



Celestial & Phoenix:
Fire Within

By

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ISBN: 978-1-60088-108-4

Cover Artist: Anne Cain

Editor: Tracy Seybold

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Cobblestone Press, LLC

www.cobblestone-press.com

Dedication

For Eugene... it was fate!

Prologue

Southern France
1607

The crowd of onlookers resembled ravenous crows ready to tear a carcass to shreds. And Emilie Deveraux was the carcass.

She'd heard tales of wolves and crows striking up a bizarre, unspoken bargain with each other. The birds would alert the wolves to the whereabouts of carcasses and the wolves would repay the courtesy by leaving behind shreds on the remains. That way, they were both satisfied.

It had always sounded like a strange companionship to her, an unlikely way for opposites to peacefully co-exist. Now, bound and peering down at the growing crowd watching her demise, she realized the world was full of strange companions.

The people milled around the town square. They were simple townsfolk like her. Yet their fear of being victimized forced them to align their loyalty with the Church. These people were the crows, the Church the wolves.

Always better to be on the dominant side than the side she was on.

The flames rose, licking her bare feet. The rags they'd allowed her to keep around her body for months were also sparked by the fire. Every inch of the fiber was burning, melting and tracing a line of flames along her chest. The skin beneath was blistered, the stench enough to make vomit rise and fall through her mouth until it stained her front. But no one

made a move; they all stared. She could see shame in most of their eyes, but some actually looked like they were enjoying it... every single one glad it was her burning at the stake, rather than *them*.

Someone had pointed the finger her way, but she'd never found out who. She'd denied the charges of Heresy and even lied about being a witch. But the Inquisitors didn't hear logic. As long as their mighty belief was spreading throughout France, they happily lined their pockets with the wealth of the Kings and Queens who commissioned these barbaric acts all across Europe.

With her hair smoldering along her scalp, Emilie started to laugh. The raspy snicker ignited as the flames tore away her skin. Until eventually her laughter echoed hauntingly through the square. It was all she could do to keep from screaming with agony.

Though the pain would only be temporary.

The fire would burn her, even kill her, but this wasn't the first time she'd suffered this fate.

In another town, over half a century ago, she'd been sentenced to the same fate. That first time she'd called out for help, to the angels in the sky or the demons below. Emilie hadn't cared who answered the call, though it was the latter who answered her cry. The deal had been struck as the flames licked away her human skin.

Emilie had made a deal with unknown demons and it had changed her forever.

She laughed some more, continued until the fire burned away her vocal cords and her lungs caught on fire. But even when the sound stopped and the flames began to calm, Emilie was still alive. Her carcass hung on the stake, skin shriveled and melted onto her bones.

Fire hurt, yet empowered her.

The spark of her own flame ignited like a phoenix that would rise elsewhere. The crowd looked horrified, confused. She felt her shriveled lips curving into a smile. The price for suffering an untimely death was to be dumped in another place, another time. She didn't know who pulled the strings. It could be the Devil himself, but the next time she opened her eyes, she'd be in a strange place.

This was her life.

Chapter One

Sydney, Australia
2007

Emmy was a much more suitable name in this time of technology and science. This was the first time she'd traveled through several centuries to wake up in the future. She'd been here less than a day and already loved this place. She was quickly adapting to their way of life, even to the new speech these foreigners spoke. Emilie was no longer in her native France but after all the pain and betrayal her own country caused her, she wasn't too upset by the notion.

She pushed her hands off the railing, enjoying the feel of the breeze sweeping through her long red hair. Her eyes were focused on the giant metal bridge to her left. The Sydney Harbor Bridge they called it. Fitting, since it sat on Sydney Harbor.

As she took a lazy step back, Emmy collided with someone. Her legs were unsteady beneath her, until she was helped upright by a pair of strong hands.

"I am so sorry," she said with an apologetic smile, looking up to meet the stranger's face.

"It's no problem," the male voice replied. His eyes were a deep blue like the water behind her. He held her shoulders as he gazed into her eyes for several seconds, then dropped his hands when he realized they'd lingered there too long.

Emmy missed his warmth when he pulled away. Words stuck on her tongue. She wanted to introduce herself, say hello and talk about the weather — anything to keep him here a little longer. He was such a lovely sight with his short blond hair sparkling in the sun. His arms now hung awkwardly at his sides, sleeves rolled up to the forearms. He was thin, but still alluring. Emmy had no problem fantasizing about running her fingers over his chest, admiring what he had to offer under the shirt.

“Well, I’ll see ya,” he said with an offhanded wave.

“Yes, see you...” she whispered watching him go. Who was this man? A stranger whom she’d shared an intimate moment with, yet knew nothing about. All of a sudden it was hard to breathe, even so close to the ocean with the slight scent of salt in the air.

Emmy struggled to take a deep breath into her lungs, heart beat frantic.

She felt dizzy, lightheaded and fell back a few paces into a bench behind her. Emmy leaned forward, resting her elbows on her thighs, head low so she could catch her breath. Why would meeting a stranger have this effect on her?

“He’s of pure blood. That’s why he’s affecting you so badly,” a voice to her left said.

For a second, Emmy was convinced the person was talking to someone else. She turned her head to the side and found an old woman sitting beside her, on the other end of the bench. She wore a long bottle green skirt that fell to her sandaled feet and a matching vest over a faded black shirt. Not exactly the clothing she’d seen in the store fronts inside the bright stores of this city.

She spotted a large green bag stuffed with smaller plastic ones at her feet. Her filthy graying hair fell past her shoulders, and Emmy figured this woman was one of the many vagabonds she’d run into while trying to catch a nap in the park earlier in the day.

Emmy was glad, and surprised that she’d been able to learn so much about this new place in so little time. Maybe it was the way of the future — predictable. Or maybe it was just another mystery of how her time traveling worked. She didn’t know everything there was to know

about this new futuristic place, but more than enough to get her by. The beings who'd granted Emmy this ability had also provided relevant details into her subconscious.

"Are you talking to me?" Emmy asked, still keeping her head low, slowly catching her breath again.

"Who else would I be talkin' to?" the woman asked. "There's no one else 'ere but you."

Emmy felt a shiver race down her spine. The breeze coming off the water felt too cool. "What did you mean he's pure blood, and why would it affect me?"

The woman turned her face. Her eyes were so dark they appeared black, piercing black holes that drilled into her. "I know what you are and I know what he is."

"*What I am?*" Emmy laughed. "I am just a woman, like you."

The woman shook her head. "No, you're more than that and certainly not from around *here*."

"How could you know that?" Emmy straightened her spine against the back of the bench, keeping her attention on the old woman. It wouldn't do any good to lose sight of someone who seemed to materialize from thin air. Besides, she felt better now. The nausea was gone and her heart was settling down.

She shrugged. "I don't know. I just know these things. I can feel 'em."

"Who are you?"

"I lost me real name a long time ago. People call me Bea on the streets," she replied with another shrug. Her ratty hair was long and wiry, reaching her lower back.

"I'm—"

"Emmy, I know."

"How could you know *that*, too?"

"I already told you, I hear things in my head!"

Well, that wasn't exactly what she'd said, but Emmy held the woman's gaze a little longer, until it was Bea who looked away.

"Tell me more about that man you claim is true blood," Emmy

encouraged. Maybe this woman was a fortune teller like some of the gypsies back in France. The ones who'd suffered the same fate as her but hadn't been so lucky.

"You're wrong, they *were* lucky," Bea said.

"Can you stop reading my mind and answer one question before I have the chance to ask another?"

Bea nodded, her gaze on the water beyond the path ahead. "That young man is a pure blood Celestial."

"And by Celestial, you mean *angel*?"

Bea nodded.

"That is not possible, angels don't—"

"Exist? Neither do demons, yet 'ere I sit on a bench chatting to a demonic being," Bea said with a snicker.

Emmy shook her head. "You're mistaken, I am not a demon. I'm—"

"A demonic entity capable of traveling through the centuries," Bea finished, "one of the Phoenix."

"No, that is *not* what I am at all!"

"You're of the old kind, not as malicious as the newer breeds but still fueled by fire. You rise from the ashes like a phoenix, in another time and another place to live a new life. Miraculously adapting by the minute because that's how *they* help us blend in." Bea spoke as if she were reading text out of a sacred book. "Welcome to Sydney," she said turning a tooth-gapped smile her way.

