

Kiwis Sinners and Saints

Chapter 1 The Kiwi

I had no sooner stepped inside the squash centre than my daughter, Wendy, confronted me, a challenging grin on her face. "Hi," she said. "We were beginning to think you had chickened out."

"There comes a time in the perception of teenage children when dads are no longer Gods, to be respected, worshipped and emulated, but rather to be shown up as quaint relics with a use by date that has just been exceeded. This was to be my fate today on the squash court, where in gratitude for my patience in instructing them over the years and demonstrating my superiority in all things, especially squash, my two teenage children intended revenge.

"Ilan's already on court having a lesson from Jim someone," she said as I joined her upstairs. "He's seems pretty good."

"You should get one too; give yourself a chance," I said, looking down on the court. I noticed with rising hope that Ian had turned pink and was about done in. I would challenge him the moment they finished.

They noticed me and stopped playing. "Hi," Ian said, between gasps. "Dad, do you know Jim?"

Little did I guess as I waved casually that he was to play a major part in my life for the next 18 months. He was about thirty, well built, with a permanent reddish-gold stubble and thinning blonde hair and he had barely raised a sweat. We had not met but he had turned up at the courts recently doing maintenance, mainly painting and repairing damaged walls. The courts currently looked as if they had developed Chicken Pox as he had yet to paint over the repairs.

"Hi," he said. "Just giving Ian a few pointers. We'll finish this game off, then it's your turn, Wendy. I hope you're a bit fitter than your brother." He turned as he spoke and served a rocket before Ian realised the game had re-started.

"Hey!" Ian protested.

"Seven love," Jim said. "Stay alert. Move around and boast them off the side wall like I showed you."

By the time Jim had finished with the two of them, neither had the energy to play me. With my God-like status still intact I shook Jim's hand in gratitude and was about to leave when he said. "Your turn."

"Yes, give him a game dad," Wendy said. "See if you can win a point."

Jim was one of those extrovert characters who acted with strangers as if they were old mates. "Tell you what," he said, before I had time to start on the reasons why I couldn't play. "I'll give you seven points start and ten to one odds. How much can you afford to lose?"

I normally only bet on near certain winners but to refuse would be to lose face. "Fifty cents?"

"Done."

"I could be playing A grade," I said. "What makes you so confident?"

He chuckled. "I saw you play in the fixtures last week."

Jim gave me the first serve, which, in my nervous state, came off the racquet frame but just managed to reach the corner where it flopped down tiredly, almost unplayable. Although he somehow got to it, his return hit the tin below the red line. I had only one point to make to win the game. I served again, a lightning-like drive that he lined up with utter contempt and smacked into the wall so hard it impacted like a rifle shot, loosening a chunk of plaster from one of his recent repairs and upsetting the trajectory. It rose up and landed in the gallery.

"Game over," I said as my kids looked down in disbelief. "Let me buy you a cold drink with your five dollars."

I didn't realise it at the time but Jim's loose bets were going to net me quite a bit of cash over the coming months. Jim turned out to be a friendly character. He was from New Zealand, an unemployed Kiwi butcher who had come to Brisbane a month ago looking for work and had been doing the repairs in return for free games. His coaching lessons were free also.

"What do you do, Bob? He asked, after we had talked for a while. "With your luck at squash you probably don't need to work."

"Now that I've discovered you I'll probably retire," I said. "Up to now I've been a freelance geologist."

He looked puzzled. "Doing what?"

"Working in the bush looking at rocks and finding gold."

His eyes lit up. "Any chance of a job?"

It so happened that I had just taken an 18-month contract with a mining company, Hunter International, looking for gold in North Queensland. I had Chas, my trusty field assistant, already lined up in Charters Towers but I needed another field hand, and Jim had already impressed me with his enthusiasm and energy.

"Could be," I said.

"I'm your man then. What do I have to do?"

"Take samples, plot up results, do a bit of cooking, set up campsites, keep track of supplies, maintain vehicles, look after the geo, things like that. It will be four to five weeks work northwest of Charters Towers, in northern Queensland, then a bit of time off before heading out again for another month or so."

"Piece of cake then," he said exuding confidence; then he frowned. "Except maybe for looking after the geo?"

"That's more important than the rest put together. Ever camped in the bush before?"

