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In this novel excerpt, police officer Dick Burnside braves the windswept shores of family, class, race, love, sports, and violence in the beachside town of Lake Bluff, Michigan.

After his son shows a penchant for throwing the football, Dick Burnside attempts to ingratiate himself and his son into the local football culture. But his son doesn't want to be pummeled on the gridiron for his father's benefit, and Burnside cannot overcome his reputation as a weak-willed yet down-and-dirty cop. Meanwhile, a drug-addled criminal from the poorer side of town undoes all of Burnside's hard work keeping the peace. And a talented young quarterback, poor and black in a rich white town, begins to overshadow Burnside's son on the playing field and in Burnside's life.

In the chapters that will follow this excerpt, star quarterback Andre Washington falls in with a rough crowd and tries to keep Burnside from saving him. And Lindsay VanderMash, an idealistic young librarian, tries to promote understanding and goodwill among blacks and whites but fails, bringing about a more sinister type of segregation.

The Breakers examines the failures of idealism and justice while exploring the human bonds formed when individuals decide to care about each other, and to set themselves against the surging waters of institutions, authority, and society.

THE BREAKERS

by

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CHAPTER I

The park was empty except for one other family; the day wasn't quite warm yet. It was a Saturday morning in late spring in southwest Michigan, the cold still clinging to the ground. Few cars buzzed past the guardrail that walled in the park. Dick Burnside, a police officer for the city of Lake Bluff, had been kicked out of the house by his wife so she could finally get just a second of alone time please; Burnside had decided it was as good a day as any to try and get his son hooked on football. Previous years Ricky hadn't really taken to the game, to the idea of pitching a ball back and forth across a length of grass. But so far that spring, Ricky, aged ten, seemed to enjoy throwing the ball every once in a while.

After the first couple completions Burnside took a step back and nodded at his son. Ricky swept the long blond hair out his eyes and exhaled loudly but followed suit, looking behind as he stepped. Soon, father and son were as far apart as they could get. They moved away from the swing set where Ricky's younger sister, Valerie, pumped her legs, to go deeper into the park, to a field nestled between two steep hills. New expensive houses loomed above, and fog hung in the wooded hills. Soon Ricky was throwing overhand with a speed and force that Burnside didn't recognize. Where had this come from? Burnside thought as he caught the ball with stinging fingertips. He squeezed the pigskin, ran his fingers across the laces, and tossed it back. His own spiral wobbled apart at the top of its arc and shuddered down into Ricky's open hands. The sunlight was just

starting to bring the grass and trees into focus. Ricky threw another long hard zinger straight to Burnside's chest.

"Way to throw it, Ricky!" Burnside shouted. But he could see that his son wasn't going to need encouragement any more. Sixty feet away, the boy bit the inside of his lip and practiced his stance, turn, release, follow-through with an empty hand as Burnside watched, the ball in his own hand. Ricky was comically small; still, it was as if Burnside's son had suddenly grown up. No. As if his son had been growing and learning and becoming all this time, and Burnside was only now far enough away to see Ricky for who he was. And who he was was going to be a damn good quarterback, once he got his growth spurt and if he could learn to run and take a hit. Burnside took a step back, took a deep breath and threw his whole shoulder into it.

The ball sailed high but plummeted to the grass, ten feet from where Ricky stood.

"Bad throw!" Burnside yelled. "My bad!" It didn't look like Ricky heard him. The boy just jogged forward to pick up the ball from the grass, and then stepped back farther than where he had stood. He palmed the ball and raised it high, elbow bent a perfect ninety degrees, and stepped forward and released. Another perfect spiral. A level line drive. Another dad stopped to watch, following each of Ricky's throws with his eyes and nodding and smiling when the ball fell into Burnside's open hands. Burnside did his best to avoid the other dad's gaze.

Burnside called it quits after half an hour. Ricky sulked away to the sledding hill wet with mud, barely raising his hand to give his sister a high five. She was special too, Burnside thought, though she tended to twirl her hair and hide behind her mother's legs

and generally act like a phantom of a kid, always showing up rooms unannounced. They climbed the muddy hill and walked past the new houses to their neighborhood as Ricky whistled a strange, airy melody. Tom Goldner, a neighbor, waved hello and asked how Gloria was doing with the job hunt.

"Fine, thanks," Burnside said.

"Good to see you, Officer," Mrs. Wilkerson, another neighbor, shouted from where she swept her front porch.

"Just Dick, thanks," Burnside called back, but Mrs. Wilkerson waved him off and went back to her sweeping. He rolled his shoulders back and straightened his neck and took even purposeful strides the rest of the way home, Val's sweaty hand in his palm. Ricky's ghostly whistle tagged along half a block behind.

Plain old Mr. Burnside, he thought. Plain old Dick Burnside.

Gloria didn't want Ricky to play junior-league Rocket football because it could stunt his growth; Burnside, after gritting his teeth and thinking about it a second—the young pastor he and Gloria gone to see a few years ago had suggested to them in a whisper that they promise each other "compromise," a word that *did*, sure enough, seem to solve much of the trouble that had somehow opened the door to their house and insinuated itself into every turn of phrase, every verbal response and wide-eyed look, every patient explanation of why the tea cups sit on the top shelf, where Dick's and Gloria's voices turned sudden corners and swerved on the edge of some anger. Compromise. A word. But it had worked. Burnside drummed his hands on the kitchen table and relented.

"As long as he can play later," Burnside said. "Seventh grade."

Gloria smiled and looked up from the classified section and nodded. "That's fine," she said in a small voice. Burnside watched her lower her head and scan through the want ads a little too quickly.

Burnside knew Steve Fleisher, who coached middle school football, from church. Burnside started stopping by practice afternoons that fall. Things in Riverside had slowed considerably, and his services were needed only in extraordinary situations. Burnside hung his elbows over the chain-link fence at Lake Bluff Middle School and waved to Steve Fleisher, the middle school coach.

"Hiya, Dick," he said. "What can I do you for?"

"Ricky," Burnside said. "He's really going to be something."

"That so."

"Even if he wasn't my kid I'd say it."

Steve nodded and then looked over his shoulder at the kids scrimmaging on the field, comically small in their helmets and pads, like they were about to tip to the overgrown grass. "Make sure he tries out," Steve Fleisher said.

Burnside cleared his throat and Steve turned around. "Listen, Steve, you gotta take a look at him. Serious about this."

Steve seemed to consider that a second, as he worked his fingers around the orange plastic whistle hung from a lanyard around his neck.

"Will do," Steve said finally. "You take it easy, now." He jogged off to the kids, who now stood with their helmets at their sides, looking around for someone to tell them

what to do, their heads darting here and there in quick jerks like birds.

Burnside and Ricky continued to play catch all fall and into winter. They wore gloves and scarves and slipped on frozen patches as they walked carefully down the hill between sledding kids to Kiwanis Park. Ricky's throws grew more forceful and accurate, and by this time, as they blew into their hands and poured themselves hot chocolate and stood around with the parents at the bottom of the sledding hill, men he didn't recognize began saying to Burnside, "Looking good." "That's a nice arm, right." "You got a Troy Aikman, huh? You got a Brett Favre, Officer?"

Burnside nodded and said, "It's just Dick."

The men smiled and put their hands up and told Ricky to throw it there.

In the spring, Burnside installed a pull-up bar in the frame of Ricky's bedroom door.

One night, as Burnside washed dishes and she dried—teamwork—she draped the wet towel over her shoulder and said, "Don't be one of those dads."

"What?" Burnside said. He set a soapy dish in the drying rack.

"You're pushing him," Gloria said. She peered at the dish. "There's still food on that dish."

"I'm not," Burnside said. He took the plate back and plunged it into the hot water. "He asked for that pull-up bar." Which was more or less true. One day Ricky had asked if he could bike down to the station and Burnside said okay, one hour. He met Ricky on the sidewalk in front of the station and helped him lock his bike to the rack. He showed his son to all the offices, to say hello to men Ricky knew from backyard cookouts and beach

parties. He remembered Bert Johnson, didn't he? Sheriff Dudendorf? Mr. DeKoonstra? Burnside took Ricky the gym—in those days just two benches and bars and three dozen free weights plus a Soloflex machine in an old conference room on the second floor. Ricky ran and jumped to the pull-up bar in the corner, did three quick chin-ups, and dropped to the floor.

"We got one of those in gym," Ricky said. "Those are cool." The next day Burnside measured the doorframe and drove to Sears.

Through spring and summer, Ricky was up in his room, working on chin-ups, push-ups, sit-ups, grunting and pounding the floor. He asked his dad if he could come along on morning runs but Burnside said no, you run enough on your soccer team.

"When you're twelve, we can run together."

Ricky nodded. "How about weights?"

Burnside shook his head. "You got to get your growth first. Then you can start weight training." Ricky smiled, seemed to take that okay. "Some kids at school are like, using Creatine and stuff, cause they want to get big. I think kids should play normal. Its not fair, and it's not good for kids, either, you know?"

Burnside looked around Ricky's face. His cheeks had been stretching into something lean and strong, though still covered over in patches of fuzz. His blond head hair shone with the gel he insisted that Gloria buy him. Ricky rubbed his chin, where a single black hair had sprouted and grew a tangled half-inch off of his face. Ricky frowned a little as he stood there, just like an adult.

"Creatine?" Burnside said. "Are you sure?"

"Some kids," Ricky said. He ran his palm over his skinny bicep. "Not, like, a lot though. Nobody I know."

Burnside smiled. "You just focus on throwing the ball, 'kay, bud? No eleven-year-old needs to lift weights. You just worry about fundamentals. And what's the first part of fundamentals?"

Ricky looked at the ground as his neck grew red with embarrassment. "Fun," he said.

"That's right," Burnside said. He folded his arms. He wanted to practice his coaching demeanor.

"I'll do five more and then I'll be done," Ricky said, and jumped to grab the chin-up bar and kicked his feet as he pulled up one.

It was all so strange. It wasn't that Ricky was excited about running or winning or doing ten pull-ups in a row or throwing a ball any chance he could get—it was as if Ricky just *did* it, without desire and without really thinking. Sports was what Ricky did; Burnside had no idea whether the boy enjoyed it. It was becoming hard, Burnside decided, to imagine his son as anything other than a kind of sports machine. Ricky was like a pastor, or an accountant. Or how people thought of cops. He was what he was, and would always be.

After Ricky had made the seventh grade 'A' team as quarterback and led the team to a winning season, Burnside started to put his feelers out. Finally, by the summer before Ricky's eighth grade year, the head coach for the Lake Bluff High Tigers, Keith Wilson, agreed to meet Burnside.

"Early tomorrow," Wilson said over the phone on a Friday night. "And I can't promise you nothing."

It was a hot summer Saturday morning. Burnside took the police cruiser from the station down Lakeview Avenue and set an alarm on his watch to make sure he'd be back in time for that stupid meeting. Department of Riverside Relations. Back when Burnside was in charge, he called it Riverside Task Force. Simple. Sheriff Dudendorf going to appoint that new guy, Errol, to Burnside's old position, simultaneously giving some kind of laurel wreath to Burnside, which he knew, amounted to an ouster.

But now he drove. The town was quiet, houses shuttered up and inside people taking deep breaths in bed, sleeping off a late night full of fireflies and ice cream, wave breaks and moonlight, walks on the pier to the lighthouse shining against the night to guide the shipping boats that still crossed the Great Lakes. Sleeping off long gazes across Lake Michigan. Burnside turned left at the library, right on Main, and pulled into the Dunkin' Donuts parking lot. Keith Wilson sat waiting inside with a newspaper, two coffees, and three doughnuts.

"I'll check the rules and regs," Wilson said. "Never had a non-teacher coach that I remember."

"I'd appreciate it," Burnside said. "Because Ricky's something special. Really." He motioned to one of the coffees, in Styrofoam to-go cups, and Wilson pushed it across the table.

"That's what you've been saying," Wilson said. "Hey, I heard you're getting a big promotion."

"If you can call it that," Burnside said. He wasn't happy about the "new era" of the department that Dudendorf and the paper had been going on about all week.

"They figure you got things clean enough, time to give you a gold watch and choice hours? That it?"

Burnside shrugged.

"So *that's* why you want to coach ball," Wilson said. He picked up a doughnut and chomped into it. "Got it."

Burnside removed the lid of his Styrofoam cup. "You know I know football," he said, looking down into the coffee. "I want to be a part of something."

"Takes more than knowledge," Wilson said. He paused to take a bite of doughnut. He chewed and swallowed with a gulp. "It's passion. It's belief. It's about the *kids*. Kids come first." Wilson licked his fingers. "Ain't nothing more important than football. Than teamwork. I play the kids who look good. So I can't promise automatically that Ricky plays. Got that?"

Burnside nodded.

Wilson waved his hand around. "Kids with promise? We make 'em look good. For colleges. Get 'em All-State. Least All-Conference. People tell me I'm going be the winningest coach of all time but that doesn't matter to me. What matters is the kids. I want 'em taking something away from this whole experience, and I want to give them all I can."

"I completely agree," Burnside said.

"You do?"

Burnside nodded, smiled. He reached for a doughnut.

"These're for my wife," Wilson said. "Who do you like at inside linebacker?"

Burnside withdrew his hand. He shrugged. "I guess I haven't been to a game in a while. I don't—"

Wilson set his fingers on his lips and nodded. "Okay. I see. Fine."

"Wait'll you see Ricky," Burnside said. "The boy can throw the ball."

"We know," Keith Wilson said. He leaned back in his chair. "I look out for these kids, Dick. Like I said." Wilson stood up, thanked Burnside for his interest, and stepped out the door.

To blow off the next thirty minutes Burnside cruised town, down Niles Avenue to the river and across, to a new housing development near the city limits, then around the perimeter of Riverside Heights and on frontage roads behind the mall, across what was left of the creek the city meant to pave but never had, through Kiwanis Park, the fog still swamped over the swing set, the merry-go-round, the teeter-totter, the empty field where he and Ricky still sometimes threw around, when Ricky had the time between practice and games and homework and youth group and the time he spent listening to CDs of comedy routines with his friends upstairs in his bedroom, their laughs and hollers sounding strangely adult to Burnside downstairs on the couch. And then up through Kiwanis and past downtown and right on Lakeview to the gentle bluff road, down and across the railroad tracks, past the train depot to City Beach, where Burnside parked and opened his car window and gave himself a couple minutes to dream about the day he'd

hold a clipboard on the sidelines and wave his arm at the field and holler with his hand cupped at his mouth and coach his boy to victory.

But there was that meeting to get to. Bob Errol was a new cop, a young black guy from one of those podunk meth-lab Indiana towns. Apparently there he'd done fine work gaining street cred and shutting down the local drug trade. Sheriff Dudendorf had hired him away with a salary that Burnside heard outstripped his own. It was a bunch of PR bullshit.

Back in 1997, Burnside, along with his old partner Bert Johnson, had come on a roundabout series of tips that pointed to a major summit or what-have-you of drug traffickers from the Chicago and Detroit arms of the Gangster Disciples, right there in Lake Bluff, in Riverside. They'd called departments around the lower half of the state to ask who they could trust in Detroit, and then called up DCPD too. Burnside and Bert went undercover to stake things out for a week prior, parked in front of two adjacent houses on Colfax. Rumor was that the Bureau wanted in, so Burnside decided they would arrest not on charges of interstate trafficking but on normal trafficking, possession, and racketeering charges—enough to put the bad guys away and get Burnside and Bert the recognition that was theirs without getting any Feds involved.

The County Commissioners took note of Burnside's good work—Bert always deferred to him as "leader" of the investigation—and made him head of the Riverside Task Force a month later. The rest was history—busts, arrests, one Baptist minister ousted and three riots put down. Murder per capita rates plummeted eleven points in two years. The neighborhood seemed on the eve of rebirth. Burnside kept the heat up just

enough and things had been going good until Dudendorf ran without contest for another term of Sheriff on some bullshit platform of reform. The final week of the race coincided with an uptick in violent crime in Riverside—four break-ins, three shootings, totally random—and Dudendorf, elected to another four years of smarmy press conferences and credit-taking, moved Bob Errol into one of the big houses that overlooked Kiwanis Park.

Burnside pulled the car up to the parking lot behind the station and picked up a stray plastic bag on his way in. Things had calmed down in Riverside, but Burnside wasn't naïve. In the past weeks, the community, the paper, the mayor and city council and neighbors and everybody else was congratulating him on the good job his team had done with Riverside. But if they knew what kind of stunts Dick and Bert and the rest of the crew had pulled over there, they wouldn't be so quick to shake Burnside's hand in a photo op. Nothing illegal—they'd had warrants—but battering rams, nightsticks, shotguns, mass arrests, knees in backbones—it wasn't pretty. Errol was to be a shot of new blood, a bridge between Riverside and Lake Bluff. Once the dirty work was done, Dudendorf wanted to make it seem that the department was a friend to Riverside. Only way to do that, then: appoint a black guy from out of town to head up the Riverside Task Force.

"Cynical but shrewd," Burnside said to Bert Johnson as he poured him a cup of coffee in the hallway outside the meeting room. The lights above them buzzed and reporters and photographers hustled past the coffeemaker and squeezed into the meeting room, jabbering in whispers and scrawling down words in their little notebooks.

"Those are big words for you, Dick," Bert said. He opened the door to the meeting room and they went in.

Burnside and Bert slinked into the meeting room through the far door, saying hi to hardly anybody. As soon as Burnside shut the door, Dudendorf stood up from a wooden chair that wasn't usually in this office and asked everyone to give Sergeant—

"Let me, repeat, *Sergeant* Richard Burnside, a big hand." The cops clapped but the reporters didn't. "He's done a lot to lay the foundation for where we are today."

Dudendorf paused and beamed at the crowd. "But now I want to give you the new face for a new era. Our newest head of Riverside Relations, Bob Errol." Everyone applauded.

The guy was handsome. He stood up and nodded to the cops, shook Dudendorf's hand, and took the podium. He was put together, a suit and tie and a small but winning smile.

Errol raised his hand and the room fell silent. "I've got a lot of work to do," Errol said. "We, as a department, have a lot of work to do. But I in particular have work to do. And the first thing I have to do is to earn your trust." He looked right at Burnside when he said it. "I'm a cop. I know what it's like. Have some guy, some other state—" he looked around the room "—some other, uh—" he whisked a hand from his crew cut downward, and all the cops started to laugh "—somebody new and different from you comes in and tells you all he's going to run things his own way." Errol paused. He patted his tie flat and stood a little straighter. He raised his chin, seemed to take in a breath that seemed altogether too dramatic for Burnside, and then cracked a smile. "But that's exactly what I'm going to do." The room erupted in laughter. Cameras flashed and Bob Errol smiled right toward them. It was patronizing, seemed to Burnside. He tuned out the rest of the guy's speech and started scribbling down plays in his notepad.

On his way out, Burnside heard a TV reporter ask Errol what the first thing he was going to do was.

"Well," Errol said. "I've been talking to some community people, teachers, pastors, librarians, maybe a poster campaign."

