

Two Weeks of Joy

By

Megan McCoy

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Table of Contents:

Chapter One	5
Chapter Two.....	14
Chapter Three.....	29
Chapter Four	38
Chapter Five.....	41
Chapter Six.....	45
Chapter Seven	52
Chapter Eight	64
Megan McCoy	69
EBook Offer.....	70
Blushing Books Newsletter.....	71
Blushing Books.....	72

Chapter One

“I’m calling for Joy Breeze.”

“You got her, how can I help you today?” For a second he felt surprised, thinking he’d been talking to her assistant.

“My name is Jericho Campbell,” he began.

She interrupted, “Is that your real name?”

Startled, he said, “It is, why?”

“Oh, it just sounds kind of made up. Isn’t Jericho a TV show? Did it get canceled? I really liked it.”

“I’m sure I wouldn’t know.” What was going on with this woman? If he hadn’t read, then talked to five people who gave her high praise, he’d just move along. He should have had Kane call. What had he been thinking? That it was his kid and he should? Yeah. That.

“I’m calling because you were highly recommended as a dog trainer and I saw on your website you’d come live in and do some in-depth training with the dogs and us. I know you’re in the Midwest, but of course I’d fly you out here to my home in Arizona and pay your going rate for the two weeks you stated on your site.” Well, he at least got through that much without interruption.

“Seriously,” the light female voice in his ear chirped. “Are you that freaking rich?” Jericho pulled his phone away from his ear. He simply wasn’t used to being questioned. It wasn’t that everyone knew his name; it was more they just understood he got what he wanted.

“Yes, seriously. I am. Are you as good as they say you are? You sound awfully young,” he said. Maybe this was a mistake. Kane was better at this, obviously.

There was giggling from the other end. He almost hung up, but shook his head. He had checked her out, she was the person he wanted and needed. His son needed these assistance dogs. Her website said she’d come live on site, for the right amount of money. That was what was required and he always did what was required. He realized they all needed to be trained, the dogs, his son, all the caretakers. He knew that whispering guy was probably busy, and the references Kane had called for him raved about Joy’s skills.

“Well, young might be in the eye of the beholder, but okay – shoot me an email. If this is on the up and up, I can actually be there next week for an evaluation. I really prefer to place my own dogs, but if you are paying transport costs, I’ll be glad to see what you have and give you my opinion.”

“My assistant is Kane and he’ll be the one contacting you with details,” Jericho said, giving her his business email address.

“Okaydoke! I can’t wait to meet everyone – don’t forget, I need details about the handlers and the background on the dogs’ prior training,” Joy said, suddenly all business as she rattled off a few other things. “But I’ll send my requirements via email with Mr. Kane, too.”

Jericho felt a bit better as he hung up the phone. Getting these dogs had been a cluster fuck from the first day. He’d thought the thirty year in business training center he’d gotten them from knew what they were doing. Maybe they did, but he sure didn’t and the follow up from them had been abysmal. His son, though, apparently needed these dogs, according to the doctors and therapists, who said it would help him deal with his recovery. They had been helping Russ some, he was happier recently at least, so he’d throw more money at the mutts before he gave up on the entire idea.

Punching another button on his phone, he called Kane and gave him Joy’s go ahead. “Forward me her email and any correspondence you get from her. As of right now, I want her here as soon as she can come,” he said. “Do what it takes or I’m going to take Thurston and Lovey out and shoot them.”

“Yeah, if I thought you meant that, I’d be worried.” Kane laughed. They’d known each other too long, Jericho thought. Kane knew everything about him and all his evil and idle threats, and wasn’t intimidated by anything.

“I am serious,” he growled.

“Yeah, and I’m your fairy godfather. Whatever,” Kane said. “Don’t worry, I’ll make sure you get what you need to know, when you need to know it and nothing else. Go home and tell the Professor his dogs are safe from your wrath for a while.”

“She better be good!” Jericho gave up being mad, and just sighed. “Okay. I’ll see you tomorrow. Heading home now.”

“Good deal, I’ll be in about nine or ten,” Kane said.

“Don’t we start work at eight?” Jericho shook his head, knowing the answer he’d get.

“You really should stop using the royal we. It’s unbecoming,” Kane said, clicking off.

Giving up on getting any respect at all from his employee, he headed out to his car. He really did need to be home. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d been in his own house. Two, three days ago? Well, if he was going to be home all week with his son and the dog trainer next week, he needed to put in some marathon time. But tonight he’d go home and spend a couple hours with the kid, then hit the caffeine and work the night away.

