

All That You Are

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Chapter 1

The Blue Note rises a step above the other bars in Ketchikan. Its elevated status comes from the fact it's located in the marina, and has dock frontage for its sister business, Fish Tail Air-a float plane sightseeing service.

A cannery used to occupy the building until it closed when the bigger processing plants began operations on Tongass Highway. The Blue Note's seagull-gray siding has remained unchanged, its metal corrugated roof leaking every year without fail. But the many locals who come to hear the sultry jazz music notes don't mind a bucket or two on the floor collecting rain water.

The relatively bright interior is due in part to recessed lights, as well as a row of uncovered side windows. A narrow hallway and door leads to a deck. In the warmer summer months, small tables are arranged on the small patio. Customers drop lines over the rail to fish for whatever will bite. They watch float planes fly in and out, as well as the numerous boats that motor to and from moor spaces.

For a small town bar, it's clean and well-staffed. The place smells like hops and salty ocean air, lacking choking cigarette smoke clouds-there are signs posted that threaten the offender with expulsion.

The Blue Note retains the integrity of its original conception: a platform for the smooth sounds of Grover Washington, Miles Davis and the master of jazz-Mr. John Coltrane. Born out from a love for the genre, the founding owner Oscar "The Sax Man" Jackson sought to make his mark in Alaska, having hailed from Louisiana in the early '70s.

Today it's run by a family member. An unlikely woman who doesn't tolerate disorderly conduct, fights, drunken behavior, political debates-most especially jabs to Sarah Palin, their state's infamous governor, or religious preferences that bash one belief over the other.

So it came as no surprise to the regulars on that June evening, that the owner grew irate over the altercation that needed resolving.

"Who are you," the woman inhaled, grabbing onto an angry breath, "to come into my place, break my glasses, knock over my chairs, and dirty my floor? You're both too drunk to clean this up, but you can be damned sure you'll be paying for what you broke."

Her low and silky voice owned the barroom's heavy air, leaving no doubt she meant business. Slender shoulders held a determined line, her posture screaming irritation over the plate of spilled Buffalo wings and glass pieces she'd confronted. Not to mention the two bruised men wobbling in their boots, one nursing a growing knot on his cheekbone from a sucker punch, and the other a bloody nose he received taking a header into the table and tipping it over like a tiddly-wink.

What had instigated the fight seemed to be a distant memory. All eyes dialed in on the slight woman with a spitfire stance. A sweet trumpet melody played through the jukebox. The music lent itself as a background serenade for all the coughing and breaths being caught.

With an exasperated sigh, she tossed her long hair over her shoulder, revealing the profile of her oval face.

At that moment, bystander Mark Moretti felt as if he'd taken a blow to his gut. Only nobody had moved to deliver the punch. The second he saw her clearly, his mind lost every thought but one.

Good God, she was gorgeous.

He hadn't noticed her when he and Jeff Grisham had entered the Blue Note, a watering hole with ocean-blue walls and coral-tone vinyl covered bar stools.

Black hair fell down her back, stopping just below where the lacy band of a bra would hook. Or un-hook. The forest-green knit shirt she wore clung to her breasts and upper body.

His gaze lowered slowly, drinking her in.

Dark denim jeans hugged her curved butt like a man's palms and a purely physical response assaulted Mark. The reaction felt as if a hand had grabbed his throat, crushing his windpipe and making swallowing difficult.

Her skin color reminded him of unstained oak. Golden brown and warm-toned. He thought her heritage might be Chinese, but wasn't positive. Her features were more Anglo, except for the sexy slant of her eyes.

Even with a flipped over table separating the distance between them, Mark could make out those killer eyes. The irises were silver-green, rimmed with a darker color he couldn't discern. Her mouth pouted, the lips a natural pink shade. The lower lip was fuller, but the upper appeared just as sinful. That mouth made a man wonder right then and there what she'd taste like if he kissed her.

With an irritated wave of her hand, she gestured to the exit. "Go beat on each other outside, fish-brains, before I beat the crap out of you myself."

For a woman whose height probably marked at five foot three on a tape measure, give or take a half inch, she had some guts.

There were very few women in the place. Mostly men who wore rubber boots, having clocked off at the canneries or they just came in from fishing boats. Then there were guys like Mark visiting from the lower-forty-eight to feast on Alaska's untamed beauty.

Damned if there wasn't a double-meaning in that right now.

Jeff shuffled in front of Mark, his cheek swelling. "Am I cut, bro?"

"No, but you're turning a ripe shade of purple."

"Son of a . . ." Jeff ran a hand through his rumpled hair, then shot his opponent a mighty glare.

Mark reached forward and jerked Jeff by the shirt sleeve to make him face away. "Leave it alone."

