

# His Liberating Flame

Book One: Escaping the Past

By: Ashley Thompson

*How can a young man keep his way pure?  
By guarding it according to your word.*

– Psalm 119:9 ESV

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# Chapter 1

Cold sweat broke out on Noble's skin and nausea churned his insides until he felt sick enough to vomit. He sat up in bed. A long groan carried through his exhale. The fine silk sheets slowly fell from his bare, muscular torso and gathered around his defined abs. Luminous moonlight streamed in from the tall-as-doors windows, brightening the master bedroom of his Tuscan mansion.

Beside him in his king-sized bed was his tempestuous girlfriend, Alyssa, an up-and-coming actress. Her luxurious strawberry-blonde hair was spread across the fluffy pillows, and she slept deeply. Not wishing to wake her, he carefully placed his legs over the side until his feet touched the carpet, his motions a little unsteady.

*What time is it?* The slate light glowed on mahogany and oakwood furniture, detailed with brass knobs.

*Where am I?* Noble examined the immaculate room.

The stained-glass panel depicting the starry sky over a rolling ocean glowed with glimmers of cyan and cobalt blue. The pearly walls were like desert sand, picking up and reflecting the silvery light.

Out of the window, the familiar hills twinkling with the emanating lights of other mansions brought recognition.

*Home.*

A sudden swell of pain erupted in his stomach, and he convulsed. He slid a shaky hand through his enviable summer-brown hair, digging his fingers unnaturally hard against his scalp. He grunted and swore.

Alyssa made a soft stirring noise, and Noble looked over his shoulder at her. She blinked, her green eyes shrouded with the glaze of narcotics.

"Noble?" she whispered, then murmured something incoherent.

"Shhh, go back to sleep," Noble said and then assured, "I'm here."

She reached for him, lightly brushing her fingers against his side. He caught her hand and placed it gently back on the mattress. She shut her eyes again, seemingly satisfied once she touched his skin. He wondered if she thought her sudden reappearance in his life would amend their last breakup. He hoped not.

A sickening feeling ascended and then ebbed in his stomach again like the rhythmic movements of waves lapping against a shore. He clutched his stomach responsively.

*What did she give me last night?*

He couldn't remember. His mind reverberated with rapid thoughts like a hollow ball ping-ponging, causing vibrational pain near his temples. He had been stoned out of his mind the night before. Whatever concoction Alyssa had mustered was "new" and supposed to help ease his tension.

It did much more than promised. The drugs had knocked him out cold!

One minute they were deliriously wrapped up in each other's arms in his bed, and the next minute, he had been sucked into the twilight zone.

As he fought another oncoming wave of nausea, he wondered if Alyssa's addiction would eventually become fatal.

He had lost a coworker, Nick, earlier in the year to an overdose on sedatives. Nick had drowned in his sauna tub. He was only twenty-two. Attending Nick's funeral was a sobering affair. After the funeral, Noble spoke with Alyssa about seeking help for her addiction. He worried about her physical safety and mental sanity, but she saw his suggestion as a condescending accusation. She never sought aid.

For a few months, he and Alyssa had lived it up, going to every party, making social appearances, being interviewed in gossip-riddled tabloids, and even doing some television commercials together. Alyssa was invited to join some of the female models who were paired with him for a runway, and she soaked it up. She enjoyed the wardrobe changes, the constant flashing lights, and the googling eyes of onlookers. It was fun. It was wild. It was hot. They were both on fire, but it was becoming painfully obvious to Noble they would burn each other to the ground if they stayed together.

Their disagreements started off innocent enough, like most couples, but Alyssa became obsessive and tried to govern things she had no business controlling. During their social exposure, she would occasionally interrupt him while he was speaking on camera to answer a question that was directed at him. She began imputing her opinion on his wardrobe, especially when they went to gatherings as a couple—she wanted them to match or for him to wear a specific outfit. At first it was cute, then it was permissible, finally, it became annoying. She started critiquing his diet, although hers was erratic and included much intermittent fasting and downloads of drugs that helped her to curb her appetite and keep her lithe figure.

She was quickly becoming like an invasive moss over his life, spreading her opinions. She would stay at his place for days before going home. She began rearranging his furniture to please her own tastes. They had never agreed to live together, so Noble wasn't sure why she thought this was acceptable. Eventually, she even began giving suggestions on what contracts and offers he should enter as if she were his wife.

