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Cold Kiss
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Holiday eBook Freebie

I have always seen the New Year as a time full of promise and excitement. The old me is left behind and I have the opportunity to become a better version of myself. To open myself up to new experiences and new wisdom. Both of the characters in this story have that opportunity, too, although it comes with a little more excitement than we usually get! I hope you enjoy this story as we usher in a new year. Happy 2009!

Cold Kiss
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Professor Mae Davis huddled under the covers of a hard bed in a cold room in a strange city. A tear trickled over the bridge of her nose before falling to the pillow and soaking in.

Happy Freaking New Year.

Just over a week ago, she'd celebrated Christmas with her friends and colleagues at the university. The small Communication Department put on a good holiday party for all different faiths and traditions. Pagans who celebrated Solstice partied alongside Catholics and Jews and Kwanzaa celebrants. Even the atheists and agnostics got into the party spirit, joining in on the wish for peace on earth.

Goodwill toward men took a downward turn, though, because two days after Christmas, Martin Greenbaum had been found dead in the faculty parking lot. Shot in the back of the head, slumped over the steering wheel of his crappy old Toyota.

That's when Mae finally took a look at the jump drive he'd handed her at the party.

That's when she started running.

For four days, she'd been looking over her shoulder, waiting for someone to stop her. To hurt her. For four days, she'd been too afraid to close her eyes. The exhaustion had finally caught up with her in this horrible, cheap hotel, and for the first time since she realized what she had in her pocket, she cried until she had no more tears.

She hadn't even realized she'd fallen asleep when a rough hand shook her awake. She opened her eyes. She'd left the bathroom light on and in the sliver of illumination, a blurry shadow moved in front of her.

"What?" She pushed her way up to her elbows, blinking until her sight cleared. "What's going on? Who are you? What time is it?"

"Time to leave."

Mae's brain and body were not on the same wavelength yet. She stepped out of bed and stubbed her toe on the man's boot.

Her eyes finally adjusted to the light and she looked down, then up. He wore black boots. Black clothes. There were streaks of black paint on his face, as well. His hair needed no cover. It was already dark as midnight.

"I refuse to have this nightmare," she told the man in black. He put a hand under her chin and forced her head up until she stared into his eyes. No. Not a nightmare. A dream man, conjured out of her confusion and loneliness. The features of his painted face were indistinct, but his eyes, as cold and deep as the midnight ocean, glittered at her, icy in the glare of the of the bathroom light.

"We. Are. Leaving." He might have been a dream man, but his voice matched every terrifying nightmare she'd ever had. Ruined and broken, the hoarse rasp hooked claws in her head and tore. Mae gasped as fear finally poured over her, setting her skin on fire.

"Who are you?"

"No time," he growled, and he grabbed her hand to pull her to the door.

She dug her heels into the thick carpet and pulled backwards, shaking her head.

* * *

Colm dragged her body against his, hoping the shock of it would keep her silent. It worked, for he heard no sound but the whoosh of her breath against his chest.

He held no hope that she would remain silent for long. It was best they left before the bad guys sent their welcoming committee. They were more likely to introduce her to the business end of a silenced pistol than bring baked goods.

He kept her pinioned against him, pointedly ignoring the small lush body plastered to his. Colm spotted the duffel next to the bed. He scooped that up, tucked it between their bodies to keep one hand free, and headed for the door.

It was too good to be true. Just as he watched the door knob turn, the woman found her voice and started to shriek.

Colm had a gift for violence. It was easy to him to sweep the 9mm out of its holster and blow a hole just an inch above the knob. A pair of stealth-clad men burst into the room, laser sights bobbing to the bed. The pillow she had slept on exploded as a barrage of bullets riddled the spot where she had lain only moments before.

Colm kept firing and kept moving. One man flew backwards to land lopsided on the ruined bed and the other ran for the window. The assassin limped as he escaped down the fire ladder and, like a good little trained killer, fired one last shot behind him as he disappeared.

Her screams halted abruptly as Colm dove for the door with her.

