

'You know something bad's going to happen and just have to keep reading ...' SIMON KERNICK

cold kisses

JOHN RECTOR

FEAR NEVER
TRAVELS
ALONE ...



John Rector's short fiction has appeared in numerous magazines and won several awards, including the Porterhouse prize. His first novel, *The Grove*, was a bestselling e-book and is forthcoming from Pocket Books. He lives in Omaha, Nebraska and is currently working on his third novel, *The Clinic*.

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cold kiss

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Freezing was not so bad as people thought.
There were lots worse ways to die.

—Jack London

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It took a while to count, and when I finished I put the last few bundles of cash back in the suitcase and said, “Almost two million, plus what we’ve got in the backpack.”

Sara nodded, didn’t speak.

She was sitting on the chair by the table. She’d changed into a pair of green sweatpants and an oversized white T-shirt. Her hair was still wet, but she didn’t seem to care about that anymore.

I zipped the flap on the suitcase then set it on the floor and slid it under the bed. My hands were shaking, and I reached for my jacket and took the pack of cigarettes out of the pocket. I tapped one out then lit it using one of the candles.

This time, Sara didn’t complain.

I sat on the edge of the bed and rested my arms against my knees and tried to think. The idea of two million dollars made it hard to focus, and all I ended up doing was watching a thin ribbon of smoke trail up from my cigarette and unravel into the air around me.

I'd just counted it, I'd held it in my hands, but I still couldn't believe it was real. Even the possibility of that much money was foreign to me.

For years, growing up, Vincent and I would spend nights sleeping in cars or abandoned houses. There was never any money, and sometimes we'd go days without food.

Back then, twenty dollars seemed like a fortune, and I tried to imagine what Vincent would've thought about two million. It was hard to do, but picturing the look on his face made me smile.

"That's all we have to do," Sara said. "It's easy."

"What's all we have to do?"

"Turn it over to the cops." She nodded, her eyes distant. "We won't have anything, so there won't be any reason to come after us. We'll just keep going like we never met him at all."

"What are you talking about?" I asked. "Why would we give it to the cops?"

"We'll be completely out of it. We'll be safe."

"Sara?"

"The police can deal with it."

"We're not giving this money to the cops."

She looked at me. "We have to."

"No, we don't," I said. "We're going to do what we talked about. We'll tell the police what happened, but we're not going to mention the suitcase or any of the money. We'll give them the backpack with his clothes and tell them it was all he had on him when we picked him—"

"No!" Sara stood up fast, her voice loud. "We can't do that. Things are different now."

"Nothing's different."

“Everything is different.” Her voice got louder with each word. “Someone shot him because of this money, and now he’s dead. If we keep it, they’ll come after us, too.”

“Who’ll come after us?”

“Whoever owns this money. Whoever killed him.”

I held up my hands and tried to calm her down, but she stepped away and backed up against the wall.

“No, Nate.”

“Sara, come on.” I kept my voice soft. “No one knows he had this money.”

“Someone does.”

“How do you know?”

“Because someone shot him, Nate, and because he had that damn gun. You said it was an assassin’s gun.”

“I could be wrong about that.” I lied. “But even if I’m not, it doesn’t mean—”

“Just stop. This kind of thing happens all the time in movies, and it always ends up bad.”

“In movies?”

“He was running from someone because of that money and now he’s dead. If we take it then they’ll come after us.”

“This isn’t a movie.”

Sara looked away. There were tears on her cheek and she wiped them away with the back of her hand. “That money belongs to someone, and they’ll come after it until they find it. For all we know they’re right behind us.”

That reminded me of the diner and Syl asking if anyone had come in while he was in the bathroom. I didn’t think anything of it at the time, and I still didn’t.

I wouldn’t let myself.

“We can’t keep it, Nate, we just can’t, okay?”

She was crying, and I let her go on until she’d calmed down enough for me to get close, then I took her hands and said, “All we’re doing is talking. There’s nothing we can do about any of this tonight, so we have some time to think everything through.”

“There’s nothing to think through,” she said. “This isn’t worth getting killed over.”

I smiled. “Two million dollars?”

Sara pushed past me, but I wrapped my arm around her waist, stopping her.

“Don’t joke about this, Nate.”

I told her I was sorry, over and over, and when she believed I was telling the truth she leaned into me and put her head against my chest.

We stood like that for a while then I said, “What if there isn’t anyone out there?”

“Nate—”

“Just think about it,” I said. “What if there’s no one coming?”

“There is, I know there is.”

“But what if there’s not? What if we end up handing all this money over to the cops for no reason?”

She looked at me like she was about to argue. Instead, she said, “There’s no way to know for sure. We just have to assume.”

“Why?”

“Because if we turn the money in and we’re wrong, at least we’re still alive.”

“And we lose the money.”

“It’s better than getting killed. If we keep the money we’ll

always be looking over our shoulders.” She paused. “I don’t want to live like that.”

“Then help me think of a way to keep it that’s safe,” I said. “There has to be one.”

Sara shook her head. “Once we tell the police about Syl, they’ll have our names on record. If someone’s looking for the money, all they’ll have to do is read the report. We were the last ones to see him alive. It won’t be hard to figure out what we did.”

She was right. Once the police knew, it would be easy to track us down. Still, I wasn’t ready to give in.

I went over all the options I could think of, but none of them felt right. After a while, I got up and walked into the bathroom and dropped my cigarette in the toilet. I watched it circle the bowl for a long time.

When I came back, I thought I had the answer.

Sara was standing at the window and staring out into the darkness. I came up behind her and put my hands on her shoulders.

“I think I have an idea,” I said.

I felt her shoulders tense. “Nate,” she said. “Please, don’t—”
“Hear me out.”

She let the curtain close then she turned and looked at me. She wasn’t smiling. “I know it’s a lot of money, but we can’t keep it. We need to let it go and move on.”

“Will you listen?”

Sara paused. She looked at me for a moment then sat on the edge of the bed and waited.

I moved one of the chairs over, then sat down and said, “Let’s go over our options.”

“Nate, come on.”

I ignored her.

“You think someone is out there looking for this money, and if we keep it we’ll be in danger, right?”

“This is pointless.”

“Let me finish.”

Sara looked away.

“We also can’t keep the money because once the police are involved, we’ll be listed in their report and easy to track down.”

Sara shook her head. “Just tell me your idea.”

I hesitated, then said, “What if we don’t tell anyone at all?”