

LOW TIDE AT TYBEE

A Seamus McCree Novella

James M. Jackson



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Low Tide at Tybee was first published by Wolf's Echo Press as part of *Lowcountry Crimes: Four Novellas* (2017)

Trade Paperback Edition: April 2020

Wolf's Echo Press
PO Box 54
Amasa, MI 49903
www.WolfsEchoPress.com

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ISBN-13 Trade Paperback: 978-1-943166-10-7
ISBN-13 Electronic Edition 978-1-943166-11-4

Printed in the United States of America
10987654321

DEDICATION

For beach lovers everywhere

DAY ONE, MONDAY

A HIGH TIDE RAISES ALL ships; a low tide reveals what's been hidden under all the water. That's especially true at Tybee Island off the coast of Georgia, where average tides are more than seven feet top to bottom. Following high tides, my granddaughter, Megan McCree, preferred to walk the beach looking for new shells. During low tides, playing on hard-packed sand flats that stretch southeast from the island into the channel of Tybee Creek suited her best.

The day we saw the thief was a Monday. Because it was March, Tybee wasn't crowded even on a cloudless day with temperatures well into the seventies. Water temperature was still fifteen degrees cooler: not a problem for a kid Megan's age, a month and a half past her sixth birthday, but darn nippy for an old fart like me. Megan and I had been wading for more than an hour through pools of water left behind after the tide pulled the ocean away from the shore. My feet had become so cold they were numb.

While Megan chased a group of sanderlings across the flats, mimicking both their frenetic steps and their halts to probe the sand for treasures, I used binoculars to spy on a dozen brown pelicans settled on a sandbar south of us. As though an unseen coach blew his whistle, they

sprang into the air and glided north in a line, remaining no more than two feet above the water. An occasional lazy wingbeat propelled their glide.

Megan tugged at my shorts. I leaned down and caught the unique scent of suntan lotion.

“Grampa Seamus? I need to tinkle.”

I smiled at the lilt in her voice that put a question mark after my name. As a youngster, she had struggled to say it correctly, pronouncing it Say-mus. Now her perfect Shay-mus would make any Irishman proud, especially one like me, born and bred in Boston.

It had only been fifteen minutes since the last time she “really had to go,” and we were to meet my mother at the car in twenty minutes. If I could convince Megan to use a blue porta potty we’d pass on the way to the car, I could leave the cold water and warm my feet on the beach sand. “It’s time to leave anyway. Can you hold it until we walk back to the car, or—”

She vehemently shook her head and pointed to the ocean. “Now!” She dramatically crossed her legs to prove how desperate the situation was and contorted her face into a pout.

I choked back a laugh at her performance. Maybe she was telling the truth. More likely she wanted the thrill of peeing in the ocean. Again. Grampa Seamus was a rule-breaker in Megan’s eyes, and for a girl who had been taught that peeing in swimming pools was a major offense, this was breaking bad. The first time I had suggested it to her, she was aghast until I reminded her that fish and turtles and birds did it all the time.

I used my left elbow to clamp the binoculars to my side and held Megan’s hand with my right. The rolling waves were only six-inches high. We waded into the water until

it was over her waist. She grabbed my hand with both of hers, leaned back, and squinched her eyes shut.

I averted my head and caught the flash of a northern gannet, its black-tipped wings pressed tightly against its white body, plunge into the ocean. It popped to the surface with a fish in its beak and maneuvered the meal to swallow it head first. I almost fell backward when Megan stood and released the counterbalance of her weight. With a quick step, I steadied myself. She let go of my hand and waded toward shore.

One of my normal steps equaled three or four of hers, especially while we were in water. I had learned to shorten my stride and try to match her two for one. At least she was now tall enough that I didn't have to lean down to hold her hand.

"Grampa Seamus? Does that man want to read my book?" She pointed high up on the dry sand of the beach toward our towels and beach bags.

