was the point, anyway? She wasn't going to change anything with her attitude.

She kept the radio off, rolled down the window, and let the cool air wash across her face. Her thoughts blew around the car in the breeze. She tried to picture Him—the God Emily talked about, the One who wanted a friendship with her. But all she could sense as she turned onto the main highway was His enormity.

God the Creator. Too big to be involved in the trivialities of her life. *God ... are You there?* She waited. Emily talked about hearing from God, sensing His voice and His response deep within her. Lauren stared straight out the windshield and tried again. *God, I need to know ... are You there?* She hesitated, but again, nothing. No, as she set out toward her apartment, she couldn't tell whether God was with her or not. But that only figured.

Just one more question He wasn't answering.