

CHAPTER I

They lie in the lifeline across my palm, a string of lead drops, irregular as river pearls. Before the fire, there were stained-glass windows; the lead has melted and rained down, letting the glass burst out like gunfire. They are here for us to find because the world around us is made of all the past. The layers of decay, discard, concealment, loss, denial, abandonment, destruction, cover what remains behind. But everything leaves a trace. Everything.

There are photographs of the Brook of Kerith Mission community at its height. Nobody could possibly be as grim as these people look, even with the silver nitrate plate's long wait. They stand in front of the church, maybe forty of them, with the minister towering in the middle, dead centre. Some of them look surprisingly old, but people aged faster then. One of the women is very pretty, surrounded by a nimbus, as if she was the only one to move. A restless soul. There are even some children, so it must have been taken long before

the mission burned. By then there was almost no one left. We have the accounts of what happened at the time, but it can be surprising how often received history and what's actually in the ground are two different things. Out of the two, I generally believe what's in the ground.

The newspapers of the time concentrate on the:

terrible loss of life, with six of the congregation of seven believed dead. Reports from those first on the scene tell a harrowing tale of pitiful cries from the unfortunates trapped by the flames. It is understood that the greater number of sufferers were gathered in the church, perhaps for evening worship. The light of the blaze could be seen as far along the river as Hopetown, from whence many eager helpers boarded what craft they could, and pulled with might and main in the hope of rendering assistance. A shocking sight met their eyes, the whole river being lit by the flames. The fire had spread to all the buildings inside the enclosing fence, until even the fence itself was consumed. Heroic efforts were made by those first on the scene, with a bucket brigade and wet sacks provided by those nearby. However, even with the gallant assistance of the rowers from Hopetown, the blaze could not be contained until the Brook of Kerith Mission was consumed. The cause of the fire is at present unknown.

The only known survivor, a young girl, has been given into the care of Mrs Otterway. A vigil was kept for the night to guard against any revival of the flames, the remains being so hot that they could not be approached until the following day. Under the auspices of the Revd. Wilberforce from Hopetown, it was decided to inter the pathetic remains of the sufferers near the scene of their demise.

This fruity piece was adorned with a splendid Victorian-melodrama drawing of Death By Fire.

My name is Chloe Davis, and I'm an archaeologist. My family has farmed at Mother's Ferry since the days when there was nothing here but the charred ruins of the Brook of Kerith Mission. This is where I'm from. I used to come down to the mission ruins with my sister Phaedra and our cousins, drawn by all the local stories of ghosts and treasure. Let me make this perfectly clear from the start. Archaeologists are not after gold. We are not after treasure. We are definitely not after fossils; that is geology, third building to your left. Shut the door on your way out. Ghosts now, ghosts are a different matter.

We still have the land, just, sort of. It's in a trust, leased to my cousin Shane. Truly creative accounting and nobody from our side of the family on the board means we haven't seen a dollar for a long, long while, but it's kind of nice just knowing it's there. We're like landlords; we may own it, but we can't go there unless we're invited.

My mother and Shane's father were brother and sister. It came as a complete surprise to me to find out that she owned half the farm. She had been content, or as content as my mother ever could be, to get payments twice yearly. That was when New Zealand was riding on the sheep's back; farming paid (or farming subsidies paid) but land wasn't worth that much out in the wops. Then things got tougher, and Uncle Dave told her she'd have to settle for a share of the profits, and then that there weren't going to be any. Land prices plunged about the same time; she tried to force a sale but with the debt on the property there would have been nothing left after the mortgage and the lawyers.

This was one of the few times my father lowered the boom; the farm had been in Phaedra's and my family since the 1880s, and my mother wasn't going to push it under. The land was tied up in the trust, the money dried up to a trickle, and the farm was leased to Shane. Uncle Dave and my father both died around the same time, and the monumental battle between my mother and Shane over whether to sell was what finally ruptured the family. I still wince when I think of it. But Mum's dead now, and this time it's Shane who wants to subdivide and sell. The rest of us have agreed to it; even Phaedra.

Shane and his cronies, who rejoice in the collective name of the River Haven Consortium, have strongarmed the council into letting them subdivide our land into lifestyle blocks. As councils do, they said yes to anything, provided they could get enough professional reports to cover their tails. One of their conditions was that a rescue dig be done on the mission site. That's where we come in. A rescue dig means that we stripmine the place for artefacts and leave the best report we can about what was once there. Everything else goes once the bulldozers start. The developers have to pay us, which annoys them, and we have to be out by an agreed date whatever the weather, which annoys us.

I rummage round the gearbox looking for second, and turn to glance at the two archaeology students who've come up to help with the survey. Daisy texted the whole way up then wondered why she felt sick. Bethany was sleeping off the night before, stretched out on the back seat of the twincab. Bill, the guy I dig with, is still back in Auckland sorting equipment. I swing the truck in between the gateposts and take the cattlestop at

a run so they'll wake up. Then I brake. It's where we've always stopped, always. It's the farm's back gate, but it has the best view in the place.

