

TANGLED ASHES

A NOVEL



Michèle Phoenix

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Tangled Ashes

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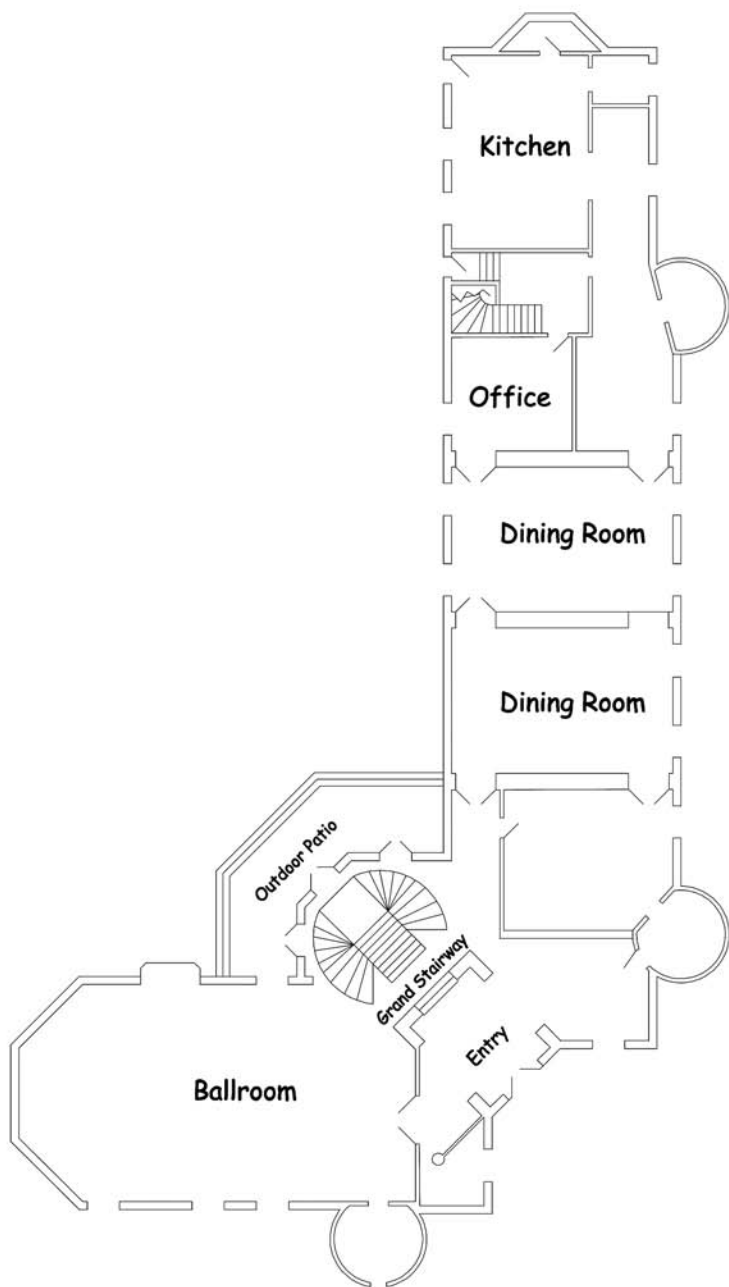
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The Lamorlaye Castle

PROLOGUE

MARIE STOOD IN the shadow of the grand staircase and held her breath. The lights were out—they had been all evening—but the ochre glow from the flames on the patio illuminated the polished wood and chiseled stone that loomed around her with threatening austerity. Beyond the window, two columns of wide-spaced guards funneled a stream of nurses and maids from the castle's rear entrance to the fire that burned like a funeral pyre, exploding tiny, arcing embers into the warm night sky. Each woman carried a box of papers past guards who were alternately turned inward and outward. Those facing the coming and going kept their eyes on the documents the women dumped into the flames, sometimes ordering one of them to retrieve a sheaf that had fallen too far to burn. Those guards who faced outward kept their eyes on the woods at the outskirts of the castle grounds, their bodies rigid, as if the senses they trained on their surroundings were fueled by the tension in their muscles and nerves. They held their MP 40s in front of them, fingers near the triggers, and peered into the thick, black tree line with eyes and ears and minds.

