



THE REMAINING

AFTER THE RAPTURE, THERE ARE FATES WORSE THAN DEATH

NOVELIZATION BY
TRAVIS THRASHER
BASED ON THE AFFIRM FILMS THRILLER

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The Remaining

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PROLOGUE FOREBODING

1

The visions predicting the end of the world began during a week spent on the beach in Wilmington, North Carolina, a week that was supposed to celebrate love and life and tomorrow.

There. I actually admitted it on paper. Or at least on a computer screen.

My name is Lauren Hall. I'm a twenty-seven-year-old black woman who grew up in Wilmington. The only reason I'm writing this now is that I don't know who to talk to. I love my friends, and I'm scared for them—for all of us—because of these visions.

The visions. It sounds like something you might hear

about in an old Southern church with the snake charmer and the blind woman in the wheelchair suddenly walking *and* seeing. I've gone to church my whole life, but I'm not blind, nor do I need a wheelchair.

Lately, however, I've felt like I might need a shrink. And no matter how many times I've prayed and how many times I've waited on God's Word, I keep seeing strange things.

I no longer question whether something's going to happen.

My only question is when.

2

There was only one objective for the trip to NC: for Dan to propose to Skylar. Well, let's make that two objectives. The proposal, and the total and complete secrecy surrounding it.

It's amazing how something as simple as meeting at a college party could ultimately result in something as complex and intricately planned as that last week in July. Skylar, of course, had no clue, and even some of the rest of us didn't know all the details. Dan had chosen to tell only those who could be the most tight-lipped. So that meant that out of the gang, Tommy knew almost nothing, Jack knew about as much, Allison knew a few more tiny details, and I knew the most. Dan knew me well enough to know I could keep a secret or two.

We'd had this trip planned for some time, so it wasn't like Skylar was suspecting anything. The woman who loved

to plan everything in her life (and I mean *everything*) surely wanted to have some kind of say in the ring she'd be wearing and the date she'd be getting married. No, I take that back. I think Skylar really wanted to propose to Dan. And she wasn't ready to, not just yet. So Dan beat her and surprised her.

He surprised all of us that week, actually. It really was a remarkable buildup to an amazing moment.

If only I hadn't been so completely terrified by then of what was to come.

3

It started the night before I was supposed to leave for Wilmington.

I'd gone out with Blake to dinner and then to see a movie. It wasn't like we went to see some movie about demons or ghosts or something like that, though I've never been bothered by horror films and I can't really recall the last true nightmare I'd had before that night. I couldn't blame it on the dinner, either. It was an enjoyable date night with the love of my life, the man I'd be spending a week away from.

I finished packing when I got home and went to bed just before midnight. Nothing unusual.

I woke up that night around three in the morning. Sweaty, breathless, worried, even guilt-ridden. I knew I had to say a quick prayer just to get my heart and soul back in order.

I'd seen things that didn't make sense, that still don't

make sense even now. Skylar in a bloody wedding dress. Dan running, his face full of tears, his anguish obvious. I wanted to help them but I couldn't. It was like I was watching them on display through a window on the street. I could touch the window and even bang on it but there was nothing I could do to break through the glass and help. Not one thing.

And that was only the beginning. When I turned my back, I could see the flames from burning buildings and the rubble from explosions. People screaming and crying—the ones who weren't lying dead in the middle of the street or on the sidewalks.

I started to run (isn't that what people do in dreams?) but I couldn't go anywhere to escape the carnage. Each turn led me to someone else I knew who was hurting. Allison. Jack. Even Tommy.

It was just a dream, of course. I knew it was. My mind turning this time with all my friends into something terrible. I was thinking about them and the upcoming proposal and the future wedding.

But the images of all the people I loved most hurting and crying and bleeding were unsettling. And simply bizarre. I didn't know where they were coming from.

It took a while to fall back asleep that night.

The next morning I simply dismissed the nightmares as just that and nothing more. Nothing worth telling anybody about. Just a mental glitch due to a busy schedule and an overactive imagination.

Yet something inside, some persistent voice, told me it was something else.

I ignored this voice. At least for the time being.

4

Our group came together during our college years. Thinking of them now is similar to thinking about family members you've grown up with and love. When a face comes to mind and makes you smile. That's how I feel about this group. I love these people.

Dan Wilson is the all-American guy. Our young Harrison Ford. Tall, dark, and handsome with a bright future. He was a smart guy long before meeting Skylar at a party and knowing she was the one, but the fact that he realized this and pursued her only made him seem that much wiser.