“Ow.”

It was the last sound he heard before she became a dead weight in his arms.

“Shitshitshit, I don’t have time for you to be dead.”

The pain brought Mae fully awake. She levered herself up on the backseat of a fast-moving car and gasped as fire streaked up her side.

“Lay back down. I’ll get you taken care of.”

That voice sent her cowering into the corner. No matter what else, she didn’t want him to speak again. That sound was conjured up out of her nightmares.

But silence was not in her nature. She had to know what was going on. Mae drew herself up, holding her breath against the pain. Her hand searched out the problem. Blood welled from a long, shallow graze high on her left side. An inch higher and there would have been a hole in her armpit. Very elegant. A couple of inches over and there would have been a hole in her heart. Very deadly.

Much as she dreaded hearing the driver speak again, she had to know what was happening.

“Do you want to tell me what’s going on here?”

“Do you have the jump drive?”

She slapped a hand to her pocket to check, then realized that she’d just given the game away. His eyes met hers in the mirror. The ice in his gaze touched her skin. Still, he hadn’t been the one to shoot her.

“Just keep your head down and you’ll be fine.”

“Fine is relative. I was fine sleeping in my hotel room.”

“You would have been fine until they blew great fu—“ He checked himself with obvious effort. “Great big holes in you.”

“Yeah. About that...” She would have asked more, but she suddenly heard a distinctive pinging sound against the side of the car, followed by tiny rushes of cold air.

The driver swerved and Mae slammed her shoulder against the door, gasping as pain radiated through her.

“Get down on the floor!”

Mae obeyed without question. Her independence didn’t extend to getting shot for mouthing off. She clamped her teeth against nausea. How had she ended up in the mother of all car chases?

The patter of automatic weapons fire rattled over the sound of the engine. Mae screamed when the back windshield shattered, showering her in pellets of safety glass. Then she was simply too frightened to scream anymore. Her world narrowed to an agonizing pinpoint of light and pain and fear.

And sound. She heard every ragged breath of her driver, every shift of his jeans over the leather seat, every slip of leather gloves on the steering wheel. As Mae's focus intensified, she imagined she could hear the grinding of his teeth and the pounding of his heartbeat, sure and strong.

The foul word he muttered broke her concentration. She went sliding over the floor of the car, adding carpet burn to her list of injuries. Mae watched in horror as the opposite door – the door right behind her driver – buckled inwards. She jerked her head up to watch another car flip side over side into a stone fence before the force of an explosion battered her senses.

The silence that followed was deafening. The car flew straight and smooth down the road and a bitter wind blew in through the gaping back window.

Mae's fingers ached as she gave up her grip on the floor.

"Are they gone?"

"Yeah." She didn't know if it was possible, but his voice sounded even rougher than before.

Mae grasped the edge of the seat in front of her and dragged herself up.

"You all right?" he asked.

"I think so. At least I'm no worse off than I was before." Her rescuer – she wasn't prepared to call him her hero yet – set his jaw and she watched as color flooded his face, then drained. That wasn't right.

"Are you...are you...um, ok?" She had learned that men could be touchy about that question. She'd probably pass out again if he snarled at her.

"Actually, no."

He pulled the car, what used to be a sleek BMW before it got riddled with bullet holes, over to the side and set the brake.

"Come here."

Mae slithered over the seat and plopped down next to him.

"Have you ever made a tourniquet?"

* * *

Several of the longest minutes of her life passed while she bandaged his wound under his direction before they continued down the road. Mae sat in the passenger seat and shivered. They'd run from the hotel without her coat or sweater, or even her shoes. At least she had fallen asleep in her clothes. With every shift, she felt tiny fragments of glass grinding into the seat underneath her. She stole a glance at the man driving next to her, his features visible in the faint glow from the dashboard.

His short, dark hair curled very slightly at the ends, but the length of his sideburns was an unexpected affectation. The hands on the steering wheel were pale with a sprinkling of rough hair. An artist's hands, long fingered and elegant though bloody, they remained relaxed as he maneuvered away from the city.

