


# Into the Cold



Russell Heath

Alatna Works 

60 Overs Point Road  
Petit Manan Point  
Steuben, Maine 04680  
207.598.7016  
[rsl@russellheath.net](mailto:rsl@russellheath.net)

Friday, November 27

The door to the cellblock closed with a finality that reverberated through her body and she knew they were coming for her. She got off her bunk and threaded her way through the other girls in their yellow jumpsuits joking and shrieking like they ran the world. When the door opened, the guard spoke her name and stepped back into the passageway indicating that Kris should walk in front.

The door to the cellblock opened, and they passed through. She must have come this way last night but she didn't recognize it. They passed through several more corridors and steel doors that opened and closed by some unseen hand. When they came to a door set into the sidewall, the guard keyed in a code and herded her into a bleak cement block room with a steel table and two steel chairs.

A boney man sitting at the table looked up. It wasn't Barrett. It irritated her that she was disappointed. Had he assigned a junior cop to interrogate her?

The boney man shuffled through papers in a file folder, found what he was looking for, and read "Kris Gabriel." He looked up.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"Bitters," he said. He indicated the chair facing him on the other side of the table.

“Bitters and Barrett,” she said.

Bitters grinned. “Joe Barrett dropped his first name because JB is backwards for blowjob and I dropped mine because Winston sounds too Princeton. Rhymes, even.”

“You’re Barrett’s bitch?”

“Reverse, generally. But that’s mostly because the prosecutors around here suck and waste his best detecting.” He pointed at the chair. “I don’t get paid by the hour.”

Kris stood with her back to the door looking at the cop scanning the pages in the file. What did it matter? What the *fuck* did it matter? She’d spent her whole life fighting and where had it gotten her? She could tell the cops everything, spend the rest of her life behind these steel doors, and what would she lose?

She sat and watched him as he scanned the remaining pages.

“So,” he said without looking up, “Motlik intends to charge you with stealing Barrett’s pistol and firing it at him, which is very funny. And then stealing a ski plane from a couple of troopers and flipping it on the Johns River, which is hilarious.” He looked up, a dark light lit his eyes that startled Kris. *This guy might not be fully sane.*

“On my best days, I get pissing in public and fumbled rapes by drunks with limp dicks.”

“Those are the only charges?” Kris asked.

“You want more?”

“Barrett thinks I killed Loren Lambale.”

“Interesting.” Bitters leaned forward and examined her. “Lambale is the fat banker who the cops are tearing the city apart looking for?”

“He’s not fat,” Kris said.

Bitter’s eyebrows rose. “Are you his publicist?”

“You don’t know shit. Did Barrett just dump you on me?”

“Not Barrett, the court, and just this morning. I haven’t read thru the case file yet, but I wanted to talk to you before you’re arraigned.”

“You’re not a cop?”

“I’m your lawyer.”

Kris studied him. *Fuck.*

“You have to pay more if you want Perry Mason,” he said.

“I can’t pay you anything.”

“That’s why you got me. Courtesy of the State of Alaska.”

“The state’s never done anything for me.”

“Good, we’re not breaking any precedents then.”

He looked at her without warmth, but without disdain either. What was he going to do to her? It was like she couldn’t turn around without being shoved back into the cold by some white man.

He gave her a few seconds to think it over and then asked, “Are you ready to get to work?”

“What’s going to happen?”

“Motlik, the prosecutor, is going to file charges, the judge is going to explain what it all means, and then set a date for a preliminary hearing. Given it’s the holidays and the entire court system will be incapacitated by good cheer, it’ll be mid-January, February. Then he’ll set bail. He’ll figure you for a flight risk since you’re from out of town and did a good job exercising the cops making them chase you around the state. Bail will be too high for you to pay or for a bondsman to risk putting up. You’re looking at home,” he nodded toward the door, “for the next couple of months. Longer if the preliminary hearing doesn’t go our way.”

She shrugged. When Barrett brought her in last night, she guessed it’d be for years.

“I did do all those things,” she said.

“You can’t make shit like this up.” He shrugged. “Doesn’t matter. It’s not what you did, it’s how you play the game.”

