



## Tangled Ashes

*Michèle Phoenix*

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**Tangled Ashes** Michèle Phoenix

**2013 Christy Award finalist!**

When Marshall Becker arrives in Lamorlaye, France, to begin the massive renovation of a Renaissance-era castle, he unearths a dark World War II history few in the village remember. The project that was meant to provide an escape for Becker instead becomes a gripping glimpse into the human drama that unfolded during the Nazi occupation and seems to live on in midnight disturbances and bizarre acts of vandalism.

## Tangled Ashes Details

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# From Reader Review Tangled Ashes for online ebook

## Victor Gentile says

Michele Phoenix in her new book, “Tangled Ashes” published by Tyndale House Publishers brings us into the life of Architect Marshall Becker.

From the Back Cover: After invading Lamorlaye, France, Nazi officials don’t hesitate to take over the beautiful Meunier manor as their headquarters, hiring two young Frenchwomen, Marie and Elise, who clean and launder to help supplement their families’ meager incomes. But the girls begin to grow suspicious when medical equipment arrives, followed by an influx of pregnant women. As the Nazis’ plans for the manor become clear, the girls must decide where their loyalties truly lie.

More than fifty years later . . .

Architect Marshall Becker arrives in Lamorlaye to begin the massive renovation of a Renaissance-era castle. The project that was meant to provide an escape for Becker instead becomes a gripping glimpse into the human drama that unfolded during the Nazi occupation and seems to live on in midnight disturbances and bizarre acts of vandalism.

Becker explores the castle’s shadowy history as he seeks to cope with the demons from his own past. Only Jade, the feisty nanny of the owner’s children, is willing to stand up to him. But Becker soon discovers that every one of the château’s inhabitants seems to have something to hide and something to protect—and something worth fighting for.

If you read my reviews you know that I like history. And I especially enjoy historical novels that center around World War II, something about the era I suspect. Michele Phoenix has weaved together a story that takes place in 1943 and in 2001. Each chapter alternates between then and now as Marshal Becker goes to France to renovate the exact castle that is the focus in 1943. “Tangled Ashes” is a thriller with all kinds of excitement and danger. This is a book about secrets and how the secrets made in 1943 affect the generations now. Also Becker has secrets and they are causing him a great deal of problems. Ms. Phoenix shows us cleverly how God has to expose those secrets to bring about a healing process. Becker is an architect and not only are we rebuilding a decayed castle we are rebuilding lives. Michele Phoenix knows how to weave a captivating story with wonderful characters that breathe. I enjoyed reading this book and recommend it highly.

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## **Rena says**

I'm always intrigued by mysteries with a historical context. That's what initially drew me to this book when a friend recommended it.

In the end, what I read was very good, but I'm not entirely sure what it was. The characters were clear and distinct. Beck's personality, especially, was vivid before I was more than a chapter or two in. However, I found myself wondering what the actual plot was to the story. Most of the action rides on character development--including the chateau, which is itself a character in this context. Until the end, I wasn't sure if the central plot was the mystery of something left behind at Lamorlaye that ties back to Marie, something revolving around Jade, or the more obvious plot point of Becker needing to come to terms with something in his past. Despite the excellent writing that made the setting clear and characters real, the story felt tedious at times because I was wondering where everything was actually going, and there was little to tell me. For the story following Becker as closely as it did, it took way too long to find out what it was that had crippled him so badly. The church and God elements felt a little sudden and easily lost with so much emphasis placed elsewhere in the story, and they read like something ultimately unnecessary when it should have been much more powerful.

The ending satisfied one plot thread while others were addressed yet left open. I ultimately liked that because it held more of an element of realism than most Western fiction where everything falls neatly into place. For a story with such broken souls heading up the cast, we shouldn't at all see perfect closure. We do see seeds, though. Seeds that have been planted that can grow into that closure most readers want for a perfect Happy Ending. But that's a different story entirely that I actually hope Phoenix writes. Regardless of the issues I had with plot focus and pacing, I didn't stop reading until I was at the end. I cared about these people and the chateau and the souls that desperately wanted to be whole again.

