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**Note From Renni Browne:** In this chapter from Scott Pratt's first draft, Joe Dillard (his name was Joe Cooter at the time) is asked to defend a young woman the man hiring him is convinced didn't murder and mutilate the evangelist at the strip club. Over the course of the editing and rewriting, Scott killed off the character who hires Joe in this scene—Gus Jackson, the owner of The Mouse's Tail. In the draft New American Library is publishing, we learn that poor Gus had a heart attack and left the 'gentleman's club' to his wife, Erlene, who is an unforgettable character. She and Joe get along just fine. And by the time Gus bit the dust—a massive coronary, so sad—Scott needed very little line editing. Most of my changes in the later drafts were small creative contributions, the kind an editor makes who knows the story and the author's narrative voice very well.

## PROLOGUE

**Thursday, April 13, 2006**

**7:10 a.m.**

The appendage bobbed ~~lifelessly~~ in the shallow water on the western shore of Boone Lake, just north of Pickens Bridge, as the sun rose red against a hazy sky. The morning fog, typical of East Tennessee in the springtime, hung above the water like a ~~pale~~ shroud. The waves from a passing ~~bass~~ boat caused the appendage to scrape against a sharp rock. Each scrape caused another abrasion, and each abrasion attracted another fish.

Seven hours earlier, the appendage had been attached to a body belonging to one John Paul Tester, a 52-year-old ~~Apostolic~~ ~~apostolic~~ evangelist from Newport, Tennessee. The body had been alive one second, dead the next. Its heart had finally stopped after too much blood had drained out through the wounds caused by a knife.

The appendage had been ~~removed quickly, without dignity, and~~ **severed quickly and efficiently, then** carried outside to a Cadillac. The Cadillac had given the appendage a ride to the bridge on a moonless morning. Once there, the appendage had been ~~unceremoniously~~ tossed over the side into the ~~liquid blackness~~ **lake** 40 feet below. For six hours the appendage bobbed easily in the calm water, disturbed only by the occasional wake from a passing boat and the nipping of the fish beneath the surface.

~~As~~ Rocky Davis stood in the bow of his seventeen-foot bass boat, ~~he~~ **hoped** ~~hoping~~ his good fortune would continue. ~~They had~~ **They'd** been on the water for only ~~thirty minutes~~ **a half-hour** and he already had two keepers. The trolling motor hummed happily as the boat crawled slowly along, ~~fifty feet~~ **thirty yards** from a jagged rock face that seemed to plunge into the water from a hundred feet above. He cast a top-water jig towards the face. ~~It was one of his favorite fishing holes. He~~ **Rocky** had caught dozens of smallmouth in ~~that~~ **this** spot over the past five years, most of them in the morning calm. His ~~brother, Donnie,~~ **brother Donnie** stood in the stern, casting and reeling, casting and reeling. Both were strapping young men, born and raised in the foothills outside Jonesborough. ~~They had~~ **They'd** finished the graveyard shift at the Mor-Flo plant, where they earned their living assembling water heaters, and ~~had~~ headed **straight** for the lake.

Rocky noticed a slight tug on his line as he reeled the jig towards the boat. ~~It wasn't a fish, he was sure, and if it was a snag, it was nothing to worry about. There was a small amount of pressure on the rod, and he could barely~~ **Too slight for a fish, and it wasn't a snag--he thought he could** make out something dragging through the green

water just beneath the surface. ~~Rocky~~**He** reeled the line in next to the boat and lifted the jig out of the water. ~~He had~~**He'd** hooked something, **all right**, but he couldn't quite tell what it was. He lifted the rod ~~higher~~, bringing the object closer ~~to his face so he could make a closer visual inspection~~.

~~"Hey Donnie," Rocky said, "look"~~**"Hey, Donnie, look** at this."

"What is it?" Donnie said, reeling in his own line.

"I don't know what it is. That's why I want you to look at it."

The object was ~~pinkish purple and between three and~~**a purplish pink and maybe** four inches long. It ~~did not~~**didn't** appear to be alive.

~~"It looks"~~**"Looks** like a **big** grub worm," Donnie said, "or maybe a dead ~~slug."~~**slug?"**

"That ain't no ~~slug," Rocky said. "Reach~~**slug. Reach** out there and get it."

"Hell ~~no," Donnie said, wrinkling~~**no."** **Donnie wrinkled** his nose. "You hooked ~~it. You~~**it, you** touch it."

~~"Pussy," Rocky said as he~~**"Pussy,"** Rocky said, reaching towards the object.

**Rocky was two years older than his brother and had spent a lifetime proving he was tougher. His hand moved tentatively towards the object, now dangling ominously from Rocky's hook. As he gazed at it, the thought of what it might be caused him to become squeamish and he jerked his hand back.**

**"I don't know," Rocky said. "I might catch some kinda disease or something if I touch that thing."**

Rocky looked at his brother, who suddenly moved towards the dangling object. Rocky's heart sank as Donnie reached out and ~~ed-out-and~~ took the object between his thumb and forefinger. He turned ~~the-object~~it around a couple of ~~times, then~~ ~~dropped it and drew his hand back in horror.~~times--then dropped it and wiped his hand on his pants.

