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## LOW TIDE

By

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When a man rode out of town in the trunk of a car, he wasn't coming back. That much Pablo already knew from his short experience as driver and errand boy for Desantis. The reason for this trip, Dominic Suarez, lay hunched on the sand, hands and feet bound with rope, and his head pinned to the ground under Desantis' sturdy foot. The boss' right hand man, Guterrez, watched Suarez the way a cat watches a bird while Pablo's shovel bit into the moist earth.

Pablo's dungarees, flannel shirt and cap seemed more fitting for the job of digging a deep hole in the muddy beach that lined the eastern edge of Tampa Bay than the men's linen suits. He looked at Desantis and Guterrez, admiring their clothes and hats, envying the kind of money and power they took for granted. To Mama and Papa, Desantis meant danger, smuggled liquor, *bolita* numbers, dead men in back alleys and on street corners. To Pablo, work for Desantis was just an attractive alternative to starving. *Tabaqueros* like Papa were too small for hungry sharks like Desantis anyway, and driving for the gangster paid a lot better than picking oranges or loading ships, colored men's work that Pablo occasionally took just to get by.

The shore lay as a long, flat expanse of sandy mud, broken by clusters of mangrove extending to the water on stilts of exposed roots like egrets wading. Herds of fiddler crabs scurried, hundreds moving as one, and ankle-high waves lapped at the shore, gurgling as they stirred the mud. The water's rhythm blotted the silence. The musty, fertile smell of decay, low tide, wafted through the air as Guterrez and Desantis watched Pablo work. The two men differed

in many ways, Desantis stood wide and low to the ground, his legs short and his torso large, and Guitierrez was lanky, all arms and legs. Desantis' head had a squared shape that contrasted with Guitierrez' oval face and broad cheekbones, and he stood nearly a head shorter than his number-two man. A thick, gray-streaked moustache hid Desantis' upper lip and mirrored his bristly eyebrows. Its straightness divided his face into two rectangles. Desantis spoke loud and often, and Guitierrez kept his tongue. When he did speak, people listened.

Guitierrez helped Pablo lower Suarez into the hole. Three herons burst from the tall grass, silhouetted against the gray evening sky as they settled Suarez into the pit.

Until tonight, work for Desantis and his gang consisted of odd jobs, mostly driving. When they came around with the truck, that meant a couple of hours stacking cases of fresh-smuggled Cuban rum into the back, then unloading everything at the warehouse. The La Salle or the Buick meant chauffeuring middleweight gangsters, picking up take-out food or running a load of booze to a party. The Cadillac, tonight's car, meant special occasions, and with a man in the trunk as they headed out of town, this one promised to be memorable.

Suarez kneeled in the bottom of the hole, his eyes continually moving between Guitierrez, Desantis, and Pablo.

"Pack it down tight." Guitierrez stepped away from the hole, his lips hardly moving as he spoke.

The bound man whimpered the way a scared dog sounds from under the bed during a thunderstorm, but he didn't move. He stank of sweat and piss, and the odor made Pablo's empty stomach clench like an angry fist. He had smelled bad things like this before, but stink of rummys and hobos somehow didn't seem as rank. Pablo filled the hole, pausing only to stomp the sandy mud and tamp it hard against the man's body. The work reminded him of the summer he helped a construction crew lay a foundation, burying brick pilings for a house off Tenth Street.

Suarez was a *bolita* runner that Guitierrez had caught skimming the take. *Bolita* had become Desantis' main business after Prohibition ended. An ancient game he had operated since he first learned it from the Cubans, people bet money on numbers etched into little balls, *bolitas*, kept in a leather bag. One of Desantis' men shook the bag to mix the balls and another pulled the

winning number out of the sack. They played out the ritual every night to a small crowd of onlookers after dinner at Los Novedadas Restaurant. Desantis ran several games, with the biggest pot running through the week and the winning number drawn on Sunday night.

This simple game brought the Sicilian and his men enough money to buy the nice cars, fancy houses, and tailored suits at the Wolf Brothers store downtown. *Bolita* paid for Desantis' brand new 1934 Cadillac and the big house with the wrought iron fence.