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## **Moirra says**

Tangled Ashes is a work of historical fiction, in which author Michele Phoenix transports the reader to Meunier Manor in Lamorlaye, France. She weaves a tale of two castles; the castle in more recent times as it is being renovated and the same castle during World War II. The chapters weave back and forth between the past and the 1990s.

First the reader is introduced to two young women that are hired to work at Meunier manor which has been made into a Nazi headquarters. One of them meets a soldier and love ensues. Although the two French women, Marie and Elise, only took the jobs to supplement their families meager existence, they end up in midst of a medical experiment of Hitler's regime.

In the alternating chapters, reclusive architect, Marshall Becker is introduced. He is hired to restore the now decrepit manor to its former glory. Becker is reluctant to take on the project, yet goes to France to complete the task. As he begins the restoration, Becker finds himself fighting his own demons and the distant memories of a time past at the manor.

This book has a lot of strong points. First, the character development is top-notch. As the mystery builds throughout the novel, the character's personalities reveal the past. Next, the quality of writing Michele Phoenix offers is exceptional. Her ability to weave a masterful story with appropriate, descriptive word choices is above par and made for a quick read, but also one that pulled me into the plot.

The thing I find most compelling in *Tangled Ashes*, is that although it is labeled as a Christian Fiction book, it doesn't come off like one. I am usually hesitant to read novels in this particular genre, because I find them to be sugary, over-the-top characterizations of people of faith. I enjoyed this book immensely because it is not that. Rather, it represents life in its gritty, messy glory. The book is full of realistic characters and life situations most people can relate to. It also doesn't tie the matter of finding faith up into a neat little ribbon. Jade doesn't present her faith in a nice, neat formulaic manner and the character of Beck doesn't accept what she says blinding. Instead, he goes kicking and screaming, full of doubt and lingering questions, which is closer on how most people wrestle with God..

The story's intricacies made this one top-notch. It is gripping, engaging and enticing. It is thought-provoking and sad, hopeful and deep. The story is riveting and the ending is unexpected and memorable. If you are historical fiction fan, *Tangled Ashes* is a must read.

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## **Lisa says**

I have a thing for castles. Maybe it was the college semester I spent here or all the fairytales I read as a kid. Whatever the reason, I like castles and manor houses and vicariously traveling to places I might not see for a very long time, if ever.

In *Tangled Ashes*, author Michele Phoenix takes us on a trip to northern France—Lamorlaye, to be exact—where a Renaissance-era castle is in need of renovations. A wealthy British entrepreneur has plans to turn the aging château into a hotel, and American architect Marshall “Beck” Becker is the man for the job.

Beck is an interesting character who brings with him more baggage than would fit on a jumbo jet. We know he's battling some demons from the past and his chosen weapon is alcohol. A brilliant and talented artist and architect, Beck's personal life cripples his professional life. Entering into the mix is Jade, the nanny of the castle owner's children. She consistently lets Beck have a piece of her mind and challenges his beliefs about his past and his present coping methods. Woven into the present-day story is the account of two young girls working at a Nazi-occupied manor near the castle in the 1940s, toward the latter end of World War II. The stories converge as secrets are uncovered.

*Tangled Ashes* was an enjoyable read, though I was slightly disappointed by the ending. I'm a happy ending, tie-it-all-up-with-a-pretty-bow kind of girl, most of the time, and that's not exactly how this book ends. It's appropriate for this story, though, because Beck is battling an alcohol addiction, and from what I've learned about addiction, there's nothing pretty or tidy about it. So to end the book in any other way would have been misleading and unrealistic. Along those same lines, Beck disappointed me in his many failings. You want to root for the guy, but he's so messed up, he fails again and again. I wanted to give up on him. Maybe that says something about my expectations for people. Thank God, He doesn't give up on us, and Beck heads toward that conclusion as he's confronted with the God he's been trying to cut out of his life.

