



A 2-IN-1 ANTHOLOGY
INCLUDES Washout Express & Wedding Express



Express Duet

INCLUDES

Washout Express

&

Wedding Express

Jody Day

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Express Duet: Washout Express & Wedding Express

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Washout Express

1

He sent the new girl in to fire me. Phoebe Waverly vamped in on those stilts she calls stilettos with a cardboard box in hand.

“Mr. Graham asked me to inform you that you are terminated, immediately.” Her attempt at a professional voice only made her sound more Southern, one word leaning on another like dominoes toppling toward a period. “This box is for your things, Miss Brown. I’ll take that office key, if you please.”

The heat rose on my face. I decided not to acknowledge her.

I picked up my purse and headed for Darryl’s office. Miss blonde, fancy-shmancy, high-heeled, manicured, former Miss Texas had tried to steal my job. Looks like she succeeded.

My hand shook as I reached for the knob. I stopped, squared my shoulders, straightened my navy business suit, took a deep breath, and pushed open Darryl Graham’s office door.

He wasn’t there. Coward.

OK, that’s it. Fired. Not let go, not reassigned, not “we think you’d be suited better elsewhere.” Just plain fired with no chance to defend myself. Each slow step back to my office melted me into the ground like the villainess of Oz, only I wasn’t the wicked witch.

Phoebe hummed a happy tune as she tossed my

Bailey Brown–Administrative Assistant nameplate into the box, none too gently. I walked out without looking at her or handing over my office key. The door slammed behind me. I might have helped it a bit.

OK, a lot.

I sat in my car for at least an hour. August perspiration trickled down my neck. The temperature and tears made my face a tomato reflected in the rearview mirror, but I didn't care. Maybe Darryl would return to Graham Properties, and then I could confront him. My brain hashed over the events of the last several weeks. One minute I'm the administrative assistant of a real estate firm; the next minute I'm out on the street.

His cell phone went straight to voicemail, but I kept punching it in anyway. Suddenly I couldn't take the heat any longer, so I started the engine of my red, '98 Oldsmobile. Darryl always harped that I needed a newer car. He hated my Olds, but he loved Pinewood Manor, the antebellum home that my grandmother left me two years ago.

Anxiety sent my hand up to caress the gold cross necklace that Gran gave me on my sixteenth birthday. "Pray it out, Bailey, and get some rest," she always said. "Things will look better in the morning."

Phoebe slithered out of the office. She looked over her shoulder as she locked the office door then snaked into her silver Charger.

Darryl wasn't coming back, at least not before I roasted in the heat. *May as well go home.* I pulled onto Main Street and checked my rearview mirror before making the left turn toward my apartment.

Mandy and Macy, my twin roommates, came home an hour later. They took one look at me and

rushed to the couch where I sat weeping.

"It's that scoundrel again, isn't it?" Macy ran cool water on a cloth and sat next to me. She put her arm around me and pressed the cool cloth to my eyes. Her red curls tickled my nose as she pulled me close.

Mandy sat on the other side and made me lay my head in her lap. Macy, her green eyes all concern, refreshed the cloth, and they sat there with me while I tried to pull myself together, pressing the cloth to my face.

They both talked about Darryl as though I wasn't there. I'd grown used to it. They didn't like him.

"What is it this time? Rag her about her weight again, as if everyone doesn't have a few pounds to lose? Just because he thinks he walked out of a GQ magazine." Mandy rolled her eyes and shook her head.

Good looking? Yes. Not a tall man, but an inch over my five foot seven and in really good shape from playing tennis. His killer green eyes could charm the skin off a snake, and his close-cropped salt-and-pepper hair made him look distinguished.

"More like *Senior Citizen* magazine. He is forty years old, for crying out loud. I bet it's that beauty queen interloper he hired without even asking Bailey's opinion. I mean really, who hires a secretary who can't type? She's always posing like she's on a pageant stage, even at the Dairy Barn. It's obscene the way she eats an ice cream cone." Macy faked a pageant pose, and swooshed her hair back and forth.

