

# ALPHA AWAKENING

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## Chapter One

Rush stood patiently in line waiting to make his coffee order. The Mocha Hut was nearly empty on a Saturday, mid-afternoon. The scents of coffee and different baked cakes permeated the air. He wasn't on duty, and he wasn't in a hurry to get home, either. His sister was moody because her boyfriend was out of town again. She was too much like their mother, and it drove him up a wall. Taking his time getting home was the least of his sins at this point.

Lost in his musings and lack of plans for the weekend, the dragged scrape of a metal chair behind him caught his attention, snapping him around.

A petite woman had leaped from her seat, glaring at her companion.

"Steven." Rush heard the hiss of the other man's name. "Let it go. Leave me alone."

When she tried to step out of reach, the man lunged for her. She squeaked with a hint of fear wound into her anger, now. Her evasiveness looked like something she'd become accustomed to.

"Kay, please. You're making a scene."

Rush frowned at the hidden threat in the lowered growl of a plea. The blond man made another dash for her that she barely managed to evade.

The woman flinched. "The hell I am."

Rush could swear by the man's posture she was about to be tackled.

He didn't know their story, but the blond trying to bulldoze over her was easily twice her size, probably early thirties. The only other two in the coffee shop had stopped to watch the free drama from the far side of the counter. Of course, neither of them thought to offer a moment's aid to a volatile situation.

Rush stepped into the blond's line of sight. "Is there a problem?"

"Butt out." Rush got a glaring, belligerent snarl for his effort.

Rush slid his hand into his back pocket. "Look, either go home and cool off or be arrested for public disturbance. Your choice." He kept his voice low, yet firm.

Dark brown eyes narrowed at the interruption. Rush didn't blink. He didn't know who this man was, and really didn't care, because Rush was used to being obeyed regardless.

"The lady asked you to leave her alone." He hadn't looked in her direction, but he sensed her move out of the other's line of sight. When the guy before him didn't budge, he withdrew and opened his wallet, showing his badge. "I'm not going to ask you again." The lowered warning was distinct. Leave or suffer the consequences.

Steven, if he'd heard right, shoved a chair out of his way, creating a new wave of racket when it bounced and clattered against the table. "We're not done Kay." He stormed out, slapping the door wide open on his way, making it bang against the outside hinges.

He waited a few minutes for Steven to return. When he didn't, Rush turned to find her. "You all right?"

She nodded, her arms around her slight body. "I wasn't expecting that."

"He's never been violent?"

"No. We weren't even dating that long when he broke it off."

Rush took a step closer to study her. Inky lashes surrounded thunderhead gray eyes. Rich, dark, black-brown hair swayed around her shoulders to not quite halfway down her back. There was no sign of old bruises, no wary glances to search her immediate space as though she were expecting retaliation for her earlier denial. Unfortunately, this woman made a perfect target for someone with a violent edge. She was petite and easy to overpower, beautiful and apparently able to stand up for herself. A heady mix of femininity and backbone. Glancing at the heeled boots she wore, he wondered if she even came to his chin.

"He broke if off?" he asked, remembering to find his voice before his mind *and* body wandered off on their own.

She nodded once. "He was getting persistent about getting together again, and I told him no." Her arms finally dropped and her chin came up, those dark eyes shooting

defiant sparks as bright as lightning. "All he did was annoy me with his persistence. He didn't make me mad until he tried to grab me. That's not like him."

"If you hadn't dated that long, it might have been exactly like him, and you're just now seeing it," Rush cautioned. He'd seen enough abuse cases to know physical violence was hardly ever exposed in the early stages of a relationship.

"True. It never occurred to me. We broke up quite a while ago."

Quiet music wafted through hidden speakers, returning a calm to the interior of the shop. The sound of feet on tile and voices told him the rest of the customers and staff had already dismissed the little disturbance. "Would you like to share a coffee?" Rush offered, taking himself by surprise. He wasn't sure why he offered. His duty was done. She was safe, but he found he wasn't ready to say goodbye. *It wouldn't hurt anything to give her a chance to put this behind her*, he told himself. His offer had nothing to do with the color of her eyes, or the sweet slope of her bottom lip.

She reached and picked up the chair she'd knocked over in her own haste to avoid Steven's grasping. "I'd like that." Standing closer to him, she held out her hand. "Kaisha Noelles, but everyone calls me Kay."

He took her hand and felt the warmth of her skin all the way up his arm. Desire, raw and unexpected flashed over his senses, a brilliant burst dying down to a slow burning ember as quickly as it had appeared.

"Rush Donovan." Swallowing, he cleared his throat when he sounded husky. Her entire palm vanished within his own, delicate yet strong, and was he imagining it, or was there a scent of sunshine in her hair?

Rush caught himself before he leaned in to find out for sure. Releasing her, he eased her back down into the chair she'd claimed and strode to the counter to make an order.

Turning away was also the safest, fastest and least telling action to help him calm the raging case of wanting from her touch. He'd never felt anything like her softness beneath his fingers, or had so quick of a reaction. Taking her entire form in a glance was pure maleness—the appreciation was all his. Snug jeans that coated her legs like soft

leather rounded her rear when she'd stooped to grab at the chair, her brown hair swaying with the movements over a simple filmy blouse with a chemise beneath it. Evocative yet sweet.

Giving the drink order, he tried to get a stern grip as his entire body woke up, aware of her like no one in his lifetime. As her remembered scent infiltrated his brain like a stamp of indelible ink on paper, he had a feeling that what had started as a simple need to help a lady in distress was going to turn into something a lot harder to walk away from when they hit the bottom of their drinks.