“How bad is it?”

“Shooting at a cop with his own gun? Motlik is not likely to see the humor in that. But, other than humiliation, Barrett didn’t get hurt, right? Worse case you get convicted of third-degree assault, a class C felony which maxes out at five years and a \$50,000 fine. Depends what the judge had for breakfast when he sentences you. Stealing an airplane—that’s grand theft; it’d be a felony charge and maybe a year. You might have to pay them back for it.”

“That’ll happen.”

“Might have to buy Barrett a new gun, too.”

“His is in the dumpster behind the Fairbanks library. Might still be there because of Thanksgiving.”

“Has your fingerprints all over it?”

“I wiped it down, but yeah, probably.”

“Then we’ll let it stay there. Doesn’t help us.”

“He needs one that doesn’t shoot so fast, anyway.”

Bitters looked at her, confused, but she looked away. It wasn’t anything he needed to know.

“Barrett’s a good cop,” Bitters said. “Good cops don’t leave their guns lying around where people can find them.” Bitters watched her gauging her reaction.

“Ask him,” she said.

Bitters gathered his papers and stuffed them into a canvas bag. He stood and, resting the bag on the table, said, “We don’t need to do anything at the arraignment. The DA will do all the talking. The judge will formally appoint me to the case. You can refuse me if you want.” He picked up his

bag, “but I’m the best public defender in town, the state really. Anyone else you get will be fresh out of law school and still believes in the rules.”

He walked to the door. “They get the gold stars, I get my clients off. Your choice.” He pushed a button set in the wall.

“Hold on,” Kris said. She walked toward him. “I need to see someone—he’s in the hospital. He was part of the shooting last night.”

“You related?”

“We’re engaged,” Kris said, lying.

“Not good enough.” Bitters turned to the door as the guard opened it.

“So that speech about the rules was just bullshit,” Kris said.

Bitters looked over his shoulder as he walked out and grinned. “You’re good.”

“Talk to Barrett,” she said.

Saturday, November 28

Justin’s door was open and she hesitated to turn into it. The cop behind her gave her a push as if she were too dumb to see it. Kris took a breath, released it. Distantly, she felt her fingers tremble.

His head was back on the pillows, eyes open staring at the ceiling. A metal framework was locked into his arm and shoulder. He didn’t see her until she pressed her belly against the bed rails and leaned into his field of vision. His eyes focused slowly and he grinned. She bent to kiss him, her hair swinging forward to hide their touch from the cops.

“Back away from the patient,” the female cop said.

“How’re you doing?” she asked.

“It hurts.” His eyebrows shrugged; it wasn’t like he could move his shoulders. “And they’re pumping serious chemicals into me.”

She reached for his good hand.

“I said...” the cop again.

He moved away. “Better not get in a fight with her,” he said. “She’ll take you back.”

“You know,” she said, not knowing how to say it. “You know, thanks.” She laughed. “It was the second time.” He had appeared at Alvilde’s bedroom door an instant before Alvilde would have pulled the trigger and killed Kris. Justin had pointed at the floor and told her to drop the gun as if she were a dog with a stick in her mouth. Alvilde had turned and fired at him. It wasn’t heroic, it was stupid. It was beyond stupid; it was pathetically stupid and, even as she thanked him, Kris felt a touch of contempt.

It took him a couple of seconds to sort through what she said. “Yeah. I guess.”

They talked, awkwardly, about the shooting, about the operation, about the microsurgeon from Ketchikan who sewed up chainsaw injuries who’d flown up Thanksgiving night to sew his nerves, ligaments, muscles, and blood vessels back together, about the possibility that Justin would be able to use his arm and hand again after a year of physical therapy.

They didn’t talk about the likelihood that a year from now she’d be in a cell doing five years for assaulting a cop and stealing a plane. Maybe she’d be there forever if some kid scrambled down the cliff and found Lambale’s body.

Behind her, the cops listened and when her fifteen minutes were up, they took her away.

Sunday, November 29

The girls lined up and walked out of the cell headed for breakfast as excited as if Timothée Chalame would be serving them their cold toast and rubber eggs. The guard with the clipboard checking them off as they went through the door, found her curled up on her bunk.