The seat pushed back to accommodate his long legs. The thick sweater he wore only accentuated the breadth of shoulders that belied his lean physique. He wore no rings or jewelry, but the solid black watch on his wrist looked like it had more gadgets than a Bond film. Kidnapping must be a profitable enterprise.

His profile might have exposed him for merely a cold man until she glimpsed his eyes. Frozen green, they glittered like sea ice in a long face hewn from an unrelenting glacier. The sharp edges of his cheekbones framed a patrician nose, made even more menacing by a telltale flaw in the bridge. She didn't want to know what had happened to the man who broke her hijacker's nose. His lips were thin, immobile, as frigid as the rest of his countenance. A scar, thin and twisted, started under his ear and snaked across his Adam's apple. That must be what ruined his voice.

The same impulse that forced her to memorize his features led her to wonder if those lips ever softened, if those eyes ever heated, if the shadow of stubble that covered his jaw felt coarse or soft upon a woman's skin.

She could practically hear his teeth grinding together as he gritted them against the pain. At least she presumed it was pain that drove that expression. Something about the tight way he held himself seemed habitual to him. The black of his jeans was darker around the band of the leather belt tied around his thigh. The seep of blood from the hole in his leg seemed to have slowed and she was grateful.

Mae cleared her throat.

"Thank you."

"What for?"

"For saving my life."

He grunted back at her.

Mae let the silence sit. Well. That had gone well. She weighed her next words carefully. She had become very careful in the last few days, but she had to know.

"Who are you?"

"No one. I deliver packages."

"Am I the package?"

He nodded.

"Where am I being delivered?"

The man didn't answer, but he bit down harder.

"If you keep grinding your teeth like that, you're going to end up in the dentist's chair."

He grunted at her, but she saw his jaw loosen marginally.

She paused another moment. "How's the leg?"

"Bleeding."

Mae sat up straighter. "Is it bleeding a lot? Do I need to tighten the belt? Are we near a hospital?"

"No, no, and no. We'll be there soon."

Mae felt her heart drop in her chest. "There? Where's there?"

"To the people who arranged for your delivery."

A hysterical laugh bubbled up from somewhere inside her. Mae clamped down her lips. She was not a hysterical woman. Yet.

"I think I take it back."

"What?"

"Thanking you for saving my life. You might have saved me from a quick death only to deliver me to a much nastier one."

"They don't mean to kill you."

Salt stung her eyelids. She wanted to scream in frustration. The stink of blood and chaos surrounded her and gunfire still echoed in her ears. The routines she depended on were long gone. A sob escaped, unbidden and unwanted. She clapped her hands over her eyes to scrub back the tears.

"Dr. Davis?" He sounded uncertain for the first time, almost nervous, as if a woman's tears had the power to shake his confidence. She sniffed back a laugh.

"I think you can call me Mae." She sniffled again and wiped away any trace of wetness around her eyes. "Once a man has seen me faint, he can call me Mae."

She hung in the silence, waiting for him to introduce himself. The second before she started babbling, he spoke.

"McIvers. Colm McIvers."

She inclined her head to him and he nodded back tersely.

“Call me Colm. Once a woman has stopped me from bleeding to death, she can call me Colm.”

* * *

He breathed deep and acknowledged that he was not going to make it all the way to the safe house before he passed out. He was sitting in a puddle of blood, and agony shot through his leg every time he pressed the clutch to shift gears.

“Can you drive?”

“This thing?” She nodded again, taking the corner of her chapped lower lip in her teeth.

“Good. Because I think it’s your turn now.”

He didn’t like ceding control to anyone, but especially to an amateur. Even an amateur who looked like a bedraggled fairy. Mae had a heart shaped face with tip-tilted eyes of blue and green, flecks of gold in their depths. Her full cheeks were smudged with dirt and tears and her hair was a tangled, matted mess.

