

***Smoke Screen* by Emilie Richards**
Excerpt

Chapter 1

She shouldn't have come. Not to New Zealand, not to Waimauri, and most especially not to this place.

Paige Duvall leaned against the sleek, straight trunk of a tree—a tree like none she'd ever leaned on before—and asked herself once more just what she was doing hiking in a country where her only companion was fear—fear and sucking, spitting mud pools that threatened to strip the very flesh off her bones.

She took a deep, calming breath and was rewarded by the acrid, nostril-taunting smell of sulphur. So much for the sweet rewards of fresh air, so much for the benefits of exploring Godzone. Godzone? No, somehow she had ventured into Hell, and the damndest part of it was that she had been warned.

She remembered the words of the old man at the Waimauri dairy yesterday. "So you're from the States. And you've come to see about the thermals." He had been understandably curious. "I should think the house there's a bit of a shambles."

Paige had appreciated his talent for understatement. "A bit," she'd acknowledged, tongue in cheek. "But I'm managing." And she was, if you could count eating meals out of cans and huddling under four quilts because she couldn't figure out how to turn on the heat.

Her answer hadn't dimmed the old man's curiosity. "Done any bushwalking?"

"Not much. I've been too busy trying to keep warm and dry."

The old man had laughed. "Ah yeah. It'll warm up in a month or two. You Yanks, your seasons are turned around." He had filled a bag with odds and ends, then set a bottle of cream-rich milk on top of the rest of her groceries. "You've been warned about wandering around in the thermals by yourself?"

She hadn't been, but the dairyman's next words made up for the lack. "If all the people who died in the Waimauri thermals stood up at the same time and cheered, it'd look like a rugby match in Eden Park." He had pushed the bag across the narrow wooden counter. "Don't go in alone, miss."

But today she had done exactly that.

It wasn't that she hadn't believed the man. She knew little about the strange country she was now exploring, but she did know enough not to underestimate boiling geysers and steaming mud pools. She just hadn't intended to come this far. She had planned to skirt the edges, scan the scenery, then decide if

she wanted to hire a guide to explore farther. Instead she had become caught up in her discoveries, promising herself that she would turn around at the next bend, the next ridge. Now she wasn't sure how to get back.

Through a haze of drifting vapors, Paige could see the haloed sun overhead. She shaded her eyes and checked her watch. The watch was a recent gift from an unlikely source, the wife of the man she had planned to marry. Now the delicate gold band sparkled against her creamy olive skin, reminding her of promises kept and broken. On a more mundane level it also reminded her that if she didn't find her way out soon, she might be one of the dairyman's cheering skeletons.

Just when had she strayed off the path—if she could call the misbegotten tangle of scorched grass garnished by the sharp, low branches of manuka shrub a path? For all she knew, she was still on it, and alive or dead the path was leading her inevitably to the netherworld.

Lost in the Waimauri thermals, and these thermals weren't extravagant wool underwear from a yuppie mail-order catalog. They were an area of such bizarre geological formations that if someone discovered her in the midst of this foul-smelling mist and undulating, steaming earth, he would probably be brandishing a pitchfork. And at this point, she might be glad to see Lucifer himself.

"Welcome to the scenic wonders of New Zealand," Paige said out loud, a grimace stretching her generous bottom lip.

"Welcome? You must be the rare visitor who appreciates our local attractions."

Startled, Paige looked up to see the outline of a man obscured by the steam rising from the shore of a rust-tinted pond to her right. For just a moment she wondered if she *had* called up the devil himself.

She took a step forward, but as she watched, he walked toward her, materializing out of the mist, a disembodied wraith solidifying slowly into flesh and bones and man.

"Would you like me to leave you alone?" he asked with the politely clipped New Zealand accent that she was just beginning to decipher with ease.

Caught exactly at the convergence of relief, curiosity and fascination, Paige scrutinized him before she answered.

He was dark—dark hair, dark eyes, skin a rich hue that proclaimed his Maori blood. His eyebrows were a thick slash of black across a wide forehead broken by a shiny thatch of midnight hair that just skimmed his collar. His features were hawklike, lines and angles and sweeping planes, and his taut, lean body was composed of lines and angles, too. Lines and angles clothed in

khaki chinos and a black pullover sweater distributed over a frame that towered inches over her own.

"No, I don't want to be left alone," she said, shuddering at the thought. "What I want is a good, stiff drink."

Without a smile he pulled a silver flask from the side of his belt and held it out to her. Paige swept her eyes up to his, cocking her head as if to ask permission. "Do I have to sell my soul for this?"

He smiled a little, just a faint twist of his lips, but she took the flask, unscrewing the top with a graceful twirl. Two swigs later she realized it was tea. Hot and strong and laced with nothing more potent than sugar.

