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opening extract from

Fletcher Smith: Playing with Fire

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1. The Kidnapping

We had just walked past the halfway line when we heard it.

The heavy, thudding sound of a helicopter, coming in low over the hills.

The sound very quickly got louder. Choppers aren't known for their lightning speed, but this baby was certainly moving. It was flying without lights as well. By the time we picked out its shape silhouetted against the night sky above the floodlights, it was right on top of us.

It swooped in and landed in a corner of the training field, 40 metres away.

As soon as it touched down, a side door opened. Six men hit the ground running. They were wearing balaclavas, and were

dressed in black combat fatigues. All six of them were carrying assault rifles. Without a word, they fanned out and sprinted across the field towards us.

It was nine o'clock in the evening. There were only three people on the training field: me, Frank the Turk, and the recently appointed coach of the Wallabies, Kelvin Hunt. Frank and I were in camp with the Wallabies in Coffs Harbour, watching Hunt try to rebuild the team after Australia's miserable failure in the World Cup. As head of the boxing programme at the Australian Institute of Sport and a former professional super-heavyweight boxer, Frank was doing some conditioning work with the players. He had been hired to improve their punching combinations, so they could brawl better in South African nightclubs. Their performance in this area had been sadly lacklustre in recent years.

As for me, I had nothing better to do, so I was tagging along for the ride. A weekend

with Frank at a Coffs Harbour resort, watching the Wallabies go through their paces, had sounded like pretty good fun to me.

Now suddenly it wasn't fun at all. We were under attack. We were blocked off from the resort, caught right out in the open, with no time to escape. There was no way we could outrun those guns.

'Get down!' Frank yelled. He and I dropped, stomach-first, onto the spongy green turf of the playing field. Kelvin Hunt, however, was a man used to giving orders, not taking them. He stayed on his feet, rooted to the spot. He blinked at the approaching commandos like a deer caught in the headlights.

Hang on a minute, his expression seemed to say. *Did I book a helicopter and a SWAT team in balaclavas for nine o'clock*? *What's going on*?

The team leader made a silent signal to the others. They swarmed in around Hunt, ignoring Frank and me completely.

Hunt backed away, shouting at the top of his voice, as four men grabbed him and pinned his arms. Hunt kept struggling. He kicked out with his legs. He bucked and wriggled. He even managed to hit the team leader with a nice Glasgow kiss. The team leader didn't like that too much. He stepped in and clocked Hunt on the side of the head with the butt of his assault rifle.

Hunt stayed upright, but his head was lolling. He was out for the count. Six pairs of hands clutched at his sagging body. The commandos dragged him quickly and expertly back to the chopper, and shoved him inside the open door. They leapt in nimbly beside him, drew the door shut, and then – barely a minute after they had landed – they took off again, arcing up and over the training ground, above the blazing floodlights, and made a beeline back towards the hills.

2. The Kelvinator

Kelvin 'the Kelvinator' Hunt was a controversial figure. He was a hard man who'd packed down in the second row back in his playing days with Sydney Uni. He didn't score too many tries, or make too many busting runs up the middle of the pack, but if you wanted an ear bitten off, or an eye gouged out, or an opposition fly-half quietly rendered unconscious in the contact area, he was your man. Rumour had it that he collected the ears he bit off and the eyes he gouged out. He took them home, dipped them in milk and egg yolk, then fried them up for breakfast, sprinkled with seasoning and breadcrumbs.

Hunt had been appointed to toughen up

the Australian scrum, which had been steamrollered by the English and the South Africans. He'd been hammering forward play all week. Three full-on, two-hour training sessions per day. The scrum, Hunt said, was the heart and soul of rugby union. It was power. It was passion. It was one man pushing two men up three men's bums. The forwards had spent long hours learning the finer points of his no-nonsense approach. They had hurled themselves at the scrum machines so many times that when they went out for a surf in the morning they instinctively packed down to throw themselves into a wave.

Hunt didn't believe in mollycoddling. He didn't give two hoots about his players' egos, their reputations, or their fragile self-esteem. The closest he got to praise was letting loose with a torrent of slightly less filthy abuse. 'Garbage! Pathetic! That was hopeless, you skirts!' meant he was delighted with the players' efforts. So did 'Come on, you pack

of pansies! Muscle up! I've had cups of Starbucks coffee stronger than that!'

The players had been training hard for five days by the time Frank and I arrived. They didn't have a lot left. In fact, I'd seen walruses in a sauna with more spring in their step. I'd seen better blind-side combinations from month-old roadkill. But strangely, not a single one of the players protested. No one spat the dummy. No one gave Hunt an earful and stomped off home, saying, 'Stuff this, I'm going back to my old job reconditioning fridges.'

The first night we were there, Hunt sent them off on a scrum run. He made them all pack down in scrums and stay in formation. Then he sent them out of the resort, up the hill to the main road, and north 12 miles to Woolgoolga.

'Ten laps round the Sikh temple, 500 push-ups, then back here again!' he'd shouted at them. 'Come on then, get moving! What are youse waitin' for? Go!'

The two assistant coaches had headed off with the players. It was the first time Frank and I had been alone with Hunt. He stood with his arms folded, watching until the players had disappeared up the road, chuckling to himself. He turned to face us with a lopsided grin.

'So, what d'y'reckon, boys?' he said. 'That oughta sort out the spiders from the cockroaches, eh?'

'You're working them pretty hard, Kel,' I said.

Hunt slapped a fatherly hand on my shoulder. 'Kid,' he said, 'I don't know how much you know about sport, but it's five per cent talent, 40 per cent skill, and 99.9 per cent blood and guts. You got that?'

'Wow,' I said. 'That's 144.9 per cent.'

'If you don't put the effort in, you don't win,' Hunt said. 'And when you don't win, you lose. Is that simple enough for you?'

'Sure,' I said. 'Unless you draw.'

'We've just come off a losing streak longer

then the Amazon river,' Hunt went on. 'We lost to *Romania*, for Pete's sake! We drew with the Canary Islands! We gotta get back to basics. Like I said to the head of the Federation when he asked me what areas I thought the national team could improve on. "What areas?" I said. "What *areas*? How about that great big green one, out there?"'

He roared with laughter at this, slapping me so hard I nearly fell over.

'I told the Federation straight-up,' he went on. '"To get Australia back on track, you need the best coach in the world. The absolute top guy. Bar none." So they said, "Kelvin, do you truly believe you're the best in the world?" And I said, "Maybe. Maybe not. But I'm definitely in the top one."'

He roared with laughter and slapped me a second time. You had to like the guy, even though he had a voice louder than David Beckham's tattoos and an ego the size of Kevin Pietersen's lunch. He looked the part, too, with his squashed nose, square chin,

missing teeth and wiry mass of leonine grey-blond hair. He looked like the Wild Man of Borneo after a week of electric-shock therapy. No wonder the press and the Federation loved him. No wonder people all over the country were hailing him as the next saviour of Australian rugby. Whatever the 'it' factor is in coaching, he had it in spades.

And now he'd been kidnapped.