

## Chapter Two

DONNA STOPPED OFF at the Fort Horace ranger station on her way to work the lunch shift at Long John Silver's. Entering to a jangle of bells, she told her Dad, standing at the counter in front of the wall of caged reptiles, that she was going to marry his boss.

Listening, Percy Bratcher treated his daughter to the sneer and flipping back of his unlikely ginger thatch that he bestowed so freely on the public. In fact, she had to break off when one of the off-season trickle of campers stepped in to ask for a map to the park. Flipping his hair, Percy with curled lip informed him they were out. The camper left and Donna resumed, flashing a ring that Percy thought sparkled grudgingly.

She lived with Mark, the wonder was that he would propose. After fleeing with her mother and brother the first time Percy got out of prison, she'd returned after his second stretch, the embodiment of the court's mercy in granting custody to a reformed and remorseful father. Naturally the head ranger fell for her.

"Married, huh?" Percy grunted. "He's a dog, you OK with that?"

Mark's affairs—besides those with park visitors, towns-women and outlying farm wives—included the one with Donna's mother that led to the standoff that landed Percy in prison in the first place.

“He’s changed,” Donna informed him. “Turning 40. Wants to settle down, raise a family.”

“Sure,” said Percy. “And you’re—?”

“Nineteen in July.” Which would also be the anniversary of her moving in with Mark (Percy didn’t care to revisit that battle). She turned to leave, opened the door without jangling the bells. “Don’t fuck it up, Daddy: Wasn’t easy. Hey, it’s *Kansas*. Been legal since I was twelve years old.”

“Set a date?”

“Saturday of Labor Day weekend, on top of Big Bone Hill. Not too bad: the dress, cake, rent a shelter for the reception. But if you don’t want to pay for it, we’ll elope.”

“Won’t get off that easy,” Percy growled at her departing yellow ruffles.

He watched her reach inside her ancient one-eyed Isuzu and open the door. Duct tape held on the front bumper and propped up its remaining headlight, brightened the smashed-up fenders and secured the back window’s plastic. A bungee cord closed the hood.

After she drove off he returned to arranging the morrow’s annual springtime burn of Big Bone Hill.

At 4:59—he was nothing if not punctual—Percy wished the snakes and turtles goodnight, turned off the shortwave and the lights, locked the door and climbed, groaning, into his decommissioned park truck. It still had the siren and amber roof lights, but its insignia were painted out in a darker shade of brown than the rest.

He drove down the lane opposite the ranger station towards the swimming beach, but short of it

turned into the woods where his old Airstream nestled against a slope like an undiscovered plane crash.

Indoors he sat down heavily and with his inevitable groan. His pet squirrel, Rocky, glad to see him, ran over and jumped in his lap. Percy, in no mood, brushed him off. In the process Rocky nipped his finger. Two telltale droplets of blood welled up.

There was nothing for it but, groaning, to get up again, wipe the wound with alcohol, bandage it, grab the .22 from behind the couch and open the door. The squirrel scurried onto the picnic table and Percy blew his head off, thus making Rocky the first casualty of Donna's engagement.

He kicked the body into the trees, and stood listening to the echoes of the rifle's report. The sound was startling in a state park where shooting was illegal—doubly so when a two-time felon forbidden guns pulled the trigger. But the echoes died out without rousing ranger sirens, and that was that.

That was that, except that, unusually for a weeknight, Percy cracked open a bottle of Kentucky Tavern. He missed Rocky's sympathetic ear and chattering counsel as he reviewed the history of Mark's worming his way into his family, but by the time Letterman came on, Kentucky Tavern was running low and he could only nod and snore.

The next morning he woke up still in his chair to a dire, if relentlessly cheerful, Kansas City traffic report.

## Chapter Three

PERCY WAS DRAGGING later as he cleaned cages. Much as on a Monday.

Sunday was his usual day for drowning such issues as being dependent for a living on the man who cuckolded him and seduced his daughter. Sundays Ranger Ray stood in for him at the ranger station and Percy *drank*.

He disappeared to his trailer Saturday evening, his six-day workweek completed, not to reappear until it was time to open up the ranger station Monday morning at 8:00 a.m. Until then he barricaded himself inside the Airstream—locked the door, closed the drapes, turned on the TV, ripped open a box of cookies and a bottle, and went to work.

Monday morning he would open up on time. Early, even; whatever the state of his head, he liked to give some time away. But on Mondays Percy carried himself with a dignity terrible to behold.

So too this Wednesday: He was moving with the majesty of a bishop.

After lunch, Maureen, a particular workamper friend of his, drove over to the ranger station to practice on the daunting new forms that Dennis decreed were to be filled out with every booth shift.

Or so she said. Percy took it as an invitation to drop by her trailer later. Well, maybe he would, if he felt like it.

“Congratulations, father-of-the-bride.”

“You heard?”

“News travels,” Maureen answered. “It’s about time.”

She floated some gift ideas, but his gruffness in response made her without further ado take a seat at Mark’s desk in the back room; as usual, the head ranger was absent.