He scratched his chin for a moment. "What's the bush? I've visited a few parks in New Zealand and I camped with the scouts as a kid."

"You sound over qualified but I could make an exception."

"What's the pay?"

I mentioned a figure, then said. "All expenses are paid too."

He looked incredulous. "You mean free tucker?"

"All free."

He leapt to his feet and shook my hand in a crushing grip. "Let's go."

* * *

Jim hung onto the door as we bounced through a water-filled mud hole, swerved round a clump of eucalyptus suckers and sideswiped a white ant's nest. "We're lost, aren't we?" he said. "The great Australian geologist has got us lost."

It was a week later and we were heading to the campsite. I could hear the unease in his voice; he was in an alien environment, for he had never lived outside a city before, and we were certainly not on the tourist route—possibly not on any route. We probably were lost but I was not about to admit it.

"There's something you should know," I said, as I peered into the rain-swept darkness—the mud covered headlights barely illuminating the overhanging branches let alone the supposed track. "Geologists are never wrong. Keep that in mind at all times, and why would you think we're lost? Just because we're off the map and the track's a bit hard to see."

"Hard to see?" He pushed his new bush hat to the back of his head. "There's no track and there hasn't been since we turned off the Towers road miles back."

It was 1986, before mobile phones and GPS systems and we were in the middle of

thick scrub, north of Charters Towers and miles from anywhere, on a track that was mostly in my imagination—a strung out series of less overgrown patches—but which I hoped would lead us to the exploration campsite. I had driven to the area the previous year doing some reconnaissance work, but a lot of vegetation had sprung up since then and spending an uncomfortable night in the cab waiting for daylight—for I doubted we could ever find our way back in the dark—was looking more and more likely.

“The campsite’s probably round the next bend,” I said, twisting the steering wheel to the left, then to the right, as I negotiated a fallen tree.

“Another bend?” He leant out the window, yelling into the darkness and waving his hat. “Another bend? My God! I can’t believe it. There’s another bend!” His exuberance was cut short as the scrub on either side closed around us. He pulled his head in, looking sheepish. “Back up. I’ve lost me hat.”

Jim and I had flown up to Townsville that morning, then driven to Charters Towers to meet Chas, who rented out the camping gear we needed and who would be bringing Art out the next day with more gear. However, on our arrival, Kerry, Chas’ wife, had no idea where he was. Rather than wait for him to turn up—which, knowing Chas, might never happen—we used the time to pick up the food we needed.

As we walked down the aisles of the supermarket, I produced two typed sheets and gave one to Jim. “That list is for the essentials—matches, rope, mantles for the gas light, fuel for the generator, salt, pepper, fly spray—Can you be trusted with our survival for four weeks?”

“What’s the other list?”

“Food and a few luxuries.”

His eyes lit up. “Like what luxuries?”

“Chocolate, tins of cream, soft drinks, biscuits, fruit cake, juices, the usual thing to make life pleasant after a day’s work.”

“You mean we can eat what we like?”

“Within reason.”

“Who defines reason?”

“I do.”

“Great,” he grabbed the second list. “Caviar, oysters, chocolates, malted milk, nuts, dried fruit. Let me at them.”

“Just remember we won’t have a fridge until Chas brings one out tomorrow.”

He grinned. “It’ll be all gone by then. Chas can bring out some more.”

After our purchases we sat in a coffee shop. Jim had already slipped into his role of field assistant. He wore a pair of old boots, tattered blue jeans, a Canadian lumberjack shirt and a wide-brimmed hat. His unshaven face sprouted a reddish-brown bristle, transforming it into something that would have looked good on a wanted poster.

“What a life,” he said, sucking on a strawberry milkshake. “Thank you, Hunter.”

“If their accountant finds the receipt for your extravagance in the pile I send in he may write you a querying letter.”

He stifled a burp into a long, punctuated growl and bit into a chocolate bar. “I can’t work if I’m gnawed at by hunger pains.”

There was actually no chance of the food bill being queried, for just as it is well documented that a large supply of beer is critical to the morale of troops in wartime, so is the quality and quantity of the food in an exploration camp critical to its running.

We eventually located Chas but by the time we had his equipment loaded it was getting dark, which is why we were driving late into the night to our rendezvous with paradise, camped by the Star River.