Emmy was starting to think the woman was some sort of crazy person. There had to be a reason she was homeless, right? She'd be happier just thinking about that blond man who'd crossed her path.

"You have to leave him alone," Bea snapped.

"Reading my mind is starting to annoy me. Can you please stop doing it?"

"Only if you stop calling me crazy in your thoughts. I'm not crazy and don't appreciate people thinking that of me." Bea scowled.

"Maybe if you didn't say strange things people wouldn't label you. Why must I stay away from that handsome young man?"

Bea's eyes narrowed. Her entire face seemed to darken. "He's an

angel who hasn't woken yet, but pure nevertheless, and if you cross paths with him too often you'll feel ill. Every time someone like him is in your presence, you'll feel weak and sick because you are his complete opposite."

"That doesn't make any sense. The opposite of pure is evil, right? I am *not* evil!"

"That doesn't matter. You are a demon and that's why you repel each other. Demons are on the opposite side of the spectrum from angels. It's best to avoid them. I found that always keeps me calm."

Emmy digested the information, remembering something she'd said earlier. Afraid the woman would read her mind, she forced the question out, "How do you know the fortune tellers I was talking about were lucky, Bea?"

The woman's profile greeted Emmy for a few seconds and she thought Bea would refuse to answer. When she slowly turned back toward Emmy, her heart froze for a second. The woman's eyes were no longer black. They were two identical flames inside her eye sockets. Emmy fought the urge to run, her gaze pinned to the old woman.

"Emilie Deveraux," Bea replied, her voice much deeper than the one she'd used thus far during their exchange. "You aren't the only one who survived the Inquisition. Nor the only one who struck a deal with the demonic to survive another day, another lifetime. I am the leader of the Phoenix in Sydney, but the Celestials like to call us the *Dirt*."

"This is not possible," she whispered.

"It's very much possible." Bea wrapped her wrinkled hand around Emmy's wrist. "Are you so arrogant you thought such a bargain could only be struck by you?" A snicker escaped her wrinkled lips, and her hand tightened around Emmy's skin. "You're coming with me, young lady, because you need the rules spelled out to you. The first rule being — you never go anywhere near a pure. They are like poison to us, do you understand me?"

"Let me go." Emmy struggled to break out of the iron-grip. She looked around their surroundings but there was no one to help. Clouds were shifting overhead, ruining the perfectly sunny afternoon.

“You and I have a lot to discuss, Emilie.” And with those words, orange flames rose up around the bench, engulfing both of them.

Emmy stopped struggling and waited for the pain, but this time, there was none.

Chapter Two

Emmy materialized inside a dark room littered with old newspapers, food wrappings and magazines. The only light came from several metal garbage bins positioned in different corners of the square area with flames flicking out of them.

She ran both hands up her arms, wiping away any residue, but the fire was gone. It no longer surrounded her. She looked around, shivering even though the heat inside the room should've conjured sweat. It was the middle of summer on this continent. January was a scorcher. The seasons were the wrong way around in this country that hadn't even existed during her last stint at life. But she could handle it. Change was something Emmy was used to.

She ran her hands up and down her bare arms again, turning her focus to the woman standing only a few feet in front of her.

"What is this place?" she asked, trying not to inhale the stench of moldy paper.

"This is where we live most of the time. Until they decide to tear it down like they do with everything else around 'ere." Bea made her way toward one of the walls, hands outstretched as she pushed aside a bunch of newspapers so she could turn her rump around and sit down. "Age isn't a friend, Emmy."

"Have you been here so long you've aged this much?"

Bea shook her head, the stringy hair sticking to her scalp. "No, I was this age when I accepted the deal, obviously not as lucky as you were,

still in your youth.”

Emmy opened her mouth to reply but decided against it. What could she say to ease the burden of age on the woman? The truth was Emmy had been lucky to maintain the slim frame and wrinkle-free face she’d sported in her early twenties... though at this stage of her existence, she wasn’t even sure how to measure her age.

“How long have you been in Sydney?” the old woman asked, one hand pressed against her lower back.

Emmy shrugged. “Not long.”

“I’m glad I found you then.”

“Is it your job to find people like me?” Emmy inquired, holding her stance in the middle of the room.

“It’s not a job. It’s an essential duty. Do you know how much trouble we could get into if the humans find out about our existence? Or even worse, if the Celestials find out we’re actually here.” Bea paused, a faraway look in her eyes. “Don’t be fooled into thinking they don’t know about us. Gordon is a very wise man who keeps on top of things.”

Emmy raised a hand in the air to stop her. She was starting to feel like an idiot, not having a clue as to what this woman was talking about. Until she’d started talking about angels and demons, Emmy hadn’t had a clue there were others like her. Let alone others on the other side of the spectrum involved with someone called Gordon! And what were these Celestials anyway? Angels made when — just before death like her? And under what circumstances would an angel offer salvation to a human? Why hadn’t an angel answered her call instead of a demon?

Her mind was racing, trying to recall exactly what had happened when she’d struck up the deal of survival. But as hard as she tried, Emmy couldn’t remember a single detail. She’d been tied to the stake for the first time, and as the flames had melted her skin like wax, Emilie had called out to someone. Anyone, willing to help her survive the awful fate, and someone had answered. A creature of fire, but the memory of how it had happened was gone.

She’d never been able to access it.

“You’re not supposed to remember,” Bea interrupted her thoughts.

"The how is not important, it's only the why."

Emmy tried to keep her anger at bay. It wouldn't do anyone any good to get all worked up and angry with this woman. Maybe she could help her work out a few things. "And do you know the why?"

Bea shrugged. "You weren't ready to die and asked for salvation. It came in the form of something demonic which has filtered into your body. You claimed you weren't a demonic being, and I suppose in some ways you're right. But your essence is tainted by fire and will never be restored, hence the name Phoenix."

"Why didn't angels answer our call?"

"Angels don't come near people like us—"

"People like us?" she inquired, lifting an eyebrow.

"You were a witch, weren't you? I was a psychic known for fortune telling. Anyone of that kind is never heard by the angels."

"Who is then?"

"People who are at death's bed at too young an age, children, innocents... those who find themselves dying while trying to rescue others... that type of selfless act gets the Celestials' attention." Bea's dark eyes were shiny inside the darkened room. The piercing look was too much to bear. "Not the type of person who winds up charged with Heresy."

"And when you find our kind, what do you do with them?" Emmy asked, trying to ignore her last comment.

"I offer them a place in our small community. We live as one and operate under certain rules," she answered.

"You live on the streets though, don't you?"

Bea shook her head. "We move from place to place, as every one of these abandoned homes winds up catching a developer's eye. We're never on the streets so much as squatting wherever we can find shelter. It's tough out there on the actual streets and too crowded with the homeless. We try not to bring any attention to ourselves."

"What will be expected of me now that I'm here?" Emmy asked, afraid to hear the answer. The last thing she'd counted on when salvaged at the stake twice, was to arrive somewhere in the future and be made to

live by certain rules. She just wanted to *live*. That's why she'd ended up in this situation in the first place.

Bea's lips were in a straight line, thin and pale as she took in a deep breath. "Nothing more than to abide by our rules and never let the Celestials know you exist."

"What are these rules anyway?" She folded her arms in front of her chest. The urge to move closer to the flames was becoming too hard to resist.

"Live with the community, move wherever we go, stay away from anything related to any type of Church—"

"Bea!" The voice was female and accompanied by a small middle-aged woman with short, uneven dark hair.

"What's wrong, Liz?"

The woman's eyes were wide. "We've got trouble."

"What kind of trouble?"

"It's some of them hoodlums that like to come and torment us."

"Let's move out!" Bea called rising to her feet.

Liz nodded. "I'll round the others up and meet you at the rendezvous point." The woman left without so much as a glance Emmy's way.

"Let's go before they get to us." Bea reached for Emmy's elbow.

"Why are we running away? We have the power of fire at our disposal, surely we can fight them off."

"No, we don't fight." Bea shook her head. "We never fight. Our fire power is only to be used for transportation, not to harm anyone."

"But these people are here to harm us, aren't they?"