Burnside rolled his eyes and walked past the line of TV cameras and suited-up reporters, not a one asking him a single goddamn question. He scrambled down the back stairs and opened the door to the parking lot and squinted his eyes against the brightness he wasn't expecting. Headlights.

"Way to do it, Sarge," Bert called from his pickup. He turned off his brights and squealed the tires turning out onto Main. Burnside patted the sealed envelope in his breast pocket, right under his badge, and began the short walk home.

"It'll pay more," Gloria said when he tossed the paperwork on the kitchen table. She pointed at the line in Dudendorf's letter about the pay increase. "Least there's that."

"They don't want me around," Burnside said. "This is some underhanded bullcrap if you ask me."

"Don't *say* things like that," Gloria said. "It's a *promotion*, Dick."

She didn't even have the classifieds open.

The counselor had actually recommended that Gloria *keep* her job—Burnside remembered that much from the sessions they paid for and sat through in uncomfortable folding chairs after the pastor had seemed to have given up on them. But Gloria used Dr. Hamlin as an excuse for everything she did these days.

"He said it'll help me with my independence," Gloria had said when she came

home with the letter of resignation for Burnside to proofread. "I'll have more freedom," she said. "This is temporary, though. Just to allow me a little rest. Just for a while." Then Val had come bouncing through the room singing, "Mommy's staying home now! Mommy's staying with *me!*"

That was two years ago.

The article in the paper the next day didn't mention a thing about Burnside's promotion.

On a Monday in early August, Burnside returned to the station for lunch after a morning camped out in a Riverside dry-cleaners parking lot, trolling for morons ignoring the speed trap on Colfax. Susan Braeburn, the department admin, handed him a slip of yellow paper as he passed her desk. "A Keith Wilson? Wants you to call."

Burnside picked up the community phone on the spare desk in the back of the front room and dialed Wilson's office number. He picked up on the first ring.

"Dick. Sorry. This year's not the right time. But next year—I'll get a spot for you next year. I just want to tell you though how honored that you would call me and how much I enjoyed our little—"

Burnside hung up and unpacked his Subway sandwich.

Burnside decided just to sit back and enjoy watching Ricky's seventh-grade year. Before the first game that fall, he mingled at the entrance to the field behind the middle school, a dirt-pocked overgrown field surrounded by a chain-link fence and pricker

bushes. Burnside said hello to the single mom who ran the snack stand; she waved and straightened her turtlenecks under her Lake Bluff Middle School windbreaker. "Why, hello, Officer Burnside," she said. "We got a good feeling about Ricky this year."

"It's just Dick," Burnside said, smiling at the wallet in his hand. He pointed to a plastic refillable popcorn bucket with the Lake Bluff Tigers logo emblazoned on the side.

"Boosters selling those," the woman said.

Burnside nodded and bought it, full, then climbed the wobbly middle school bleachers with Gloria and Val. They sat on the cold metal bench and waited. Both Gloria and Val complained that the popcorn was too buttery, too yellow, too salty, why couldn't they bring their own snacks.

"And I can't believe that thing cost you twenty dollars," Gloria said.

"Twenty *dollars*?" Val said. Burnside gave her the evil eye and then looked at Gloria, who scratched at her tensed-up forehead and shook her head almost imperceptibly from side to side.

"Glor," Burnside said. "We're supporting Ricky's team. Come on. This'll last us all season. And that's that."

Then turned to the field and waited without saying anything more.

A few minutes later, Ricky led the huffing seventh grade 'A' team out of the old shed on the other side of the field, where the middle school football changed into their game clothes. He looked different, seemed to Burnside. Looked important. In the just-wilted light of 5 pm, Ricky stood lean and tall in his navy blue jersey and faded yellow pants, leftovers bought at a discount from the stockpile the boosters kept in cardboard

boxes under the high school bleachers to sell to the parents of middle-school players. His shoulder pads looking now like they fit him, like they and his ridged thigh pads and round knee pads and tall thick white socks and that shined-up helmet were not a costume over his pre-teen body but an extension of his form. His posture—something in the curvature of his spine and the hang of his long arms—still recognizable to Burnside, still belonged to his son, but this—this football player, this *quarterback*—seemed finally like something else entirely, like an adult. Like someone who could *play*. Burnside rose to his feet and tugged Gloria to standing and started to scream, uncontrollable. "Tigers! Tigers! Let's go!" The other parents jerked their heads around to look at him before following suit—rising to their feet, cheering. "Tigers! Tigers! Let's go, Tigers!" A player tapped the top of Ricky's helmet with his fist and Ricky nodded.

"Is that Ricky?" Val said.

"That's him in the middle," Burnside said.

"The short one?"

"Hmm." He did look a little skinny next to all the other kids. "Yeah," Burnside said. "The short one."

Ricky would turn thirteen in a week.

In the second play Ricky seemed to juggle the snap a second, but was able to clutch the ball close to his chest as he fell back a few feet. He scanned the field from sideline to sideline just like Burnside had taught him; he lifted the ball high. Then one of the fatsos on the offensive line fell to his knees with a grunt and then referees seemed to divert their attention to Ricky. Two linebackers darted through the hole, headed right at

Ricky. But Ricky didn't see. He kept twisting his head and cocking his elbow back.

Downfield, a receiver broke away from his man and put his hands high.

In the stands, Gloria turned to Burnside. "Those guys are going after him."

Burnside nodded. The center rushed back and dashed one of the linemen to the grass.

"Does he see them?" Gloria said.

Burnside opened his mouth, about to say, "He'll be fine," when Ricky's ankle twisted and the linebacker still standing sprung at Ricky's middle and knocked him back. The ball sputtered out of Ricky's hands and into the air as Ricky smacked the grass, shoulder pad first. He brought his knees up to his chest. Gloria gasped. The parents in the stands went, "Ooh." Then the other linebacker rose to his feet and grabbed at the fluttering ball, brought it to his chest, and ran it off. Both teams followed, rushing past Ricky who was curled up and shivering in the grass. Five yards from the visitors' end zone, the Lake Bluff center finally brought the lineman down.

"Shit," Burnside said when the play was over. He felt spit brewing in his mouth and sucked over his tongue and down his throat as Ricky, on the field, got to one knee, touched the back of his neck and then brought his hand to his face, spread his fingers as if to look for blood. One shoulder pad stuck out of his collar; the other out his sleeve. Ricky got to both feet and shook his head and jogged downfield to the new line of scrimmage. Parents from both sides got to their feet and clapped. Burnside involuntarily touched his own neck and felt his skin crawl.

As the defensive team ran onto the field, one of Ricky's linemen tucked Ricky's

shoulder pads back into his shirt. The ref asked Ricky something and Ricky nodded and jogged to the sidelines. The rest of the game he flung the ball as hard as he could, quick as he could, didn't seem to Burnside like the kid was even looking for his mark—Ricky threw three interceptions and completed fewer than half his attempts. And though that was expected for somebody who'd just had the piss knocked out of him, it was totally unacceptable behavior for a serious athlete—he was letting his team down, for one, and his own self, for two—and Burnside intended to tell Ricky as much when they got home from the game that night. Gloria and Val disappeared upstairs to play with dolls or whatever it was they did most evenings in Val's room, and Burnside asked Ricky to sit down.

"I was gonna get a Coke," Ricky said.

"You sit down, bud." Burnside took his place in the old wooden rocking chair and straightened the afghan behind his shoulders before rocking back, forward, back, forward, then coming to a stop, both feet on the floor. Ricky stood on the other side of the coffee table, his mouth hung open and sweating beading at his hairline.

"We got to talk," Burnside said.

Ricky shook his head. "I'm good."

Burnside blinked and watched Ricky wipe his chin with the sleeve of his shirt. He had a zit, a big red infected one, sprouting at the corner of his lips and he pulled and squeezed at it.

"You're good," Burnside said. "Good." He sucked in a breath and rocked back in the chair. "What happened out there, Rick? You can't do that."

Ricky shrugged. "Got hurt. No big deal."

"It's not a way to start the season."

"Guess not."

"Look at me when I'm talking," Burnside said. "If I'm going to be your coach, we're going to have to develop a different kind of relationship. There needs to be mutual respect—it's not just a father and son thing."

"Who said anything about you coaching?" Ricky pulled his hands away from his face and looked at them.

"Look at me when you talk to me," Burnside said.

"What if I don't *want* you to be my coach?"

"Lots of kids' dads coach 'em. They like it."

"Says who?"

Burnside closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "Ricky, Ricky," he said. "This is not the point. The point is, I just want to know if anything's bothering you."

"Cause I fucked up," Ricky said. It couldn't have been the first time—there was no way—but there, in the living room with night pressing the windows from outside and the soft sounds of things happening upstairs—voices, even—it seemed to Dick Burnside that this was not only the first time he'd ever *heard* his son swear, but the first time his son *had* sworn, ever—the first time that word had escaped his mouth, the first time he meant it in all its negativity and surliness. To Burnside it had always seemed like spitting at the world. Some sort of ultimate disgust. Burnside took another deep breath and looked Ricky right at his downcast eyes. But Ricky didn't look up—he brought his sleeve to his

nose and sucked up some snot—and Burnside felt himself soften.

"I'm sorry," Burnside said.

Ricky looked up, crying. "Just if—" he gulped "—like, only if there's a—oh, never mind."

"No. No. Ricky, no. What?"

"Nothing."

"Come on."

Ricky swallowed and rubbed at his nose. His eyes were limned in the faintest shade of red. His finger went to the zit on his chin but then pulled away.

"What?" Burnside said.

"You only asked—" Ricky's voice started to crack again "—only cause I had a game. That's the only reason you asked."

Burnside felt a flutter in his chest and his lower lip fell away and he shook his head a little, not knowing what his son meant. "Asked what, Ricky?" he said, his softest voice. "What did I ask?"

Ricky closed his eyes and smiled a little. His cheeks grew out at that moment, and he seemed to regain all the baby fat he'd lost out there on the field, in uniform just before the game started, poised to lead his team of kids through the struggle and story of a football game.

Ricky gulped and said, "If there was something." He sniffed. "*Wrong*," he said, and turned away, and took the stairs slowly up to his room. Burnside went up, put his ear to Ricky's door, but all he heard was Gloria reading Goldilocks to Val in the other room.

Then there was a smash and Ricky yelled once and Burnside turned away, to see Gloria and Val eyes wide and terrified in the doorway to Val's room.

"It's nothing," Burnside said. "He's upset. Let's give him a little time."

Burnside worked Saturday and Sunday—nothing doing. A day sitting in a parked car, the county emergency dispatcher's voice poking through the radio static like a needle through a ball of yarn. Coming home to a house where the light didn't seem to work right—where everything was glazed over with dust. Out of focus. Then, on Monday, after waving the kids off to the bus stop and consuming a breakfast of eggs sprinkled with preshredded cheddar cheese and two cups of coffee and a blank stare into space, he knocked lightly on the bedroom door to make sure Gloria was still asleep, and then took to the stairs to find out what had happened in Ricky's room.

The door was open, which surprised Burnside, and the chin-up bar was no longer in the doorframe. Burnside would have thought his kid would want to shut out the rest of the house, keep whatever it was he did up there a secret. Ricky certainly seemed secretive lately. Hidden. He had always been an interested kid; he'd always asked questions and looked adults in the eyes if they answered. Now, though, he was retiring to his room as soon as he arrived home from practice. He wasn't saying much at the dinner table. Burnside opened the door all the way and saw the pile of light bulb shards in a neat pile next to Ricky's bed, white as cooled-off ashes from a campfire. The chin-up bar Burnside went back down the stairs for a broom and dustpan and a new light bulb.

He swept the bulb parts into the pan and then went to the bathroom for a wad of toilet paper, which he wetted under the faucet and pressed to the hardwood floor to pick

up the remaining pieces he couldn't see in the dim light. Burnside hadn't realized how dark it was in there. Ricky had one small window that looked out over the small backyard, the separate garage, the alley. But his dresser was pushed right up to the window, so the top of the dresser—and its stack of postcards and a miniature quarterback figurine Gloria had bought him and Burnside had rolled his eyes at, himself—overlapped the bottom of the window. Burnside got on one side of the dresser and pushed it along the wall toward the closet. The room would get more light that way.

There were no casters or rollers on the bottom of the dresser, so it squeaked and shook as Burnside pushed it. To get it really moving, he had to wriggle it back and forth on the edges while pushing it forward with his hip. Hell on the floor. As he got the dresser at least part of the way toward the closet, the top drawer rattled itself open a few inches; Burnside couldn't help but take a peek.

Boxer shorts, balled-up socks, bandannas, gym shorts. Burnside pushed a hand through the cotton and nylon. He wasn't sure what he was expecting to find. Wasn't sure even why he was doing this. Maybe some once-precious baseball cards now bound with a rubber band and fraying at the edges. He worked his hand back and forth along the hard bottom; stopped to remove the drawer entirely. He folded back the underwear and socks to find a cassette tape, a photograph of Gloria taking a cake out of the oven, a stuffed animal Burnside had forgotten—Billy the Beaver, with soft brown fur and googly eyes and a black leather tail, that Dick had joked about to the guys on the force: *My kid's three years old and even he sleeps with a beaver every night*—and a notebook, marked *journal*. Burnside opened the front cover but found only a scrawled message in capital letters:

PRIVATE! KEEP OUT! Burnside turned one more page—it said *I MEAN IT!*—and another page—*THIS MEANS YOU!*—then shut the notebook and slid it into the back of Ricky's drawer, propped the drawer into the dresser and slid it shut. He took the broken light bulb pieces to the downstairs trash, forgetting all about replacing the light bulb, which he had left in Ricky's drawer.

CHAPTER II

Burnside actually liked his new shift. He had that title, Sergeant, an 8 percent pay increase, plus hours cut back down to forty so he got to sleep with his wife at night. In his new position there were quotas, unofficial of course, but that was no problem. Couple-three pull-overs a night, maybe one ticket a night, and *poof!* management was happy. The new job, even though it was in all but name and pay a demotion, didn't pressure him to deliver. Dudendorf never called him up at home to ask how he was holding up. Reporters didn't show up unannounced at his office. He got to keep his private office, in fact, though a week or so after the press conference two hefty black men from the moving company the PD used from time to time showed up to boost the Riverside Task Force filing cabinet onto a dolly and cart it away to Bob Errol's office. As they left and Burnside asked if they would close the door behind them, he opened the drawer just below his elbows. Burnside moved aside the boxes of pens and a stack of business cards that were not current anymore and a block of Post-It notes and extra citation booklets and a spare badge he kept in case he did anything stupid like lose his, and removed a manila folder, of which no other copy existed, marked, simply, *PLAYBOOK*. He looked inside, at the two sheets of paper, a letter signed by Sheriff Dudendorf and two county judges, absolving Burnside, Bert Johnson, and the rest of what had been the Riverside Task Force

of any wrongdoing in their enforcement of the law since 1997. Burnside hadn't heard anything one way or the other about what to do with this letter. He didn't want to assume that the letter would still be valid, legal and binding. He shut the folder and slipped it into a drawer.

In bed, at night, Gloria seemed strange. They'd only slept in the same bed at the same time one or two nights a week while Burnside was on RTF the past five years, and had sex maybe every third time they slept together. Now that Burnside had every night off he sort of expected the sex to happen once more with some sort of regularity. But they continued on the once-every-ten-days-or-so schedule, as if nothing had changed.

At home one night he cupped his hand and set it on her shoulder, covered by a gold satiny nightgown. Burnside ran his hand past the sleeve and along her soft bicep, over her knobby elbow, down her lovely sleek forearm to her hand, and began to massage her knuckles. She hummed for a second, but then pulled her hand away.

Gloria said, "I think coaching is going to be really good for you."

Burnside rolled away and sighed at her wheedling voice.

She wanted Burnside to coach, she really did, at least she said she did, but she wanted to know how much he'd be making as coach, because with her having quit her job and all—

"But you're looking," Burnside said.

Gloria sat up. "I never said that."

Burnside reached over to rub her nightgowned thigh. "That was the understanding."

Gloria looked down at Burnside's hand, watching it go up and down her leg. "I can't take care of two kids and a husband and work all at the same time," she said.

"You did for thirteen years, Glor."

"Seven with two."

"You worked when Val was a toddler," Burnside said. He moved his hand away again and scooted his shoulders up the wall. "What could be tougher than that?"

"It doesn't get easier, Dick." Gloria closed her eyes, her lids fluttering and flushing like they did sometimes before she said she felt a migraine coming on. She pulled the neck of her nightgown a little higher. "If you're going to be home at night now," she said. "And not during the day anymore—" She pressed her fingers into her eyebrows.

"Head hurt?" Burnside said. He picked up a glass of water from the nightstand, tilting his head forward to try and suck a drink from the top of the glass. But it wouldn't take, so he raised the glass and tipped his head back a little, into the wall, moved the bottom of the glass higher until water splashed over his lips and fell down the sides of his mouth. He gulped but only got a little water.

"No, Dick." Gloria opened her eyes and glanced down at him. A bead of water hung in his chest hair, lit by the blue nightlight she insisted on keeping plugged into the wall. "Now let me clean that up," she said, shimmying out of bed, hurrying off to the kitchen for a paper towel.

Keith Wilson was shooting the bull with Bob Errol in the waiting room when

Burnside arrived the next morning.

"Well, hiya, Dick," Wilson said, walking over with a big smile and a burly paw outstretched. "Put 'er there, assistant team coordinator."

Bob Errol smiled and looked at his shoes.

"That's good news, I suppose," Burnside said.

"It's *great* news, Dick." Wilson clasped his hands behind his back. He wore a Lake Bluff Panthers polo shirt. "We got a great batch of boys this year, a lot of real talent. We want *you* to be our discipline man."

"You take all the time you need," Errol said to Burnside. "Football is important to this community."

Burnside looked at him. Errol wasn't his boss.

"I do have to work today," Burnside said. "Can't drop everything right now, you know?" He attempted a smile. "How can I get in touch with you?"

Wilson frowned. "Don't act so excited, Dick." He looked over at Errol and sighed. "Tone down the celebration a little, will you?"

"Um, just one second," Burnside said. He jerked his head a vague direction away. "I got to check on one or two things right quick and then I'll get right back here to talk to you, Keith. All right?"

"You can call me Coach," Wilson said.

"Okay, Coach," Burnside said.

"That's right, Coach," Wilson said. "You're Coach now too."

Burnside thought about that and went down the hall to his office. Bob Errol

followed.

"Hey, Dick," Errol said, jogging to catch up. "Just want to congratulate you one more time. Great news. For you, for the department. If there's one thing I know it's that kids *need* somebody like you. Somebody with backbone to show them what's right. Just great. How long you been pulling for this?"

Burnside unlocked the door to his office and set his briefcase on his desk. "I'm going to show you something, Bob."

Errol smiled, uneasy. "Okay?" But he knew more than he let on, it seemed, and closed the door with his heel.

Burnside went behind his desk and unlocked the top drawer. He removed the plastic pencil tray and picked up the manila folder. He held the *PLAYBOOK* folder out to Errol. "I was wondering if you'd seen this."