"Didn't he give Bailey power of attorney? She could have him committed. He's obviously crazy." Mandy patted my arm.

"Fired," I choked out.

"What?" they cried in unison.

Mandy socked a fist into her hand. "What do you mean fired? For what? Not wearing your hair poufed up to the ceiling? Not wearing your skirts short enough?"

Macy gently took my hand in hers. "What's that going to do to...?"

Mandy shook her head to deter her sister from broaching the question.

They pulled a comforter up over me and chattered about their classes in hushed tones. Sleep crept over me in spite of a pounding headache.

The moon shone pearl shafts through the blinds when I woke up a few hours later. My mom's favorite hazelnut coffee scented the air. *She must be here.*

"Oh, you're awake. Hi, sweetie." My mom leaned over the back of the couch. Her nurse's uniform meant she'd left work to come and see me. She put a kiss on my cheek and lovingly tucked the blanket in around my shoulders.

"I guess the girls called you." My dry throat rasped hoarse with grit.

"Yes, and they went out so that we could visit a little while. Hon, what in the world is going on?" She sat alongside me on the couch, holding my hand. Same face, same brown hair and eyes as mine, although gray peeked through at her temples "Why haven't you called me?"

"What are the nurses at Marshall General doing without their director tonight, Mom?"

"They can manage for an hour. You're avoiding my question." She tugged me toward her, and I leaned my head on her shoulder.

"Oh, Mom, I've been so stupid." Tears welled up again in my aching head. "I hardly know where to

start.”

“Well, doll, I can imagine. Marshall is a small town. Even though you didn’t tell me, I heard about Miss Texas getting hired at Graham Properties. That would intimidate anyone.”

“It’s more than intimidation. Darryl is totally smitten with her. They have been inseparable, under the guise of Darryl training her, since he hired her two weeks ago. He actually sent her in to fire me today.

“Sent *her*? To *fire* you? Where was he?”

“Nowhere around.”

“Coward. Why do you even want that job? Your grandmother’s house is just sitting there waiting for you to share it with the world. What about that idea of yours of turning Pinewood Manor into a bed-and-breakfast?”

“On hold. Darryl and I had plans.” I opened my mouth to say more, but as my plans evaporated like castles in the air, emotion choked me.

Mother put both her arms around me and held me tight, our heads resting together. “I’m sorry, sweetheart. What a tough day.” She stroked my arm as we sat silently for a few moments.

“Maybe it’s time to dust off those plans. So much of your heart is tied up in Gran’s place. Going ahead with your dream might be good medicine right now.”

“Maybe.” I’d imagined my own bed-and-breakfast, but Darryl was supposed to be there, too.

“I miss living there, don’t you?” Mom donned a wistful smile.

“Yes, it’s a shame it needs so much work. I intended to get started on all the repairs, but then...” Was it possible for me to change the subject? I kept coming back to the same thing.

"Darryl came into your life. I know." Mom let a sigh escape her lungs. Sitting here now, I couldn't believe how I had let a relationship with Darryl manipulate my intentions. What did I have to show for it now? No B&B, no boyfriend, and no job. What a fool I'd been.

My mother squeezed my hand, pulling me out of my self-inflicted pity party.

"Your grandmother did make us a happy home after your father left us." Mom's face clouded over, and tears spilled onto her cheeks.

"I still miss her."

She looked directly into my eyes. "Gran and I raised you to be a strong and independent woman and to love the Lord. I watched you blossom in high school. You had so many friends. I'm surprised to see you give in to this all-consuming destruction since Darryl came into your life."

"Destruction? What do you mean?" I knew what she meant all right, but hadn't I concealed my insecurities all these years, even from my mother?

She didn't know I'd overheard the last argument my parents had before my father left. "Fat little kid," he called me. Even as an adult, I couldn't shake the feeling that he left because of me. I'd been trying to make up for it ever since.