Sometime later, and with great relief, I recognised the site I was looking for and slowed, then turned off into a cleared area and stopped. The lights lit up a depressing scene

of straggly scrub, dripping gums and white ant nests. After a short silence Jim spoke.

“Why have we stopped?”

“This is it.”

“Is what?”

“Our destination.”

“We're going to spend a month here?”

“Camping spots don't come any better. Were you expecting a power point and hot shower?”

“I want out.” He bumped his head against the dash a few times in mock disgust.

Although it was only late March and quite warm, the sodden and gloomy surroundings possessed a certain ability to chill the mind if not the body. Luckily the rain had eased to a fine drizzle.

“You could have picked a place with fewer rocks.” Jim said. “What funny shapes.”

He was referring to a few cone-shaped, smooth brown objects, some reaching knee height. I stifled a groan of incredulity and the thought that my new fieldy might turn out to be quite useless crossed my mind. “They're termite mounds, Jim—white ant nests. Are you saying you've never seen one before?”

“Never.” He got out and undid the sides of the Landcruiser tray, his shock already forgotten in the excitement of this new and strange environment. “Okay, what now?”

“We'll unload the gear, clear the funny rocks, and erect the tent.”

“No worries! Take a break while I fix everything.”

“You're going to set up on your own?”

He gave one of his wide grins. “Can't be too hard, surely, and I've got to look after the geo. Isn't that what field assistants do?”

I could not believe my luck at finding this gem. No field assistant in my experience had ever expressed such a desirable sentiment, but wisely I declined Jim's offer. Setting up our big tent was no job for one man.

An hour later, we had most of the gear stored out of the rain and the tent erected. The tent was a square design with a centre pole, corner poles, and double canvas and fly screen walls that could be rolled up or let down.

“For an ex-butcher you didn't take long to learn how to set up a camp,” I said, eying the muddy footprints all over the inside walls.

“That's really good,” Jim said, testing one of the camp stretchers. “Rain was nice too; don't need a shower now.” His stomach growled. “What are we going to eat? I'm famished.”

“Ever cooked before?”

“The odd barbecue. Don't mind learning, though. An old geo like you must have picked up a few clues.”

“I was a natural,” I said. “Find me a tin of baked beans and some eggs and I'll demonstrate 30 years of practical bush knowledge on the gas stove.”

Jim disappeared outside and I could hear him grumbling in the rain until there was a crash of tins and cutlery. “Thank you, Bob!” he called loudly. “Thank you for the wonderful job, the wonderful weather, and for inviting me to spend a month in this wonderful arsehole of a place.”

He came back with beans, eggs, a tin of fruit, some pressurised cream and a sodden cardboard box that had once been full of assorted packets of biscuits, nuts, dried fruit and other delicacies until the bottom fell out.

He munched on a biscuit, then opened a packet of mixed nuts and poured them down his throat. “Everything's lying in the rain but we don't have a tarp so stuff it. When do you expect Chas to turn up?”

I tipped the beans into the frypan “Early tomorrow.”

“That's really good.” He found a bar of chocolate and began to demolish it. “It's good

that the company pays for the tucker. Do you eat like this every time you go bush?"

I cracked the eggs onto the steaming beans as he searched through the carton for more food. "Never. Until I saw you I thought it was impossible."

He looked into the frypan. "Only four eggs? Aren't you having any?"

* * *

The next morning we woke to find the wet bush glittering in the sunshine and the Star River gurgling in the background. After putting the finishing touches to the campsite we scouted the few tracks in the area while waiting for Chas and Art, who finally turned up late in the afternoon.

"Got a bit delayed," Chas said.

Chas, who was about Jim's age, was solidly built and dressed as always in newly washed blue dungarees covered with fresh grease and oil stains. He was a phlegmatic character who never let life's turbulence and setbacks upset his composure. I expected him to be a stabilising influence in the camp, for where Jim saw every change and obstacle as an exciting challenge to be probed, queried, confronted and conquered, Chas merely moved on like a deep ocean roller.

As Chas was employed on another contract, he had brought out Art Fenman, his cousin, to take his place. If I had known anything about Art he would never have been given the work, but by the time I realised just how useless he was he had become a sort of black sheep of the family, not wanted but hard to get rid of.

"Where's the caravan you were going to bring?" I asked.

