



WEDDING Express

THE WEDDING'S OFF...
OR IS IT?

JODY DAY

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Dedication

For Randy Day, whose love and support points me to Christ every single day.

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What People are Saying

"There are so many reasons I love this book." ~
Rise' Uttley

This story is just like one of those movies...
[*Wedding Express*] really spoke to my heart. ~ Earnest
Roberts

1

I can't get married. Dizziness swirled in my brain the moment I realized I'd have to tell her. The muscles in my neck constricted like a rope. I felt as if I'd been strung up with the horse about to be kicked out from under me. I leaned against the wall. *What's happening?* A thousand, galloping stallions pounded through my heart. Will she forgive me? Will I lose her forever? My chest tightened, breaths barely filling my lungs. My hands shook so much I dropped the photos of my parents' wedding. Bailey wanted to see them, use them in our wedding.

I can't get married. Why hadn't I felt this crushing grief over Mom's and Dad's deaths before now? Why now, of all times? I'd be no use to Bailey like this. *Get a grip, man. Can't have this.* A flash of heat raced up my face. Nausea stung the back of my throat. I looked around the diner's storage closet for some kind of container. Boxes and cans of food distorted. The room spun, slowly at first, then whirling faster. Another heat flash exploded perspiration all over my face and neck. I dropped to my knees and sprawled on the floor in darkness. The concrete felt like sand in my hands, first rough, then sinking into quicksand.

~*~

I lay at the bottom of a dark pool. Shadows flickered above me. *Father God?* Strains of music set to the Twenty-Third Psalm floated above me.

"The Lord is my shepherd." *Bailey? Where are you?*

"I shall not want." *Dad?*

I rose further toward the surface with each word of the psalm. Suspended just under the edge of the dark pool was a sea of faces. Why did they look so sad and afraid in all this peace?

Flashing red lights assaulted my eyes. I broke the surface and blinked rapidly trying to focus. My neck and face sweltered in the East Texas heat and humidity. I wanted to tear open my shirt, but my arms wouldn't budge.

"Oh, God, please don't take him," a voice cried out. Red hair framing wild eyes came into view. "Don't move, Scott," the red hair said.

I tried to reach for my chest, but strong hands pulled my arms down to my side. Was I floating in the air? The lifting sensation dizzied me. So much noise. Someone crying.

Scattered phrases from various voices.

"Conscious, breathing, early thirties, his name's Scott West."

Screeching tires. A car door slammed. My vision cleared.

Bailey.

We are meant to be together. How could I have thought of postponing our wedding? I'd been trying to ignore my fractured heart for months. Half of me danced in the clouds with my brown-eyed girl, the other half grieved, missing my folks who'd been gone only a few months.

The panic in her face caused a different kind of

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pain. I'd never seen her velvet brown eyes so frightened. Her dark caramel hair seemed to fly in slow motion as she ran toward me.

My fractured heart solidified into one driving force. I loved her. How had anything else mattered?

The medics wouldn't let her near me. Panic choked me.

Ambulance doors slammed shut.

2

My head felt like the inside of a teddy bear, all fuzz, and lint, and cotton wool. Shoe leather for a tongue, I couldn't swallow. Not dead. There's no pain in heaven...and my body, especially my head, pulsed with it. I listened to the sound of my own breathing wondering what I might be in for if I opened my eyes.

Chancing it, I blinked against the light pouring from windows to my right. An IV line poked from my arm. I sniffed at the combination of rubbery adhesive bandage scent and the ultra-clean fragrance of bleached sheets. The beeping of some kind of monitor blared in my ears. *Yep, I'm in the hospital.*

A heavy sigh and whispering got my attention. May as well see what's up. *There's my girl.*

Bailey was sitting on a vinyl-covered couch, head bowed, eyes closed, and lips moving. A drenched and wrangled knotted handkerchief peeked out from hands that were clasped under her chin, white knuckles showing. The sunlight streaming across the top of her head gave her an angelic glow. *Look what I've done to my angel.*

Beloved. I'd promised to call her that as a reminder of all we'd been through together, and especially the miracle that had taken place in her heart. I couldn't get the words out.

Good, old Uncle Toppy perched next to her, his

head bowed as well. His pale face tensed under a sun-infused tangle of red hair. *He's lost so much, and look what I've done to him.*

"Who's minding the store?" Ouch. Desert in my throat. My vocal chords protested with a fit of coughing. My loved ones rushed me.

"Oh, thank God!" Bailey lifted my hand in both hers.

"I'll get the doctor." Topy put his hand on my head and ruffled my hair a bit, his face regaining color. He hurried out the door.

My girl smothered my face with little kisses. Tears spilled onto her cheeks, and then my hand, as she held it to her face.

"If I get kisses like that, I'll have to get sick more often. Water, please." Coughing commenced and blurred every word.

"Sick? Babe, you had a heart attack." Her tears fell in streams now. She closed her eyes, caressing my hand.

"What? No way. A severe case of indigestion and overwork, but surely no heart attack." I would have laughed if my throat had any moisture at all.

