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Deborah
CHALLINOR

FROM
the **ASHES**

A Restless Years novel

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This book is for Summer Rose Harete Paul

Part One

Chapter One

Hawke's Bay, June 1955

The late afternoon sun sat just above the line of bald poplars between the tractor shed and the house, almost blinding Ana Leonard as she peered out the kitchen window. Oh God, he was at it again. She rapped smartly on the glass.

'Jack!' she shouted. '*Jack!*'

He didn't even look up. Should she go and get him, or let him wander inside in his own time? She opened the range door, eyes narrowed against the escaping heat, and poked a skewer into the roast. Nearly done. She sighed: if she didn't fetch him he might never come in. She wiped her hands on a tea towel then went out, flapping across the yard in her slippers.

As she watched her seventy-five-year-old father-in-law shuffling about in shirtsleeves, gumboots and a pair of baggy underpants, crumbling up Weet-Bix and feeding them to the chickens, she had to admit he really was getting worse.

She said, 'That's our breakfast you're chucking on the ground.'

'Well, I don't bloody well like Weet-Bix. I'd rather have bacon and eggs.'

'You get bacon and eggs, every morning. I make them for you.'

'Do you?' Jack looked genuinely surprised.

‘Yes, after your Weet-Bix, which you do so like. You have them with hot milk and sugar.’

‘Do I?’

‘Come on, come inside, it’s getting cold.’

The sun was dropping behind the hills now and, although the day had been fine, outside at dusk in the middle of a Hawke’s Bay winter was no place for a half-dressed old man. Also, David and the children would be back soon and the kids would only laugh — not cruelly, but they were likely to find the sight of their grandpa wandering the yard in his underpants highly entertaining. Then again, they were used to his odd behaviour, so perhaps they wouldn’t.

‘I’m not cold,’ Jack said, hurling two whole Weet-Bix at a chook.

‘Well, I am.’ Ana took him gently by the sleeve. ‘Come on, in you come.’

Jack allowed himself to be led. ‘Where are the kids?’

‘Out with David.’

‘But where are they?’ he demanded, sounding a little panicky.

‘Up in the top paddocks, moving sheep. The grass is getting a bit low.’

Jack relaxed. ‘That’s true.’ He toed off his gumboots at the back door and arranged them neatly beside the wood box. ‘What’s for dinner?’

‘Lamb roast.’

‘And kumara?’

‘Always.’

‘My favourite.’

Jack gave Ana the empty Weet-Bix box and headed towards the kitchen.

‘Go and wash your hands,’ Ana reminded him.

He changed direction.

‘And put some trousers on!’ she called after him.

*

‘Pass the carrots, Peter,’ Rowie said.

‘Pass the carrots, Peter, please,’ Ana corrected. Rowie was nine and because of that believed she could order her younger brother around like a lackey.

‘Yeah, please,’ Peter echoed.

David said mildly, ‘That’s enough from you, Mr Smart Aleck.’

‘She started it.’

‘And I’m finishing it. Eat your dinner.’

They ate in silence for a minute, then Jo said, ‘I fell off Misty today. In the top paddock.’

Alarmed, fork poised halfway to her mouth, Ana stared at her youngest daughter. She rode very well for a five-year-old, was fearless and fell off her pony with apparent impunity. Usually she bounced, but one day she wouldn’t.

‘Did you hurt yourself?’

‘No.’

‘Did she?’ Ana asked David.

‘She said she didn’t.’

Jack said, ‘Pass them kumaras, will you?’

David passed his father the roast kumara. ‘Anything in the post today?’

These days the mail arrived once a week at the farm gate via rural delivery van, which was a marked improvement on the war years, when someone had to drive into Kereru, the closest little settlement twelve miles away, and collect it from the general store.

Jack shrugged. ‘Bits and pieces.’

‘Nothing important?’

‘Didn’t look. Been too busy.’

‘Doing what?’

Jack stared at his plate. After a minute it became clear he was struggling to remember his day.

Ana rescued him. ‘You read your book, tidied up in the yard, helped me with the washing and fed the chooks. That’s right, and you fixed the fence behind the tractor shed.’

‘Full day,’ David agreed.

‘And we got through over a thousand sheep,’ Jack added.

No one blinked an eye though obviously that was completely made up; shearing wouldn’t start till November.

‘Did you?’ David said. ‘Good on you.’