A secret. A secret to cover other secrets. The few shadowy memories Burnside remembered in his skin. The stuff he thought of when Gloria suddenly touched his bare skin in the night. He had knocked down two kids as they tried to run away. One had scrambled off with a bloody nose; the other held his arm out at Burnside, attempted to jab a pointed finger at Burnside but his entire hand hung limp at the end of his arm. The kid's eyes had drifted to the broken wrist and widened. He shook his arm, the hand hardly shaking, and screamed. Burnside had put his fingers to his lips and told the kid, "I'm here to help."

Errol smiled and waved Burnside off. "We've got all this downstairs. A ton. You've done fantastic work, Dick and between you and me, I'm not sure why they even

brought me in. The work you did—I mean, the documentation alone—" Errol looked at the folder in Burnside's hand, not even a corner peeking out from inside. "I assume that's just what's most pressing," Errol said.

Burnside had at first tried to rinse away those thoughts—another time he had stuck the butt of his pistol into a gang member's chin, breaking his jaw enough that when he appeared in court ten months later, he spoke through a cage of metal—those awful thoughts with heavy lifting and lactic acid and when that didn't work, long runs, but his bones had started to feel brittle and hollow afterward, shin splints. And then, after signing the affidavit, he realized that this wasn't such a big deal to him, not anymore. Punches he had thrown, breaths that had escaped him as he staked out the houses of drug dealers. In the dark, between houses missing shingles.

Burnside thought about striking a mysterious face and just asking Errol if Dudendorf had talked to him about the potential legal ramifications of his work. But instead Burnside set the *PLAYBOOK* in his briefcase and closed it. "Yeah. Yeah, you're right. That's pretty much it."

Errol stood staring at Burnside. But his gaze wavered and Burnside took a breath.

"I guess I just wanted to make sure you'd seen this," Burnside said. "Because there are things that could happen, or might have happened, that could make things tough for you. Tough to do your job."

Errol nodded, staring over Burnside's shoulder at the window behind. The blinds were closed. "I appreciate that, Dick," Errol said. "And just to be clear, I want your help. I want to keep you on the detail you seem to have been on. Keep the pressure on those

locations. Keep the folks in line while we keep the public happy. But we need somebody in the dark trying to scare 'em straight." Errol seemed to think a second. "You seem to have been good at it."

Burnside drummed his thumbs on top of the hard briefcase. He shut his eyes tight. "Looking forward to a little less pressure," Burnside said. "I think I'll pass. Hell, I'm a *coach* now." He left the briefcase on top of the desk, walked past Errol, opened the door, and went to work out the details with Keith Wilson.

Keith Wilson gave Burnside Thursdays off practice so Burnside could watch Ricky play middle school ball. Ricky's eighth grade season wasn't much of an improvement. Though he threw hard and far and fairly accurate, he couldn't connect with a moving target. Burnside gritted his teeth when he realized this at Ricky's first home game that season. It was simple. And he had overlooked it. They had Ricky running, but when he ran his feet seemed to flop all over the place. He lost his footing even when the grass was dry and the pressure was elsewhere, just a long path of empty field in front of him. At each game, Burnside squeezed his hands together in the stands and kept quiet. He didn't want to be one of those dads jumping up and slamming a program against his knee when his kid made a stupid mistake.

At the first away game, fifty minutes away in Kalamazoo, a kid drove his shoulder into Ricky's stomach and he fell to the ground, clutching at it and curling up into a ball. Over the commotion of gasping parents and shouting coaches, Burnside could hear his son's soft sobs. He knew he hadn't heard that sound in a long time, but still he knew it.

He remembered it from a long time ago, when Ricky would fall down the steep stairs and he would glare at Gloria, whispering, "Don't baby him. Don't. He's got to *learn*." But it was bone-hollow hell watching the kid push himself up with those little arms, wipe his nose with his knuckles, sniff, and walk away.

On the field at that game, Ricky couldn't get himself up. Gloria buried her head in Burnside's neck and whispered in tiny gasps, "I can't do it, Dick. I can't watch. Just can't. *Can't do it.*"

Burnside slowed his breathing and made his eyes go out of focus so the players gathered around Ricky's slumped body and the coaches running out onto the field with a small duffel full of splints and gauze and athletic tape became blurred and indistinct.

"Val shouldn't have to see this," Gloria said into Burnside's collarbone.

"It's just football, Glor," Burnside said, and then his wife's sobs grew loud enough for other parents to turn from watching the concern on the field and stare at him. Gloria's tears wet his neck and dripped under his collar.

Ricky stood up with a hand on each of his coach's shoulders, and he hobbled off to the sidelines. The second-string QB jogged out to take Ricky's place. Ricky, at the opposite end of the field, took off his helmet, ran a towel over his face, took a drink from a Nalgene somebody handed him, and watched the play. The second-string handed off to a back, who darted through the defensive line but was taken down by a tall kid with big hands. Burnside, with Gloria snug against him, squinted across the field at Ricky, who was touching the back of his neck and nodding a little. Then he looked up, and while Burnside couldn't see so well at that kind of distance, it seemed like Ricky met his eye.

Then Ricky stood, said something to his coach, and snapped his helmet back on.

"He's okay," Burnside said to Gloria.

"Don't tell me he's going back out there," she said.

Ricky took the field and gave a high-five to the second string. On his first play back he threw an interception that Kalamazoo Central ran back for a touchdown.

At the next home game, Burnside's neck grew red as he climbed the stands alone. The other parents seemed to give him room. "Hi, Dick," a dad said softly. Burnside nodded and steeled himself for the carnage to come. It was almost like Ricky *wanted* to get pummeled, the way he allowed even the biggest, slowest kids, the ones with the hunchiest shoulders and the jiggiest bellies, to approach him as he stood behind the line of scrimmage with the ball. Ricky's head snapped backward when a guy tackled him, and the back of his helmet slammed the ground and then he lay motionless in the grass twice that game. Other dads came over to Burnside afterward to ask Burnside if he thought Ricky was going to be all right after that hit in the third.

"He'll be fine," Burnside said without looking at the other dads or the field or anything.

After the game, Ricky's face was spotted with red, his left eye bloodshot, his hairline brimming with sweat. Burnside asked, "You okay?"

Ricky shrugged. "Mom come?"

Burnside shook his head.

"That's cool," Ricky said. "Whatever." He tossed his bag into the backseat and flopped into the car with a loud breath. At home he scrambled up the stairs, muttering

something about homework. Gloria asked Burnside with her eyes *Was it bad?* and Burnside nodded. Later Burnside heard Val's and Ricky's murmurs above. He started up the stairs, then stopped, turned, and went into his own bedroom.

In the final minutes of the final game of the eighth grade season, against Riverside Middle, a batch of skinny sticks and overweight bruins, pads flopping off the backs of their shoulders, so many of the jersey numbers worn away that it was hard to keep track of who was where and even who was who, Ricky dropped back for an easy toss to a wide-open cornerback a couple feet inside the end zone. Ricky raised his arm to throw but then jerked around to the side, as if he'd seen somebody coming at him. But no one was. So he looked back again at his man, who had moved, for some reason, across the end zone where a stand of tall yellow-jerseyed Riverside boys stood picking at their bellybuttons. Ricky stayed where he was and got knocked flat by a kid shaped like a light bulb, who immediately after the tackle stood and started to shake his belly and sagging brown arms like some kind of dance. Burnside shook his head and went down the bleachers, feeling the other parents' eyes on his back.

Keith Wilson was waiting underneath the bleachers. Slats of light cut his face and body into horizontal lines.

"Rough game," Burnside said. He stepped past a support beam and joined Wilson in the shadows. "How was practice today?"

Wilson shook his head. "Your and Ricky's places on my team are guaranteed," he said. "I know talent when I spot it. We don't let juvenile setbacks hurt anybody's chances at a brilliant future. But do not forget that I will not hesitate to reward hard work and

good decision-making and to punish lack of effort and idiocy." Wilson sniffed and turned away. Lake Bluff High won their game the next night.

After that game, Burnside went into the locker room afterward to give every kid a high five, even though Wilson told him not to spend too much time in there with the boys during a game. It didn't look good.

"I'm proud of each and every one of you," Burnside said. The boys were wrapped in towels with Garfield or Bud Light logos on them, were reaching for the ceiling and rolling on deodorant. Somebody yelled, "Party time!" from the showers.

"I mean it," Burnside said. He met the eyes of the only kid who was looking at him, a skinny fullback with thin lips who was pulling on his jeans. "You showed a lotta hustle out there, and what's important is—" Then the fullback dropped his eyes and started pulling on his shoes.

Somebody yelled from the locker room, "Man, who's holding?"

Somebody else said, "Shh," and pointed at Burnside, who smiled, hung his head, and left. Lake Bluff went on to win the district championship two weeks later, though they got trounced in the first round of state playoffs. Two seniors would go on to start for Michigan State, three at Western Michigan, and six or seven others would attend training camps in the summer, with pretty good chances at snatching a walk-on spot.

Burnside enjoyed practices that first year. He tagged along as Wilson barked at players and demanded excellence. Burnside tried to figure out which blue practice jersey belonged to which acned face, tried to figure out how many guys it'd take to plow through Lincoln High's wall-like offensive line. Early in the season, he mentioned

something about a new defensive formation to Wilson, but Wilson waved him off.

"No, no, you just stick close, okay? I got guys on that. Good, smart guys. You, though, Dick—" Wilson lifted the brim of his Lake Bluff ball cap and squinted at Burnside "—you just keep your eye for problem kids, all right?" Wilson winked at him and fixed his hat in place. The air smelled like smoke that day. Burnside couldn't figure out why. There had been a wood-burning ban that autumn, because it was so dry. Especially outside of town, the trees were like tinder sticks, just waiting.

The kids were mostly good that year. They watched Burnside out of the corners of their eyes. Burnside figured just his presence kept the unpredictable elements in line.

After football season was over and the first snows had fallen, Ricky's friends, kids from the eighth grade team came over to the Burnside's house most days after school. Three or four or five of them would wait in the small front yard in their hats and gloves and NFL Starter jackets—an even split between Bears, Lions, Cowboys, Packers—while Ricky threw on his boots at the front door off of the living room and quick yelled, "See you!" as he hopped down the frozen front steps to the street to his friends, their breath condensing as they blew into their fists. Ricky would have a football, and they would stretch out in the salt-thick street and through long bombs, trying to make it a full block toss. The Lake Bluff blocks were small. After they were finished, they would climb the front stairs, and bang to be let in. Gloria would go to the door, welcome them with a tray of hot chocolate. The kids took off their sopping boots, left them in a pile on the mat, and asked for Mountain Dew. Ricky cracked jokes. The kids plopped onto the couch on the wall that faced the front door and dig under the cushions for the remote, turn on the TV

and scan through ten channels before saying, "Don't you got cable?" Ricky shook his head. The Burnside's never used the front stairs.

Burnside sometimes left for work in the middle of these games. He would pull out of the garage and drive down the alley to their street and give a quick honk to the boys; he would wave out the window and tell them to pass it here. But Ricky shook his head and told his friends no. "My dad'll get pissed if you hit his car." Ricky didn't even look in Burnside's direction as he drove by, and eventually Burnside quit trying. He drove through the alley to Niles and turned right. By February, he quit even bothering to check up on Ricky and the boys.

Over the summer Burnside was able to convince Dudendorf and the detective in charge of scheduling to allow him weekends and nights in August so he could work football camp in the last two overheated weeks before school started. On the first day of two-a-days, Burnside dropped Ricky at the field where the freshman team was standing around, leaning against a chain-link fence with their arms crossed.

Keith Wilson came rumbling over, his gut swinging back and forth, visible under his polo shirt as he moved. He held a clipboard and his metal whistle was perched in his mouth. "Got a job for you," Wilson said.

Burnside nodded, like he always did.

"We got the Riverside ruling," Wilson said. "You know?"

Burnside shrugged.

"Busing. Schools of choice. Hell, I don't know. I don't keep up with this shit."

Wilson jerked a thumb behind him. "Three guys back there. Don't know anybody. Don't

know any *thing*. Talk to 'em. Let 'em know how we do things." Wilson picked something up off of his clipboard, a pack of maybe 10 pages, stapled in the top corner. "Playbook. Get 'em to learn it." Wilson handed the pages to Burnside with a smack. "And don't let them give you no guff. Keep 'em in line." Wilson smiled to himself and slid on a pair of mirrored sunglasses. "You seem to have been good at it. While you're at it, see if any of them can play QB."

Burnside took the pages. "What about Ricky?"

Wilson didn't move. "What about him."

Burnside looked down at the pages. "He's a quarterback. He can throw the ball."

Wilson shook his head, just a bit, tiny, nearly imperceptible. "Dick, he's a *freshman*. He's got to learn to take a *hit*. These are *big kids* here." Wilson smiled. "Go on, then," he said.

Burnside took a glance at Ricky—who stood still in the middle of all the freshmen standing around laughing and bouncing on their heels, waiting for someone to tell them what to do, Ricky still in the center—and then went over to the three black kids in Riverside High t-shirts, the arms cut off, the bottom hem cut off, their lips curled and faces looking scared and intimidated by all the whoosh going on around them.

"Hey, boys," Burnside said. "Hiya. Coach B." He waved and the three boys reached their hands up tentatively. "Let's chat."

The kids screwed their mouths up and blinked.

"Come on, now, fellas. I'm not gonna yell at you. Let's talk football. You—" Burnside pointed at the skinny one in the middle "—what do you play."

The kid shrugged and said, "I don't know. Running back."

The fat kid smiled and clapped the skinny one on the back and said, "Come on, man, you *tell* him. *Tell* him, dog. This, this right here?" The fat kid pointed at the skinny one. "This guy, this dude right here, he like Barry Sanders' *cousin*, man. He got that *quickness*, you know?"

The skinny kid shook his head.

"Man," the fat kid said, "Dude's like Barry Sanders plus Emmitt Smith all rolled up into one."

The quiet kid, the kid on the end, lifted his head and said, "Walter Payton."

The fat kid turned. "Who the hell's Water Payton, man?" The fat kid shook his head and smiled up at Burnside. He tugged the bottom of his shirt, pulling it lower over his ample gut.

Burnside brought a pencil out of his breast pocket and tapped it against the playbook. "Walter Payton. Running back for the Chicago Bears. The Sweetness. One of the greatest players ever. Ever hear of the '85 Bears?"

The fat kid and the skinny kid shook their heads.

"Dude, I *hate* the Bears," the fat kid said. "Lions, man."

Burnside stood there a second, watching the light in the sweat at the top of these three boys' heads. Finally he pointed to the fat one and said "What's your name, son?"

The fat kid dropped his eyes and told him. The other two did too. Burnside folded the playbook in half to get some stiffness in the paper as he scrawled their names down. There was a reason citation booklets came with a hard cardboard backing, Burnside

thought.

"Now," Burnside said. "Any of you play quarterback?"

The quiet one dug his toe in the dirt and hung his head and muttered something.

"What'd you say?" Burnside looked at his pencil marks on the back of the playbook. "Walter Payton, what'd you say?"

The quiet kid looked up. "Andre Washington. That's who you want."

The fat kid slapped his belly and said, "Damn, he's right! Andre *Washington!* Dude's like the number one quarterback *around!*"

Burnside wrote down the name "Andre Washington" and then said, trying for the hard cop voice he rarely used even to teenagers getting into fights at the breakers or drunks hanging around bar parking lots after hours or kids in gang colors circling playground slides in Riverside, "All right. Let me tell you a little something about how things work around here."

During the break between practices, when the heat of the day was too much for sweaty kids to run any more, Wilson and Burnside and one of the other coaches headed across Lakeview Road to Bill's Lounge for strategy talks. There, amid burgers and plastic glasses of Coke, Wilson asked how things had gone with those three.

"Mentioned something about a QB, actually." Burnside took the folded-up playbook out of his pocket. "Andre Washington?"

Wilson frowned at his fries.

"Hell, Dick," one of the other coaches said. "You want to go over there talk to him, go ahead. But—" he shook his head "—don't say nobody warned you."

Burnside put the sheets of paper into his lap. "What? What do you mean?"

Wilson stuck a fry in his mouth and bugged his eyes at the other coach.

"You should go talk to him," the other coach said. "You got the talent for it."

"What?" Burnside said. He looked around the bar. The neon lights on the walls were shut off; the lamp above the pool table dark too. Chairs were turned upside down on all the other tables. The bartender sat on a stool with two thick college textbooks open on the bar in front of her. She pulled her hair back, keeping her eyes on the page. When Burnside looked back at his table, Wilson and the other coach were smiling at him.

"What?" Burnside said again. "Did he not apply? Or try out, I mean?"

The other coach looked about to speak, but Wilson put his hand on the guy's shoulder and picked up the whistle from his chest and said, "Kid's got an attitude. That's it. No biggie. Family doesn't want him coming here. Anyway we can't go having every kid with a good arm from Riverside come over here for school."

"Just trying to look out for the team," Burnside said. "Nothing more important than the program."

The other coach nodded and said, "Ain't nothing more important than football."

It was Wilson's line, what he screamed across the field at the players.

Wilson pointed the whistle at Burnside and said, "But I don't want to rob us of our own stellar talent." Wilson kept his eyes on Burnside long enough to let it sink in.

"Ricky," Burnside said under his breath. Burnside's son had told him he was going to Subway, then tromped off with two other kids to the parking lot and got in a beater car with a bungee cord holding the trunk shut.

That afternoon, shading his eyes as he watched the three kids from Riverside jog circles around the practice—the skinny one the slowest of the three—Burnside decided he'd go see this Andre Washington, even just to talk.

When he went into work that evening, Susan Braeburn, the department admin, gave him a note.

"Bob Errol wants you to call him," she said.

"He in?"

Susan shook her head. "And tell him the librarian called him back."

Burnside nodded and went to his office. He opened the drawer, checked for the *PLAYBOOK* folder, and then picked up the phone.

"Bob," Burnside said. "Dick Burnside."

"Well, hey there," Errol said. His voice sounded less gravelly than usual. "Listen, you caught me in the middle of dinner, sorry, but I got something I really need you for. Can I count on you? This is, uh—" it sounded like Errol stood up and walked somewhere else, maybe into some long dark hallway in the middle of his house, far from the open kitchen, the dining room, the big couches and picture windows he surely had—"um, in regards to Riverside. Got somebody I need you to check up on."

Burnside cleared his throat. "I told you, Bob. I'm sort of over that thing. That's not—"

"Not what you do anymore," Errol interrupted. "Got it. But see, I've got so many things up in the air now—got to think how my new department, uh, *comes off*, you know.

So I need somebody with your expertise."

"What do you need, Bob? You got a tip or something?"

"Just some complaints," Errol said. "One of those houses by the boat ramp. Go on and check up on things. Make sure nobody's getting into any trouble. Got me? Nothing big, not now anyway. See what you can see."

Burnside tapped his fingers against the drawer that held the file. "Okay. I'll stop by. And Susan said something—"

"The librarian?" Errol said, his voice brightened and quicker. "Uh, Van something? Vander something?"

"I don't know."

"Good. Good. She's who I'm working with on this thing, actually. Community thing. Posters. Building legitimacy. Building bridges. What it's all about, Dick." There was a soft voice in the background and then Errol said, "Gotta go, Dick. Thank you. Thanks a million."

