

Chapter 1

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It probably started in about 1969. The seed of an idea that had slowly matured, shot a few roots out, until now. It was ready to burst forth out of the dark depths of the soil of his mind and either flower to its full capacity or wither and die as a seedling. It all depended on the four men sitting in his lounge room, having a few drinks and catching up on what each had been doing for the past few months.

All were in their thirties and forties and had all been in the construction game most of their working lives, had lived hard and at times rough, but as far as Greg was concerned they were the salt of the earth. Intelligent and fearless in their own way and would never let you down in a sticky situation.

There had indeed been a few of those over the years, he smiled to himself as he listened to Rangi, the only Māori in the group, relate in his good natured way, an account of how they had found themselves one night at Wellington's notorious Puhinui Tavern. A natural storyteller and stretcher of the truth, Rangi Tahere had them in fits as he related the incident and Greg found himself rubbing his finger along his bent nose; a permanent reminder of that particular night.

They'd known each other for the best part of ten years, while Greg and Rangi went back to their rugby days in Taranaki and the halfback five-eight combination they had formed. That combination had taken them right through to provincial honours

and to what should have been the All Black test combination in the mid 1950s. It still rankled Greg that they had been passed over, simply because he had played in trials for Australia, he was not considered eligible enough as he was born in Australia and an Australian citizen; the fact that his mother was born and raised in New Plymouth was not considered, but that's all in the past now, Greg murmured to himself as he shook his mind back to the present, amidst another burst of laughter from his guests.

It was Pete Davies, his travelling partner from the boat trip across the Tasman, and the thinker and most studious of the group, that broke it up. He turned to Greg, 'Okay Greg, old son, it's been great drinking your beer for a change, but you didn't ask us to gather here from all parts of the North Island just to talk about old times. The fact that the house is devoid of women, is for you, amazing and intriguing to me, to say the least. So old mate, what's up?' he asked.

They all turned to look at him in unison, Pete, Dave Philpot, Bill Keller and Rangi Tahere.

On most construction sites they had worked on for various companies, Greg had been sort of in charge. While they were all extremely competent, he had that quality that made him a decision maker and most of the project managers would relate their instructions through Greg, knowing full well that he would quickly and competently divide the workload giving each of the crew, as they were nicknamed, the jobs best suited to their skills. This in turn had made Greg their leader, and he had on numerous occasions earned the respect of them all.

Now he was going to ask them to help him and back him with their life savings, on a scheme, that basically was wild. Did he have the right to ask them to risk it? He had agonised over this for the last few months as he had put his plan together. One thing's for sure, he could not do it alone and whilst he was prepared to put

up everything he possessed, would they do the same? What the hell, he thought, they are all grown men, so here goes. 'You're dead right as usual, Pete old boy,' started Greg. 'Since the finish of the last job we all completed together, the Kapuni Natural Gas Pipeline, I've been doing a lot of research and scheming on an idea I've had for a few years now. It's not illegal, but it will definitely stretch a few friendships and leave some red faces, if it's ever found out who set it up. I need the help of all of you to do it properly, and I've chosen to ask you, not just because of our friendship, but because you also each have a certain expertise that will make the job go so much easier.'

He noted that they were all listening intently, the drinks forgotten and that there was no sign of fidgeting on his insinuation of the scheme being slightly bent.

'Over the past years, we have all done pretty well I guess, but when we get together over a few beers, the conversation always gets around to, apart from women, a big kill! How to get enough together to not have to leave home for six to eight months on end, to another godforsaken construction camp somewhere in the middle of nowhere and for you, Rangi and Dave, having to leave your wives to bring up the kids, especially you Rangi, how the hell Tania manages your eight has got me beat. She's quite a woman and too bloody good for you.'

They all laughed at that, with Dave clipping Rangi good-naturedly around the ear, when he replied, 'She helped herself for the last four, when I was asleep,' with an innocent look.

For the first time Dave Philpot spoke. A tall, dark, heavy-set man, Dave had an amazing skill with machinery. He could operate any earthmoving equipment invented and on numerous occasions, when others had their machines hopelessly bogged down in mud, Dave would hop in them, and with the touch of a concert pianist, he would play the gears, throttle and clutch

to coax the huge machinery up and out of the quagmire they had been buried in. Time and again he had saved his bosses, not only the valuable downtime of the particular machine, but the additional cost of having to bring other equipment in to tow the bogged plant out. Greg had often thought of the thousands of dollars Dave's skills had saved over the years, and to him it was all in a day's work.

'Well, you've certainly hit on my sore spot all right. Yvonne and I have had quite a few discussions about it and I've just about decided to quit and buy a second-hand machinery and equipment business. I've got a fair bit saved, but not enough to go in free hold, so I'd have to borrow, and that means paying those bloody money sharks interest, and you all know how that goes against the grain,' he explained. 'So! What's all this going to cost and what do we have to hijack?'

Greg laughed, 'There's no hijacking to be done, we might have to borrow a few things, but as far as costs go, it's a minimum of fifty thousand a head.'

Greg let that sink in and watched them all. He knew they all had assets or accounts in excess of that amount, as they had all done very well over the past few years, earning top money and whilst they all lived life to the full, none were the type to gamble it away or piss it against the wall, as is sadly the case with a lot of their fellow workers.

'What's the return and over what period of time?' asked Bill Keller. Small and wiry, Bill was an explosives expert, amongst other things. He was so good he had been known to blow a Pommy Union Delegate's work boots up as he was about to put them on. The particular gentleman was forever causing stoppages over trivial little things and the contract was running at a stop/start rate, which was frustrating to everyone. It was a general consensus that this guy had to go, and go he did. His boots blew

to bits as he was about to pull them on. The boots disintegrated with an almighty bang and the sixteen stone delegate flew out the door and from all reports, back to mother Russia, because he was never seen around the construction sites again.

Greg answered Bill's question, 'It will take a month to set up properly and after that period, another two weeks and it will be all over. The return on whatever your investment is will be ten to one or for your \$50,000 you'll get \$500,000 tax free. If you want to invest more, there is no limit and the return will be the same, but you all have to stipulate how much you're putting up and it has to be paid up in full by one week from tomorrow's date. That's April 21st.

'It's vital to the plan that that date is adhered to and the time schedule from then on must be kept. Secrecy is paramount for success. If any hint of what is happening leaks out, it will collapse. I can assure you that this is the only way that you will dent your investment, even if the scheme does not work to the full, there is no way you can lose all of your money, and at the most, it would be three percent.

'That's it gentlemen, I can't tell you any more yet. You all know me well enough to know I don't go off on tangents, but by tomorrow I need your answers and then I'll tell you the rest of the details. I hope you all decide to join in, you will not regret it, I can assure you. For those of you who decide not to take the plunge I must ask you to leave us to discuss the details as, though I know and trust you all, mistakes do happen and as I have already stated, secrecy on this project is the most important aspect of the final outcome. I'm going to have a shower now. I've arranged for dinner to be delivered at around nine o'clock, so that gives you four hours to talk it over amongst yourselves. I won't answer any more queries until tomorrow morning,' and with that he turned and walked to the door.

On reaching the door, Greg turned and addressed them again. 'One more thing chaps,' he said, 'to show you the faith I have in the scheme, I've sold this place and I'm putting the whole lot in, \$250,000 and with that he walked out.

'Christ!' said Rangi. 'He's sold Greenslopes.'