Ana sent David a fond glance across the table. Jack’s deteriorating state of mind was the only fly trapped buzzingly in the ointment of her family’s happy existence on the farm. She’d been a land girl working for Jack during the war when David, a veteran, had arrived home in 1944. She’d stayed on and married David two years later, then the children had arrived. Jack’s mind had been fine then, but over the last couple of years his behaviour had become increasing erratic, to the point that David couldn’t work with him on the farm any more. He had enough to cope with without babysitting someone who was becoming forgetful, unpredictable, irrational and foul-tempered. David, however, flat out refused to take Jack to the doctor in town in case the doctor recommended a mental hospital, which, David knew, would be the end of his father.

Instead, she and David kept a close eye on him at home. In the mornings she helped the children with their correspondence school lessons, as the farm was many miles out in the Hawke’s Bay hills, so it was relatively easy to watch Jack, and in the afternoons they all often rode out and worked on the farm with David, though today she and Jack had stayed home as it had been washing day.

In a year or so, though, Rowie would have to be sent to boarding school in Napier, and when Peter and Jo — who refused to answer to Joanne — grew older, they’d go off to town, too, which saddened her. But they had ambitions they’d never achieve if they stayed on the farm. Rowie wanted to be a nurse, and Peter, even though he was only six, was desperate to be a soldier — just like his father, and his grandpas Jack and Joseph Deane, Ana’s father, and half a dozen men on the Murdoch side of his family, not to mention all the warriors on the Te Roroa

side. Jo's current goal in life was to be a shearer because she had so much fun when the gangs — made up mostly of Ana's Maori relatives — came out to the farm at the end of the year. Ana wasn't too concerned — there were worse things to aspire to than being in a shearing gang. Besides, up until the Christmas just past Jo had wanted to be a horse.

It was an isolated life, living this far out, but very rewarding living and working on the land. Some days it was heaven on earth, and on others it was a grind — freezing, miserable and filthy — but they loved it. They didn't own the farm, they leased it and always had, but they were doing really quite well from their sheep, which they did own. David had lived here all his life and Ana came from both sheep-farming and shearing families, so it was everything to them. They grew almost all their own food, and only went into Napier once a month for other supplies, or perhaps to the store at Kereru for anything urgent. The electricity was on at the house now, albeit somewhat unreliably, and up at the shearing shed, and they even owned a refrigerator and a radiogram. There were regular district dances and sports events, neighbours close enough to ride to, and the great sheep station Kenmore, which Ana's parents ran, was within driving distance. It was a good life.

Rowie cleared the plates while Ana fetched pudding, hot from the range. It was apple and blackberry crumble, which she served with cream — also Jack's favourite.

'Lovely-looking crumble, Mary,' he said.

Ana smiled. 'Thank you.'

It was his long-deceased wife's name — and he used it so often these days she no longer bothered to correct him. Though she did tap his wrist to stop him pouring mint sauce over his pudding, and pointed instead to the jug of custard.

Pudding finished, David pushed his plate away and let out a long, satisfied burp, which never failed to make the children laugh. 'Open the post, will you, love?' he asked Rowie, pointing to the small stack of envelopes propped on the kitchen mantel.

It was usually the kids' job to open the mail, a feat David couldn't manage with only one arm, though Jack collected it from the letterbox at the end of their long driveway. Actually, Ana suspected David probably could open the mail, but he let the kids do it to make them feel important.

Rowie carefully removed the contents of each envelope, unfolded them, smoothed them flat and passed the small pile to her father.

'Bill, bill, advertisement for sheep wormer,' he muttered, shuffling through them, and then stopped, his gaze snagged. As he read a few lines his mouth opened but nothing came out, then he abruptly scraped back his chair, stood and left the room.

Alarmed, Ana stared after him. She wondered if she should go after him. 'Clear the table, please, Rowie.'

'But it's not my turn, it's—'

'Just do it, will you?'

Grumbling, Rowie began collecting plates while Pete and Jo smirked at each other.

Ana snatched up the fruit crumble dish and shoved it into the range.

Rowie said, 'Mum, there's nothing in that.'

Ana took it out again, dumped it in the sink and chipped furiously at the baked-on crusty bits around the edges with a knife. Little lumps of crispy oatmeal flew everywhere.

Jack laughed, and so did Pete.

'What's so funny?' Ana demanded. 'Get off your backside, Peter, and help your sister.'

Peter looked as though she'd slapped him and Ana felt awful because she hardly ever spoke to the kids like that.

Then David came back. They all stopped what they were doing and looked at him. His face was white.

He dropped the letter in front of his father. 'What's the meaning of this?'