Sighing, he realized he was tired of working all day and all night. His wife had been dead for over three years now, and he was ready for his own life again. If it didn’t feel so sleazy, he’d sign up on one of those dating sites. He assumed he wasn’t that ready or they wouldn’t feel so sleazy. He knew Kane found dates on them, often and he always seemed to have had a good time. Jericho knew that he didn’t want just a good time, though. He wanted what he had. To be married, to the right kind of woman, and to be happy. It seemed so hard to get there again and he really wasn’t interested in the dating process anymore. It had been fun when he was in his early twenties, but a week after he’d met Lori, he knew he never wanted to date again. If life had gone like it was supposed to go, he never would have. Once again, for the millionth futile time, he cursed the car accident that took her from him, and brought years of painful rehab, depression, and anxiety to Russ’ life.

Taking a quick glance at the clock he realized it would be two hours before he made it home if he started now. So he started.

Joy hung up the phone and shook her head. What in the living hell? Sure, she’d had that blurb on her website – will fly anywhere to train your dog, all expenses paid and a hefty salary. She’d put it on there as a joke, really. One day she’d been wishing for a vacation and looking at her bank balance and decided, why not? Most of her boarding and training business came from her website. She’d just added a fun little extra on there.

It had taken her less than two minutes, over a year ago, to dream up a big, luscious dollar amount and pop a paragraph on her website. She’d all but forgotten it was there. While she wasn’t going to get her hopes up, because things fell through in life all the time, after all, she was going to compulsively check her email for the next few days and see if she’d been hit by a scammer or not. That, she told herself was more than likely. “I’m going to send you a check for five thousand dollars, take your plane ticket out of it and return the rest to me, care of somewhere shady overseas where I’m trapped in the hospital, and can’t get out till I pay them cash.” Then

the entire thing would bounce and he'd be calling for more. Yeah, one of her mom's friends had been hit by a scammer. Lost her mind because of 'love' and then her house.

Joy would never be that stupid. She knew it.

Relaxing back in her computer chair, she figured, yeah, that was probably how it was going to go. But on the off chance it wasn't a scam, she started making plans in her head. Just playing. Pretending. Like buying a lottery ticket. Nothing else!

She'd have her buddy, Jenn, who worked in the kennel part time, move in here for a couple weeks to take care of her dogs, and the house. If it were real, she'd get some time in sunny Arizona, and would be back to triple digits in her bank account. Those double-digit statements were scary and they'd been hanging around way too long.

She loved what she did, but really, it paid sporadically and like crap. The power company didn't seem to care she did good work for good people. They preferred being paid in real money, just like the dogs wanted real food. Good deeds only took you so far.

Looking down at the dog at her feet, she said aloud, "What do you think, Tymber? Want to go to Arizona? Or are you worried about sunburn?" Her hairless Chinese crested looked up at her with his world-weary face, used to her flights of fantasy, and obviously not going to weigh in on this one.

"Well, fine, let's go do chores, what do you say? Maybe there will be an email telling me when this windfall will show up, when I get back. Probably not till tomorrow, though, huh?"

Tymber knew her routine better than she did. Why Chinese crested weren't more popular, she didn't know. Sweet, smart, small dogs who adored their people and would do anything for them. Her dog almost read her mind. She knew it, he knew it, and they worked together as a great team. Any dog she trained had Tymber as a mentor. Anything she taught to another dog, Tymber could grasp. People raved about goldens and Labs, but unless this crested she rescued from the shelter at three months was the exception to the crested rule, everyone should have one.

She and Tymber wandered out to the dog kennel. Even though he was less than a third of the size of most of the dogs there, he didn't know it, but pranced in as if he owned the place. Which, he technically did. He was the only dog who was there to stay, not there to be trained or retrained, then either sent home or found a home for, or just for boarding purposes.

She boarded dogs while people vacationed for her bread and butter but her specialty was ‘helper’ dog training. Not service dog, though she could and did sometimes, but they took a lot more time. Her skill was teaching what she thought of as practical things, beyond the basics of not peeing in the house, jumping on people or generally acting like jerks.

She taught pick things up and bring them to me. Take my socks off. Help me stand up. Open and close the door. Calm me down when I get upset. Not hard things to teach an eager dog, she thought, as she dipped out food for the starving masses. Often – always - the people needed a lot more training than the dogs did, but she tried not to tell them that. She’d found they usually got offended. They’d seen the TV shows! They knew how to train a dog – obviously it was the dog’s issue! Joy had developed the knack of smiling and nodding agreeably while giggling on the inside.