And then there was the letter he'd left me.

Gran told me to throw it away. *Why? Would it hurt me?* I'd put it, unopened, in a small, wooden jewelry box and stashed it in an old secretary at Pinewood Manor, along with Gran's Bible and photo albums. Out of sight was not out of mind; it nagged at me like an unpaid bill.

"Sweetie, you let Darryl tell you what to do. I

don't mean as a boss, I mean even down to what you wear, what you eat, and when you can and can't go out with your friends. It's not like you. And it seems you've forgotten all about church."

My mom opened her mouth as if to say more, but ended up holding me in silence. "Bailey, I have to get to work. I'm doing an all-nighter. Will you be OK?"

"Sure, Mom. I'm fine. Don't worry." I got up to pour myself a cup of the coffee she'd brewed for me. She hugged me good-bye and held onto me as though she didn't want to leave.

"No, really, Mom. I'm fine now."

She left my apartment reluctantly but with an encouraging smile.

Mom spoke the truth. Darryl did have that effect on me. Something about him made me lose my senses.

No. I will not be treated like so much garbage. If Darryl wanted to fire me, he'd have to do it himself. Did he think this changed everything else? Had he forgotten all our plans? I made up my mind to go back to the office on Monday, and then I kept my cell phone next to me all weekend.

Darryl never called. I couldn't understand that. Nothing about this made sense. The little Barbie-doll secretary got to me too much.

Monday morning my face looked like warmed-over lobster. No amount of ice water alleviated the redness and swelling from lack of sleep and too much crying. My eyes betrayed me, but resolve energized me. I determined to go into the office and have a reasonable discussion with Darryl.

I took my coffee with me to Pinewood Manor to clear my head for an hour before venturing into the task ahead. Calm settled over me as I drove the three

miles out of town and up the hill to the mansion. The long, azalea-lined driveway welcomed me to my childhood home. As I crested the hill, I saw Darryl's red Jaguar parked next to Phoebe's Charger in the driveway.

Why would he bring her here?

I'd given him a key because he'd promised to handle the repairs for me. Since hiring Phoebe, he'd been showing her around all of the firm's holdings, but Graham Properties didn't own Pinewood Manor. Confusion quickened questions in my mind.

The front door opened, and the two of them came out of the house, arm in arm. They stopped and faced each other. Darryl wrapped Phoebe in his arms and kissed her.

A punch in the stomach. The shock of the sight threw me into a mental spin. I backed up and jerked the car around. They saw me. Phoebe hadn't just stolen my job. She'd stolen my fiancé, too.

Finished.

That fact filled me like a fast-brewing coffee maker. I backed down the lane where no one would see me and got out of my car on rubber legs, shaking with sobs.

Marriage? Head on collision.

Career? Run off the road.

The pieces of my life stacked up like a multi-car accident. My future lay as a tangled mass stretched out on the highway of life.

Darryl could have betrayed me anywhere. He knew what Pinewood Manor meant to me. Could I have meant so little to him? I should have known he'd prefer that little beauty queen over me. Hadn't I expected this? But to bring her here?

Hurt and anger clamped down on my heart. Short breaths rasped from my throat. I dropped my face into my hands and tried to get a grip.

Thrown away again.

I got into my car and drove. Thirty minutes or so passed. Could anyone be stupider than me?

I pulled over to the shoulder and turned off the engine. Could I even pray?

“Father, I’ve really messed up. I’m so hurt and miserable that I can’t even think straight. I’m completely washed out, wasted, desperate, and I don’t know what to do. Please help me.”

Something caught my eye. A sign to my right advertised: Washout Express - Exit 477.

Great. God agreed. *Washout*. Yes, that was me. Washed out, washed up, finished, done. Maybe Exit 477 led to an East Texas Isle of Misfit Toys, the place where all the washouts go.

