

Chocolate Therapy



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spring creek
BOOK COMPANY

Provo, Utah



CHAPTER ONE

For the hundredth time since yesterday afternoon, I picked up the unopened pink envelope from the kitchen counter and read the sender's name and address: Leland Mitchell Freeman, P.O. Box 3561, Eugene, Oregon. So the old guy had been hiding out in Eugene. I wondered how long he'd been there. Now that the initial shock of seeing his name had dissipated a bit, I took a closer look at the flowery, loopy handwriting. It looked feminine. My name, as addressee, had so many loops and swirls that it looked more like artwork than handwriting. Joan Freeman Spencer. I had never seen my maiden name written together with my married name. It looked strange.

Sighing, I tossed the envelope back on the kitchen counter. I was curious about the contents of the envelope, just not ready to open it. Too many questions, tears, and overall bad feelings were trapped in that envelope, waiting to be released. I could live without them for now, thank you. Anyway, I had other things to worry about right now, like the dining room table. I pushed in the chairs then grabbed a wet dishcloth to relieve the table of the oatmeal clumps, toast crumbs, and milk and orange juice dribbles left over from breakfast. At what age did kids not make such a mess at the table? I gathered the whole mess into the dishcloth and flung it into the sink.

Dodging two backpacks, a pair of shoes, and a briefcase that weren't where they were supposed to be, I made my way to the staircase that led to the second floor where two teenagers and a seven-year-old were supposedly getting ready for school. "You guys almost ready?" I called up the stairs. The unintelligible grunts and moans that I got in response told me absolutely nothing except that my three children were still breathing.

"I'm ready for school, Mommy," my husband Keith said as he walked down the stairs. He stopped on the last stair long enough to straighten his tie before kissing me. He really was going to school. He taught at the high school where our oldest son, Brandon, attended the tenth grade. Keith had been teaching math there since the beginning of the school year when a teacher had to quit suddenly due to illness. Previously, Keith had taught at a high school thirty miles away. He was thrilled to be working so close to home now. Brandon was not thrilled.

Brandon had made it perfectly clear to us that he wasn't happy about his dad being a permanent fixture at the high school. I guess it was hard to be a cool teenager at school with the looming possibility that your dad could pop out around any corner. Keith was sensitive to Brandon's feelings, however, and made an effort to stay out of his way at school as much as possible.

I brushed a toast crumb from the corner of Keith's mouth and smiled approvingly as I surveyed his freshly starched white shirt, green and navy blue striped tie, and dark pants. "I'm so proud of you for getting dressed without my help. You sure are growing up."

He kissed my forehead and said in a low voice, "It would have been a lot more fun *with* your help."

"That's totally disgusting," Brandon muttered as he made his way around us and grabbed his backpack off the floor. To Brandon, everything was disgusting these days. I wasn't too worried about it, though. He'd be sixteen in three weeks, and if he kept up the sour attitude, I wouldn't have to worry about him dating. What girl would want to look at that scowl? Still, it would have been nice to

see him smile now and then.

Sometime between his fifteenth birthday and now, something had happened to the smiling, happy boy that was Brandon. I was almost certain that aliens had taken my happy son for observational research and replaced him with this sullen, non-smiling version. Hopefully, their research would be over soon.

“Ready to go, Sport?” Keith said as he reached for his briefcase.

“I wish you’d quit calling me that.” Brandon lumbered out the door that led to the garage, with a half-hearted wave at my call to have a good day. One of the advantages of having his father work at the school was a ride to school every morning, but Brandon acted like it was a sentence imposed to make his life miserable.

Keith watched our son from the doorway for a moment. I thought I detected sadness in Keith’s expression. I looked from the father to the disgruntled son who stood next to the Suburban with his arms folded defiantly. They looked so much alike: same shade of blond hair, same blue eyes, same stance, and the way Brandon was growing, I knew they’d be the same height before long.