"It doesn't matter. We don't hurt anyone."

"Is that another one of your rules?" Emmy asked, the sarcasm too strong in her voice for the older woman not to detect.

"Yes," Bea whispered. "Now let's go!"

Emmy wasn't enjoying this one bit. Things had been better when she'd been on her own without having to deal with anyone. She wasn't the best at following rules. She'd never listened to her mother when she tried to explain how other people would look badly upon her use of

magic. Emilie always enjoyed showing off her talent and wound up lost in the dungeons for years, before eventually being burnt the first time. How was she going to take a complete stranger bossing her around?

She wasn't.

As Bea wrapped her old hands around Emmy's arm and started calling the fire to move them somewhere else, she used every bit of power she could summon to detach herself from the woman. Bea's eyes widened when her hand slipped from Emmy's grasp and they each disappeared in different directions.

* * * * *

Emmy landed on her butt in a patch of dry, brittle grass with the air knocked out of her. It took a few seconds for her head to settle after the travel. She only engaged in it when there were no other means of making an exit – being burnt at the stake or stealing clothes were a few occasions she considered essential.

The sky overhead was dark, but the heat still clung to the summer air.

Emmy pressed her fingers against the ground, lifting her body upward. She wiped the dirt and grass from her jeans. She'd stolen this pair from a large store upon arrival, undetected as her light fingers picked out the jeans, tank top and black boots with the seeming intention of trying them on. They fit so well in the fitting rooms, she decided to make her escape then and there. Leaving behind the scraps still attached to her body after arriving from her plight in France.

She looked around, and realized she seemed to be inside some sort of cemetery. The headstones looked faded, old and weather-worn like they'd been here for centuries. The realization that she should've been in the position of being buried years ago roused a chill up her spine.

She'd cheated death.

Emmy shrugged away the feelings, taking a few steps forward until she noticed someone standing in front of a crooked stone a few paces ahead. It looked like a man, dressed in jeans and a white shirt that stood

out amongst the bleak light of night. His blond hair shone in the scarce light of the moon and faraway streetlights.

"It's all right, I won't hurt you," the man called, still with his back toward her.

She froze on the spot, careful not to step on any actual graves.

The man turned around slowly, his eyes filling with recognition as they swept over her. "It's you again."

Emmy cleared her throat, heart hammering against her chest. It was the same man she'd stumbled into back at Circular Quay, while staring at the Sydney Harbor Bridge and Opera House across the water. His face was darkened by the shadows of the only tree in this place. What was this place?

"Yes, it is me," she breathed.

"We have to stop meeting like this," he said with a wink. A smile curved his lips, making his eyes light up.

The throbbing of her heart was now being echoed inside her head. She took a step forward, even though her body suddenly felt sick and weary. Another step and they were within arm's length, the sickness stirring inside her stomach now.

So Bea had been right, this was some sort of Celestial being and she was reacting accordingly. But she couldn't stay away. That face was so attractive, his nose a little too wide for his face but that rigid jaw line was like nothing she'd ever seen on anyone before. His lips were thin, but still luscious to gaze at.

Her stomach was somersaulting with the effect of his nearness.

"Where am I?" she asked.

He looked at her with a quizzical expression on his face but answered anyway, "In the small cemetery behind the All Saints Church."

At the sound of Church she spun around in a half-circle, trying to see where the building was. But she didn't get the chance. Before she was able to catch her footing, it caught on metal rimming around a gravesite and had her slipping forward.

Familiar arms caught her in an impromptu embrace and the sickness grew to an intensity she could hardly stand. There was a buzzing

in her ears and the rapid beating of her heart was making her body clammy.

"Whoa, careful there," he said with a small smile. His solid hands helped straighten her for the second time in one day. "I'm Zac, by the way."

"I, uh... I'm Emmy," she somehow managed. Her fingers were up against her temples, trying to keep the pain at bay.

"Emmy, that's a nice and unusual name. I like it," Zac said with a smile. His arms were still around her, eyes peering into hers.

She closed her eyes for a second, just enough to inhale the freshness of his skin. He smelled like trees and grass, with a hint of aftershave. When she opened her eyes again, he looked a little shy. He made sure she could stand up on her own before removing his arms and taking a step back.

"Hardly anyone comes to this cemetery anymore," he said breaking the awkward silence between them. He looked down at the almost bare headstone in front of him. "It's a shame, but most of these people don't have any relatives to visit them."

"You still visit," Emmy said in a small voice. The drumming was echoing inside her skull, sending the beat along her limbs. Her arms and legs felt queasy, shaky, and she knew she'd have to escape soon or risk collapse.

He nodded, looking at her for a second. "I always visit. It's peaceful here. Gives me a chance to be alone and think about those less fortunate than me."

"I better leave you alone then," she said stepping away.

"No!" he called. "You don't have to go."

"Are you sure?"

Zac nodded. "Positive."

"All right."

"So what are the odds of two complete strangers literally running into each other twice in one day?" Zac said with a chuckle.

"Not very high, I would think," she answered with her own smile.

"Maybe its fate." A shy smile swept over his face.

"Maybe it is." If only the pain would stop, she would totally agree this was something that was meant to happen. Though, in spite of the pain and Bea's words echoing inside her head, Emmy didn't want to leave his presence. There was something very alluring about him, some sort of connection that apparently they should *not* be feeling towards each other. But even she knew the old saying of opposites attract, the story of the crows and the wolves... unconventional pairings.

"So, why did you come here tonight?" he asked.

Her palms were clammy. What could she say to that? Not the truth. Emmy took a deep breath, feeling a little strange lying so close to a church. "I was just going for a walk and wound up here."

"Walking alone at night isn't a good idea."

"I can take care of myself."

Zac turned to give her a once over, his gaze sweeping over her face before looking lower. For an angelic being, he sure let his eyes wander along the length of her body. "I'm sure you can, but isn't there someone waiting for you at home?"

"No," she said.

"Either way, I'd be happy to walk you back somewhere safer. I'd rather not leave you here on your own." Zac's eyes shone, but he seemed a little nervous.

"Are you leaving already?"

"Yeah, it's getting late and I have to go see someone," he replied, not moving forward. As if he regretted having to part ways.

"Your wife?" She couldn't believe it when the words left her mouth.

He shook his head with a smile. "No, there's no one waiting for me either. Just work."

"You work at night?"

Zac shrugged. "Whenever I'm needed."

"Oh." Emmy wanted to know more but didn't want to seem pushy or nosey.

He laughed. "I work for a charity organization. We help the homeless, sick kids, old people, that kind of thing. Our hours are all over

the place.”

“Oh, right,” she said with a smile.

“Anyway, it’s been a pleasure running into you today. I hope we can do this again sometime.” Zac stepped away from her. He put his hands in his pockets, and slouched his shoulders as he walked into the shadows. Past the tree and along the concrete path located on the side of the brick building she assumed was the church.

Emmy watched him leave, waiting until he turned the corner before looking away. Her heart still beat to a rapid pulse, and her mouth was dry but her head had stopped aching. Feeling seeped back into her limbs. Her legs were a little stronger and her arms were no longer shaky. The further he got from her, the more relaxed she felt.

She sighed, wishing she would’ve asked him for some indication of where he worked or lived. She could follow him home, sneak around in the shadows and risk feeling the sickness take a hold of her again. No, she’d seem like a stalker. And if there was any chance — no matter how remote — of fate leading them back to each other, Emmy wasn’t willing to tempt it.

She closed the distance between her and the tree, deciding this would be as good a place as any to watch night turn into day. When she was sitting on the uneven ground, her mind filled with his memory. He had a name now. *Zac*... And it repeated over and over inside her mind. Zac, who worked at helping people and visited the graves of the dead no one else would. She understood why he’d be a great candidate for the Celestials, but wondered what type of death he’d suffered to get here.

Maybe one day she would find out, but right now she was feeling tired, her limbs ready to relax after such an eventful day. Emmy lifted her legs, pressing both knees against her chest to lean her cheek into the crook of her folded arms.

Chapter Three

The blow to her head had Emmy's eyes snapping open to the world, though she wasn't ready yet. She wanted to sleep longer, couldn't even feel the heat of the sun on her yet. Her vision was a little foggy. She cleared her eyes with the back of her hand before another smack came.