"I can't—" Burnside started to say but then Errol hung up on him. Burnside yawned and rubbed his eyes and looked out the small window behind his desk. It faced west, toward the lake. Between historic buildings, street lights, and tree tops, he could see the sun starting to shine the lake green. The green would fade to brown, and then to a deep blue before the final bursts of light—yellow, pink, red, sometimes a straight bright blue—in the half hour before and the few minutes after sunset.

The next morning, as the first heat of the day settled into Lake Bluff, Burnside

took the long way into Riverside. He drove slowly along Main Street, looking past his pasty pale hand draped over the wheel and out the windshield. The historic gaslights and downtown buildings, two-story brick jobs with bay windows trimmed in white and pink and dark green, gave way to an old barrel factory now sandblasted and painted and renovated for condos. Soon the road dipped past the soft meadow of Kiwanis Park and Burnside noticed laminated pictures—kid's drawings—strung along a taut section of twine, fluttering in the breeze just above the guardrail. Gateway to the ghetto, Burnside thought as he turned onto Colfax at the far end of the park. Maybe those pictures were part of Errol's new plans. He cruised along the five-lane road past the shuttered outlet mall and the old motel he and Bert had exposed as a haven for drug use and prostitution a few years back.

Burnside checked the street signs against the address he had written on a Post-It. These block-long streets to the south of Colfax were atypical enclaves of single-family homes, the kind of streets Burnside passed all the time in his days when he headed up RTF. But he had never once turned onto it. The tension of Colfax and Pipestone and Brundage Avenue—all those boarded-up houses in shambles along the river, their dark windows, past which anything could be happening—seemed to dissipate on streets like this.

The third street was the one.

Burnside parked in front of a two-story house, paint peeling off the siding but the windows shiny and clean and the grass spotty but trim. He checked the address against the Post-It Wilson had given him, stepped out of the car, and climbed up to the front

porch. The wooden steps seemed to have some give to them. Burnside touched the railing and it wobbled. The wood on the porch itself was rotting, he could see. He tapped his toe around the porch while he waited for someone to answer the doorbell. By the time a young black woman yanked open the door, he had found three spots where the boards were loose. A kid cried in the background.

"I'm looking for Andre Washington," Burnside said.

The kid kept sobbing.

"Oh," she said. "Yeah. He said you gonna come here."

Burnside smiled. "Here I am."

The cry shut up just then and the woman turned to scoop up a toddler. The kid was about three, wriggling in a blue t-shirt and jeans. He held a sippy-cup with both hands. Behind the two of them an older woman sat on the couch, reading a newspaper and humming to herself.

The woman at the door turned back to him. "He be back later. He got school now. You gonna be his new teacher?"

Burnside shook his head. He looked down at his feet, the boards bending below them. "Coach," he said.

"Football, huh?" the woman said. "Yeah, good one. Come over the river, cherry-pick 'em and plop 'em in a desk. Look like you got a diversity program. All you doing is using black folk to play sports. Should be illegal."

"I'm not on the school board, ma'am," Burnside said. "I'm just looking forward to meeting our new star."

"New star? I know you're not supposed to talk to him about that yet. Anyway that boy's a lazy shit. Too busy playing ball to watch after his nephew or say hello to his *sister*."

Burnside backed up. "I'll come back."

"I bet you will," she said, and closed the door. Burnside stood there a second, looking at the porch, and then headed to practice.

When he came by the next day, later, he brought measuring tape and a notebook. Before even knocking he got down on his knees and began to measure the length of the boards he'd need cut to fix the porch. He inspected the cross boards—or studs? what were they called exactly?—did some quick math to figure out how many nails he'd need. He went down the stairs, counting six, and looked at the porch's foundation. There was the problem: no concrete. The porch was held up only by latticework and four wooden posts loose in the dirt. He wrote *concrete* in the notebook, measured the railing on the stairs, and then got back on his knees to re-measure the boards. His ass was in the air and he could hear himself huffing when the woman from the day before opened the door.

"You again."

Burnside's hips ached as he stood. He raised his hand.

"I'm Lanesha," she said. "Andre ain't here."

"Oh," he said. "I'm sorry. Bad timing."

"Nah," she said. "I'm kidding." Then a tall thin boy rose from the couch and walked to the door, the three-year-old on his hip.

"Andre," Burnside said, peering through the doorway at the dusty bright room

inside. "I'm Dick Burnside."

"You the cop," Andre said. "Heard about you."

Lanesha raised her eyebrows. "They got cops coaching you now? Damn, boy, you gonna be white before summer's *out!*" She laughed and Andre pressed the little kid to her heaving chest. She laughed again and then turned to Burnside. "I'm sorry," Lanesha said. "Just a little fun. You be nice to my little bro, now, you hear?"

Burnside smiled. "Yes, ma'am."

Andre stepped onto the porch and pointed at the measuring tape and notebook on the porch. "What's that?"

"Just some preliminaries," Burnside said, squinting at the board he had been measuring. A crack ran from one edge into a recessed knot in the middle. Stomp on that and it would break through easy.

"My sister, she's not always like that," Andre said. He got down on his knees and looked at the boards. Burnside pointed at the crack.

"Yeah," Andre said. "Yeah, that don't look too good. So you gonna fix it, right?"

Burnside shrugged. "Just taking a look for now."

"You and me maybe fix it together," Andre said. His voice was high-pitched and raspy. Something soothing about it, like the sound of water running past your neck. "I been looking to find out about construction and whatnot."

"What you need to do really is to put in a new foundation," Burnside said. "People stand on this porch, all there is is a couple posts in the ground, no concrete—that's bad. Concrete foundation is what you need."

Andre sucked his lower lip into his mouth. "I don't know about all that."

Burnside crouched, picked up his pencil and tape measure, and stood again. "If you want to do it right."

Andre nodded, seemed to think about that. He went to the edge of the porch and stuck his head out and over and looked down at the grass. It was thin, seed-planted grass that didn't seem to have really took. Small shoots of grass interspersed among dry gray dirt. Then Andre looked up and the sun shone on him, making the nylon of his Bulls jersey sparkle and his face glow a deep healthy brown, and he took a breath that spread his chest and pushed his round shoulders back, and Burnside could see how *strong* the boy was, how large, with long arms, biceps with shape and definition to them, large hands and palms that looked hard and sure. Andre was different from Ricky that was for sure. Andre had the look of someone who was sure of himself.

"I got accepted, right?"

"To Lake Bluff?" Burnside said. "Did you apply?"

Andre looked over his shoulder and nodded.

"Then I assume so," Burnside said. "That you got in."

"I ain't heard," Andre said. "Officially. You know, one way or the other."

"I'll check on that for you. You know we've got camp right now."

Andre nodded. "Yeah, heard about that."

"Well, we want you there." Burnside stood up a little straighter. "That's why I came here today, actually. Was wondering when you'd join us."

"Bring back some wood," Andre said. "We can build this porch, you know what

I'm saying? Then maybe I can come little bit later. Got my job and everything."

"We don't tolerate slackness," Burnside said. "We've got no place for laziness."

Andre smiled. "Ain't nothing more important than football. That's what everybody say about Lake Bluff." He stood there a moment, seemed to consider Burnside. "And I want to thank you for coming."

"What's that?" There were plenty of other questions Burnside wanted to ask, what Andre thought of the various offenses in the conference, whether he felt comfortable running the ball, what kind of support structure he wanted from a potential team, whether he thought he could make the rest of the two-a-days before school started, but Andre stepped back inside and left Burnside here on the shady porch.

"Bring by the materials and the plans," Andre said. "Next weekend. We get to work."

"I'm just here to talk football," Burnside said. "I'm sorry about all this." He held the tape measure up in the air. "Sorry."

"No, I want you to see I like to work hard, right? So I work hard with *you*."

Andre's eyes seemed to grow large and wet. "I don't want you thinking I'm all lazy and sh—" He smiled, seeming to smile inward, toward his own neck. With his strange smiles and his odd high-pitched voice there was something mysterious about this kid. Something strange and hidden that Burnside could feel but couldn't quite tease out. And it wasn't the mystery of what went on in crack houses that dotting the concrete plain of Brundage Avenue. Wasn't anything illegal or scary, but something tender and wounded, like a hurt squirrel at the base of a tree, unfed and scrawny, having been handled by humans. Or a

bruise turning yellow.

But Burnside knew this was a dangerous way to think. He took a deep breath and looked up at the blue sky past the dark straight line of the porch overhang.

Finally Andre quit smiling and tapped his fingers against the doorframe and said, "That I'm lazy."

Burnside took a step down the porch. "I appreciate that," he said. "Tell you what. I *will* be back, and we can talk a bit about the team, the kind of thing we're putting together. I'll make sure about your acceptance, too. Suppose you can't play until you enroll."

"You do that," Andre said. "Bye now." He shut the screen door, and then, a second later, the heavy wooden front door with a clap.

The heat had warmed Burnside's shoulders to sweating already, and though what he really wanted to do was to take a walk around this neighborhood, looking so beautiful all of a sudden, he stepped down the stairs and into the sunlight got into his car and took the bridge across the river to Riverside Heights, Brundage Avenue, the road along the river. He parked across from the boat ramp.

The house was what was called a *known drug location*, in other words a crack house on a grass-choked block overlooking the river and a municipal water access. Rich folks and tourists probably complaining about weirdos stalking them. "African-American," they always said. "Maybe some kind of drug problem." That kind of language pissed Burnside off beyond belief. Those smug assholes and their twenty-two foot cigarette boats, the kinds of boats Burnside dreamt of owning but never would, not on a

cop's salary. Still, he'd keep a big profile, drive past, walk past, knock on the door from time to time. Hopefully scare most of the crack-addled crazies inside where the only folks they could hurt were themselves.

The houses front door was a pale blue. Burnside parked and watched. He could see shadows, definitely a couch pressed up to the window, meaning that though the house was officially vacant, it was being used. On his way up he checked out the supports. Solid 4x4s laid in concrete.

A high-pitched waggle of a voice came from the top of the porch. "I ain't do nothing. Name's Sammy Slug and fuck if this Negro ain't innocent."

"Language," Burnside said. Then he climbed the stairs. All he saw at first was a wisp of smoke at the man's fingers. A cigarette. The man leaned forward from his chair, traces of white beard scattered across his grayish face. He touched a gold chain around his neck with his cigarette hand, closed his eyes, and took a breath through flared nostrils.

"Fresh air, officer," Sammy Slug said. "Shit don't beat that. Some my friends, they don't like it. They in they houses, smoking that *crack*. You don't *never* do crack, you hear me. Not *never*. Not when you got that *fresh* air." He shook his head and his greasy jheri curl swung from side to side. "No sir."

"I can't have you disturbing the peace," Burnside said. "Sammy, is it? Got ID?"

Sammy Slug smiled. He plugged the cigarette into the bottom of his plastic chair. "Nigga's homeless," he said. "Nigga ain't *got* no ID."

"You don't live here."

"I don't live." Slug raised his eyebrows. "Not here, not nowhere."

"I can make your life very difficult," Burnside said.

"Don't doubt it." Slug bent forward, his fake gold chains hanging over his kneecaps, and coughed at the ground.

"I assume you've spent nights in jail," Burnside said. "So what am I going to have to threaten you with?"

Slug coughed again. "I need a drink," he said, and stood up and went inside.

Burnside followed him to the door. "Oh no you don't," he heard himself whisper as Slug disappeared into the dark, empty room inside. Seconds later Slug came up behind the door with a twenty-ounce of RC Cola in hand and slammed the door in Burnside's face. Burnside turned and went down the steps. Two black kids in white t-shirts and shorts had stopped their bikes in the middle of the street and were pointing at him and laughing.

"Hello, boys," Burnside said.

One kid froze while the other clapped a hand over his mouth.

"Sorry, sir," the frozen kid said.

Burnside waved his arm at them and took the last step into the yard. There was no grass there, only hard brown dirt. "Nothing to apologize for," Burnside said. "You know him?"

The kid with his hand over his mouth started wheeling his bike backward and shaking his head. "Nah, we don't know nothing about that," he said. "C'mon, Anthony." He set his feet on the pedals and popped his butt onto the seat. The bike wobbled a little before he took off pedaling.

"See you," Anthony said, and rode off.

Burnside watched them a long time before checking his watch, seeing it was noon, and driving across the river and into Lake Bluff, heading for Bill's Lounge.

When Burnside opened the door he found Wilson alone at a table, his hamburger polished off, an array of papers spread in front of him, and a short glass of whiskey, no ice, cupped in his hand.

"Uh, Keith? You all right?"

Wilson shuffled the papers and looked up. "Dick. Hiya. Where you been all morning?" Wilson took his fingers off the glass of whiskey but didn't move it around.

Burnside looked Wilson in the eye and said, "Duty calls."

Wilson pursed his lips and stared back. "You got a duty here."

"I'm a cop, Keith." Burnside took a chair down from a table and set it on the tile. He sat down into the chair and air whooshed out of the cushion. The bartender was drying glasses and humming. The squeaks of towel on glass punctuated her humming.

Wilson raised the glass to his lips. "Talk to the Washington kid?" Then he drank.

Burnside scooted his chair closer to the table. "Um, Keith? Drinking? It's noon."

Wilson raised his eyebrows and then set the glass in front of Burnside. "What, you thirsty too?"

Burnside shook his head and pushed the glass across the table. It squealed and the amber-brown whiskey splashed up the sides of the glass.

The bartender hummed and set a glass in a rack.

Wilson leaned back. "So, Washington. You saw him. Kid doesn't know his head

from his elbow, right?"

"He didn't seem to know if he was going to be attending Lake Bluff or not."

"What'd I tell you."

"I told him I'd check on it. Told him he needs to come to practice if he wants a spot. No mid-season walk-ons."

Wilson smiled, reached for the whiskey, and down the rest in one gulp. "Less he's good," he said. "Good as they say."

Burnside watched Wilson gather the papers together. "Anyway," Burnside said, "When I see him next, I'll make sure he knows."

Wilson looked up. "Knows what?"

Burnside swallowed. "If I see him. He's got a, ah—"

"Wait—next? See him next?"

"Yeah," Burnside said. "Gonna help him out with his porch. Got some problems. Maybe me and Ricky. Rebuild the deck. Nothing major."

Wilson nodded. "You see if he's got the arm they say he does. He does, then I'll make sure he's, ah—" He picked up the whiskey glass and turned it in his fingers. The dull light from behind the bar lit the glass up. Finger smudges all around the lip. Finally Wilson set the glass down. "Make sure he's accepted. Of course nobody hears about this."

Burnside didn't know whether he meant the drinking of the recruitment.

Wilson peered into the empty whiskey glass. "Now," he said, "I want you working with kids on tackling technique this afternoon."

CHAPTER III

The rest of the week Burnside was on tackle duty. The older kids waited ten yards away from the tackle sleds. They dug their cleats into the dirt, crouching and then sprung forward, sprinting in full pads across the grass and slamming into the sleds, going in low with a shoulder and arms spread but not too far, just like he'd taught them, and they rolled off the sleds, slapped the ass of whichever kid was behind the sled holding it up, and then looked at Burnside for approval. Burnside nodded to each kid. And then looked past them, across the muddy grass and across the parking lot. In the field on the other side, Ricky and the freshman team ran scrimmages and worked on simple plays. Seemed like Ricky was only throwing the ball every other play. And the other freshman playing QB was connecting a heck of a lot more often. But of course he couldn't tell from this distance. Burnside shook his head and blew a whistle—he'd found one in his desk at work—and ran out to the field. "Okay," he said, "I want my three guys—" he meant the three from Riverside, all of whom Wilson had put on second-string defensive line but Burnside made his go-to men "—to get over here and get timers. We're running the forty, fellows."

All of the older kids snapped their chinstraps open, groaned and whined. "Now? In pads? *Coach!*"

"I mean it," Burnside said, and tossed an electronic timer to the skinny kid. He watched Ricky on the field far away, backing away from a linebacker about to sack him. Ricky fell to his knees and the ball rolled right into a defender's arms.

Finally, on Saturday morning, Burnside went down the front steps and into the small front yard to find Ricky laying out on a beach chair. He wore his old red swim trunks with a fraying hem, black flip-flops, a baseball cap, no shirt. His skin was pasty and looked stretched thin and Burnside felt he could see through it, to some brightness hidden inside, almost like Ricky was a white handkerchief stretched tight and held up to the light.

That was a dumb way of thinking, too.

"Going to the lumberyard," Burnside said. "Why don't you put on some real shoes and come with me."

Ricky sipped through a red straw poked into one of the big plastic cups from a Kalamazoo bar Dick Burnside had frequented as an undergraduate. He didn't realize he and Gloria still kept the cups around.

"C'mon," Burnside said. "Hop to it."

Ricky slipped on a pair of sunglasses and pointed across the street. "You got Bert's truck," he said.

Across the street he had pulled up the dusty red pickup he had borrowed from Bert. A dent in the drivers door and a small Confederate flag sticker stuck to the back windshield. Burnside had thought about popping the windshield open and threading a bandanna or something through the gap to try and cover the sticker. But he hadn't. It

wasn't his truck. It was one quick trip to the lumberyard.

"You can't sit here all day," Burnside said. None of his neighbors were out in their lawns or on their screened in front porches. "Put on some shoes and let's go." He looked further down the street to where the Goldners were trimming the hedges on the side of their house, and then Burnside took a step closer to Ricky and crouched down in the grass. Their eyes were on the level. "Help your old dad out, huh, buddy?"

Ricky picked up a book and flipped a page loudly.

Inside, Gloria had a dozen envelopes opened and their contents spread across the table. "Hon," she said, writing something in pen on one of the sheets of paper. Some kind of invoice. She put the slip into an envelope and ran the edge along her tongue. She wore khakis and a button-down shirt and Burnside was frankly glad to see her up and working so early on a Saturday when she was usually moping around in a nightgown, telling the kids in a hoarse whisper they couldn't watch so much TV, it was a beautiful day out and here they were plopped down in the carpet eating sugar cereal and rotting their brains away.

"Our son needs a lesson in motivation," Burnside said.

"And I need a lesson in personal finance," Gloria said. She set the envelope down on top of two others.

"I'm taking him to the lumber yard. You know that kid I was telling you about?"

"Mmm." Gloria put on her reading glasses and removed the contents of another torn-up envelope. Burnside had mentioned Andre to Gloria last night when he came home at 2 am from work. She had been sitting up, awake, sipping tea that had gone cold

and reading a book that the pastor at church had given her, something about the stages of life and moving through them biblically. Some sort of bullshit, seemed to Burnside.

"The kid from Riverside?" Burnside said. "Remember? Kid Wilson likes." He gulped. "Washington."

"You told me." She slipped her reading glasses on and peered through them.

"The quarterback," Burnside said.

Gloria set the bill down. "That's Ricky's position," she said.

Burnside looked back over his shoulder, out the window, into the yard. Trees, Bert's red truck. "This year it'll be Andre Washington."

"In Ricky's position? Who is this kid, anyway?"

"Andre," Burnside said. He swallowed.