A sound near the castle's front door snapped Marie's head around. She pressed harder against the cool stone at her back and scanned the entryway for movement. Two rats scurried across the floor and

disappeared into the circular sitting room in the east tower, twittering like bickering lovers. Marie expelled her breath and turned to glance again at the procession outside the windows. The nurses' white wimples glowed orange in the night, lit by the flames that rose several feet into the sky. No one saw her. All eyes were on the urgent task before them and the unseen threat from the nearby woods.

When Marie stepped away from the wall, her shoe squeaked on the smooth granite floor. She reached down and removed the brown leather slip-ons she'd been given with her uniform eighteen months before. Glancing around the entry hall one more time, she moved out of the shadows, climbing the marble steps that led her to the landing from which the elegant stairway swooped around in two graceful arches that met again at the landing above. Across from the stairway was the castle's main entrance with its large double doors flanked by tall windows. The moon glanced off dozens of trucks and town cars parked outside, poised for the next day's evacuation.

In the stream just beyond the front doors, a duck rose from the water, clapping its wings and quacking loudly enough that the guards must have heard it. Marie froze. Though the ducks were a common element of the castle's soundscape, any noise on this night would be enough to arouse suspicion and reveal her presence. She stood conspicuously on the landing, visible from the front doors but still mostly hidden from the windows behind her and the glow of the fire. Blood pumped so loudly in her ears that she had to quell the impulse to cover them with her hands.

When a minute had passed, then another, Marie allowed herself to relax a little. She peered around the edge of the staircase's railing. The fire seemed to be smaller now; the procession of nurses was slowing too. She had to act quickly. Without another look out the window, she moved on stocking feet toward the nursery. There was no time for fear. The brass knob on the nursery door was cold to her touch. When she entered, the large, ornate room was quiet but

for the sound of small lungs breathing and infants' mouths suckling thumbs. This was a ballroom designed for luxurious events, not for eerily quiet children—Nazis in training. The silence in the nursery had always astounded Marie. Even in the daytime, in those hungry minutes before feedings, the babies had seldom cried. It was as if they knew their crying would serve no purpose in this place where their lives merely served to advance political agendas.

Marie moved swiftly past the night nurse's empty bed and the cribs of the children, each draped with a navy-blue blanket adorned with an eagle holding a wreath of oak leaves that framed a swastika. She knew the sleeping forms by name. Petra. Inge. Karl. Ulli. Marie longed to reach out and stroke each blond head and hold each slumbering child now that no nurses or officers were there to stop her. But she couldn't. Not with tomorrow dawning in just a handful of hours.

Squaring her shoulders, Marie quickly moved past the remaining cribs, each holding a child whose sleep was as deep as it was despondent. The small wooden beds were arranged in two neat rows with a wide aisle down the center that ended at a fireplace as tall as Marie. There were eight cribs in all, far fewer than at the height of the program's glory. These infants were the prized products of the castle. The perfect ones. The promise of the Aryan people.

A dog barked in the courtyard. Marie heard the Generalmajor's voice ordering two guards to investigate the ruckus. There was the sound of running feet, shouts directed into the woods, then the dog's whimper as a rifle's butt connected with its flank. The tenuous, tense calm that had held the castle in a vise since noon was broken by the disruption. The procession that had been conducted in silence until then ended in shouted orders and a flurry of movement around the remains of the fire. Generalmajor Müller's voice rang out again, ordering the women to their quarters and sending the soldiers to join the others who had been stationed around the perimeter of the castle for the better part of the afternoon and night.

Marie panicked. There was no time. Once the additional guards sealed the gaps in the ranks around the château, her escape route would be closed. She hurried to the last crib on the right and pulled back the fabric shielding the baby from view. The three-days-old infant lay utterly still, its tiny white fist curled next to its cheek, its rosy lips parted and slightly curved upward. A smile in this context was an astonishing sight.

