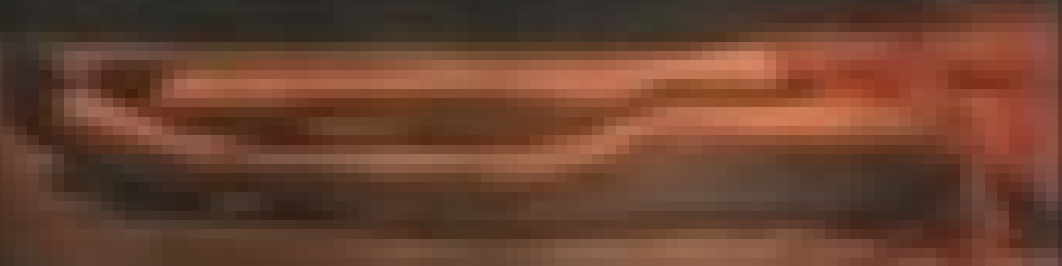


# RAGE

THE ULTIMATE BRAWL

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## **RAGE**

**Richard Bachman**

A high school Show-and-Tell session explodes into a nightmare of evil...

So you understand that when we  
increase the number of variables,  
the axioms themselves never change.

-Mrs. Jean Underwood

Teacher, teacher, ring the bell,  
My lessons all to you I'll tell,  
And when my day at school is through,  
I'll know more than aught I knew.

-Children's rhyme, c. 1880

## Chapter 1

The morning I got it on was nice; a nice May morning. What made it nice was that I'd kept my breakfast down, and the squirrel I spotted in Algebra II.

I sat in the row farthest from the door, which is next to the windows, and I spotted the squirrel on the lawn. The lawn of Placerville High School is a very good one. It does not fuck around. It comes right up to the building and says howdy. No one, at least in my four years at PHS, has tried to push it away from the building with a bunch of flowerbeds or baby pine trees or any of that happy horseshit. It comes right up to the concrete foundation, and there it grows, like it or not. It is true that two years ago at a town meeting some bag proposed that the town build a pavilion in front of the school, complete with a memorial to honor the guys who went to Placerville High and then got bumped off in one war or another. My friend Joe McKennedy was there, and he said they gave her nothing but a hard way to go. I wish I had been there. The way Joe told it, it sounded like a real good time. Two years ago. To the best of my recollection, that was about the time I started to lose my mind.

## Chapter 2

So there was the squirrel, running through the grass at 9:05 in the morning, not ten feet from where I was listening to Mrs. Underwood taking us back to the basics of algebra in the wake of a horrible exam that apparently no one had passed except me and Ted Jones. I was keeping an eye on him, I can tell you. The squirrel, not Ted.

On the board, Mrs. Underwood wrote this:  $a = 16$ . "Miss Cross," she said, turning back. "Tell us what that equation means, if you please."

"It means that a is sixteen," Sandra said. Meanwhile the squirrel ran back and forth in the grass, tail bushed out, black eyes shining bright as buckshot. A nice fat one. Mr. Squirrel had been keeping down more breakfasts than I lately, but this morning's was riding as light and easy as you please. I had no shakes, no acid stomach. I was riding cool.

"All right," Mrs. Underwood said. "Not bad. But it's not the end, is it? No. Would anyone care to elaborate on this fascinating equation?"

I raised my hand, but she called on Billy Sawyer. "Eight plus eight," he blurted.

"Explain."

"I mean it can be . . ." Billy fidgeted. He ran his fingers over the graffiti etched into the surface of his desk; SM L DK, HOT SHIT, TOMMY '73. "See, if you add eight and eight, it means . . ."

"Shall I lend you my thesaurus?" Mrs. Underwood asked, smiling alertly. My stomach began to hurt a little, my breakfast started to move around a little, so I looked back at the squirrel for a while. Mrs. Underwood's smile reminded me of the shark in *Jaws*.

Carol Granger raised her hand. Mrs. Underwood nodded. "Doesn't he mean that eight plus eight also fulfills the equation's need for truth?"

"I don't know *what* he means," Mrs. Underwood said.

A general laugh. "Can you fulfill the equation's truth in any other ways, Miss Granger?"

Carol began, and that was when the intercom said: "Charles Decker to the office, please. Charles Decker. Thank you."