This time to her midsection, forcing a swish of air from her mouth as pain knotted her muscles. Lying on her side, she had a clear view of the boot heading toward her face.

She slid along the brittle grass just in time to avoid the impact. The attacker overshot the kick and almost tumbled.

"Bitch!" he called. "Give me your money!"

Her lungs ached, and she struggled to grab as much air as she could. She sat up, ignoring the aches and pains now pulsing through her body. The fear that had gripped her system at the first realization of the attack was now evolving into a ball of rage. She'd been sleeping, minding her own business. Who did this guy think he was anyway?

"I said give me your—"

"I don't have any money!" she cried.

The attacker's dark eyes narrowed, suddenly focused on her chest. "Fine, you can pay with your body."

"I don't need to pay for anything—"

"If I say you need to pay, you need to pay!" He leaned over to hook his stubby fingers on the tops of her shoulders. He lifted her upright, shoving her so hard her spine impacted with the tree trunk in a splinter of

further pain. He pressed his body against hers, towering over her, keeping her pinned with his hips. The whiff of alcohol and sweat made her gag, caused further pain inside her injured midsection.

The guy grabbed Emmy's chin, forcing her head back as he lowered his face toward hers. Emmy was fuming inside. She closed her eyes to the attacker's advances, willing herself to be anywhere but here. Unlike the control Bea seemed to possess, she was never able to think of a certain spot and appear there. She just wanted to escape.

The flames engulfed her body, her eyes shot open. The attacker's eyes were bloodshot, wide as the flames burned the skin from his bones. His screams of agony were the last thing she heard before disappearing.

* * * * *

Emmy walked in the park with both hands stuck deep into the pockets of her jeans, boots kicking against the trimmed grass. She could still hear her attacker screaming in agony as the fire burnt him alive. Emmy closed her eyes for a second, lifting her face toward the clear sky, sniffing in the scent of grass and the slight whiff of salt water. The ocean wasn't too far from this serene place they called The Royal Botanic Gardens.

She was trying to forget the ordeal at the cemetery, but so far hadn't succeeded. Why had that man forced her to hurt him? She'd just wanted to be left alone, to dream about Zac.

Something bounced off her shins. Emmy opened her eyes and looked down to find a small blue plastic ball near her feet. She leaned over, picked it up and straightened. Out of nowhere, the drumming began inside her head.

Someone was jogging toward her. When he was within throwing distance, she prepared to throw the ball but froze in mid-throw. Recognition washed over her mind.

"I don't believe this," a now familiar voice called, getting closer. "We've really got to stop meeting like this!"

Her heart was beating wildly against her chest, fingers holding the

plastic ball still in her hand. He was right, what were the odds of running into each other almost everywhere they went?

"Zac!" the voice of a child called behind him.

She looked over his shoulder. A little boy with blond hair was approaching. A grin plastered his freckled face as he stopped beside Zac. He offered her a tooth-gaped smile before saying, "Hi."

Emmy wondered who this little boy was. But the sickness building up inside her stomach was a distraction from her wandering thoughts.

Zac looked down at the boy with a beaming smile. He ruffled his hair, playfully. "This here's Benny. Benny, this is Emmy."

"Emmy? I've heard that name before... on TV," the boy said with a cheeky smile.

"I bet you have." She forced a smile to cover the pain of being so close to Zac.

"Are we still gonna play?" Benny asked.

"Sure," Zac replied with a nod. He looked behind him, then back at Emmy.

"I better give you the ball back," she said preparing to throw it.

"No, hold on." Zac fished around in the front pocket of his jeans.

"Why don't you go grab yourself an ice-cream, Benny?"

"Are you serious?" An excited look wreathed Benny's small face.

"Here you go." Zac stuck a note into his hand.

"Thanks!" Benny turned away and ran across the stretch of green grass. Zac watched him until he was safely at the back of a very long line. It was almost midday, in a park full of children, with only one ice-cream truck parked on the outskirts.

Zac ran a hand through his hair, a goofy smile plastered on his face. "I just can't believe this. We keep running into each other. It's amazing!"

"Yes, I know." Emmy nodded, trying to avoid the penetrating look in his eyes.

He couldn't seem to take his eyes off her. His arms hung at his sides like he didn't know where to put them. That lingering look was making her a little nervous... and excited.

"Is that your child?" she blurted.

"Benny?" Zac shook his head before answering, "No, the organization I work with helps kids that don't have fathers. I take him out a few times a week. We watch a movie, or play a bit in the park. His mother is a recovering alcoholic, and his father's in jail for domestic violence. Benny's a great kid, but he's seen too many bad things. I just want to help him find a good path in life. Show him there's still good in this world."

"That is very noble of you," she said with a smile. The pain was stirring even harder than before, but she couldn't stop her heart from fluttering at just how much goodness this man possessed. He was the closest Emmy had ever come to a saint. If only her body would agree with her brain and heart. Then maybe she wouldn't have to deal with this combination of fear, pain and excitement.

"Your accent, there's a little twang of something I can't place," he said with a smile.

She laughed. Of course he'd noticed her accent. She was a fast learner, but some things never fade. "I am French, from a little town in the south of France."

"Wow, I've never met a French person before. That's very interesting."

"And you?"

"Oh, I'm as Aussie as they come, I'm afraid. I think it goes all the way back to the first Fleet." Zac leaned forward a bit, his voice hushed. "I think there was a convict or two in my ancestry."

She couldn't help but laugh again, thinking how unlikely it would be for his familial lineage to lead back to criminals. The combination of having him so close, and the hot sun beating against her back was making her body weary. Sweat was building up under her top.

"So, is it true that French people eat frog legs and snails?"

She looked at him, unable to find a response.

"I'm only teasing," Zac said with a wink.

"Of course you are."

Zac reached out for her, taking hold of her hand. His fingers were warm, a little clammy. He looked to his left, making sure Benny was still

safe in line before he stepped a little closer.

Emmy's head was spinning. Having contact this intense and intentional drove the drumming inside her head to a feverish rhythm. She wanted so much to be touched by him, to be truly together, but feared she would pass out at any moment.

"Are you all right?" he whispered near her ear.

"Just a little warm," she answered truthfully.

Zac dragged her along the grass, his gaze still on the boy as they moved. He stopped beneath a large tree with plenty of shade for both of them. His hand still held hers. He stood directly in front of her, his blue eyes pinning hers.

Was she really seeing her emotions mirrored in him? Or was she just hoping, imagining it?

He pushed a strand of red hair behind her ears and her knees weakened. They were too close. His Celestial goodness affected her badly. Emmy was afraid she'd have to confess everything to him right now. But she didn't want to ruin this intimate moment with something so shocking. This was the first show of obvious emotion Zac had displayed. He wasn't touching her because she was clumsy, but because he wanted to.

"You're very beautiful," he said moving closer.

"Thank you." She didn't know what else to say.

"I'm really enjoying running into you every time I'm out." Zac's breath played along her lips. "I think someone's sending us a message."

"What kind of message?" Emmy closed her eyes, barely able to ignore the pain stirring inside.

"I mentioned it last night... something about fate." And with those words his soft lips touched hers. A soft brush and a squeeze of her hand was enough to ensure these emotions stirring inside her like a whirlwind affected him as well.

The plastic ball fell from her one-handed grasp.

"Zac, Zac, look what I got!"

Emmy opened her eyes when the approaching calls caused Zac to step back. His fingers lingered on hers, slowly massaging the inside of her palm.

"I have to go," she whispered, hoping he'd heard the husky comment.

"Promise me we'll cross paths again," Zac said, seconds before the boy approached with a chocolate-covered ice-cream cone.

Emmy nodded as his fingers slipped from hers.

"This is awesome, Zac!" Benny called.

"Looks like you've already eaten half of it!" Zac laughed warmly and winked at Emmy.

"I'm not going to wait for it to melt." Benny lapped up some more. "But I can still kick the ball around!"

Zac looked at her awkwardly, the regret of having to leave while she was within his grasp easy to read.

Her stomach somersaulted in a way it never had before, causing her heart to swell so much the pain temporarily faded to the background.

Emmy leaned over and grabbed the plastic ball. She walked over to Zac and instead of throwing the ball, placed it into his hands. Their skin connected for an innocent, yet intimate touch.

