

GAME 7

A Novel by
ALLEN SCHATZ

Copyright © 2009 by Allen Schatz

All rights reserved.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book is a work of fiction... in other words, I made it up. Names, characters, places, and incidents might seem similar to the real world, but in all cases they are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to said real world is entirely and completely coincidental.

Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise), without the prior written permission of the copyright owner and author of this book.

Thanks for supporting the author's rights... I appreciate it.

For the "real" Sandy, Michael and Samantha, my umpiring crew.

"The great thing about baseball is that there's a crisis every day."

~ Gabe Paul

1910-1998, baseball executive

PROLOGUE

June 20, 1997

Bluefield, West Virginia...

Today was opening day for the Bluefield Orioles, a minor league baseball team and one of the few bright spots in an otherwise dismal and decaying town long removed from its former glory days. For Tammy Rogers, her own life was beginning to feel a little too much like that as well. Her luck had been mostly bad for a long time and the prospects of something better were beginning to fade like the worn-out shingles on the building where she lived. But like every year at this time, Tammy had a renewed sense of hope because opening day meant more than just a new season, it meant new possibilities.

Those new possibilities put an extra zip in Tammy's stride as she set out from her apartment on foot. The warm and breezy night was perfect for a stroll, but not the only reason Tammy was walking. Her destination was a place called Wild Aces, a short three blocks from her apartment, but a distance Tammy liked to call her "safety net." It was close enough to fetch the car if needed, but far enough to work off a buzz if not. It all depended on how lucky she was, and on this night Tammy sensed her luck would change.

At its best, Wild Aces was nothing more than a dive where the legal drinking age didn't mean much. That meant most of the ballplayers and after-game crowd ended up there, which meant it was *the* place for Tammy because the parade of young studs was perfect for what ailed her. The fact that many of the athletes were barely out of high school was never a factor because Tammy was very good at ferreting out those old enough to play her game.

The bar was already filled with its usual collection of drinkers by the time Tammy arrived shortly after 10 P.M. She paused inside the entrance to size up the faces and let them return the favor. She was wearing a knee-length spaghetti-strapped pale yellow sundress that hugged her body. Her blonde hair was a touch above the shoulders and a light application of make-up adorned her face. She didn't need much because at 26 she had a natural look and all the right curves in all the right places. Satisfied she'd been properly noticed, she sauntered to the far side of the long bar. As usual, an empty stool awaited and she smiled as she worked herself onto it.

"Hello, Tammy," a familiar voice said from behind the well-worn bar top.

The voice belonged to Billy Dubbs, proprietor of Wild Aces and a man with whom Tammy once shared a night. It never went beyond that, outside of being the reason for the always-ready

stool whenever the Orioles played a home game. Without waiting for her reply, Billy placed two drinks in front of Tammy: a shot of Jack Daniels and a bottle of Miller Lite.

“I’ll start your tab,” he said. “But don’t forget to settle up this time.”

He winked at her and she gave him her cutest smile in return.

“Oh, Billy, you know I won’t,” she said.

A man to her right watched with great interest as Tammy quickly downed the whiskey. After she caught his stare she adjusted her position on the stool to analyze the face without being too obvious. The light at the bar was somewhere between an old flashlight and a handful of candles, but was enough to let her see the man was attractive and most important, not too young. She mouthed a “Hi” in his direction. He responded with a smile and pushed himself away from the bar. As he approached, Tammy’s “get lucky” meter stirred to life.

“Hello to you, too,” he said with an extended hand.

“Tammy,” she said as she took it.

The touch sent a shiver down her back and she shuddered.

“Nice to meet you, Tammy, may I join you?”

Her heart was racing and when she spoke again her voice was barely audible.

“Please,” she said.

As he sat, she silently chided herself for letting the simple exchange leave her so flustered.

“You’re not from Bluefield, are you?” she said after regrouping.

“No, first time.”

“Oooh, a traveler, huh?” she said in her best pick-up voice.

“I get around.”

“I’ll bet you do,” she said with a wink.

She reached for her beer and took a sip, but accidentally-on-purpose dribbled some down her chin in the process. As the liquid made its way to the space between her breasts, she pinched a napkin off the bar and made a show of dabbing at it. After finishing, she returned her eyes to his.

“You missed some,” he said.

He used the side of his finger to wipe a drop from her chin and the touch sent new shivers up and down her spine. Her nipples got rock hard under the thin fabric of the dress and the man’s eyes took notice of her excitement. After a few seconds she managed to find her voice again.