Marie took the blue blanket from the crib and ran to lay it open on the night nurse's bed. Then she hurried back and lifted out the sleeping infant. It stirred and whimpered but didn't wake. Returning to the bed on unsteady legs, she placed the child in the blanket and swaddled it tightly, grateful that the dark fabric would further mask their escape. Then she stripped the sheet from the nurse's mattress and folded each corner over the baby.

With the château's front door patrolled by guards and the back door too visible, the only exit was through the window to the left of the fireplace. There was no need for silence anymore. The grounds were alive with the sounds of moving soldiers. Marie slipped her shoes back on, opened the window, and leaned out, looking left, then right. There was a six-foot drop to the path beneath. The fire was close by, barely hidden by the curving end of the building. Without taking the time to second-guess her plan, Marie sat on the edge of the window and swung her legs around. She reached back and gathered the four corners of the sheet, forming a sort of sling in which the baby lay. She lifted it out the window and held it down as far as she could, but it still didn't reach the ground.

Marie slowly lowered her body out the window, twisting as she did, so that she hung by the shoulder that straddled the windowsill. She knew she'd have to straighten her arm to lower the baby to the ground without jarring and waking it. Her muscles rebelled and shook as she grabbed the window ledge with her hand and gradually began to straighten her arm until it was fully extended. The fingers

holding the ledge began to bleed as the rough wood cut into her skin. She gritted her teeth and strained farther, trying to lengthen her body without losing her grip. Her eyes stung with the pain and effort.

Just when she thought she'd have to drop the baby and deal with the consequences, Marie felt its weight lessen. The improvised sling had found the ground. Marie dropped the rest of the sheet, then let go of the windowsill, pushing herself off the wall as she fell, conscious that the baby lay beneath her. She crouched on the ground for a moment, catching her breath, blotting her bleeding palm and fingers with the sheet, and trying to calm her nerves.

When she opened the bundle and took the baby into her lap, open and alert eyes met hers.

"Shhh," she soothed softly, scanning her surroundings. She could see three soldiers heading away from her across the clearing on the other side of the river. Marie realized that they'd be looking for intruders coming *into* the property, not exiting. That would surely play in her favor. Just around the corner from where she stood, the officers stamping out the fire set off toward the woods to join their comrades in wait for the inevitable. Both clearings were too exposed. There was nowhere Marie could go but into the river at her feet. Though the locals called it a *rivière*, it was really more of a wide, slow-moving stream whose depth and width varied as it snaked through the property and around small islands.

Marie bundled up the white sheet and jammed it under a bush, then made her way down the river's steep bank, holding the baby close. She slid and had to catch the root of a willow tree with one hand to steady herself. The baby whimpered, frowning, its eyes mere slits. "Shhh," Marie soothed again, steadying her footing on the riverbank. "It's okay. I'm right here." The frown dissolved. The baby stared. Marie let go of the tree root and touched the infant's chin with her finger, bringing her face closer and lowering her voice

to a calming pitch. "I'm going to get you out of here, okay? But you have to help me. You have to be quiet." The unblinking stare lengthened. Marie looked at the black water beneath her and shook her head at the folly of her plan. "I'm going to try really hard to keep you dry," she promised the child. Then she looked up at the stars and pleaded for help.

Her feet slipped on the mud as she descended the remainder of the slope, but she regained her footing and waded quietly into the water. The thick layer of silt on the bottom made Marie lose her balance and sucked the shoes off her feet before she'd taken three steps. She walked out until she was hip deep in the murky darkness, her bundle held tight and high above the river. She moved at a slow and deliberate pace, testing her next step before she trusted it, and progressed steadily out of the castle's night shadow and into the deeper woods. Every time the baby whimpered, she hushed it with a soothing sound and kept moving.

As Marie reached the outer perimeter of the property, she heard whispers in the darkness and paused to catch her breath under a wooden bridge. The voices came from both sides of the river, soldiers predicting what the new day would bring, their eyes trained on the walled boundary she had to reach. Marie knew they would see her if she emerged from her hiding place. The moon was too bright. The woods were too calm and motionless.