"It's okay," she whispered near his ear. "I know I'll see you again... it was meant to be."

Zac didn't say anything, didn't have to. The answer was buried deep in his blue eyes. He wanted to see her again as much as she wanted to see him.

As Emmy turned away, the sickness dissolved with every step she took. But the burning feeling sweeping along her back told her Zac stared as she walked away, just as intently as she'd watched him every other time.

Chapter Four

Not having any money or any means of getting it was very annoying. Walking past an array of restaurants serving hungry people lavish meals Emmy could neither afford nor steal made her stomach rumble.

She hadn't eaten anything all day.

As she turned down the adjoining street, Emmy noticed a homeless shelter on the corner. The city seemed to be full of people with no place to live, and several locations were scattered to offer free food or shelter. She'd managed to stay away from these places, even though she'd walked by several times since she'd arrived in Sydney. She felt a little scummy, thinking about getting a handout like this. Especially since Bea had told her it was best to stay away from the human homeless, so no attention was drawn toward the Phoenix.

Hunching her shoulders forward, arms crossed in front of her chest, Emmy decided one time wouldn't do any harm. She just wasn't in the mood for fending for herself at the moment. Not with so many thoughts of Zac turning inside her mind. The fact that he seemed to want her as much as she wanted him made her want to scream at the loss of his nearness.

He was worth every bit of pain she suffered because of their opposing existences. And he'd kissed her! She could still taste his lips on hers, feel the brief warmth.

Emmy kept her head low as she walked inside the shelter and was

greeted with the awful stench of human body odor. The homeless in front of her looked like they hadn't bathed in years. She tried her best to hold her breath and take shallow breaths, catching small glimpses of the bread rolls and butter packets she was approaching.

Her stomach rumbled.

"They serve nice tucker 'ere," the man in front of her turned to say, "you new 'round 'ere? Haven't seen you before."

She nodded slowly, regretting the move when a whiff of the heavy jacket he was wearing in the middle of summer filled her nasal passage.

"Next!" a male voice called up ahead.

Emmy kept her head low most of the way along the line, hoping not to catch anyone's eye. That way, no one would be tempted to strike up a conversation again and she'd be free to think about Zac.

"Next!" called the male voice again. Only this time, it sounded very familiar.

She scooted forward, realizing it was her turn.

Emmy grabbed a bread roll on the way over to the man standing behind the table set up with plates and utensils. As she looked up, her heart literally stopped for a second. Pain rendered her paralyzed.

Zac's blue eyes stared into hers with a confused and shocked expression. "Emmy, what are you doing here?"

Shame flooded her brain, washing over her like scalding hot water. Emmy had to fight the urge to ignite the fire. Instead, she turned around, clutching the roll tightly as she ran down the hall. Emmy ventured out into the street with the sound of running feet chasing after her.

She continued, without turning back.

"Emmy!" Zac called, "Emmy, wait!"

But she didn't wait. Tears blurred her vision as she ran down the street, cars forced to brake around her with horns blaring. But she didn't care, just kept running until she reached an alley and was sure Zac was no longer chasing her.

Her heart ached. She should have known she was drawn to that place because he was about. He was a good, pure man and would be prone to help the homeless. He'd told her himself.

With tears still falling, Emmy ignited her fire.

* * * * *

"You shouldn't have left us," a voice called above her.

Emmy was inside a tunnel. The overhead traffic thumped above, but the noise was muffled. No one trekked down here because it smelled like urine and the sewage system was only a few steps away.

She lifted her tear-streaked face to meet Bea's watery eyes, surprised the woman had found her. Her grey hair was still falling limp along her shoulders. The scowl Emmy expected to find was instead a look of concern. Wrinkles stood out along her leathery skin when she extended an arm.

"Are you all right?" Bea asked.

Emmy nodded, ignoring the woman's helping hand. She wiped her tears with her sleeve, wondering why she was such a wreck. She'd been such a confident witch in her earlier existence, and now as a traveling creature, Emmy found herself sniffing more than usual. It was frustrating and hard to understand.

"Don't be so hard on yourself. It happens to all of us," Bea answered her unspoken question. She lowered her arm. "When we end one existence and enter into another, our personalities are slightly altered. It's not a big issue. You just need to come to terms with the new things that make your mood strike one way or another."

"I need to be with him, Bea," she whispered. "But I might have ruined everything."

"You're not talking about the Celestial, are you?"

Emmy nodded again. The skin of her face felt dry.

Bea sighed, meeting her eyes. "Is that what happened? You went out of your way to see him and —"

"No, I stumbled upon him again, after I left you. Several times!" Emmy turned her face away.

"I don't want to upset you anymore than you already are, Emmy, but Gordon knows we're 'ere now." Bea's voice was harsh, as if she was

trying to drop a bombshell.

"What do you mean... *how*?"

Bea's eyes darkened. "Gordon's people found a man at the church cemetery burnt to a crisp. Instead of reporting it to the police, Gordon's conducting his own investigation. Some of your residue always remains in the ash. The average human wouldn't know cigarette ash from ours, but he does. We've got to move somewhere across the country because Sydney's no longer safe."

Emmy was confused. If Gordon was the leader of a group of angels... what harm could he cause them? She hoped the old lady could hear her question.

Bea sighed. Her bones creaked as she struggled to sit down. Until she eventually fell to the ground beside Emmy with both legs spread out in front of her, covering her varicose veins with the long skirt.

"Yes, Celestials are touched by angels as we are by demons, but they are by no means peaceful," she said.

"But Zac helps people."

"Zac?" Bea turned an accusing glance toward her. "Ay, ay, ay, you know his name. That can't be good for us, Emmy. The scent of you is probably on him, too, and it's only a matter of time before Gordon finds out."

"Can we get back to the hostile angels?"

"Yes, they help people. Some even become priests, but their good nature doesn't extend to our kind. Anything demonic needs to be destroyed, as far as they're concerned," Bea answered. "And I have no doubt Gordon's got a taskforce tracking us right now. So, we need to go, *now*!"

"I don't want to go, I like Sydney."

"You'll like Melbourne, Adelaide or even Perth just as much as Sydney."

"Do they have Zac there, too?" She turned her face to Bea, trying to stop herself from thinking about their kiss in the park.

"Why are you so fixated with this Zac? You met him yesterday, by pure accident."

"I think it was fate."

"Fate? There's no such thing as fate." Bea clicked her tongue. "You have a decision to make, Emmy. And I hope you consider all your options before making the wrong one. You can stay 'ere and take your chances with Gordon and his people—"

"But we can't be killed. We are immortal beings."

"We aren't immortal. We can be killed just like any other creature. We're resilient and have the ability to vanish by use of fire and be reborn like a phoenix, but there are ways of killing us. You know so little about what you are. Emmy, you need our guidance. I can explain and answer every question about what we are... but we have to leave today. What's your choice?"

"Why are my body and soul so drawn to Zac? Even though I feel so sick around him, all I want is to feel and see him near me." If anyone could answer this question, Emmy would be more than glad to hear it.

She'd never believed in love. Had never experienced it firsthand or even felt a coil of it. She did know passion and lust. The French were very open and willing participants in that facet of a relationship, even way back in her time. But she'd never felt such a deep-consuming desire, like she did at the mere thought of this mysterious man. Bea was right. They'd only crossed paths for the first time the day before. She didn't know that much about him, yet, she felt like they belonged together.

"Bea, I cannot take this any longer." The brush of lips they'd exchanged filled her mind again. Just for that brief second, the pain had ceased. Then the look on his face at the homeless shelter replaced everything. "I need to tell him what I really am."

Bea shook her head. "That'll only make things worse."

"It's worth the risk. I'm sure he feels the same way about me. Doesn't that make it right?"

"I can't answer that for you. I don't think anyone can. You have to listen to your heart, but don't let it cloud your judgment so much you wind up nothin' but a pile of ash, never to be rekindled," Bea answered softly.

And with that comment, Emmy knew what she had to do. No

matter how painful or wrong it seemed.

Chapter Five

Emmy looked over the side of the building. It was a long way down, and for a second she tried to imagine what it would feel like to slip over the edge. Allow the fire of regeneration to engulf her and take her to another time.