Jack Turner was Dan's childhood buddy growing up in Wilmington. As kids they were friends simply because they were both involved in sports and had a lot of similarities. While Dan's the all-American, Jack's more of the heartthrob. He's the Tom Cruise of the bunch, the good-looking athletic type who always seemed to be surrounded by friends.

I met these two because of my friendship with Allison Costa. She was a classmate I got to know the first two years I was at Duke. If it hadn't been for my mother and her ailing health, I wouldn't have transferred to UNC Wilmington before my junior year. But I know that was something that God chose to allow for a reason.

And sometimes his reasons remain unknown to us.

Allie and I continued to be close friends even while I was gone. I relied on my girl a lot during those years when my mother fought her cancer and even after she passed. It's amazing how God puts just the right people in your life at the exact time you need them. Allie kept me sane while my faith kept me hopeful.

What can I say about Allie? She's good people. She's got a good soul. She's an honest, outspoken, and sometimes even fiery Italian. I've always loved her because I never need to wonder where I stand with her. It's no wonder Jack fell for her. They've been dating for over six years now. I've wondered just how serious it is, but Allie doesn't really like to talk about it. And now it's Dan beating Jack to the punch, proposing to Skylar before Jack can make it official with Allie.

Skylar—"the girl next door," a cliché I hate using but one that really does fit her. I'll be honest since I'm writing this to myself and nobody else. I didn't like Sky when Allie first introduced us. I felt like I'd been replaced. Here's this beautiful blonde who's vivacious and well-to-do with wonderful parents and a wonderful life and surely a wonderful dog, too. Or so I naturally thought. And the selfish person inside of me went, *So I'm losing my friend to this chick while I'm dealing with my mother's cancer? Thank you, LIFE.*

But while Skylar might *look* like the girl next door, she's got an immense heart. I know that now.

At my mother's funeral, one thing stood out more than anything else. It was something Skylar did for me. So simple

yet so meaningful. She showed up at the funeral and came over to give me this huge hug. She'd come to the wake the night before and had been one of the many people I barely remembered seeing. But that morning, as I stood filled with an ocean of grief I didn't know what to do with, Skylar gave me a tiny little bag.

"These are violet petals," she said to me.

And that was it. She hugged me and let me be.

My mother's name was Violet. So during the funeral, I remember clinging to that bag of petals as if somehow squeezing them might bring my mother back. Or at least take away the pain of losing her.

I still haven't told Skylar how much those petals meant to me. Or how much that simple gesture still means to me now.

5

Snowprints on the sand in the summer. I could see them stretching out for miles.

The snow fell in huge flakes, and normally I might dance around with an open mouth, but now I ran in terror. Running to find someone to tell. Running to try to figure out what exactly was happening.

Again, I knew I was dreaming. Sort of. My feet felt lighter. The touch on the ground felt softer. Yes, it was snow on sand, such a strange mix. But I knew it wasn't real.

Yet the terror wrapped around my heart felt authentic. It was pure. Even if I knew it was unnecessary.

I hadn't been this afraid since first learning about my mother's cancer. And then it took months and months of desperately giving it to God before I learned to let it go.

This feels like something impossible to let go.

I ran to find someone to tell. Not to help me but to help them.

If you knew the world was about to end, what would you say? Or maybe the question should really be, if this world was going to end, whom would you tell?

I could see the sea, ripe and red. The color of blood. The color of death.

I ran and glanced back at bloody tracks I was making.

I was bleeding myself, though I didn't know how and couldn't figure out why.

And this was when I woke up. Still out of breath. My feet felt wet.

I had been at the beach house only one night, but already the dreams were seeping into my mind, heart, and soul.

I could only hope the tide would eventually take them all away.

6

I was grabbing coffee that first morning at the beach house when I saw Tommy coming up to me, carrying that video recorder of his.

"Listen, Scorsese," I told him, "it's a little early for filming, isn't it?"

"Never."

Tommy Covington was the lovable comic in our group, the guy who seemed to love life the most and always seemed to be at odds with it too. He was the moodiest one out of the three guys but also the one I knew the best.

“Everybody else still sleeping?” I asked.

“Late night last night,” he said, a question in his voice. I hadn’t joined them.

“I needed some sleep,” I told him.

“Oh, come on. You’ve gone soft on me already.”

