

7TH INNING STRETCH: TWIN KILLING

An excerpt...

Full story coming soon... by Allen Schatz

“A baseball game is simply a nervous breakdown divided into nine innings.”

~ Earl Wilson

1934-2005, first black major league pitcher to pitch an American League no-hitter

Prologue

Point A...

Thursday, October 23, 2008

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania...

FBI Special Agent John King and his soon-to-be-ex partner, Special Agent Rudy Marquez, were seated on a bench near the fountain in Logan Square. Both men were in a bad mood, but King's was more dangerous. That was usually the case. It wasn't because he was a bad person, but some loose wires in his head made it seem that way. The men were discussing a case that was not going according to script. Of course, it was a bad script, but like the wires King didn't see it. He didn't see a lot of things.

What he did see was a scattering of pigeons near his feet, scurrying about picking at scraps on the ground. He also saw a couple of the city's homeless population scavenging from a trashcan across the path from the bench. Not surprisingly, the plight of both types of rodents was lost on King and he grew tired of their presence. When he kicked at the birds, causing them to fly away, the vagrants looked up at the cacophony of fluttering wings.

"Beat it, dirtbags," King said in a growl. "Or I'll kick your asses, too."

The disheveled men cursed something under their breaths and slithered away. King eyed their slow escape. It did not improve his attitude.

"And get a goddamned job," he said in a shout after them.

The ratty men turned back and displayed a different kind of bird. King started to stand, but a hand from his partner stopped him.

"Yo, John, lighten up," Rudy said with enough of an edge to make his point. "They aren't hurting anyone."

King's head slowly turned. His eyes were cold and dark. Rudy did not like what he saw. King didn't care.

“Sure they are,” he said. “They’re fuckin’ losers and they annoy me.”

Rudy shook his head and added a loud sigh.

“Yeah, well, that may be, John, but one bad day is all that stands between them and you. You might want to give ‘em a break.”

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Point B...

Nine months later

July 13, 2009

1 day before the Major League Baseball All-Star Game...

Boyd Livingston left the FBI twelve years ago and started Eye-on-U Security. Boyd had met a lot of good people in those years. John King was not one of them. In fact, King was about as far from good as anyone Boyd had ever encountered. A weaker spirit might have wanted to stick their head in an oven and turn on the gas. Boyd wasn’t that far--yet--but there was little left of his rope.

He was seated behind the desk in his office. King was standing on the other side, anger dripping off like sweat. The anger was not unexpected, but there was something else in King’s eyes, something that gave Boyd reason to pause. The past few months had been extraordinarily trying for Boyd and everyone else at the firm and King seemed at the center of it... or so Boyd thought. The desperation he saw was giving him doubts.

“I’ve given you too many second chances already, John,” he said. “Why should I believe you now? Everything points to you.”

The muscles on King’s face twitched. Boyd could almost hear it. King’s eyes narrowed.

“You *need* to believe me,” he said in a low voice. “*It wasn’t me.*”

Like Rudy Marquez months earlier, Boyd sighed and shook his head. It was the normal reaction most people had towards King.

“John... I don’t *need* to do anything,” Boyd said. “You come in here with these wild-ass accusations and I’m supposed to just fall for it? I think maybe Garrett was right.”

King’s face clacked through a few more twitches before something of a smile worked onto the corner of his mouth. Boyd did a double-take.

“Something funny, John?” he said.

“You might want to think again,” King said.

Boyd stood and leaned over the desk. His eyes narrowed to match King’s.

“Garrett is an extension of me,” he said. “If you have a problem with him, then you have a problem with me. That means it’s *you* that better rethink things.”

King held Boyd’s stare.

“I’m done thinking,” he said.

After a few seconds, Boyd turned and moved to the windows. Summer had settled in on Philadelphia and it was hot. As he looked out at the city he could see thermals rising up from the cement below. On his side of the window a different kind of heat was building.

“I’m tired of this shit, John,” he said with his back to King. “Do you hear what I’m saying?”

King held his tongue, his entire being an overworked spring, ready to snap. That was usually the case... and the problem. Everyone expected the snap. It was only a matter of time. When the last straw came, everyone knew it would be a good idea to be clear of the explosion. After another few seconds, Boyd shook his head again.