Gloria looked down again. "Ricky's why you took this job."

"He's a freshman, Glor," Burnside said. "He can't hack it yet. He'll have two solid years of QB."

Gloria tore an invoice along its perforated edge. "Think he can hear us?" She looked up from the sheet of paper with an earnest, open face that told Burnside she wasn't messing with him—that she was serious. Then her eyes turned hard again, and she tossed the ripped invoice across the table. It skated up and then fell flat. She was looking at it.

Burnside said, "Anyway, he needs some work done to his house, the porch, really, and I thought it would be, you know, a nice gesture—" Burnside tapped his thumbs against the kitchen table but Gloria still didn't look up "—if me and Ricky went over to help him out with it. Fix it up, you know."

"Not everyone is as fortunate as we," Gloria said, looking down.

"You're right," Burnside said. "That's exactly what I said."

Gloria took her reading glasses off and set them down on an envelope. "Might as well spend the tons of extra money we have lying around on somebody else's welfare."

"It'd be a nice gesture."

Gloria pointed at the stacks of bills on the table. "We have bills, you know."

Burnside took a deep breath and closed his eyes. He wasn't going to make this into anything it wasn't. So he spun on his heels and grabbed a pair of tennis shoes from the middle of the living room and went down the front steps to the yard where Ricky was humming a little tune to himself and running his fingers up and down the shiny spine of his paperback. Burnside couldn't read the title but assumed that Gloria would have said something if it was something the boy shouldn't be reading.

"Come on," Burnside said, grabbing Ricky's bare elbow as he walked quickly toward Bert's truck.

Ricky stayed in the car with his book while Burnside picked up the wood he had called ahead for. A black fellow in a blue jumpsuit and the kind of green visor that poker players and newspaper editors in old movies wear helped Burnside haul the boards from the yard behind the store and to the truck. Burnside was sweating just after that and decided they'd better stop home for a rattier shirt and a couple of bottles of water.

Inside, Burnside opened his underwear drawer and removed two red bandannas. The boards were set at an angle in the bed of the truck but still stuck out past the gate, so he'd have to tie something on them to let other drivers know.

"Dick?" Gloria called from somewhere. Burnside stuffed the bandannas in his back pocket and came out of the bedroom.

She stood in the dining room wearing a nightgown, like she hadn't just been up and working not forty-five minutes ago. Val was there too, with a teddy bear. She dug her knuckle at the corner of her eye. Burnside looked from his daughter to his wife, both standing there—both folding their arms and staring at him, like he didn't belong—both ready to sleep the rest of the morning and the hot afternoon away, the light cast through windows passing in dusty rays across their sleeping forms until it was dark enough to wake again. Gloria often spoke of how she loved to wake at night. It was like a second morning, she said. A second chance. Burnside pushed the bandannas down a little farther in his back pocket.

"How old is this Washington?" Gloria said.

Burnside pulled off his t-shirt and put on the ratty work shirt. "Sixteen? Seventeen?"

Val tilted her head back to look at Gloria. Gloria's neck was going red. "You know what I mean, Dick."

Burnside adjusted the collar and shook his head. "No clue, Glor."

"What grade."

Val took her mother's hand.

"He'll be a sophomore," Burnside said. He turned around and went to the door.

Val said, "What's a sophomore, mom?"

"What's that in your pocket?" Gloria said.

Burnside kept his hand on the door handle as he turned around. He reached with the other hand around behind him and tugged the corner of a bandanna. He pulled and felt his wallet dislodge and then tumble out of his pocket to the ground. Val squinted at him. His mouth tasted like salt.

"Handkerchiefs," Burnside said. He waved them in front of his body.

"Don't work too hard," Gloria said. Burnside kneeled and picked up the wallet from the ground. The truck was rumbling and Ricky was humming something to himself in the cab as Burnside tied one bandanna around one of the boards sticking out of the bed.

Ricky hauled the wood out while Burnside went around the back of Andre's house to knock. No one answered after two minutes so Burnside tried the handle. Locked. Burnside came around the house to the front yard, dragging his fingertips along the vinyl siding. Ricky had laid all the boards out in the grass. A bandanna still tied around the end of one of the boards. Ricky himself was in the street, his face close to the back windshield of Bert's truck. He had grown skinnier over the summer, and looked frail in the big T-shirt, an old jersey from the department rec league baseball team Burnside had played shortstop for years ago.

"Ricky," Burnside said.

Ricky stuck his finger on the Confederate flag sticker. "We got to take this off," he said in a pinched voice. He started to pick at the edge of the sticker.

"Let's get to work, bud." Burnside went to the truck and grabbed his toolbox out of the bed. "Come on, Ricky."

Ricky looked at him. "You can't have this kind of thing around here," Ricky said.

"Leave it be," Burnside said. He carried the toolbox from the truck to the porch and set it down at the bottom of the steps. Ricky followed, grumbling and looking over his shoulder.

After they had gotten on their knees and pried the nails from the rotting porch boards, after they had stood on a stepladder set in the old mulch around the house and removed the supports from the porch's overhang, propping the overhang with new boards as they knocked the old wood into the dirt, after Ricky had said, "So we do the concrete next?" and after Burnside had wondered, as he pried another of the old support boards out of the dirt and tossed it to the grass, where Ricky had gotten that pronunciation, *concrete*, wondered if he said *ce-ment* too, and after Burnside had stacked the water-rotten wood crawling with termites in the back of Bert's truck and stood their with the second red bandanna pressed against his sweaty forehead, a car down the street pulled over to the curb and crept along it, pulling up right behind Bert's truck, and Bob Errol and another officer, Fields, one of the new guys on the Riverside beat, got out in plainclothes. They ambled slowly down the sidewalk, moving their heads from side to side and taking big, dramatic breaths. Fields whistled and cocked his head, looking at the porch project.

"Thought that was Bert's truck," Errol said, straightening the back of his collar as he walked.

Burnside pressed the bandanna to his eyebrows. Ricky stuck the shovel blade into the dirt and stepped on the back of it. The concrete mix was still in the back of the truck.

"He's letting me borrow it," Burnside said.

Errol walked past Burnside, patted the rotten wood piled in the back, and went

right up to the sticker on the windshield. He clicked his fingernail against it.

"Flag never flew over slavery," he said. He turned around and licked his lips. He pulled a pair of mirrored sunglasses from his breast pocket and put them on.

"Dick, you got family round here?" Fields said.

Burnside shook his head. He said, "Me and Ricky—"

"Just a little community service," Errol said. "I like that, Dick. I really do." He looked up and down the street, the skinny two-stories flashing in his glasses like a filmstrip. "Now this is the Washington boy's house, is it not?"

Burnside set the bandanna on the gate of the truck. "I'm sorry about that," he said. "It's Bert's truck."

Errol nodded. "I know, Dick. No problem. You learn to—" Errol smiled.

"Washington's going to be quite the player, you think?"

Burnside nodded. "We think so. He's got quite the reputation. Kids know who he is."

"What do you think?"

"Haven't seen him, matter of fact."

"Good as your kid over there?"

Ricky was laying the posts next to the holes he'd dug. Fields stepped up onto the curb and went to inspect Ricky's work. Ricky said something to him, and then went to the truck.

Burnside turned to Errol. "If what we've heard is true, Andre has the ability to be the best QB in the conference, maybe best in district. Long as we can get him to play."

Errol scratched the side of his neck. "That's your hope, anyway. Get him on the team."

Burnside nodded and stared at Errol, at a silvery version of himself reflected in the man's sunglasses. Ricky unlatched the gate and pulled it down. Errol's eyebrows raised above his sunglasses. Ricky dragged the bag of concrete mix along the bed and hoisted it up onto his shoulder.

"What're you doing here, Dick?" Fields called from the front yard.

"New porch," Burnside said. His throat was dry and he cleared it but still his words were quiet. "Needed some work done." He turned back to Errol. "And there's nothing wrong with that, for the record. No illegality whatsoever."

"I know that," Errol said.

In the front yard, bigger than Burnside's own, he noticed just then, Fields turned around, looked at the house, the bottom of the front door five feet above the ground, the bottom corner of the screen door fluttering a little in the wind. Bits of green paint chipped off the wood they'd removed lay at the base of the house, sparkling in the dirt. Fields turned to face Burnside and Errol, and frowned.

"I don't see a porch," he said.

Errol laughed and clapped Burnside's shoulder. "That's good work," Errol said. "Come on, Fields." They walked back to the unmarked car parked down the block, halfway between Andre's house and the dead-end park.

Ricky dropped the bag of concrete mix in the dirt and tore the twine sewn across the top. Fields honked as the unmarked car drove away. The trunk of the car gleamed

with the sun and Burnside thought of the rifles that lay inside. The tires seemed shiny and wet, like they had just gone through a car wash.

They poured the concrete and put the posts in, fitted them into the porch overhang, then held the posts for ten minutes, until the concrete had seemed to solidify somewhat, and then propped up the posts with old 2x4s and old milk crates from the Burnside's garage and leaned the two thick boards cut in steps for the sides of the stairs against the posts too, for extra support. Burnside wiped his brow again and offered the bandanna to Ricky, who shook his head in refusal and stood staring at the posts.

"Can't stand much straighter than that," Burnside said. He looked to Ricky and cracked a smile. But Ricky said nothing.

Burnside said. "Let's get a sandwich."

Ricky nodded and opened the passenger door. Then Burnside thought a second, got the level out of the back of the truck, and went to the yard with it, the metal cold in his palm. He held it against the posts and the little green pills inside the level floated between their guidelines when he held it against the post on the left; the right-hand post left them floating to the top of their green liquid. Just a bit of a nudge was all it needed. The concrete was congealing quickly and it took Burnside a hard shoulder push to get the thing to move. Burnside gave it shove and heard a squeak from the top of the post. He looked up. The flat top of the post pressed flush against the roof overhang, but one corner seemed to press a dent into the auburn vinyl. And the screen door—now it shook. A wave crossed the screen; the loose corner flapped near Burnside's mouth. The door swung open; Burnside veered away to avoid getting clocked in the chin. Inside was movement.

A hand gripped the edge of the door and bare brown toes curled over the edge of doorjamb, and Burnside took a step back and called, "Stop! Don't!" before looking up. An elderly black lady in a cotton housedress stood above, her chin juttled out and angling down at Burnside. The hem of her dress brushed the corner of the door. Long black hairs sprouted from her gray ankles. Burnside flicked his nose with a fingertip.

"What you doing?" the woman said.

"I'm Richard Burnside," Burnside said. He waved a little and took a step closer to the door.

The woman looked down at her feet. It'd be a bad tumble for anyone, Burnside thought.

"I'm going to be Andre's coach next year," he said.

"Andre don't need no coach," the woman said. She looked from side to side. She wrapped her fingers around the outer edge of the doorjamb and sneezed.

"Be careful," Burnside said.

"You took my porch," the woman said.

"Why don't you come around back and I can show you what we're doing," Burnside said.

She bit her lip and shook her head.

Burnside said, "We didn't realize you were home."

She didn't move.

He said, "Andre's going to help us, soon as he gets home."

She took a step back.

"Dad?" Ricky called.

The woman took another step, so both feet were inside, and her fingers left the screen door. It creaked closed but didn't latch.

"That's it," Burnside said. "Nice and easy."

She stomped her bare foot on the floor inside. "Don't you tell me what to do. You just move on out my yard and quick cause I'm gonna call the police and make sure you *do*."

Burnside shook his head a little. "Ma'am," he said. "Mrs. Washington?"

She opened the door again. "Uh huh?"

"We'd like to come back in an hour and continue working on the porch. We don't want to leave you without a porch."

"You best go on," she said. "I'm calling."

"When is Andre going to be back?"

"Calling the cops," she said. "Calling right now."

"Ma'am, I am—" But Burnside thought better. "We'll be back," he said, stepping away.

"Dad?" Ricky called. He got out of the truck.

"You better not," the woman said. She had a plastic telephone in her hand. A long cord stretched out along the hardwood floor inside, white against the house's shadows.

Burnside turned around. "We're going," he said to Ricky. "Get in."

The woman inside the house. He thought he remembered Andre calling her "Grandma Washington" at some point the other day. Must have been his father's

mother—Burnside knew nothing about Andre's parent situation, though it seemed like the grandmother was the only one in the picture at this point. Which was interesting to Burnside because he generally thought that it was usually the father who abandoned, not the mother, in these types of situations, though he knew this was probably a racist statement or not thought-through, at least, probably prejudiced on some level. Before he knew it, he was turning left onto Napier and getting into the right-hand lane, headed toward a Subway and trying to think about who would be on-duty there, whether or not it would be that cute girl Janita who used to flirt with him and Bert when they stopped in there all the time. She'd remember who he was, and what kind of discount he deserved.

Burnside understood why people like Gloria suggested that he bring a lunch he had made himself, since it would probably be healthier, less wasteful, less expensive, and just as convenient, but he liked opening the doors into a public place like this, swept clean and mopped, the odor of cleaning products lingering on the plastic tabletops and the clear plastic guard in front of the tomatoes and shredded lettuce and triangles of cheese that had been sitting out god knows how long, and the wrinkled black aprons and smiling faces of the Subway employees, like Janita, offering up whatever today's special was. Burnside liked to take what people could give him, he decided. He liked accepting what was offered. It gave people like Janita, a young handsome chubby black woman who raised a kid single-handedly in the apartments behind the mall while the kid's father was off playing soccer on a scholarship down at some school in Florida—in fact Burnside knew the father, or knew of him, the older brother of an offensive lineman who was looking pretty good this year, good shot at a college scholarship himself, Donny Van Zyl,

though Burnside thought Van Zyl was just as cocky and as much a responsibility-shirking asshole as his brother playing midfield down in the Sunshine State, even though the older Van Zyl was to be commended, maybe, for even dating a girl from Riverside, not a lot of kids would do that—anyway, Burnside like to give people like Janita a chance to be proud of themselves and their work.

Janita was off that day and the woman in charge shook her head when Burnside asked about the police discount.

"You ain't in uniform," she said as she rang up the total on the cash register.

Burnside sucked down most of his Diet Dr. Pepper and looked across the table at his son. Ricky had ordered a foot-long and was already chomping through the second six inches. Lettuce fluttered out of the end of the sandwich, and the bread was already squeezed down to a dense mass. Burnside ate a chip and scratched at something sticky on the tabletop.

"Ricky?" Burnside said. "You want to slow down there, bud?"

Ricky looked up, his lips around the sub, and nodded. He swallowed a huge bit with a gulp and washed it down with bottled water.

"So, Dad," Ricky said. "Andre's playing QB this year?"

Burnside sipped at his drink. "That we're not sure about."

Ricky scrunched up his eyebrows. "Why we doing this then?"

"This?"

"The porch," Ricky said. He took a bite, chewed twice, said, his mouth full, "Fixing it."

"It's a nice thing to do," Burnside said. He could feel his voice drifting away from him. "Not everyone is as fortunate as we are." That kind of bullshit. The same shit that preacher at church Gloria was so fond of always spouted from up front, his hand clutching the radio device hooked to the small microphone clipped on the zipper of his robe—*We must take care of our brothers and sisters who have not been blessed. Blah blah blah.* When Janita was around, Burnside never felt like he had to think of her as someone less blessed than he. He just thought of her as another young shy girl with a smile that could stun millions, given the chance, on national TV or something.

Ricky swallowed. "Mom says we don't have any money ourselves."

Burnside shook his head and looked at the stacks of brown plastic trays on top of the trashcan, sheets of placemat sticking out of them at angles like a poorly kept file. "That's her opinion," Burnside said. He finally picked up his sandwich and started to eat.

"Because I thought," Ricky said, "that I was going to be like Jeremy Sanford or Donny Van Zyl. Like, that you and Wilson were gonna be getting me recruited or whatever. Because if Andre—" Ricky looked at Burnside directly in the eye, no more of the spaced-out kid quick to anger and keeping a secret journal tucked under his socks and boxers, and Burnside met his unmoving blue eyes until they seemed not to belong to a human any longer but some kind of force, like a boss or a sheriff or a judge, and then Burnside looked away "—if he's gonna be QB for three years, then I'd only have, you know, one year."

Burnside chewed and looked at the top of Ricky's head. Avoided those eyes. "I don't know that it's good for you to be talking like this," Burnside said.

"Like what? I'm just asking a question."

"You're getting a little big-headed, don't you think? I don't like this sense of entitlement I'm hearing from you."

Ricky clenched his teeth and whispered. "I'm just *asking*."

"Because, you know, my first priority is to the team. You've got to work just like everybody else does."

Ricky looked away, picked up his water. "Okay."

"And there are kids that because of who their parents are, whether they live in big houses or work as lawyers or doctors or their dads are bigwigs at a pharmaceutical company or something, they think they can just walk on and get a guaranteed spot. And we—" Burnside felt his face tighten as he spoke "—*we* are not like that."

Ricky rolled his eyes. "*We*."

"Don't get uppity," Burnside said. He had no idea where the word came from.

"Maybe I don't even like football," Ricky said. "Maybe I don't even care."

Burnside took a breath, rolled his shoulders back, and sat up straighter in the booth. He looked around, at the black families starting to come in through the front door and line up behind the counter, at the grizzled old man by himself in a corner chewing a cookie thoughtfully. "Let's not talk about this here," Burnside said.

"Maybe it's my big secret." Ricky looked down. His voice was breaking up.

"Maybe I don't care."

"Come on," Burnside said. He slid the keys across the table. "You want to drive?"

Ricky shrugged.

"Hey, Ricky." Burnside waited for the boy to lift his head. "I'm proud of you. You understand that? You're tough. You care. I'm proud."

Ricky shrugged and grabbed the keys and stood up.

Burnside called after Ricky, in the lowest voice he could manage, "Let's just get this thing done, huh?"

When they pulled up, the old woman from earlier, Andre's grandmother, stood in the yard. A uniformed cop stood facing Andre's grandmother, writing things down in a notebook. Andre's grandmother jerked her thumb backward at the front of the house. When Ricky parked the truck and Burnside got out he could see who the cop was.

"Bert!" Burnside shouted. "Hey, bud, let me explain all this."

Bert Johnson turned around, tapping his pencil against his notepad. He took such a deep breath his chest seemed to inflate, pressing at the buttons of his black uniform and the gaps between stretched open like mouths to show his white undershirt. Then he exhaled, eyes still fixed on Burnside, and his posture slumped into what Burnside knew.

"Dick," Bert said. "Man, this don't look too good."

"Truck's working fine," Burnside said. He thought of what might happen if he could get this woman to take a look at the kind of sticker her saving grace police officer had plastered on the back of his truck.

Bert stroked the little goatee he had been trying to grow all summer. It looked like the kind of thing a baseball pitcher might have, or the new pastor at Burnside's church. "Dick, why don't you leave, let me and the lady work things out," Bert said. "How about it?"

Burnside pointed at the porch. "You see that? It's not finished, Bert. You can't leave a house like this."

The old lady snapped her fingers and shuffled over. "I *asked* you. You don't listen. You better leave, or I get my grandson come here and *make* you leave." She spit on the ground.