Tommy ended up being nice and set his video camera aside. I knew he’d be shooting a lot this week, leading up to the big moment.

If Tommy Covington could do anything in the world, it would be to direct motion pictures for Hollywood. But I don’t see Tommy doing that. Oh, I’d never tell him to his face. I could see him maybe doing a small indie flick or two. But he doesn’t seem to have the Hollywood kind of persistence.

Then again, I might be wrong about him.

I remember the first time I met him, when he came up to me after seeing me at a party I’d attended at Duke University. I was going to UNC Wilmington by then but still liked to go to parties with Allie at Duke on the weekends. Tommy was at UNC Wilmington too, and we ended up realizing the connection we had with our friends. There was definitely a connection between Tommy and me too, at the beginning. But Tommy was never someone I could imagine myself being with long-term. The fact that

my mother probably wouldn't have been thrilled about me bringing home a white guy had nothing to do with it; it just wasn't meant to be. And eventually someone else would capture his attention.

"Looks like we're going to have great weather," Tommy told me.

"I can't wait to sit on the beach and put on my headphones and veg out."

"Oh, no. Come on—I have activities for us to do."

"Activities? Like what?"

"We're going on a cruise. Beach volleyball. Bicycling into town. Beach football."

"Oh, and let me guess," I said, joking. "Beach . . . soccer?"

"No vegging out this week." Tommy paused. "Think Sky knows anything?"

"No. She's too much of a control freak to imagine Dan would plan all this to propose here."

"Hope she doesn't get mad."

I only shook my head.

"What?" Tommy asked.

"Skylar won't be upset."

"How do you know?"

"I saw the ring."

7

That makes Skylar sound so superficial. She can be, but so can anybody else. And what girl doesn't dream of the

perfect guy and the perfect house with the white picket fence? Okay, maybe my perfect house doesn't have a fence around it but rather happens to be fenced in by the woods, but regardless. Skylar's a girl. And Dan wasn't going to upset her.

The nightly ritual turned out to be sitting on the beach around a campfire. Everybody would be tired and giddy and full and warm from the day's sun on their skin. We would laugh and tell college and post-college stories. We imagined how our lives would be in one year or five years or ten years.

Even there, in the midst of so much happiness, I felt prompted to finally say something about my dreams and the worry I was carrying around with me. Tommy even asked me in front of everybody what was wrong.

For a second, I almost told them. *Almost.*

"I'm fine. I'm just tired."

"Oh, come on, Lauren," Tommy said. "You were just crying with laughter, and then all of a sudden we start talking about the future and you become a zombie."

"How are things with Blake and you?" Skylar asked.

"They're good. Really."

"So are you guys pretty serious?" Allie asked.

"Yeah."

"Something's wrong," Tommy said.

"Nothing's wrong."

"Why so glum, then?"

I only shook my head. I wanted to tell Tommy to leave

me alone and stop prying. I wasn't about to tell them my dreams. Not as a group. Not in this setting.

Nothing ruined the mood like telling everybody I was seeing visions of their deaths and the end of the world.

I might—*might*—tell Allie at some point. And the only reason I'd do that is to have her convince me I wasn't totally losing my mind.

"Maybe Lauren has something else to tell us," Tommy said, still pushing.

"Wait a minute," Jack said. "Lauren, are you going to be a mommy?"

Leave it to Jack to go *there*.

"You know my thoughts on that. You know it would take a miracle for that to happen."

They all knew where I stood when it came to purity and waiting for marriage. And I definitely didn't want that subject to be talked about on this night.

Jack was a little extra animated from the generous amount of beer he'd had. Nothing unusual, just Jack being Jack.

Thankfully, discussion moved away from me and onto other things.

Thankfully, nobody ended up asking me about my mood again.

8

I could see them all out on the boat laughing and dancing and having the time of their lives. I was on the shore,

watching and waving and listening. I called out to them, but they were too far away.

It was nighttime, and I couldn't understand why they hadn't told me about the boat outing. Maybe I'd gone to bed early, but shouldn't they have told me they were planning to head out onto the water later? Now the music and laughter and waves were all too loud for them to hear me.

The boat began to head farther and farther out to sea. And then something happened.

Flames rose from the boat.

I could now hear the sound of screams. They couldn't simply jump off. They were trapped. Burning.

And as the boat and my friends became glowing ashes floating in the middle of the night, my heavy breathing and my pulsing heart and my sweaty forehead soon told me this was just another nightmare. I was in bed. My friends were fine.