He hated feeling controlled—his agent had enough control of his life, and he certainly didn't want it from his girlfriend. Since adolescence it had been a sore spot for him and the source of uncharacteristic rage. It began with his father, whom he hadn't spoken to in years. Noble accused Alyssa of being controlling and she accused him of being proud.

As their relationship progressed, so did the aggression between them. They would fight and break up and then get back together again. It was a vicious cycle. Although they were terrible for

each other, Alyssa always became desperate when Noble brought out obvious discrepancies in their relationship and asked for distance.

Noble pressed his fists against his temple and tried to shake off the dense fog that clouded his thoughts.

He had come home under a lot of stress from his shrewd agent who had booked him out for the next month. The agenda was filled with five or more jobs a day, from sunrise to sunset with no weekends off. It was so overwhelmingly busy, Noble felt it was more like slave labor than a career.

The minute Noble had walked into Anthony's office after reviewing his schedule, the agent had slickly risen from his lacquered redwood table and offered him a glass of scotch. Classic move—liquor and a smile before the kill.

His olive tanned skin, and black pepper hair with salty grays at the temples gave him a sophisticated, wolverine appearance.

"You can't be serious about this schedule," Noble had said, throwing the paper onto Anthony's pristine desk.

"Noble." Anthony's voice had that practiced paternal warmth that had once fooled him. "This is the opportunity we've been waiting for. Paris, Spain, Greece—"

A trace of a knowing smug lifted the corner of his thin lips. Noble had come to know this was Anthony's non-verbal way of telling him that *he* was the one really in charge of his life, and Noble had no real ultimate say in matters—regardless of how advantageous Anthony painted his decisions. Yet, Anthony's smiles never reached his eyes.

They had gotten into a huge quarrel full of explicit cussing until Noble finally stormed out of the room breathing threats that he wouldn't put up with Anthony for much longer. Noble could still hear Anthony's parting words, "One day you'll wake up and thank me for everything you've become."

Noble gritted his teeth thinking of all the international traveling that would be his life for the next four weeks.

How did Anthony expect him to work multiple shows a day for weeks, with no weekend breaks? All the international travel, time changes, jet lag and his long overdue, unspent vacation hours weren't adding up to a pleasant trip. He imagined all the alcohol he would surely gulp down, and the pills he would pop, just to keep from imploding.

Noble swore again under his breath.

He couldn't do this anymore.

He *wouldn't* do this anymore!

Noble *hated* what he had become.

He dreaded the ceaseless crowds full of screaming women that pierced his eardrums until he felt like sirens were going off in his brain. He was gorged on self-indulgence, materialism, and fame. It had rotted in his gut. He loathed the pretense that his life as a wealthy top model, with a gorgeous actress girlfriend, was a golden pedestal to be praised, when inside of him there slowly formed an insatiable hunger like a black hole longing for something he couldn't

identify—something that was existentially good and fulfilling, but unattainable as far as he was concerned.

He thought this life of stardom and copious self-pleasing would fulfill him. It was what he had passionately wanted. Well, for several years it had been, but now it was rapidly losing its appeal.

But what else was there?

This was the life he had broken with his past for. He had given up everything he'd known for this.

He stood, feeling wobbly at first, and made his way to the bathroom just in time for the drugs he had swallowed to come out in violent heaves. After it was over, the acidic taste of bile burned in the back of his throat. Sickened and feeling emptied, he slumped by the commode and didn't rise until he felt strong enough.

Here he was, the fantasy of thousands of women and the state's upcoming "most sexy man alive," slumping by a commode after an ugly vomit.

A wry smile twisted his desired lips as he gave a self-deprecating chuckle.

*If only my fans could see me now.*

Eventually, he moseyed his way into the master kitchen, passing three of his redwood butler pantries and the opal and lapis lazuli stone bar counters that he had meticulously searched for and eventually had specially designed. The counters always reminded him of the starry constellations or reflective sunlight on the Pacific Ocean. Few people understood his inspiration for this particular design, even as they gaped at it in admiration. Unfortunately, his counters were cluttered with Alyssa's things, so he could barely see the royal blue colors mingled with the flecks of white rainbow colors that shimmered in the opal.

He grabbed a glass of mineral water from his stainless-steel refrigerator and downed it. He turned on his coffee maker and stood by the tall glass-paneled windows facing east to catch the sunrise. They were twelve feet high and easily showed him the heavens as well as the earth below.

A rubicund dipping canyon was before him, but above him was the night sky. He looked up, hoping to see starlight, and a strange longing from his childhood rapped at his conscience.

The snowy mountains.

Wildlife under the aurora lights.