The engines of the Fort Horace Fire Department trundled with their police escort into the park as scheduled, and firemen took up positions around the massive hogback of Big Bone Hill, from the apple orchard on its eastern side planted before the Civil War to the wooded western base. They unwound their hoses, tested the wind and placed their accelerants, preparing to cremate the never-plowed height’s dead goosegrass and bluestem much as the Osage Indians used to in their own springtime ritual.

When the start signal crackled over the radio Percy paid no mind, but Maureen stood up to peer out the side windows.

She saw smoke begin to rise from the far side of the hill. Soon orange tongues were darting into the air and licking together, merging into a frontier of flame that, in obedience to the wind, came over the hilltop as though to flee the billowing clouds of its own smoke. Fire defined the whole humped outline of Big Bone, and Maureen had trouble holding off the idea that it was coming for her. But at Apple Lane the waiting firemen washed the smoke white, revealing the hill behind wiped black with char.

It was, as always, vaguely disturbing. Smoke crawled over to envelop the ranger station, and a little seeped inside. It brought to mind Baghdad that

week—shock and awe, TV screens blossoming with explosions in night-vision green.

Coughing, Maureen said, “Oh well, how would we ever know we lived in heaven without the *occasional* reminder of hell?”

No response. She sat down again and, having filled in another sample form, ran numbers on the calculator. The results made her sigh heavily.

“Look, Maureen!”

“Not now, Percy,” she said, cupping her ears. “Trying to concentrate.”

“Ralphie wants to say hi.”

She only half heard, for a second wondered if he were unzipping—*Ralphie?*—when he pushed his fist in front of her face. At first she thought it held a gun, then saw that what wrapped his hand was a *snake*.

From the front room—reached in a leap—she commanded, “Put that thing away!”

“Aw, Maureen, be nice.” Stroking the snake’s upright head, Percy approached again. “Ralphie’s the biggest captive king snake in Barber County.”

“*Now*, Percy!” She bumped against the door. Bells jangled. “*Really!*”

He backed off. “He likes to get out, too,” he grumbled. “Not right to keep them in cages.”

“Don’t let them *out*, do you?”

“Sometimes a guy’s filling out a fishing license?” he answered, putting the snake back in its glass box. “And Ralphie slithers over to say hello. More gregarious than the others.”

“Don’t believe you. Pull something like that and Mark would show you the door.”

“Welcome to any time, the *twit*,” he said, clanging the cage closed.

Bravado, Maureen knew. Mark was all Percy had. If not Mark, who’d ever give him a job half as good as his crummy ranger-station one, \$8 an hour plus truck and trailer? Mark had a slave for life.

Like a kid—a kid who knows he’s trouble—Percy flipped his sheaf of ginger hair as Maureen returned to the desk.

“Know who’s marrying Donna?” he asked, his craggy features softening.

“Um. *Mark*, I do sincerely hope?”

“No, but splicing ‘em?”

“Who?”

“Travis. All set, already talked to him.”

“*Our* Travis? Why, Percy, Travis is nothing but a mail-order minister!”

She regretted it the instant she said it, even before she saw how he took it, angling his face away while it filled with blood in a slow burn.

Sitting down again, she reflected that, however thoughtless, what she said was true: Travis, mute mower of campground and meadows, whose rare utterances thanked *Jaysus!* for lemonade, expressed gratitude to *The Lord!* for a sunny day, had recently earned a gold-bordered State license through an online course.

“Reverend Harrison might be available,” she called. “Have you checked?”

“Silly me,” Percy answered, “keeping it in our happy little park family.”

“I just want the best for Donna.”

“And I *don't*?” he thundered. “Shame of it is, Maureen, when the rest of us are standing up there on Big Bone and Donna marries Mark, *you* won't be there.”

“Percy, I'm *sorry* – ”

There was a click and a squeak.

“No, I won't have it,” he called. “Fucking shame, too.”

“Now, Percy – ”

He reappeared, holding a mouse by the tail.

“You're officially *disinvited*,” he told her, brown eyes flashing gold beneath beetled brows. “Nothing to be done about it.”

“Don't do this, Percy.” She got up and followed him to the front. “You're always cutting yourself off – ”

Bells jangled, and a stranger stepped inside.

“Afternoon,” he said.

## Chapter Four

PERCY AND MAUREEN looked at him.

Maureen wondered what he was thinking as he looked back. Tall and thin, he had dusty-dry cheeks and hair somewhat long. At first she thought, mistakenly, that he was a good deal younger than her 53 or Percy's 46, maybe because like a youth he kept

open the option of flight, standing on the balls of his feet.

The mouse squealed, asking what the holdup was, and Percy flicked it into the king snake's cage. It fled to the top of an artfully placed branch and stood tense and still, its white fur bathed with fluorescence.