For now.

9

"You okay, Laur?"

I'd held it together and kept my craziness from everyone. But Allie eventually caught me at a quiet moment in the house while the rest of the crew was out on the beach.

"Yeah, I'm fine," I told her.

"It seems like something's going on."

"I'm just tired."

“That’s what you said yesterday,” Allie said. “Seriously—what’s going on?”

By now I’d made a promise to myself: don’t tell anybody until *after* the wedding. Nobody needed to know I saw the wedding party dead on the floor before the groom had even proposed to the bride.

“Laur?”

“Tell me something,” I said, not deciding to tell her but simply taking another route. “What would you do if you knew tomorrow didn’t exist? If this was the last day of your life?”

“Sounds like a soap opera,” Allie replied with a giggle.

“Serious.”

Allie came and sat by me, then put an arm around me and gave me a half squeeze. “That’s what this is about,” she said.

“What?”

“This. The last outing. The final hurrah. Then one by one, we’re going to go our own ways. Some together, but not *all* together, not like this.”

I smiled. “Yeah, I guess that’s it.”

“We’ll always be friends,” Allie said.

“How do you know that? A bit idealistic, isn’t it?”

“I think friendships or any relationships take work. And I know you, Laur. I know how hardworking you are. You’re tenacious. Kinda like Skylar but in a different way. Sky’s tenacity is in getting her own way. Yours is in making sure others do.”

Now she was genuinely starting to make me tear up.
 “That’s one of the nicest things I’ve ever heard.”

“Well, I’ve been around the boys, so I haven’t had a lot of nice things to say.”

We both burst out laughing.

“I’m going to miss this,” I told her.

“What? This place? The beach? *Me?*”

“You, of course. Always. But no—this place in life. I keep looking ahead and all I see are responsibilities and burdens and weights. Some good. But all weighing me down.”

“You’ll always have me to come lighten your load,” Allie said.

I forced a carefree smile. Something told me I wouldn’t.

Something told me Allison wasn’t going to be around much longer.

And this feeling baffled me, and even made me feel a bit guilty inside for thinking such a crazy thought.

10

Each day during the week, Dan did something special for Skylar. Nothing over the top that would cause her to think something was happening. He was always being sweet to her, so this wasn’t anything new. But each thing somehow involved the rest of us. One evening we went through snapshots of the last half decade when all of us knew each other. Another was an evening out with just us girls (paid for by Dan). Another centered around watching Skylar’s favorite

movie, *My Best Friend's Wedding* (complete with matching dinner and sing-along from the scene we all knew).

Little by little, Dan was giving Skylar gifts. And they were smaller and smaller items until the last, which would be a tiny box with a ring inside.

But really, it wasn't gifts Dan was giving to Skylar. He was ultimately giving her—and the rest of us—something we'd never let go of.

Memories.

That final night, we were all tired and giddy and both ready to go back home to normal lives and sad to leave this place behind. We did the nightly routine around the fire pit on the beach.

And that was when Dan finally paved the way to asking the big question. We didn't know how he was going to do it, but we did know we would be there.

“Okay—I have a game I want us all to play,” Dan said. “I want to know one question you're burning to ask. The number one question.”

“Questions we're wanting to ask each other?” Jack asked.

“No—just questions you have.”

“About what?”

Dan shook his head at his friend. “About anything. Life in general. You can ask anything to anybody.”

“What if you don't have any questions?” Jack asked.

We laughed and mocked him and he was amused with our response.

“What? I'm being honest.”

“Jack Turner,” Tommy said, joking. “The ultimate blank slate.”

“Come on,” Dan said. “It’s confession time. Jack just needs a few minutes to wake his brain cells up.”

“Ha-ha.”

Skylar went first. No surprise there.

“I’ve always wanted to ask my parents something. I’ve always wanted them to tell me if they’re just faking it. If they really, truly are that in love with one another.”

“That’s awful,” Tommy said.

“What? I’m being honest.”

“Your parents are crazy for each other.”

“I know, I know,” Skylar said. “It’s just—I wish I knew their secret. Or if they’re just really good fakers.”

We laughed and couldn’t believe she actually thought that. Everybody knew the Chapmans. They weren’t faking it. Granted, I’m sure they had their struggles, though it was hard to imagine.

Each question seemed to get a little deeper and more personal.

