

THE FISHING PARTY

"MAN, THIS THING SMELLS LIKE SOMEBODY HURLED IN IT," Little Pussy said, wrinkling his nose in the backseat of the ten-year-old rusted-out Chevy wagon they had stolen in town. It was eight P.M. and they were heading back to the Sporting Club. New York Tony was driving with the headlights out.

Mickey, in the passenger seat, was trying to spot the shell road that led to the beach. "There it is," he said, pointing to the opening in the shrub line.

The wagon groaned and shook as it made the turn. Tony shut off the engine and coasted to a stop near Paul Arquette's bungalow. They sat for a minute, listening to the hot engine tick in the dark.

"Okay, Puss, we're going fishing, so we need one of those cabin cruisers tied out on the wharf. Make sure nobody's on the dock, then get aboard and see about getting it started. Don't turn it on till me an' Tony get aboard."

“Right.” Little Pussy got out of the car and moved down to the beach. He waited for his eyes to adjust to the dark. Once he could see that nobody was on the wharf, he crossed the strip of white sand and climbed up on the dock, his lace-up leather shoes making clacking sounds on the freshly painted wood.

Mickey and New York Tony put on gloves and got out of the car. The Flamingo Suite was locked and empty. Mickey moved around to the back where he had broken the glass and saw that it had already been fixed. “Shit,” he said in mild disgust. This time he removed the pane without breaking it, opened the door, and fitted the glass back into the slot. He let Tony in the front door.

“Okay, this Warren guy is in something called the Seafoam Suite. It’s the next one down. Pick him up and bring him here. And keep him quiet.”

“Right.” Tony moved silently out the back door and disappeared down the beach.

Warren and Paul were having dinner in the big dining room with the two pollsters from the DNC. They were scheduled to go back to Washington tomorrow. People at other tables stole glances at the famous senator. They talked about the Iowa caucus and how Paul should get there early and start working the state in late January. Paul’s wife, Avon, called him long-distance from Washington. He took the call on the head waiter’s phone. By nine o’clock, Paul and Warren said good night to the pollsters, and they all headed back to their respective suites.

When Paul put his key in the door, he was yawning. He moved carelessly into the room, turned to lock up, and felt the cold touch of a gun on his temple.

“Whaaah!” he yelled in fright.

“Hands behind you, Paul. Don’t fuck with me or I’ll blow your nuts off.”

“I . . . You . . .” Paul sputtered.

Paul put his hands behind him, and Mickey wrapped them quickly with some silver electrician’s tape Milo had given him. Then he spun Paul around and pushed him against the door.

“You can’t do this to me. I’m a U.S. senator.”

"You're puppy shit, Pauly. You shouldn't a' forgot who you were dealing with."

A few minutes later, the back door opened and Warren Sacks was pushed into the room with a pillowcase over his head. Tony pulled the case off once they were inside, and Warren stared at them, his eyes bulging with terror. He had a pair of his own tennis socks taped into his mouth.

"Tony, get a couple a' pair of swim trunks outta the dresser . . . an' some socks for Pauly."

"Just what the fuck do you think . . . ?" Paul didn't get any further because Mickey hit him in the solar plexus. When Paul's mouth flew open to exhale, Tony shoved the socks into the opening, then Mickey pulled him upright and pushed his head back against the wall.

"How do you guys feel about fishing? I know it's late, but what the hell. . . Wanna see if anything's running out there?"

Warren and Paul looked at Mickey through wild eyes.

They stepped out of the pink Flamingo Suite, closed and locked the door, and headed toward the cabin cruisers.

Little Pussy was in an Egg Harbor with a flying bridge. He stuck his head out of the cabin. "Over here," Puss whispered, and they loaded Paul and Warren aboard. On the stern of the boat, printed in corny circus letters, it said REEL FANTASY. They pushed Paul and Warren down into the padded fighting chairs.

"Any live bait aboard, Puss?"

"In that tank," Little Pussy answered.

The bait tank in the stern was full of medium-size sea bass swimming lazily in the brackish water.

"Is everybody ready for a Reel Fantasy?" Mickey asked. "Puss, let's get outta here."

Little Pussy had found the keys hanging on a hook inside the starboard hatch. He started the engines while New York Tony cast off the lines, and the thirty-foot fishing boat moved slowly out to sea, its running lights off. Within moments, the *Reel Fantasy* was out of view of land.

They cut the engines somewhere over the Great Bahama Bank, and

Mickey grabbed the small hand fishnet, scooped several of the bait fish out of the tank, and started to chop them into little pieces. When he was finished, he scraped the fish and innards into a drain bucket. All the while, he talked to a terrified Paul Arquette.