"Mrs. Washington," Bert said. "Please be calm. This man here is an officer of the law, same as me, and he knows how you feel."

She stuck her finger at Burnside. "Him? He ain't no cop. I seen cops. I know all the cops round here. He ain't one of them. He took my damn *porch*! There was a porch here! Right over here!"

Bert shook his head at Burnside, trying not to smile. Looking at Burnside he said, in even tones, through stiff lips, "Sergeant Burnside is maybe our foremost expert on the Riverside area, ma'am.

"Ain't no porch expert."

Bert raised his hand to his beard and covered his smile with his long fingers.

Burnside was through with this. He clapped his hands and looked directly at the woman. "Let's take care of this. Do this right, okay?" She seemed very short standing here on the ground. Her head tilted back and her eyes pointed past Burnside's face, like she was trying to stare down the high raggedy clouds that had collected above. "None of us could use the stress over this. So here's what we'll do. We'll go, leave you here. But I'm going to be in contact with Andre, ma'am, and I am going to have him explain the situation to *you*. No use us getting involved in your private matters." His collar was hot at

the base of his neck. "Then I will come back and get to work with Andre on this. That's how it's going to be." He stood tasting the weird grime of the summer air. He was waiting for her to flinch, he realized. And that was not a good thing to do. Because these people, tenacious as they, he thought—but that was nothing to think about, either, Burnside decided, and swallowed and stepped sideways through the yard. "Bert," he said. "Why don't you give me a hand with this scrap wood. Get it out of this nice lady's yard, huh?"

The woman grumbled and shook her head. She watched Burnside and Bert gather the rotted wood, green paint chips crumbling to the grass and collecting there like shadows.

"I want to show you something," Burnside said. He walked Bert to the cab and jerked his head toward the back windshield. "What's this?"

Bert squinted and seemed to consider the sticker for a while. "Rebel flag," he said. He shrugged his shoulders. "Battle flag, to be exact."

"What makes you think this is okay?" Burnside said.

Bert leaned in closer to the sticker. "You catch some shit for this?"

"It could have been bad," Burnside said. "You never know what kind of stuff this type of thing is gonna provoke."

"If I would've known you were coming here," Bert said.

"That's not really the point," Burnside said. He looked through the back windshield at Ricky in the drivers seat. The boy faced forward, his hands on the wheel. Sure he was listening, of course he was, that was fine, and he should be. In the yard, the woman turned around and walked along the side of the house. She wore work boots with

the laces untied.

"Like anything was going to happen," Bert said. "Nobody gives a shit about that anymore." He pointed at the sticker.

Burnside tapped the drivers side door. "Start her up, Ricky," he said. He turned to Bert. "What makes you say that?"

"Old news, brother." Burnside and Bert had called each other *brother* every day back when they rode together. Sometimes they applied the sobriquet to their regulars, their informers, the folks they picked up and dropped off at the drunk tank. Called them *brother*, too. It was like the cops and the bad guys and the confused people who don't have a clue whether they're coming or going, as if all of the people who did their deeds right there in the street and in the parks and at the beach were a family spread out over the grid of Lake Bluff and Riverside. A family you'd call the public, full of rivalries and deceit and lost siblings and dirty secrets and memories of long-ago get-togethers when all possibilities were just that, possibilities, a map that could point you anywhere, a wide-open beach you had plenty of years to explore, to watch grow and recede with each coming wave. *Brother*. Most people suffered through their private dramas at home, past doors locked from the inside, lit by lamps and candles. In those days, Burnside had dreaded the arrival at home after shifts. He had often been in danger, it was true, in the line of fire, but the heightened awareness danger gave him had felt *important*. Like fatherhood had at first. Like prayer did sometimes, at church, surrounded by a quiet congregation, all of their heads bowed and eyes cast down to their knees. Like love. But now Burnside just felt confused. Like it was night and he had swam out far and closed his

eyes and dunked his head underwater and swam ten feet down to the sandy bottom of the lake as the air turned bad in his lungs. Like he was trying to find his way to the surface.

"That's all long gone," Bert said.

Ricky fired up the truck and it rattled before shaking down into a steady hum.

"Known me for years, brother," Bert said. "Never had me figured for a Johnny Reb."

"No," Burnside said. "No, I did not."

Bert stared. Burnside could smell his old partner's breath, a mix of coffee and cigarettes. Bert reached up and tugged on his goatee before turning to the truck and digging a fingernail under the sticker.

"Let's take this sucker off right now," Bert said. "Once and for all, what do you say? Brother."

Ricky drove slow the whole way home and didn't ask a single question. When they arrived, Ricky folded up the beach chair he had left out in the front yard, took it around back to the garage, and went up to his room. Burnside climbed the stairs later that evening, put his ear to Ricky's door, and heard a faint sound. It wasn't breathing. It could have been the skitter of pencil across notebook paper.

CHAPTER IV

The next day, Sunday, after church, Burnside brought the cordless phone into his bedroom, shut the door, and called Andre. He realized he was breathing short breaths and haze was starting to creep in at the edges of his vision. So Burnside made himself sit on the waterbed as he listened to the long rings on the other end of the line. The room smelled like sleep and Burnside caught himself yawning. After fourteen rings he hung up.

"Who doesn't have an answering machine this day and age?" he said as he shut the bedroom door behind him.

"What's that?" Gloria said. She had changed from her church clothes into a nightgown and sat on the couch in the front room with a glossy magazine and a can of Vanilla Diet Coke. They made that now. When he and Gloria had first started dating, in Kalamazoo, while he was at Western and she was working as the last typist in the country, for a law firm made up of two crotchety old Southerners who wore suspenders and straw hats and seersucker suits even to court sometimes, back then Gloria used to pour her glass bottles of Coke into plastic cups and sprinkle a little imitation vanilla extract into them. Then drop in a cube or two of ice. Now everything was automated: the vanilla in the pop, the icemaker in the refrigerator. Gloria picked up the remote from the coffee table and muted the cartoon video of Bible stories that Val sat in front of.

"What was that, Dick?" Gloria said again.

"Mom!" Val cried at the TV. She didn't turn around.

Burnside went to her and scooped her up from the carpet. "Way too close, munchkin."

Val wriggled through his arms. He had rolled up his shirt sleeves sometime in the middle of that interminable sermon and Val's plastic barrettes scraped his skin.

"Ouch," Burnside said.

"I'm not your munchkin," Val said. "Turn it back on."

Burnside sighed and sat down on the couch next to Gloria. "Could you believe that sermon?" he said. "Twenty minutes. A twenty-minute sermon! I couldn't believe it."

"I thought it was very interesting," Gloria said. She turned a page in her magazine. "He had some interesting things to say, I thought."

"Mom!" Val shouted.

Gloria clicked the remote and bad voiceovers burst from the television speakers, distorted and full of strange pauses. "Sorry, sweetie," Gloria said.

"I love this one," Val cooed.

Burnside looked out the front window at the truck across the street. "It was all abstract," he said. "All just notions. Justice and kindness are ideas. They don't mean anything to individuals. It's like he has no idea how to relate to people by themselves. Without all these ideas getting in the way."

Gloria looked up. She slapped the magazine shut. "How do you know?" she said. "You don't think he understands people?"

Frustration bloomed in Burnside's chest. He hadn't felt anything so strong at home in a long time. "No," he said, "I don't."

"What about me?" Gloria said. "What about the times I was having? I went to him and he helped me out. He was a pretty *good* understander of people, I thought."

Burnside shook his head and smiled his friendliest smile. "Understander of people," he said. "Look at you."

Gloria's brow tightened. "You mean listen to you," she said. "To get technical."

On the TV, Jesus watched as a sick man was lowered from the roof into the room where he sat teaching. Val's mouth hung open and she played absently with the barrettes in her hair.

"I just don't think you should be talking about how the poor are always with us and those less fortunate and all of that without really trying to understand them. As people. Not as the poor or the less fortunate. Just as people." Burnside swallowed. "As folks," he added.

"Listen to you," Gloria said. "You'd be a wonderful counselor."

"I didn't say that."

"I didn't say you did."

"Well, then."

"Well what?"

"I don't know. Nothing. Well nothing."

Gloria looked at him in disgust. "You don't think anybody understands things quite as much as you do. You think cause you've been shot at you understand people."

Think you always know what's best. If you see a *porch*—" she twisted her face into something truly ugly, like a dirty dishrag wrung out and dried to harden on top of the sink faucet "—you know the best way to fix it." She wiped the corners of her mouth with her fingers.

Burnside stood. "Fine," he said. "Just fine." He took a deep breath and tried to count to ten, but by three he was convinced it was useless.

Val licked her lips, stills staring at the TV, and said, "Don't fight."

"It's fine," Burnside said.

"It's nothing, munchkin," Gloria said.

They looked at each other a while, with softening eyes each of them, and then Burnside turned around, opened the bedroom door and closed it softly, and dialed Andre's phone number again.

No answer.

No answer.

He decided he would get some fresh air. Get out of the house. Swing by Brundage Avenue, the boat ramp and the *known drug location*, make sure no one was getting into trouble. Maybe chat a little with the fisherman cranking their barnacled boats out of the water and onto the trailers many had built themselves. Ask them where how they decided where was a good spot to fish. Fisherman knew how to keep calm. Burnside rocked on the waterbed and closed his eyes and tried to listen to all that was going on in his house but didn't hear much except the indistinct hum of the TV.

Sammy Slug had his shirt off and was wading into the water at the boat launch.

He was up to his thighs and bending over, tugging his pants off. A man on the dock threw an empty beer can at Slug and then shook his fist.

"You're one sick fuck, you know that?" the man belched. "Fuckin' perv."

Slug waded over to the floating beer can, picked it up, and sucked at it a second before throwing it over his shoulder. His dark pants floated around his waist, reminding Burnside of photos from oil spills. Slick on the surface, far as you could see. Killing fish and otters. Slug ducked underwater and wriggled his pants off.

"Aw, sick!" the guy on the dock said.

"Take a hike, bud," Burnside said. He jogged to the end of the dock. Slug surfaced. There *was* oil on the surface of the water, in fact. A powerboat was being hauled up the ramp next to the dock, and liquid poured off its outboard engine. Slug spat out water and swam like a dog over to the dock where Burnside stood next to the belching guy.

"Afternoon, officer," Slug said.

"Get out," Burnside said.

Slug nodded quickly, water shaking out of his long curls. "Got you, boss. Niggers round the *world* got you."

The guy turned to Burnside and raised his eyebrows. "You got this?" he said, and Burnside nodded.

Slug walked up the boat ramp with his pants in his hand. His dick hung between his legs and water streamed off it onto the concrete. When he got to the top of the launch he wrung the pants out and pulled them back on.

"Got me some decent exposure back there," Slug said. Burnside put his hand between Slug's bare shoulder blades and pushed him forward. His hand made a wet sucking sound as Slug walked, barefoot.

When Slug got to the porch of the crack house he spun around and jumped into a crouch, some kind of karate position. "Hi-ya!" he said, chopping at the air. Water flew from his fingers and splattered Burnside's face.

"Write me up?" Slug shouted. He kicked and Burnside backed off. "Get your little book out and write this nigger a ticket?"

"I'm going to call the police unless you go back inside quietly."

Slug jump-kicked and stumbled on his landing. "You *are* the law, motherfucker. Ain't no need to call no other police." He karate-chopped again and coughed. Burnside could see that Slug was hacking up water.

"I'll give you until the count of three to get inside," Burnside said.

"One two three hi-ya!" Slug stuck out both fists and punched the air above his head with the viciousness of a hurt raccoon.

"Come on, Sammy," Burnside said.

"Fuck you."

"I don't need this," Burnside said. "Get inside."

"Fuck you."

"*Sammy*," Burnside said, like he was the pastor this morning summoning up all kinds of false divinity to back up his sober but stupid pronouncements. "Sammy," he said again, his voice low like an organ.

Slug stopped with the karate moves and stood in the grass in front of the house and let his arms hang to his side. He jerked his head once and his wet hair plastered itself across his face. He brushed it away with a shaky hand. "Okay," he said. "Shit, I am *going*. I am motherfuckin' *gone*." Then he lunged at Burnside with both arms and Burnside batted his hands away. Slug laughed and turned around and climbed the stairs to the porch, coughing. Burnside wiped his wet hands on his pants.

That was pretty good, Burnside mouthed as he drove home.

Gloria was stacking plates with sandwich crumbs on them in the sink.

"Keith Wilson called twice," she said. "Twice. Thirty minutes. What is this about, Dick?"

Burnside shrugged and he felt the satisfaction glide off his face. "I'm sure it's nothing," he said. "Nothing to worry over. Ricky here?"

Gloria dropped a fork against a plate and glared at him. "You tell him what he's done to this family. Look at Ricky. You just tell this Coach Wilson what." She reached for the washcloth hanging over the faucet and turned the water on. Burnside walked into the bedroom and steadied himself against the wall with one hand as he dialed.

"What is this?" Wilson demanded. "What in the goddamn hell you think you're doing?"

"Hi, Keith," Burnside said, keeping his voice low. The water ran in the other room. "Gloria said you called."

"What the *hell*, Dick? Can I trust you?"

Burnside took a deep breath. "I have to say that I'm not quite sure what you mean,

Keith."

"Not sure! The hell! Guy says he's not *sure!* Rips a kid's porch to all hell for no reason and then tells me he's not sure! Does this sound crazy to you, too?" There was a sound like a smack on Wilson's end. "Tell me."

"We got it all worked out," Burnside said.

"The hell you do. Kid calls me up, says his grandma's all busted up, some cop came over and told her she can't have her porch no more."

"Andre and I talked about it."

"And you brought *Ricky* into it!" Wilson shouted. Burnside could imagine Wilson's forehead going red and the vertical vein boiling to the surface. Every time Burnside imagined Wilson, the coach had a clipboard in his hand and was usually smacking it against something.

"Look, let me just tell you—"

"Tell *shit!* This is serious shit! You make me go over there and fix it, my god. Think, Burnside! *Think!*" The line cut off and Burnside listened to the dead air a second before he hung up and called again. It rang and rang and the answer machine picked up, Wilson in a slow voice.

"You have reached the Wilson residence. Please leave your name, number, and a brief message, and we will return your call."

Burnside listened to the beep and hung up. "Where's Ricky?" he called out.

Gloria murmured something he couldn't understand, and then he opened the bedroom door into the dining room.

"What's that, Glor?"

"Out," she said. "Down at the beach or something."

"Mmm," Burnside said. He went past Gloria and up the stairs.

"Where're you going?"

"Checking on something," Burnside said. "Ricky told me he had a light out up there."

"Again?"

Burnside shrugged and took the stairs one at a time.

Burnside shut Ricky's door behind him and listened for Gloria. She whistled downstairs, faint through the floor. Burnside stepped carefully across the creaking floorboards to the dresser, which Ricky had moved back in front of the window. Lightly as he could manage, Burnside slid open the sock drawer. He rummaged through, touched the bottom of the drawer. Nothing. He closed his eyes and let out a big sigh. Then he turned around, saw that the pull-up bar was back in the doorframe. He tapped it to make sure it was secure, and then took one look back at the bedroom.

And there it was. The black-and-white notebook, open on Ricky's pillow. Burnside kneeled next to the bed and peered over it. A blue pen rested in the center of the pages. But this page was blank. He flipped backwards, blank page, blank page, blank page. And then, one flip of the page, there were words, bad words, small words and more of them than Burnside thought could fit on a page, tiny cussy writing, *fuck you fuck you fuck you fuck you I hate football hate football hate football ain't nothing more important than motherfucking football fuck you fuck you fuck football fuck fuck fuck all this.*

Burnside let the pages fall back into place and braced his hands on the bed to stand. The bed rattled under his weight and he got to one knee, then to both feet, and saw he had left handprints in the covers. He brushed them away and left Ricky's room.

Downstairs, Gloria looked up from the couch, looking dusty and indistinct, the light coming in through the window behind her, a soft glow. "What were you doing up there? Wrestling?"

Burnside shook his head and went into the bedroom.

The next week, as he drove from Riverside past the park and into downtown Lake Bluff, Burnside saw that the posters along the guardrail were missing.

When he got to the station, Burnside hiked the stairs to Bob Errol's office, nodded to the cops sipping coffee in the hallway, and let himself in. He told Errol, without a greeting, that he wasn't sure how effective he was being.

"Just keep the pressure up," Errol said. "Just let 'em know we know we're there."

Burnside nodded. "But no arrests."

"No arrests, no lockups. I just want the pressure."

"With all due respect," Burnside said, "I think they're beginning to realize there're no consequences. Take this guy."

Errol took a deep breath and looked up from his computer screen. "Yes?"

"Guy, Slug. Sammy Slug. Newbie, far as I know. Friggin' nutjob. I can't talk to the guy without the cuffs. He does karate in the front yard."

Errol smiled. "I think they're calling it tai chi these days."

"Walks around naked," Burnside said. He threw his open palms in the air. "Guy is high literally every time I talk to him and you know how they are, how you can't reason with them when they're like that. And damn, Bob, I don't know what to *do*." Burnside sucked in a deep breath that went on longer than he expected. Somebody was heating up leftovers in the break room microwave next door and it smelled like something fried. When the microwave dinged Errol spoke again.

"Let's go over together," Errol said. "You and me. Talk to old Slug a bit."

"Right now?"

"You can tell me how that porch project is coming together." Errol stood and opened his drawer. He clipped his gun into his belt.

Burnside pulled the cruiser up to the crack house and shut off the engine. "So do you know this guy?" he said.

Errol removed his sunglasses and polished them. "Sammy Slug? Sure."

"What is his deal? He just the town drunk or what? Crazy guy? Or is he involved?"

Errol smiled. "Involved?"

Burnside's face fell. "You know. Does he deal, distribute, anything like that?"

Errol shook his head. "Just a user, far as I know."

"Poor guy," Burnside said, looking out his window at the house. The blinds in the big window out front were yanked down and someone's face was behind there. "So you want to go in first or you want me to?"

Errol undid his seat belt and opened the door. "Why don't you go."

"Kay." Burnside put the car keys in his pocket and opened the door. He heard voices coming from the boat ramp across the street. The face in the window disappeared as bounded up the porch stairs.

"Police," Burnside said to the shut door. "Open up." He tapped his nightstick on the window next to the door and shouted louder. He could see the silhouette of the couch and nothing else. "Open up." Burnside put his hand on the doorknob and tried it but the door was locked.

"Police," Burnside said again. In the old days, he and Bert would have made a friend inside. Burnside wondered if Errol had a search-and-seize for this house yet, if he had ever planned to, or if the spring raid was just a myth, a carrot to pull Burnside along.

Finally the doorknob started to turn in Burnside's hand and a sliver of space opened up. An eye looked out; a mouth breathed sweet-sour breath. The guy spoke in a Miles Davis rasp.

"Whatchoo want."

"I'm looking for Sammy," Burnside said. He put his hand on the door and pushed, but the chain tightened on the other side and the door didn't go any further.

"Ain't no Sammy here. Try back later." There was music, some kind of 70s soul music from Memphis, the kind of stuff that was popular in Kalamazoo bars twenty years ago. Al Green maybe.