I brought up the whole having-kids thing with Blake. It was a subject that we hadn’t talked about yet, simply because I didn’t want to be the girl who asked the question about how many kids he’d like. Blake didn’t seem too interested in kids in general and never, ever, *ever* said something like, “Man, I can’t wait to have a couple of boys or girls one day.” He never went there. So of course I was genuinely curious.

“So just ask,” Tommy eventually said.

“I don’t want to even go there. I mean—we’re barely talking about the future and all that. I don’t want him feeling pressured.”

Tommy’s question revolved around his father and what he *really* thought of Tommy’s current career and life direction. It was an obvious choice for Tommy, since he spoke often about his clashes with his parents.

When Jack finally got serious, he opened up about his hope and desire to play some kind of professional sport and the door that had closed since college. I knew it had been tough for him but didn’t realize *how* tough.

For all of us, the vulnerability being expressed was special and rare.

These were all such great people.

Allie finally began to speak. But as she started to talk, something happened.

It’s like she was going to say something and then changed her mind.

“I guess my question—my questions—are just general ones,” she said. “Ones I have that anybody could answer. I would just like to know if all these things I want to do—things I hope to do in the future—will ever come true. Will ever actually happen. Sometimes it seems like I have too many lofty goals and plans, and then I think I’m not even anywhere close to doing all of those. It’s overwhelming.”

“You can do it,” Skylar said. “How’s *that* for an answer?”

Allison laughed. But something told me she had wanted to share more. About what, I didn’t know.

We talked more about the future and things we wanted to do and things we hoped would happen. This lasted for about twenty minutes and even I forgot that Dan hadn't said anything.

"Wait a minute," Skylar said, breaking the conversation. "Dan—you didn't even give us your big question."

"Oh, that's okay. I enjoyed all of yours."

The fire crackled in front of us and the stars glowed like tiny little embers in the night. Dan had an arm around Skylar and looked comfortable and even almost tired.

Little did I know Mr. Dan Wilson could be such a good actor.

"Oh, come on," Skylar continued. "You have to have some question. Something about the job?"

Dan acted like he was considering. This was when I began to think, *Wait a minute, he might actually propose to her.*

"I guess the biggest question I have is like lots of yours. Where I'll be. I mean, I wonder if I'll be able to do this night after night, week after week, year after year."

"Do what?" Skylar asked.

"Be next to you."

That's when I think all of us knew, including Skylar. Her eyes grew wider as she turned to get a good look at him. Suddenly she noticed Dan wasn't tired and he wasn't neglecting his question and he wasn't only moderately interested.

"Dan?"

“I want to know if the girl I’ve spent the last few years dreaming about and loving would still like me around day after day. Will she grow tired of me? Will I be able to make her happy? Will she still laugh at my jokes? Will I be able to always be her knight in shining armor? These questions and ten thousand other ones all revolve around this girl I’m madly in love with.”

We were all smiling and silent while Skylar turned to face him.

“Dan . . .” she said in a soft voice.

“No. Here’s the thing. There’s really only one question I want to ask. One important question that can change my whole life. But it’s one you have to answer. And I wanted to ask it to you in front of our closest friends. I wanted to surprise—”

“Yes!” Skylar said, wrapping herself around Dan before he could get any more words out of his mouth. “Yes, yes, yes.”

They embraced and kissed and we all clapped and laughed.

“Let him finish,” Allie said.

“Isn’t there supposed to be a ring?” Jack asked.

“I wish I had my camera,” Tommy said.

“I wish this night could last forever,” I ended up saying. And I was being truthful. I wish the night didn’t have to end.

Dan finally managed to say the words to Skylar and show her the ring. She definitely wasn’t saying no now. No way. Uh-uh.

We sat around the campfire for a long time. None of us wanted to go to bed. We wanted to take this one last chance to be together and be young and not worry about tomorrow.

Little did any of them know I *was* worrying about tomorrow. I was worried it wasn't going to arrive.

I felt like I still had so many things I wanted and needed to say. But for the rest of the night, I remained silent.

The silence still haunts me.

The world hasn't ended. My friends aren't dead. The wedding is right around the corner. Everything is fine, right? So why do I still feel terrified? Why do I still get the feeling something is coming that none of us will be able to escape from? What is God trying to tell me?

I wish I knew.

1 CAMERAMAN

Everything goes black.

For a minute, Tommy can only stand there freaking out. His heart races.

