



JOY
Express

DOUBLE THE BLESSING,
BUT WHERE'S THE JOY



JODY DAY

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Dedication

For Kristen and Jarret Boyd, whose faith and strength in unspeakable tragedy inspires all who know them.

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What People are Saying

Reading anything that Jody Bailey Day writes is like coming home—and like home, there are fusses and fights, and a lot of suspense and drama built into *Joy Express*, but faith winds through it. It draws you to toast your hands over the warmth, and hug yourself with the blazing joy she brings to everything she writes. I don't often read faith-based fiction, as writers can sometimes get heavy-handed. You can tell by this book that Day writes like she lives, with the warm fire of faith in every word. I have read everything she writes, and wait eagerly for her next. Every. Single. Time.

Lisa C. Hannon, Author,
"She's Thinking Out Loud"

1

I squeezed the couch cushion with both hands as a Braxton Hicks contraction tightened in my lower back. Or was it a real one? Eight months in, so it *could* happen right now. I focused on ivy shadows dancing behind the lacy window curtains until it passed. Moving around in the mid-morning air would help.

My usual get-off-the-couch ritual proved more difficult every day. I spread my swollen feet, anchored one hand on the arm of the couch, pushed off with the other hand, and propelled the basketball stomach into the air. The few feet from the living room couch to the front porch of the inn stretched miles away, but I waddled there anyway.

I wiggled into a porch rocker and willed a cooler breeze to materialize. My perfect, snowy wedding nearly a year ago spoiled me for every December to come. The piney woods across the road shone green in the sunlight. Normally I'd seek refuge from the heat with a stroll on the fragrant, dead pine needles. My football-sized feet prevented any pleasure jaunts among the cool shadows.

Could I even find shoes that didn't hurt for the Barkley House dedication this afternoon? Maybe I could get away with dressy flip-flops. That was standard East Texas footwear all year round anyway, except maybe three days in February. The snow last

December surprised everyone.

I decided to just rest for five more minutes. My speech needed practicing. I also needed to pull our wedding cake topper from the freezer. Maybe there'd be time for a private first-anniversary celebration tonight. Two weeks early, but the actual date was too close to my due date.

My sweet, hard-working husband balked at leaving me alone. I'd shooed him on. I'd promised to keep my cell phone near me and Phoebe was just up the road at the diner. So much work to be done and I couldn't help Scott with any of it.

"Welcome to the Grand Opening of the Helen Barkley Missionary Retreat," I whispered. I planned to keep it short, given I couldn't stand very long. "I may never be able to erase the picture of Pinewood Manor, my grandmother's home, and one of Marshall's finest antebellum mansions, smoldering in ashes in this spot just a little over a year ago. But the building of Barkley House has brought healing. Mother and I know that Gran would be pleased that we have a resting place for missionaries, because they were so close to her heart."

There was that old, black vehicle again. I'd seen the classic car creeping around Exit 477 several times over the last couple of days. The canopied lane that banked the road to our home seemed to draw strays. I'd been one of them.

Now, how did the rest of it go? "On this special day..."

The car pulled into the driveway.

My tortoise speed preempted a stand-up greeting, but I leaned forward in the rocker.

The reflection of tall pines on the windshield hid the driver's face from view.

My heartbeat sped up, and I placed a protective hand on my stomach. I reached for the phone in my maternity jeans pocket. I'd left it on the coffee table. So much for my promise.

The driver climbed out but stood by the door. He ran a hand through a head of hair more gray than brown. He hesitated as if he might slide his fiftyish, slight build back into the car. Instead, determination flashed in his dark eyes as he took a step away from his vehicle and slammed the door.

Probably just someone scouting out a weekend stay at the inn for Christmas. Couldn't he see the CLOSED UNTIL SPRING sign?

I rubbed my damp palms on my jeans, and tried to swallow.

"Bailey!"

A shock raced up my spine, and my vision blurred. The pines, the black car, and the ivy covered porch rails melded into blackish, green waves. I was five years old again, crouching in the back of a Pinewood Manor hall closet. The musty coats making me cough. The fear he'd hear. He'd raged at Mom for a long time. I'd covered my ears. But as he'd stormed down the hall, I heard the words that became my prison.

"You baby her too much, she's too fat, and she'll never amount to anything!" *Slam.*

Beloved, you are free.