He stopped so they could switch places. The trip around the car tested him more than anything he’d ever done, even with Mae under one arm as a crutch. The leak in his leg had slowed to a trickle, assuring him that he wasn’t in danger of bleeding out. The bullet had torn through flesh, but missed the artery and bone as far as he could tell. Still, he nearly blacked out twice before she got him settled in the passenger seat.

The jeans and thin T-shirt she wore were bloody and filthy. They also did a poor job of concealing some first class curves. He knew she was freezing, so he reached over to the dashboard and flipped on the seat heater, hoping it still worked. It must have, because a few moments later, she snuggled into the seat and gave him a shy, grateful smile he didn’t deserve. At least she followed directions and soon they pulled into the driveway of the safe house, where she would be protected.

Where she would be out of his reach. Colm was thirty-eight years old. A decorated, highly respected officer with a reputation for being a cold sonofabitch. He didn’t dispute it, but lately, he’d had the feeling that there had to be more to life than shooting some people and delivering others. Even his father, the original cold sonofabitch, had a family. Colm had nothing.

Nothing but a bonfire burning in his thigh. He’d have been up shit creek without the woman shivering next to him.

The clock on the dashboard blinked a number change. 11:55. On New Year’s Eve. A time for new beginnings.

“Stop the car for a minute.” Mae looked at him, surprised, but did as he asked.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Just wanted to let you know what was going to happen.”

She turned towards him stiffly and he remembered her own wound. “How’s the side?”

“I’ll be all right. How’s your leg?”

“It’ll be fine.” He cleared his throat, wishing his voice sounded better. “Just up the road, you’ll be delivered to the CIA. They’ve been looking for what’s on that jump drive for quite some time. So have some other people. The ones who tried to kill you tonight.”

Fear jumped back into her eyes and he was sorry he’d put it there.

“We’re not going to hurt you, Mae.”

She nodded.

“But your life is going to change.” He almost envied her. A new name, a new home, a fresh start. What would it be like *not* to be shot at for a while?

A breath gusted out of her, half a snort, an amusingly abrupt sound coming from the proper woman in the driver’s seat. “My life changed when Martin gave me that drive.”

Damn. He liked her. Bullet-burned and bloody, Mae Davis was solid and steady in a crisis. Most people would be in shock right now, but she just kept moving. Her lips quirked up and he liked that, too.

“What about you, Colm? What will you do now?”

He didn't have an answer for that, but he knew what he wanted to do. His instincts had saved his life more than once, but he'd never relied on them to save his heart.

Colm leaned forward, ignoring the pain in his leg, his eyes trained on hers. She blinked, and her smile changed to something soft and sweet.

Her lips were cold, and so were his. The smell of blood and leather surrounded them, but it didn't matter. Pain faded, replaced by hope. They were alive.

Her hair tangled in his fingers as he pushed the kiss deeper and she followed. Her fire and his ice blending together, hissing and steaming as they came together. He wanted more and shifted forward to touch her, to run his hand down her shoulder. She leaned into his touch and the sensation of her cold little fingers on his jaw made him shiver in a way that had nothing to do with the temperature.

The harsh gleam of a flashlight hit his eyes and even though the closed lids, it burned. A face leaned down – an agent he knew and had previously liked until the interruption – and grinned.

“Happy New Year, Agent McIvers.”

Colm looked down at Mae, who returned his gaze solemnly.

“Happy New Year, Colm.” She smiled – a small turn of her lips, just for him – before she slid out of the car and came around to his side, letting him lean on her as they limped to the house.

“Happy New Year to you, too, Mae. I think we're off to a good start.”

Author Biography

Sela Carsen is just your ordinary, average, everyday stay at home mom.

Really. Ignore the two Monkey Children. And the disaster area she calls home. And the Darn-Near Perfect husband who patiently puts up with the chaos. Did she mention the Boxer?

If you see her talking to herself while she's going down the produce aisle at the grocery store with her travel mug of coffee welded to her hand, well, doesn't everyone do that?

Despite the caffeine-induced jitters, she has managed to write comic romances featuring smart, funny, mostly alive, occasionally dead (and undead), and not always entirely human characters.

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