Jack fumbled his spectacles from his shirt pocket, put them on and slowly read the letter. Ana could hear the dogs yipping

at something outside and the night wind rattling the poplar branches, but the silence in the room was total and went on and on until she thought surely her head would burst.

Finally Jack said, 'I don't know.'

'What do you mean you don't know?' David almost but not quite shouted. His face had gone from white to red now. 'It's addressed to you! Mr Jack Leonard!'

Ana was shocked. Her tall, handsome and, above all, usually imperturbable husband hardly ever lost his temper, and especially not with his father. 'Who's it from?' she asked. 'What does it say?'

David glared at her, making her think *she'd* done something wrong. 'It's about the lease on the bloody farm. It hasn't—' He stopped. 'Hop off, you kids. Go to your rooms. Now. Go on.'

They scuttled off, frightened.

David closed the kitchen door behind them. 'The bloody lease payment hasn't been made.'

'Yes it has,' Ana said. 'Ages ago.'

'Not according to that, it hasn't,' David snapped, snatching the letter off Jack and handing it to her. 'See?'

She read quickly.

*1 June 1955
Mr Jack Leonard
Maunganui Road
RD
Napier*

*Messrs Larkin, Scott and Picard
Barristers and Solicitors
Hastings Street
Napier*

*Dear Mr Leonard,
We have been instructed to contact you on behalf of the
lessor of your farm, Mr Charles Johnston. You will be*

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aware that a lease payment is payable every five years, and that a payment was due in December of 1954. Reminders were sent in February and in April of this year (1955).

As the lease payment is now six months overdue, and reminders have been sent with no apparent response on your behalf, we regret to inform you that Mr Johnston feels he has no option other than to terminate your lease contract.

Therefore would you please vacate the farm within a period of two months, i.e. by 1 August 1955, removing all your stock and any farm equipment purchased by you, but leaving the house and farm buildings, fences, etc, in good order.

Please note that Mr Johnston does not wish to enter into any personal discussion regarding this matter, please therefore direct any questions, in writing or in person, to the above address. Thank you.

Yours sincerely

GA Scott

Solicitor

(Messrs Larkin, Scott and Picard)

‘But we did pay it,’ Ana insisted. ‘In December. I sent Jack down to the letter box with the cheque for the postman. I know I did. You *did* put it in the letter box?’ she asked Jack.

He stared helplessly back at her. ‘I must have, if you gave it to me.’

‘Well, you bloody well *can’t* have!’ David roared. ‘For Christ’s *sake*, Dad!’

Jack’s arm shot out, a shaking finger pointing angrily. ‘Don’t you take that tone of voice with me, boy. You’re not too old for a hiding, you know. Fucking cheeky little sod!’

‘Jack!’ Ana exclaimed. It wasn’t the bad language — he’d been coming out with that for a while now — it was the nasty, bullying sentiment that accompanied it.

‘You keep out of this, Mary.’

David turned on her next. ‘Didn’t you notice the cheque hadn’t cleared?’

Ana felt sick. It had been shearing time and money had been going out of the farm account to the shearing gang, and coming in from wool sales. Financially it was a very busy time of the year. ‘No, I didn’t. I just assumed ...’

David thundered out of the kitchen, yanking the door open so hard it bounced off the wall. Ana followed him to Jack’s room, where he started going through the drawers in his father’s bureau. It didn’t take him long to find what he was looking for because they weren’t hidden, just shoved in among the socks, underwear and bits and pieces: the missing cheque still in its envelope, and the reminder letters (opened), together with a handful of other bills Ana had thought had been lost in the post but which had since been paid anyway.

David turned to Jack, now standing in the doorway, and brandished the cheque and reminder letters. ‘*Why*, Dad?’

Jack’s anger seemed to have left him. He was just a confused old man again. ‘I don’t know. I can’t remember.’ A lip-quivering silence, then, ‘I’m sorry.’

David rubbed his hand across his eyes and breathed out an enormous sigh. ‘God almighty. I’ll go into town first thing tomorrow.’

*

As David drove off the next morning Ana watched him all the way down the long driveway until she could no longer see him. No rooster tail of dust followed him as it was raining and the day was grey and miserable, just like her mood. They’d had an awful night, neither of them getting much sleep, and he

probably felt as ragged as she did. He'd taken the new car, a Chevrolet they'd only had since February, when they'd bought it second-hand. It had cost them a packet nevertheless, but it was definitely worth it. However, he was that stropky this morning, in a terrible frame of mind, and she was worried about him.

She was worried about all of them.