I looked at Mrs. Underwood, and she nodded. My stomach had begun to feel shriveled and old. I got up and left the room. When I left, the squirrel was still scampering.

I was halfway down the hall when I thought I heard Mrs. Underwood coming after me, her hands raised into twisted claws, smiling her big shark smile. *We don't need boys of your type around here . . . boys of your type belong in Greenmantle . . . or the reformatory . . . or the state hospital for the criminally insane . . . so get out! Get out! Get out!*

I turned around, groping in my back pocket for the pipe wrench that was no longer there, and now my breakfast was a hard hot ball inside my guts. But I wasn't afraid, not even when she wasn't there. I've read too many books.

## Chapter 3

I stopped in the bathroom to take a whiz and eat some Ritz crackers. I always carry some Ritz crackers in a Baggie. When your stomach's bad, a few crackers can do wonders. One hundred thousand pregnant women can't be wrong. I was thinking about Sandra Cross, whose response in class a few minutes ago had been not bad, but also not the end. I was thinking about how she lost her buttons. She was always losing them—off blouses, off skirts, and the one time I had taken her to a school dance, she had lost the button off the top of her Wranglers and they had almost fallen down. Before she figured out what was happening, the zipper on the front of her jeans had come halfway unzipped, showing a V of flat white panties that was blackly exciting. Those panties were tight, white, and spotless. They were immaculate. They lay against her lower belly with sweet snugness and made little ripples while she moved her body to the beat . . . until she realized what was going on and dashed for the girls' room. Leaving me with a memory of the Perfect Pair of Panties. Sandra was a Nice Girl, and if I had never known it before, I sure-God knew it then, because we all know that the Nice Girls wear the white panties. None of that New York shit is going down in Placerville, Maine.

But Mr. Denver kept creeping in, pushing away Sandra and her pristine panties. You can't stop your mind; the damn thing just keeps right on going. All the same, I felt a great deal of sympathy for Sandy, even though she was never going to figure out just what the quadratic equation was all about. If Mr. Denver and Mr. Grace decided to send me to Greenmantle, I might never see Sandy again. And that would be too bad.

I got up from the hopper, dusted the cracker crumbs down into the bowl, and flushed it. High-school toilets are all the same; they sound like 747s taking off. I've always hated pushing that handle. It makes you sure that the sound is clearly audible in the adjacent classroom and that everybody is thinking: Well, there goes another load. I've always thought a man should be alone with what my mother insisted I call lemonade and chocolate when I was a little kid. The bathroom should be a confessional sort of place. But they foil you. They always foil you. You can't even blow your nose and keep it a secret. Someone's always got to know, someone's always got to peek. People like Mr. Denver and Mr. Grace even get paid for it.

But by then the bathroom door was wheezing shut behind me and I was in the hall again. I paused, looking around. The only sound was the sleepy hive drone that means it's Wednesday again, Wednesday morning, ten past nine, everyone caught for another day in the splendid sticky web of Mother Education.

I went back into the bathroom and took out my Flair. I was going to write something witty on the wall like SANDRA CROSS WEARS WHITE UNDERPANTS, and then I caught sight of my face in the mirror. There were bruised half-moons under my eyes, which looked wide and white and stary. The nostrils were half-flared and ugly. The mouth was a white, twisted line.

I Wrote EAT SHIT On the wall until the pen suddenly snapped in my straining fingers. It dropped on the floor and I kicked it.

There was a sound behind me. I didn't turn around. I closed my eyes and breathed slowly and deeply until I had myself under control. Then I went upstairs.

#### Chapter 4

The administration offices of Placerville High are on the third floor, along with the study hall, the library, and Room 300, which is the typing room. When you push through the door from the stairs, the first thing you hear is that steady clickety-clack. The only time it lets up is when the bell changes the classes or when Mrs. Green has something to say. I guess she usually doesn't say much, because the typewriters hardly ever stop. There are thirty of them in there, a battle-scarred platoon of gray Underwoods. They have them marked with numbers so you know which one is yours. The sound never stops, clickety-clack, clickety-clack, from September to June. I'll always associate that sound with waiting in the outer office of the admin offices for Mr. Denver or Mr. Grace, the original dipso-duo. It got to be a lot like those jungle movies where the hero and his safari are pushing deep into darkest Africa, and the hero says: "Why don't they stop those blasted drums?" And when the blasted drums stop he regards the shadowy, rustling foliage and says: "I don't like it. It's too quiet."