I had a minor issue with Beck's spiritual transformation as the author implied that the traditions of the liturgical church were inadequate for bringing about change and true spirituality. I don't know if it was intentional or a byproduct of her involvement with an evangelical church her parents helped found in Lamorlaye, but it didn't sit well with me. I would hate for someone to walk away from this book thinking the ancient Christian traditions and liturgies were useless. I have been learning otherwise, of late, but that's a

different story for another day.

Jade has her own issues, but she's a good complement to Beck's brash and aggressive behavior. The castle, however, is the star, and I have a feeling that words and pictures don't do it justice. At least, not in its heyday. View Phoenix's photo album [here](#). The castle could use some love. Makes me wish I had lots of money and a good reason to move to France.

Overall, I liked the book. Phoenix grew up in France, in the shadow of the Lamorlaye castle, and I'm glad she took the time and effort to write a story that shares her experience in that part of the world.

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In exchange for my review, I received a free copy of Tangled Ashes from the publisher.

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### **Jamie Jasper says**

It was different, but good. I would read another book by this author...I kind of liked that she didn't tie everything up nice with a bow at the end, and left it real(the potential for a relationship between Jade and the main character).

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### **Kav says**

An unexpected treasure of a read with a dual timeline! Present day tangles with 1940s in occupied France and provides a story rife with complicated layers and complex characters. Phoenix does an amazing job of weaving past and present together and the way the two timelines collide towards the end is page-turning perfection!

This is the kind of novel that explores hard topics and poses difficult questions. About life. And faith. Beck, in particular, is a lost soul, dragged down by despair. I didn't like him much at the beginning and he still irked me as the story progressed but I could also understand how he'd gotten to this point in his life as the author peels back some of those layers to reveal pain and hurt and betrayal.

A moving account of people caught up in real life struggles and the God who has the power to bring hope and healing if they are willing accept His offered hand.

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### **Rhonda says**

This was an ok story, but I found myself not really caring about the characters and felt like the plot was a bit predictable.

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## **Nikole Hahn says**

Tangled Ashes by Michele Phoenix mixes the past and the present in a dual-story of intrigue. While the story is five-star quality, I'm not sure I get the correlation between the title and the story.

Marshall Becker is an architect and a drinker. His partner and friend, Gary tricks him into taking a job in France to restore an old castle. While in the castle, Becker witnesses strange phenomena like things being destroyed. Slowly, Becker learns the history of the castle as he works on finishing the restoration project by the owner's wife's birthday bash. At the same time, you get to read the story of two french maids decades earlier during Nazi occupation. As the strings of the varying plot lines drift together, Becker and the on-site nanny become involved, but that's a complicated storyline.

Most stories that involve a man and a woman usually end up with a romance. Becker and the nanny, Jade have their struggles. Becker is an alcoholic and tries to quit drinking without help. Jade has a secret illness and she's not forthcoming about it. The reader will become tense as she nears the middle of the novel to find out why Becker drinks. It's shocking. Shocking still that by the end of the novel, Jade was never told of the reason for Becker's drinking. That would be a typical novel. Michele Phoenix writes a different kind of novel.

It doesn't involve romance and Becker's character is rough. You'd think with such a rough, loud, and unpleasant character a reader would not like him. This reader liked Becker. In spite of the roughness, you saw a bit of the tenderness he hides behind the bottle. He often loses his temper, even in front of the children. Then, there's JoJo—the squatter on the property.

JoJo doesn't talk. He's great with horses and wood. As the plots start to come together to complete the puzzle, the reader is left in an aha moment. It all makes sense now. The end of the story is vaguely unsatisfying. You wonder if the end was left that way for a sequel. That being said, I enjoyed the story and the complex characters. I gave this novel four stars.

\*Book given by publisher to review.