The heavenly whisper steadied me a bit. I remembered. *Yes, Father.* The present returned and my dad's words that I'd worn like skin nearly all my life fell away. *Move, Bailey. Get up and go in the house.* What does one say to the father who abandoned my precious mother and me in a molten rage and never so much as

called in over twenty years? ‘What do you want?’ formed in my brain, but never registered with my mouth.

He stepped onto the porch and lunged right into my space, both his fists tightly knotted by his side. His eyes narrowed into sinister slits. “You’re coming with me.”

“No, I’m not.” I managed to push out of the rocker and tried to turn toward the front door.

He grabbed my arm and pain shot to my fingers as he pulled me down the stairs.

I stumbled, but managed not to fall. I jerked my arm as hard as I could, but his grip only tightened. A sharp pain and a kind of pop ripped inside, below my babies. “Help!” A pain and incredible pressure gripped my lower back. “Please, I’m due any minute. Let me go!”

“I can see that. It does complicate things a bit, but it’s all up to you.” He jerked me toward the sedan. He opened the car door, pulled the driver’s seat forward, and shoved me in the back. “Lie down, and shut up!”

I screamed until he pulled a pistol from behind his back and pointed it at my stomach. His hand shook. “I said shut up. Lie down and don’t get up until I tell you.”

Tears slid down my face as I lay on the car seat. I rubbed the red stripes on my arm and watched the pines whiz by in a green haze. My son and daughter moved within me.

2

“Scott, where do you think Bailey wants to put the cold drinks?” Uncle Toppo called from the kitchen.

“I’m sure whatever you think will be fine.” I sized up my black suit from the hallway mirror just outside the kitchen door. It looked better on me a year ago. I shoved my hand into the right pocket and pulled out a crumpled green tie that hadn’t seen the light of day since the wedding.

“Uncle Toppo, is there such a thing as an iron around here?”

Toppo stuck his head into the hallway. “Look in the caretaker’s quarters. Tracy should be there. I bet she has one.” He stepped into the hall and edged me away from the mirror to straighten his tie and button his black suit. “My turn to primp.”

“Your tie looks like a Shar-pei pup, Uncle Tops. Take it off, and I’ll iron it with mine. I have to go pick up Bailey. Everything ready?” I waited as he unfastened his red tie and handed it to me. “And you need to run a comb through that rooster hair. Looks like shredded carrots.”

He chuckled, reached into his pants pocket, and pulled out a comb.

“The place looks great, doesn’t it? I can’t wait for Bailey to see Barkley House complete with furniture and landscaping.” The work had kept me away from

Bailey too much, but after today I'd be all hers. "We had to close up shop for one full day so everybody could help Tracy put up the Christmas decorations, but it was worth it."

"It has that new car smell. Well, paint and furniture polish. Go find that iron and let's get this shindig underway." He waved me down the hall.

I knocked on Tracy's door. She opened it with a flourish, extending her arm to display her efficiency apartment. Her ever-present, jet black pony tail swished as she showed me her new digs.

"A little too much 'frou-frou' for me, little sister, but very nice if you like that sort of thing." I faked a yawn.

Her dark brown eyes sparkled, but she smirked. "What do you know? It is lovely. Totally befitting a college scholarship winner, and retreat caretaker, like myself." She giggled and sat on her frilly turquoise bedspread. "What do you need?"

"An iron." I showed her the wrinkled ties.

"Good grief. ¡Que desastre! Here, give them to me." She laid the ties on a small kitchen table and pulled an iron from a bottom cabinet. She plugged it in and waited for it to heat.

Wasn't that Joseph Calderon's son in a framed photo on the cabinet? The Barkley House had a great construction crew, but none worked harder than the contractor's son, Javier. Protective older brother mode kicked in, even if she was just a long-time family friend. I picked up the picture and shoved it in front of her nose.

"What's this? You dating Javier?"

She blushed as if she'd been caught in a secret and yanked the photo from my hands. "None of your

business." She stepped over to her dresser, opened the top drawer and tossed the photo in it, mumbling in Spanish.

I followed and tried to retrieve it, but she slammed the drawer shut. "Aw, come on. Who have you gotten mixed up with?"