“Are you a ballplayer?”

“I’ve been known to play the game.”

The finger came back and drew an imaginary line across her shoulder and down the arm. Goosebumps sprouted all over her skin and she closed her eyes to absorb the sensations. She knew they weren’t still talking about baseball and seconds later a satisfied smile filled her face. She was wet from his touch and the lucky meter jumped all the way up to 10. Tammy was ready to go; all the man had to do was ask. About an hour or so later he did just that.

It was the last time anyone saw her alive.



Present Day
Thursday, October 30, 2008
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Game 7 of the World Series...

A radio broadcast boomed through the stadium concourse: “*Swing and a miss, struck him out! Second strike-out for O’Hara and the Rays are retired in order in the top of the first...*”

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Three down, fifty-one outs to go... or maybe forty-eight, but that would require some good luck, something I hadn’t had too much of in the past two weeks. The surprise assignment to umpire the World Series should have been a dream come true, but the avalanche of shit that came with it had turned it into a nightmare. I was confused, angry, and scared, but I needed to keep my head on straight and do my job--the life of my girlfriend hung in the balance... and so did mine.

“Marshall,” a voice said from behind me.

I turned and found Alexei Sanchez, the Tampa Bay Rays catcher, approaching. Alexei was one of the few others in the ballpark who knew what was happening, and like me, everyone thought him a victim in the mess. Unfortunately, at least for me, that was about to change.

“Hey, Alexei, have a good game.”

“Oh, I will,” he said.

It wasn’t so much the edge to his voice that added to my worries, but rather the look in his eyes, a look I’d first seen years ago. I reluctantly accepted his outreached hand and he slipped me a small piece of paper as he pulled away. I did my best not to react. It wasn’t often someone

passed me a note on the field, in fact it had never happened before, but I didn't have time to think about that once I unfolded the note.

GIVE ME THE MONEY OR SHE DIES

Whatever courage I had left vanished faster than free beer on college night. I had come to the ballpark fully-prepared for something to happen, but this was way more than I could have expected. I looked up at Alexei, but no words came. What could I say? I was wrong about his involvement, but it wasn't the first time I'd been wrong in the past two weeks... nor would it be the last.



Two weeks earlier
Thursday, October 16, 2008
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania...

Michael O'Hara was in trouble.

In baseball terms, it was time for a call to the bullpen. Luckily, Michael had experience with that having played in the major leagues for 13 seasons during the '70s and '80s, first as a starting pitcher, then more prominently as a closer. It had been a relatively successful, but well-traveled career, mainly because of Michael's bad temper. He had pitched for Cleveland, Texas, New York (the Mets), and Philadelphia, and was a fiery competitor, but teams got tired of the tantrums and were never reluctant to move him along.

The fire had served him well during his baseball career, but wasn't very helpful for his current passion: Texas Hold 'Em poker. Michael had learned to control the anger--mostly--but never quite mastered the art of quitting while ahead, or more appropriately in this case, while behind. Because of that, he was staring at a \$1.5 million line drive of debt, of which \$850,000 belonged to the handsomely dressed, bald and very large dark-skinned man at the other end of a small conference table where Michael sat. The man's name was Dikembe Dukabi and he was not happy.

"Mr. O'Hara, I don't believe you understand the gravity of your situation," Dukabi said.

It was just after 2 A.M. and the room's dim lighting gave Dukabi's face a menacing appearance. Michael didn't spook easily, but the sight along with the booming voice was unnerving. When Michael failed to respond, there was a slight movement in Dukabi's hand and

two bodies descended from the shadows. Had Michael not been so scared he would have seen something familiar in the taller of the two men.

The guards took up station on either side of Dukabi. The tall one fit the role: he was dressed in black from head-to-toe with a stubbled face and unkempt dark hair. The second was a polar opposite and looked horribly out of place: he was clean-shaven and his bulbous head was covered by fake black hair, but it was his outfit that was most noticeable. The jacket and slacks had a slew of colors and patterns that were an affront to the eyes. Michael wasn't quite sure what to make of either so he tried to project a little attitude.

"What, you guys trying to scare me?" he said with his best sneer.

Dukabi scoffed and Michael flinched.

"Mr. O'Hara, there is no need for us to *try* anything," Dukabi said.

Michael had been in some tough situations over the years, but nothing like this. No, this had gone south of tough in a hurry. It was his own fault: the income earned while pitching should have been more than enough to repay the debts, but like a few too many things in his life, hanging onto money was something of a challenge for Michael, not surprising given his selfish tendencies. Not all of his money was gone, but after agent fees, taxes, divorce payments, and several outlays few knew of, it wasn't necessarily still in his possession.