“Out, Gabriel,” she said.

Kris shook her head. “I can’t.”

“I don’t say things twice.”

“Lock the door, I won’t go anywhere.” Kris turned away and stared at the cinder block wall.

“Are you sick?”

Kris shook her head.

“I’m going to ask again. Are you sick?”

This time Kris nodded.

“If any of the girls’ stuff is missing, it’s on you.”

Kris nodded. The body behind her left and a second later the door closed, the electric bolt locking home. She pulled her hand out from beneath the gray blanket and picked at the mortar between the cinder blocks.

It spun in her brain. The night she killed her father. The darkness, the yellow beam of the flashlight on his shoes, the snow falling, the nausea, her righteous fury at what he had done to her mother, Ben’s revolver in her hand, cocking the hammer, he slapping the gun away, the muzzle flash when the hammer tripped, he stumbling and she pulling the trigger again and again as he screamed in the darkness until the gun was clicking empty, her ragged breath, the sour beer-reek of her vomit, and collapsing into the snow and passing out.

*Why did he have to be my father?*

He raped Evie and Kris was born. How can you deal with that? How do you hate a man whose crime created you?

*Why didn’t he tell me?*

Her brain tipped back into the blackness, the nausea, the crack of the revolver firing, Lambale’s sobs, pushing him off the edge of the cliff, having to go back for the keys, and he still alive.

There was no exit. There never would be.



*Why did I have to do it?*

Monday, November 30

Bitters was standing by the steel table when the guard led her into the room. He jiggled something in his pants pocket and waited impatiently for the guard to close the door. He pointed to the seat.

“What was that you said about Barrett?” he asked when she was seated. “About him needing a gun that didn’t shoot so fast.”

“What about it?” Kris said.

“Did you have sex with him?”

It sounded like he was accusing her of fucking up her case. She stood so he couldn’t lean over her.

“What’s it to you?”

“Don’t fight me, woman, I’m on your side.”

“I’m not your bitch.”

Tell me about it.”

“Fuck you.”

Bitters stared at her. After a pause, he sat down, folded his hands on the table, and looked up at her. “It could be important,” he said.

It was enough, and she told him of sneaking into Ben’s cabin because she couldn’t survive the night outside and, after he’d found her and cooked her dinner, they’d had sex in the bed up by the ceiling where it wasn’t so cold.

“Do you have any evidence of it?” Bitters asked.

“You don’t believe me?”

“It’s a jury that needs to believe you.”

Kris thought of the night, of the candle he'd lit at the head of the bed, of the weight of his body, of him coming into her, gently; of her trying to disassociate her feelings from him, from what he was doing to her, and, as he moved in her, of the loneliness she felt. She remembered how he stopped and ran his finger up the ridge of her nose and over the arc of her eyebrow to rest it on her cheek.

"Kris," he whispered. "Look at me."

She opened her eyes. The candle's light was faint, flickering on his forehead, his eyes hidden in pools of darkness.

He kissed her and began moving again.

Did she respond? She couldn't remember.

"Pubic hair, semen on your panties," Bitters said. "Condom wrapper."

She shook her head. "He came on my belly," she said.

"Yeah. A baby-Barrett would complicate his married life."

Kris looked away. "There might be some on the sleeping bag."

Bitters straightened, his voice sharpened. "Where is it?"

She told him how to contact Annie.

Bitters walked over to the steel door and jabbed at the button.

"Pray, girl, she hasn't washed it."

Wednesday, December 2

The door to the cell opened and all the girls turned their heads and stared at the door. Anything was exciting. The guard called for Kris.

"Go, girl," someone said as Kris stepped into the corridor. Everyone knew there was no normal reason for Kris—for any of them—to be taken away this time of day.

The guard opened the door to a dressing room and handed her a bag with her street clothes. When she came out, the guard took her to a secured window, the clerk slipped a manila envelope through a slot, told her to check its contents, and then sign the release form.

She passed through another steel door; the guard didn't follow her, and she stepped into a waiting room.

Bitters looked up from a magazine. He rose. For the first time, she saw him smile.