"A good start," she said wryly, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand before she handed the flask back.

"You're shivering."

"I started shivering when I got off the plane in Auckland."

He stretched out his hand and lifted the hem of her sweater, rubbing his fingers across the knit. "Cotton," he said, and the word sounded like the vilest profanity. "Cotton and silk. Small wonder you're freezing."

"Worse than freezing, I'm lost."

"Suppose you tell me what you're doing here in the first place. Didn't you see the signs?"

She *had* seen the signs. *Danger. No Trespassing. Proceed At Your Own Risk.* She had ignored them. She had ignored subtler versions of signs like them all her life. This wasn't the first time she had found herself in Hell because of it.

"This place belongs to me," she said.

"Pardon?"

"It's mine, or rather, my mother's." She gestured to the weird landscape surrounding them. "As far as you can see, and farther still. I knew Duvall Development owned a chunk of the world, but until this week, I didn't know we owned Hades, too."

He frowned. "You're American."

"Guilty as charged."

"This is New Zealand."

And she knew exactly what he meant. So why, if she was an American, had she wrapped her

greedy little fingers around a chunk of Godzone? She imagined her deliverer was experiencing the same thing she did every time she realized just exactly how much of the good old U.S. was owned by Arab sheiks.

"My mother is a Kiwi," she said. "The land came to her recently at the death of a relative."

"Jane Abbott."

"That's right. And I'm here to evaluate it."

"Gold in the mud pools? Uranium in the geysers?"

"Land, Mr..." Her voice trailed off when she realized she didn't know his name. "I'm Paige Duvall," she said, holding out her hand.

His hesitation was so slight that a less observant person might not have noticed it. "Adam Tomoana." He took her hand, wrapping it in his own.

In the second before he withdrew she felt the rough texture of calluses and the strength that could crush her delicate bones to dust.

"Were you bushwalking, Mr. Tomoana?" she asked, using the dairyman's phrase. It conjured images of a grown man leaping from shrub to shrub.

"Trespassing."

She was surprised at the bitterness in the word. "True, but it was lucky for me you were. Now you can point me out of here."

"I'll take you back."

She heard no pleasure in his voice, just a bitter resignation. It spoiled her pleasure at his rescue. "Thank you, but I got this far by myself, so if you'll show me which direction to go, I'll get myself out of here."

One expressive eyebrow rose. "Oh? And you're certain your luck will hold again?"

She was beginning to dislike him. "Luck had little to do with it. I was very careful."

"Not careful enough to keep from getting lost."

She shrugged.

He turned and started through the mists. "Perhaps it wasn't luck. Perhaps your footsteps were guided," he said cynically.

"Guided?" she called after him, interested despite herself.

He stopped at precisely the point where he would have disappeared from her view and motioned her toward him. "Our dead ancestors," he said darkly.

She frowned. "What's that supposed to mean?"

He said something in a language so fluid it seemed to slip through the pores of her skin and infuse warmth into her chilled body. He paused, and then with a short, frustrated exhalation of air, he repeated his words in English. "Yours and mine, Miss Duvall," he said shortly. "We're cousins."

Not exactly cousins. Adam allowed himself a small smile. At least, not cousins in the Pakeha way. Still, his words had produced the desired effect. Miss Paige Duvall had said nothing more. She trudged along behind him, keeping up the pace he set without so much as stumbling on the rock-strewn path.

Adam didn't even need to glance behind him to know exactly how close she was, how determined to match his stride, and how irritated. He didn't have to glance at her to know that none of those things would show on her face.

Nothing showed on Paige Duvall's face. Not fear that she was lost in a place unlike any she had seen before, not surprise that a man had materialized out of the mists to rescue her, not anger that the man dared to herald their blood bond. The face was inscrutable, but the woman was not.

He could read every emotion in the veins of her long, slender neck, in the movement of her shoulders, in the nearly invisible shudders of her gloriously perfect body. He could read the way she tossed the short, gleaming mass of black hair off her face and the way one delicately arched eyebrow lifted as she worked to conceal her thoughts.

He could read her. For what it was worth.

Adam crested a hill and stopped, waiting for Paige to catch up to him. "If you're tired, we can rest. But we're almost there."

"I don't think this is the way I came."

He turned and admired her mixture of haughty displeasure and exhaustion. If she hadn't been warm since arriving on the North Island, she was warm now. A thin sheen of perspiration decorated the smooth skin of her forehead. "Perhaps we should go back and let you lead us home, then," he said politely.

He watched her body tense. "I'm not going back. I've seen enough geothermal activity to last me for the day."

"Have you seen enough of New Zealand, too?"

