

Chapter V

The Quicker to Anger

[CLUMP CLUMP CLUMP]

Peyton? Peyton!!

Jeez, you *would* be slow opening the door the one time I've got my hands full of hot stuff. Lookee here: T G it's F pizza delivery! Provided to you fancy-free by Gimme-a-Tip Express! I've had pizza on my mind all day long. I wanted to start devouring this one in the elevator on the way up here. Sure hope you like sausage 'n' onions 'n' mushrooms 'n' olives 'n' peppers—'n' Heineken! Lookee *here!* I got a taste for Heinies (the drinkable kind) during my tour of duty on the "Belgian Bulge." You're a hands-on pizza eater, I hope? Thank God—this guy I was once with would only eat pizza with a *knife and fork*. That should've tipped me off right there about that guy and his serious problems.

Skoal!

(Chomp. Chomp. Chomp. Swig.)

Boy this is fine pizza! Nothing like burnt cheese to put the "yum" in your tummy.

So: here we are, after one complete week of sugardaddyish confessionalizing. You'll notice that *I* brought *you* this fine pizza and this nice six-pack; so you see I'm not a complete freeloading deadbeat. Who'da thunk it? RoBynne O'Ring—have I told you yet about her? that's right, she *is* writing a smutnovel—RoBynne has these wickedly elegant earrings, one saying *Hoodah* and the other *Thawtit?* Now if I had a set like that, I wouldn't have to talk with my mouth full—just point at my earlobes.

(Chomp. Chomp. Chomp. Swig.)

I especially dote on the mushrooms. Guess there's a little hobbit in me. (And boy does he wriggle around!)

So what shall you listen about tonight? Sadie keeps wanting to know why I keep coming over here, and what I'm up to and what you're up to, and getting all exasperated when I act hush-hush secretive about it just to gnarl her. Sadie being a redhead, you see, she's extra gnarlable; the redder the hair the quicker to anger, in my experience. (Being strawberry blonde myself, I have a perfectly serene disposition.)

Yessir! I've been playing dodgeball with Mercedes Benison's temper since I was ten years old. Desi knows how to bounce it around too, and she's only *five*. For instance she had her heart set on buying one of those basset pups next door and Sadie told her forget it, no way we're spending money on "something that craps in the yard," so of course they're over there picking out a puppy *even as I speak*. Gotta hand it to Desi—she can play her mother like a coppertop piccolo. 'Course, she's had a lot of pointers from me: *I can play Ms. Sadie like a carrot-haired concertina.*

(Chomp. Chomp. Swig. Belch.)

Oops! Sorry. And here I've been eating very genteelly too, not glopping all over the floor or anything. (Remind me that I still need to deal with those dust bunnies under your sofa.) When I was in the Brownies back in Marble Orchard, we used to have these burping *contests*—and we were pretty good at it too, for a bunch of well-bred small-town girls. Anyway: ready for another bottle 'n' slice? No? Don't mind watching me have another of each, do you? Attaboy! Okay, ladylike now:

(Nibble. Nibble. Nibble. Sip.)

How's that for demure? Remind me to change into pink undies, next chance I get.

Where was I? Oh right. So what else can I tell you about Sadie that you probably don't already know? She's told me all about *you*—or at least what you were like when she was first here: how you could always be found at Marr's Bar on the Milky Way, at a corner table that no one but your gang of "Dilated Nostrils" was allowed to sit at unless they were hotsy young chiclets which I'm guessing must've included Sadie 'cause she was pretty hotsy

way back then (JUST KIDDING, SADIE!). She says you were all the time throwing these “raspberry parties” where everybody had to make up drinking chants on the spot like Cyrano de Bergerac, except that she suspected you made all *yours* up ahead of time; and how you were absolutely larger than life from being so full of yourself (her words, not mine) and how you used to be known as “The Wizard of Schnoz” and could make the walls rattle with your Rabelaisian laughter and would get so damned French (again quoting Sadie) with the hotsy young chiclets, but only for nine days before you’d pay no more attention to whoever the latest one was. Why only nine days?...

Jeez, don’t get sore!

Oh come on, don’t you know me by now? A curious person, remember? Never mind. Simmer down. Have another beer. Think of all those poor folks in the Low Countries, working their behinds off to brew us these Heinies.

That’s better. That’s what I call a good Rabelaisian guffaw!

(Clink.)

(Swig.)

So enough about you. Back to *me*, where we belong.

I first got to know Sadie when I went to her sister Alexis’s wedding—*my* sister Alexis I should say, since of course she’s my stepsister too; except that Alexis shuffled straight off to Buffalo where she’s been having babies every other year like obstetrical clockwork, so I don’t really know her that well. Not like Sadie: we really *are* sisters, at least I’ve always thought so and so has she. I mean it was her idea in the first place, that her dad—that’s *AR*nold—and my mom should get together. So the very first time I clap eyes on Sadie, she’s all eager smiles *and* plotting *and* scheming to turn innocent ME into her own little sister. And here’s ME rolling around in hysterics when she introduces herself as “Mercedes Benison.” (Hee hee hee! That name *still* cracks me up.)