“Tymber, bring me that leather leash, please. I’m going to take Zoe out for a walk.” Zoe was some kind of pit bull mix. People talked about ‘it’s all about how you raise them’ all the time, but Joy knew people often got a dog for the breeding. If you got a golden, or a dachshund or Great Pyrenees, you could guess at their temperament. Sometimes pit bulls, especially ones with fighting behind them, had issues. Zoe was staying with her a few weeks to make sure she had none before she went home to stay. So far, so good. “Thank you, Tymber,” she said, taking the dragging leash from his mouth. Snapping the leash on the eager pit pup, she ran her through her paces again. She’d be sending her home with an A+ report card soon.

That evening, Tymber on her lap, she opened an email from Mr. Kane. Okay, then. So far this sounded legit. She jotted down the information he gave on Jericho Campbell, who could be her new boss, to do some Internet research on him. A bit later she picked up her phone and called her best friend and part time kennel worker, “Jen-a-fir,” she sing-songed.

“Joy-Joy-Joy,” she heard back and grinned.

“Guess what guess what!”

“You just landed a hot millionaire and all your worries are over?” Jennifer guessed.

Joy gave a dramatic pause. “Yes.”

Silence from the other end of the phone, then, “What? Are you kidding me?”

“Well, maybe sort of! I just got hired to fly to Arizona for two weeks and train this rich guy’s kid’s dogs! He’s paying for everything and there will be real money in my account when I

get home!” Joy still couldn’t believe it was totally on the up and up, but the email she’d gotten had enough details to convince her it could very well be. Enough to start making her plans.

“Are you shitting me?”

“Jennifer, watch your mouth, what would your mother say?” Joy scolded playfully.

“Something worse and you know it. So! Spill! What’s going on?” Jennifer asked.

“Well, apparently his kid was in a bad car wreck, and is recovering very slowly. His therapist suggested a service dog, so rich daddy trotted out and got him two.”

“Two? Oh my god. Really?”

“Yes!” Joy continued, “And they got them from Harris Kennel over in Texas. It’s been going downhill since her dad died. She just isn’t the same kind of trainer he was.”

“I know, I think she’s going to be out of business soon,” Jennifer agreed.

“Well, anyway, so they have these two honking expensive dogs that guess what!”

Jennifer laughed, “That no one understands and no one knows what to do with?”

“How did you guess?” Joy said, not giggling. It really wasn’t funny, but she really wanted to giggle about it. Two weeks in Arizona! “So apparently since he’s got more money than good sense, he’s flying me out to teach them all what to do with the dogs. Can you imagine?”

“No. I can’t. Well, let me know details and Henry and I will move in while you’re gone. I hope this works out for you!”

Jennifer had an eight year old son who loved the dogs, and they enjoyed getting out of their little one bedroom apartment and coming to her house, which was a bit bigger and had lots of dogs for Henry to play with and room to run. Little boys needed that. Jennifer taught school, and worked at the kennel part time, but Joy knew she needed money. Her husband had died and left her medical bills she still struggled to pay. So this would be a bit of a vacation for them too. Hoping this worked out for them both, Joy said, “Well, I’m going to do a bit of research about him, and then will let you know as soon as plans come together. And you know what?”

“We love it when a plan comes together,” they both chorused and Joy hung up.

Wow. Her life. What had just happened to it? Whatever it was, she was going to take full advantage of it. She punched ‘Jericho Campbell’ into her search engine and prepared – hoped - to be awed. Or at least reassured.

“Hey, Professor,” Jericho called out as he walked toward his son’s room. While his son’s real name was Russell, he’d been The Professor since his tiny solemn baby face made his mom laugh and say he looked just like the Professor on Gilligan’s Island.

“In here, Dad,” he heard back.

“Got the horses tied up?” he asked, opening the bedroom door.

“No, but Kerrie took them outside to do their business. I missed you. How long are you home for?”

“Just tonight, but I have a couple bits of good news,” Jericho hated that his son sat in the wheelchair and didn’t run to meet him like he used to do. Hated the hearing aid protruding from his malfunctioning ear. Hated that his one arm would need ‘a lot of therapy’ to recover some motor control. Hated all this. But, at least he had the money to help him, where he couldn’t help his wife who’d died in the same accident. That had been over three years ago and they were still struggling.

“What’s the good news?” Russell rolled over to him, and looked up expectantly.

“I’m taking all next week off,” Jericho said, leaning over to peer into his computer screen. “What you playing?”