"Mind your own business, or get someone else to iron this wadded up excuse for a tie." She play-shoved me away and started working on the tie.

"I bet Bailey knows what's going on. You girls always have secrets."

She winked.

"So, do you miss waitressing for me at the diner? Been hard-pressed to replace you, but Phoebe does OK. I'm about to lose her too, I think." I sat on one of the kitchen chairs.

"Why do you say that? She's doing a pretty good job. That's our Bailey. Giving that faded beauty queen a chance, even after everything she did to her," Tracy said. "I think this is the first job she's held for more than a month."

"She stole Bailey's loser fiancé, and I'll always be grateful to her for that." I winked.

"True, but if it weren't for me, you might not be married to Bailey at all," Tracy said. "Hey, did you ever thank me for that?"

"I believe I did, but, Oh, Planner of Secret Weddings, Queen of Romantic Surprises," I teased, and bowed low, "thank you, Dear Lady Salas, for saving me from my Extreme Foolishness."

"You're welcome. I'm so glad it worked out." "Nothing like losing both parents and planking with a heart attack to ruin an engagement. But you never lost faith. I'm surprised Bailey stuck around."

"It wasn't just me. We all knew you'd get your act together. You must be sticking to that healthy lifestyle. Looks like you've lost some weight."

"Yeah, but don't mention it to Bailey. She's gained with the pregnancy, and she's sensitive about it. I think she looks more beautiful than ever."

"She does. Now why do you say the diner may be losing Phoebe?"

"I think she's about to get married." I loved watching Tracy's face light up.

"What? Are you serious? Who?" She left the iron sitting on my green tie.

"Whoa, you'll fry it," I said, laughing.

She pulled the iron away from the tie. "Spill it, for crying out loud."

"Oh, you're willing enough for me to tell my news, but you won't give it up about Javier." I was enjoying this too much. I knew just what buttons to push with this girl. I'd watched her grow up.

Tracy picked up the iron and ground it into my tie.

"OK, OK, it's just a hunch, but," I began, lowering my voice and looking over my shoulder.

Tracy's mom entered the room.

"You two are worse than old ladies." Liz shook her head.

My news about Phoebe and Pastor Jack would have to wait.

"Hurry and get Bailey so we can take some pictures before the ceremony." Liz pulled off my baseball cap. "It doesn't go with your suit."

Tracy handed her mother my tie, and then Liz helped me get it on straight.

"Tracy, please give Toppy his tie when you finish. I'm outta here." I winked at my two good friends and

jogged out of the room. I pulled out my cell and called Bailey to let her know I was on my way.

She didn't answer. Probably getting dressed. Everything took her longer these days. I'd be glad for her ordeal to be over. I couldn't wait to hold those babies in my arms. Would they have Bailey's molasses brown hair and eyes? Or black hair and blue eyes like me?

I turned my truck toward I-20 and headed for Exit 477. I couldn't believe it had been almost a year. I smiled thinking of our wedding day, complete with snow. I probably should have told Bailey that her deadbeat dad had slithered into the ceremony, but I sent him away. No way would I let him ruin her day.

Even though decorated for Christmas, both my businesses on Exit 477 looked foreign with no activity. Was the diner really that small? Across the street, the washout facility looked like a one-eyed sleeping giant with its expansive door on the entrance closed.

I pulled up to the inn, which was also closed for business since Bailey didn't have the energy to care for guests. I parked in the street. Her car would ride more comfortably.

"Bailey? Time to go." I held open the front door. Too quiet. I went inside and didn't find her in our bedroom, but her clothes for the ceremony were laid out on the bed. I looked upstairs, even though she hadn't taken those stairs in weeks. Not there either.

"Blast it, woman, you didn't try to go up to the prayer garden, did you?" She'd missed it so much, I wouldn't really blame her for trying.

My dress shirt stuck to my back as I jogged across the steaming backyard and then into the prayer garden.

No Bailey.

Had we discussed her waiting for me at the diner? Maybe someone picked her up already? I'd been so busy that maybe I got my wires crossed.

Phoebe rented my old apartment above the diner. I called her as I jogged back to the inn. "Have you seen Bailey?"

"Why, no, Scott. I'm waiting for Ja-, um, my ride," she drawled into the phone. "Have you called her cell?"