"You tell him that Officer Burnside wants to speak with him. Give him that message, okay?" Burnside looked directly at the eye in the crack. Bloodshot, milky. Specks of white crud in the lashes. "Officer Burnside," he said.

"Look, we don't have no trouble here. All right? No trouble. You want to look around? Clean up and let you look. Gimme couple-three minutes."

Burnside shook his head. "No," he said. "Have a good day, sir."

Burnside turned around and started to shrug at Errol, but Errol was on the sidewalk talking to, who would've thought, but of course, Sammy Slug. Slug wore a red sleeveless t-shirt and those gold chains.

"Sammy Slug," Burnside said loudly as he made his way down the stairs. He heard the front door click shut behind him.

Without turning Errol said, "Mr. Sammy here has some interesting things to say about you, Dick. Some interesting accusations." Errol cracked a smile, that smirk like he was an actor onstage changing up his face to signify that he, or his character rather, was having a thought just now, and you, the audience, needed to know about it. Guy did this all the time. Two cigarette boats shot past on the river, kicking up wake and slamming their hulls against the surface with a sound like dice clattering on felt. It was a no wake zone.

"Why don't you tell Officer Burnside what you just told me," Errol said.

Slug fingered his necklace and shook his head. His hair bounced around and seemed much shorter to Burnside than it had the other day. "Nah," Slug said. "No, I don't want to. That's a trap right there. Y'all try and trap me. But nope. No way. Ain't about to get snared in no trap."

Burnside tried to smile like Errol did and said, "You aren't going to offend me, Sammy."

Sammy's eyes went wide. "Ain't about no offense," he said. "No sir." He spat. A silver bike was leaned up against a tree behind them.

"Now, Sammy," Errol said, looking at Burnside. "You said Mr. Burnside here was, ah—how did you put it?"

Slug took a step backward toward the bike. "Didn't say shit."

"Abuse and battery is a pretty serious accusation," Errol said. He put his sunglasses on and Burnside saw himself reflected in them. A tubby stooped man. "Police brutality is a heavy charge."

Slug hung his head and ran his fingers along the gold chains. "Ain't nobody know the shit I seen," he said. Then he turned around, pushed the bike forward, muttered "Brutality," and hopped on.

As they approached the station, Errol said, looking forward, his arm resting in the open window, "I'm going to treat these charges seriously."

"Really?"

"Really."

Burnside gulped to keep his anger down and gritted his teeth as he parked the car in the lot behind the new station. "It's going to be tough to work now, you know that? With that hanging over my head."

Errol smiled and it suddenly seemed to Burnside like the most disturbing thing he had ever seen—this black man in sunglasses and a wide constant grin, whose every motion was deliberate, who was sitting in Burnside's shotgun seat, who unbuckled his seat belt calmly, letting the feed mechanism above the headrest take the nylon belt until

the lock part clicked the top. This man kept power behind his sunglasses, behind his eyes. Burnside had always tried never to wear sunglasses on duty unless he absolutely had to. It was one cop cliché he could do without.

"Keep up your usual stellar profile," Errol said, and left the car.

CHAPTER V

Keith Wilson called on the night before school started and sat waiting in his minivan in front of Burnside's twenty minutes later. As the light was beginning to fade, they drove through Lake Bluff, past the big houses on the hill above Kiwanis Park, and then down a side street to Colfax, past the clumps of young black men smoking cigarettes, on their way to Andre's.

"How's he doing?" Burnside asked.

"Washington?"

"Is he coming to school?"

Wilson turned the car off and leaned back in his seat. "Well," he said. "You said you were going to check."

Burnside looked out the window and unbuckled his seat belt.

Late afternoon turned out to be the ideal time to work on the porch. The light had faded a bit so the wood didn't blind Burnside with its shine, and the heat had subsided some, so he no longer felt his neck burning. Wilson was good with the hammer and it turned out Burnside and Ricky had done all the hardest work before. The two coaches finished by dark, criss-crossing a new lattice underneath the porch as the streetlights hummed on. Just as they were about to leave, Andre walked around the house and into the front yard.

"Yo, Coach," he said. He squinted and turned his head to look at all the work they'd done. "Thought we were gonna do this thing together."

Burnside looked at Wilson. Wilson seemed to take a step back, to consider something, before giving Burnside a wide-eyed look, like, *go ahead*.

"Time was of the essence," Burnside said. "I didn't want anybody getting hurt over that porch."

Andre laughed. "That's good. That's real good. You know it's been all summer, right?"

"You saw how it used to be," Burnside said.

Andre stood there shaking his head and smiling. "You and me, Coach B., we gonna have a good year together. You know how to catch a ball? Dudes in practice got no finesse. Check this though. Go long." Andre produced a football from behind his back and pointed at the fence across the street that blocked off a parking lot from a narrow strip of grass. Burnside jogged over, looking both ways as he crossed the street. When he turned, a tight spiral of a ball was arcing over the street and fell right into his arms.

"Good catch, Coach," Andre said. Burnside felt himself smile the widest he had in a while and threw the ball underhand back across the street to the boy.

Andre was waiting under the bleachers at the first day of after-school practice.

"Coach Wilson got me in," Andre said smiling. "I'm gonna be a Lake Bluff Tiger. Woo woo!"

Burnside gave him a goofy smile and went over to Wilson.

"I want you on him," Wilson said. "I don't want him getting lazy. Be the cop." Burnside and Wilson stood on the field, shading their eyes from the sun, the boys running drills they'd learned over the past month. Burnside's three Riverside kids were conducting drills, and even though they wouldn't start, they seemed to be bringing the team together.

Wilson made a vague gesture toward Andre Washington and then turned to Burnside. "You're like a fresh start, Dick. Somebody he can maybe relate to." Wilson did something with his mouth that reminded Burnside of a cartoon cow chewing cud, and moved on down the field to bark at the second-string defenders slamming into the tackle sleds. "More *intensity!*"

Andre stood there in the muddy field looking side to side and seeming separate. Like his solid form had been superimposed into the ordered chaos of football practice. For an hour, Burnside went over the plays with Andre, and Andre nodded each time.

"You sure you get this stuff?" Burnside said.

Andre murmured and nodded.

In the last half hour of practice, Burnside led Andre to one end of the muddy practice field and introduced him to the team. "Okay," Burnside said. "Fellas, we're going to run a couple plays. Try this thing out." But when Andre tried to run the play, simple screen pass, dropping back and scanning the field, turning his head slowly from one shoulder to the other for a wide view, the ball up by his shoulder but held very tightly, looking and counting to three or five or whatever, waiting for his man to get open, then taking a deep breath Burnside could see—could feel the excitement—each time something went wrong. A hole would open up in the offensive line and a green-shirted

defender would rush through and slap both hands on Andre's chest. Andre never let the ball fall to the ground—he tightened his hands and clutched the ball to his stomach, curling his body around it for protection—which was good, but as soon as all twenty-two starters got word that the play was over, Andre would dig his toes into the grass, kick up a clump of dirt, and then slam the ball to the ground, spit out his mouth guard, rip off his chin strap. Spit flew from inside his facemask. And then he started to yell.

"What the shit you call that? Fuckin' pieces of shit is what *you* all are. What's so hard about that?"

This wasn't the calm funny boy that Burnside remembered sneaking out the front door or around the side of the house.

"Get on him," Wilson shouted from downfield. He pointed an angry finger in Andre's direction. Burnside put his head down and jogged over.

At first Andre didn't take the claps on the shoulder the right way. Burnside meant the heavy handling to feel paternal. He smacked at Burnside's hand and wriggled away to yell some more and eventually run the play again. After three days of this, Burnside marched over and just stood in front of the boy. Burnside folded his arms across his chest.

"Don't touch me," Andre said.

"I'm not going to hurt you."

"Don't you even touch me."

Burnside shook his head slowly. His arms lifted with his breath. "No, no. I won't, Andre."

Andre put his lips together and ground his teeth. Sweat coated his cheeks and dripped out of his helmet, down his neck and under his collar and his whole head seemed to Burnside to gleam with passion and mystery. "Well, don't," Andre said.

"You can't yell at those guys like that," Burnside said.

Andre turned and looked out across the muddy practice field, at Lakeview Road shooting past. A strip of gray pavement before the houses and the bluff past. The lake a few spots of blue like sky behind clouds on an overcast day. "I know," Andre said.

"Trying, Coach."

"Keep it up then," Burnside said, and jogged off.

The first game was the second Friday of school, and by Tuesday's practice, Andre's temper had started to subside.

Burnside watched Andre throw long bombs down the practice field for a while, and then said, "You weren't like this the other day."

"Like what?" Andre said. "Like calm? Like this?"

"He said you got angry but you weren't yelling at guys like this."

"Ain't yelling," Andre said. He took three light steps back, his toes firm in the grass and heels raised like a dancers. Drew back his arm and threw. The ball fell right into his receiver's arms. Andre was quicker on his feet than Ricky ever had been. Just as accurate, but the way he moved—

"I know that," Burnside said. "But why? Why do you lose your temper? Is it the guys?" Burnside swept his arm to indicate the rest of the field, where boys stood slumped in their pads and picked at the grass stains on their practice shorts. Some of the bigger

guys were running the forty. Two kids gave each other high fives.

"Nah," Andre said. "You gotta expect some mistakes at first."

The receiver ran the ball back to the Andre. Andre kept his eyes on the receiver as the kid flicked the ball over Burnside's head. It banged the chain-link fence. Andre bent to pick it up and ran his fingers over the laces. "Thanks, dog," he told the receiver, who ran off again.

"It's this helmet," Andre said. He held the football out and inspected the seams. "This uniform." He picked at the fabric over his shoulder pads. "Makes me uncomfortable, I guess."

"Lake Bluff," Burnside said.

"Ain't about Lake Bluff."

"Not about Lake Bluff," Burnside corrected.

"Whatever."

"Go on."

"Like, this just a practice jersey. This ain't—this not the real thing. I'm just waiting for the real thing to get *started*, you know what I'm saying?"

Burnside looked into Andre's eyes, wide and scared under the helmet. "No, Andre," Burnside said. "No, I don't."

"Mm." Andre turned back to his receiver and winged it too high. At the top of its arc, the ball lost velocity and came tumbling almost straight down into the mud. "Gimme til the first game," Andre said. "Gimme that and I tell you then."

It didn't get dark until well into the third quarter that Friday, though the field

lamps had been on and humming and shining their light since warm-ups at six pm. During the game, Burnside was surprised that he could hear the noise of the lights even as the crowd jumped to their feet to clap and scream, which they did every couple minutes because Lake Bluff dominated. These must have been a new kind of lights since when Burnside played. Because the Dowagiac defense was clumsy and inept, Lake Bluff mostly ran the ball, and Andre did a good job getting the football to his man and letting him fly. Lake Bluff laid low on defense, per Wilson's instruction. It was Burnside's job to talk the defense into playing slow. "Let their plays develop," Burnside said, a phrase of his own invention. "Watch them. Figure out who they are and where they're going. Don't expend all your energy. Don't strike too soon."

The hulky defense kids laughed through their mouth guards and flexed their biceps under the shirt sleeves that were too tight with elastic, not having been broken in yet, said stuff like, "Okay, Coach. Gotcha, Coach. Good deal, Coach." Then they clapped and hustled onto the field saying, "Bastards wouldn't score anyways."

And they wouldn't. Two turnovers in the fourth quarter alone resulted in runbacks for Lake Bluff TDs. They won by 21. On his way from the bench to the locker room, Andre walked past Burnside who stood answering questions from a newspaper reporter. Andre stuck his hand up and smiled. "Gimme five, Coach. Didn't lose my temper."

"No, Andre, no, you didn't and—" but as Burnside began to think of what more praise to give, the boy disappeared into the steam and wet towels of the locker room. He heard somebody inside giving directions to a party.

On Monday Wilson called Burnside at the station and told him that he had done a

good job with the Washington boy, and could he take a look at defense now? Get them really fierce. Really ready to rumble. Ready to tear shit down.

CHAPTER VI

Burnside stood on the landing of the stairs. At his feet were stacks of Val's new jeans and a pile of Ricky's dirty practice jerseys tossed from the top steps. An envelope with a return address from Western Michigan lay on the first step up from the landing. It was a Wednesday. Burnside had just returned home from practice. Andre had jogged up to him and asked if Ricky wanted to get together some weekend, throw the ball around.

"Ricky, you up there?" Burnside gulped, nudged aside a pair of clean socks with his toe and climbed the stairs. He and Gloria had met at Western.

"Ricky? Gotta question for you."

Ricky's door was shut. Burnside put his ear to it. He heard breathing. He heard a little voice whispering. Then he thought of the journal, years ago, and something inside of him contracted. He felt a sharp hot pang of awfulness in his chest. He took a step back and rapped his knuckles on the door, hard.

"Ricky? Open up, bud."

He put his hand on the door handle and turned it.

"I'm coming in," he said.

Something struck the door from the other side and Burnside jumped.

"I'm *doing* something," Ricky said from inside his bedroom.

"Oh," Burnside said. "Okay, buddy. I'll come back."

The bedsprings creaked and footsteps came pounding and then Ricky opened the door.

"Yeah?" Ricky set his head against the side of the door.

"Nothing," Burnside said. "I'll come back. Go back to what you're doing." He turned around and started down the stairs.

"*Dad.*" Ricky made a huge exhale.

Burnside stopped, his foot on the clean pair of socks. "Well, shit." He bent on the stairs, his palm flat on the wall for balance, and picked up the balled-up socks.

"Okay," Burnside said. "Hey. You know anything about a party, last Friday? After the game?"

Ricky pursed his lips. "What do you want to know?"

"Nothing. Nothing. Just wondering if you knew. Maybe at the breakers or something?"

"You don't want those guys getting in trouble," Ricky said.

Burnside shook his head and smiled up at his son. "Guess not," he said. He tossed the socks from one hand to the other. "And I don't want you getting mixed up in anything."

"*Dad.*" Ricky's head rose and fell in the crack of the door.

"Okay." Burnside pitched the socks up the stairs. "Put those away for me, huh?" he said, and went back down the stairs.

Later, Ricky came downstairs. Burnside switched off the TV and turned to him. "You have a girlfriend, Ricky?"

Ricky smiled. "Come on, Dad. What do you think?"

Burnside shrugged. "Frankly, I don't know. I wouldn't know, I guess."

"You probably would've heard, don't you think? I probably would've talked about her."

"Yeah, guess so," Burnside said. He set the remote on the couch next to him and stared at it. "Are you doing anything cool for school right now?"

"Just a paper."

"What's it on."

"I don't know. Sociology of downtown or something."

"What you do for it?"

"What's with the questions all of a sudden?"

Burnside held up both his open palms. "I'm just curious," he said. "Curious about my son's life."

"Probably gonna ask me next if I'm gay or something. Probably want me to rat out some parties or something."

"I didn't say that."

"Mm." Ricky wandered off into the kitchen and Burnside could hear him opening and closing cabinets.

"Ricky!" Burnside said. "Ricky, don't be like that."

Something slammed. "*God*, Dad. I'm getting something to *eat*. Jesus."

Ricky sat in a kitchen chair in silence, slurping his cereal and watching with his dad whatever was on TV.

*

It wasn't until October that anyone else realized that the children's posters had gone missing. A creak interrupted the Monday morning staff meeting and there was Susan Braeburn, standing at the door.

"Guys," she said, gravel in her throat. She took a deep breath and looked around the room, leaning into the conference room through the half-open doorway. It seemed to Burnside that she looked at everyone but him, though he remembered having this feeling many times before.

"The posters," Susan said. "The posters the children did." She gulped and her face contorted. "They're *gone*." She hung her head and shut the door. Dudendorf paused a second, then went on reviewing the increase since last month in across-the-board reported violent crimes. Errol sat in the folding chair next to Dudendorf's swaying gut. He smiled a little but began to seem distracted. Errol started out the window while flipping pages on his legal pad, but didn't make any notes, didn't really look down.

After the meeting, Bert suggested that Burnside join him in his cruiser to head out and take a look. They cruised past Kiwanis and sure enough, just as Burnside had seen: nothing. "Let's hit the other spot," Bert said, and drove downtown. He parked on the side of the Park Street Bridge, where you weren't allowed to park. Susan was right. Burnside scratched at the few pieces of Scotch tape still stuck to the metal guardrail where the posters had been.

"Too bad," Burnside said.

"You don't have to say that," Bert said. "It was a dumb idea in the first place."

Burnside picked off a piece of tape with a fingernail and flicked it over the edge of the bridge. He lost sight of it long before it settled to the train tracks. "Bob worked hard on those. It was a nice thing to do."

Bert turned from the guardrail. "So what? I work hard pulling over kids who swerve out of their lane on Friday nights." He watched a car glide down the bridge and turn left toward Park Beach and the breakers. "Nobody says *that's* a nice thing to do." Bert shook his head. "Let's get out of here." Bert pulled the parking brake and the car fell forward a few inches. Instead of turning around at the bottom of the bridge, Bert turned left and drove past the three-story summer homes and their dark picture windows and empty garages, through the Park Beach parking lot. He parked at the end of the lot, by the locked gate in front of the water filtration plant. Past that were several picnic tables, falling apart, some rough spikes of dune grass, and then a wide-open grassy field on top of the city water reservoir, buried. The reservoir ran right up to the lake, where water splashed against piled boulders slick with algae. Past that, tangled bushes walled in a strip of beach littered with driftwood and old iron erosion fences pounded into the sand and jutting out into the lake. Kids called this the breakers. Burnside had heard there were weekly fights there, all planned out and scheduled for Sunday nights. That had been the rumor, anyway, but Burnside had never seen much besides high school kids drinking cheap beer and smoking cigarettes. If their parents were rich, the cops sent them home with a stern warning. If they'd never heard of the kids' folks before, they'd confiscate the beer.

Bert got out of the cruiser. "Let's check it out, huh? See if we can find us some

perps." Bert laughed and took a long swig from his bottle of water. He switched off the computer mounted on the dash that kept a record of where the cops had been.

Burnside followed Bert over the gate and into the field. Wind blew across from a sheaf of dune grass, past a stand of stunted trees and across the field and over the exhaust vents in the middle. The edge of the lake was dark brown; amorphous puddles of oil floated on top of the steady water, refracting an unstable rainbow. A mile out the lake looked calm.

"What are you up to this spring?" Bert said. He was bent half over and seemed to be inspecting the grass for something. Cold wind blew in off the lake and Burnside turned his back to it. The water filtration plant stood like some kind of ancient stone edifice.

"What do you mean?"

"You coaching anything else? You gonna be around?"

"Of course, Bert. What are you talking about?"

"Bob Errol." Bert dropped to his haunches, grunting and clapping a palm on one knee, and then leaned forward, a little like a linebacker. He grabbed something in the grass and stood up, breathing heavy. "And here we are," he said. He put one hand to his back and held the other out to Burnside. "Would you look at that."

In Bert's reddened palm was a stubby metal pipe, a tangle of steel wool sticking out one end. It was the kind of thing crackheads smoked out of over in Riverside. Usually what they found here, in the breakers field, when they found anything, was crushed beer cans and empty plastic fifths of cheap vodka, sometimes little plastic baggies with a couple of seeds and stems inside. Nothing so serious as all this. Burnside whistled.