Chas gave a sheepish grin. "About 20 km back in a creek. The tow bar broke. I can get it welded at the station and bring it out tomorrow before I head back."

The old Landcruiser tray top he drove had a well used look with scratches and dents and bits of the bush hanging off every projection. In a wildlife park it would have made a brilliant hide. Jim was already circling it, checking out the equipment. It was so down at the back from the weight of gear it carried that it looked almost sporty with its headlights pointed to the treetops. "Is this all your stuff, Chas?" Jim asked.

"Yep."

Jim took in the deep freeze, generator, fridge, power cords, hand winch, roo jack, and numerous boxes of food with an admiring and calculating eye. "You could have put a bit more on. The springs aren't flat yet."

"The rest's in the van."

"So you do a bit of contracting then?" Jim asked, keen to get the inside running on making money in exploration, although with Chas, getting any sort of information required skills beyond the reach of most.

Chas lay on the ground and wormed his way under the Toyota with a spanner. "Yep."

Jim squatted down. "Get much contract work?"

"Some."

"What sort do you do?"

"Bit of everything."

"We're hiring your gear, eh?"

"Yep."

"So how much can you make by hiring it out?"

"A bit."

"What else do you do?"

"Whatever's going."

Jim might have tapped this fount of information all afternoon but I began to unload the gear and he got up to help. He grabbed the generator and turned to Art who was sitting on a box drinking a coke. "Give us a hand here, Art."

Art was about twenty, grossly overweight, with tight curly black hair, thick lips, deep-

set eyes, triple chins and puffy cheeks. It was a face that looked as if it had already plumbed the depths of corruption and enjoyed the experience enough to want to sample more.

"Sorry, mate" he said, squinting up at Jim. "Me back's a bit crook; I might manage some of the lighter stuff. The springs in the bloody Tojo are shot. I need to rest up a bit."

Later that night, when Chas had driven off, Art carried his bedroll into the tent and surveyed the space between the two camp stretchers. "Why didn't you guys clear a flat spot?" He turned to Jim. "What about loaning me your mattress? You've got a stretcher."

"Get real," Jim said. "Anyway, you'll be out like a light after doing all that heavy lifting."

I took pity on Art and lent him mine. We turned in about eleven but Art had a snore that needed so much pressure to wind its way through the adenoids, pharynx, larynx and other obstacles that it vibrated the ground as well as the eardrums. We didn't get much sleep.

"Anyone ever tell you, you snored?" Jim asked the next morning.

"I only snore if I'm uncomfortable. If you'd of loaned me your foam I'd have slept like a baby."

"I'm talking about snoring, not sleeping. Why didn't you go back with Chas and sleep in the caravan?"

Art gave a snort. "You reckon I snore. You should hear him. Things fall out the bloody cupboards when he gets going."

Jim turned to me, munching on a wedge of toast dripping with butter and strawberry jam. "What's on today?"

"Sampling the drainages for gold."

"That's really good. I'll make the lunches. What does everyone like?"

"A couple'a hot pies, fries and tomato sauce, washed down with a few beers is all I need," Art said.

"Dream on," Jim said. "And we don't have any beer."

"I've got eight cartons in the van."

I looked at Art in amazement. "Chas is teetotal," I said. "How come he lets you load his van with beer?"

"I didn't tell him."

Jim chuckled. "Probably why the tow bar broke."

Chas turned up later with the caravan. "I fixed the tow bar," he said. "Bert reckons the property is overrun with feral pigs."

"Who's Bert?" Jim asked.

"The cow cocky."

"Cow cocky?" Jim mulled over the terminology. "You mean he's the owner of this farm we're on and runs cows?"

"What planet are you from," Art said, derisively. "It's a station not a farm. You must be a Kiwi. You talk like one of those refugees."

"And proud of it," Jim said.

"Poor bastard," Art snorted. "Did you hear about the Kiwi who was pulled over by the traffic cops. 'Sorry officer', he said. 'I'm not much good at making a U turn but I can sure make its eyes bulge'."

"That's enough, Art," I said, concerned for the smooth running of the camp. New Zealand, our closest neighbor, was reputed to have more sheep than women, which was a great stimulus for generating crude jokes, and because our unemployment benefits were so generous, Kiwis—named after their famous New Zealand flightless bird—arrived here in droves.