Whatever lay beyond the exit didn’t really matter. It only added more hurt to think God answered my prayer that way.

I started the engine and took Exit 477.

2

I slowed the car to a crawl. Lush, white elm flanked and canopied each side of the narrow road. Lacy shadows dotted and flickered on the street.

You're here.

Where did that thought come from? The words whispered as though something waited for me, longed for me. My heart drew forward in slow motion. A small healing seemed to take place. A deep, cleansing breath rose from my lungs.

The surreal pathway cleared after a mile. The poetic and dreamlike bubble I'd driven through vanished. A large, aquamarine building loomed on the right. The sign read Washout Express.

Yep, that's about the size of it for me...expressly washed out.

A quaint diner-gas station combination called West House faced the Washout Express across the street.

A bell jingled as I pushed open the door. As I took a seat at the counter, a ponytailed waitress flashed me a grin, her friendly brown eyes shining. "What'll it be, ma'am?" Her nametag identified her as Tracy.

"Cola, please. A real cola, not a diet one." *Take that, Darryl.* "Make it with vanilla if you have it."

"Vanilla, my favorite. Comin' right up." The AC worked overtime in that little place, and the coolness calmed me. Tracy brought my cola.

“Will there be anything else?” Tracy’s youthful openness brought me out of my stupor a little.

I ventured a conversation. “Is there a hotel nearby?”

“Lots to choose from in town.” Tracy scribbled on her order pad and then put the pencil behind her ear. “Roach motels all the way up to high dollar. What are you looking for?”

“How about something in between that, say, near here, like on this exit?” I used the straw to swirl ice around in my cola.

“On this exit? Nada.” Tracy wiped down the counter, offered to refill my drink, and answered the phone in the same breath.

While she spoke on the phone, I looked over the diner. A stack of Bibles sat on a shelf above the coffee machine. Tracy hung up the phone and looked my way.

“Bibles?” I pointed to the shelf behind her.

“Yes, we used to have church here for the truckers. That is until the owner’s wife died about a year ago. One of the drivers, Jack Weatherby, is a preacher. He always tried to come through here on Sunday. He still checks on us now and then.”

“Oh, OK.” *Church in a diner? Intriguing.* “Well, I think I’ll take my drink over to a booth and sit a while, if that’s all right.”

“Of course, take your time.”

A couple came in the door, and Tracy busied herself waiting on them.

I sipped on my soda while life decisions stalled in my mind. I couldn’t stay here. I couldn’t go to Gran’s until I could finish the repairs. Go back to Marshall? Head toward Dallas? Panic paralyzed my thinking.

Stranded in a test I hadn't studied for, I searched for an answer.

Mom. She'd be worried. I should call, but there was no use discussing what I wasn't sure about. Too many unanswered questions ate at my tired brain, and I didn't relish trying to explain. I opted to text her.

Mom, I'm taking a short vacation. I'll keep my phone on but really don't want to talk. I'm OK. Please let Mandy and Macy know.

I pushed the send button. She'd worry, but more importantly, she would pray. "Help," was all I could manage to pray.

Tracy approached. "I just remembered. There's a sort of bed-and-breakfast about a half mile up the road. The owner isn't there much, but you might convince him to let you stay." Tracy moved along to deliver her tray.

She came back in a minute. "His name is Scott West. He actually owns this diner, the washout across the street, and the B&B that his mom ran. He's got his hands full now since she passed away. His dad had a stroke about the same time. Scott's taking care of everybody and everything. He'd probably let you stay there, but you'd most likely be on your own most of the time."

"Thanks, Tracy. Where can I find him?" Did I really want to do this? What was the point of running from my problems? I needed to suck it up, go home, and deal with it. My stomach churned at the thought of all the changes that assaulted me, and the changes to come. I could at least look into this bed-and-breakfast.

"He's across the street at the Washout Express.

You can go over and ask him if you like." She gathered my glass and napkins with one hand and wiped the table with the other.

