

The Alpha King’s Human Mate by HC Dolores

Chapter 38

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“Your first love is your first love. It cannot be analyzed, explained, or forgotten.”

Aisling Bea

My mom had been right about the little cafe in town ~ it was cute and cozy. They also just had good coffee, much better than the black sludge that Steve was drinking in his thermos every morning.

After I’d gone with her that first night, I started going there on my own. Sometimes I’d take a book to read, and other times I would just people-watch with steaming hot coffee in my hand. \^)

Yorba Linda was definitely a small town, there was no denying that. Besides a grocery store, a movie theater, a library, and the little cafe, there were just houses here. (*

But it was also peaceful and the people were nice but not intrusive. I was used to living in a small town — if you could call the Blacktooth Pack a town ~ but the pack had never felt peaceful.

Everyone had heightened emotions, mates were all over each other, and people thought they were entitled to know every aspect of your life. It probably had to do with their “mind link,” but as a human, it wasn’t great. Yorba Linda might’ve been small, but nobody bothered you. People

went about their business and didn’t inquire about yours. It was nice.)

After ten days in the little town, I found myself spending another afternoon in the coffee shop. This time, I was equipped with some mystery novel I’d pulled off mom’s bookshelf. Her collection was sparse, so I would need to make a run to the local library soon.

I walked up to the coffee shop counter to place my order. The shop was a little busy, and I watched the barista ~ a college-aged girl with dyed purple hair whose nametag read Amber ~ multitask like a pro.

Geez, she really moves fast. (: She slid someone’s mocha down the counter and then turned to me. Despite how quickly she seemed to be working, there wasn’t a hair out

of place. She didn’t seem to be breaking a sweat. (=

“What can I get you?” she asked with a bright smile, and I saw her eyes

widen when she looked at me. “Woah,” she muttered under her breath.)

My cheeks instantly flushed. Why is she staring at me like that? “What?” I couldn’t help but ask. She was still staring. “Do I have still

breakfast on my face?” Before she could reply, I swiped my shirt sleeve across my face several times. “Oh, no,” Amber said, smiling awkwardly, “No, I’m sorry ~ I wasn’t trying to stare. It’s just...you reminded me of someone for a second. I

kinda thought you were her.”

“Let me guess,” I said, “She’s a redhead with freckles? We kind of all look the same.”

She chuckled, “Yep, you got it. Sorry. I didn’t mean to make you feel awkward. Anyway, what can I get you?”

“Steaming hot Americano with cream.” “Coming right up!”

After procuring my drink, I settled into one of the armchairs by the window to read my book.

I was nearly fifty pages in when a voice broke through the silence. “Clark? Clark Marshall? Is that you?”

My head whipped up instantly, my body on high alert. I took a sharp inhale when I saw who it was.

“Aiden?”

He definitely looked older than the last time I’d seen him two years ago. I could tell he was taller, his hair was shorter, and he was less scrawny

— but there was no mistaking the same blue eyes and fluffy blonde hair.) This was Aiden, my first boyfriend.

The one who Griffin insisted on knowing about, and interrogated me about whether Aiden had touched me.

For a moment, all I could do was stare at him with wide eyes. Of all the people who could recognize me in public, Aiden was far from the worst — but where had he come from? What was he doing in a tiny town like

Yorba Linda?

“It’s so good to see you,” Aiden said with a bright smile and he plopped down on the empty chair across from me, “I couldn’t even believe it was you when I walked in. I thought I was seeing things.” *

His blue eyes were even bluer than I remembered them to be and I couldn’t help but blush. Suddenly, I felt all too aware of how frizzy my hair was or how big Steve’s jacket must’ve looked on me.

Of course, I’d run into somebody I know when I look like I just rolled out of bed.

“No, it’s me,” I told him, “You’re not seeing things...but what are you doing here?”

His smile didn’t falter for a second. “In this coffee shop or Yorba Linda, you mean?”

“Yorba Linda,” I said, “Not that I’m not happy to see you. I guess I just really wasn’t expecting you.” “I could say the same about you, you know,” he grinned, “Last I remember, you were living in Washington with your dad. But to answer your question, my folks moved to SoCal about a year ago. I’ve been going to the local college a town over, but I always stop here for coffee ~ nothing beats the pour-over here.”

Aiden’s explanation made sense. From what I remembered about him, his parents frequently moved for his dad’s job. He had lived in California when we were kids, relocated to Oregon when we started dating, and now it seemed like he was back in California. ^)

Just in time for me to run into him, it seems.

“Your turn,” Aiden said, sipping his own drink, “How’d you end up in Yorba Linda? Last I remember, your dad was pretty strict about your whereabouts.”

“Lm visiting my mom for a while,” I said, “We’re catching up.” It wasn’t technically a lie, I was doing those things. It just wasn’t the real truth.

Aiden nodded, and I saw him glance at his phone. “Shoot...I’ve got to go. I’ve got class in twenty,” he said, and then he paused, “But I don’t suppose I could see you again? It’s been two years - I’m sure you and I have a lot of catching up to do too.” \^)

Is he asking me out? *

Red colored my cheeks. Aiden was cute, we had a brief history together, and he was probably the only person ~ besides mom and Steve - that I knew in the area, Could going out with him really do any harm?)

The offer should’ve excited me, but something was nagging at me - some sort of gut feeling telling me that going out with Aiden was wrong. \^)

Griffin’s face flashed through my mind.

Stop thinking about him, Clark. He’s a thing of the past. He’s probably already moved on from you, shouldn’t you do the same?

Aiden must’ve sensed my hesitancy because he quickly clarified. “Geez, sorry,” he awkwardly chuckled, “I didn’t mean to come on too strong like that. I meant as friends. Catch up as friends.”

I tried to push down the nagging gut feeling I had. This wasn’t cheating - going with Aiden as friends wouldn’t be doing anything wrong. Griffin and I had never been in an actual relationship anyway. Those require both parties to be willing, and I had never been willing to accept the mate bond.

With another sip of my drink, I mustered a smile. “No, no, it’s okay,” I said, “I’d love to catch up as friends.” (#

“Great,” Aiden sent me another blinding smile, “Here, you can put your number in.” He handed me his phone. “I’m not sure if you’ve been there yet, but there’s a movie theater in town. They play a lot of the classics. I remember you were always a secret Hitchcock fan. They’re playing Psycho next Friday. You down to go?” Just a friendly movie between...friends. Human friends that you haven’t seen in years.

I nodded and dialed my number into Aiden’s contact list. “Yeah, sounds great,” I said, “I’m surprised you remember that.”

“Oh, you’d be surprised what I remember about you, Clark Marshall,” he teased me, standing up. “Anyway, I’ll see you Friday.” He gave me a wink before departing the shop. (^

It was still weird to hear people refer to me with my mom’s last name. It felt like I was sinking back into an old identity, an old version of myself, That’s what people like mom, Steve, and even Aiden knew me as: Clark Marshall, the regular girl who liked classic movies and mystery novels.

It was refreshing more than anything. It felt like I was shedding the skin of what I’d been forced to be for seven years: Clark Bellevue, the human.

This is good though. Catching up with Aiden will be good for me. (^

Still, I couldn’t shake that nagging feeling that I shouldn’t be interacting with Aiden.

As I shoved my face back into the book, I didn’t see the way Amber’s eyes stuck to me like glue. I certainly didn’t see the way she’d been watching my entire exchange with Aiden either.