A deep sadness that had been building in him for nearly eighteen months resurfaced. He missed the way things were before his fame. He could barely see any stars due to the smog in Lost Angels and the eyesore city lights that never went out. He sighed and made some salted coffee. Suddenly cold, he turned on the heated flooring and slumped onto one of his many white, faux leather couches.

He couldn't go through with this. Not this time. He couldn't imagine doing a month's worth of international runways, gigs, and parties in Europe. After six years of living at a rat-race pace with Anthony at the wheel, and no vacations, he felt on the edge of a mental breakdown.

The stardom and licentious living that he once craved so mightily, that he had torn away from

his parents for, now left him wanting.

# Chapter 2

Hours later, Alyssa arose and took a hot shower. She appeared slightly out of sorts, despite her perfect makeup and bold red lipstick. She was dressed in a nice sequin nude dress with tall Louboutin heels and a long animal-fur coat. Diamond teardrop earrings hung from her ears. She went about collecting her things.

“Do you have everything?” Noble asked from the couch as she stilled.

“Yes, darling,” she said in a sing-song rhythm. She eyed him with her seafoam green eyes before checking her phone. She had a photoshoot to do this morning, thanks to his connections.

“Break a leg,” he said standing from his leather couch.

She blew him a kiss from across the room, her rouge lipstick staining her milky palm, “After you.”

He felt no comfort or warmth from her actions. Strangely, he was numbed by her presence, as if she were a block of ice within his chest, slowing down his blood circulation.

She strapped her Hermes purse across her shoulder and said, “I’ll see you tonight.”

He wondered what made her think she could make plans to be at his house without his consent. He knew her sweetness would turn into venom, as it usually did when she was not high or under the influence of some substance. He didn’t want to deal with that tonight.

“Babe... I would like to be alone tonight,” Noble stated.

There was a slight pause as she gawked at him. Within a flash, she threw a glass of expensive Lafite Rothschild. It flew in his direction, and he narrowly dodged it in time. As the glass broke, deep maroon liquid splashed everywhere like blood.

Her cold green eyes glinted with feral anger.

“You *promised* me! You promised me you wouldn’t shut me out!” She yelled, her temper rising despite the sedatives that were losing their potency. She kept increasing her measures as her body numbed to the effects.

Noble stared at the scattered glass across his floor and frowned.

Yes, he had promised her that—when they were so buzzed out of their minds and in such a stupor they could do nothing more than laugh nonsensically and speak out of their rear ends. Any words of faithfulness he had “promised” her last night were worth nothing. But he didn’t want to outright remind her of their oblivious state, nor the worthlessness of his promise. He had to be more tactful than that with her.

“That’s not what I’m doing,” he said, trying to sound calm, aware things would rapidly escalate if he lost his cool.

“Yes, it is!” she said undeterred.

“No, it isn’t.” He finally dragged his eyes away from his stained carpet, wondering how soon

he should call up a maid, and met Alyssa's gaze.

She crumbled the second their eyes met. "I'm sorry." She came at him, wrapping her arms around his neck and jumbling out nonsensical words. Her words began to slur and the anxiety she gave off was almost palpable. He felt repelled being near her. He lifted his hands to her elbows to gently pull her away, but the minute he did, she clutched him tighter. "You can't shut me out! I need you!"

"I think you need a psychiatrist, and a doctor," he said, smelling liquor on her breath, despite her heady floral perfume.

He untangled her arms from him and put firm hands on her shoulders, both to keep her away and to reason with her, "Calm down before you do something you regret...*again*."

He led her in a breathing exercise they had practiced before. She resisted at first but then began to follow along. She went still and for a brief second; he thought he had successfully prevented another maddening episode.

She narrowed her eyes at him and started saying how much she needed him. Then the accusations of how he failed her as a lover began. Before long they were arguing. Noble had had enough of their verbal spars and told her they were over for good this time. She screamed and cussed at him before spontaneously breaking out in tears.

He could only stare at her. He didn't know what was wrong with her or what she'd taken this time but her actions were a little extreme, even for her.

"You never loved me," she spat in self-pity.

"Come on, Alyssa," Noble scoffed, not falling for her theatrics. "Love was never a part of the equation, and you knew that walking in."

He didn't like her playing the innocent victim because she was far from it. She was just as much of a perpetrator as he was.

Her mood shifted back to anger. "You used me!" she charged. "You just wanted more fame and used my popularity as an actress to grow your own!"

Noble crossed his arms, not denying her accusation but not totally agreeing with it either. "We used each other," he stated matter-of-factly. "You wanted in on the modeling world and dating me opened more opportunities for you. I wanted more commercial exposure and dating you expanded that for me."