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## **Melinda says**

Tangled Ashes by Michele Phoenix

In Lamorlaye, France there is a castle with a history that began in the 1940s and is about to be unearthed.

American Marshall Becker is at the top of his game professionally as his restoration business is going international. Personally Becker has never been lower. To fight his demons he's turned to alcohol and shut himself off from the world.

Becker finds himself completely out of his element as he works against the clock to restore the castle before the deadline Fallon, the owner gave him. The work isn't a problem. It is the presence of Fallon's twin six year olds and their nanny, Jade. Along for the ride is the interior designer, Therese, and a recluse who lives on the

property, Jojo. Soon his drinking becomes an obstacle in getting his work done as well as a mysterious visitor who searches the castle at night.

Challenging him along the way is Jade. The energetic nanny with a unique outlook on life. She's pushing him to be kinder and face the alcohol problems. Her perspective on life increasingly aggravates him and then breaks him as he learns of the motivation behind her outlook.

As renovations continue, secrets are uncovered. There is a tie to the 1940s that is clear from the beginning. If you know history, then you understand the significance of the dates. WWII is underway and the castle in France has been occupied by Nazis. Soon history becomes present as an event 60+ years in the making happens.

I enjoyed Tangled Ashes, Phoenix wove an interesting tale. The main character in the story was the castle. She presented it beautifully, making me want to visit France and bypass the Eiffel Tower for Lamorlaye.

I must admit I was more intrigued with the WWII portion of the story. Despite seeing where it was headed early on, Phoenix kept me interested in the journey to get there. The modern day story was good. Becker is a hard man to like even as a fictional character. His growth came slowly and really it wasn't a marked growth by the end of the book.

As a personal taste - I could have done without the multiple paragraphs on the nightmares Becker was having. I'm not a fan most of the time of detailing dreams or nightmares. Many authors try to ambiguously haunt their characters in an effort to drive up the drama. As a reader this is infuriating. Phoenix may have hidden clues to Becker's demons in the nightmares, but I took to skimming them.

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### **Laura Priebe says**

Though it was a bit predictable in places (bad boy opens up around good girl), I still enjoyed it for its surprises and history.

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### **Naomi Musch says**

I stumbled upon Tangled Ashes by Michele Phoenix a couple weeks ago and devoured it. It's one of those stories you happen upon only once or twice a year -- the kind that should have a cover blurb reading, "I was written with your specific taste in mind." For me, that's women's fiction set in a superbly written historical backdrop and characters combined of both imperfect and compelling qualities.

I mean, talk about an anti-hero! I adore a well crafted anti-hero, and it was hard for me to even think I would ever like Becker, the anti-hero in this one. Gosh, but he tries so hard I couldn't help it, even though every one of his failures angered me. And Jade, who started off as so easy going, had quite a few flaws in her own character to bring her to life. But the story that really sung was that of Marie, the young French woman working in the chateau who is trying to protect her friend and rescue her friend's baby.

The story of the Lebensborn (Nazi baby factories) in Nazi Germany -- or in this case, Nazi occupied France -



- is ripe with intrigue and danger, and the author did a superb job of tangling up my emotions over the women and babies caught in such a plight.

There's some mystery to the story which is a main thread, but that didn't compel me as much as the characters themselves. I would call this an extremely good character driven story, built around a strong plot, rather than the other way around.

I learned, after completing the reading, that the author spent a good deal of her growing up years around the castle in the story as well as experiencing some other things that were included in the story (no spoilers!) and the authenticity of writing "what she knows" comes through. It's a 5-star novel, and I'm a new fan of Michele Phoenix.

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### **Tammy G. says**

Wow! This debut novel, TANGLeD ASHES by Michele Phoenix is an incredible read!

First of all, I love to read about World War II and how many people escaped or helped others in their time of need. TANGLeD ASHES (don't you love the way the title is upper and lower case words to represent tangles?!?!?) well, just a side note .... this is a book that deals with a different side of Hitler's plan to bring ALL Aryan peoples into the world to rule and have a "perfect" bloodline.

