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TERESA TRENT

THE FREEZER QUEEN

As the snow fell outside, Carolina McGill pulled a piping hot lasagna out of the oven. Carolina was known as the "Freeze Ahead Queen" which she channeled into a profitable business that catered to frugal families. As she placed the lasagna onto the stovetop, she heard her front door open and close.

"Mother? Are you in the kitchen?"

It was nice of her son, Morton, to finally come when she called. Carolina had called both of her sons earlier in the day and asked them

to stop by and pick up the many dishes of food she had baked ahead for them. Carolina McGill was "the" Mrs. McGill of McGill's Frozen Dinners and Pastries. She started the business when she was in her late twenties after a nasty divorce and, much to her surprise her home-cooked meals became mainstream. She wrote cookbooks outlining her methods and home cooks snapped them up. People who didn't have time to cook a meal themselves

went out of their way to get a Mrs. McGill meatloaf dinner or her specialty Mrs. McGill's chicken fried steak. It was pretty overwhelming for a girl who had dropped out of college to find herself deep in the world of commercial food production. Still though, she struggled along, hiring various business managers, until finally, her youngest son, Michael McGill, was old



enough to help with the management. When Michael took over, the company skyrocketed, and soon

McGill's Frozen Dinners became a national brand. That's what made "Mrs. McGill's" of interest to many of the biggest food manufacturers in the country. Multiple buyout offers followed, and Michael helped his mother sort through all the offers and come to final decision. Now at the age of fifty-eight she had everything she would ever need and had been given the gift of comfort as she aged.

Carolina was bored stiff.

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She still lived in the three-bedroom ranch home where she'd raised her two boys because, as she loved to say, if it ain't broke don't fix it. Her only problem was there was nothing to do. Nothing but cook and think about her life and her children. Her oldest son, Morton, had chosen not to help with the family business. He was a big hulking figure like his father, and the last thing he wanted was to be affiliated with was the sugary-sweet Mrs. McGill pictured on every frozen dinner.

Morton wanted to be a musical theater actor. According to his mother, this choice was frivolous and unseemly for a grown man. Then there was the hard truth that Morton McGill did not look like a typical musical theater male lead. He was a little pudgy, his dark hair thinning and a face only a mother could love. No matter how many voice lessons he took or diets he stuck to, he was always cast as the sidekick—or worse—the villain.

Morton stood at the door in his sock feet, leaving his snowy boots on the mat provided for him next to the front door. "You didn't need to do all of this, mother. I'm just fine. "

"Living all alone in that apartment eating cheap pot pies over rice?" Carolina McGill didn't get the irony of her statement. She never thought of her stuff as cheap frozen dinners. She made home-cooked bake-aheads. "I figure this will keep you eating good for at least a week. Then you'll have to come back to me again. That is if you have time with

all of your theater things." That hurt. Since moving back town Morton had no theater projects because small towns didn't usually have working professional theaters. One of the reasons he had responded so quickly to his mother's call was he wanted to ask her if she would be interested in helping him invest in a closed-down theater. His idea was to turn it into a professional venue.

"There's no cooking like your mother's cooking." Morton hoped that would help placate his mother, who seemed to be on a bit of a tear tonight.

"Morty, I need you to do a favor for me." She walked over to her cupboard, and pulled a little red box down from the top shelf. "I need you to go down into the crawl space and sprinkle this. We have mice. We can't have the mice getting into my food stores."

Carolina McGill treasured her food stores almost as much as she treasured her two sons. She hated going to the grocery store, so once she became financially solvent, she transformed the basement into her own personal market. With an exhaustive inventory, if the world ended, Carolina would be eating chicken fried steak and green bean casserole while the rest of the planet earth starved to death.

"Couldn't you get Mike to do this, Mom? You know how I feel about small spaces." Morton had one terrible fear: he was claustrophobic. It affected him so much he had to sleep with his bedroom door open. The idea of maneuvering around

in his mother's crawl space was torture to him.

"My crawl space is quite large. There's nothing to be afraid of down there. Be a man and go give this box a few shakes and you're done. I don't see what the big deal is. I ask your brother to do so much for me all the time. Can't you do this one simple little thing?" She held the box out to Morty and reluctantly, he took it from her.

He heaved a sigh, opened the basement door and descended the steps. His heart was pounding as the panic attack started to settle into his chest. The walls of the basement rose up around him, threatening to consume him. He ran into the room that connected to the crawl space, stifling the screams his mother might hear. He opened tiny door and lowered himself into the cold dirt.

Carolina McGill went back to her cooking, humming a little tune to herself as she watched the snow fall outside her window.

"What a picture of domesticity." Michael McGill leaned against the opening of the kitchen watching his mother putting tin foil over a plate of cookies.

She turned with a broad smile. "Mikey." She walked over and gave her son a little hug and a kiss on the cheek. "Mikey" as she called him, was thirty-five, with broad shoulders, and looked the absolute opposite of Morty. He worked out and kept himself fit and healthy. He had recently married and was expecting his first baby. Carolina's grandchild. Every mother's dream.