The baby gurgled again, and Marie clamped a hand over its mouth. "Shhh," she murmured as the baby started to protest. It tried to twist its head away from her hand and arched its back when it didn't succeed. "Please," she whispered, staring frantically into the baby's eyes. "Please." The baby twisted again, a strangled sound escaping from under Marie's hand. She pressed harder against its mouth. "*Please . . .*"

On the bridge above her, a branch snapped under a soldier's boot.

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JANUARY 2001

MARSHALL BECKER PLANTED both palms on the impossibly shiny surface of his friend and business partner's cherrywood desk and leveled the kind of look at him that made foremen quake and contractors relent.

"Say what?" His voice was low, but it packed all the threat of his glare.

Gary pushed back from the desk, the wheels of his leather chair soundless on the Oriental rug that covered the office's Italian tile floors, and crossed his arms. He glanced out the window at the breathtaking sunset view of Boston's ice-covered Charles River and the waterfront homes that still sported their Christmas lights. Then he looked back at Becker, resolve in his eyes. "It's for your own good."

"You didn't just say that!" Becker snapped, smacking the desktop with his hand.

Gary sat forward in his chair, elbows on the desk. He met Beck's stare with practiced calm. "Will you let me explain?"

"You can explain all you want. The answer is still going to be a resounding no."

"Dude . . ."

"*Dude?* What are we—twelve?"

"It's a sound business decision. We need this contract."

"The Sag Harbor project is nearly finished. You can't pull me off that now."

"Kevin'll take over for the homestretch."

"And the deal on the Annapolis Inn . . ."

"We haven't signed off on it yet. Even if we do, you know there's months of preliminary work before we can start the remodel."

Beck stepped back from the desk and crossed his arms. He could feel a vein pulsing in his forehead and a telltale flush moving up his neck. "We're equal partners."

Gary raised an eyebrow. "Yes."

"We both make the big decisions. We *consult*."

"Yes."

"So . . . ?"

"So this is an obvious call, and if you were being logical, you'd agree."

Becker sighed. They both knew that neither logic nor rational choices had been a high priority for him in months. Maybe years. He was past caring. "We're pulling out," Beck said. He jutted his chin toward the phone. "Go ahead—pick it up. We're pulling out."

Gary looked him straight in the eye. "I've already signed the contract."

"What?" Beck stared at him in disbelief. "Let me get this straight—you get a call from some guy you met at a convention offering you a job in a country where neither of us has ever stepped

foot, and you—without consulting with me—sign on the dotted line? Seriously?”

Gary nodded. “That’s the gist of it.”

Beck hissed out a lungful of frustration and dragged his fingers through his hair. His eyes settled on the wall to the right of Gary’s desk. Stalking around the desk, he grabbed a plaque from the wall. “You see this?” He pointed at the names engraved in the polished copper, his finger spearing at the company logo. “T&B. Gary Tyler and Marshall Becker. Tyler and *Becker!*” He accentuated his own name. “I’m in this too, *dude,*” he sneered, “and unless you plan on taking the *B* off this plaque, you don’t make any decisions without consulting me. And certainly not if they involve *me* flying halfway around the globe to do the work!”

He hurled the plaque across the desk. It sailed off the edge, upsetting a pile of *Architectural Digests*, and fell nearly soundlessly to the silk rug on the floor.

“Get ahold of yourself.” Gary’s voice was low, his eyes burdened.

Becker glared a moment longer, lips pursed, before moving to retrieve the plaque. He brushed it off and, with great precision, hung it back on the wall. Fingers unsteady, he spent an inordinate amount of time leveling it before stuffing his hands into his pockets and walking over to the panoramic window with its priceless view across the river, his body so rigid that he could feel his muscles spasming. He gazed out from the eighth floor of the Back Bay brownstone that had been the first and finest renovation of their twelve years of collaboration, his mind less on the view than on the dilemma at hand.

“What if I refuse?” he asked quietly. “What if I call your stuffed shirt myself and tell him T&B has changed its mind?”