Now, in the present day Marshall Becker, otherwise known as Beck, has been "suckered" into renovating a massive Renaissance-era castle by his partner, Gary. When Beck arrives at the train station in Chantilly and is met by Therese Gallet who is to accompany him to the castle in Lamorlaye, Beck is intrigued. Beck learns that the castle was a Kommandnatur-a Nazi headquarters-during the war. Lamorlaye and Chantilly were Hitler's calvary's home base.

Once Beck and Miss Gallet begin to unearth the old castle and renovations begin--odd things begin to happen making Beck come to the realization that someone wants to hide what happened here so many years ago.

Once the story begins chapter three begins with Elise and Marie's story. How all those years ago smart and gussy Marie pulled a stunt to rescue one child.

From chapter three until the end of the book about every two chapters is the story about what Elise and Marie were going through during the war.

I had heard about the Lebensborn. It was a place that offered an attractive alternative to a hospital birth to many women, especially single ones. The Lebensborn homes offered unwed mothers a place to go have their baby in secret, in pleasant surroundings, with top-notch pre-natal care. "We were treated like princesses," remarked one girl who brought her baby into the world at one of these homes. About 75 per cent of these girls came from the BDM or the Reich Labour Service. A number of children were born disabled and were dispatched to euthanasia clinics where they were either poisoned or gassed.

Oh! The sad incidents that came with Hitler's regime! But oh! the wonderful courage that God wrought in many also!

Mystery, suspense, history and love all wrapped into one fantastic read!

\*This book was provided by Handlebar/Tyndale Publishing\*

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### **Laura Knoerr says**

A chateau in France during World War Two that is used for the Nazi Lebensborn program...

A baby rescued...

An American company hired in present day to rehab the 'haunted' chateau...

A man in need of redemption...

A woman who seems out of place caring for other people's children...

The premise has so much promise. The story begins in an intriguing way with the viewpoint of a sixteen year old French girl, Marie, who works for the Nazis at the chateau to provide for her family. Gradually, she realizes what is going on, especially since her friend and co-worker is caught up in it.

Juxtaposed with the World War Two story is a modern story about an American company rehabbing the chateau to serve as a high end hotel and restaurant. The American in charge of the rehab, a man named Becker, has been sent to accomplish the job by his partner as an alternative to alcohol intervention therapy. A mysterious Frenchwoman designer irritates Becker, but facilitates the process of the rehab project. Another Frenchwoman, the lovely Jade, cares for the property owner/developer's children and begins to minister to Becker as well as a mysterious man who lives on the fringes of the property.

Unfortunately, Becker never becomes likable or truly redeems himself. The bulk of the modern story is about his tortured relationships, his victim mentality and his ongoing and unsuccessful battle against alcoholism. Even the character of Jade unravels. Then, the promised mystery from the Nazis in France during World War Two, also delivers only sadness and despair in its resolution.

Spoiler alert.

When I reached the end of the book, I felt cheated. I had put up with all the anger and failure and depression and fear of the characters, and at the end of the book all I got was more anger and fear and depression. The World War Two story ends badly. And then, when Becker abandons Jade, who is fighting cancer, to go home and get alcohol treatment, I wanted to strangle him - and the author - for stringing me along. I know people with horrible life problems and I don't enjoy being pulled down into their misery. The book only hints at the saving grace of God, but never manifests it. The book, like Jade's church, is "holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power. Have nothing to do with them." (2 Timothy 3:5)

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## Coyle says

This book is a serviceable read... and not much more. Granted, Michele Phoenix can string together two words- and quite well at that (I read the book fairly quickly, and with far less wincing that I though there would be given that this book is basically Christian chick lit). What fell flat here was really the plot. There are two story lines, a major one set in the present focusing on Marshall Becker, the alcoholic architect charged with updating the local castle for a rich Englishman, and his growing/tense/banter-filled relationship with Jade, the rich Englishman's nanny. The minor story line is set in [sigh] Nazi-occupied France at the same castle and involves two French maids hired to work at the "secret" Nazi baby factory set up in the same castle. The two stories finally collide at the end of the book. (I won't give any spoilers, not that there are many to give.)