They both knew she had been in partnership with Anthony in exposing them as a couple in the first few days of their relationship. Noble remembered how excited she had been to officially come out as a couple. She was sitting on one of his many leather couches in his third living room when they talked about how to maximize their growing popularity while they could. She was wearing one of his shirts which was obviously too big for her, and her long, slender legs rested over the arm of the chesterfield as her head lay in his lap. Her energy had been wild as she expressed how much she adored him and was looking forward to modeling.

She knew full well he wasn't ready for their public revealing, but she had done it in a grasping way to prolong her relationship with him—a fear instinct from her rejection issues. Anthony had done it for monetary reasons. As usual, Noble had given in to the wishes of others.

Alyssa clamped her lips shut. Even though her eyes sparkled with rage, she couldn't deflect the truth. "I've given you more than you've ever given me," she retorted. "You've made a killing on the TV ads I helped open up for you."

"You can thank my shrewd agent for that," he said, knowing the underlying reason why Anthony had moved boundaries to get him into parties with young, affluent women for years. Even though it felt like an excuse to bring Anthony into the conversation, and he hated that, it was factual.

Every hookup equaled more media exposure for Noble and thus lined both his and Anthony's pockets. According to Anthony, everyone won with more commercial attention. His idea of a bonus was that Noble got pleasure out of it, the women would get fleeting happiness out of it, and he would get richer through it. Win-win according to him. Noble had to admit Anthony's tactics, while lacking moral purity, did get results.

Once Noble ditched his original hope of becoming a teenage sports model and acquired Anthony as an agent, he used this and many other maneuvers to increase Noble's popularity.

"Life is about climbing the ladder of success, even if the ladder is made of human heads," Anthony would say with a dour laugh.

Noble now had a mansion with four garages, three luxury vehicles, an inordinately large fan base for a model, a private guard and driver, and more money than he knew what to do with.

For all appearances, Anthony had been right about climbing the ladder.

But all that fame had slowly eaten away at Noble's soul. His sense of ethics had all but evaporated, his sense of autonomy had diminished, and he was addicted like many others in his world—a rich slave to his own passions.

"You're a low-down rotten playboy!" Alyssa spat.

"If I'm a playboy, then you can hop away, little bunny," Noble coldly dismissed her with his hand.

Alyssa swore and began ranting again. Noble thought the nightmare would never end but then her phone vibrated alerting her that she was running late.

She threw many insults his way and, in his anger, he hurled a few back at her before she left.

It didn't take him long after that to realize he needed to get away. Disregarding his scheduled engagement with Anthony, he called the usual cleaning service to tidy up his place while he packed his belongings. He quickly had his guard, Alonzo, change the locks so Alyssa couldn't get in. He was a burly man with broad shoulders, a formidable frame, and warm brown skin the color of hazelnut. He was also the most efficient security guard Noble had ever had in all his years of modeling, and he seemed to be good at everything he was instructed to do.

Noble met him outside, before the tall metal gate hidden by thick green bushes. Under his stately, stone white trellis with climbing blooming vines leading into the winding path toward his mansion, they conversed.

"Nobody is allowed on this property while I'm away. If anyone comes to the gate, tell them I'm not taking any visitors and to leave a message with you if it's important enough," Noble instructed.

Alonzo nodded, shades covering his brown eyes. The morning sunshine bounced off his shiny bald head. “Will you need an escort or guard sir?” he asked respectfully. “It’s unusual for you to go anywhere without someone to assist you.”

Noble still felt it odd that Alonzo insisted on calling him “sir” when he was more than twice his age—but he allowed his guard this awkward liberty. “No.” Noble gave him a brief pat on the shoulder. Although they barely spoke outside of work-related topics, Noble liked Alonzo.

“Are you sure?” Alonzo asked. Although his expression was professionally reserved, Noble caught the hint of concern in his tone.

“Yes.”

“Have a good, safe trip sir.” Alonzo spoke, accepting his wishes. Noble nodded, and with bags in hand, he departed.

At first, he didn’t know where he would go, but a faint thought came to his mind. It was light and sweet, like whipped cream on his tongue.

*Go home.*

He hadn’t been to Pine Castles in ten years on purpose. As far as he was concerned, there was nothing in that small, snowy mountain town that he cared for, except for his parents. He debated the idea before deciding he had nothing to lose. Perhaps three days in the high, crisp altitude would clear his brain and give him a sense of peace from the chaos.