"Bert has the lease on a few thousand acres," Chas said, getting back in his Toyota to leave. "They're known as cow cockies as they mostly run cattle. He said he'd call by later."

He waved goodbye.

* * *

Bert turned up in his Landcruiser the next evening with three pig dogs. "I'm going to cull a few pigs, they're ruining the land," he said after yarning for a while. "Want to come along?"

Jim was in the back of his Toyota in a flash, joining the excited dogs. "Reckon we could catch a baby one?" he asked. "Wouldn't mind keeping one as a pet."

"Stone the bloody crows, are you ridgi-didge?" Bert said, scratching his head "Should be a few little 'uns about, for sure."

It didn't take us long to find some pigs. The dogs were excited but not nearly as much as Jim, who jumped out with them, waving his hat and yelling.

The dogs circled, rounding up half a dozen that came tearing past the Toyota, Jim in close pursuit. A half-grown black boar with small curved tusks, collided with a dog and Jim launched himself forward and caught it by the back legs.

"Mad bastard", Bert said. "He must be a quid short in the bank; it'll have him for breakfast if he lets go."

It looked as if Bert was going to be right for Jim not only had the pig to contend with but one of the dogs, that thought this squealing and shouting combination was a new type of animal to be attacked.

"I've got it," Jim gasped, as it jerked him along the ground. "He's mine."

"More like he's got you, mate" Bert said, as we ran over. He threw a sack over the pig and knelt on it, fighting off the dog. "It's as mad as a cut snake. Bring some rope, Art."

"Oink, oink," Art replied between laughs. "Oink, oink."

"These bloody things are dangerous," Bert said, after he'd trussed up the pig. "He could have ripped your guts out."

Jim brushed himself down and patted the pig. "Never saw black ones before."

"What are you planning to do with it?" Bert asked.

Jim looked at it dubiously. "It's probably a bit big to tame. Maybe I'll fatten it up for eating."

Bert tried not to laugh. "You can't tame these, they're naturally wild, but there's a pen you could keep it in if you want."

We took the pig back to the homestead and Jim fixed it up with straw and water as if he were putting a baby to bed.

"Jim's missing the four legged woollies," Art said. "He'll be in there with it soon. Oink, oink."

* * *

A couple of weeks later we accompanied Jim on his evening trip with the camp scraps, to feed the pig.

"It's getting tamer," Jim said, as we leaned over the sty. "Used to squeal and carry on, now it just watches."

"Sounds like you've fallen in love with it," Art said.

"It likes its new name." Jim clicked his fingers. "Here Artie, come to Jimmy." The pig didn't move. "It's getting fatter, too. Its barrel shape and the way it eats the leftovers gave me the idea for the name."

"You're probably scared of it, that's why you named it after me," Art scoffed.

"Who'd be scared of a tub of lard?"

"Okay. Bet you're not game to climb in there."

"You reckon?" Jim took a piece of sweet corn and straddled the railing as the pig glowered at him from the far corner.

"Ever see the film Razorback?" Art said. "Pigs love human flesh. I know of a bloke broke his leg and was stranded in the bush overnight. The pigs found him. All they left was

the skull.”

Jim edged over the railing and crouched down inside, then held out the corn. “Here Artie. Come to Jimmy.”

The pig, after considering its options for a moment, took him at his word and charged. Jim leapt the rail with a yell.

Art doubled up laughing. “Oink, oink,” he honked. “Oink, oink. Bloody Kiwis.”

Jim took a ragged breath. “Another week and he’s mince meat.”

“I thought you wanted to tame it?” I said.

Jim shook his head. “Bert reckons they can’t be tamed. Think I’ll kill it next Sunday. Bert’s got an old bath we can use and the nights are pretty chilly. It’ll be just right for setting the meat.”

* * *

Bert supplied a tractor, a .22 rifle, an old bath and a couple of forty-four gallon drums of water the following Sunday, and we had the water heating in the late afternoon as the evening chill set in.

“We need to scrape off the hair before we can cut up the meat,” Jim explained. “There’s a critical temperature for the water. Too hot and you spoil the meat; too cold and you can’t get the hair off.”

When the water in the bath was close to boiling Jim picked up the rifle. “I suppose you’re a crack shot?” he said to Art.

“Once cleaned out a guy in sideshow alley with a point 22,” Art said. “Took the rifle off me after I’d won most of the prizes.”