The wind slapping strands of hair against her face pushed Emmy out of her insane reverie. What was happening to her? She didn't like the woman she was becoming. Was Bea right? Would her personality be altered every time death swept near and she made it to another time? She could handle change, but didn't like the idea of eventually becoming a completely different woman. Someone not even she would recognize. And if she'd escaped death two times already while burning at the stake, how could a Celestial being end her life?

Things did *not* make sense.

The only thing that did make any sort of sense was her feelings for Zac.

Her red hair swept against her face, sticking inside her eyes every now and then. She needed to be here, right now.

This was just some building, reaching high into the sky. But it had called out to her, pulling her here after she'd given Bea her answer. She would meet them at Central Station in a few hours, where they'd all board the train and head south. But first, she needed to see if fate was working between her and Zac, or if it'd just been pure coincidence.

"I can't believe it." Zac's voice cut into her thoughts.

A small smile played along her lips as she swiveled around to face the familiar blond. Her heart shook inside her chest, the pain of his presence starting at the pit of her stomach and racing upwards.

"It's you again. What're you doing here?" He looked around the roof area. A pool was set onto the right, a few lounge chairs near the edge.

"I was hoping to see you," she answered, unmoving.

"You know I live here?"

"No."

"Then, how?"

"I was hoping," Emmy said with a shrug.

His blue gaze focused on her. "I was hoping to run into you again. I just didn't think... after you ran away from me at the shelter, I wasn't sure anymore."

"I was ashamed."

"You don't need to be." He shook his head. "Listen, why don't you come down to my apartment?"

She didn't respond, just looked at him.

"I don't mean to... oh man, this is kind of strange because that would be a lie. I'd love to, y'know? Ah... Emmy, would you like a drink or something?"

She nodded. Her heart beat so rapidly it set the same rhythm beneath her skin.

"Great." Zac turned around and headed back down the stairs.

She followed him down two flights of stairs and into a narrow corridor with three separate doors. He stood in front of the middle one, inserted a key and pushed the white door open. He motioned for her to step inside, and she did with awe and wonder in her heart and mind. The pain of being around him was suddenly soul-consuming and she winced.

"Are you okay?" Zac asked, closing the door behind her. He advanced towards her, guiding her over toward a blue couch.

"Yes, I just feel a little queasy."

"Would you like something to eat?"

"It's nothing food can quench," she answered, meeting his eyes.

Zac sat down on the couch beside her, their thighs touching.

"What's going on between us? I mean, I know what I feel for you is raw attraction. No, it's much more than that, it's soul deep... but there's something else too, isn't there?"

"My body aches every time I am anywhere near you, yet I want to be around you all the time," she said.

"I know what you mean, I feel so lightheaded whenever you're around... but we only just met. I've never even been interested in anyone like this before. Yet now, all I can think about is you and me..." Zac's voice trailed off when he caught her gaze. "That kiss in the park—"

"Do you know what I am, Zac?"

"A very hot woman who for some reason is as drawn to me as I am to her?" he asked with a sly smile.

"No, I mean... I know what you are..."

"I don't know what you mean." His face clouded over with confusion.

She took his hand in hers and felt the headache start pounding inside her brain. "I know you're a Celestial and I'm... the opposite."

Zac's hand fell away from her grasp when he shot upright. He ran a hand through his short hair, leaving a trail of spiky tufts. "What? How could you know? It's not possible."

"I don't like the term your people use for mine, but I'm one of the Dirt. I was saved from death by demons."

"Stop, Emmy... I don't want to hear anymore. There's no way this can be happening. The first time I find myself totally captivated by someone and you turn out to be..."

She stood up, standing in front of him as he struggled with his internal battle. "What have they told you about my kind?"

"That you're evil, tempters of lustful feelings."

"That is not what I am."

"No?" His eyes were wide as he shot the question at her. "Then why do I feel this strong desire to reach out and kiss you every time we meet?"

"Because we're attracted. Fate has decided we are to be together."

"Gordon's warned us about you."

"Gordon? The same man who hunts us down to kill us?"

Zac's eyes were filled with horror. "You don't know what your kind do. This morning we found a man burnt to a crisp because one of yours decided to kill him!"

"At the cemetery?" she asked.

"Yes." He looked into her eyes and slowly came to the realization she was pushing for. "That was you? You killed a man in cold blood?"

"No, I killed a man because he was trying to rape me!"

Zac's eyes softened. "I'm so sorry, I'm just so confused..."

"Let your heart lead you, that's how I got here... to you," Emmy said touching his forearm.

He was wearing a button less blue shirt that made his eyes even deeper. His skin felt warm beneath her palm. The pain in her stomach was still there. Emmy's head drummed but she didn't care. This felt right. She wasn't going to stop before finding out where this would lead them.

Zac placed a hand over hers, lifting it to his lips to plant a soft kiss that left a heated print on her skin. He pulled her close until their bodies were flush. They were almost the same height. He was only a few centimeters higher and she found it alluring.

Emmy couldn't take it any longer and closed the distance between them, pressing her lips against his. He responded, wrapping both arms tighter around her until she felt the air being sucked away from her lungs. But that was just another burden to add to the growing list. At this proximity, having his hands running up and down her back and her hands around his neck, Emmy felt like she would die before they got to do more.

"I want you, Emmy." His mouth ran down the length of her neck, kissing lightly.

"I want you too," she managed, almost choking on the desire.

Zac lifted her small frame off the floor, carried her until her back was pressed against the wall. She slipped along the front of him, denim sliding on denim, his eager fingers unbuttoning the top of her jeans.

Emmy allowed him the move, suddenly relieved that she'd sneaked in a quick shower at a local gym before coming here. Her skin felt

clean, itching to be released from clothing. And when he pulled the boots off her feet, followed by her jeans down the length of her thin legs, she gladly kicked them away. He was back to her mouth in seconds, kissing her with a ferocity she'd never seen in a man. It was almost animalistic, amateurish, like this was the first time anyone had enticed him into this. And she wondered... just for a second, could he be...

"Have you ever been with a woman before?" Emmy asked.

His eyes darkened, cheeks reddened.

"You don't need to be embarrassed." She pulled the shirt up and over his head. She ran fingertips along the firm expanse of his chest and stomach, feeling the ridges of muscle.

"No, I haven't," he whispered against the crook of her neck, avoiding her eyes.

She forced his face toward hers, meeting his gaze with a soft smile. "It is all right, Zac. There is no need to keep any secrets between us. I will be gentle with you."

"No, there's no need to be gentle." Zac pushed past her lips to force his tongue inside her mouth.

Emmy responded to his every whim, licking the inside of his mouth with her tongue, allowing his hands to move along the contours of her body while she unbuttoned his jeans enough to stick her hands down his crotch. He responded with a shiver, lips falling away from hers to press against her chest.

"It's alright," she whispered.

"I can't take this anymore." Zac pulled down his jeans and underwear in one movement, discarding them on the floor. His eager hands pulled her panties off next. Zac ran his palm along her chest, and her nipples reacted instantly. She pulled off the tank top herself, as he stared at her breasts in wonder.

He hesitated for a while, almost like he didn't know what to do now that she was naked and ready for the taking. So she stepped up to him, pressing as tight as she could. His erection lengthened between them, along her gut. Zac closed his eyes to the connection as she bit on her bottom lip to fight the throbbing inside her head.

"Don't shy away now," she managed in spite of the pain. A new hunger was added to the mix, as the wetness between her legs urged her forward, enticing him. She didn't care about foreplay and getting in the mood. They were both more than ready. "Zac, make love to me."

His blue eyes met hers, arms suddenly around her while he led her back to the couch. He sat down, and Emmy's gaze focused on his erection.

She smiled at him, spreading her legs far enough to kneel on either side of him. Emmy sunk down onto Zac. The pain in her head, and the queasiness surging through her system suddenly faded. The only thing left was the rapid heart movement. But she could handle that.

"Can you feel that?" she asked, wrapping her arms around his shoulders.

"Oh... yeah..." he moaned, licking his lips.

"No, the pain... it's subsided," Emmy whispered.

Zac lifted her hips slightly, encouraging her to slide up along his length and back down again. It seemed like he wanted to move forward, and who was she to deny the passion burning inside them? Especially since joining provided a reprieve from the pain of being close to him... maybe it was why the Celestials were so keen to stay away and destroy the Phoenix.