\* \* \* \*

Kay watched him turn and speak to the barrister for their cups. Her mind was still spinning over the near attack from Steven. They'd broken up months ago. Why would he want to come back to her now, when he was the one to end it between them? It had been some story about a personal issue, and he didn't know how long it would take him. Rather than have her wait for him, he had politely ended their occasional dating. She'd moved on. Her heart hadn't been invested, which was probably for the best considering what she'd seen today. The last thing she needed or wanted was to find herself in *that* kind of a relationship.

"Here you go," he said in a warm as honey voice. How did a man with that rugged of a face get that kind of voice? The voice wasn't the only thing to appreciate about her knight in shining armor. He looked young, until she looked into his eyes. There was a calmness in them that spoke of maturity, a soul who had seen a lot and refused to let it weigh him down. The day's growth of dark beard gave him a rakish aura that added to the masculinity of his face. With slightly thick lips and broad cheekbones, she found the deepness of his eyes hard to resist. She also couldn't help but wonder how it would feel to slide her palm down one cheek, intrigued by the allure of the sensation. She hid the wondering question behind a tentative sip of her drink.

"That's good."

He smiled at her approval of his choice.

Rush sat across from her, palming his own drink between solid hands. Well-muscled arms were molded by a navy blue t-shirt, stretched across a very impressive chest, the strength hinted at beneath the molded cotton. He wasn't overly tall, which truth be told, Kay found intimidating at times. She didn't stand five-feet barefoot. Her size had been perfect for gymnastics, but not real life.

Watching him over her cup, she followed the planes of his face. Not exactly handsome. Maybe striking would be better. Definitely a man used to being in command. A quiet confidence rested all around him. Thick raven black hair looked finger combed into loose swirls over his head. She'd already decided his best asset was definitely his eyes. A deep-sea blue with a smattering of dove gray and brown throughout. How something that artistic could ever be simply labeled as hazel was beyond her. His eyes were as gorgeous as the rest of what she'd seen.

"So, you're really a cop?" she asked after he'd had a chance to sample his own drink.

"A detective, but yeah, for the records," he joked lightly. "You?"

"I work at Savrenson and Son."

"The jeweler downtown?"

She smiled, pleased he knew of the store. "That's the one. I work there part-time as an appraiser. I actually deal in antique jewelry."

"Is that a piece?" he asked, noting a ring on her hand with a glance.

"Yes, it is. This is a family heirloom, though," she explained, letting the light sparkle off the peanut-sized emerald and gold band.

"It's lovely," he said. Glancing up, she noted he was looking at her, not the ring when he said that.

Was he flirting with her? A rare warmth filled her face, and she dropped her gaze. "Thank you."

An hour flew by without notice as they talked. She couldn't remember when she'd sipped her last drop, or when she'd stopped caring if there was anyone but them

in the shop. He told her stories about himself and his sister, and she regaled him with tales of growing up with her best friend Stacey. Laughter soon erased the ugly scene she'd been a part of before Rush's intervention.

"Can I ask you something?"

Kay shrugged, completely at ease with Rush. "Sure."

"Do you only do antiques or can you get a feel for something a little more modern?"

Her grin broadened. If there was one thing she knew, it was jewelry. "If it sparkles, I can tell you what it's worth."

"Mom had a few pieces that she wanted to hand down. I'd like to know what they are worth."

"Are you planning on selling them?" she asked, torn at having the chance to see them, but wondering why he'd want to sell something valuable to his family.

"Definitely not to sell. She'd come back and haunt me for even thinking it."

"Your parents are deceased?" she asked sympathetically, curling a hand over his where he rested them together on top of the table.

His gaze fell to where she held him with a wide-eyed stare, his thumb brushing her skin after a hesitant heartbeat then capturing her hand between the both of his. Warmth fluttered from her belly downward at the simple act. "Unfortunately. I became Sheridan's guardian at an early age."

Dark shadows dulled the life in his eyes as thoughts filled them. A few seconds later, he blinked them away, looking up at her again. "I have a few more responsibilities now, but she's still my younger sister, and I'm still her brother."

There was love in the gruff words, a light smile softening the harsher grimness his memories had brought to him.

"I'd be happy to look at them," she told him, bringing her attention back to the question. The heat of his hand over hers was growing. For some reason, the image of trailing her fingertips up his forearm to dance lightly until they reached a bare shoulder appeared before her, and her breath grew ragged.

“Good.” Rush seemed genuinely pleased, his eyes catching the light to glint at the same time his lips lifted. “Can you come to the house to see them? They’re in the safe there. Or, I can bring them to the store for you.”

“You don’t have to. I can look at them wherever. I have a kit that I can bring. If you want a certified appraisal, I have permission to use the store for that.”

He lifted her hand still captured between his and held it to his lips as an absent gesture. She wasn’t even sure if he knew he was doing it.

But she sure did. The instant he brushed her knuckle over his lower lip, her heart tripped over itself like it was falling down stairs. At some point in the last hour, he’d moved closer, almost at her side, and the ease and tender care of his fingers wrapped around her, while holding her hand, stole her breath. The languid strokes were causing sparks the size of lightning bolts to fly through her system.

“I don’t think I need a certified declaration right now, but it wouldn’t hurt to have it later for insurance.”

Kay nodded, her voice lost beneath the tender swipe of his touch. The warmth of his breath as it flowed over her skin sent liquid tingles down her spine, a raw ache building deep inside as an answer to some call she didn’t, or couldn’t, hear.

Somehow, she managed to trade her information with him, thankful there were such things as muscle memory and autopilot, because her brain had officially checked out.

He walked her to her car and even held the door for her.

“Thanks,” he said. “Buckle up.”

She guessed it was as ingrained to say as ‘hello’, and smiled in answer.

Rush didn’t move until she couldn’t see him in her mirror any longer.