Jim dropped the pig cleanly with a single shot, then using a tripod mounted on the tractor, he hauled it up and dunked it in the hot water. After that, Jim and I began scraping the skin down over the bath while Art made useful and enlightening commentary as he warmed his backside by the fire.

“That water looks like one of your soups, Jim,” he said, coming over to inspect our progress and staring in distaste at the murky and evil looking black brew in the bath, now full of mud, rotting food scraps, hair and blood. “Probably taste a bit better though.”

He poured himself a cup of tea from the billy on the fire and stood close to the warmth, for it was a clear starry night and getting quite cold. “Should’ve had the water hotter though, mate. The hair isn’t coming off as readily as yours has been falling out.”

Art was right about the skin. The evening chill and the size of the pig had cooled the water too rapidly and we now had to work hard to clean the hair off but Jim was so preoccupied that he seemed not to hear Art, so Art had another dig.

“They reckon young bald Kiwis never get the women and they become homosexual as a result. I hear they kick the homos out of New Zealand and they come over here in droves.”

This sally too, went unanswered.

“Used to work in an abattoir once,” Art said. “Butchering is a mug’s game if you ask me. No wonder you quit and came over here.”

After we had scraped the pig down, we used the tractor to move it off the bath and I watched as Jim, now back in his trade, started to gut it expertly, using the set of butcher’s knives he always carried with him.

“Don’t know how you could kill something you were in love with,” Art said, throwing some wood on the fire, which blazed up. “You should stick to sheep like a normal Kiwi. Never known a Kiwi to take a shine to a razorback before but I guess it takes all types.”

It was this sally that finally seemed to get through to Jim. He stopped cutting and looked down at the carving knife he was holding. It glinted in the firelight as he twisted it about, testing the blade with his thumb. The knife was a long carbon steel number with a slight curve that put me in mind of a sultan’s scimitar. He turned towards Art, who, from the grin on his face and the wobble of his double chins, was clearly pleased with the effect of

this final barb that demonstrated yet again that he was a man of clever wit.

Jim seemed to make up his mind. Giving the pig a push that set it swinging on its tripod, he changed his grip on the knife from one of cutting to one of stabbing, fixed Art with a particularly malevolent stare and headed towards him.

My God! I thought, Art has pushed him too far. It had happened before in exploration camps. The heat, flies, camp food and primitive living conditions can send a man 'troppo' and now Art's crude humour had pushed Jim to breaking point.

Art obviously thought so too. His mouth opened, his eyes widened, and with each measured step Jim took towards him, everything opened wider. A dark stain appeared down Art's right trouser leg.

I took a step towards them but the swinging pig would have moved faster. I was caught in a moment of paralysis just as Art obviously was. As time seemed to slow in anticipation of death, Jim stopped in front of Art, then bent down and picked up his sharpening stone. He chuckled as he began to hone the blade.

"Had you going then, didn't I? Thought you was going to faint."

"Faint." The squeak in Art's voice diminished his bravado somewhat. "I was just about to give you the chop. Lucky you stopped in time."

He glanced at a dark stain on Art's trouser leg. "I think you wet yourself."

"Spilt me tea, that's all."

I breathed a sigh of relief but as the contract still had another 17 months to run I was not certain they would both survive. Jim went back to work until the pig was cleaned to his satisfaction before he packed his knives away.

"It's a well known fact that feral pigs are full of worms," Art said, having recovered from his near death experience and enjoying the warmth of the blazing fire on his back. He was clearly keen to get in a few more sallies and make up for the ultimate embarrassment of wetting himself, especially now he knew Jim was harmless.

"That's why you'll never find the locals eating them," he continued. "I guess a Kiwi would find that the best part though. Oink—oiiiow." The grunt of derision suddenly turned into one of pain. "Shit!—I'm on fire!—God!—Help!" He began to jump about in panic before rushing over to the bath. He flopped in on his back, immersing himself in the muck with a hiss of steam as his burning boot sizzled.

I could see Jim's mouth working as Art hauled himself out of the glutinous brew and squelched over to the Toyota. It was a golden opportunity for a smart comment but Jim couldn't get going at first, all he could muster was a faint, "Catch that porker, Bob—Don't ... Don't let it get away, oink, oink."