Gary moved to the front of the desk and leaned back against it, facing his friend with a mixture of concern and determination on his face. “We risk losing his business.”

Beck turned on his partner, eyebrows raised, ready to make that sacrifice, but Gary put up his hand in caution. “This is just *one* contract, Beck. But the guy owns half the historical properties in that part of the world. It might be hundreds of thousands—maybe millions—we’re throwing away. Not to mention getting our foot in the door of a European market.”

Beck leaned back against the window. “Why’d you do it?”

“Why did I commit?” Gary pursed his lips for a moment. “Because you need to get away from here. And because you’re the right guy for the project. And it wasn’t going to happen unless I—me, your business partner—took the initiative.”

“It’s a straightforward renovation gig. Any one of our guys could head it up.”

“Number one, castle renovations are never straightforward, and number two, none of our guys have been project managers for jobs this size. None of them are the master craftsman you are, *and* none of them speak the language.”

A long silence settled over the office. An antique grandfather clock ticked sullenly in the corner, a gift from one of their most prestigious clients.

Beck finally spoke, weariness in his voice. “So you think I need to get away from here.”

“And the sooner the better.” Gary pushed off the desk and moved to stand by his friend at the window, staring out as night fell over the stately homes of Arlington Street. “Seriously, Beck. You’re the one who can pull this off. He doesn’t want industrial efficiency. He wants traditional workmanship. You’re the best guy for that.”

“Not by myself—not this big of a job.”

“He’s got crews there who can do the bigger stuff. You’ll oversee the project and personally take care of the more tricky renovations.”

Beck nodded and pressed his lips into a hard line.

“It’s what you do best,” Gary repeated. “It’s what your passion

was at Dartmouth—before you became the tyrannical moron you are now.”

The men stared at each other for long moments.

“I want lodging on-site.”

“So you can avoid sleeping by working all night?”

Beck raised an eyebrow.

“Done,” Gary conceded. “I’ll talk to the owner myself.”

“Meals provided.”

“I’m sure that can be arranged.”

“Transportation?”

Gary winced. “You can’t drive here, so why should you drive there?”

“Because my DUI doesn’t count over there?”

“They have taxis. Use them. We’re not in any shape to deal with a lawsuit if you tangle with French policemen.”

“Fine, but T&B foots the bills.”

“Done.”

The two men stared each other down, Gary’s blue gaze holding Becker’s amber glare without the slightest trace of capitulation.

“You’re talking about a pretty big step here,” Beck finally mumbled.

“It’ll do you good.”

“And you know that because . . . ?”

“Trish told me it will,” Gary said. Trish was the sweetest woman Beck had ever met, and he wondered how she’d put up with Gary for nearly ten years.

“You bypassed me completely on this one.”

“For your own good, Beck. Come on—give it a shot.”

Beck shook his head and stared up at the ceiling.

“What do you have to lose?” his friend added.

That was just it. He had nothing to lose. Except frustrating jobs, tedious social engagements, and endless nights staring at his TV or computer screen. “What do *you* gain from this?” he finally asked.

Gary shrugged. “Not sure. But this is about you, man. And the

welfare of the contractors you've been terrorizing." He shrugged when Beck cut him a disparaging look. "I can't afford to lose another one to emotional distress. Not good for business."

"You're full of it," Beck mumbled.

"Besides—Trish's been planning an intervention for months now. So that's your option. Either you go off to France like a good little boy and bring in some dough for our retirement funds, or you stay here and have a horde of do-gooders descend on you to commit you to a Doofus Anonymous center."

Beck rolled his eyes. "Nobody says *doofus*."

"I'm an innovator."

"You're full of it."

"So you've said."

Beck leveled a laser-sharp stare at his friend and held it for a moment. They squared off like wrestlers in a ring, both above six feet and built like quarterbacks. If things had ever come to blows, it was anybody's guess who would have come out on top. "Don't ever overstep me again," Beck said with unmistakable gravity. "Not for my own good. Not for T&B's good. We're equal partners. Just be happy I'm in the mood for a change of scenery this time."