“That new game you gave me. It’s kind of boring though. Got any better ones coming out?” Russ gave the screen a swipe or two.

“Why is it boring?” Russ often tried out some of the new games his company wanted to put on the market. Jericho had found he was a good beta tester.

“Just is,” Russ shrugged. He looked up from his game. “Are you really going to be off, or just work from here like you usually do when you say you’re off?”

Apparently Jericho’s hesitation told Russ what he needed to know, because he looked away, and asked, “What’s the other good news?”

“Oh! I think I have a dog trainer coming to help us with the horses,” he tried to high five him, but Russ just looked at him as if he were a fool.

“Dad, the dogs are fine. I don’t trust your judgment on the dogs anyway,”

“Hey, what do you mean by that?” he asked, offended.

“It means you don’t like them and don’t think they are smart,” Russ explained. “I do like them and I really need some better help with them. I’m not dumb, Dad. I know they can be better than they are.”

Jericho shook his head, hoping that therapy would help his son's battered body eventually become as strong as his mind again. The dogs seemed to help his understandable depression though, which was worth a lot.

"If they can't learn they can go to the barn and live with the rest of the horses," he grumbled, hearing Kerrie, Russ's tutor and caretaker come in with the dogs. Two big active labradoodles bounded into the room, obviously delighted to see him. This breed had come highly recommended, supposedly smart, easily trained and intuitive, they were also low shedding and hypoallergenic. They were also huge, ate a lot, and bounced around like horses. The trainer had forgotten to mention those things. The dogs had worked just fine for her, but things had gone steadily downhill in the last few months. When he contacted her about a refresher course, she told him they would have to come there. He just didn't have time to do that and didn't want to send Russ out there alone. He'd worry too much about the boy traveling without him, even with Kerrie there to help him.

"Mr. Campbell, welcome home," Kerrie said in way Jericho knew she didn't really mean it.

"Hello, Kerrie, how're things working out?" he hoped he wouldn't kick himself for asking.

"Russ is doing great. I did not sign on to do dogs though," she looked at him as if he would banish them to the fictional barn, immediately.

"I hired a trainer who is coming out to help us work with the dogs," he reassured her. "She'll be here Wednesday."

"Oh, thank goodness," Kerrie said, so thankfully that Jericho got very nervous.

He hoped this new trainer would work out. More than ever.

"You can go ahead and go home, if you want," he told Kerrie. "Russ and I are hanging out tonight."

It took her less than ten seconds to grab her purse and head out the door with only a back handed wave and no word of goodbye to Russ at all. He wasn't very happy with that, but figured he'd be home enough in the next week to see how things were really going.

"Did you eat yet?" he asked Russ. "Want to come to the kitchen with me and see what we can scrounge up?"

“Sure,” his son put the video game down and began to roll out of his room. “I had supper, but I think there’s some ice cream in the freezer.” “If we have some, it better be in the freezer,” he said as he fell into step beside him. “What do we do with them?” Russ laughed and said, “We shut them in the room, and they go to sleep.”

Jericho waited till Russ was out the door and did that just, realizing he missed being home, but he had not only had to be both parents to his son, but step in to the CEO seat in the software company his wife had started. This company would be his son’s legacy and he’d vowed to make it a great one for him. Lori would want him to do that. He would not let her down.

“You’re so silly, dad,” he pulled open the bottom freezer, then got himself a bowl and spoon while Jericho rummaged in the fridge for leftovers. They’d moved most things lower so Russ could help himself as much as possible, and Jericho really struggled when he was home, not to do everything for him. Often it took a strength of will that he hadn’t realized he possessed. He munched on the piece of cold pizza he found, while Russ scooped a couple spoons of ice cream in his bowl.

“Did Lucas make it over this week?” he asked about his son’s best friend.

“He did. He’s trying out for baseball again,” the wistfulness in Russ’ voice felt palpable to Jericho. They’d been on the same team since preschool, till the accident.

“Next year, bud,” he said, as confidently as he could. “The doctors say you’ll be on your feet soon, and that will give you a while to get stronger to run those bases after that home run hit.”

Russ rolled his eyes. When had he started doing that? Chair or not, he wasn’t a little kid anymore. Teenagers scared him. Even when he’d been one, they’d scared him. He had been so glad to get to college and away from the high school drama and hormones. But then Russ asked, just like a little kid, “Will you come to my first game, Dad? You never did before.”

Jericho looked him in the eye, and said, “You can count on it.” And decided that nothing would stop him from attending one of the games ever again. No matter what it took.