“Guess I’m off to work,” Keith said. “Hey, you still haven’t opened that letter from your dad.” He walked around me and picked up the pink envelope, waving it. You *are* going to open it aren’t you?”

“Eventually.”

Keith raised an eyebrow. “It’s a letter, Joan. It can’t hurt you.”

That’s what he thought. I grabbed the letter from him and returned it to the counter.

“Why don’t you make your son’s day and let him drive to school? That learner permit won’t do him a bit of good if he doesn’t ever use it.”

“In the Miata?” He gave a worried glance at Brandon and then at the red sports car Keith drove to work every day.

“Sure, why not? He hasn’t driven it yet. I’m sure he’d much rather drive a sports car than an old Suburban that might as well have “nerdmobile” plastered all over it. In fact, I think you should

set aside some time every day to take Brandon driving. You have a lot more patience than I do.”

“Patience! It has nothing to do with patience. You’re afraid of driving with your son,” Keith taunted.

“With good reason.”

The truth was, I was terrified to ride with Brandon as driver. The last time I did was two weeks ago. Brandon had swerved in a valiant effort to avoid a suicidal bird that had chosen that moment to swoop across the road right in front of us. Before I knew it, we were traveling at a fast pace across Edna Garrison’s front lawn.

I never moved so fast.

We ended up with me on Brandon’s lap and my foot jammed over his on the brake pedal. Edna’s newly planted petunias were uprooted and permanently embedded into her sidewalk. Luckily, the only injuries were Brandon’s bruised right foot and his bruised ego.

Okay, so maybe I did have a little something to do with Brandon’s sullen attitude. But I only did it to save us.

Keith looked at the cherry red Miata in the garage. The car was Keith’s baby, his pride and joy, only two years old. He loved it for lots of reasons, including the sentimental tie it had to his father, Bill Spencer. Bill had bought the car for himself, paid cash, during an older-age version of a mid-life crisis. He died six months later.

Keith’s mother, Gladys, hated the car. She had tried to give it to us for free. Keith protested, but not as loudly as his two brothers did: if Keith got a free car, they should get free cars. Since Gladys didn’t have enough cars to go around, she offered to sell it to us for low monthly payments. This somewhat satisfied Keith’s two brothers, although they didn’t know why she chose to sell it to us and not them. We didn’t know either. But we were thrilled to have a second car with payments we could afford.

“I don’t know if I should let Brandon drive it yet,” Keith said.

“He doesn’t know how to drive a standard, and that clutch is kind of tricky. If he drives the Suburban, he’d be fine, but with the Miata, well, it would take more time.”

I grabbed the Suburban keys off the hook near the door and dangled them in front of Keith. “Fine. Take the Suburban.”

“We need to go, Dad,” Brandon complained.

Keith gave in. He leaned in close to me. “Fine, I’ll let him drive this morning if you open the letter from your dad and read it. Today.”

Before I could protest, a wail erupted from upstairs.

“Mom!”

I stood still, analyzing the voice as it erupted again.

“Mom! I need you! It’s an emergency!”

My swift analysis of Ryan’s cries told me that it wasn’t a real emergency, just something that a seven-year-old boy would perceive as an emergency, like maybe his favorite purple shirt was still in the laundry room, waiting to be washed. “Be right there,” I called.

I followed Keith into the garage. After pushing the button that opened the garage door, he tossed the Suburban keys to Brandon who grudgingly caught them and climbed into the driver’s side. Keith cringed when Brandon fired up the engine.

“Another motivating ride to school with my son and an exciting day of classes with kids just like him. I’m so lucky. It’s a good thing I like teenagers.” He gave me a kiss. “See you later.”

“What about Ryan?” I asked. “Don’t you want to see what his emergency is?” I always thought it was interesting that when kids had an emergency, they always called for their moms. And dads were content to let it stay that way.

“He’s fine. If it were a real emergency, you’d have already been up those stairs, three at a time. I trust that mommy radar of yours.” Keith waved at me as he climbed into the Suburban.