"What's happening?" she asked.

"Let's move," he said.

She shouldered into her parka as he led her past the checkpoints and to a rusted-out BMW. They were approaching Egan Expressway when she said it. "I'm free."

"Very. Lunch is on me—pick your place."

He turned left toward town and accelerated. The gray waters of the channel, the black trees across the water, and gray dirty snow flashed by. The sky was heavy with featureless clouds. Flecks of hard snow swirled in the slipstream of cars racing past them and clicked when they hit the windshield. It was cold.

"Baranof," she said. The fanciest place in town.

He barked, a laugh. "Not your style."

"They have to feed me," she said. A Native, a criminal straight from jail, a girl from the streets. "They have to say yes miss and please and thank you and smile like they mean it," she said.

"Do it, girl." He barked again. "Fuck 'em right up the ass."

They took her parka and hung it in the coatroom, they seated her at the table, put a menu in her hands, smiled, and asked if she'd like to start with a drink. She didn't know what to order and said, "Later." The waitress smiled said "of course" and smiled again and left.

"If she smiles again, I'll puke," she whispered.

“After we’ve eaten. They’ll give us the meal for free.”

She giggled, caught herself, and went street-cool. She picked up the menu, didn’t recognize anything on it.

“What is this shit?”

“Did you want that drink?”

“There’s no rye.” She flipped the drink menu over. No Budweiser either.

Bitters plucked the menu out of her hand. He waved the waitress over and ordered for them both.

The drink, when it came, was sweet and went down like candy and then it kicked and tears came to her eyes and she exhaled like she’d been hit.

“Like it?”

“Might be too much for me,” she said.

“Give it another try,” he said, “it’s your day.” Bitters’ eyes suddenly shifted over her shoulder. Kris turned. The smiley waitress was seating an elderly couple.

“You get a twofer,” Bitters said. When she didn’t respond, he said. “You get to fuck with the Baranof and you get to fuck with Loren Lambale’s parents.”

Kris twisted in her seat to see them better. She hadn’t known, hadn’t even wondered, whether Loren had parents. She watched them order, stiff and prim, not responding to the waitress’s over-enthusiasm.

They were her grandparents. The only family she had left. They were white, well dressed, confident, they belonged to a world she could never be part of. Sweat pricked her skin, and the blood drained from her head. She grasped the table with both hands to stay upright. She bent her head, her hair slipped forward hiding her face. They were her family. She pulled in air. It didn’t go deep, she breathed again. They would despise her.

“You OK?” Bitters asked.

She nodded keeping her face hidden. She took another breath startled at the fear that coursed through her. She needed to leave and stood, pushing her chair back. And then she realized that the Lambales didn’t know. They didn’t know that she was their granddaughter. Her fear drained away leaving her limp. They would never know, she would never tell them.

There was a sudden scraping of chairs, a charge of agitation and anger from behind her. She looked at Bitters, his eyes danced.

“Incoming,” he said.

Mr. Lambale said, “Lana, don’t.”

Bitters rose to meet her. Meaty like her son, she plowed into Kris’s field of vision and stood facing Bitters looking up at his boney face, alight in a welcoming smile.

“Mrs. Lambale—”

“You are scum.” The hate in her voice scorched the air. “And you will burn in hell for it.”

“Ah, Mrs. Lambale,” he said. “I understand how distressing it is to people of privilege when the justice system doesn’t work their way.”

“She is guilty—the cops know it, the DA knows it, and you know it. You got her off on a technicality--”

“It is truly upsetting that Native Alaskans have constitutional rights.”

“This has nothing to do—”

“Mrs. Lambale,” Bitters said, “you’ve made your point, mistaken though it is.” Bitters turned to Kris. “May I introduce to you my client, Kris Gabriel?”

As if just noticing her, Mrs. Lambale turned to Kris startled. She stared at Kris, taking in her clothes, her unbrushed hair, her face sallow from too many days without sun. Mrs. Lambale gathered herself.

“You murdered my son,” she said. “You will suffer. If not by the law, then by me.”