Not now. Not today. This is so not happening.

But as quickly as the screen went blank, the camcorder bolts right back to life, just as a high-definition video recorder should do. Especially one bought just this year for over twelve hundred bucks. Of course, it's not one of those professional cameras that cost close to five thousand. Tommy Covington might be good, but he's not *that* good. Or that successful. Not to own one of those machines.

Maybe not yet.

He's on a sidewalk right next to the river, facing the hotel, doing the kind of work a second unit on a film crew might do. Capturing some shots on location for mood and for setting purposes. No actors, no lines to be said. It's just background work, the stuff usually done by a team Tommy hopes to one day be a part of.

Before I become the next big-name Hollywood director like Christopher Nolan.

Seeing the world in the rectangular frame of a camera's viewfinder puts things into perspective. For the past half hour, Tommy has noticed things about the city of Wilmington he's never really seen before. Having grown up in the Chicago area, he still feels more like a Midwest guy than a Southerner. Yet he has no intentions of moving back north. All of his family are still living in the Chicago suburbs, but his *true* family is here in this city. Many of them are here in this hotel.

Two of them are actually getting married today.

Tommy aims the camcorder at the hotel. The Plantation is one of those luxury places that Tommy wouldn't be able to afford now or even probably five years from now. He's already captured the fancy logo and impressive entrance in a digital file. Later on, when he begins to assemble the video, he'll do some fun things with this footage. Perhaps some narration, definitely some cool music.

Dan asked him to do this as a favor, knowing that he'd do a good job. "Make sure Skylar likes it," was all Dan had to say. Skylar, Tommy knows, has this way of bringing

out the best in people. Granted, they might be angry and in tears by the end, but everybody wants to please Skylar. Especially the man marrying her.

So far, Tommy has gotten a number of important pieces of the city on film. The Cape Fear Memorial Bridge. Riverfront, the intimate seafood restaurant where Dan took Skylar on their first date. The small balcony where they ate. The coffee shop they often frequented, a place Tommy spends way too much time at. The pub all of them liked to go to on weekends, a place Tommy spends way too much money at. All pieces of the puzzle that represent Dan and Skylar. Soon to be Mr. and Mrs. Wilson.

Tommy thinks about the past month and realizes it's been quite possibly the best month of his life. Maybe because he's been around the gang so much, enjoying the final month of summer. Maybe because of what Allison, the maid of honor, said last night in an emotional toast at the rehearsal dinner, that this wedding was really going to change everything.

Maybe she's right. Maybe this will change everything.

Tommy has gotten hours of footage on video since Dan proposed to Skylar at the end of the summer a year ago. The beach house they all rented, the proposal that all of them helped with. Tommy can only hope that his own engagement and wedding—if that ever happens—will be half as memorable as Dan and Skylar's. But then again, it's Dan and Skylar. They should have their own trademark and brand. Maybe a reality television show.

And I'll be filming it.

Of course, before Tommy proposes and gets married, he probably needs to start dating. That's probably a necessity.

His phone buzzes, and he checks out the incoming text. It's Allison.

I'm so not going to make it through this day.

Tommy smiles at the text and sends a quick one back.

You'll do fine. And who knows? Maybe someone else will propose today.

The text is simply supposed to be an encouragement to Allison. He pauses for a second on the sidewalk, waiting for a response. But none comes.

Very typical. He's used to waiting.

Sometimes it seems his whole life revolves around watching and waiting. Watching for the right moment, waiting for the right memory to capture.

Hoping for that perfect minute where everything finally comes together.

He's a patient man. He doesn't mind watching and waiting.

Tommy heads into the hotel, ready to capture some more moments on film. He has a feeling this day will indeed change everything

Tommy opens the hotel room door and finds Jack standing there half-dressed, listening to his iPod and not stressed about anything. Typical Jack Turner, already

running late and acting like the world revolves around his schedule.

“You gonna put the rest of your suit on?” Tommy asks but doesn’t get a response.

He moves over to Jack and pulls one of the earbuds out. Then he steadies the camera to get some more footage.

“Jack, you have anything to say to Dan? This is it, man. He’s the first one of us to get put on permanent lockdown.”

The smile appears, the one that has always made girls like Allison and all those others go gaga over Jackie-boy. Mr. Football Star, not quite talented enough to be the next Tom Brady but certainly handsome enough to play the part.

