Something to Be Reckoned With

The cathedral was packed to capacity, and the napkins were flowing heavy.

Every pew was full. People stood three deep along the back wall and down both side aisles under the tall windows, shoulder to shoulder, fanning themselves with the folded programs. Grown men held napkins over their faces like they were trying to keep something in. Women passed them down the rows from purse to purse, and nobody asked for one twice.

Somewhere near the front a voice broke loose and rose over all of it.

“Why, Lord? Please, Lord. Give her back.”

Then another voice took it up, and another, until the whole room was asking the same thing in different keys. *Why. Please. Give her back.* The sound climbed into that high ceiling and stayed there, the way sound does in a church, like it was waiting on somebody to answer.

The pastor stood. He didn’t hurry. He set one hand flat on the pulpit and waited until the room had cried itself down to a hum, and then he spoke into the quiet he’d made.

“We need not ask why,” he said. “But thank You, Lord, for carrying our sister this far. Thank You for allowing us to be part of this journey.”

Part of this journey.

I sat with my hands folded in my lap and let that settle on me. I have been part of this journey longer than anybody in that building. I was there at the very start of it. I was there for everything.

I was there for this, too.



Fifteen years earlier.

"You need to make sure they want to be in my wedding first," April said. "Then we'll pick a date. The following year."

That was April all over. Most brides pick the date, then the dress, then the hall, and then go around collecting bridesmaids like party favors. Not her. April went to her people first, one at a time, and she asked, and she waited until every one of them had said yes and meant it. Only then did she open a calendar. A wedding, to April, was never a day. It was the people who'd agreed to stand in it with her.

So the year went by exactly the way she said it would, and then it was the day.

The cathedral was packed to capacity that day too. The napkins were out then as well, but they were pressed to the corners of smiling eyes, and every now and then somebody laughed into one. The light came down colored through the windows and lay across the aisle in long stripes, and the whole place smelled like flowers and good perfume and old wood that had heard a lot of promises.

Daniel stood at the altar. You could tell what he was from the back of the church. Some men wear a suit; a football player only

borrows one, and the shoulders give him away every time. His family was in hotels. His father had always believed that once Daniel was finished with football he would come home to the family business, and Daniel hadn't, and you could read that on the old man's face from the front pew, even at a wedding. A father still waiting.

Beside Daniel stood his dearest and closest friend. A rookie, a lucky one, who had made a name for himself on the field, grinning at the crowd like the crowd had come for him. I'll tell you plainly: remember him. I wish I didn't have to ask you to.

Then the doors at the back opened, and every head in that cathedral turned.

April's father brought her down the aisle with his hand on her arm. Her hair was flawless. It always had been. She didn't look at the guests and she didn't look at the floor. She looked straight ahead at the life she had planned, the way she'd planned everything, a year out and every person accounted for.

And me? I was standing where I had always stood. Right next to her.



The reception was being held in Dubai.

You read that right. The vows were said in the cathedral, and then the whole wedding got up and flew halfway around the world to eat cake.

I'm Tonya, by the way. I should have said so sooner. I've been here for everything. Every scraped knee and every slammed door, every breakup and every get-together, every time we fell out and

every time we found our way back. If this story belongs to anybody besides April, it belongs to me, because I'm the one who saw it. I'm the one telling it.

April and I met in the third grade, and I will never forget the day.



It was the first day of school.

I saw April before she ever saw me. She and her dad came in together, or they started out together. She was trying to lose him. She walked fast and then faster, the way a little girl does when she has decided she is grown, and she almost made it, too, before he caught up with her and took hold of her arm. He didn't yank it. He just squeezed it, slightly, and bent down to say something close to her ear. I couldn't hear a word of it. I can only imagine what was being said.

And I knew right then that we were going to be besties. I didn't know a single thing about her. I just knew.

Lord, she was put together. Her hair was flawless. It was pulled up in that carnival way, in sections with little parts between them, the way the Mickey Mouse kids used to wear it with their bows and things. She had on a yellow crop top and yellow shorts to match, and a lovely little Louis Vuitton backpack sitting right in the center of her back like it had been placed there by hand. Her sandals were to die for. They were a brown, creamy color that flowed right into the yellow socks she had on, so the whole outfit ran from her head to her feet without a single break in it.

Then I saw her stop at the desks and look down at the name place, and to my surprise, she was sitting right next to me.

Me, on the other hand. My clothes were not spectacular. I had on my tomboy jeans and a nice little T-shirt that said *Rebel Dead*, my favorite, favorite rock band, and I remember looking down at that shirt and back up at all that yellow and thinking, why would this pretty girl want to be friends with me?

The moment I sat down in my seat, April turned around.

"My name is April," she said. "And your name is Tonii."

I was floored. I hadn't given her my name. Nobody had introduced us. I just sat there with my mouth open, puzzled clear down to my shoes.

"How did you get that?" I said.

She leaned in like we were already in on something together.

"Do you remember last week," she said, "when you were in Walgreens with your mother? You stormed out, and she came after you, and she said, 'We don't do things like that.' And you turned around and said, 'I do things like that all the time, young lady. Don't try it.'"

I did remember. I just hadn't known anybody else in Walgreens was paying attention.

"My mother was appalled when she heard that," April said. "I, on the other hand, giggled." She looked at me the way you look at something you've already decided to keep. "You are something to be reckoned with. We are going to have wonderful years together. I know it."



And from that day on, you could not tear us apart.

All the way through grade school. All the way through high school. All the way through college. Through the breakups and through the get-togethers, through the fallings-out, and there were fallings-out between her and me, believe that. However far apart we got, we always managed to come back together.

And here we were again, the two of us, on our way to her wedding reception in Dubai.

It is sickening, really. As you can see, we apparently have a little bit of money. Well. April does, at least.

The plane we were on was bigger than the President's plane. I am not exaggerating to make a point; I'm telling you what it was. It was humongous. It had five full bedrooms, each with its own bath. Do you hear me? Five bedrooms, with baths, flying through the air on the way to Dubai, and behind us came two more planes full of guests. Those two they rented. Of course they only own this one.

I was settled in up front, as comfortable as a girl in tomboy jeans has ever been on a plane like that, when April came back to where I was sitting. She wasn't smiling. April had smiled through her entire wedding day, through every picture and every hug and every napkin, and now she wasn't.

"I need to talk to you," she said. "And it's not a joke."

I knew that voice. I had known it since we were eight years old.

"Okay," I said, and I got up.

We went toward the back. Past the guests and the glasses and the noise, all the way to one of the rooms in the back of the plane, and April stepped in after me and closed the door. It shut out

everything. The laughing, the music, the whole wedding. All of a sudden it was just the hum of the engines and the two of us, the way it had always been, ever since that desk in the third grade.

She looked at me for a long moment. Then she said it.

“I’m late.”

“Late,” I said. “Late for what? We’re on the—”

And then I heard it. I really heard it. I looked at her face, and then at her hand, which had already gone to her stomach without her even telling it to.

“Oh, no,” I said. “Oh, no.”

April didn’t blink.

“Oh, yes.”