He was eight hours from his designation and determined to go for it. His raven black Mercedes was self-driving. His voice activated the AI in his car, and it pulled up the GPS system. Within seconds, the fastest route showed on the screen.

The next five hours of quiet helped clear his head. For a while, he delighted in watching the landscape slowly transform from palm branches, illustrious tall buildings, skyscrapers, and mansions into wild, majestic mountains. For miles he took sentimental pleasure in the rural spaces full of natural rocky mountain junipers, fringed sage, Oregon grape holly, prickly pear, and—one of his favorites growing up for its striking color—red twig dogwood.

He stopped for an early lunch since he had missed breakfast. After eating and stretching his legs, he continued on. Soon, he cruised up a mountain pass. Coming around the bend, a spacious valley opened, blanketed in pristine white snow. He saw fresh snow falling from contrasting clouds rippling with the setting rays of the sun and the dark space above. The snow fell like shimmering white gold and was powdery light. A soft smile played on his lips as he looked around. Pleasant memories of himself as a young child frolicking in snow colored his imagination.

Everything seemed to finally be okay, until his addiction to alcohol began filling him with unease. His body began reacting as his mind became obsessed with the thought of having a few drinks. He hadn’t thought to pack any liquor when he planned this spontaneous trip. He started to search for the nearest pub but stopped himself. Angry with himself, he flung his phone into the passenger seat, but the urging only increased.

Noble gritted his teeth, grasping the steering wheel so hard his fingers turned white.

*No! I will not get wasted on my first night back home,* he vowed to himself.

He didn't want to lose control of his ability to think clearly. Not after what happened with Alyssa. He thought of something else he could do to give himself some sort of appeasement. The only other thing he naturally turned to was women. For years, whenever he felt restless, he would turn to substances or the warmth of a beautiful woman in an attempt to fill his emptiness.

He smiled, thinking about having a light-hearted fling with someone new for the next few days while he was on vacation. He could go to a club and easily pick up a quick date. He frowned unexpectedly as he thought of the type of women that would be in a nightclub. He didn't want another Alyssa in his life, or anyone remotely close to his many ex-girlfriends. No, he wanted someone else. Someone different. Someone sane. And someone...good.

It had been a long time since he went out with an ordinary, decent woman. For a second, he couldn't think of a common meeting place for such women, and he gave a self-deprecatory chuckle.

"Where should I go?" he wondered out loud.

He stared up at the car ceiling, temporarily frustrated. Wrinkles formed on his forehead as he frowned, thinking hard. It took many minutes before the idea of going to a café came to mind. He searched for nearby cafes, and a few options appeared. Sliding his thumb across the screen, he noticed a new one that hadn't existed before he left home.

Snow Café.

"Something different," he voiced decidedly. It only took minutes through moderate traffic to get to what turned out to look like a modest diner. It was aglow with warm light radiating from the windows against the cold, dark night. Piles of recently fallen snow were shoveled and pushed to one side of the parking lot. The air felt clean and crisp but devoid of the high oxygen saturation that he was used to living at sea level. Being back in Pine Castles felt surreal. A powerful sensation started low, as if there were an invisible current under his feet, and it began to swell in minute levels. The feeling was so palpable, Noble wondered if it were an effect of the drugs being cleansed from his nervous system.

He locked his car and went inside. Men and women in huge coats, snow boots, scarfs, and other winter apparel, sat around at tables eating, chatting, and drinking hot drinks from decorative mugs. The café was quaint, and well-lit with ceiling lights. No one was in line, so he walked up to the counter and greeted an older man, Greg, with Santa Clause worthy white hair. Greg gave Noble a polite smile and poured him a complimentary glass of iced water before asking, "how can I help you?"

"Give me a second to look at the menu." Noble said, gazing above the man's head at the menu." Noble didn't want anything caffeinated as he planned on getting a good sleep tonight. After a brief scan, he settled on the homemade decaf cappuccino.

"It's got a strong bold kick to it," Greg warned. "Customers usually use sugar to help soften the taste."

"I'll take it." Noble responded.

Greg rang up his order and made the drink himself.

"Take a seat wherever you'd like, sonny." Greg handed Noble his order.

“Thank you,” Noble replied and decided on a table beside the wall of square windows. He sat down and began scanning the room for his next potential fling. Then he saw her.