I’ve been tagging around after her ever since.

Weirdly enough it’s exactly the same with my mother—I mean you’d think Sadie was Mom’s own blood daughter, and me the wicked but oh-so-cute stepchild. Many’s the

time I've seen them standing side by side, with the exact same pissed-off expression on their faces.

"Carrie, can't you DO something about her?" Sadie'd say, and "Don't you think I WOULD if I COULD?" Mom'd say back at her. And there I'd be, going giggle-iggle-iggle at them both. They'd breathe fire and threaten me with everything on the laundry list (especially when I'd throw my red things in with their whites) but it only made me laugh harder.

Jeez. Poor Mom. (Flick; drag.) She *never* knew what to do with me, and I could rile her *so* easy. For example she got herself a nose job, after she left my dad; I couldn't see any difference then and still can't. Pisses her off every time I mention it. "Kelly RebecCA!" she'll say; "Yes ma'am!" I'll say. That's the usual gist of our conversations.

Anyway: she did marry *AR*nold, who's a big old sweetie (always blushes when I kiss him) and I did come to Demortuis to live with them and Sadie. And then we all took a trip together to Fort Lauderdale, where Sadie and I had an outright fistfight one night when we had to share a motel bed and she kicked me with her big old giraffe-girl feet and then had the *gall* to claim that *I* started it, even though it was blatantly obvious that *she*'d been born first (the gun-jumping weisenheimer) and so started EVERYTHING.

And then the very next day we all trooped out to breakfast and ran into GOWER, of all people! You know, my dad—just back from Vietnam, too. Well, my mom had a hissyfit like you wouldn't believe: she and Gower went off a little ways and yelled at each other for fifteen minutes or so. Poor *AR*nold was so embarrassed, and—get this!—Sadie wrapped her arms around me the whole time, as if I were going to be traumatized or something. But it was all just a bore. Proved they were right to split up, I guess. They must've had fights like that when I was little, but I never remember any.

You know, I can't imagine actually growing up in the same house with the two of them. I mean they're my parents and it's not like I don't love them or whatever, but Jeez—I couldn't've done without Sadie and Desi and *AR*nold and all.

Just like I can't do without this last slice of pizza!

But—I'm willing to share it with *you*.

Attaboy.

(Chomp.)

*

So what are we going to see tonight? *Never Cry Wolf*? Who's in that? Charles Martin Smith? Oh sure, the Toad nerd from *American Graffiti*. Do you mind if I talk all through the picture? "No more than usual," yeah right...

Not too many people here. Goody! Maybe this time I won't get shushed by a bunch of busybodies. So anyway: I had a weird dream last night. *No*, not from eating too much pizza. It was sort of about Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde and my first Halloween dance in high school—HEY! that was the dance where Stuck-Uppity Pillsbury made that guy cry! I just remembered! By golly, it *is* a small world after all.

(Is that supposed to be the Yukon? Sure looks cold. Too bad it's not Antarctica and there won't be any penguins.)

Anyway I went to that dance as a vampire, in chalk-white fright makeup and a long black wig; "Miniature Morticia" they called me. That was the same week I realized I could never be a nurse like Gramma Otto'd been. And I'd wanted to be one, too, till I found out in Freshman Biology you had to chop open a perfectly good worm and check out its *insides*. I mean, GROHsss. You've probably realized by now that I'm no veggie, but I sure might become one if I had to actually wring a chicken's neck and pluck out its feathers and disembowel it from scratch and so on. Which might be handy skills to have if you worked as a *taxidermist*, say, instead of nursing sick people.

(What's Toad doing up there? Is he—oog! He's eating MICE! *Bleahhhhhhh*. Here, take this popcorn; I don't think I'll be wanting any more...)

Well thanks a lot for picking the "unusual" movie. I suppose now I'll dream about running naked through the snow with a pack of hungry wolves after me—nothing symbolic about *that*, of course. Or about snacking on rodents!—I'll never be able to watch Tom & Jerry again, or Pixie & Dixie or Speedy Gonzales, without losing my appetite.

My roommate at Nilnisi U. was a reincarnated fieldmouse. Missy Trace! She wasn't bad-looking, just sort of mousily nondescript. And nervous and timid and shy and naïve. So naturally Joe Biggins tormented her every chance he got—hiding behind curtains or around

corners and then leaping out at her, putting her in headlocks and half-nelsons—“C’mon, Missy!” he’d say, “Two falls outta three! Winner has to give the loser a sponge bath!” I thought Missy was literally going to FAINT. One night I heard her squeaking in her sleep: “No, Joe! Don’t, Joe!”—but she acted annoyed when I woke her up, so maybe Joe Biggins was the sum total of her erotic fantasies. (Yugggh.)