I had gotten to the office late just so Mr. Denver would be ready to see me, but the receptionist, Miss Marble, only smiled and said, "Sit down, Charlie. Mr. Denver will be right with you."

So I sat down outside the slatted railing, folded my hands, and waited for Mr. Denver to be right with me. And who should be in the other chair but one of my father's good friends, Al Lathrop. He was giving me the old slick-eye, too, I can tell you. He had a briefcase on his lap and a bunch of sample textbooks beside him. I had never seen him in a suit before. He and my father were a couple of mighty hunters. Slayers of the fearsome sharp-toothed deer and the killer partridge. I had been on a hunting trip once with my father and Al and a couple of my father's other friends. Part of Dad's never-ending campaign to Make a Man Out of My Son.

"Hi, there!" I said, and gave him a big shiteating grin. And I could tell from the way he jumped that he knew all about me.

"Uh, hi, uh, Charlie." He glanced quickly at Miss Marble, but she was going over attendance lists with Mrs. Venson from next door. No help there. He was all alone with Carl Decker's psychotic son, the fellow who had nearly killed the chemistry-physics teacher.

"Sales trip, huh?" I asked him.

"Yeah, that's right." He grinned as best he could. "Just out there selling the old books."

"Really crushing the competition, huh?"

He jumped again. "Well, you win some, you lose some, you know, Charlie."

Yeah, I knew that. All at once I didn't want to put the needle in him anymore. He was forty and getting bald and there were crocodile purses under his eyes. He went from school to school in a Buick station wagon loaded with textbooks and he went hunting for a week in November every year with my father and my father's friends, up in the Allagash. And one year I had gone with them. I had been nine, and I woke up and they had been drunk and they had scared me. That was all. But this man was no ogre. He was just forty-baldish and trying to make a buck. And if I had heard him saying he would murder his wife, that was just talk. After all, I was the one with blood on my hands.

But I didn't like the way his eyes were darting around, and for a moment just a moment-I could have grabbed his windpipe between my hands and yanked his face up to mine and screamed into it: *You and my father and all your friends, you should all have to go in there with me, you should all have to go to Greenmantle with me, because you're all in it, you're all in it, you're all a part of this!*

Instead I sat and watched him sweat and thought about old times.

I came awake with a jerk out of a nightmare I hadn't had for a long time; a dream where I was in some dark blind alley and something was coming for me, some dark hunched monster that creaked and dragged itself along . . . a monster that would drive me insane if I saw it. Bad dream. I hadn't had it since I was a little kid, and I was a big kid now. Nine years old.

At first I didn't know where I was, except it sure wasn't my bedroom at home. It seemed too close, and it smelled different. I was cold and cramped, and I had to take a whiz something awful.

There was a harsh burst of laughter that made me jerk in my bed-except it wasn't a bed, it was a bag.

"So she's some kind of fucking bag," Al Lathrop said from beyond the canvas wall, "but *fucking's* the operant word there."

Camping, I was camping with my dad and his friends. I hadn't wanted to come.

"Yeah, but how do you git it up, Al? That's what I want to know." That was Scotty Norwiss, another one of Dad's friends. His voice was slurred and furry, and I started to feel afraid again. They were drunk.

"I just turn off the lights and pretend I'm with Carl Decker's wife," Al said, and there was another bellow of laughter that made me cringe and jerk in my sleeping bag. Oh, God, I needed to whiz piss make lemonade whatever you wanted to call it. But I didn't want to go out there while they were drinking and talking.

I turned to the tent wall and discovered I could see them. They were between the tent and the campfire, and their shadows, tall and alien-looking, were cast on the canvas. It was like watching a magic lantern show. I watched the shadow-bottle go from one shadow-hand to the next.

"You know what I'd do if I caught you with my wife?" My dad asked Al.

"Probably ask if I needed any help," Al said, and there was another burst of laughter. The elongated shadow-heads on the tent wall bobbed up and down, back and forth, with insectile glee. They didn't look like people at all. They looked like a bunch of talking praying mantises, and I was afraid.

"No, seriously," my dad said. "Seriously. You know what I'd do if I caught somebody with my wife?"