# Chapter 3

Noble couldn't take his eyes off the woman across the café. Everything about her seemed to glow. Her thick auburn hair with honey-gold highlights cascaded down in lush waves, reaching her tapered waist. Her lips were painted with cool lavender lipstick. Plum blush lightly colored her cheeks. The hue complemented her vibrant, sun-kissed skin. She read a recipe book, drank coffee, and ate pumpkin pie.

A deep purple scarf wrapped elegantly around her neck, striking against her white, flowery blouse and brown fur-trimmed jacket.

He was surprised to find that instead of pants, she had on a pleated, white skirt. He guessed she must have leg warmers or thermals underneath. Knee-high, amber-colored boots snuggled her feet and lower legs.

Her eyes intently scanned the pages of her book. On her left ring finger was a golden band inlaid with aqua rhinestones. Noble sighed heavily as his attention rested on her ring.

She set her book down and took a bite of pie. Chewing slowly, she lifted her hand and rested her chin on it. She stared toward the kitchen doors with a forlorn expression. The flickering candlelight illuminated the beautiful maple syrup color of her eyes. Noble grinned, drinking in her image.

As if sensing his stare, she looked directly at him. She smiled in greeting. Noble averted his eyes, nonplussed she caught him spying. When he turned back toward her, she had returned to reading her book.

*Why didn't I wave or say hello?*

Noble rubbed his palms against his pants, befuddled by his unexplainable reaction.

Wasn't he just acclaimed for having "the public aura of alluring sophistication, subtle seduction, stylish wealth, and effortless class" in one of L.A.'s top tabloids?

Yet, for all his seasoned years, he was flabbergasted by her little smile.

*Perhaps I'm still disoriented from Alyssa's mixture?*

There was no telling what she had put in it.

Noble tapped his fingers on the polished wooden table and studied the ruby walls of the café—decorated with paintings of lattes, bakeries, roses, and snowy hills with pine trees—in a failed attempt to get his mind off her.

Steam wafted in from the busy kitchen as the double doors flung open. Noble swung his attention toward the disturbance and picked up the acute fragrance of onion and ginger. A frazzled-looking woman hustled into the dining area and slumped against the wall. Her coily hair stuck to her smooth, sweaty, dark skin. Her chestnut-colored eyes were moist from the seasonings flying about in the kitchen behind her. She brushed her hair back with a slender hand,

running her fingers through her tight curls.

Noble's heart went out to her. He saw she was dreadfully tired. She looked his way in a daze, and without thinking, he smiled at her, lifting a hand in greeting. To his surprise she waved back.

She began inching her way toward him.

He sat up in his chair, his shoulders tightened. *I hope she's not one of my crazy fans.* He gave a wry grin and made a mental note to remember to disguise himself for the remainder of his travels. *Normally Alonzo catches these things.*

She stopped an arm's length away and tilted her head. Her lips parted and a soft gasp escaped as their eyes met. From her body language, he knew she had noticed the piercing, arctic blue color of his eyes. It was one of his most famed traits.

Noble shook his head to remove the escaping strands of his summer brown hair that hung over his eyes.

"Forgive me, but you have a charming smile." Her voice came out timid.

The energetic current he had experienced outside began to rise. It was stronger and at his knees now.

He grinned at her compliment as his face unnaturally warmed. He pulled at the collar of his royal blue shirt before thanking her.

"I'm Trisha."

"I'm Noble." He held out his hand.

"No, you don't want to shake my hands, they're sweaty," She warned.

He laughed, "You're probably right."

"Yeah." She sighed and brushed her hands on her apron.

"Why don't you sit down and take a break?" He offered her the seat in front of him.

"I'd like to, but it's around 8 o'clock. The nightly crowd is starting to come in."

"That's a shame...I could use the conversation," he mumbled without thinking.

Her eyes widened.

"That came out wrong," he stammered. "What I meant was you seem flustered, and I could use someone to talk to. I'm feeling the way you look."

"Well thanks for noticing my looks." She quipped, before giving him a warm smile and sitting down. "I'm all ears."

Noble feared he was too bold with her. His stupidity would only become more apparent if he spilled his guts out to her, a woman he had just met.

"Water?" he offered, motioning toward his untouched cup.

"Don't mind if I do," Trisha leaned over to take a sip from the straw.

She then rested her elbows on the table and asked, "Okay, pretty boy, what seems to be the problem?"

Noble arched an eyebrow at her words.

"I can be just as forward as you," she said with a teasing smile before leaning back.

He chortled at her witty repartee. She had a spicy personality.

She sat comfortably and seemed eager to listen to him. A part of him wanted to dash out the

door but her eyes seemed trustworthy. Even if she wasn't, he reasoned, he could always just avoid this coffee shop for life.