“Careful, Mrs. Lambale,” Bitters said. “That is not an entirely appropriate remark to make in the presence of witnesses.” The lunchroom had seized up and all eyes were on them.

Mrs. Lambale looked at Kris with the same disdain as Alvide had. Distantly, Kris realized that this woman had lost her son, that she was struggling with the same pain and emptiness that Kris had felt sitting in the cold in front of Ben’s cabin; the same pain and emptiness that Kris felt the day before lying on her bunk when the explosions of the pistol, the muzzle flashes, and the sobs of her father spun round and round in her head.

Kris knew this, but understanding this was too foreign and unexpected to her for it to make any difference. Kris would do what she’d always done. She’d fight.

“Your son raped my mother,” she said. “Your son’s wife pointed a shotgun in my mother’s face and while my mother watched pulled both triggers. Your son’s wife shot my friend and then blew her own head off so she wouldn’t be humiliated in the newspapers.”

Kris paused and then said, “The evil is in your family.”

Mrs. Lambale’s face paled, her lips thinned, and she threw her arm back and swung her fist at Kris. Before it landed, a hand flashed out and grabbed her wrist. She struggled, but Mr. Lambale held her, whispering gently until she quieted and he led her out of the room.

Bitters seated himself, placed his napkin on his lap, and picked up his fork looking very pleased. Like a stunned fish let back into the sea, the lunchroom slowly came back to life.

“Evil,” Bitters said. “That was good. Shakespearean almost.”

Kris’s heart pumped, adrenaline still charging through her body. She kept her hands clenched in her lap so no one would seem them tremble.

“I wanted to say shit,” she said, “but the Baranof might have kicked us out.”

“Not until we’ve paid.” Bitters ate, his fingers were nicotine-stained. A smoke would feel good now.

“How did she know?” she asked. She was falling off her adrenaline high, her voice tiny, barely making it out of her mouth.

“That the charges were dropped? The DA would have told her.”

“I wasn’t charged with murder.”

“Yeah, but it’s conventional wisdom around the JDP that you killed him. She would have picked it up.”

Kris shook her head. “I didn’t, though.”

Bitters smirked. “You were the last person to see him alive—at the parking garage, you lied about when you got back to Justin’s apartment, you took off the next day like you were running, you were drinking at the Lucky Lady beforehand, and you’re hotheaded and uncontrollable. Motive’s not clear, no one believes Lambale raped your mother, but since Alvilde killed Evie and herself, something nasty was likely going on that you figured out. Even a beat cop dumber than a cow can draw obvious conclusions.”

“Why didn’t they charge me, then?”

“They have a body problem.”

“No body, you mean?”

“They’ve looked hard enough. But without a body, he could be shacked up with his French mistress fucking his brains out for all we know. It’s a reasonable doubt.” Bitters mopped his plate with his bread and chewed.

“You’ve got time,” he said. “The investigation is in major disarray.”

Kris waited.

“Barrett’s been taken off the case.”

He looked at her as if wanting a reaction. She didn't give him one.

"How did you get the charges dropped?" she asked.

Bitters grinned and Kris understood he'd been waiting to tell her this since she walked out of Lemon Creek. "Your buddy, Annie, hadn't washed the sleeping bag—it hadn't occurred to her. She took a look at it for me and found dried body fluid-like stuff stuck to the inside. I went to Motlik and told him I'd have "Juneau cop rapes Native girl" on every newsfeed in the country if he didn't reconsider. Motlik knew it wasn't something they could win. Cops aren't in a really good position with marginalized people these days. Plus, a detective leaving his gun unsecured and the Troopers leaving the keys in the ignition of their airplane—the defenders of truth and justice haven't exactly covered themselves with glory."

He barked and waited for her reaction.

Kris picked at her meal. "It's not how it happened," she said.

Bitters shrugged.

"If I hadn't touched him, he would have left me alone."

"Let's keep that to ourselves," Bitters said.

"He's got a wife and daughter."

"What is with you?" It was like Bitters was getting pissed off because she wasn't appreciating the genius of what he'd done for her.

Kris picked at the food on her plate.

"Pocahontas," he said, "look at me. *Look* at me."

Kris looked up.