"Agreed." Gary went around the desk and retrieved a manila folder from one of the drawers, then slid it across to Beck. "Here's what you need to know. Ticket's in there too. You leave February 2, two weeks from tomorrow."

"Are you kiddin' me?"

"First class. To *Paris*. Stop your whining."

Beck leafed through the documents in the file and took a closer look at several photos. "This is big," he said without looking up.

"But you love it, right? Do I know you or do I know you?"

Beck pointed at his friend with the folder. "If this thing goes bust, the blame's on you."

"Fair enough."

Beck moved toward the door, grabbing his jacket off a leather chair and casting a disparaging glance at Gary's shoes. "And buy some real shoes, will you?" he said. "Those shiny Italian things are for sissies."

"You know what, Beck? Go to—"

"France? Why, I believe I will." He gave his partner the you-owe-me-one look that had gotten them through the worst hurdles of their collaboration and opened the door.



The two weeks before Beck's departure passed in a frenzy of work-related pressures—tying up loose ends on nearly finished projects, handing others off to collaborators, and postponing those that didn't require immediate attention. Beck and Gary pored over what few blueprints they had of the castle in France, comparing visions and arriving at creative compromises that were both pragmatic and artistic. There was little they could truly predict from a continent away, but what *could* be anticipated was meticulously planned out. Turning a castle into a high-class hotel and restaurant, of course, was primarily a business proposition, but the hotel needed to be true to its origins if it was going to attract the clientele its owner hoped for.

Beck entered the Lucky Leprechaun two days before his departure and took a stool at the end of the bar.

"Hey there, Beck," Jimmy said from the other side of the counter. "The usual?"

"Yup."

"Knockin' off early?" Jimmy asked, cutting a glance at the Miller Lite clock on the wall above the door.

"Just pour the beer."

The bartender saluted. "Aye, aye, sir."

There was some pleasure in watching the foam pour over the

top of the tall glass and edge down its side, eventually soaking into the coaster's smiling leprechaun.

"Just past three and boozin' it up? What are we celebrating?" Leslie asked, sliding onto the stool next to his.

"My partner's insanity."

"Well, here's to the productively insane! If you two get any more successful, you're going to have to develop big-shot attitudes." Beck raised an eyebrow at her. "Never mind. That ship has sailed." She lifted a hand to get Jimmy's attention and pointed at Beck's beer. "One more."

Becker's eyes were on a recap of a Celtics game on the TV screen in the far corner of the room, but his mind was on the chore at hand. He hated this kind of thing. The artificial sincerity of cutting ties with the unimportant. He glanced at Leslie. Her eyes were on the game, her manicured fingers idly turning the glass of beer in front of her. Quarter turn, quarter turn, quarter turn. Her platinum hair was overteased and sprayed hard. Her makeup was garish—too bold and somehow geometric to actually flatter. Her business suit was expensive and sleek, cut to enhance her toned and trim physique. If he kept his eyes on that and away from her calculating gaze, he was okay. But if he met her dollar-sign stare for more than a few seconds at a time, the beer soured in his stomach.

"So talk fast—I'm between meetings. What's Gary's harebrained scheme this time?" she asked, swiveling toward him on her stool, legs crossed, the tip of her foot sliding around his calf. "Turning another dilapidated factory into a schooner museum?"

Beck turned to dislodge her foot. He dispensed with subtlety—wasn't in the mood for it anyway. "I'm heading to France. For a few months. Big project for one of Gary's contacts."

Leslie raised a perfectly arched eyebrow. "Nice. Can I come along?"

On the television screen, Paul Pierce took a shot from the top of

the key and failed to make a basket. "I leave in two days. Thought you should know."

There was a pause while Leslie absorbed the information. Then she leaned in, her mouth close to his neck, and whispered, "Guess we'd better make the most of the time we have left, huh, slugger?"

The beer on her breath repulsed him. The way she touched his thigh did too. Then again, he'd never been more than mildly intrigued by her. Theirs was a cynical arrangement of convenience and distraction. He got the distraction and she got the . . . He wasn't sure what she got, actually. It wasn't predictability and it certainly wasn't entertainment. More often than not, they used more words ordering their drinks than they did having a conversation. That's where the convenience came into play. Hours of company and no need for small talk. Didn't get any better than that.