Bailey's mom walked in with a quick step, Topy close behind.

"Yes, Scott, you had a heart attack," Topy said.

Not possible. *I'm too young for that. Just overworked.* The seriousness on their faces needed brightening.

"Am I gonna get special treatment?" Had to be a good thing to be laid up when your future mother-in-law is Director of Nurses at Marshall General Hospital. Her forehead folded like venetian blinds. Guess she didn't care for my little joke.

Gwen Brown checked my IVs, yanked a blood

pressure cuff out from behind my head and wrapped it around my arm. She pumped it up, her brow furrowed. It kept getting tighter, and tighter. I finally cleared my throat, and she started as if she'd forgotten I was there. Her hand went to the little screw valve to loosen it. I hadn't seen her look like that since she and Bailey found out the contents of an old letter from their deadbeat husband and father. How could he have abandoned those two excellent women? His lame apology hurt them both.

Where was the relief and happiness they'd experienced when they got free from Kevin Brown's rejection? Instead, they were upset and worried about me. *Good going, man. Not.*

Why were they all so serious? I'd be fine, right as rain as soon as I could get on my feet again.

"The cardiologist will be here before long. How do you feel?" Her cold stethoscope on my arm gave me a shiver as the cuff deflated.

"Sore from top to bottom. I landed on concrete in the storage room, so that makes sense. I have a killer headache. Could I have a glass of water?" I could barely swallow.

Bailey stroked my forehead. Felt nice, but I was not an invalid. I'd be out of this hospital in no time.

"That headache is probably caused from the nitroglycerin tablet we gave you. Forced all your veins wide open. It will subside. I'll have some ice chips sent in. The doctor will order a meal for you, but don't expect fried chicken." She penned something on my chart.

"High?" Topsy asked, crossing his arms and stepping forward craning his neck to get a look at my chart.

"No. It was, but we're controlling that with medication." She patted my arm. "I'll be right back with those ice chips." She walked out, and I heard a "whew" under her breath. I'd really worried everyone.

Time to sit up and quit looking so wimpy. I pushed against the bed, but weakness sent me back to the pillow. *I'm not having this.* I took the deepest breath I could and tried again. Didn't work. Tried again.

"Don't, Scott. You shouldn't exert yourself." Bailey stopped my third attempt with the palm of her hand.

Humiliating. *Let me alone, woman.* I raised both my hands against her protest. She stepped back wide-eyed. Topy eyed me as if I'd mocked the teacher or something. *What?*

Mrs. Brown returned with ice chips in hand. She took one look at me struggling to sit up and shook her finger at me. "Oh, no you don't, young man. You lay back down." She smoothed the pillow under my head and tucked the sheets and blanket around me.

If they'd all just leave me alone a minute and let me get my bearings, I'd be able to sit up just fine.

Mrs. Brown spooned a few ice chips into my mouth. Heaven.

Bailey sat down, awfully quiet. I didn't like the worry on her face. I just needed to get out of the hospital, and quick. I had work to do. My diner, the washout facility, and my mom's inn couldn't run themselves. OK, Bailey ran the inn, but she sat next to me instead of looking after guests. All my fault.

"Again, who's minding the store?" I squeaked out.

Topy patted my arm. "West House Diner is safe in Tracy's hands. The twins are helping, and Liz comes after work. Tracy can handle it. Don't worry."

Certainly they could. No one knew Topy's diner

business better than longtime friends Liz Salas and her daughter Tracy, who was like a little sister to me. But they shouldn't have to rearrange their schedule for me. Tracy needed to move on with her life and get into college, and her mother shouldn't have to work at the diner after cutting hair at Liz's Locks all day. *Man! You're a real drain on society, Scott. Good going.*

The presence of Bailey's twin former roommates probably kept Toppo's two Washout Express employees distracted from their work. Greg and Todd were sweet on Mandy and Macy.

"And across the street at the Washout?"

"You know those boys have got you covered. And they're taking turns helping out at the diner when business slows down. Not a thing to worry about but getting better." He sat down next to Bailey.

I decided not to ask Bailey about the inn. She read my mind. "Shelley's Heart only has one booking this weekend. I haven't decided whether to cancel or not." Her quiet whisper, pale cheeks, and worried eyes concerned me.

My throat began to feel much better after a few more spoonfuls of ice chips, but soon warmth crept up my chest and into my throat. My mouth filled up with watery spit. I looked at Mrs. Brown. *No, please, no.*

"Nauseated?" Mrs. Brown grabbed a blue plastic ring, shook out the bag part and put it under my mouth.

Toppo stepped up and grabbed Bailey's hand, pulling her out of the room just in time. At least she didn't see me get sick.

A mental list began forming in my head. Get the low down from the doctor and then get out of the hospital. Period. I needed my clothes ASAP. My focus

consumed me. All caught up in trying to figure out how to get out of there, I almost forgot Mrs. Brown's presence.

"Scott, I know this is hard for you. You're used to taking care of everyone. Now you need to let us take care of you. Everyone's praying," she said, patting my cheek.