He peered over at the beautiful woman adjacent to him. He slightly lifted his chin and nudged it in her direction. "Do you know her name?" he asked.

Trisha turned around in the direction of his gaze. "Purple scarf?" she asked with a twinkle in her eyes.

A small laugh escaped his lips, "Yeah, is she... with someone?"

"Yes," Trisha replied. Her eyes squinted as if she was studying him for a change. She fell painfully silent when he didn't deter from his interest in the other woman. In the space of the pause, she closed her eyes meditatively for a long moment. Then opening them, she voiced sheepishly, "Her name's Rose,"

"Rose," he breathed. *She is just as beautiful as one.*

"She's a poet who collects paintings and wine. She wants to live on a vineyard and her favorite color, in no surprise, is purple."

Noble smiled as Trisha described Rose before asking, "How do you know so much about her?"

"She comes here often... for therapy, goodies, or just to say hello. It's her quiet hangout spot."

"Therapy?"

"Mhmm... just like you. I'm her listening ear. I don't know why it is but... almost daily someone talks to me about their problems."

Noble stirred his hot cappuccino. "Yeah, funny, I guess. Maybe it's your presence? You seem trustworthy."

"Thank you."

Noble sipped his drink before wrinkling his face at the taste. He'd forgotten about Greg's warning. Trisha reached into the jam case, pulled out a few packets of sugar, and handed them to him.

"So anyway, do you know if she's married?" he asked, hoping the ring she wore was anything but a wedding one.

"I think the ring pretty much speaks for itself."

"Yeah," he said under his breath.

His expression fell and Trisha reached out and briefly rubbed his arm. "It'll be okay. God has someone special for you."

He ignored her mention of God and sighed. "But I want her."

"It's not good to covet another man's wife," she said both gently and firmly.

"Perhaps," he voiced, deciding not to speak his true mind to *this* woman. She obviously belonged to some kind of faith. "But it's hard not to. I mean, *look* at her."

Trisha nodded in agreement, "She is lovely."

"*Stunning*," he corrected, his tone like syrup.

Trisha took a deep breath before gazing out the window at the falling snow sprinkling down

like white gold. The flickering light of the pink candles gracing the table danced on her skin, brightening her rich eyes.

“You know what’s stunning?” she asked. The soft quality of her voice was so low, he wondered if she was speaking to herself. She answered her question, “This weather, your blue eyes, this world, and... God.”

Noble followed her gaze out the window. It was beautiful. Yellow lanterns glowing below the starry night sky. The hills and mountains covered with blankets of snow made waves along the horizon.

“Sometimes we get so caught up in what we don’t have that we fail to see what we do have. We have a way of becoming calloused to our blessings and we lose the simple joy in everyday life.”

Noble turned to her, drinking in her healing words. “You put that well.”

She smiled in response.

Something about her expression made him forget his desire for a moment. “But I’m a man who knows what he wants. I guess that’s why my mom used to call me ‘picky.’”

“There’s nothing wrong with hoping or dreaming, but you shouldn’t let your goals become a source of torment on your today.”

Noble pressed his lips together, falling mute.

“Besides,” she continued, “contentment makes time seem to go by faster. If God has given Rose to another man, then she is not the one for you. He knows what you need and want out of life, and your wife. And don’t worry, I’m sure he’ll meet all your requirements...and his. God’s not going to give you someone you’re not attracted to.”

“How do you know?” he asked, half curious.

*How can anyone have such confidence in God’s ability to act on behalf of someone they just met?*

He hadn’t prayed to God in almost ten years. Rather, his faith had become more explorative, and he had delved into enough philosophies and religions until he had collaborated his own brand of muddled values.

“Because he hears and values your prayers...and you don’t look like the kind of man who could stay single for long.”

Trisha’s reassuring words melted over him like a balm in his heart. She folded her arms and sat back with a confident smile.

“I guess I *don’t* look like the kind of man who could stay single,” he jested, posing as if he were in a photoshoot. What she clearly didn’t know was that he had years of professional practice.

Trisha laughed heartily at his cocky pose and overly animated sultry smile. He noticed she had nice teeth and a bellowing laugh that seemed to start from her stomach and dive from her heart. He couldn’t help but join in. She laughed loudly before covering her mouth with a hand to stifle her cheer. It was one of the truest laughs he had ever heard. Usually, girls would laugh daintily around him, something he called “fake laughs,” but Trisha seemed almost as happy as a

countryman who just won a new pig.