Mother's Ferry spreads out below us on both sides of the river. Back when the town had no name and no pub, a commercial genius with an unusual surname owned a patch of salty flat land on the wrong side of the river. He sold it to a publican, used the money to build a ferry from the town to the new hotel, and died a wealthy teetotaler. Now there's a scatter of new houses up the raw dirt roads on the small shapely hills across the river. Down on the far waterline, the perfect wedding-cake pub, under the biggest Moreton Bay fig in New Zealand. Or so they say. Our side has a crowd of sober little houses, climbing up the hill to the church.

We bounce down the track from the ridge road, through land seamed with nikau groves and clumps of manuka in the gullies, and ford the stream down onto the river flat where the Brook of Kerith Mission was. The girls are both sitting up now, enchanted. The old fruit trees are long past bearing but have still struggled into leaf, and the willows by the stream are fresh green in the sun. A tongue of land runs out flat and grassy into the river, edged with a shelly tidal beach, and the hills with their bush rise up behind it like an amphitheatre. It looks such an easy dig — velvety, flat, sheep-nibbled grass, some features already showing through the surface, the Brook of Kerith sparkling through the trees at the height of the tide, on its way down to the Kaipara. Poor sods. Little do they know. This is limestone country; the soil can be only a foot deep in places, but the stone underneath stops it draining, and three days of rain turns it to quagmire.

The other big disadvantage is that we're right on the fenceline to the Starrets' farm. It's a mighty good fence. It needs to be, to keep the Starret cattle out. The grass really is greener on this side of the fence, where the fertiliser is. Don't fertilise for three years, and your dirt falls off the hills. There's nothing holding the Starret dirt down except the thistles.

There's a fenceline, of a sort, down the other side of the dig, too. Totara posts last sixty years in the ground; these have rotted and fallen over. There are garden escapees bright in the small patches of sun where Shane's cattle have forced paths through the taupata and manuka. Catch Shane spending money on something that doesn't belong to him. It's a separate leasehold block, now back to thirty-year bush, surrounded by a collapsing fence, and with an old, very old, house. It belongs to my sister Phaedra, and I'd love to know how she got hold of it. But even that's going now.

We take some photographs, take some bearings, take some measurements, then walk down to the little white half-moon of beach to sit in a row on a sunny log with our sandwiches. The point runs out flat for far enough to make this an all-tide landing, and we can see across the water to the old Mother's Ferry pub, where we'll be staying. The girls perk up — till I tell them it's been dry since the seventies. You can imagine the disappointed little faces. That's where we're headed next. It's nearly an hour's drive round the head of the harbour. There's not going to be much competition to get out of bed an hour early to take the truck round, or get back an hour late to a cold shower. We'll have to make everybody take turns. We're lucky we have a couple of tin dinghies for going backwards

and forwards across the river.

I bounce the truck over the pub's wide, scruffy lawn to a halt in front of the verandah. The big kauri door stands wide, and there's a radio somewhere. Cries of delight from the girls. Another picturesque setting; they haven't seen the picturesque plumbing yet. The old bedrooms upstairs, unused for years and with no electricity, had better be out of bounds. Apart from the rain and the possums both coming in through the roof, I'm not having candles in a building this old. I don't care who sleeps with whom; they're old enough to sort that out for themselves. I know the cliques and the gossip are going to keep any hooking up down to a dull roar, anyway.

I follow the radio, and hear a kettledrum crash. It's from the kitchen. I round the corner, and there's a bottom sticking out of the cupboard under the sink. The bottom's owner straightens up. It's Janey Tawhai. She's somebody I knew from when I was a kid up here, though she was really more Phaedra's friend; they're the same age. She comes over, hugs me, and reaches for the coffee. We take it out on the steps, in the sun. I'd booked the Rugby Club caterers because I'd heard they were good; I didn't know they were Janey. I ask her how it's going.

'Well, country place like this, if you don't want to move to town, you have to make yourself a job. If it's food and it's around here, I do it. Gets better all the time.' She looks me up and down.

'Thought you might have been staying at Shane's. S'pose you've got to keep an eye on this lot, though. What do you think of the new house?' I didn't even know there was a new house; I came in the back gate. One of the terms on the contract with the River Haven Consortium, was 'current occupant not to be

disturbed' — understandable, and not rare when you think of all the things a dig can run out of or need to borrow.

'Haven't seen it.' The eyebrows go up at this. Local memories are long. The internecine battles that followed Shane's father's death probably seem like yesterday to her. However, Janey knows more than I do about the River Haven Consortium that Shane's got doing the work and putting up the money.

'Consortium!' she snorts. 'Big talkers who don't pay their bills. Three fat blokes from the RSA. And the other two are ones you wouldn't trust further than y' could throw the buggers.'

'You'd trust Shane further than you could throw the bugger then?'

'Hell, no, I was just being polite because he's family.'

'We never are, so don't you bother.' As I leave to retrieve the girls, Janey goes back under the sink, to drag out one of the biggest pots I've ever seen. I could boil my cousin Shane in that.