"What, Carl?" That was Randy Earl.

"You see this?"

A new shadow on the canvas. My father's hunting knife, the one he carried out in the woods, the one I later saw him gut a deer with, slamming it into the deer's guts to the hilt and then ripping upward, the muscles in his forearm bulging, spilling out green and steaming intestines onto a carpet of needles and moss. The firelight and the angle of the canvas turned the hunting knife into a spear.

"You see this son of a bitch? I catch some guy with my wife, I'd whip him over on his back and cut off his accessories."

"He'd pee sitting down to the end of his days, right, Carl?" That was Hubie Levesque, the guide. I pulled my knees up to my chest and hugged them. I've never had to go to the bathroom so bad in my life, before or since.

"You're goddamn right," Carl Decker, my sterling Dad, said.

"Wha' about the woman in the case, Carl?" Al Lathrop asked. He was very drunk. I could even tell which shadow was his. He was rocking back and forth as if he was sitting in a rowboat instead of on a log by the campfire. "Thass what I wanna know. What do you do about a woman who less-lets-someone in the back door? Huh?"

The hunting knife that had turned into a spear moved slowly back and forth. My father said, "The Cherokees used to slit their noses. The idea was to put a cunt right up on their faces so everyone in the tribe could see what part of them got them in trouble."

My hands left my knees and slipped down to my crotch. I cupped my testicles and looked at the shadow of my father's hunting knife moving slowly back and forth. There were terrible cramps in my belly. I was going to whiz in my sleeping bag if I didn't hurry up and go.

"Slit their noses, huh?" Randy said. "That's pretty goddamn good. If they still did that, half the women in Placerville would have a snatch at both ends."

"Not my wife," my father said very quietly, and now the slur in his voice was gone, and the laughter at Randy's joke stopped in mid-roar.

"No, 'course not, Carl," Randy said uncomfortably. "Hey, shit. Have a drink."

My father's shadow tipped the bottle back.

"I wun't slit her nose," Al Lathrop said. "I'd blow her goddamn cheatin' head off."

"There you go," Hubie said. "I'll drink to it."

I couldn't hold it anymore. I squirmed out of the sleeping bag and felt the cold October air bite into my body, which was naked except for a pair of shorts. It seemed like my cock wanted to shrivel right back into my body. And the one thing that kept going around and around in my mind-I was still partly asleep, I guess, and the whole conversation had seemed like a dream, maybe a continuation of the creaking monster in the alley-was that when I was smaller, I used to get into my mom's bed after Dad had put on his uniform and gone off to work in Portland, I used to sleep beside her for an hour before breakfast.

Dark, fear, firelight, shadows like praying mantises. I didn't want to be out in these woods seventy miles from the nearest town with these drunk men. I wanted my mother.

I came out through the tent flap, and my father turned toward me. The hunting knife was still in his hand. He looked at me, and I looked at him. I've never forgotten that my dad with a reddish beard stubble on his face and a hunting cap cocked on his head and that hunting knife in his hand. All the conversation stopped. Maybe they were wondering how much I had heard. Maybe they were even ashamed.

"What the hell do you want?" my dad asked, sheathing the knife.

"Give him a drink, Carl," Randy said, and there was a roar of laughter. Al laughed so hard he fell over. He was pretty drunk.

"I gotta whiz," I said.

"Then go do it, for Christ's sake," my dad said.

I went over in the grove and tried to whiz. For a long time it wouldn't come out. It was like a hot soft ball of lead in my lower belly. I had nothing but a fingernail's length of penis-the cold had really shriveled it. At last it did come, in a great steaming flood, and when it was all out of me, I went back into the tent and got in my sleeping bag. None of them looked at me. They were talking about the war. They had all been in the war.

My dad got his deer three days later, on the last day of the trip. I was with him. He got it perfectly, in the bunch of muscle between neck and shoulder, and the buck went down in a heap, all grace gone.

We went over to it. My father was smiling, happy. He had unsheathed his knife. I knew what was going to happen, and I knew I was going to be sick, and I couldn't help any of it. He planted a foot on either side of the buck and pulled one of its legs back and shoved the knife in. One quick upward rip, and its guts spilled out on the forest floor, and I turned around and heaved up my breakfast.