But at the moment, enjoying her glide up and down this exquisite man's body, she didn't care. The feeling of desire swept inside her veins, the growing warmth starting at the very core between them until Emmy felt the waves of orgasm tear through her. All control failed her, heat itched along her skin, the fire starting around her... and she stopped.

She took a deep breath, ensuring the flames didn't erupt and accidentally kill Zac while they were enjoying this intimate moment.

"Why'd you stop?" he asked groggily.

"Are you okay?"

"More okay than I've ever been."

"Good." She cut him off with a kiss, rebuilding the rhythm until she watched Zac's face convulse as he exploded inside her.

Zac howled, his head falling against the back of the couch.

She held his head to her chest, hoping to anchor him through what

was obviously his first orgasm with a woman.

When his eyes met hers, they'd lightened to the color of a clear summer's day. His pupil was gone. There was only the blue of his iris inside the outline of white.

"Zac..."

He didn't say anything, seemed frozen to the spot though his heart still beat against her cooling body.

"Zac, what's wrong?" As the question left her mouth, he quivered beneath her.

Another howl escaped through his mouth, only this one sounded more like pain than anything else.

Emmy jumped off his lap, taking a step back as he fell on his side, slipping off the couch. His hands were pressed against the floor, knees holding most of his body weight as she spotted something tugging at the skin of his back. The smoothness rippled as white tips tore through his skin and slowly spiked out, making the opening bigger and bigger.

"What is happening?"

"Step away from him, you fire demon!"

Emmy jumped at the words. She hadn't realized there was anyone else in the room. She turned around quickly and came face-to-face with a tall man with short white hair. His blue gaze pierced hers, the frown so deep on his face the skin seemed almost translucent.

"Who are you?"

"I'm Gordon. I've been looking for you." He took a step forward. There was something clutched in his right hand, a rounded sword with the hilt curved around his knuckles.

Emmy took an instinctive step back, looking over her shoulder to find white wings halfway out of Zac's back. He lifted to his knees, spine arching painfully as the howls continued. Wings were tearing out of his body! Why didn't the man with the white hair have wings, too?

"What's happening to him?" she whispered, tears stinging her eyes.

Gordon sniffed the air between them. "You tempted him into sin. He's changing because of you. Your kind isn't welcome near ours."

"Help him!"

Gordon shook his head. "No, it's too late for him. He's been tainted with your essence and must be culled, just like you!" Even before the words were out of his mouth, the man swung the sword.

Emmy watched it slicing through the air and backed up enough to avoid it.

Gordon repositioned himself, taking another swing. This time he knocked over a lamp sitting on a side table.

"No, Gordon," Zac called between his howls of pain.

The man paused, sword held in midair only a few paces away from them. His gaze bore into Zac's and when he swung the large blade again, it struck the tip of one of the new-formed wings. A gush of blood splashed along her midsection, staining the floor and sending spasms through Zac's body.

"Zac!" The bastard was going to cut his wings off! What effect would that have on him? Emmy wasn't about to find out. She threw herself against Gordon, sending them off to the side, collapsing on the floor in a heap. Her naked shoulder scraped against the carpet, leaving behind a burning sensation she ignored. She pushed her hands against the floor, gaining her footing seconds before Gordon.

The sword was there again, between them. What was it about that sword that would hurt both of their kinds? She wasn't going to waste anymore time thinking about it. Emmy ducked below the sword's height and barreled against Gordon's gut. She struggled, but managed to wrap both arms around him, willing the heat to begin.

Emmy didn't want to leave Zac like this, but there was only one thing that would get Gordon away from both of them. She needed to call her fire and finish him off. The heat was buzzing around them, popping her ears as it engulfed them.

Tears fell from her eyes when she stared at Zac's body. He was upright now, half-leaning on the couch, blood staining his wounded wing. They were both out, large majestic white wings spread out behind him.

But she wouldn't get to see him again, not after this.

"Emmy, stop!"

She thought it was Zac, but he was still leaning over, wounded, trying to gain control over his new self. Emmy turned her head toward the front door. Bea was standing there, on the other side of her flame-blurred vision.

"Don't do it, Emmy," Bea said, lifting a hand. "We don't kill."

"He tried to kill us, wounded Zac." The smoke stung Emmy's eyeballs and Gordon was trying to point the sword downward into her.

"I know. He'll never stop trying to kill us, but we're not like him," Bea continued. "Please, retreat the flames and let me take care of him."

"But he'll never let us be. I cannot leave Zac's side, not now, not after —"

"I don't expect you to," Bea said with a frown. "You should stay with Zac, but not here. If you want to be together, you must leave this time."

Emmy hesitated.

The flames held at bay around her for a few minutes as she pondered the words. Another time would require her being near death, but it would also ensure her being with Zac. They'd exchanged one intimate moment that resulted in his transformation, but she wanted more. She needed more, wanted to know everything about him and needed him to want the same from her.

Emmy turned her face toward him. He was upright, sweat and blood trickling down his naked body. His eyes met hers. A small nod was all she needed to confirm his wishes.

The heat lessened, a little bit at a time until the flames were gone. She stepped away from the man who'd tried to kill them. He fell back. The skin on his arms, neck and chin was blistered. His breathing was shallow and ragged.

"Is this why you tried so hard to keep us away from each other?" Zac stepped forward, looking down at Gordon with anger on his handsome features.

Gordon managed a nod but couldn't answer. The strange sword hung limp at his side.

Emmy turned her attention to Bea. "Is it for the same reason you

keep our kind from theirs?"

She shook her head, the wiry long hair hardly moving as she made the motion. "No, I just want to keep everyone safe, including their kind. The Celestials kill us and any of their own kind that involves themselves with one of ours. I refuse to have so much bloodshed when all I need to do is encourage distance."

In that moment, everything Emmy had ever been raised to think was right and wrong was turned upside down. Since when did fire beings care about others?

"We might be from demons and the total opposite from them, but essentially, we all came from the same place," Bea answered. "We aren't evil. You were right about that but there are those who'll never see it that way."

Zac's hand wrapped around hers and her head didn't ache.

"The pain's gone," she said to Bea.

"Yes, you two are connected now. It's time you get out of 'ere before he gets a second wind." Bea pointed at Gordon, who still struggled for breath on the floor.

"What will you do with him?" she asked.

"We'll deal with that," she said turning back towards the door.

"Liz!"

The short woman appeared.

"Watch him for a little while, I need to say goodbye to Emmy!"

"No problem."

"Come on you two. We need to get to the roof." Bea turned to walk out the front door.

* * * * *

"Thanks for everything," Emmy said with a small smile. "Sorry to cause you so much trouble."

Bea shrugged. "Ah, what can you do?"

"I wish I had time to tell our people the truth," Zac said, stepping forward to look at Bea.

"They'll never believe you," she answered with another shrug.
"Now, get goin'."

"Are you sure this is going to work? Don't I need to be close to death?"

"Jumping off the side of a building can only lead to death... unless you've got wings," Bea said with a wink.

"Are you sure you can fly?" Emmy asked him.

He nodded.

"Now, stop stalling before you catch a cold up here. You're both still naked!" Bea teased.

"Thank you again," Emmy said. "I hope we'll meet again sometime."

Bea nodded in agreement.

Emmy took a deep breath of air before lifting one bare foot after the other. What was the point of putting any clothes on when she was headed toward fire anyway? She released the breath and took off at a sprint. Her legs moved briskly, feeling the swishing of air around her body. The further she moved, the greater the air climbed up her nose. The edge was drawing closer and when she jumped over the short railing and felt her chest being lifted by nothing but air, she closed her eyes.

The exhilaration of free-falling, even if only for a few seconds, was amazing. Adrenaline shot through her system in a surge that had every nerve-ending in her body tingling.

This was it.

She was heading down the side of the building, facing death rapidly.

And just when she'd lost all orientation of how far she'd fallen, strong arms wrapped around her. She opened her eyes to meet Zac's. They were still the blue of the sky and for a brief moment she wondered if they'd ever change back. Emmy snuggled against him. One arm was wrapped around her back, the other beneath her knees.