He was right. I had been blessed with mommy radar. And since Keith had to ride to school with the cheerless Brandon, I supposed that our unpleasant parenting duties were somewhat evenly divided. I was, however, a bit satisfied to see Keith with one hand braced

against the dashboard and the other clutching the handle that hung above the passenger door window as Brandon peeled out of the driveway.

As I made my way up the stairs to Ryan's room, I realized it was only Tuesday. It felt like it should be Friday already. Why did some weeks have to drag by so slowly? Ryan was sitting on his bedroom floor with his head in his hands.

"Okay, what's the problem?" I asked.

He looked up at me with teary blue eyes and wiped his nose on the back of his sleeve. "Blackie's gone again. I looked everywhere. I can't find him."

Ryan sniffled. His cheeks were red, and he looked so sad that I felt guilty for taking my time in coming to help him. I removed the wire mesh top from the ten gallon aquarium and removed one piece of rodent paraphernalia after another. Sure enough, no black mouse.

"Do you think Ricochet ate him?" Ryan asked in a small voice.

"I hope not." I shivered, looking around the room to see if our wiry black and white tuxedo cat was slinking around. There was no sign of him. The cat was too sneaky for his own good, and he had no fear. And when he wasn't being sneaky, he zipped through the house like he'd been flung from a slingshot, bouncing off the walls and furniture, hence the name, Ricochet.

Thirteen-year-old Amy poked her head into the room, an unplugged curling iron wound through a chunk of her dark hair. "Blackie's gone again? Cool. Maybe you'll have to pull him out of Ricochet's teeth again, Mom. It was awesome last time, all that blood and stuff."

Immediately, Ryan started howling.

"Amy," I warned.

Amy turned defensive. "What did I say? I always get blamed for stupid things around here. I only said what really happened." She unwound the curling iron from her hair and stomped off.

"If that curling iron is still hot, make sure you put it in its

stand.” I called after her.

Amy mumbled something in reply and shut the bathroom door. Amy was at the age where her hair was of great importance. She was the only one of my children with brown eyes and dark hair, like mine. However, her hair was much thicker and shinier than mine, and she spent a great deal of time fixing it and looking in mirrors.

I put an arm around Ryan and pulled him close. He calmed down a bit. “Tell you what,” I said. “We’ll close the door so Ricochet can’t come in here, and I’ll look for Blackie today while you’re at school.”

“Like closing the door’s going to help,” Amy called from behind the bathroom door. “Blackie’s the size of a tube of lipstick. He can squeeze right under the door and—”

“That’s enough,” I interrupted. Ryan’s howls started up again. He didn’t stop until we’d closed his bedroom door and stuffed socks through the crack at the bottom so Blackie wouldn’t be able to get through. I knew he could, though. If he really tried, Blackie could chew his way right through the socks, but I kept that information to myself.

“Can we say a prayer for him?” Ryan sniffled as he pulled his backpack off its hook in the kitchen near the back door and dragged it into the living room. He was the only one of my three kids who hung his backpack and coat where they belonged.

“That would be a good idea.” I said. I had a feeling Blackie might need all the help he could get.

“Count me out,” Amy said. “I’ll be late for school if I hang around to pray for a mouse. He’s probably dead, anyway.”

“Amy, please show a little respect for your brother’s feelings. You can pray with us.”

Amy heaved a sigh and dropped onto the sofa. “Alright, but if I’m late for school you have to write me a note.”

Ryan’s prayer for his mouse was short and to the point, asking that we find Blackie and that Ricochet wouldn’t eat him. The prayer worked its magic. Ryan was smiling, confident we’d find an intact

Blackie. Amy was relieved she wasn't going to be late for school.