In the kitchen Peter and Jo were clearing the breakfast table in silence. The children all knew something was wrong. They hadn't been told what, but they were on edge. Only Jack, out feeding the chooks — in the rain, getting soaked — seemed oblivious. Ana very much wanted to shake him until his false teeth flew out of his head and make him tell her why he hadn't put the cheque in the letter box for the postman to collect, and, even more baffling, why he'd opened those reminder letters and then just shoved them in his sock drawer, but she knew it would be pointless. And cruel. He possibly hadn't known why himself, at the time, never mind knowing now. It was her fault, really, for giving him the cheque to take to the letter box in the first place.

Rowie came in from feeding the horses. 'When will Dad be back?'

'Sometime this afternoon, I expect.'

'Do we still have to do our lessons?'

'Well, yes. Why wouldn't you?'

Rowie stared at the floor. 'I don't know. Because things feel funny.'

'I'll make cheese scones for lunch, shall I?' Ana suggested, then bit her lip. Her children were upset and she couldn't think of anything better to offer them than cheese scones.

Peter said, 'Has Grandpa done something wrong?'

'No. He's just ... no, he hasn't.'

Jo stood on tip-toe to put the Marmite back in the cupboard. As usual, she couldn't quite reach. 'Can we go for a ride this afternoon?'

Taking the jar off her and putting it in its customary place, Ana replied, 'If it's stopped raining. I don't fancy riding out in all this, do you?'

'I don't mind. I'm not scared of rain.'

Jack came in then, his socks squelching on the kitchen lino. 'Fucking rain.'

Ana winced, though the kids all giggled. 'Well, you shouldn't have gone out without your gumboots, should you?'

After that the morning seemed to drag on and on. Jack stayed in his room and the children plodded through their schoolwork, then Ana made the promised cheese scones and cold meat sandwiches.

During lunch Jack asked, 'Where's David?'

Ana told him, 'In town.'

'What for?'

'Business.'

'What business?'

Taking a deep, calming breath, Ana said, 'Just business, Jack. He'll be back this afternoon.'

'Bloody waste of time.' Jack bit into a scone. 'Should be out with the sheep.'

At the word 'sheep', crumbs flew out of his mouth and landed all over the lunch things.

'You've got terrible table manners, Grandpa,' Jo observed.

'Sheep farmers don't need table manners.'

Jo took a bite of her sandwich and deliberately spat it onto her plate.

'Stop that!' Ana exclaimed.

'Grandpa did it.'

'I don't care what Grandpa did! Bloody well behave!'

Jack reached for the butter. 'Don't be so hard on her. She's only wee.'

Ana turned on him. 'Shut up, Jack. Don't you think you've caused enough trouble?'

Looking astonished, Jack stared at her. 'Have I?'

Ana put her elbows on the table and rested her head on her hands. He was unwell, she knew that. He couldn't help it and she shouldn't lose her temper with him. But that didn't stop him from being unbelievably annoying. God, where had the old quietly strong, unerringly reliable Jack gone? She might as well be raising four children now.

Everyone was silent for a long time.

Then Jack said, 'Where's David?'

*

It had stopped raining so they all went out to check the sheep David had moved yesterday. Oddly, Jack didn't need any help saddling Rex, his horse, or riding him, even though Rex was a bit of a bad-tempered bugger. David thought it was because being on horseback was so ingrained in his father it was automatic. He didn't even have to think about it. It was only when he stopped to open a gate, or to do some other farm-related task, that things started to go wrong.

When they got back to the house at a little before three o'clock, the Chevrolet was in the driveway.

Ana rushed inside to find David at the kitchen table. He'd buttered a scone but hadn't eaten it, and had made a pot of tea. She touched it: cold.

She didn't need to ask — she could see it in his face.

'I'm sorry, love,' he said. 'We've lost it.'

She sat down, feeling suddenly sick. 'We truly have lost it?'

'Apparently Johnston won't change his mind. According to his solicitor he's already got new tenants lined up.'

Ana couldn't believe what she was hearing. 'But we've been leasing off him for years. You have, at least. And Jack leased off his father.'

'I know, but it's something to do with being able to put up the rent if he gets in new tenants.'

'Well, we can pay more, can't we?'

From the Ashes

David closed his eyes briefly, and Ana could see this was hurting him horribly.

‘It doesn’t matter, Ana. It’s too late. We have to sell up — the stock, the horses, the dogs, everything.’

‘But ... what will we do?’

‘I don’t know, love. I really don’t.’