"Oh my goodness Mother, you've knocked yourself out this time. You know with everything going on with Laney right now, we really appreciate this." His wife, Laney, was having a hard time in her pregnancy and cooking smells could cause her to throw up. Michael's mother's dishes were a godsend for their growing family. Michael looked at the casserole dishes lining the counter.

"This all can't be for us?"

"No. I made some for your brother as well."

Michael looked around the kitchen. "Where is he?"

"He went down to the basement. He's taking care of some mice for me."

"Oh, no. Your little store. I'm glad he got on it. It's so nice to have Morty back in town with us."

Seconds later, Morty came busting through the door, holding the small red box of rat poison. Clearly he was glad to be out of the confined space of the basement. Upon seeing his brother, he smiled. "Hey Mike."

"Well aren't you the good son. I hope you got rid of Mickey and Minnie."

Morton brushed the dirt off of his knees. "I did my best." He finished his sentence with a glance at his mother who suddenly turned back to the counter.

"So what's up with you?" Morton hoped that if he and his brother began exchanging pleasantries if could turn into the perfect opportunity to bring up the sale of the theater. After all, he had just battled one of his greatest fears and went down in his mother's crawl

space on his hands and knees. Surely this was a good time to ask.

"Just waiting on that baby," Michael said. "Laney says it can't happen soon enough."

Carolina's back was still to both of her sons. Morton walked over and placed the box of rat poison on the counter. "Thank you for wanting to do that, Morty. I'm sure it will help." She turned to face Michael. "Can I get you boys some tea or hot chocolate? It's awfully cold out there."

"No," Michael answered. "We're expecting a couple more inches tonight and I don't want to leave Laney alone for too long." He went to a stack of covered dishes with his name on them. "If it's okay with you, I'm going to grab my dinners and head back out."

"Of course." Carolina nodded.

"Uh, Mother. I was wondering if I could talk to you about an investment I would like to make." Morton began his rehearsed speech.

Carolina raised a hand and waved him off like a troublesome gnat. "Not right now, Morty. It's been a long day."

Morton's face flushed. She wasn't even going to listen to him. She would have listened to Michael. "Mother, I wouldn't bother you, but this is important."

Michael stepped toward the door. "That's my cue to go. Good seeing you again, Morty."

"Yes. You, too."

"Let me walk you to the door." Carolina looped her arm in Michael's. Morton could hear them as they

entered the foyer. "Now you call me if anything happens. I'll come to the hospital. That hospital food is no good. I'll make us a nice little dinner...."

~O~

The next day a neighbor found Carolina McGill—dead, slumped over a cookbook, a cup of tea next to her on the table. From the white caked-on substance around her mouth, paramedics knew almost immediately that she had somehow ingested poison. They would later surmise it was the same kind of poison that could be found in that little red box in Carolina McGill's cabinet. When the police made a perfunctory search of her house, they found a diary in her bedside table. In the diary, she documented an ongoing feud between her and her son, Morton.

Every day. Every day I grow more and more frightened of my own son. Morton is such an unhappy man that now I feel he wants to take out his anger on me. Some days he reminds me of his father. These are not good days. I write this now, hoping that no one will ever read it. If I die, look to Morty first. You can be sure he did it.

Morton McGill never saw it coming when the police pounded on his door and arrested him. They found his fingerprints on the red box and had his mother's diary. Morton was going down for the death of Carolina McGill.

Michael rushed to the police station to be with his brother.

"You can't let them do this Mikey," Morton pleaded.

"I can't stand being closed in. "

"I'll do everything I can, Mort. You know that, right? I know you didn't kill our mother. You loved her. I've called a lawyer for you. We're getting you out of here. I promise. Did mother say anything to you about being sad or despondent?"

The door opened and Detective Rogers, who was assigned to Carolina's case, entered the room. "We need to ask your brother a few questions," the detective said to Michael. "If you could just step outside for moment." Michael rose to go.

"Oh, and one more thing, I know that you both have had a lot of very hard news in the last couple of weeks, but did your mother ever mention anything about a tumor?"

Morty scratched his head. "Tumor? She never said anything."

The detective sat down across the table from Morton. "Your mother had a tumor on her brain. The coroner said she wouldn't have survived another six months. She didn't tell you anything about this?"

Michael took a seat next to the detective. "No, nothing."

"She never even mentioned going to a doctor." Morton said. "As far as we knew she was healthy as a horse. I was sure she was going to outlive all of us." This crushing news was the final nail in the coffin—Morton's coffin. His mother was dead, but worse, his mother had been dying. Had she known? Had she known and not trusted him enough to share it with him? If that were the

case, he felt sorry for her having to handle that by herself. He might not have turned out to be the man she wanted him to be, but he was still her son. He would have been there for her.