They left to catch up with the other kids in the neighborhood who they walked to school with. Once they were gone, the house was silent. I felt a brief pang of loneliness, like I did every morning after everyone had gone. How was I ever going to survive when I didn't have the kids to look forward to in the afternoon? Sure, they drove me crazy sometimes. Sure, they were a lot of work, and I was exhausted by the end of the day. But I couldn't imagine what it would be like when my children were all grown up. Thank goodness that was still a long way off in the future. I was content to live in the present for as long as possible where my kids still lived at home and needed my loving attention. And speaking of home and loving attention, my kitchen desperately needed my help at the moment.

With hands on hips, I surveyed the mess. It was really hard to concentrate and focus on where to start with that pink envelope on the counter glowing like a Christmas tree on a dark night. Okay, so it wasn't really glowing, but it was certainly emitting some kind of telepathic signal to my brain, saying over and over, "Open me, open me." I sent it a simple little message of my own. "No."

Making sure my message was clear, I picked up the envelope and threw it into the freezer. "Try making your way out of that," I said. I felt a little silly talking to an envelope, but the freedom I felt was immense. With a surge of energy, I rinsed out the dishcloth I'd thrown into the sink earlier and sent the breakfast remains chortling down the garbage disposal. Next, I attacked the peanut butter smudges on the pantry door with spray cleaner and a handful of paper towels, vigorously wiping them away. While I was at it, I cleaned all the fingerprints from the back door. Since there were fingerprints and smudges all over the kitchen, I decided to attack them all.

An hour later, my kitchen was spotless, cleaner than it had been in months. I washed my hands and slowly rinsed them off, enjoying the warmth of the water. Satisfied with my clean kitchen, I sat down to rest a minute. A nice cold drink would be good. Since

I was sort of thinking about starting a new diet, I settled for ice water. I opened the freezer to get the ice, and there it was, glowing for all it was worth in the freezer. That pink envelope. What was the world coming to when a person couldn't even get ice from their freezer without being flashed by a glowing pink envelope?

I left it in the freezer and sat down to think. There was only one way to settle this. I'd have to open it. I know, most people would wonder why on earth I was so afraid of an innocuous pink envelope with swirly letters on the front. The thing was, I hadn't seen or spoken to my father for over thirty years, his choice, and now he thought he could show up and act like nothing had changed.

According to my sister, Marilyn, who had spoken with him on the phone, Leland was ready to become a part of our lives again. He had found Marilyn's name through an Internet white page directory. She had been easy for him to find because she was listed under our maiden name, Freeman, hyphenated with her married name, Williams. Since our dad had no idea what my married name was, he had called Marilyn first. She then suggested that he write to me, rather than call me. She was afraid I might hang up on him, although she didn't tell Leland that. Marilyn refused to tell me everything that she and Leland had talked about, thinking it would be best if he told me himself. That's what the letter was for. And that's why I was afraid to open it.

I went to the kitchen cupboard where the pots and pans lived and pulled out a hidden box of Hershey's candy bars—milk chocolate, no almonds. Stressful times called for positive reinforcements. The box had originally contained thirty-six chocolate bars. Now it was only half full because stressful situations occurred often in my household. So much for thinking about starting a new diet. I'd think about starting one some other day. I slowly ate one whole candy bar, one chocolate rectangle at a time, letting it melt on my tongue before breaking off another. When it was gone, I picked up the pink envelope again.

The phone rang. I dropped the envelope, glad for the interruption until I looked at the caller ID and saw that it was Lila Greenly from next door. I considered not answering it. But if I ignored Lila, I'd have to open the letter, exchanging one unpleasant thing for another.

I answered the phone.

"Joan!" Lila screeched before I even finished saying hello. She had a pretty good set of lungs for an eighty-plus-year-old.

"Yes," I said slowly.

"Joan, that dog of yours is staring at me again with that big goofy grin on its face. I tell you, I won't be laughed at by no dog!"

I repeated line for line what I always said when Lila called. "Rosie's not laughing at you, Lila. Dogs can't laugh; you know that. She's being friendly. I think she really likes you."