Paige heard the challenge. "Why do you dislike me?"

He was surprised that she had cut so quickly to the point, and he felt a moment of reluctant admiration. She was going to save them both time. "It's not you I dislike, cousin," he said, watching to see her reaction. "It's what you stand for, what your coming here means."

Paige lowered herself to the ground and rested her head against a tree trunk. "I have no cousins in New Zealand," she said, closing her eyes. "My mother was an only child, raised here in Waimauri. Both her parents are dead. My father was raised in New Orleans. My only living relative in New Zealand was a distant relation of my mother's, a woman named Jane Abbott, and she died last year leaving this—" she raised her hand as if words had failed her—"this place to my mother. So you have me confused with someone else."

"Do I?" Adam watched Paige as she rested. She had grown into an extraordinarily beautiful woman, but then, she had been an extraordinarily beautiful child, a child wrenched from all of them by the untimely appearance of her father. Even now he remembered the sound of her grandmother's weeping.

Maori and Pakeha. Polynesian and Caucasian. Brown-skinned and light. How strange that a mixture of blood could produce the rare, perfect creature sitting so placidly in front of him, her lies no more than words she had been taught to believe.

"Do you dislike me because I'm an American and I own part of your country?" Paige opened her eyes to find that he'd been staring at her. "Well, rest easy. I don't want it. I've come to sell it back."

"Have you?"

Strangely, it irritated Paige that she couldn't read his tone. *She* was the unfathomable one. She wasn't sure she liked having her own inscrutability reflected back at her. "How far are we from the house where I'm staying?" She stood, brushing off the seat of her pants.

"Over that ridge." Adam pointed to the next hill. "And through the grove." He said no more, just waited for a bellbird to cease its melodious chiming before he turned and started back the way they had come.

He had been swallowed by the thick, scrubby forest before Paige realized he was leaving her. "Adam?" She heard his first name roll off her tongue and wondered why it had come so easily. There was no answer. "Thank you," she called into the silence.

The bellbird's sweet chimes were her only answer.

The Maoris had called it Aotearoa—the land of the long white cloud. The first Europeans on its shores had called it New Zealand—originally Nieuw Zeeland, after a province in Holland. Modern day Kiwis affectionately called it Godzone—for reasons they kept to themselves. Huddled under a blanket in front of a smoking fireplace, Paige shivered and wondered what insanity had brought her to this place where sheep vastly outnumbered people, and people seemed content with nothing more than the simplest pleasures.

Some of her reasons for being here were obvious. Someone from Duvall Development had to evaluate this, the most peculiar of their vast real estate holdings. Despite her father's resistance, she had felt that person should be her, because in some strange way, this place was part of her heritage.

And then there had been her need to get away from everything familiar and find herself again.

"Are you there, Paige Duvall?" she asked, leaning over to pour herself a shot of brandy. "If you are, please show yourself so I can pack up and go back home."

In the resulting silence, the brandy spread like indolent fire through her bloodstream. Paige tried to concentrate on her body's response, because it was better than concentrating on her loneliness. And she was lonely. Soul-shuddering, dead-center-of-the-bones lonely. Lonelier than she had ever been in a life where loneliness had been the status quo.

Only now, for some reason, it felt different. If loneliness had hurt before, she had been able to tell herself it didn't matter. Now it mattered, and no incantation to the contrary could help.

"So what did you expect?" she asked herself, sipping the last drops from the glass. "You just lost your best friend."

Strangely enough, that part hurt more than losing the man she had planned to marry—even though they were one and the same person. Granger Sheridan, friend, lover, confidant. Granger of the warm gray eyes and the easy grin. Granger with whom she had believed she had a chance to build a life.

Granger was gone now, reunited with the woman he had loved for ten long years, and Paige was left alone, her heart unbroken but somehow... emptied. She had loved Granger, but she had loved his friendship most of all. And Granger had loved her, but it had been Julianna he had burned for, Julianna for whom he had almost given his life.

Somehow Paige didn't inspire that kind of devotion in men. She hadn't inspired it in Granger,

and she hadn't inspired it in her ex-husband. She was a woman men thought they wanted to possess, but once they discovered how impossible that was, they lost interest. Only Granger hadn't wanted to own her, and perhaps that had been because he had loved another.

That thought made her add another inch of brandy to her empty glass. No, she wasn't a woman who aroused great passion. Nor was she a woman who stimulated male bravado. Not usually, anyway. Of course, there had been the strong, silent man who had rescued her today.

"Adam Tomoana." Spoken aloud, the name had all the smoky warmth and full-bodied texture of the expensive brandy she was drinking. It was civilized, with just a hint of earthier, untamed pleasures beneath its cultured surface.