"Jesus H. ~~Christ, Donnie!~~" Rocky said. "~~Do~~Christ!" Donnie said. "Do you know what that is? Do you know what the fuck that is?"

Rocky ~~Donnie had not~~hadn't heard his brother ~~speak in such an excited tone~~ ~~since he had been bitten~~sound so excited since he got bit on the finger after sitting on a black snake ~~during a camping trip~~when they were camping last summer.

"What is it, ~~Rock? Is it poisonous??"~~is it poisonous?" Rocky said. "Do you--"

"~~No, I...~~I think it's a pecker, ~~Rock~~Donnie. I swear to God it's a pecker."

"A pecker? What do you mean a pecker?"

"A dick, you know, a pecker."

"Is it a human pecker?"

Donnie gingerly snared the object again and "~~I swear I believe it is,~~" Rocky ~~was moving~~think it is." Rocky took a step towards his brother. Donnie with the ~~appendage dangling from the end of his fishing line.~~

"Get that thing away from me!"~~Donnie said.~~ Rocky said.

Donnie ~~Rocky~~stopped, and the brothers stared ~~in amazement at the shriveled~~ ~~appendage.~~together at their catch.

"Wow," Rocky~~Donnie~~ said. "You're right. It's a pecker, sure as the world."

~~Kinda~~Kind of small, though.”

“Maybe it’s been in the water awhile,” ~~Donnie~~Rocky said. “I know what ~~swimmin’~~swimming in a pool does to me. What do you think we should do with it?”

“Hell, I don’t ~~know,~~” ~~Donnie replied.~~“~~Whoever~~know. ~~Whoever~~ lost it is probably ~~lookin’~~looking for it. I know I would be.”

“You think they can put it back on?” ~~Donnie~~Rocky said.

“They did for that one ~~dude, what~~dude--what was his name, Bobbitt? You ~~remember that? His wife got~~remember, his wife got real mad at him and cut ~~it~~this thing off and tossed it out the car window by the side of the road. They put it back on. Hell, I remember ~~hearin’~~hearing it was bigger after they put it back on than it was when she cut it off.”

“Should we put it in the cooler?” ~~Rocky said.~~

~~I’d hate~~“Hate to waste a good cooler,” ~~Rocky~~Donnie said. “I don’t ~~believe~~think I could ever use it again if we put that pecker in it.”

“A ~~sandwich baggie~~baggie, then,” ~~Donnie~~Rocky said. “Didn’t you bring a sandwich?”

~~Yeah,~~I brought a peanut butter sandwich, but what am I ~~gonna do with it?”~~  
~~Donnie said.~~supposed to do with it?”

“Do with what?” ~~Rocky said.~~

“My sandwich. The bread’ll get hard.”

“Eat it, dumb ass,” ~~Donnie~~Rocky said.-

“I ain’t exactly hungry right ~~now,~~” ~~Donnie said.~~now.”

“Goddammit, **Rocky**~~Donnie~~, just get the baggie and put some ice in ~~it,~~” **Rocky**~~said.it.~~”

**Rocky**~~Donnie~~ obediently reached into the ~~small, plastic cooler and did as his brother commanded. He placed a handful of ice in the baggie and handed it to Rocky.~~ **small plastic cooler for the baggie, ashamed that he had momentarily shown weakness and given his brother the opportunity to take the upper hand. He removed the sandwich, replaced it ~~the~~ sandwich with a handful of ice, and handed the baggie to his brother.**

**Donnie maneuvered the penis until it was free from the hook, dropped it in the baggie, and placed the baggie underneath the driver’s seat.**

~~**Rocky took it but didn’t move.**~~

~~“You already touched it once,” Donnie said. “It ain’t gonna kill you to do it again.”~~

~~Rocky wrinkled his nose, reluctantly snared the penis again, and removed it from the hook.**shuddered but he got the penis off the hook easily enough.** He dropped it in the baggie and placed the baggie underneath the driver’s seat.~~

~~“Jesus,” he said. “That’s~~ **“Jesus, that’s** nasty. So ~~what do we do now?”~~ **now what?”** He looked up at his brother. “Should we call the law?”

~~“Probably,”~~ **“Reckon so,”** **Rocky**~~Donnie~~ said. “I just hate to leave. ~~They’re bitin’ pretty good this mornin’.~~” **I mean, when they’re biting and all.”**

“The **gent**~~guy~~ that lost this thing can wait a little longer,” **Donnie**~~Rocky~~ said. “Hell, he’s lucky we found it. What say we fish this hole for another forty-five minutes

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and then take it back in?"

"Sounds like a plan," **Rocky said.**~~Donnie said.~~ "What kind of jig you  
castin', ~~casting,~~ anyway?"