Lila ignored me. "Can't even hang my clothes out on the line but that dog's settin' there watching my every move, laughing at my clothes. Well, my clothes might not be the best, but I'm not dressin' to please no dog and that's for darn sure."

"Lila, please. She's not laughing at your clothes, for heaven's sake. Rosie's just friendly—"

"If you don't get her the heck out of my sight, I'm calling the cops. And we'll see who's laughing then." The phone clunked in my ear as Lila hung up.

I knew she'd call the police. And I also knew they wouldn't come. Oh, they'd been here once before, and once was enough for them. I'd never forget, last year, a month or so after Rosie came to live with us, when an officer came to my door. He had a sour expression on his face, I thought at first. Later, I realized he was trying not to laugh.

"Mrs. Spencer?" he had asked me.

"Yes."

"Sorry to bother you ma'am. My name is Officer Krantz. Seems we've been getting numerous complaints from a Mrs. Lila P. Greenly about a—" Officer Krantz's sour expression turned more sour as he sucked his lips inward and his eyes began to water. He

coughed into his hand. "Excuse me." He tried again. "Complaints about a laugh—"

His eyes were watering now. Strange gurgling sounds were coming from his throat. I had to save the poor man.

"A laughing dog?"

The gurgling sounds found an outlet. Officer Krantz began laughing so hard he had to hang on to my porch railing for support. "I really am sorry," he said, trying to regain his composure. "It just strikes me as funny." He pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped his eyes. "Down at the station we all thought it was a joke at first, but this Lila lady is persistent. She also has a very loud voice."

"Tell me about it. What exactly does she say my dog is laughing at this time?"

"Well, it's been a number of things, actually, over the past few weeks. I have it all right here. He looked over his notes and started laughing again. "I can't do it. Here." He handed me his clipboard and let me read the report.

It wasn't anything I hadn't already heard from Lila herself. It was all there, word for word. The dog had allegedly laughed at Lila on the following occasions: immediately following a hair appointment when most of Lila's hair got singed off during a perm "because that crazy fool Rhoda let it process too long"; when the elastic in Lila's underwear snapped while she was sweeping her back steps and they fell to her feet; when a sudden downpour flattened her hair to her head as she hurriedly yanked her laundry off the clothesline.

There was more, but I'd heard it all before.

"So what are you going to do? Arrest my dog?"

"No, ma'am," Officer Krantz said, wiping his eyes again. "But if I could see the dog, you know, for the record."

"No problem."

We walked to the backyard, and I let the officer through the gate. Rosie smiled at Officer Krantz and licked his hand.

"She's beautiful," he said. "Had a golden retriever myself, once. The way your neighbor described her, I expected to see a laughing

hyena or something.” He knelt down to get a closer look at her face. “Don’t know if I’d go so far as to say she’s laughing, but she does have a nice smile. Don’t you girl?” He scratched her head and underneath her chin. Rosie loved the attention.

The officer apologized again, thanked me for being so understanding, and suggested that I *try* to keep the dog away from Lila’s view as much as possible. *Try* to get along. *Try* to keep the peace.

The last year had been one big *tryal*.

After that, whenever Lila called, I’d sometimes ignore her and let the dog be. But because I was being so neighborly today, I went out to retrieve Rosie. I could see Lila standing inside her kitchen a few feet away from her window where she thought I couldn’t see her as she followed my every move with her over-sized binoculars.

I knelt down next to Rosie who was still staring through the chain link fence towards Lila’s house, her mouth open wide and her tongue hanging out. I waited until Lila’s binoculars changed to a downward position, then Rosie and I both smiled at Lila. Big, giant doggy smiles. I even helped Rosie wave a friendly paw. The binoculars immediately disappeared, and Lila’s voice bellowed from within the safety of her kitchen.

“Don’t think I’ll ignore that, Joan!”

Rosie and I waved again. What was Lila going to do? Pelt us with clothes pins? I felt a teensy bit guilty for antagonizing her, but I felt a whole bunch more victorious.