Jack steps a little closer. He’s a bit taller than Tommy, a bit more broad-shouldered. A bit more everything, in fact. “You know, if you’re gonna shoot the wedding, you should probably be wearing some pants.”

With the quickness of a star quarterback, Jack grabs the already-loose pants on Tommy’s rented suit and pulls them down to his knees. Then he moves directly in front of the camera lens. “Dan, today is your day, my friend. We are happy to be here to share it with you. Tommy even wore his lucky boxers.” He reaches out and forces the camera onto Tommy and his favorite boxers, the ones with bacon all over them and the phrase *Bacon makes everything better* written in various places.

Tommy pulls his pants up and then backs away to redirect the camera off his boxers. He aims it back at Jack.

“We love you, brotha!” Jack screams.

“Don’t mock the bacon boxers,” Tommy says with pretend seriousness.

“Never. Only respect.”

“That’s right. Now, you gonna come upstairs?”

Jack shrugs. “We still have an hour.”

“Where’s our main man?”

“He’s all tuxed out. Stopped by a few minutes ago for a beer.”

The fridge in Jack’s hotel room is probably as full as the bar up on the rooftop.

“Did you charge him?” Tommy jokes, turning off the camcorder and buckling his pants back up. “You almost broke the button, you moron.”

“It’s nice to see you in a suit, looking all responsible. You should try it out more often and burn those concert tees.”

“You already sound so corporate. When’d you turn so old?”

“One of us has to,” Jack says as Tommy leaves the room.

Tommy finds the comment ironic. Out of all of them, Jack is the one who seems least likely to grow up. He doesn’t mind playing the game of being a manager at a financial company—a position his father helped him get—but he still isn’t about to suddenly “grow up.” Whatever that term even means.

“I’m going to find our groom before he decides to call everything off,” Tommy says over his shoulder.

Jack only laughs, knowing Dan wouldn’t call anything

off. Knowing that if Skylar suddenly decided to do something like that and run away, Dan would follow her. He would do anything for his lady.

It's a nice thought. Doing anything for your lady.

One day maybe I'll be able to do anything for someone.

One day maybe.

But today is not that day.

Dan Wilson's perfectly styled hair is the first thing Tommy sees when he enters the men's room directly off the rooftop hallway. Tommy is already recording and aims the camera at the soon-to-be groom.

"How you feeling, buddy?"

Dan's head pops up, and his surprised look soon turns to annoyed amusement. "This better not make it into my wedding video. You can stop shooting while I'm in the bathroom."

The groom looks tall, dark, and handsome in his black tuxedo. Tommy isn't about to ruin this glorious moment by shutting off the camera. "I left my car running outside just in case you want to bolt," he jokes.

Tommy pans the camcorder to the mirror behind a set of sinks. Dan enters the picture and stands next to him. As always, Dan looks calm and collected. Tommy would be sweating by now if his own wedding ceremony were only an hour away.

“Your car’s a hunk of junk,” Dan says. “We wouldn’t make it out of the parking lot.”

“We can hijack the limo, then.”

“You know what you need? You need to find a good girl like Skylar,” Dan tells him, washing his hands.

Tommy moves his head away from the viewfinder and looks into the camera in the mirror. “Groom wisdom. Nice.”

“There’s nothing better than being in an honest, committed relationship. I think—”

“Seems a little hard to take relationship advice from the dude who just joined a church because his fiancée wouldn’t marry him otherwise.”

Dan smiles. “The girl gets what she wants.”

Both men hear the sound of a toilet flushing. The door to one of the stalls opens, and the handsome older man stepping out greets them with a confident smile. “Gentlemen,” Skylar’s father says with quite a bit of irony in his voice.

Mr. Chapman makes Tommy feel a bit nervous anyway, and now this.

Tommy and Dan both greet the bride’s father as he starts to wash his hands. Dan gives his groomsman one of his look-what-you-did-now glares, then uses Tommy’s suit as a towel for his wet hands.

Tommy shouts out a *hey* but gets promptly ignored by the groom, who heads out of the bathroom.

For a second Tommy contemplates interviewing Mr.

Chapman, then gives him a courteous smile before following Dan. He figures he's got enough bathroom footage for one day. He still has to interview the rest of the bridal party and get their candid thoughts before the big event begins.

It still blows him away that he's here—that they're all here. His best friend is getting married. And so it goes. Life happens and you can't help it.

You just hang on for the ride.

It's going to be a memorable day. Tommy plans on enjoying every single moment.