Megan's eyesight was much sharper than mine, but I had ten-power binoculars. She was right. A guy in navy swim trunks and a gray hoodie squatted next to our stuff, pawing through one of our two bags. I tapped my shorts pockets, felt the outlines of my keys, wallet, and phone.

Bless her heart, Megan thought her books were valuable; but ignoring her love of books, the bag otherwise contained only suntan lotion, Megan's cover-up, my mother's sweater, our shoes, and the towel Mom had used before she went for her daily walk. The second bag was reserved for wet things, like the shovel and buckets Megan had used to create her fairy sand castle.

The guy swiveled his head, as though checking to see if anyone was watching. It was too far away and the light was wrong for me to get a great look at his face. Dark

sunglasses, the bill of a black baseball cap poked from under his hoodie, and the sense of a goatee were the only details I could make out.

I yelled, “Hey! You!” Although he probably couldn’t hear me, he might have noticed us pointing and me watching him through my binocs. He rose, and with the long strides of a water bug on a smooth lake, headed for the boardwalk exit over the dunes. His flipflops (black?) kicked up sand with each step. Muscular legs turned his step into a bounce once he hit the bridge spanning the dunes. Youthful, I thought.

Megan pulled me forward. “Let’s go.”

“In a sec, Pumpkin.” I followed the guy’s progress, hoping he would stop at the top of the dune bridge and look back. He didn’t. “All right, kiddo. Last one to our stuff is a rotten egg.”

With a high-pitched squeal of delight, Megan took off. Even though we were more than a soccer pitch away from our belongings, she had proved on earlier beach trips that she could run the entire distance. The rippled texture of the sand didn’t seem to bother Megan at all, but on cold-deadened feet, the ridges found pressure points with each of my steps. I mentally said, “Eech” and “Ouch” with alternating steps. Even so, I kept pace with her on the exposed sand bar, once pulling just far enough ahead to cause her to let loose another shriek. She broke into a sprint and surged past me.

I let her stay ahead until we reached the sand of the main beach. Its warmth felt good to my frozen feet, although I knew I’d pay with painful tingles once circulation resumed. Sprinting ahead of her, I turned around and ran backwards so I could keep an eye on her while I chanted in a sing-song voice, “Run, run, as fast as

you can. You can't catch me, I'm the gingerbread man. I've run away from a little old woman, and a little old man, and I can run away from you, I can!"

When I judged we were a dozen yards away from our belongings, I purposefully tripped in the loose sand above the high tide line. Megan flew past me and flopped onto her towel. "I won! I won!"

I gave her a friendly pat on the head. "You sure did." A quick check of our bags revealed Mom's sweater was on top. I had placed it on the bottom. The guy had definitely rifled through the bags, but I couldn't visualize anything missing.

What had that been about?

ACCORDING TO MY MOTHER, PROMPTNESS, not cleanliness, was next to Godliness. I expected to hear about my transgressions because Megan and I would be a couple of minutes late to the scheduled meet at our rental car. Once we put the sand dunes between us and the ocean, we lost the cooling breeze. A half-block later, sweat began beading on my forehead. My mouth dried out and tasted of salt. Megan soon lagged, a sure sign she was tired. Maybe Mom had slowed her walk due to the heat and she'd be late, too. I could hope.

Megan perked up a little when I promised to stop at Seaside Sweets on the way home to our rented house as a reward for excellent behavior on the beach. My son, Paddy, and his wife, Cindy, would not have approved of a sweet treat so soon before dinner, but Megan was with me, not them, and what did it matter if dessert came before the main meal? The shot of energy was short lived,

and with a hanging head, she shuffled her feet on the last few steps to the car.

The sun had baked the car for the three hours we had been at the beach, so it didn't surprise me that even though Mom had her own set of keys, she wasn't sitting in the car. I scanned the few shady spots along the road hoping to conjure the eighty-one-year old. No Mom.