As he finished filling the hole, Pablo smoothed the sand with the back of his shovel. The man's head protruded from the ground as if it were a weed sprouting from the mud flats. Desantis chuckled. "Good work, kid." He patted Pablo's shoulder and turned to Suarez. Desantis swung his foot at the man's head as if kicking a football. He bent his knee at the last moment, his shoe swirling loose sand into the man's face. "How smart do you think you are now?"

Suarez opened his eyes and a wince faded from his face. He wore a black eye, the bruise fresh, purple, and angry. His other cheek shined red, the surface rubbed raw by fast knuckles, and his lips stood swollen under an equally rounded and broken nose, the lower lip split and still bleeding.

"Frigging thief." Guitierrez' voice rumbled and the tall Spaniard crossed his arms. His small, dark eyes narrowed as he gazed at the buried man.

Desantis paced circles around the exposed head. "How could you be so damn stupid?" He stooped and shouted the last word into Suarez' ear. "Nobody steals from Desantis." He grabbed Suarez by the ear and shook him the way a dog shakes a rag.

Pablo watched the boss. What kind of punishment would Desantis deal out tonight?

Desantis loomed over Suarez' head. "Stealing from me." He pointed at himself with all ten fingers. "From me." His eyes grew large, as if such an act were beyond belief, like pigs whistling and cows flying.

"Tonight, you die." Guitierrez stepped in front of Suarez, his voice level and even. He could have been reading the weather report.

Pablo's pulse quickened. He had never seen a dead man before, not for real, just pictures in the newspaper and bloodstains on the sidewalk. He knew Desantis and his men wielded power,

but hadn't considered the power over life and death until he saw the anger in Desantis' face and heard the certainty in Guiterrez' voice.

Pablo didn't know what Desantis would do next. He had thought the Sicilian or Guiterrez would pull out a pistol, that the hole he just dug would be a grave.

Guiterrez stared at Suarez, and Desantis stepped back from the water. The Sicilian looked at the wet edges of his shoes and laughed. Noise burst from his throat like a wild animal sprung from its cage.

"Tide turning?" Guiterrez pushed his hat back and squinted at the setting sun.

"Right on time." Desantis stooped to pluck a small shell from the ground and toss it into the water. The *plunk* it made as it broke the surface was the only sound beyond the whispering rustle of the small waves against the mangroves.

Pablo looked at the water, it had moved a good two feet closer to them in the time it took to bury Suarez up to his neck. Desantis stood square in front of the trapped man, then took two steps to the left, water lapping against his shoes.

"I'm not going to kill you, *pendejo*. We're letting Mother Nature do the job." He leaned down and propped his hands on his knees to look Suarez in the eye. "That means you're going to die of natural causes." A cascade of laughter spilled from Desantis, his teeth shining even and white beneath his moustache.

Guiterrez smiled at Desantis' joke. "How long can you hold your breath, *cabron*?"

Desantis stomped his feet in the shallow water gathering around him. The soles of his feet made slapping sounds as small splashes of water scattered, half of them landing on and near Suarez. "Don't think you can hold it for six hours." He reached down to pat Suarez on the cheek, but it sounded more like slapping.

Pablo swallowed; his throat felt dry and leathery. His heart fluttered against his stomach. He'd never seen a man die before and didn't know what to do.

The water inched forward, covering more of the mud flat and probing brackish fingers of water inland. The sun shrank to a pink glow in the west, its broken image on the rippled surface of the bay looking like a wide westbound boulevard from the shore to the horizon. A heron

stepped into the reflection, silhouetted in the dying sunlight on its stilt legs while it jabbed its head into the water. The bird came up with a wriggling minnow, then tipped its head back to gulp the live fish with a shake of its neck.

Guterrez set his jaw. "Ask yourself, was this really worth the two thousand you stole?" He paced around the buried man and leaned over his head from behind. "Or the five hundred you spent before we got the rest of it back from you?"

He tapped his foot against the back of Suarez's head, the way Pablo's father slapped the back of his head when he did something wrong. The incoming water had begun to reach the ground near Suarez' chin.

Desantis stepped back and watched the bay, his thick arms folded. Guterrez joined him, waiting for the water to rise.