“What I don’t get, Paul, and maybe you can explain it to me, is what the fuck you think was going on all those years . . . ? This was never anything but a straight business deal. How’d you get so far off the fucking road?”

Paul tried to grunt an answer muffled through his sock-stuffed mouth. Mickey ignored him and turned to Tony. “Turn on that spotlight and throw this chum in the water.”

Tony flipped on the night fishing lights. Fifty feet down in the ocean’s green water, they could see colored fish swimming on the reef. Then Tony threw the bucket of chopped fish, blood, and guts into the water.

“Puss, move the boat around while Tony spreads it out.” Paul’s eyes were bulging and he started to choke. Mickey reached over and pulled the spit-wet socks out of both men’s mouths.

“Look, Mickey, I’m sorry. I didn’t think it through. You’re right. I’ll tell the DNC no. We’ll put it back the way it was.” Arquette was frantic.

“Yeah, but Paul, that still leaves me with a problem. Once a guy rats me out, I can’t ever trust him again. What if we get you in the White House and I ask you to do me a favor and you tell me to fuck off, like this afternoon? What’m I gonna do to you once you’re the President? . . . See the problem?”

Paul swallowed, sweat formed on his forehead.

“You don’t get a second chance,” Mickey continued. “This was a one-chance kinda deal. Now we gotta get you changed.” He picked up the trunks and flipped them at Warren and Paul. The trunks hit their legs and fell to the deck. “Untie ’em, Tony.”

“Why do we need trunks?” Paul whimpered.

“’Cause I said so, okay?”

“I’m not gonna do it,” Paul said.

Tony jerked Paul up onto his feet and hit him lightly in the stomach. “Okay, okay,” Paul gasped, and Tony untaped his wrists so Paul

could unzip his pants and get into the swimming trunks.

Warren was pleading in a singsong voice. Mickey couldn't even tell what he was saying.

"Shut the fuck up," New York Tony yelled at Warren.

In a few minutes, both were wearing swim trunks.

"Bring me some ropes," Mickey ordered. Little Pussy scrambled to find them. Mickey looped rope under Paul's armpits and knotted it under his breastbone, stuffing towels underneath so there would be no rope burn.

Then Mickey shoved Paul hard in the chest and Senator Arquette jackknifed off the transom of the boat into the bloody water. Mickey looped the end of the line over the stern cleat. New York Tony fastened another towel-padded rope around Warren, threw him overboard, and cleated him off on the port side.

Paul was yelling. "Let us in! . . . Why are you doing this to me?"

"Let's drag 'em around a little," Mickey said. Pussy hit the throttle and started to pull Paul and Warren through the bloody chum.

"Stop!" Warren screamed. "This blood will draw sharks!"

"Now you're on my wave length," Mickey said to himself as he scooped out more fish and chopped them up. "Come on, boys. . . . Dinner's on," Mickey said to the empty sea.

They didn't see the first dorsal fin for almost twenty minutes, but once it came, several more were there within seconds. Tiger sharks with strangely beautiful yellow markings on their backs.

At first, the sharks made slow passes while Warren and Paul screamed in terror. The sharks brushed up against them, not quite sure what they were, making tighter and tighter circles. Then a nine-foot monster turned and came hard at Warren. It hit him in the kidneys, ripping and tearing with its razor teeth. Warren screamed in pain as the tiger shark arched its back and slashed its tail, tearing a huge piece of Warren loose.

Blood spilled into the water.

"For the love of God! For the love of God!" Paul screamed, seconds before a shark slammed into him. The shark rolled on its back and threw its head, tearing half of Paul's shoulder away. The sea boiled red with the feeding frenzy as dorsal fins and teeth flashed in the floodlit water.

T H E P L A N

"We got the right bait on now," Mickey said.

Unexpectedly, Little Pussy vomited, spewing up half a bag of M&M's and two peanut brittle bars he'd eaten on the plane.

The sharks were feeding with abandon, ripping and tearing. Within seconds, half of Warren Sacks was gone. Paul was missing one leg along with his right arm and shoulder to the chest.

"I don't wanna lose 'em completely. Let's get outta here," Mickey said.

Puss, with peanut-chocolate vomit still on his shirt, hit the throttle, and they roared away from the sharks. The lifeless torsos were skipping and turning at the end of the ropes, doing a macabre dance in the churning wake.

They cut the bodies loose twenty yards from shore and watched until they washed up on the beach.

They hosed down the boat, retied it to the wharf, and returned to the airfield.

"Everything work out?" Milo asked.

"Went fishing but we lost our bait," Mickey said.

Minutes later, they were headed back to New Jersey.

Everything had taken less than an hour.