When I turned back to him, he was looking at me. He never said anything, but I could read the contempt and disappointment in his eyes. I had seen it there often enough. I didn't say anything either. But if I had been able to, I would have said: *It isn't what you think.*

That was the first and last time I ever went hunting with my dad.

Chapter 6

Al Lathrop was still thumbing through his textbook samples and pretending he was too busy to talk to me when the intercom on Miss Marble's desk buzzed, and she smiled at me as if we had a great and sexy secret. "You can go in now, Charlie."

I got up. "Sell those textbooks, Al."

He gave me a quick, nervous, insincere smile. "I sure will, uh, Charlie."

I went through the slatted gate, past the big safe set into the wall on the right and Miss Marble's cluttered desk on the left. Straight ahead was a door with a frosted glass pane. THOMAS DENVER PRINCIPAL was lettered on the glass. I walked in.

Mr. Denver was looking at *The Bugle*, the school rag. He was a tall, cadaverous man who looked something like John Carradine. He was bald and skinny. His hands were long and full of knuckles. His tie was pulled down, and the top button of his shirt was undone. The skin on his throat looked grizzled and irritated from overshadowing.

"Sit down, Charlie."

I sat down and folded my hands. I'm a great old hand-folder. It's a trick I picked up from my father. Through the window behind Mr. Denver I could see the lawn, but not the fearless way it grew right up to the building. I was too high, and it was too bad. It might have helped, like a night-light when you are small.

Mr. Denver put *The Bugle* down and leaned back in his chair. "Kind of hard to see that way, isn't it?" He grunted. Mr. Denver was a crackerjack grunter. If there was a National Grunting Bee, I would put all my money on Mr. Denver. I brushed my hair away from my eyes.

There was a picture of Mr. Denver's family on his desk, which was even more cluttered than Miss Marble's. The family looked well-fed and well-adjusted. His wife was sort of porky, but the two kids were as cute as buttons and didn't look a bit like John Carradine. Two little girls, both blond.

"Don Grace has finished his report, and I've had it since last Thursday, considering his conclusions and his recommendations as carefully as I can. We all appreciate the seriousness of this matter, and I've taken the liberty of discussing the whole thing with John Carlson, also."

"How is he?" I asked.

"Pretty well. He'll be back in a month, I should think."

"Well, that's something."

"It is?" He blinked at me very quickly, the way lizards do.

"I didn't kill him. That's something."

"Yes." Mr. Denver looked at me steadily. "Do you wish you had?"

"No."

He leaned forward, drew his chair up to his desk, looked at me, shook his head, and began, "I'm very puzzled when I have to speak the way I'm about to speak to you, Charlie. Puzzled and sad. I've been in the kid business since 1947, and I still can't understand these things. I feel what I have to say to you is right and necessary, but it also makes me unhappy. Because I still can't understand why a thing like this happens. In 1959 we had a very bright boy here who beat a junior-high-school girl quite badly with a baseball bat. Eventually we had to send him to South Portland Correctional Institute. All he could say was that she wouldn't go out with him. Then he would smile." Mr. Denver shook his head.

"Don't bother."

"What?"

"Don't bother trying to understand. Don't lose any sleep over it."

"But why, Charlie? Why did you do that? My God, he was on an operating table for nearly four hours--"

"Why is Mr. Grace's question," I said. "He's the school shrink. You, you only ask it because it makes a nice lead-in to your sermon. I don't want to listen to any more sermons. They don't mean *shit* to me. It's *over*. He was going to live or die. He lived. I'm glad. You do what you have to do. What you and Mr. Grace decided to do. But don't you try to understand me."

"Charlie, understanding is part of my job."

"But helping you do your job isn't part of mine," I said. "So let me tell you one thing. To sort of help open the lines of communication, okay?"

"Okay..."

I held my hands tightly in my lap. They were trembling. "I'm sick of you and Mr. Grace and all the rest of you. You used to make me afraid and you still make me afraid but now you make me tired too, and I've decided I don't have to put up with that. The way I am, I can't put up with that. What you think doesn't mean anything to me. You're not qualified to deal with me. So just stand back. I'm warning you. You're not qualified."

My voice had risen to a trembling near-shout.

Mr. Denver sighed.

