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opening extract from

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DANGEROUS GAMES

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1. The Has-Been

It was a slow day at the Institute of Sport. I was sitting in my office with my feet up, tossing peanuts into a glass of water. So far, one peanut was bobbing on top of the water, while about 20 others lay strewn across my desk. Three-pointers never were my strong point.

There was a knock at my office door. I lobbed another peanut. Rim shot. Then in walked Tom Baker.

I knew who Baker was, of course. I'd read about him in the sports pages. He was the best young cricketer in the country, but he had just been dropped from the national team. He'd also been dropped from the Australia 'A' team, the Prime Minister's

Eleven, the one-day squad, the 20–20 squad, and the New South Wales Blues. Things had got so bad, he couldn't get a game in the back garden at his grandma's at Christmas. All because he wasn't scoring any runs.

In the last six months he'd got 34 straight ducks. He'd got five golden ducks, two diamond ducks, and one very rare double-diamond duck, when he'd got run out while he was still padding up back in the pavilion. He was washed up. Hung out to dry. Left on the line for the birds to peck at. All at the ripe old age of 21.

He walked through my door looking more miserable than a kickboxer with foot rot. His eyes were bloodshot. His cheeks were hollow. He looked like he hadn't shaved or washed in weeks. He was wearing a rumpled, dirty one-day international uniform – the hallowed green-and-gold silky pyjamas – which was strange. As far as I knew there was no one-day international scheduled that day for inside my office.

When I turned to face him, he stopped dead. 'Who are you, kid?' he asked.

'Smith's the name,' I said. 'Fletcher Smith.'

'The sports private investigator?'

'The very same.'

Baker frowned. 'So this is your office?' he said. 'That's your desk?'

'Yup.' I smiled at him. 'And that's my computer. And down there's my rubbish bin. And over there's my plastic plant. And . . . '

'But you're just a kid!' Baker spluttered. 'How old are you? 14?'

'Five and a half,' I said. 'I'm a boy genius.'

'Yeah, right.' Baker shook his head. 'Look, kid, don't waste any more of my time. I'm in serious trouble here.'

'Trouble is my middle name,' I said. 'You want a sports P.I.? I'm the best in the business. Actually, I'm the *only* one in the business. But still. One hundred per cent success rate, in all my cases.'

'What sort of cases?' Baker asked. 'Pencil cases?'

'You can leave if you like,' I said. 'The door's wide open.'

Baker hesitated. He glanced at the open door. He glanced at the empty chair next to mine. Then he sat down.

'Peanut?' I said, holding out the packet.

'Uh . . . no. Thanks.'

'So what can I do for you, Tom?' I said.

He blinked. 'You know who I am?'

'Are you kidding?' I grinned at him. 'I've watched every game you've played. You're the next big thing in baggy green. The stroke play of Michael Bevan. The power of Ricky Ponting. And the suave good looks of Merv Hughes.'

Baker grinned. Then, just as quickly, the smile disappeared from his face.

'Yeah, I used to be pretty good,' he said. 'But then I lost it, kid. I lost my mojo. It's completely gone.'

'You mean your form?' I frowned. 'I don't know if I can help you there, Tom. I'm a sports detective, not a performance coach.'

'I mean I've *really* lost my mojo,' Tom Baker said. 'My lucky charm. The one I've had since I was eleven years old.'

He looked around suspiciously, as if expecting a mob of TV reporters to come leaping out of the filing cabinet. 'Listen,' he said. 'Before I go on. This will all stay confidential, won't it?'

'Absolutely,' I said. 'I give you my word as a sportsman.'

'All right.' Tom let out a long sigh. 'About this lucky charm. You see, it's the whole reason I got good at cricket in the first place. Before I had it, I was the worst batsman in the world. I couldn't hit a barn door if you dropped it on me out of a tree.'

'I get the picture,' I said. 'You were useless. Go on.'

'Then I got given something,' Baker said. 'A shrunken black pig's foot on a silver chain. After that, everything changed.'

'A shrunken black pig's foot,' I repeated. 'OK. This is starting to sound a little crazy,

Tom, but I'm still listening.'