Together, they gained height again. His two large wings swayed behind him, like an injured bird who could still take flight. The bleeding had stopped but there was a small section missing from the top of one

wing, and she imagined it wouldn't be a good idea to stay in mid-flight for too long.

Emmy leaned close to his ear and whispered, "Are you sure you want to do this?"

"I don't want to be anywhere you're not," he said with a smile.

Her stomach fluttered as they hovered over the roof of the building they'd just left. She felt the warmth of fire igniting inside her like a match, but Emmy just wanted a few more seconds... just enough height to see Bea one last time, wave goodbye to her.

The old woman lifted a hand and waved.

Emmy did the same, just as the fire started around them. She hoped this wouldn't kill Zac in the process or disfigure him while they were transported. Bea had assured her that being connected and sharing intimacy would make him immune.

As the fire engulfed them like a fireball in the middle of a clear Sydney sky, Emmy spotted Gordon approaching Bea. His curved sword was high in the air, ready to strike.

Emmy opened her mouth to warn Bea but the flames were too heavy and bright, loud. She called out to the old woman anyway, "Bea, behind you!"

Bea lifted her head in response, meeting Emmy's eyes. Even past the flames, it suddenly felt like the psychic connection Bea seemed to have with her was working both ways. Emmy felt the calm sweep through the woman as she glanced over her shoulder, before turning back to look at Emmy.

In that brief second, everything moved in slow motion. Gordon's sword was above his head, preparing to cut through the air, his muscles working with perfect aim.

Bea shut her eyes.

"Zac, we have to save her!" she whispered into his ear.

"How?"

"Can you get us close to her?"

He nodded. "I'll try."

"Please, we're running out of time!"

Zac didn't hesitate. His wings flapped behind him instantly, moving them across the sky like a speeding fireball. They were so close it took only seconds to reach Bea. Her eyes were still closed as the sword cut down toward her.

Emmy's heart was pounding like crazy as they approached Gordon. He was oblivious, focused on tearing down Bea.

"Hold me tight, okay?" Emmy shifted in his strong arms, hands extended outward, flames caught in mid-motion.

She grabbed the old woman by the shoulders. Using all of her strength to lift Bea away from the blade's impact and wrapping her into the rising fire.

Gordon lost his footing with the momentum of the strong swing he was hoping to deliver.

Bea's eyes snapped open, arms wrapped around the tops of Emmy's bare arms for added support.

"You don't have to do this!" she said.

"Yes, I do," Emmy said with a nod, digging her fingers deeper.

Emmy wasn't able to keep the flames at bay much longer. She looked up at Zac and he tightened his arms around her to support the extra weight.

She shut her eyes and everything went black. All feeling, except Zac's strong embrace and the tight hold she had on Bea, vanished.

Epilogue

Sydney, Australia
2057

The flames cleared just as Emmy's fingers slipped off Bea's shoulders. She instinctively reached forward to grab her again but the older woman had already landed on her butt with a thump.

"Where are we?" Zac's arms were still wrapped tight around her, protectively, as if he didn't want to let go.

"We could be anywhere." Emmy looked around at their surroundings. It was dark, shadows played along the bare wall behind them from the movements going on outside in the street. As her eyes adjusted further, she noticed several racks of clothing and an assortment of other shelves.

This had to be some sort of store. Like the ones she'd perused in Sydney, where clothing hung from everywhere with beautiful colors and fabrics she hadn't known in her original time. Though this place was bleak in comparison.

"We're inside some sort of camping store." Bea approached them with a slight limp.

"Are you hurt?" Emmy scrutinized the older woman. Bea smoothed her wrinkled clothes and ignored the question.

"Sounds like the perfect place for us to land." Zac untangled his arms from hers and walked over to one of the clothes racks with narrowed

eyes. His wings were no longer visible and his eyes seemed back to normal.

Bea met her eyes and answered her unspoken question, "He doesn't need them all the time, but they'll be available whenever he does."

Emmy sighed, looking down at her still naked body. She'd forgotten they were both still naked, until she admired his athletic body. Though now didn't seem the right time to be thinking about that. Even if he set her desire ablaze as she watched him choose some pants.

"Well, go on." Bea cut into her thoughts. "Don't just stand there. Grab yourself some clothes so we can get out 'ere and see where you've dropped us."

Emmy nodded. She walked along the store, bare feet kicking away objects she couldn't see properly in the bleak lighting.

She finally found a rack with what looked like women's clothing, though it definitely didn't match the feminine standards the storefronts of Sydney had displayed during her brief stay. Emmy wished she'd somehow thought to grab her discarded clothing, but the only true things worth saving were their lives. And together, Zac and Emmy had managed to save Bea's as well.

She took a shallow breath and released it as she pulled dark pants made of heavy material over her hips, zipping them up and clasping the button in the middle. Emmy then wrapped her body in a green short-sleeve shirt and buttoned it all the way up to her neck. She was secretly glad there were no mirrors around, she probably looked awful.

"You look beautiful," Zac whispered kissing her hair. He moved around to stand in front of her, with a smile on his handsome face. He kissed her lips lightly, with the promise of what lay ahead now that they were together.

"The shoes are over 'ere!" Bea shouted from the other side of the small store.

Emmy pulled back from the kiss, amazed at how wonderful it felt to be around Zac without having to deal with sickness affecting her body. She stared into his eyes for a lingering moment and confirmed they *were* back to normal. Then Emmy wrapped her fingers around his and led him

toward the shoe rack.

They each picked out a pair of thick socks and ankle boots that were heavy, but comfortable. He offered her a wink as he tied his shoelace and her heart fluttered at his affection.

"Great. Now that we're all dressed let's get out of 'ere." Bea was already past the unattended counter and at the glass-paneled door when a shrieking sound erupted outside.

"What is that?" Emmy asked covering her ears.

Zac shrugged.

Bea continued to the door, pushing it outward and stepping outside, one of her wrinkled hands still holding the long door handle. Whatever she found outside shocked her so much her jaw dropped.

"What's wrong?" Emmy rushed over to the old woman, dropping her hands from the side of her head as she noticed a bunch of weapons sitting under a long, shattered glass display case. When she reached Bea's side, Emmy looked out onto the street. Her heart sank. She couldn't believe her eyes.

Zac sidled up behind her.

The sky was black, with a tinge of red and a cover of smoke. As if there'd been too many fires and not enough rain to clear them. The buildings across the street were wrecked, bricks tumbling over the side and some roofs caved in. Glass littered the sidewalks, as well as debris and burnt car shells. Sirens rang out from several directions in the distance as a bunch of people ran past screaming at each other.

"Where are we?" she breathed.

Bea sighed. "Emmy, we're back in Sydney."

"This doesn't look like Sydney to me." It was Zac who pointed out the obvious, placing a hand on Emmy's shoulder.

The old woman turned to pin her piercing glare on each of them. "I think we've arrived in a future Sydney."

Emmy couldn't understand how she'd worked that out simply by glancing outside. As far as she was concerned they could be anywhere.

"Emmy, look to the left," Bea said doing her mind-reading thing again.

She turned her face, squinting to get a clearer view before finally spotting the arch of the Sydney Harbor Bridge, between gaps in the smoky haze.

“Oh.” Emmy couldn’t think of anything more to say.

“Looks like we better get back inside and grab some of those weapons,” Zac said already heading back into the store.

“Emmy, I believe you got us ‘ere for a reason,” Bea said with a twinkle in her eye. “We may have caused this future after we left, and have landed ‘ere to correct it.”

The realization was a little too deep to grasp, but as long as she knew Bea was safe and she had Zac beside her, Emmy was willing to face this new time.

Author Bio

Yolanda lives in a suburb of Sydney, Australia with her wonderful husband and cute daughter. She's been putting stories together since her early teens.

Now that her daughter's in school, she gets the opportunity to write every day, and she loves every minute of it!

Yolanda's had over 50 short stories published online and even has another (creepy) persona called the crypt SCRYbe. When she's not writing she spends as much time as possible with her small family. She also enjoys watching movies, TV shows and reading – she *loves* to read.

Come visit her blog: www.ysfetsos.blogspot.com

And if you dare... drop by and visit her other, twisted persona:
www.nocturnalooze.com/ascrybe1.htm