"Let me nail this into your brain. Big-balls Barrett wants your ass in prison. He wants it bad enough that even if he's off the case, he'll do what he needs to do to make it happen. He'll find



Lambale's body, or the murder weapon, or the motive, and if he doesn't, he'll manufacture evidence that will put you away until you grow mold. You get me? I've seen it happen a thousand times.

"It wasn't news to him that he has a wife and daughter when he was fucking you. It's his dick, he sticks it where he wants to, and he wanted a good fuck before he brought you in. No, don't look away. Look at me." Bitters waited, leaning over his plate glaring at her until she was looking at him again. "You don't mean *shit* to him."

She didn't say anything, so he said it again, "You don't mean shit."

Kris knew this, but it didn't make a difference. She felt as if she had fought for something and had lost.

Bitters sat back and stared at her. "Right now, your ass could be sitting on cold steel benches at Lemon Creek eating shit you wouldn't feed a dog. But it's not, your ass is in the Baranof eating steak and it's free to go anywhere it damn pleases."

Her eyes watered. She dropped her eyes again so he couldn't see.

"I've got nowhere to go," she said.

"That's not a problem if the alternative is Lemon Creek."

Kris shrank into herself, hiding from Bitters' anger.

"You got that guy you're engaged to," he said.

That was a lie too. "I could try," she said.

Bitters barked. "In my considered judgment, it's not worth the effort." He pulled out his credit card and waved it at the waitress. "The state doesn't pay me to problem-solve existential ennui. You're on your own." The waitress took his card. He stood and leaned over the back of his chair, "If you need representation for the murder charge, let me know." He followed his credit card to the cashier, signed the slip, and left without looking back.

Kris had fought all her life. She'd fought to eat, to stay warm, she fought Evie's drinking, she fought to stay sober herself, to keep men off her, to support herself so she didn't need to trade sex to survive on the street. She left Alaska a 15-year-old stowaway in a long-haul truck in the freezing pit of winter, and she fought to make a new life in Los Angeles.

She had fought since she could walk and all she had for it was ashes. There was nothing for her in L.A. Nothing in Alaska but ice and cold. Her mother, father, brother all dead. There was Justin. But what did a white boy—who'd never been hungry, who'd never had to fight for anything—know? And there was Ben, an old man sitting in an empty house as broken by his crimes as she was of hers.

That was it, all she had.

She thought of Evie. Had the alcohol worked? Had it kept the pain away?

“Are you done?” The waitress startled her. “Can I take your dishes?”

Kris shook her head. The waitress left.

Kris had used sex to get what she wanted from Barrett—a few hours of inattention so she could get the snow machine ready and take his gun. His boots, too. What did she care if Bitters had used it to get her off? Maybe she didn't, maybe she was just tired of fighting. Maybe she didn't want to be humiliated, to become like her mother using sex to make her way in the world—

*Oh, God.*

She sat up, stunned, not wanting her brain to go where it was heading. Had twelve-year-old Evie done it to Lambale? Could it be possible that young? To be trading sex for things? Kris felt the fear coming back into her. What could she have traded it for—a twelve-year-old Native girl? Kris knew it could have been anything, even a few minutes of a white man's attention.

Kris stared into her plate, the uneaten steak, the broccoli with a yellow sauce, the drink, candy pink in the glass.

Did he rape Evie? Or did Evie play him, drunk, horny, and too stupid to understand what was going on? Maybe sex with a twelve-year-old was always rape; maybe it was in the white world where fathers read bedtime stories to twelve-year-olds, and kiss them good night. It wasn't rape in Evie's world. In Evie's world, sex got you what you wanted.

Did Kris shoot a rapist or a sap?

She would never know, but the question would rot in her forever.

The waitress appeared again. "We need the table. Other people are waiting to eat." Kris nodded. The waitress picked up her plate of uneaten food, the remains of her drink, and Bitters' dishes and left. In a second, she was back with a new table cloth and place settings.

Kris collected her parka from the front desk and zipped it to her chin. She looked through the Baranof's doors at the hard grit of snow blown by the wind.

She pushed against the heavy brass doors and stepped into the cold.