"So you may think, Charlie. But the laws of the state say otherwise. After having read Mr. Grace's report, I think I agree with him that you don't understand yourself or the consequences of what you did in Mr. Carlson's classroom. You are disturbed, Charlie."

*You are disturbed, Charlie.*

*The Cherokees used to slit their noses . . . so everyone in the tribe could see what part of them got them in trouble.*

The words echoed greenly in my head, as if at great depths. They were shark words at deep fathoms, jaws words come to gobble me. Words with teeth and eyes.

This is where I started to get it on. I knew it, because the same thing that happened just before I gave Mr. Carlson the business was happening now. My hands stopped shaking. My stomach flutters subsided, and my whole middle felt cool and calm. I felt detached, not only from Mr. Denver and his overshadowed neck, but from myself. I could almost float.

Mr. Denver had gone on, something about proper counseling and psychiatric help, but I interrupted him. "Mr. Man, you can go straight to hell."

He stopped and put down the paper he had been looking at so he wouldn't have to look at me. Something from my file, no doubt. The almighty file. The Great American File.

"What?" he said.

"In hell. Judge not, lest ye be judged. Any insanity in your family, Mr. Denver?"

**I'll discuss this with you, Charlie," he said tightly. "I won't engage in--"**

" . . . immoral sex practices," I finished for him. "Just you and me, okay? First one to jack off wins the Putnam Good Fellowship Award. Fill yore hand, pardner. Get Mr. Grace in here, that's even better. We'll have a circle jerk."

**"Wh-**

"Don't you get the message? You have to pull it out sometime, right? You owe it to yourself, right? Everybody has to get it on, everybody has to have someone to jack off on. You've already set yourself up as Judge of What's Right for Me. Devils. Demon possession. Why did I hit dat l'il girl wit dat ball bat, Lawd, Lawd? De debbil made me do it, and I'm so *saw-ry*. Why don't you admit it? You get a kick out of peddling my flesh. I'm the best thing that's happened to you since 1959."

He was gaping at me openly. I had him by the short hair, knew it, was savagely proud of it. On the one hand, he wanted to humor me, go along with me, because after all, isn't that what you do with disturbed people? On the other hand, he was in the kid business, just like he told me, and Rule One in the kid business is: Don't Let 'Em Give You No Lip-be fast with the command and the snappy comeback.

"Charlie--"

"Don't bother. I'm trying to tell you I'm tired of being masturbated on. Be a man, for God's sake, Mr. Denver. And if you can't be a man, at least pull up your pants and be a principal."

"Shut up," he grunted. His face had gone bright red. "You're just pretty damn lucky you live in a progressive state and go to a progressive school, young man. You know where you'd be otherwise? Peddling your papers in a reformatory somewhere, serving a term for criminal assault. I'm not sure you don't belong there anyway. You--"

"Thank you," I said.

He stared at me, his angry blue eyes fixed on mine.

"For treating me like a human being even if I had to piss you off to do it. That's real progress." I crossed my legs, being nonchalant. "Want to talk about the panty raids you made the scene at while you were at Big U learning the kid business?"

"Your mouth is filthy," he said deliberately. "And so is your mind."

"Fuck you," I said, and laughed at him.

He went an even deeper shade of scarlet and stood up. He reached slowly over the desk, slowly, slowly, as if he needed oiling, and bunched the shoulder of my shirt in his hand. "You show some respect," he said. He had really blown his cool and was not even bothering to use that really first-class grunt. "You rotten little punk, you show me some respect. "

"I could show you my ass and you'd kiss it," I said. "Go on and tell me about the panty raids. You'll feel better. Throw us your panties! Throw us your panties! "

He let go of me, holding his hand away from his body as if a rabid dog had just pooped on it. "Get out," he said hoarsely. "Get your books, turn them in here, and then get out. Your expulsion and transfer to Greenmantle Academy is effective as of Monday. I'll talk to your parents on the telephone. Now get out. I don't want to have to look at you."

I got up, unbuttoned the two bottom buttons on my shirt, pulled the tail out on one side, and unzipped my fly. Before he could move, I tore open the door and staggered into the outer office. Miss Marble and Al Lathrop were conferring at her desk, and they both looked up and winced when they saw me. They had obviously both been playing the great American parlor game of We Don't Really Hear Them, Do We?