"OK, OK, my bad," he said with raised hands. "I can see I've touched a nerve."

"You've done more than that," Dukabi said.

He stood and the black leather chair he'd been sitting in hissed a sigh of relief as he began to pace the room. Michael followed with his eyes and took in the surroundings. Outside of a few pieces of African art on the walls and several bookcases filled with unfamiliar titles, the most notable feature of the office, besides Dukabi, was a huge mahogany desk faced by two armchairs. The arrangement left absolutely no doubt as to which side held the power and Michael started wondering why Dukabi had picked the conference table instead, but dismissed the thoughts when the big man stopped next to him.

"I am most disappointed," Dukabi said. "I expected payment Mr. O'Hara, but you now tell me you are unable to do so. What am I to make of this lack of respect?"

He stared down and his position away from the direct lighting above the table gave his face an even more ominous appearance. Michael flinched again.

"I meant no disrespect," he said in an unsteady voice.

Dukabi scoffed again.

“How is it you meant no disrespect?” he said in a quaking voice. “Your hands are empty Mr. O’Hara. What is it I do not see?”

Someone of lesser fortitude might have needed fresh underwear at that moment, but if nothing else, Michael had balls, despite the fact he often misused them, and he managed to remain dry and stain-free.

“I... uh... need a little more time,” he said.

“Explain,” Dukabi replied.

Dukabi’s slightly clipped English accent carried a distinct tone of higher education, but the man was a mystery to Michael, as he was to most everyone else. Of course, that was how Dukabi wanted it, but it did leave Michael at a disadvantage.

“A few people owe me,” he said. “But I need a couple days to get your money.”

He was taking a huge chance with the fib because he had no idea how much Dukabi might know about his background. He held his breath and waited for the reply. The big man glanced back at the guards as if looking for a confirmation... or something else. When neither reacted, Dukabi looked back to Michael.

“Mr. O’Hara, I am a businessman. In my experience I have learned business done in haste is bad business, something your situation proves most elegantly, but you have tickled my curiosity so I shall play along. You may have more time.”

He turned and moved back to the other end of the table. Michael let out his breath and took another before standing. He started to move for the door but a hand from Dukabi stopped him. The big man looked directly into Michael’s eyes, but Michael managed to hold the stare.

“And Mr. O’Hara,” Dukabi said. “You *will* repay me, one way or another.”

Dukabi waved a hand as if brushing away a gnat and Michael didn’t wait for a change of heart. He turned and made a beeline for the door and didn’t stop until he was safely inside the elevator.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Paperville, Tennessee...

William “Wil” Clemmons was on his knees in a planting bed in front of his Victorian-era house. Pots of colorful mums sat next to him awaiting their turn to be buried in the freshly tilled soil. The late-afternoon sky was a perfect blue and a light breeze provided a nice offset to the

sun's warmth. The beautiful flowers and gorgeous weather left Wil dreading the thought of leaving home, even if it was to serve as lead umpire in the World Series.

"Now that's a pretty sight," a voice said from behind Wil's back.

He turned and saw a smiling but unfamiliar face on the sidewalk. The stranger waved. Wil returned the gesture and used the interruption as an excuse to stand.

"Thanks, friend," he said. "They sure are pretty this time of year. Do you plant?"

"I wish," the stranger said with a frown. "Too much travel."

Wil pulled off his gloves and extended his right hand.

"I know the feeling," he said. "The name's Wil Clemmons, nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Clemmons," the stranger said in a pleasant tone.

He came forward, a slight limp in his stride, and gripped Wil's hand, but instead of shaking he yanked hard and pulled the umpire close. Wil was shocked by the move and even more so when a needle appeared and the stranger jabbed it into his neck.

"Easy now old man, help is coming, you'll be fine," the stranger said in a whisper as he lowered Wil to the ground.

The cocktail of Succinylcholine and Versed worked quickly and the shrill sound of an approaching siren was the last thing Wil heard. Seconds later an ambulance roared around the corner and screeched to a halt at the curb in front of the house. Two EMTs hopped out and hustled across the grass.

"Oh, thank God you're here," the stranger said. "I think he had a heart attack or something, I mean, he just fell down. I started CPR, but I'm not sure I did it right."

"That's OK, sir, we'll take it," one of the technicians said. "Are you related to this man?"

"No, no, I was just walking by. Goddamn, is he gonna be OK?"