I dumped the bags into the trunk and opened a car door. A blast of superheated air took my breath away. While the car cooled, I led Megan to the shade of a crepe myrtle in a front yard four houses past the car. "We'll wait for your Geema here," I said. I stuck a finger in one ear to block Megan's decision to sing her ABCs and dialed Mom's cell phone. After five rings, my own voice invited me to leave a voicemail for the dialed number.

At eighty, Mom decided she wanted a man's message on her phone. At the beep, I said, "Where the heck are you, Mom? Megan and I expected to meet you at the car. Did I screw up the time? Give me a call. I don't see you in a couple, I'll walk Megan to Seaside Sweets. You remember where it is, right? On Sixteenth Street? Call, okay?"

I knew I was rambling, but talking delayed worrying about everything that might have gone wrong. She was spry and healthy, but she could have fallen, or had a stroke, or heart attack. What would I do with Megan if I had to go to the hospital?

Megan completed the third go-round of her ABCs and was beginning to fidget. Figuring I could buy a little time, I pulled up an app for a spelling game that Megan loved. It presented an image and she had to spell it. The sights and sounds of fireworks rewarded correct answers. If she misspelled a word, the screen shook and the phone

buzzed. It was a battery killer, but more importantly it might prevent a Megan meltdown.

While Megan scored fireworks for DOG, CAT, HAT, RED, ROAD, and a bunch of other three- and four-letter words. I paced the sidewalk, keeping one eye on Megan and the other on the direction of my mother's expected arrival. Two doors down from the crepe myrtle, a bee's buzz grabbed my attention and a new shot of dread poured through my veins. Bees darted around the purple azalea from which the sound arose. Mom's EpiPen was sitting at the house. What if a bee stung her? She could be in anaphylactic shock. My chest sympathetically tightened as I imagined her fighting to breathe.

Where was the nearest hospital? Did they have ambulances on Tybee? They must. It was a city. It had a fire department. Savannah had a teaching hospital. EMTs carried epinephrine, didn't they?

Ten minutes passed. Megan would soon tire of the game. Should we drive to the police station and report my mother missing? They would know if there had been an emergency call, right? By now, Mom could be waiting for us at Seaside Sweets. No, she'd call if she got the message—unless she forgot to charge her phone last night? Wait a minute. I was the one who forgot to charge his phone; Mom never did. She did sometimes forget to power on her phone after shutting it down before going to bed. Maybe today was one of those days?

If I drove to the police station rather than call, I could show them her picture from my cell phone. We could drive by Seaside Sweets on the way in case she was waiting for us. "Come on, Megan. Let's hop in the car and look for your Geema."

"Why, Grampa Seamus? She's right there."

Megan pointed to my mother, who was walking up from the beach—the opposite direction from where I expected to see her. Megan skipped down the sidewalk. So much for being tired. What if she knocked my mother down? She didn't. She stopped and carefully wrapped her arms around my mother's legs in an enthusiastic hug. I was becoming such a worrywart. It was exhausting. I needed a nap.

Hand-in-hand, the two of them ambled toward the car. Once Mom was close enough I didn't have to shout, I said, "I was worried."

"I was afraid of that," Mom said. "I went to take a picture and discovered I had dropped my phone somewhere. I retraced my steps to try to find it. I was darned near three-quarters of the way back when I decided I had left it in the pocket of my sweater. I didn't have any way to contact you."

I clicked the key fob and popped the trunk. "Grab it. Then we need to take Pumpkin for a gelato. I know, it's almost dinner time. But, you were the one late . . ."

Mom grabbed her sweater and patted the pockets. "Maybe it fell out?" She felt around inside the bag.

"I'll call it, so we can follow the sound," I said. A corner of my mind wondered why I hadn't heard it ring when I had called and left the message.

"Good thought," Mom said, "but I turned it off driving to the beach."

"Geema, let's go get ice cream." Megan tugged on my mother's arm and nearly dropped my cell phone.