"You better get to him," I panted. "We were sitting there talking about panty raids and he just jumped over his desk and tried to rape me. "

I'd pushed him over the edge, no mean feat, considering he'd been in the kid business for twenty-nine years and was probably only ten away from getting his gold key to the downstairs crapper. He lunged at me through the door; I danced away from him and he stood there looking furious, silly, and guilty all at once.

"Get somebody to take care of him," I said. "He'll be sweeter after he gets it out of his system. " I looked at Mr. Denver, winked, and whispered, "Throw us your panties, right?"

Then I pushed out through the slatted rail and walked slowly out the office door, buttoning my shirt and tucking it in, zipping my fly. There was plenty of time for him to say something, but he didn't say a word.

That's when it really got rolling, because all at once I knew he couldn't say a word. He was great at announcing the day's hot lunch over the intercom, but this was a different thing joyously different. I had confronted him with exactly what he said was wrong with me, and he hadn't been able to cope with that. Maybe he expected us to smile and shake hands and conclude my seven-and-one-half-semester stay at Placerville High with a literary critique of *The Bugle*. But in spite of everything, Mr. Carlson and all the rest, he hadn't really expected any irrational act. Those things were all meant for the closet, rolled up beside those nasty magazines you never show your wife. He was standing back there, vocal cords frozen, not a word left in his mind to say. None of his instructors in Dealing with the Disturbed Child, EdB-211, had ever told him he might someday have to deal with a student who would attack him on a personal level.

And pretty quick he was going to be mad. That made him dangerous. Who knew better than me? I was going to have to protect myself. I was ready, and had been ever since I decided that people might-just might, mind you-be following me around and checking up.

I gave him every chance.

I waited for him to charge out and grab me, all the way to the staircase. I didn't want salvation. I was either past that point or never reached it. All I wanted was recognition . . . or maybe for someone to draw a yellow plague circle around my feet.

He didn't come out.

And when he didn't, I went ahead and got it on.

## Chapter 7

I went down the staircase whistling; I felt wonderful. Things happen that way sometimes. When everything is at its worst, your mind just throws it all into the wastebasket and goes to Florida for a little while. There is a sudden electric what-the-hell glow as you stand there looking back over your shoulder at the bridge you just burned down.

A girl I didn't know passed me on the second-floor landing, a pimply, ugly girl wearing big horn-rimmed glasses and carrying a clutch of secretarial-type books. On impulse I turned around and looked after her. Yes; yes. From the back she might have been Miss America. It was wonderful.

The first-floor hall was deserted. Not a soul coming or going. The only sound was the hive drone, the sound that makes all the schoolhouses the same, modern and glass-walled or ancient and stinking of floor varnish. Lockers stood in silent sentinel rows, with a break here and there to make room for a drinking fountain or a classroom door. Algebra II was in Room 16, but my locker was at the other end of the hall. I walked down to it and regarded it.

My locker. It said so: CHARLES DECKER printed neatly in my hand on a strip of school Con-Tact paper. Each September, during the first home-room period, came the handing out of the blank Con-Tact strips. We lettered carefully, and during the two-minute break between home room and the first class of the new year, we pasted them on. The ritual was as old and as holy as First Communion. On the first day of my sophomore year, Joe McKennedy walked up to me through the crowded hall with his Con-Tact strip pasted on his forehead and a big shit-eating grin pasted on his mouth. Hundreds of horrified freshmen, each with a little yellow name tag pinned on his or her shirt or blouse, turned to look at this sacrilege. I almost broke my balls laughing. Of course he got a detention for it, but it made my day. When I think back on it, I guess it made my year.

And there I was, right between ROSANNE DEBBINS and CARLA DENCH, who doused herself in rosewater every morning, which had been no great help in keeping my breakfast where it belonged during the last semester.

Ah, but all that was behind me now.

Gray locker, five feet high, padlocked. The padlocks were handed out at the beginning of the year along with the Con-Tact strips. Titus, the padlock proclaimed itself. Lock me, unlock me. I am Titus, the Helpful Padlock.

"Titus, you old cuffer," I whispered. "Titus, you old cock-knocker."

I reached for Titus, and it seemed to me that my hand stretched to it across a thousand miles, a hand on the end of a plastic arm that elongated painlessly and nervelessly. The numbered surface of Titus' black face looked at me blandly, not condemning but certainly not *approving*, no, not *that*, and I shut my eyes for a moment. My body wrenched through a shudder, pulled by invisible, involuntary, opposing hands.