“All jokes aside,” he began as they quieted down, “your faith is admirable. Have you always felt that way?”

“It’s much less a feeling as it is a belief. And it didn’t get that way overnight, *trust me*. I’ve been waiting...patiently on God for some time now. But in this season of waiting, I’ve learned and experienced things I never would have. My faith is growing.”

“Like what?” he asked, suddenly curious.

“Hmm?”

“You said you learned some things. Care to give an example?”

Trisha gave a radiant smile, “Well, he’s taught me that patience isn’t the ability to wait, but the ability to have a good attitude while you wait. Not only that, but to wait faithfully, and full of hope while you expect the Lord. I...believe the verse is Psalm 27:13, and it says: What, what would have become of me had I not believed that I would see the Lord’s goodness in the land of the living! Wait and hope for and expect the Lord. Be brave and of good courage and let your heart be stout and enduring. Yes, wait for and hope for and expect the Lord.”

Her words struck his heart, and her faith and compassion reminded him of his mother. He loved the definition she gave of patience.

“I like that.” His lips curved upward.

She lifted her shoulders, as if shied by his looking at her.

“What are you waiting on?” Noble asked.

Her eyes widened and her shoulders fell, she seemed hesitant.

“What?” he asked, wondering at her reluctance. “If you can be my listening ear, then I can be yours,” he reasoned.

“You asked me to listen,” she countered.

“And now I’m asking you to talk.”

“Many things...and a who.”

“That’s not specific enough,” he voiced, unsatisfied.

“No pressure,” she said with a hint of jest and defensiveness in her voice.

“Of course not,” he said, inching forward. “Take your time.”

She was quiet for a while before clearing her throat. “Well, I want to eventually become a massage therapist and... have a family of my own.”

“Was that so hard?” he asked, giving her a sideways smile as she released a heavy breath.

“No.”

“I’m sure you’ll be a good masseuse and an even better wife and mother,” Noble glanced down before looking back up at her. “You should consider being a counselor as well.”

“I plan on becoming one, except I don’t want to get paid for helping people.”

“Why not?” he asked, befuddled. He saw nothing wrong with charging clients for quality counseling. “How do you expect to make a good living otherwise? Surely not working in a place like this.”

Before she could answer, a gusty wind blew in and with it a crowd of young adults with

snowflakes on their clothes and boots, engaged in conversations, the smell of hot, spiked apple cider on their breaths. Trisha watched as the group of friends neared the counter.

“I really need to get back to work,” she told him.

“Wait, one moment more?” he asked. He was enjoying her company. It was the most meaningful conversation he’d had in a long time.

“Umm,” she said, considering his request. She chewed on her bottom lip and then appeared to be apologetic as her gaze went downcast. She shook her head and then suddenly stopped herself as if she had been interrupted by someone mid thought.

Noble noticed the way her eyes softened with a glow.

He began to sense an invisible stream around his waist. It was comforting and warm, like sunlight. He rubbed his head, wondering if he was experiencing some sort of last-minute euphoria from the substances he’d consumed the night before.

Trisha turned her gaze toward a coworker who walked out from behind the double doors and approached the counter.

“Who is that?” Noble asked, following her gaze.

“Paula, my bosses’ wife.” she said.

Paula hailed the group of young adults and began taking their orders. She glanced at Trisha for a split second and passed her an approving look. It was so fleeting and inconspicuous that Noble almost missed it.

Trisha slowly agreed to his request, “Okay... I can stay for a little longer.”



Ashley Thompson is a blessed wife and mother. She believes in God's ability to write beautiful love stories. She married her first boyfriend, Stephen, on a majestic mountain in Colorado beside a quaint church. They met at Christ Haven Lodge, a heavenly three-story chalet with a sunroof, indoor pool, and stone fireplace. The lodge is nestled on thirty acres of forest land, complete with a lake. Ashley spent her leisure hours bonding with Jesus and her husband.

Stephen was the first and only man she's ever dated and kissed. They have two wonderful daughters and live in a picturesque beach town.

Ashley is a life coach, teacher, and bestselling author. She is certified in New Testament Leadership and holds a B.A in Biblical Studies. As a former prayer minister for Andrew Wommack Ministries, she has prayed for thousands of people. Her writing has been featured on

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Ashley's passion is for people to enter a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and be made whole by his love. She enjoys coffee, Autumn leaves, scenic walks, candles, worship dancing, and the vivid Pacific coast. Her greatest treasure is her relationship with Jesus and her family.

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To read more of her work and receive uplifting monthly devotionals, visit:

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