“As usual, nothing to say,” he said to the window. “I’m not surprised.”

That changed as soon as he turned and found a Glock-22 pointed directly at his face. He chuckled slightly and then his expression darkened.

“Now you *really* need to rethink things,” he said in a low growl.

“I told you, Boyd, I’m done thinking.”

“So... you gonna shoot me like you shot Alex Harris?” Boyd said. “You better make *damn sure* you don’t miss. I won’t be as forgiving as he was.”

Snap.

The sound filled the room. Boyd’s eyes widened when he realized the source was not King. King also realized something. He had been at his tipping point, the moment when the virus that was his anger was about to hit critical mass, but this was *not* that moment. No, this was something else entirely and the bad day Rudy Marquez had warned of had begun.

Part 1: The Journey from Point A to Point B

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Monday, October 27, 2008
During baseball’s World Series
Philadelphia...

John King was seated at a familiar table, but had a different view. Unlike prior visits, on this occasion he was on the *wrong* side. He didn’t like it. There were four men seated opposite, on the *right* side. King once considered these men compatriots--at least in name if not actions--but saw them now as the enemy. The feeling was mutual. King studied each face and finally responded to a question left hanging moments earlier.

“Yeah, well, this is bullshit and you know it,” he said to no one in particular. “I was just doing my job.”

There was a scoff from one of the other men.

“That’s rich, John,” the man said.

His name was Aaron Bonner and he was head of the FBI’s Philadelphia field office Internal Affairs unit. With Bonner was Alex Harris, Director of the office, Damien Hastings, another

agent currently working the same case King and Marquez were on, and Len Dykstra--no, not the ex-ballplayer--one of Bonner's IA investigators. Those three were quiet. Bonner had the floor. After a few seconds, he stood and began to pace in and out of the shadows created by the bad lighting in the interview room.

"Doing... your... job," he said in a slow cadence. "That *is* rich."

King did not react. Bonner continued.

"I'm fairly certain *your job* was to work with MLB security to *prevent* trouble, not cause it. Then again, trouble seems to follow you, doesn't it, John?"

Again King did not react.

"So tell me," Bonner said. "At what point did shoot your boss get added to your responsibilities? Was it before or after frame the umpire?"

King's expression held--it was mostly unresponsive--but his eyes changed. A few beats passed as the eyes screamed out at his accuser. It was not a scream of fright.

"We thought Connors was in on it," he said in a low voice. "*Harris* wasn't supposed to be there. It wasn't my fault."

The subtle insult of the director did not go unnoticed. Bonner paused and took a drink from a bottle of water. When he finished he began rapping the empty container against the back of his knuckles. The hollow bonking noise filled the small room. After a few seconds, he returned his gaze to King.

"*You* weren't supposed to be there, John," he said. "I will give you one thing, though. Connors *was* in on it. He was one of the victims. Too bad you missed that detail."

Connors was Marshall Connors, major league umpire and key figure in events taking place around baseball's World Series, events that would ultimately include two kidnappings, a

connection to six previously unsolved murders, and the death of Agent Hastings several days after this meeting. In a misplaced attempt to get ahead--something Agent Marquez did far too often from Alex Harris's perspective--he had convinced King that Connors was the bad guy in the case. The two agents couldn't have been more wrong. Their mistake was costly.

At the table, Alex Harris's uninjured arm came up and his hand rapidly rubbed a tired-looking face. His discomfort was obvious, but how much was from the wound versus King's words was debatable. It may have been neither. The case was going nowhere at the moment. This hiccup was not helping. Bonner took note of the director's annoyance and stopped pacing. He was directly across the table from King. He leaned in and stared hard at the agent.

"John, you've been on our list for a long time," he said. "You're reckless and you're a danger to every other agent in this office. I mean, seriously, it wasn't bad enough you decided to plant the bugs, but draw your weapon, too? What, were you afraid of Connors? Jesus Christ, John, the man's a fucking umpire. What was he gonna do, throw his brush at you?"

The insults hit home and King's eyes came up and met Bonner's. There was something new to go with the scream, a crack, a tick. It was hardly noticeable, but it was there and Bonner backed off a fraction of an inch.

"We weren't worried about *Connors*," King said in a sharp tone.

"OK... then why pull your weapon?" Bonner said.