The chief strength of this book is that it is well written. I sailed through it easily and with some level of enjoyment. Even more, while her faith clearly comes through, she's not preachy (much) about it. While there are ways to work your beliefs into a story organically (cf. Stephen Lawhead), far too many Christian authors

fling it in your face, often at the expense of artistic value. Phoenix does not commit this crime, and even has some talent as a storyteller, she just needs a good story to apply it to.

The biggest problem I had with the book is, as I've been hinting at, the lack of a worthwhile plot. Through the 350+ pages of the story, there's really not enough tension or action or, well, *anything* to set the pace. In the hands of a less competent writer, this book would have been awful. In Phoenix's hands, it's just kind of meh. Having said that, I'll give her a tiny bit of leeway since in the author's note she reveals that the setting and the Nazi baby factory were both real (and where she grew up, see picture above). And that shows in the book- easily the best parts of the story were her descriptions of the setting. And while you can do a lot with setting, you can't carry an entire novel with it. (Just ask Mervyn Peake.)

So would I recommend this book? Well... maybe if you're one of those people who have decided that you are only going to read "Christian" books (please don't be one of those people) then yes, this is better than most of the tripe out there. So if you've restricted yourself to Amish fiction and books that have covers that would be Harlequin Romances if two or three articles of clothing were removed, then this book will likely be a step up and I suggest that you take up and read. On the other hand, there are a lot of books out there that you really could be reading instead, why not pick up one of those?

*I received this book free from the publisher (or at least from a proxy marketer). They did not pay me or in any way require me to write a positive review.*

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## **Renn Shearin says**

When Marshall Becker arrives in Lamorlaye, France, to begin the massive renovation of a Renaissance-era castle, he unearths a dark World War II history few in the village remember. The project that was meant to provide an escape for Becker instead becomes a gripping glimpse into the human drama that unfolded during the Nazi occupation and seems to live on in midnight disturbances and bizarre acts of vandalism.

Tangled Ashes by Michele Phoenix was an intriguing novel that was I enjoyed immensely. This novel was written beautifully and showed a great deal of historical detail and accuracy that could only have come with a great deal of research. Her description of the town of Lamorlaye and the chateau in the novel were clear and well written, and it was evident that the author had lived in the same area as well. The plot line of Tangled Ashes was filled with suspense, mystery, and personal adversity and struggle. The novel

emphasized the importance of learning to love others and oneself, the value of faith in God, and the danger and harm that alcoholism can have for all involved. I enjoyed the fact that while there was some romance in the novel, it did not end in a way typical way and was not the main focus of the novel. The narration of the story was very interesting. Most of the story was told from the perspective of Becker as he worked to renovate the chateau, get over his alcohol addiction, and learn to communicate and live with others. However, after every few chapters there is a chapter from sixty years previously at the same chateau which is told from the perspective of Marie. Marie is a young French girl who is working for the Nazis in Nazi controlled France, and the events she is working through have unexpected influences on what Becker sees and experiences.

The characters of *Tangled Ashes* were well written and realistic. Each of the main characters had their own strengths, flaws, and struggles that made them very sympathetic to the reader. Becker was full of his own problems and it was very convicting and inspiring to begin to see him work through them. I do not want to give too much away, but the other characters were also interesting and well developed, and the characters involved in the side story of this novel also went through a process of great redemption throughout the course of the novel. Overall, I found *Tangled Ashes* to be a great read, and I look forward to reading other novels of Michele Phoenix.

I received this novel for free from [Netgalley.com](http://Netgalley.com) in exchange for an honest review.

Please check out more of my book reviews at my blog, <http://hearttoheartbooks.blogspot.com> if you found this review helpful!

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