"That guy hit me for no good reason," Jeff moaned, his legs not quite stable. He'd put away an undeterminable beer count and was feeling no pain.

Mark's dry tone cautioned, "It might have been you saying guns should be banned and him saying people like you should be banned."

"He's just a Wild Bill who doesn't have any common sense about the dangers of guns in a big city."

"You left Seattle behind. This isn't a big city."

Disregarding that information, Jeff gathered his vest. "I'm out of here, bro. Come on." He trudged through the door onto the pier, a gull squawking at the opening.

Mark held back, his gaze seeking the dark-haired woman who obviously ran the Blue Note.

Her attention focused on Jeff's sparring mate, she asked one of the bar's heavyweights to escort him outside. Now she tucked her hair behind her ears, then rested hands on her hips. Giving a sigh, she looked at the tumbled furniture. If Mark wasn't mistaken, she seemed shaken by the aftermath of men pounding into one another.

Her next move, she began to right the table, and Mark jumped in to help. From bent knees, she looked up through her lashes as he took hold on the opposite end.

"I got it," he said, and in one motion had the table back onto its legs.

She didn't readily say thanks, something that struck a chord in him. It made him think she rarely asked for help so that word didn't immediately pop into her vocabulary.

In her throaty voice, the kind that whispered into a man's ear in a way that would make him do anything, she uttered, "I could have done it myself."

They stood so close, he could smell her warm skin. A light sandalwood fragrance or something earthy. Maybe her shampoo, its scent possibly coconut. Whatever it was, he wanted to breathe in deeper, pull her into his lungs and keep her close.

She took a step back, eyes locked into his.

In the few seconds that ticked by, he could read her as clearly as a cloudless day. She had a stubborn pride in her. A determined veneer set her features like an ice sculpture. But underneath the cool facade, he detected the vaguest hint of feminine frailty, as if one more scrap of trouble might just set her off into an emotional meltdown.

Arching her brow, she asked, "What are you looking at?"

"You, sweetart."

The words hovered between them, their implication meant a lot more than he'd spoken. But she wasn't stupid, not even close. He knew damn well that a hundred times a day, men must look at her. And lust.

"Quit it."

The heavyweight came to stand beside her, pointedly glaring at Mark. "Hey, he was with the guy who took the right hook."

Defiance lifted her chin a notch, as if now she had a reason to get rid of him, too. "Get out."

Sliding into a body language that pretty much won over any female he set his sights on, he folded his strong arms over a chest that years of construction work had developed into hard slabs of muscle. He knew he was built as solid as a steel frame, stood taller than most men, and had been blessed with Italian good-looks.

While he hadn't shaved today, the stubble shadowing his face could be considered, by some, handsome in a movie star way. When he smiled just right, a slight impression of dimples made a bracket at the corners of his mouth.

He slipped one hand into his jeans pocket, then shrugged. "I'm just standing here."

Not the response he desired, she shot back: "I don't like how you're standing. So get out."

Now stuffing the second hand in his pocket, for reasons quite oblivious to her, he said, "You know, you'd look a lot prettier if you wiped that frown off your face."

An evenness marked her repeated command. "Get out."

The beefy guy's hands closed into ham-like fists. A warning that if he didn't leave, he'd be dealt with.

Mark got the message, but he didn't move real fast. Instead, he reached into his back pocket for his wallet, fingered through the bills, then dropped a hundred note on the table. "That should cover the tabs and the damage." He paused, then

added in a lazy drawl, "Unless you want to make other arrangements. With me."

A fiery light burned into her beautiful eyes, and she reacted in an angry tone to his offer. "You're in Alaska, fish-brain. And you're in my bar. Inside here, it's my law. I say get out. Now go."

With a resignation that he didn't feel, but played along, Mark nodded. "Yeah, somebody's got to drive Jeff home-and I have the truck keys. But I'll come back another time to make you smile."

The muffled sound she made as her response gave a crooked lift to the corner of Mark's mouth.

He always liked a challenge. Maybe it was fate after all that had him stuck in Ketchikan.

Seeing Jeff sitting on the pick up's tailgate, Mark headed for the parking lot. The soft sound of salt water lapping next to pilings and the metal clink of rigging against masts filled his ears.

The hour neared eleven and a misting drizzle had taken over for the day's steady rainfall. It seemed like the sun had just set only moments ago, the sky still vaguely awash in its color. The days here were long, the Summer Solstice fast approaching.

He never would have guessed he'd be here, with a guy he'd only known for twenty-four hours, driving him home and sitting up tonight thinking about a woman who'd caught his attention like no other ever had.

Long story, and he was still writing it, making up a whole lot of bull as he went.

But for the first time since his connection to Kenai had been canceled, the straight story looked a whole lot better than fiction.