'It's not what it is that's important,' Baker said. 'It's who gave it to me. You see, I didn't get it from just anybody. I was . . . chosen. Marked by the hand of destiny. Or actually . . . ' Tom's voice dropped to a whisper. 'By the hand of the Don.'

'Sir Donald Bradman gave you a pig's foot?'

'*Shhhh!*' Tom waved his hands at me, at the same time glancing nervously all around the room. 'Nobody knows, kid!' he hissed. 'And I mean nobody! I'm only telling you because you're my last chance. If you ever tell anybody else, I'll have to kill you.'

I stared at him. He was just about crazy enough to be serious. Most of the people who come through my door are crazy, to tell you the truth. They've been pushed over the edge by blackmail threats, kidnappings, fans who won't leave them alone, or ruthless agents cheating them out of their life savings. So I wasn't too worried about Tom Baker.

If it weren't for desperados like him, I'd be out of a job.

'Always nice to get the first death threat out of the way,' I said. 'Now we can relax.'

Baker said nothing. He sat slumped in his chair. He'd gone back to doing his kickboxer-with-foot-rot impression. Man, he was miserable. He was in worse shape than David Beckham after England lost to Portugal in 2004.

'So how'd you get this pig's foot from the Don?' I asked.

'I was playing club cricket in the Under-12s,' Baker mumbled. 'Got my usual duck. Out second ball, clean bowled, leg and middle stump. I was taking off my pads under some trees when this old bloke appeared. He introduced himself, asked how I was feeling. Asked if I wanted a few tips to improve my game.'

'So you said yes.'

'Who wouldn't?' Baker said. 'Don Bradman was my hero. I told him I'd give

anything to play like him. "You know what, son?" he said, "I've been looking for a kid like you. I reckon this is your lucky day." Then he took this tiny shrivelled-up black thing out of his pocket, and gave it to me. "Put this in your pocket every time you bat," he said. "*Every time*. And don't tell anyone about it. Not even your mother. It can be our little secret."'

'OK,' I said. 'So it's a *magic* shrunken pig's foot. Is that what you're saying?'

'You can laugh,' Baker said stiffly. 'But I did exactly what he told me, and from then on I was a totally different player. I couldn't stop scoring. My test average before I lost this thing was 99.9, did you know that? Just like the Don's.'

I nodded. I'd read that statistic somewhere. No other batsman in world cricket came close.

'Then six months ago, disaster,' Baker went on. 'I lost it. Somewhere at the Sydney Cricket Ground, after the one-dayer

against Pakistan. I dropped it, or left it in the changing rooms, I don't know what happened. I went back and searched everywhere, but I couldn't find it. After that, I couldn't play for toffee. I went from hero to zero. From legend to laughing stock. It's been a nightmare. You can't imagine what it's been like.'

He held his head in his hands, rubbing his temples. The poor guy was suffering. I felt sorry for him. I knew then and there that I was going to take the case.

'I'm lost without it, kid,' Baker said. 'I can't go on. I can't face never playing test cricket again. Sometimes, in the dead of night, I wake up thinking terrible thoughts. I get these dark, horrible, desperate urges . . . '

'To do a KFC ad?' I said.

'I want to kill myself!' Baker raged. 'And I will! I swear to God! *I've got to get it back!*'

I stood up. I'd heard just about everything I needed to hear. Baker hesitated, then got to his feet also.

'That's it?' he said. 'You'll take the case?'

'Leave it with me, Tom,' I said. 'I'll find your pig's foot for you, but it won't come cheap. I charge 50 bucks an hour, double time if I'm missing something good on TV.'

Baker bent down and unzipped a sports bag on the floor beside him. He took out a parcel wrapped in brown paper, and tossed it on my desk.

'Here's ten grand up front,' he said. 'There's another 20 in it if you find it. Cash.'

I stared at the parcel. I didn't need to open it. I knew the sound of money hitting my desk. 'That's a good start,' I said. 'But let's make it 40 when I find it. A nice, neat 50 grand all up.'

'Done.' Baker didn't hesitate. He thrust out a hand and we shook on it. Something made me think I might live to regret this deal. But then you live to regret most things in the sports private-eye business. It comes with the territory. And 50 grand would sure buy me a lot of peanuts.