At the table, Alex Harris glanced at Agent Hastings. Both knew the answer, but had no plans to share that knowledge with the IA team. It was relevant to the World Series case, but not remotely so to Bonner's work.

"Fuck you," King said with even more of an edge. "You fuckin' IA guys have no idea. You're all a bunch of pussies chasin' the wrong things."

Bonner's expression darkened and Agent Dykstra perked up at the insult. Before either could do anything more reactive, Alex Harris's voice filled the air.

"Enough," he said with as much force as his condition allowed.

All eyes turned to the director... well, all except for King's. Alex's left arm was in a sling and a touch of red was visible on a bandage covering his shoulder. The gunshot had not done any serious damage, but it was enough to leave Alex in a pissy mood. Having to deal with the IA unit wasn't helping. Neither was King's continued belligerence. Alex decided to end both.

"Aaron, shut up," he said; then to King. "Look at me."

The tone of the second statement was ugly. King's head slowly turned. His expression was similar to one he'd displayed towards Alex seconds before getting his ass kicked by a paid consultant by the name of Thomas Hillsborough. Thomas had been brought in by Alex to help with the World Series case. He also happened to be Marshall Connors's best friend. Thomas had not reacted well to what King and Marquez did. Luckily for King, Thomas was not in the room to see the expression again. The result might have been a few steps up from an ass-kicking.

"This is what happens," Alex said. "You resign. Mr. Bonner is happy because he won't have to deal with your shit any longer. We'll all be happy for that. You get service credit to the minimum pension and then you go away. I don't care where."

Bonner had no intentions of letting King off of any hooks and started to protest, but a hand from Alex stopped him.

"*We're done*, Aaron, you got him gone," he said. "This has already wasted more time than I had to give. It's over. Go write it up before I change my mind."

Bonner reluctantly ceded to his superior officer.

"Fine," he said. "Let's go, Lenny."

Alex watched the two IA men leave and then turned back to King. As he stared down at the man, his thoughts were heavily tilted towards unpleasant, but there was something else. He didn't want to care--King didn't deserve it--but he found himself doing just that. Like every parent--Alex considered his agents his children--no matter how good or bad they behaved he still loved them... despite how far King had stretched it. The punishment just doled out, something Marshall would later describe as a slap on the wrist, reflected those feelings. King's career was over, but it could have been a lot worse. Alex sighed and moved to the door.

"John, do yourself and the world a favor and get some help," he said. "Or that anger is going to be your end."

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South Philly...

Amanda King stared at her husband of six years. Where he was a brooding dour soul, she was sunshine and happiness, although at the moment, both qualities were being severely tested. They were sitting at the kitchen table in their two-bedroom row-home. It was a modest table in a modest kitchen in a modest house, but the King's were a modest couple... at least on the outside. King's government salary was part of the reason--or blame depending on which side of the table you were on--and the prospects of losing it gave Amanda concern.

"What happened?" she said. "What do you mean you quit?"

"I mean *I quit*," King said. "Retired, whatever, I'm done. I can do better on the private side."

Amanda closed her eyes and tried to remember the lessons of her self-help books. "*Take a deep breath and engage... Don't react... Reactions have no thought... You must think to engage... Thinking is good...*" Slowly she opened her eyes again. The picture was still bad.

"Aren't you too young to retire?" she said in a calm tone. "Can you explain that?"

The tightness was returning to King's face. He loved his wife, but sometimes she was as bad as everyone else.

"What's there to explain, Amanda?" he said. "I fucking quit."

Amanda tried not to react to the biting tone. He needed her help, not an indictment. She found a smile and tried to engage his eyes with hers. It almost worked.

"You retired from the FBI because you can do better elsewhere. OK, I think I understand, but what if you *can't* do better, John? Then what happens? Can we live on the pension?"

King's expression morphed into something ugly and Amanda's smile evaporated. When he stood, she flinched and braced herself. She had dismissed the incident from months ago as a one-time event, but his eyes now made her wonder: What if it wasn't?

"Just shut the fuck up," he said in a low growl. "I don't need your shit, too."

He stared at her for a few seconds before turning and stomping from the room. When the front door slammed, Amanda remembered how to breathe again. As the tremor faded, so did the fear... at least a little. It never truly left, not any longer.

Stay tuned for the full story... coming soon!