"Yes, ma'am. I know. The Lord has never failed me, and I'm not about to stop trusting Him now." That's right, God would help me heal, and I'd be back to work in no time. I had to put a smile back on Bailey's face.

The weakness that sent me to the ground? Horrible. The pain I felt when I saw the fear on her face as they whisked me into the ambulance? Worse, so much worse. Worry lined her forehead, fear flushed her cheeks. Worst of all, pity hardened her glance, as though more had been lost to me, and she had to fix it somehow.

This silly overreaction to a dizzy spell threatened our life together. I needed to be with her as soon as possible. All the vacillating emotions had to stop. I would marry her as soon as I could stand up straight.

"I'll look in on you later. If you need anything, just push the call button." Mrs. Brown turned to leave just as Topy stuck his head in the door.

"I'm taking Bailey home. She's protesting, but I'm insisting. She's been here with you since you were admitted. We'll check on you tonight."

"Thanks, Topy." I hoped they'd both get some rest. Relief. Now I could get stronger without Bailey feeling pity for me. I'd be sitting up in my own clothes, and ready to see her later.

Without warning or knock, a tall man with a brisk

walk came in wearing a white scrub coat, his pocket embroidered in red, 'Harkin, Cardiology.' I hadn't looked that far up since I saw the skyscrapers in Dallas as a child.

"I'm David Harkin, nice to meet you, Mr. West." His firm, confident handshake and straightforward, dark brown eyes indicated his professionalism, but I sensed a friendliness that put me at ease.

"Call me Scott. When can I go home?" I tried to sit up again but experienced the same results. I willed a mental promise to myself. Sit up or bust.

"You've had a traumatic health event, Scott, so it depends." He flipped through papers on a clipboard. "How are you feeling?"

"Like I planked in front of a semi. There's no way I had a heart attack, Doc. Early thirties is kind of young for that, right?" This tall man with the jet black hair had the answers. Surely he'd get me out of here quick.

"It's actually not uncommon." He looked at my chart. "You're, oh, thirty pounds overweight, and I understand you manage three businesses? There must be a good deal of stress involved in that. You recently lost both your parents, I'm told. Your cholesterol is through the roof. You're a prime target for premature heart disease."

I took a deep breath. Didn't like the sound of "disease." OK, but that all sounded fixable. "What's the plan?"

Dr. Harkin opened his mouth and a bunch of the alphabet poured out, phrases all starting with C's. I did recognize EKG and the fact that something called ST measured slightly elevated.

"There doesn't appear to be any muscle damage, but I have ordered another round of tests. I think we're

looking at a mild cardiac episode brought on by stress. Did you experience any shortness of breath before yesterday morning?"

"I couldn't do anything without stopping to catch my breath."

He closed the clipboard case with a snap. "We'll talk some more about it later. Right now, you should just rest and let these good folks take care of things. There is every reason to believe you will recover fully and live a normal life. We caught it in time to avoid any lasting damage to the heart, and if you continue to feel better, and make some lifestyle changes, there's no reason to think you won't recover fully."

"When can I go home?" Everything Dr. Harkin said rang true, but I still wanted out of that bed. Helpless.

"I wouldn't think about going home for a day or two. You are fairly stable now, but let's wait on those tests. My assistant will help us start putting together a plan for your recovery, and we'll begin talking about that tomorrow or maybe the next day."

"You mean diet." The mention of food equaled more nausea. The thought of dieting exhausted me. Everything exhausted me. My eyes just wouldn't stay open.

"You need to sleep. I'll be in to see you in the morning." Dr. Harkin shook my hand again. As he turned and reached for the door, another nurse walked in. Penetrating green eyes smiled behind a surgical mask. Her short bobbed, raven black hair shone under the lights of the room.

"Scott, meet my assistant, Melissa Murphy. She'll be working closely with you on your exit plan and your follow-up appointments." Dr. Harkin rested his

hand on her shoulder as he introduced her. She pulled the mask down to reveal her smile.

“Hello, Scott.” She reached for my hand.

My drowsiness vanished as I looked into the face of my former fiancée.

3

My mouth dropped open. I'd never expected to see her again. Never occurred to me to tell Bailey about it. *Uh, oh.* "Melissa." How long had it been? Ten years? Of all things, and out of the clear blue sky. I should say something, but what? She hadn't changed a bit, still beautiful.

"You two know each other?" Dr. Harkin crossed his arms and looked from me to Melissa and back again. Did he just frown?

"We were...uh," she cleared her throat. "...were good friends after high school." She pulled her hand away from mine.

"I see." Dr. Harkin studied her. A pained expression crossed his face, and then he returned to all business again. "Well, Scott, I'll look in on you again in the morning."

"I'll be in as well, and we'll discuss a plan of action to get you up and going again." Melissa's comment sounded professional and detached.

Doctor and nurse left the room without another word.

Mrs. Brown entered with a tray. "Here's your chicken broth." She rolled the table over the bed and set the tray down. "Sip it slowly."

I felt my stomach twist at the thought. "Maybe later. How about a clear soda?"