"Actually," he said, taking a long swallow from his glass, "I'm going to be swamped, so . . ."

"There are a lot of hours in a couple of days," she insisted, her voice dropping a notch or two as she traced the veins on the top of his hand with a fingertip. Whoever said a person couldn't live on hope alone had never met Leslie. She'd known him for several months and still lived with the delusion that she'd get him into bed. "What are you—a monk?" she'd asked one night, when he'd driven her home in the wee hours after a protracted cocktail party and dropped her at the curb. He'd driven off without answering, watching in his rearview mirror as she stomped her foot on the wet sidewalk. But she'd recovered fast enough and somehow made peace with the situation. As long as they played with fire on a regular basis, she seemed happy to be his drinking partner and social accessory. Suited him just fine.

Beck downed the last of his beer and dropped a twenty-dollar bill on the polished surface of the bar. He stood, grabbed his jacket off the stool next to him and moved toward the door.

“What—no ‘See ya later’? No ‘Nice knowin’ you’?” Leslie swiveled on her stool, hands out in amazement, a flush of red high on her cheeks.

Beck gave her a long look, racking his mind for something meaningful to say. But he could no more validate their relationship with declarations than he could end it with regret. He shrugged, averted his eyes, and turned to go.

It hadn't taken long for Beck to say the rest of his good-byes. Most of them had required no more than a few words of instruction and a casual wave. Such was the nature of his friendships. They were about work or about distraction. Period. They didn't keep him warm at night, but they sure made transcontinental moves less complicated.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

THOUGH MANY ELEMENTS of this novel are fictional, the places featured in it are not. The Meunier manor, hidden away in the hills above Lamorlaye, does indeed exist, and it really was the site of France's only Lebensborn until the Germans evacuated in 1944. Most of the documents that might have helped to reconstruct the WWII period of the manor's history were destroyed as the Nazis left, but there is no doubt among historians that many children were indeed born there during the final months of the war. Unlike other "Fountains of Life," Lamorlaye's seems to have been reserved for women who entered the program voluntarily. Others across Europe were much more sordid, their babies the product of rapes and kidnappings committed in the name of expanding the Third Reich.

When I was thirteen, I started attending a small school that met in the Meunier manor. The property belonged to the Red Cross at the time, and it housed a rehabilitation center for physically handicapped children. I was part of an integration program that allowed a handful of students from the village to study with the residents of the center. I have vivid memories of reenacting the entire *Les Misérables* musical on the front steps of the manor, of playing soccer

in a clearing in its woods, and of taking “field trips” to its Japanese gardens.

Lamorlaye’s small evangelical church is real too—my parents were among its founding members. And the White Queen’s Castle is one of my favorite places on earth. I spent many afternoons there, picturing myself as the owner of the diminutive and exquisite architectural wonder and trying not to watch weekend fishermen showing worms onto metal hooks.

I have no childhood memories that don’t involve Lamorlaye’s other landmark, the château. Until I moved away at the age of sixteen, I spent much of my leisure time on the grounds of the castle, which housed the European Bible Institute from 1960 until 2001. While my parents taught inside, I played on the islands and went on treasure hunts in the woods. My brother and I came *this close* to burning the building down one afternoon as we lit matches on a stack of mattresses stored in the back stairwell. I’ve crawled under the castle’s patio and imagined grand events in the ballroom we called a chapel. Beck’s Château de Lamorlaye was home to me. It nursed my childhood aches and fueled my romantic élans. Its grand staircase remains a defining feature of my growing-up years. I dearly miss my castle days.

Today, though the château’s grounds have become a much-visited botanical garden, the building itself is locked and empty, slowly succumbing to the ravages of time. Yet even in its less pristine condition, it is graceful and strong, a silent sentinel whose towers and arches guard mute vestiges of the lives that once breathed within its walls.

Much more information, including photos of the castle and other sites in the novel, can be found on my website, www.michelephoenix.com.