From there, the investigation of Carolina McGill's death went into a predictable pattern. The police took Morton to trial and he pleaded innocent. The jury of his peers did not agree. Morton was given a life sentence in an eight by ten cell. The jury and the judge had no way of knowing they had just sentenced Morton McGill to hell. It was the day Morton was to be sent to maximum security that Michael McGill received a letter in the mail written in his mother's handwriting. It had been forwarded from her attorney's office.

Dear Michael,

If you are receiving this, then I have passed on. I have one more little job for you. I have a couple of storage units that will need to be emptied. You will find inside of them four freezers filled with enough food to keep you and your lovely wife and my grandchild eating for the next year. Now that you don't have to share them with your brother Morty, please empty out the contents of the freezers and enjoy!

*Always thinking of you,
Mom*

Michael set the letter down and thought for a moment. How could she have known that Morty was out of the picture? The only way she would have known was if she knew Morty was in prison for her murder.

Michael grabbed the letter and ran out the door. They were about to transport Morty to prison, and he could stop it.

"Honey, where are you going?" Michael's wife asked as she stood in the doorway, holding their son in her arms. Michael stuffed the letter in his pocket.

"I'll be back." He ran out the door as his wife waved to her husband through the cold window, and then watched him swerve out of the driveway.

When he opened the large metal door of the storage unit, he gasped as the final creak of metal against metal sounded. The freezers stood waiting for him. On top of one of the freezers was another envelope. His name was written in the center in his mother's familiar scrawl. He ripped it open and began to read.

My dearest Michael,

If you are reading this, then the final step of my plan has been completed. I need to make an admission of guilt. I always loved you more. Morty looks like his father and as he grew, acted like him. I divorced your father. I couldn't divorce my son. He never had the ambition and the loyalty that you have, and for that I reward you. You will find you are the sole beneficiary of Mrs. McGill's Home Cooking estate. I am hoping at this time Morty is sitting in jail. He was not the man you are. Did he poison me? What do you think?

You may also know now I am dying and sadly, I don't think I'll be seeing my new grandbaby. Give that little

one a hug for me and some good home cooking.

*With love,
Your mother*

Michael lifted the freezer door to find at least one hundred casseroles wrapped up neatly in tin foil. Each was labeled in his mother's hand, affixed with an index card containing reheating directions. He thought of Morty and his claustrophobia. Now that he had his mother's letter, Michael could prove she committed suicide and framed his brother. He slammed down the freezer door and sped to the police station. Morty was about to enter the tiny cell that was his nightmare. Detective Rogers hung up the phone as Michael ran into his office.

"Wait!"

Detective Rogers came around the corner of his desk. "I don't know how you heard what's going on, but we are trying to get it under control."

Michael did not listen to what the detective was saying. "I have a letter. I have a letter from my mother. She committed suicide and framed Morty!"

The detective's phone rang. He picked it up and listened to the voice on the other side, and then answered with a grunt. Hanging up the phone, his eyes met Michael's. "Mr.

McGill, I need to tell you something."

"Look here." Michael McGill spread the two letters out on the detective's desk. "Look. My mother, she framed Morty. She killed herself. She admitted it in this letter."

Detective Rogers leaned over the letter and began to read. When he looked up again, his face had turned a sickly shade of green. He reached back for his rolling chair and fell into it. "Oh my God. This is terrible." He reached back and ran both hands through his thinning hair, letting out a frustrated sigh. His superior, Chief Asher, came over with a cell phone held against his chest.

"I am so sorry, Mr. McGill. We did everything we could."

"Yes, well now you need to get Morty back here. He's innocent. We have proof. He's innocent. He doesn't have to go to jail." As Michael finished his sentence, he realized something wasn't right.

"Maybe you need to sit down." Chief Asher pulled a chair from another desk and sat it next to Michael.

"We were transporting your brother to the federal prison, and when he was released from the bus to go into processing, he grabbed

our officer's gun. A struggle ensued, and your brother did not survive."

~O~

"I can't believe how very generous you are Mr. McGill. All of this food for the food bank? And donating four freezers to store it in?" Sister Bernadette of the Home and Family Food Bank for the Poor squeezed Michael's arm.

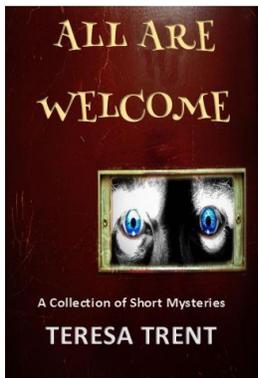
Michael . "You are quite welcome. I would also like to give you this check." Michael held out a check equal to the total amount of the inheritance from his mother, the famous freezer queen, Carolina McGill.

The sister beamed when she saw the many zeros on the check.

"You will surely be blessed in heaven by our heavenly Father."

Michael should have been comforted by the sister's kind words, but deep in his heart, he would always know he had failed. He stomped off back through the snow. Laney and the baby waited at home, and he promised to pick up some dinner on the way. Something convenient, but definitely not a frozen dinner.

THANK YOU FOR READING THE FREEZER QUEEN



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