"I'll try again. You're sure you didn't see anyone pass from the inn?"

"Just an old, black vehicle of some kind. Flew by like a racecar. But there was just one little old man inside."

Please, God, no. Please don't let it be her father.
"Thanks, Phoebe, I'll call her right now."

Her cell buzzed on the coffee table, next to her purse.

Bailey, where in the world are you? I walked onto the front porch and noticed something I hadn't seen on the way in.

Splashes of blood spotted the steps.

Dizziness sent me to my knees.

3

Stay focused, Bailey. The trees disappeared, replaced with a cloudy December sky. The periodic *whoosh* of passing cars let me know which direction we were going on the interstate. Pretty sure we took a right off the exit, which meant toward Dallas.

Keep thinking. The babies settled down, and I turned my attention to the interior of my mobile prison. Maybe I could write HELP on my hand and slip it up the window. Nothing, not a stray pen to write with or use as a weapon. Maybe I could sit up and put my hands on his face, cause the car to swerve, get attention. No. An accident might hurt the babies. If I could just find my voice. I took a deep breath, but coughed against the acrid scent of exhaust. "Where are you taking me?" The fear in my tearful voice made me mad. I needed to be strong.

"I won't hurt you." He kept his eyes on the road.

"Please, I need to go to the bathroom." *Keep your head, Bailey.*

"I told you to shut up. You can go in a minute." The earlier venom in his voice had morphed to a nervous tremor. "I won't hurt you."

"You already did. You wrenched my arm and practically dragged me to this car. I'm pregnant, can't you see that?" *Don't cry. Don't cry. Keep your head. God help me.* "Please slow down."

He had to be doing ninety.

I leaned against the door. Maybe I could jump out if he'd slow down, but the interstate offered no chance for that. Could I jump out without hurting my babies? Maybe I could flag somebody driving past.

"I just want to talk to you. All those people around you wouldn't let that happen." He ran a shaking hand through his hair.

"You kidnapped me so you could talk to me? You risked jail so you could talk to me? I don't understand." My heart beat so rapidly I thought I might be sick.

"You'd press charges against your own father?" He looked over his shoulder at me and then suddenly lurched and grabbed my arm, bobbing his vision between me and the road.

I tried to pull free. "Please, you're hurting me. I don't know you from Adam. This isn't right. Please, let me out. I'll get a ride home."

"You can't just go for a ride with your old man?" His grip tightened until my fingertips went numb.

He accelerated then jerked and flailed my arm from side to side. "I said I need to talk to you. Don't make it so difficult!" Spittle spewed from the side of his mouth. His breath reeked of alcohol.

Terror tightened my chest. I gripped the door handle and prayed. He weaved in and out of traffic. It was a wonder I didn't hear fast-approaching sirens. That would be a good thing.

My babies would not die like this. *Father, I'm turning this over to you. Please lead me.* I willed my breathing to slow. What kind of mother would I be if I lost my head now? "All right, let's talk. But pull over or something. Your driving is scaring me. It's not good

for my babies." I tugged my arm away.

He shot me a surprised look. "Twins?" He let go.

The blood rushed into my fingers, making them tingle. I forced myself to look up at him. Blue veins bulged in his neck like lightning bolts. He wiped his mouth with his shirt sleeve. Gradually, he slowed the car's speed.

"Let's go back to Marshall. There are lots of places we can talk."

"Right. As soon as I let you out of this car, you'll be calling the police." He revved up the engine again.

"It's amazing they're not on your tail already."

He jerked his head toward me, lips white.

My breath caught in my throat. I'd said the wrong thing.

He banged his fist on the steering wheel. "You'd turn me in? Your own father? She must have made you hate me."

The volume in his rant hurt my ears. "No, I'm sorry. I mean that the way we left, it will cause my family to worry. If I could just let them know I'm all right, then there'd be no police and we can talk." Some kind of supernatural strength helped me lift my hand over the driver's seat and touch his arm, which seemed to calm him.

He relaxed and slowed the car again.

"Are we close to a bathroom?" I really needed to go now.

Brown—I couldn't think of him as my father—didn't answer. His shoulders slumped and his eyelids drooped a little. He took a breath as though about to speak, but his eyes darted to the rear view mirror. His posture shot to attention.

Sirens and flashing lights passed us and faded.