And when I opened my eyes again, Titus was in my grasp. The chasm had closed.

The combinations on high-school locks are simple. Mine was six to the left, thirty right, and two turns back to zero. Titus was known more for his strength than his intellect. The lock snapped up, and I had him in my hand. I clutched him tightly, making no move to open the locker door.

Up the hall, Mr. Johnson was saying: "... and the Hessians, who were paid mercenaries, weren't any too anxious to fight, especially in a countryside where the opportunities for plunder over and above the agreed-upon wages ..."

"Hessian," I whispered to Titus. I carried him down to the first wastebasket and dropped him in. He looked up at me innocently from a litter of discarded homework papers and old sandwich bags.

"... but remember that the Hessians, as far as the Continental Army knew, were formidable German killing machines ..."

I bent down, picked him up, and put him in my breast pocket, where he made a bulge about the size of a pack of cigarettes.

"Keep it in mind, Titus, you old killing machine," I said, and went back to my locker.

I swung it open. Crumpled up in a sweaty ball at the bottom was my gym uniform, old lunch bags, candy wrappers, a month-old apple core that was browning nicely, and a pair of ratty black sneakers. My red nylon jacket was hung on the coat-hook, and on the shelf above that were my textbooks, all but Algebra II. Civics, American Government, French Stories and Fables, and Health, that happy Senior gut course, a red, modern book with a high-school girl and boy on the cover and the section on venereal disease neatly clipped by unanimous vote of the School Committee. I started to get it on beginning with the health book, sold to the school by none other than good old Al Lathrop, I hoped and trusted. I took it out, opened it somewhere between "The Building Blocks of Nutrition" and "Swimming Rules for Fun and Safety," and ripped it in two. It came easy. They all came easy except for Civics, which was a tough old Silver Burdett text circa 1946. I threw all the pieces into the bottom of the locker. The only thing left up top was my slide rule, which I snapped in two, a picture of Raquel Welch taped to the back wall (I let it stay), and the box of shells that had been behind my books.

I picked that up and looked at it. The box had originally held Winchester .22 long-rifle shells, but it didn't anymore. I'd put the other shells in it, the ones from the desk drawer in my father's study. There's a deer head mounted on the wall in his study, and it stared down at me with its glassy too-alive eyes as I took the shells and the gun, but I didn't let it bother me. It wasn't the one he'd gotten on the hunting trip when I was nine. The pistol had been in another drawer, behind a box of business envelopes. I doubt if he even remembered it was still there. And as a matter of fact, it wasn't, not anymore. Now it was in the pocket of my jacket. I took it out and shoved it into my belt. I didn't feel much like a Hessian. I felt like Wild Bill Hickok.

I put the shells in my pants pocket and took out my lighter. It was one of those Scripto see-through jobs. I don't smoke myself, but the lighter had kind of caught my fancy. I snapped a light to it, squatted, and set the crap in the bottom of my locker on fire.

The flames licked up greedily from my gym trunks to the lunch bags and candy wrappers to the ruins of my books, carrying a sweaty, athletic smell up to me.

Then, figuring that I had gotten it on as much as I could by myself, I shut the locker door. There were little vents just above where my name was Con-Tact-papered on, and through them I could hear the flames whooshing upward. In a minute little orange flecks were glaring in the darkness beyond the vents, and the gray locker paint started to crack and peel.

A kid came out of Mr. Johnson's room carrying a green bathroom pass. He looked at the smoke belching merrily out of the vents in my locker, looked at me, and hurried down to the bathroom. I don't think he saw the pistol. He wasn't hurrying that fast.

I started down to Room 16. I paused just as I got there, my hand on the doorknob, looking back. The smoke was really pouring out of the vents now, and a dark, sooty stain was spreading up the front of my locker. The Con-Tact paper had turned brown. You couldn't see the letters that made my name anymore.

I don't think there was anything in my brain fight then except the usual background static-the kind-you get on your radio when it's turned up all the way and tuned to no station at all. My brain had checked to the power, so to speak; the little guy wearing the Napoleon hat inside was showing aces and betting them.

I turned back to Room 16 and opened the door. I was hoping, but I didn't know what.