Pablo picked up the shovel and leaned on it. Compared to the stories Desantis' soldiers told about shaking down debtors and driving rival gangs from the boss' territory, tonight's job would seem dull in comparison. They left the guns at home and the switchblades closed this evening just to hang around the shore and watch the incoming tide smother the life out a man.

When the water rose high enough to cover his chin, Suarez rolled his head back on his neck and began whimpering. The waves splashed water on his face as they broke against his throat. Pablo's legs grew weary, and he straddled the shovel's handle to sit on the steel blade. He didn't want to watch but found his eyes drawn to Suarez' exposed head.

Desantis chuckled and nudged Guterrez as the bay began to wash over Suarez' mouth, leaving him sputtering between waves. Suarez extended his neck and lips as if trying to kiss the clouds, reaching above the rising water. Already, the incoming tide had washed the dried blood from his neck and jaw.

Pablo felt tired, the hour's labor oddly taking as much out of him as a whole day's work. He didn't want to be part of this any more. Gangster work was supposed to be glamorous and powerful. Tonight's job was simply cruel and ugly.

A six-inch wave, perhaps the remnant of a freighter's wake as it sailed out of the port, washed completely over Suarez' head. He coughed, a racking and whooping sound, and sprayed

bay water like a whale spouting. The water crept higher against his cheeks and panicked grunts escaped from his mouth.

Desantis gathered four large shells. He threw one at Suarez, striking his ear. “You going to steal from me again?”

An incoming wave covered the man’s face with water, and he sputtered, fighting for air.

Desantis threw another shell. This one hit his cheek, drawing fresh blood. “*Carajo*. I asked you a question.” He drew his arm back to throw another shell. “You going to steal any more?”

The drowning man shook his head as another wave rose to his eyes, then receded to his lips. He gurgled and coughed out a reply: “*No!*”

“Good.” Desantis dropped the seashells. “Now you learned something. And now you die.”

Pablo craned his neck to see Suarez. Now would be the time to dig him out of the sand, maybe rough him up a little more, then tell him to leave town. This was enough.

The drowning man extended his ruined lips like a snorkel to draw air. As he exhaled, he moaned. “No.” Panic from the rising water gripped him, and his voice rose to a falsetto. An incoming wave smothered the next cry.

In the cigar factory where Papa worked, if you stole, the company fired you. In Desantis’ gang, if you stole, you died like this. Those were the rules, and grubbing out a living by rolling Havana leaf into cigars might be boring, but the stakes were easier to live with. Seeing a man die for real felt a lot different than the movies, street stories, or newspaper reports. Pablo couldn’t find any glamor or drama in tonight’s work.

“Won’t be long.” Guterrez said.

The bay rose above Suarez’ extended lips and he made wet gasping coughs, their sound muffled by the brackish water. Pablo stood and found another spot higher on the shore because the incoming tide threatened to wet his feet. He didn’t want the thing that was killing Suarez near him and watched the drowning man thrash his head around, trying to reach the surface and not

finding it. Pablo shivered and rolled down his sleeves. Sand dug into his arms, and he shivered again as Suarez gurgled and sputtered.

Foam rose to the surface around Suarez' head, then he stopped moving. Pablo glanced at Guitierrez.

The Spaniard watched the water stir Suarez' hair as it moved in and out. After a few moments, the only sign of the drowned man was a change in the shape of the waves as they washed over the top of his head. Guitierrez glanced up to the night sky. The moon, not quite full, had risen. He looked at Desantis. "Done."

Desantis peered at the water and snickered. He nudged Guitierrez. "Guess that taught him not to steal."

Guitierrez smiled, his teeth looking long and reptilian in the moonlight. "He won't do it again."

"Boy." Desantis snapped his fingers at Pablo. "You didn't lose my car keys?"

"Nosir." Pablo held them up as proof of his reliability.

"Then take the shovel and let's go." Desantis led the way inland between the mangrove bushes. The leaves rustled against his suit like whispered secrets as he walked back to the Cadillac. "Time for a drink. I'd invite Suarez, but I think he's had his fill already." Desantis and Guitierrez laughed.

Pablo took a last look at the water and shivered.