



THAW AND SERVE

BY JESSICA FREELY

So this is what it had come to. Prone on the floor of a convenience store, his face mashed against the frozen Breast-O-Turkey he had picked up for his solitary holiday repast, Mal Spencer railed against his fate. He did so silently, and without moving a muscle, because a rabid delinquent in a ski mask was pointing a gun at his head. Beside him, his shabby briefcase had burst open on impact with the floor, spilling student term papers all over the dirty linoleum tile.

He didn't want to die this way, not as an adjunct professor at a community college, not as a lonely, aging intellectual clutching the over-processed remains of a creature nearly as benighted as himself. No. It wasn't fair. He'd tried so hard, first a student and then as a professor, but time and time again, he was passed over for promotion by clowns who favored style over substance.

"Hurry up," the gunman shouted at the boy behind the cash register. Mal snuck a glance up at the pair. The gunman was stocky, thickly muscled in the shoulders and dressed all in black. Oh God, how cliché. The young man behind the register was trying hard to keep it together. Mal admired that. His hands shook as he opened the cash register and handed over fistfuls of tens and twenties, but the look on his face was one of brutally enforced calm. With a start that could have cost him his life if the gun-wielding miscreant had not been distracted, Mal realized he knew the boy. Tom Stevens. He'd had him a year ago in freshman comp. Good Lord. So this is what had

become of him after Mal had failed him for willful and persistent comma splices. Just goes to show, grammar is important.

“Is this all you’ve got?!” Apparently the gunman was disappointed with the contents of the till. He waved his gun in Tom’s face. “Where’s the safe?”

Tom was as pale as the gelid flesh of Mal’s intended holiday repast. “It’s in the back, but I don’t know the combination.”

“You’re lying! Get out here!” He fired the gun at the liquor bottles behind the counter. The sound of shattering glass filled the air and the heady perfume of mingling whiskey, vodka and gin tickled Mal’s sensitive nose.

Tom hastened around the counter to the gunman’s side. From where he lay, Mal couldn’t see Tom’s face anymore. Just the scuffed toes of his brown, imitation leather hiking boots.

“You’re going to open that safe, or I’ll kill everybody here,” the gunman shouted. Did he have shout quite so much?

It wasn't as if he didn't have their undivided attention. A woman screamed. *See?* Unnecessary dramatics were contagious.

"I told you, I don't know the combination. If-if-if you let me call my boss he can give it to me."

Mal developed a new appreciation for Tom's intelligence, but the gunman didn't fall for it. "Bullshit! You'll call the cops!" He started pushing Tom down the dairy aisle, away from the customers, who were all prone around the checkout area. "You know the combination. You're going to open the safe or I'll kill you, and then I'll kill everyone else here."

Tom was going to die. He didn't know the combination. Mal knew, from the efficient, controlled way in which he'd handed over the cash from the till, that Tom was not stupid enough to lie in a situation like this. Mal felt a wholly unaccustomed pang of guilt at having failed the young man. Perhaps, if he had tried to talk to him...

This was ridiculous. If someone was going to die here today, other than the masked lunatic, of course, it should be Mal, not Tom. Tom had his whole life ahead of him and if he survived this incident, he might have new motivation to take his studies seriously. As for Mal, what did he have to live for? A frozen, Flav-Or injected pseudo turkey and a piece of pumpkin pie? The ridicule and contempt of his students and his colleagues? The certain knowledge that he would never, ever, be named chair of the Medieval Studies Committee? To hell with all of it. He could spend the next thirty years become increasingly bitter or he could die today, hopefully doing somebody some measure of good.

Mal raised himself to his hands and knees. The other shoppers were looking about cautiously. He held one hand to his lips and scooped the frozen Breast-O-Turkey up in the other. Carefully, he crept down the adjacent aisle. Candy. Bins of Tootsie Rolls and Mallomars witnessed his skulk toward certain death.

He reached the end of the aisle just as Tom and his armed escort rounded the

corner of the dairy aisle. The stock room was ahead of them. The gunman did not see him, but Tom did. His eyes widened, briefly, but he made no other sign. This was it. Now or never.

Mal rushed up behind the gunman, the frozen Breast-O-Turkey held aloft in both hands. He was easily a head taller than the man and it was not difficult to bring the frozen bird amalgam down on top of the miscreant's skull with a resounding thud. The man grunted, and crumpled to his knees. Tom, rising a good many more notches in Mal's estimation, snatched the gun from him and held it aimed at the robber's head.

ooo

"Tootsie Roll?"

Mal looked over at Tom, seated beside him on top of the checkout counter. He had a hopeful look in his eyes as he extended the fudge-like confection. Mal sighed. "Why not?"

The sugar helped with his adrenaline crash. One of the customers had called the

police, they'd carted the gunman, a repeat offender, of course, away, and taken statements from everyone present. By the end of it all, people were falling prey to sentimentality, calling him a hero and uttering other dangerously vapid platitudes. Fortunately, they'd all gone now. Now it was just he and Tom, sitting in companionable silence, staring at the liquor-slicked floor and the shuttered blinds of the storefront. With surprise, Mal realized this was perhaps the most comfortable he'd ever been with another human being.

"You don't remember me, do you?" said Tom.

Mal looked at him out of the corner of his eye. "Actually, I do. Comma splices."

Tom buried his head in his hands and groaned. "Oh, God, I was such an idiot. You said you were going to fail me and I didn't believe you. My head was so full of romantic fantasies about you, I couldn't even pay attention in class."

Mal turned sideways to look Tom in the face. Was this some kind of joke? "Romantic fantasies," he said. He was about to continue with, *How very droll, Mr. Stevens, there is a career for you on the stage,* but the look on Tom's face stopped him short. The young man was serious. Incredible.

Tom leaned forward, and reached up with one hand to cup the side of Mal's face. Mal sat as still as if Tom were the Medusa herself, but when Tom's warm, soft lips touched his, he found he was not nearly so frozen as he'd thought.

THE END

THAW AND SERVE

FREELY

PROMPTS USED TO WRITE THIS STORY:

INCREDIBLE
RABID
BOTTLE
BLINDS
TOOTSIE ROLL
CLOWN
TURKEY
SLICK
PUMPKIN
BOOTS

COPYRIGHT © 2008 BY JESSICA FREELY