Um—do you think we could go back to your place for awhile? I’m all spookacified...

I still haven’t told you about my dream last night—how Lonnie Fesso went to that Halloween dance half as Dr. Jekyll and half as Mr. Hyde, and monopolized me between them. Boy, could they shake it—which Lonnie made awfully clear when he took a swing at this Jack-o’-lantern piñata, busting it open and starting a riot by clouting all the candy-grabbers with his piñata stick. I mean, police cars came and everything. I’m surprised I don’t dream about that dance more often.

I’ve had some *really* weird dreams about some of the hotshots I’ve been out with. Lonnie Fesso wasn’t the ultimate hotshot, not by a longshot. Some of my weirder dreams are like scary movies, and I just love scary movies, but some of the dreams—

I think I told you that after I saw *The Shining*, this guy I was with dreamed these bugs were—yeah, crawling all over him all night long. Well, that was the same guy who’d only eat pizza with a knife and fork. I met him while I was working at the bank in Demortuis, and they told me to get a batch of logsheets copied at the corner Kinko’s. And there he was, this Viking god with curly golden locks and jutjawed chin-cleavage—like Siegfried Do-Right of the Nibelung Mounties. Guess what his name was? Okay, brace yourself:

JIM MIDGE.

Now if that isn’t a bass-ackwards tip-off, I don’t know what is.

But oh my God—

—he had the COOwullest smile—

—his hands were cool too, downright cold in fact, but it was summertime so they felt amazing, and he could use them like a Swedish masseur. He was rigidly muscular from head to toe and everything he wore was always spotless, he had a thing about sanitation and was

always emptying my ashtrays, wiping them clean, wherever we went. He himself didn't smoke and mostly drank ice water (and would *chew* the ice) but he did introduce me to zombies that summer. You know: rum and apricot brandy. And every time we had one he'd say "Bottoms up!" and sweep me off my feet and out of my *shoes*, even, when we kissed— Jim being so tall, you see, and my arms around his Nordic neck till he'd turn me into molten oleo with his Iceman Cometh hands and lips and...

...I thought he was *so* romantic...

...I thought he might be THE one AND only...

That bit about being alone-in-a-cone-of-cosmic-light? I thought that was going to be US. Alone together, forever and ever...

Even though he had these teensy-tiny tattoos on his fingertips, spelling out some ex-girlfriend's name forwards and backwards; I was willing to overlook that. I mean, he could make my heart *squeal*...

(Um—would you pour me another one, please? This next part gets kind of dry.)

Okay. Jim claimed he was from this shrunken old ghost town out west. He wanted me to go out there with him, not to visit anybody or anything, but (I thought) to come to grips with his inner self or whatever. And I was all supportive and couldn't *wait* to go. So we headed way out west, to this place straight out of *The Last Picture Show*: all shades of grey and dry as dust, like some Nowhere Land. And there I was with my Nowhere Man.

He took me to this abandoned-looking motel, and I don't know if Norman Bates was the manager or if in fact anyone else was around. So, um, we went to the room at the end and Jim took the bed apart till he found these mattress handles and smiled that COOwull smile of his and meanwhile I'm unpacking his bag and I find four silk neckties and I'd never seen him wearing *any* kind of tie and, um, there was also this black nylon stocking, just the one, and I, um, I wrapped it around my neck like a goddam *scarf* after undressing for him, and don't ask me what he may have had in mind when we got there, but—

—anyway. We just went to bed, as per usual.

But then he woke me up at some godawful hour and said we had to get out of there right away, so I went to wash up 'cause I couldn't see straight and he came into the bathroom

with me and watched me wash and then I put on my glasses and saw him in the mirror and he looked all ashenfaced like he'd lost something he'd wanted and I was going to ask him what but it was 2 AM and I just had to yawn and then he grabbed me and shouted "WAKE UP!!" at me, "*WAKE UP!!*" and, and, he, um, well, he sort of—"hit me upside the head," as the saying goes. Two or three times, or maybe it was four—I wasn't exactly keeping score. It broke my glasses but not my skull—too thick-headed, you know. Ha ha. And I'm kind of used to bouncing off walls, you know, without anybody's help. But...

...I don't know if he felt sorry about it. 'Cause, um, we didn't have a whole lot of conversation afterwards. 'Cause he started throwing up bigtime, see, and then he sort of stopped and I, um, I sort of left him there, in that bathroom, with, um, with his head, well, in the, down the, you know...

I've never told anyone any of this before. Not even Sadie.

I don't want to talk about it anymore.

But I will say this.

It hurt, it hurt like hell, but it could've been a lot, lot worse. Right? So no tears shed. See? No tears. I swore I'd never cry about him. And I haven't, ever. Not once.