The inevitable was in play. Ralpie, coiled at the bottom, lay equally still, or more still yet. Something happened too subtle for humans to perceive, and the mouse began scratching frantically at the glass. Moving ineffably over its own length, the serpent struck. The mouse screamed, but the slow-motion process of swallowing began even as the hind legs kicked—fast at first, then with envenomed languor.

Percy turned to the stranger with his most guileless expression.

“Help you, sir?”

“Thanks so much,” said the man humorously, as shown by his lidded eyes and droll tone. “I can see it's a veritable Eden.”

“Oh, you mean the mouse, sir?” Percy quizzed, playing along. “Snakes have to eat, too, and they don't eat anything dead. One of Nature's little arrangements.”

He leaned back and showed his teeth as another man might pat his holster.

“Cool,” said the man.

He started to speak, but Percy said, “And we're all about Nature here, sir.”

The man waited before saying, “Great.”

“Do our best, sir,” Percy said, adjusting his hair with another flip. Over time Maureen had come to realize its red, though it looked dyed, was actually

faded from the unimaginable hue it once was. In the morning Percy dashed it flat with a comb, and after that whipped it into shape with snaps of his head.

"Is Dennis around?" asked the man. "He's expecting me. My name's Jack, here to work in the booth over the summer?"

"Maureen, what time does Dennis get home? Six o'clock?"

"Or a quarter to," she answered, putting out her hand. "I'm Maureen. I work booth, too, Wednesday and Thursday evenings."

Smiling, Jack shook her hand. "I'm all day Fridays."

"And this is Percy Bratcher," she said. "He runs the park, isn't that so, Percy?"

"Glad to meet you," said Jack, extending his hand again.

Ignoring it, Percy leaned back on his elbows and nodded out the window at the spruce old motorhome idling in the smoky parking lot. "That your rig?"

"Yeah."

"Got a camping permit?"

"No, I haven't."

"Need a permit."

"Later, Percy," Maureen urged. "Dennis will have one for him."

"I don't know," Percy said.

"Then ask Mark."

"Mark's not here, you know that."

"Well, then, let Dennis deal with it."

"What do I do till Dennis gets home?" Jack asked.

"Wait," said Percy, savoring every particle of his authority. "But not in here."

“I’d set up, Jack, if I were you,” Maureen suggested. “Campground’s just a few hundred yards on. You can see it from here, on the left halfway to the lake?”

“Maureen, how do you know where Mark wants them?”

“*Them?*” asked Jack.

“Him and his wife,” Percy said as if Jack weren’t there.

“I don’t have a wife.”

“No *wife?*” Percy asked. “Why *not?*”

“Percy!” said Maureen.

“Because I’m gay,” said Jack. “Against the law for me to marry.”

“Got *that* right,” Percy said.

“Site 83’s empty,” Maureen told Jack rapidly. “Right next to mine. Good gravel *and* a sewer connection. Follow me, I’ll show you. Percy, he can set up, if Mark doesn’t like it, he can move later on.”

“Fuck. Get him a thingy for the pole.”

“In here, Jack,” she said, and he followed her into Mark’s office while she looked for a plasticine orange V that, slipped into the utility stalk, signaled a volunteer’s site. Quietly she said, “Don’t mind Percy, his bark’s worse than his bite. You’ll like it here, and we’re glad to have you.”

“Thanks,” said Jack, taking in the posters on the walls. Most showed wildflowers, but an old one captioned *Ski Kansas* depicted a skier crouched in a wheat field’s snowy stubble.

Maureen found what she was looking for and turned to leave, but Jack recoiled.

“What’s *that*?” He pointed at something hanging, aimed at the customers, in the darkness beneath the counter.

Percy came alive.

“*This* ol’ thing?” Stepping up, he stooped, inevitably groaning, and with a sweep of his arm lifted it into the light. It looked quaint, like a pirate’s matchlock pistol. “Never seen a sawed-off shotgun before?”

“Don’t know that I have.”

“Best little problem-solver going,” Percy assured him, cradling it. “Case things get out of hand.”

He swung it out, not exactly aiming at Jack, and racked it: *Ker-chunkt!*

Every inch of Maureen’s bowel spasmed. Percy stood there smiling his smile that was like a snarl.

“*Cool*,” said Jack.

“Let’s go find your site, Jack,” Maureen said.

“Appreciate it, Maureen,” he said cheerily. “Thanks, Percy.”

“Any time, *sir!*”

As Jack held the door for her, Maureen heard Percy breathe, “*Faggot.*” Then, out loud, “OK, guys, who’s hungry?”

Hell is always at hand, which you  
cannot say of heaven.

Akira  
Kurosawa  
*Ran*

Then I saw that there was a way to hell,  
even from the gates of heaven.

John Bunyan  
*Pilgrim's Progress*

*The Wedding on Big Bone Hill*

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Published by Steven Key Meyers/The Smash-and-Grab  
Press

ISBN 978-1-7368333-7-7

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A 2014 edition of *The Wedding on Big Bone Hill* was published by BookLocker, and a 2016 edition of *Junkie, Indiana*.

Revised edition 2021.

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