"Megan," I said to Geema's little helper. "Can you find Geema's phone in the bag? And give me mine while you're looking." To my mother, I added, "You sure you left it with your sweater? You checked your fanny pack, right?"

She gave me a look that said, “How stupid do you think I am?”

“Butter blindness,” I said. “You know, you look in the refrigerator for the butter and can’t see it right in front of your eyes?”

“Good recovery, Seamus. Look for yourself.” She unclasped the fanny pack and handed it to me. “Any luck, sweetie?” she said to Megan.

Megan had dumped the beach bag contents into the trunk and carefully checked each item before stuffing it into the bag. I unzipped the front pocket of the fanny pack where Mom normally kept her phone and recovered lip balm, two pouches of ready-to-use wipes, clip-on sunglasses, and a ballpoint pen from a local real estate office. The larger compartment contained only her flat wallet, Kindle Paperwhite, and darts’ case. Mom maintained an enthusiastic following in the world of competition darts. She’d retired from tournament play, but still raised thousands for charities, and she always carried the case with her. My father had given it to her more than forty-five years ago, shortly before he had been killed. It was her personal talisman.

“No phone.” Megan emphatically shook her head.

“It’s not in with the beach toys?” Mom asked.

“Nope,” I said, “but you can check in case I’m the one with butter blindness.”

“Oh dear, it was almost brand new. And they’re so expensive. Do you think we should try walking the beach once more?”

“No, Mom. I think we saw a guy steal it.”

“STOLEN CELL PHONES SEEM TO go in spurts,” Tybee Island’s Detective Sergeant Brittney Issa said with a dollop of southern drawl in response to our report of the probable theft of Mom’s cell phone. “You’re the third person in the last two weeks. At least y’all didn’t store any confidential data on yours. Sometimes we’re lucky and they show up in a lost and found. Sometimes they’re used for a day or two and pitched away. You’re the first who saw anything. Although white male, medium height, fit, and wearing swimming trunks and a hoodie, doesn’t exactly narrow the suspect pool a whole lot. Anything else specific?”

I pegged the detective in her early forties with shrewd eyes behind a friendly demeanor. All the time her words suggested it was a lost cause, she beamed an appreciative smile. Even though I had the feeling her smile was the syrup to catch unwary insects, I liked it a lot better than the tough cop approach some officers take. “I might recognize the way he walked if I saw him again,” I said. “But even through the binocs, we were a long way away. Wore dark glasses. Had a goatee. Flip-flops. He might have had a tattoo on his . . .” I closed my eyes to try to conjure the picture. “. . . right leg.”

“Spider web.” Megan stuck another scoop of strawberry gelato into her mouth and smacked her lips in audible delight.

“Really?” I said. “You could see from so far away?” I gave the detective an eye roll to indicate my skepticism.

Megan dramatically shook her head. “Before.”

With that single word, she grabbed our attention. Oblivious to our stares, she concentrated on scraping the last of the gelato from the cup.

“Before what?” I prompted.

“At my fairy castle.”

Behind my eyes came a warning throb. “He was at your fairy castle?”

A nod. “He watched me.”

“Where was I? Where was Geema?”

“Geema was gone walking. You were watching those big brown birds that crash into the water.”

“Pelicans,” I said without thinking. *And a man approached Megan?* “Pretend I was that man. Can you show me how far away he was?”

Megan moved two feet away. Acid burned in my stomach. *That close and I didn’t see anything?*

“The spider caught a bug with a green head and big red eye,” Megan said.

Detective Sergeant Issa squatted her five and a half feet down to Megan’s size. “Did he touch you?”

Head shake.

“Did he talk to you?”

Megan added a “No” to her head shake.

“Can you show me on yourself where it was? The spider?”

Megan pointed to her right calf.

“The spider web was black?” Issa asked.

A nod from Megan.

“Did you recognize the bug? Was it a fly?”