Paige doubted Adam's actions in the thermals qualified as risking his life. He had been perfectly at home amid the steam and smoke, and leading her to safety had seemed almost more of an excuse to get rid of her than to protect her. She had been an intruder, even though the land belonged to her family, and Adam, who had no legal claim to the land, had seemed to belong to it.

He had called her "cousin." She wondered what he had meant. She was no more his cousin than the New Zealand prime minister was her uncle. She had no relatives in New Zealand, and she certainly wasn't Maori, although Adam probably wasn't fully Maori, either. She remembered reading that many New Zealanders claimed Maori blood, Maori mixed with Pakeha, as they called white-skinned New Zealanders. The Kiwis claimed to be proud of their mixed heritage. If they truly were, it was a model the rest of the world might want to take note of.

Cousins, though? No, she was as alone here as she could possibly be. That was part of the reason she had come. No family, no one to ask questions, no one to give her advice, no one to tell her they were sorry that her life had taken another downward spiral.

Paige looked at her empty glass and wondered when the brandy in it had disappeared. Lately she had begun to enjoy the taste of liquor too much. Was this how her mother had started? Had Ann Duvall looked down at her glass at the beginning of her slow slide into alcoholism and wondered when the liquor in it had vanished? Paige shook her head, repressing a shudder, and screwed the top back on the bottle. She had grown up watching the agonizing deterioration of the mother she adored; it had been the ultimate lesson on the merits of sobriety. There were no solutions to life's disappointments at the bottom of a bottle of brandy.

In all probability, there were no solutions to life's disappointments period.

She was immediately ashamed that she was giving in to the sadness that had been trying to

claim her since she had said goodbye to Granger in Honolulu two weeks before. She gave herself a mental shake. She stood, stretching her cramped body.

"And on that note of self-pity, Paige Duvall stands, gathers her four quilts around her as protection against the New Zealand night and calmly finds her way to bed."

It was early; she didn't really feel like sleeping, but since the Waimauri nightlife consisted of one hotel pub that closed its doors at ten and a public hot bath that showed movies while families lounged in steaming outdoor pools, her choices were limited.

Limited, but apparently not as limited as she had first thought. The timid knocking on her door proved that. Paige dropped her quilts and straightened the cotton-silk-blend sweater that Adam Tomoana had reviled. She brushed her hair back from her face as she strolled through the three-room cottage to the door.

A little boy stood on the front steps, surrounded by the mists of the chill night. Paige guessed he was no older than four, a sturdy little cherub with curling wisps of black hair framing a dark, serious face.

Since her conversation with children had been limited to "Hello," "Goodbye," and "What's your favorite television show?" she cleared her throat and tried the first.

The little boy's answer was to hold out a package wrapped in brown paper.

Paige was puzzled. "Is that for me?"

He nodded.

"I didn't order anything."

He moved backward without answering.

"But then, you're not the standard delivery boy type, are you?" She took the package from his hands. As he stepped backward again she tore the paper, lifting out an ivory sweater replete with intricate, twisting cables and honeycomb designs. The wool was soft as a cloud and as heavy as the New Zealand dew.

Paige squatted down so that she and the little boy were at eye level. He promptly stepped backward once more, as if he were afraid she might grab and shake him.

Although his expression hadn't changed, Paige sensed his fear. "Did I scare you?" she asked softly. "I'm sorry." She tried to think of something else to say to reassure him, but she had no idea how to comfort a little boy. "Will you tell me who sent this?"

"Granny."

She nodded. "Does your granny have a name?"

"Granny."

Paige smiled. "And a lovely name it is. Can you tell me why she sent the sweater to me?"

He pretended to shiver, wrapping his arms around his chest.

Paige understood the pantomime. "She was afraid I was cold?"

The cherub nodded.

Paige cocked her head, searching the boy's angelic features. "And how did she know?"

There was no answer, no pantomime. The little boy just turned and stepped off the porch. In a moment he had vanished into the night mists. Paige started to go after him, but she knew it was useless. The little boy knew where he was going. She didn't. After a minute she climbed the steps of the porch and went inside.

In the tiny bedroom she shivered, wishing, not for the first time, that her mother's cousin had left an electric blanket as part of her bequest. Her hands clenched on the little boy's mysterious gift; then she shrugged. Whoever had sent it wanted her to wear it. Paige slipped off her expensive designer sweater and let the ivory wool slide down over her silk blouse. Almost immediately she was more comfortable, so comfortable in fact that she actually felt sleepy. Suddenly the bed looked more inviting than it had in days.

As she lay down, fully clothed and warmer than she'd been since stepping off the plane in Auckland, Paige realized that for the second time in one day she'd been rescued by a beguiling male stranger.