"I might just do that. Pardon my ignorance, Tracy, but what is a Washout Express?"

"It's a place for truckers to have the concrete washed out of their beds and trailers so they don't drip the excess on the city streets."

"Well, thanks. I guess I'll go and inquire of the very busy Mr. West. Nice to meet you, Tracy. I'm Bailey Brown, by the way, and you've been great." She deserved a generous tip. I obliged.

Business suit and heels were probably not standard dress inside a washout facility. Nervousness jangled my brain as I reached into my purse for a mirror. Yep, my face still looked red and stressed. Whatever. I would just stand tall and be businesslike.

Confidence, Bailey. Perhaps my nose pointed a little up in the air, overcompensation for my lack of assurance at that moment.

The grimy counter to the left faced a row of equally not-so-clean chairs on the right. I tapped the little ringer on the counter.

Five minutes passed with no response, so I rang the bell again. Exhaustion began to settle on me, but my backside was not about to sit in those filthy chairs. Finally, a door behind the counter opened.

An elderly man hobbled out with a cane. He just stared at me.

"I'd like to speak to Mr. West, please."

"Wait, wait, wait." The old man turned and went back through the door and closed it.

My feet and ankles throbbed in my heels. A crushing headache nearly blinded me. Temptation to

sit in those grimy chairs nearly won. Five more minutes passed, and when the old man came back without Mr. West, my patience evaporated.

"Is Mr. West here or not?" I crossed my arms and glared at him.

"Queen o' Sheba, Queen o' Sheba, Queen o' Sheba!" he shouted and pointed his cane at me. "Sit, sit, sit!"

Dumbfounded, I decided to leave rather than sit in those awful chairs and wait for someone who might not come.

I grasped the doorknob. I didn't need this. The point of my excursion was to get away from the stress, not add to it. I'd be better off at home. A young man came rushing through the door behind the counter.

"What's the matter, Dad?" Tenderly, he put his arm around the old man and walked him to one of the chairs. He spoke quietly to him and then handed him a magazine.

"Queen o' Sheba, Queen o' Sheba, Queen o' Sheba," the old man repeated, pointing his cane at me.

"Oh, hello, I'm sorry. I'll be right with you," the younger man said.

Moments later, he turned my way. "Please excuse my father. He's recently had a stroke and has trouble expressing himself. He always says things in threes, and sometimes it's hard to tell what he means. I'm Scott West. What can I do for you?" The exhaustion in his pleasant voice matched the weariness in those gorgeous blue eyes.

"The waitress at the diner said that you have a bed-and-breakfast down the road. I'm looking for a place to stay for the night. Would you be willing to rent me a room?"

"It's more like a bed-and-bring-your-own. I'm a little shorthanded these days. I haven't had time to do much business there. Wouldn't you prefer to drive a few miles into Marshall and get a nice hotel?"

"I just came from there. It sounds crazy, but I need to stay on this exit tonight. I don't need much, just a bed." My eyes began to tear up and my face turned warm. The sound of my crazy, pleading voice alarmed and embarrassed me. The man probably thought I was nuts.

Scott tilted his head sideways and squinted. He wrinkled his forehead and then pressed his lips together. He finally broke the awkward silence.

"If you'll give me a couple of hours to finish up here, I'll open it up for you, if you're sure that's what you want to do."

"Yes, please."

"All right, I'll meet you there at six." He looked as though he wanted to ask a question.

Please don't. My pleading eyes must have gotten the point across. "Thank you. I'll see you then." I reached for the doorknob, but not before noticing Scott's father staring into space. With gentle hands, Scott helped the frail man up and walked him to the back room.

I drove home and gathered a week's worth of clothes. I also called the locksmith. He agreed to have the locks at Pinewood Manor changed and the keys delivered to my mom.

Pinewood Manor would not be a meeting place for Darryl and Phoebe any more.

~*~