“No!” Megan stomped a foot. “It had a fish tail and no legs. It was stupid. I can draw better, and I can count to a hundred. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight—”

Issa chuckled and returned the eye roll I had given her earlier. “I believe you can, Miss Megan. Now, you look like a smart girl. Can you think hard for me? What else can you tell me?”

To my surprise, Megan did not protest the

interruption of her numerical recitation. She squeezed her eyes shut. Her ruby lips flattened. Then her eyes popped open and she pointed to Detective Issa's gun. I held my breath, expecting another revelation about the perpetrator.

"You have a gun. Grampa Seamus doesn't like them, but Geema has one."

"In Boston," my mother quickly added. "With a carry permit. Is there anything else we can do, Detective?"

"I think that's it." Issa rose, signaling an end to our meeting. "I want to again caution you. If your 'find my phone' app kicks up a location, contact us. If you happen to find it yourself, let me know that, too."

Mom looked between us. "Seamus, you're supposed to respond, 'of course.'"

IN THE CAR, MY MOTHER said, "On the way home, let's drive by the place I saw."

"I think I lost a thread, Mom. Which place you saw?"

Mom had fallen in love with Tybee several years earlier once a friend showed it to her. This vacation had multiple purposes: give my son and daughter-in-law a two-week break from child-rearing, let Mom and me spend time alone with Megan, and look for a place I could rent in summers and allow Mom to escape Boston winters.

"The one I wanted to take pictures of when I discovered my phone was missing. It's on our way."

I checked to make sure Megan had secured herself in the car seat. "Okay, a quick drive-by, but we need to feed Megan soon. The ice cream won't hold her for long."

Mom's directions were useless. She had spotted the

building on her beach walk and didn't have an address or even an accurate sense of exactly where the building was located other than, "past the pier right on the ocean." After several futile attempts on side streets, I stumbled onto it.

"That one!" Mom proclaimed. "It's the right-most unit of the three-condo building."

I pulled to the curb and powered down the windows for a better look. Three stories high, each unit had a single-car garage underneath the back—clearly inadequate, four vehicles were parked on the lawn and driveway of the left-most unit. The units were narrow with a single rear window on the second and third floors. Sea-green awnings covered each unit's rear entrance and second-floor window. I counted three side windows on the second and third floors and could see the edge of a deck at the second story level.

Topping the building was a red metal roof. The thing had all the charm of a love child between a concrete bunker at Fort Screven, the abandoned coastal fort just down the road, and the metal pole barn building I used for a garage at my place in Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

Yet, it *was* right on the beach. A group of seagulls wheeled overhead, squawking what, after watching *Finding Nemo* with Megan, I would forever think of as, "Mine, Mine, Mine." One of my purchase criteria was to be able to hear waves on the beach at night to lull me to sleep. Even with the current minimal wave action, I picked up the deep thrum of the waves.

A freshening breeze slipping through the gap between buildings brought with it the tang of salt air, fresh even at low tide because the gulls acted as garbage disposals for any dead and rotting fish. It was far enough away from

the Tybee pier so the crowds were thinner. It had possibilities.

“I’m cold,” Megan complained from the back seat.

The sun was setting behind us and after Megan mentioned it, I realized tingling goosebumps had popped on my bare arms. I raised the windows and looked for a real estate agent sign so I could punch in the property code on my phone and get the particulars. No sign visible. “Did you get a flyer? What are they asking?”

“No clue,” Mom said. “A poster in an ocean-side window said it was for sale by owner, no agents need apply. And a phone number. That’s the picture I wanted.”

Megan kicked the back of my seat hard enough to threaten whiplash. “I’m hungry,” she whined.

“Me, too, kiddo.” I put the car in gear and zipped up the windows.

“I know it doesn’t look like much from here,” Mom said. “But it’s got a private walk across dunes, and the view is to die for. You like it, don’t you, Megan?”

Great, now Mom was playing the grandchild card.