"Don't see this kind of thing around here too much," Bert said.

Burnside saw something bright in the grass. A speck of yellow in all that dark green. "No," he said. "You don't." He went to what he saw and picked it up. It was the cap to a twenty-ounce pop bottle. RC Cola.

"What's that, a pop top?" Bert said. "That's nothing."

"Guess not," Burnside said, slipping the cap into his pocket. "Just some litter," he said. "You were saying about Bob Errol."

"He contacted me," Bert said. "He's got a little job for us. Old Riverside boys. Guess the carpetbagger knows his jig's up. He knows that playing nice ain't working, not around here. Wants you and me to do a raid. In the spring, nice weather, maybe around April, so users won't be out on the street for the summer yet, I guess."

"When'd he tell you this?"

Bert shrugged. He turned over the pipe in his hand. "Week ago. Maybe two."

"That house on Brundage," Burnside said. "I bet that's it. By the boat ramp."

"That's the one." Bert held the pipe up to his eye.

"He's had me putting pressure on that place for weeks now," Burnside said.

Bert cleared his throat. "And if I'm not mistaken, this right here—" he shook the pipe and then wound up and pitched it into the lake "—means that one of our crack house denizens gonna be right around here somewhere."

It was as if this was a stage production, Burnside would think later. The way Sammy Slug just then appeared from behind the curtain of swaying dune grass at the far end of the breakers and walked across the field to where the two cops stood.

"Officers," Slug said.

"Well, shit," Bert said. "Look who it is."

Slug jabbed his shaky finger right at Burnside, but Burnside ignored him, turning to Bert and saying, "How'd you know he was gonna be here? You two plan this?"

Bert shook his head.

"You ain't sposed to get near me," Slug said.

"You think he heard us?" Burnside said, going along with the playacting.

Bert nodded. "I think he probably did, Dick."

"Then he better tell his friends we're gunning for 'em. We're gonna raid and soon, so they better keep themselves clean." Burnside licked his lips and raised his eyebrows at Slug. "You got that Sammy?"

Slug shut his mouth and took a step back. He shook his head up and down so rapidly it seemed like an involuntary spasm of some kind. Or maybe that was the results of combining crack and caffeinated cola. Burnside didn't know. He often wondered what it would be like, to smoke some of that, just once, to see. Suddenly he felt cold air seep under his collar and he shook his head no. It wasn't smart to think like that. Slug backed off.

"Gone fuck you *up!*" Slug shouted. "Gonna fuck that *football* team yours! Damn!"

When Slug got halfway to the spot he had appeared from, he started running. He weaved through the dune grass, the trees and bushes, up the embankment and onto the railroad tracks. He ran toward the river.

"Scared him," Bert said with a smile. "Like old times."

"What he say about football?" Burnside said. "What was that?"

Bert shrugged. "You probably shouldn't come by here anymore. With the investigation and stuff. This is where he—" he pointed at Sammy Slug "—where he hangs out nowadays."

Burnside kept watching Slug until he disappeared past the Park Street Bridge.

In the parking lot, a BMW had pulled up, tinted windows, rap music rattling the shut doors and the bumper.

Bert put his hand on his nightstick and waved his other hand at the windshield. "Scram!" he shouted. The car stopped and reversed, swinging around in the sandy parking lot and leaving the way it came. The back windshield was lighter and clearer than the windows, but Burnside didn't look inside, for fear of who he might see there.

The air just seemed different the night of the last game of the season. Burnside was starting to feel that he was somehow specially attuned to changes in weather, pressure, the feeling of wherever he was. Maybe it had something to do with getting old. Dudendorf used to joke that he could feel wrong-doing like an ache in his knees.

Andre was doing well, real well, that game. The team was killing. Under the bright lights, the fans going on, Donny Van Zyl sacked Lincoln High's QB twice and didn't even do his obnoxious celebratory dance afterward. Andre completed thirteen passes by the fourth quarter, two of them long bombs for touchdowns. The skinny kid from Riverside, who ended up being able to run pretty good, found holes in Lincoln's defense and scuttled through them like a mole or something—his rushing by the third

minute of the fourth quarter was something like 60 yards.

Then, in the first minutes of fourth quarter, the middle of a drive for Lake Bluff, eighteen yards out from putting the game at 24-9, Andre wiping his hands on the backs of his thighs to get the sweat off, ready to call the hike, and Burnside feeling so proud on the corner, even though he hardly talked to Andre anymore since those first days, Andre on the field bent low and about to call for the snap, there was a loud clank from high above, and a hissing sound, and then the lights shut off.

Andre called the hike in the darkness but nothing happened. Wilson tore off his hat and ran onto the field. When the auxiliary lights came on dim and flickering, both teams were standing with their hands on their Lycraed hips, muttering. Only Andre acted like the game was still going. He dropped back and raised the ball high. Both teams looked back at him. The skinny running back from Riverside jogged back to Andre and said something. Wilson was screaming his head off at the referee, who was looking at a tiny rulebook he had retrieved from his back pocket.

On the sidelines, a kid tapped Burnside on the shoulder and said, "Coach B? What do we do?"

Burnside shook his head and said nothing. He imagined he could hear Gloria's voice cold in the stands behind him.

On the field, Andre spiked the ball to the ground and yelled. "Bullshit! This a bunch of fuckin' *bullshit*. Goddamn, son! All y'all! *Fuck* you!"

Burnside jogged onto the field shouting, "Andre! Andre, hold up, brother!"

Andre ripped off his helmet and tossed it aside.

"Easy," the running back said.

Andre shook his head and spit. He stepped backward to the visitor's stand.

"Bullshit," he said.

Burnside ran to him, feeling the simmer of the crowd behind him, the shuffle of parents standing up and asking each other *What is happening? What is going on?* He caught his breath and set his hand on Andre's shoulder pad. Andre didn't brush it off.

"Coach," he said.

"It's okay, Andre. Take it easy."

Andre was sobbing. "I blew it, man. I fuckin' blew it."

"It's not your fault," Burnside said, making his voice as low and smooth and soothing as he could. But he felt an anger rising in him, and watched the darkness at the bottom of the poles that held aloft the field lights, where probably the electrical boxes were. "It's not your fault," Burnside said. "Not your fault. Not your fault."

Andre nodded and nodded and said nothing until Wilson came over, his hair a wreck and face red and patchy and said, "Make up game. Tomorrow. Lincoln High. 8 am."

At home Gloria rushed Val upstairs to bed, oversaw her tooth-brushing, while Burnside busied himself picking up the kitchen. Ricky said he was going to go out with a couple guys from the freshman team, could he take the car.

Gloria, still with Burnside's old letter jacket pulled tight around her sides, came down the stairs and said yes.

Burnside snatched his keys from their spot in the middle of the kitchen table. "Not

so fast now, bud. Where you going?"

"I don't know," Ricky said. He stood in the middle of the dining room, sweeping one foot in front of him like a soccer drill or something. "Out. With some guys from the team."

"Whose house?" Burnside said.

Ricky shrugged. "We'll probably go down to the beach or something."

"No parties," Burnside said.

Upstairs Val and Gloria were singing a song together.

Burnside said, "You probably want to talk over the game."

Ricky shrugged, chewed the inside of his mouth.

Burnside said, "Back by eleven."

Ricky looked up. "Dad."

Burnside tapped his watch. "I mean it. And call if you go anywhere else."

Ricky nodded. "Besides where?"

Burnside said, "You don't ever see Andre Washington when you're out, do you?"

Ricky furrowed his brow. His face looked like a photo from a funeral.

"Do you?"

"Dad," Ricky said. "We don't hang out at crack houses." Ricky swiped the keys off the table and spun them around his finger as he walked out the back door. Burnside kneeled next to the table and inspected the wood for any scratches Ricky might have made.

Gloria came down a few minutes later, still in the old letter jacket, medals and

pins dangling from the *L* on the breast, one chevron on the sleeve from Burnside's one year on the varsity football squad—he'd broken a wrist at the end of the season and didn't really want to play again after that and now, in the dim light of the dining room, his wife whispering into his ear that his daughter wanted him to kiss her goodnight, he realized for the first time ever that maybe he and his son were more similar than he'd ever thought—that he flopped, like an NBA player exaggerated an injury and earning the wrath of armchair coaches bursting up from their seats and shouting at the television screen—he had flopped, same as Ricky.

Burnside took the stairs one at a time. When he opened Val's door, into that burst of bright yellow walls and pink stuffed animals lining every available surface, she was already asleep. Burnside shut off the light and went back downstairs.

He stayed up, watching TV until Ricky showed up at home again. He came in with a half-empty two-liter of Mountain Dew and said, "Going to bed," and then took the stairs two at a time. Burnside started to get up, then something on the 11 o'clock news caught his eye—a graphic: VIOLENCE IN SW MICHIGAN? Burnside sat in his chair and turned up the volume and watched Bob Errol, the lake shimmering behind him like a stage curtain, discuss the "upsurge" in gang and drug violence, and his team's attempts to thwart it. Burnside fell asleep on the couch; he hadn't learned anything he didn't already know.

In the morning Burnside rustled Ricky but Ricky shook his head, breathed out a sour bad breath but normal bad breath, not the smell of stale beer or marijuana, said, "No." Burnside took the car, which smelled normal, too, its normal subtle damp stink,

like wet fur. He drove along the harvested soybean fields, just grubby brown roughage for acres and acres, down to Lincoln High. The field was damp with dew and maybe two dozen parents sat in the stands with Thermoses and donuts. There was something sweet about the makeup game, Burnside decided as he pulled on his Lake Bluff Tigers windbreaker. An eight-minute game, early Saturday morning, most of the town still asleep or in their pajamas, but the kids here in the bright light of a fall morning, in a football field surrounded by farmland and country gas stations, here not for fans or approval or popularity but for pure sport, here to display skill and cunning, here to slam each into the ground.

Wilson ran up to Burnside's car in the lot. "Seen Washington?" Wilson said.

Burnside shook his head.

"He's your kid," Wilson said, and ran off.

When the ref, a different guy than last night, checked in with Wilson and Burnside five minutes before the game was supposed to start, Andre Washington still hadn't shown. Burnside went to the three kids from Riverside and asked them.

The quiet kid, Walter Payton, shook his head and said, "He got this job I think."

The skinny one, the running back, said, "Yeah. Yeah, he right. Andre got a job down that Mexican nursery something."

Burnside nodded and went off to tell Wilson, who was already yelling at the facemask of the second-string QB, a clumsy senior who could hardly throw. The second-string QB ran onto the field to hear the ref discuss how they'd begin the game and Burnside said, "I can call Ricky. Got my cell phone right in the car."

Wilson turned to him and barked, "Now? We got eight minutes to play! Should of thought that earlier. Use your *head*, Dick. Jesus."

The second-string QB called the snap and backed up on the wet grass but his cleat stuck and his other foot slipped and the ball went flying high. A Lincoln defender jumped up to snag the ball from the air and ran it back as the Lake Bluff team slipped and slid down the wet grass.

"Not fair!" Burnside screamed at the ref.

"Easy," Wilson said.

The Lincoln kid ran the ball back for a touchdown, spiked it in the grass, and ran circles around the end zone, shouting "Yeah! Yeah! Hell yeah!" Only a few fans stood in the bleachers celebrating and so there it was, Burnside thought—the naked game. One kid running in circles with his hands raised screaming "Yeah! Hell yeah!"

Lake Bluff lost and Burnside went home.

Gloria and Val were gone when Burnside, so he did dishes and checked on Ricky—still sleeping—and generally cleaned up, wondering where they had gone. When his wife and daughter showed an hour later, Gloria wore a long coat and carried in a glossy box for some kind of video game system. She set it down on the coffee table.

Burnside got up off the couch and said, "What the hell is that?"

"It's an Xbox," Val said, dancing around the table. She was holding a bunch of wilting flowers "It's *really* cool."

"If you won't let your son do what he loves," Gloria said, "you might as well make his life easier."

"Glor, you know we really can't afford that."

"You don't even know how much it costs."

Then a pounding above their heads. Ricky appeared in shorts and socks at the bottom of the stairs.

"Dad?" he said.

Burnside and Gloria stared at him.

"What?" Ricky said.

"Mom got you an Xbox," Val said. "We went to get flowers too."

Ricky's posture seemed to change as he considered his parents. "Cool, Val," he said. "You and me'll play that later. You get it set up for us, okay?"

Val nodded forcefully. She set the flowers on the kitchen table and looked up.

Staring at his son, Burnside said, "You ask for this? You know we're trying to save money."

Val's eyes moved from her brother to her father to her mother to the Xbox to the flowers and finally to the floor.

Burnside said, "Why didn't you come to the game? We *lost*, by the way. Damn Washington kid didn't show."

"I told you," Gloria said. "You can't trust a kid like that."

Burnside said, "Why didn't you come, Ricky?"

"I don't know, Dad," Ricky said. He gulped. Burnside turned to him. The boy's head was cocked, as if he was trying to read the spines of books lined up on library shelves. A few seconds passed and Burnside realized that everyone was waiting for him

to speak.

Gloria said, "Ricky, go to your room." She pointed at the stairs and Ricky turned around and bounded up. Then she turned to Burnside. "You ever even consider asking for a paycheck?" she said. She set her hands on top of the glossy Xbox container and pulled them across the top. It squeaked and squealed with friction. "Twenty hours a week of extra work and Saturday mornings too you do it for *free*?"

Burnside moved his toes around in his shoes. "Jesus," he whispered. "Goddamn."

Val went to the couch and sat next to her father, but when he tried to put his arm around her she scooted away and glared at him with burning eyes.

But Ricky didn't play the Xbox. He began taking long walks under the streetlights through dirt-pocked snow banks. Burnside would see him at the end of the street, looking both ways before he crossed Niles Avenue. Ricky rarely got home in time for dinner.

"I don't think it's safe," Burnside said to his wife.

"Leave him alone," Gloria said.

"We don't even know where he goes," Burnside said.

"You don't," Gloria said.

"Well, I want to," Burnside said.

"Sure you do."

"I saw he got a letter the other day. From Western! He's only a freshman. I don't even know what he's doing."

"That was for his *paper*," Gloria said, waving her hand in front of her face. "For

school. On colleges. You don't even know. For your information, now he's doing a paper about the beach, or something like that. That's where he goes, probably."

In this way, Burnside became sure that he would catch his son getting into what kind of trouble he couldn't imagine, at the breakers.

CHAPTER VII

The investigation into Sammy Slug's accusation began in December and was finished two weeks later. Burnside wasn't invited to give a statement. Susan Braeburn, the department admin, forwarded him an email originally sent from Errol to Dudendorf and the other higher-ups. He had done nothing wrong, was what Burnside could glean from the corporate blather the email dripped with, but he was to stay away from known drug users and other "problem areas." He assumed this meant the house on Brundage. And the breakers.

By the week after Christmas, things in Burnside's life seemed to slow, even shut down. Snow fell every few days, covering the town like a sheet fluffed and left to fall. Sound didn't seem to travel as far in the cold, seemed to Burnside. That or everything got a little muffled. The sun reflected from the snow banks that lined every street, blown up against every house, emanating a brightness that screwed with your eyes and made it hard to focus on anything. Snow drifts would knock down your fence if you weren't careful. Burnside spent most of his winter looking down at the dash when he was driving, at the floor when he was inside.

And listening. Those scurrying footsteps upstairs, the hours on the phone, even the notebook he'd found on Ricky's bed—all sinister scratches on a map that pointed to the breakers, that weird violent landscape pushed up against the lake. Burnside had

generally stayed away in the past, so he wouldn't ever find out what was happening there. He preferred to keep the breakers a shadowy spot of mystery. Or of wonder. He wanted never to really be able to hear what happened there, if anything happened there. The weekly fights. Maybe the dealers targeted kids there. He wondered if it was also where gay kids went to make out.

"You got to stay away, Dick," Bert warned him one day. Burnside had shown up at dusk, in plainclothes. It was winter. "There's nothing for you here."

Burnside said nothing and trudged away, past the water filtration plant and over the locked gate, into his car. Banks of salty slush were piled on other side of the narrow beach road that led back to Park Street, and Burnside's headlights lit them the palest white he'd ever seen. His car howled as he gave it gas. Though the roads were salted and the ice scraped to the side, Burnside's tires couldn't quite take hold until he got past the shuttered summer homes and onto Park Street.

But he kept coming back. And one day, after a warm day melted the snow but a cold night froze so the roads were lined with ice, Sammy Slug appeared in the haze of Burnside's headlights. Burnside tapped the horn at Slug because it was going to take a long time for the car to stop. The antilock brakes kicked in, rattling his foot on the brake pedal. The rubber squealed against the ice and Slug stepped to the side, blowing on his hands. He wore red knit mittens.

"You can't see me," Slug said. He waved his arms back and forth like a football ref. "You ain't allowed. Like we divorced."

"Hello, Sammy," Burnside said. He smiled, but Slug wouldn't have any of it.

"Serious. Me and that nigger you got on the police, we done *talked* about this shit. You ain't sposed to see me." Slug pursed his lips and shook his head.

"Do you need a place to sleep tonight, Sammy? It's cold out. I got some hot coffee if you need it."

Slug shook his head and blew on his hands again. "Got a place."

"Let me ask you a question," Burnside said, shutting the car door. "You ever see any kids around here?"

"Nuh-uh," Slug said. He pulled his hood farther down his ears. His breath was lit by the headlights so it glowed and seemed to rise above his head and hang there, like a halo. "Ain't nobody down around here. Not this time of the year."

Burnside took a step closer. "I wonder if you've seen any kids."

"I told you," Slug said. "Ain't nobody. No friends here. Y'all told me to warn 'em all."

"Friends?" Burnside said. He leaned against the car. "Tell me about your friends, Sammy."

Slug shook his head and backed away from his condensing breath. "I got restraining orders against you and shit." He raised his gloved fists. "I'll fight you." Slug hopped forward.

Burnside put his hand on his flashlight. "Get out of here. Get the fuck away from me." It was cold. He wasn't wearing gloves. He shook the flashlight at Slug and Slug scurried backward through the parking lot. Slug slipped on the ice and turned to his knees and crawled off into the snow blown up against a temporary erosion fence. Burnside

could hardly feel his hands and held them in front of the blower until the hot air thawed them enough to drive home. There was a church just up the bluff that housed the homeless and he was sure Slug didn't need any help finding the way.

March was warm and Burnside was taking in the smell of spring through an open window when the email from Errol came through. The date for the raid. Second weekend in April. Two weeks after Easter. Rain or shine. But early April froze again. Ice crackled at the edges of roads where blacktop met the concrete curb. Tree branches dark against the gray sky, cracks in a ceramic cup. Neither sleet nor snow, Burnside thought in his kitchen as he poured a pot of coffee into a Thermos and stared at the frost at the corners of the window above the sink. The frost seemed to be lit from inside with stripes of bright colors, like the color bars on a signed-off TV station. His cruiser was parked out front. He set the Thermos on the floor of the car under the glove compartment. He would drive through back roads to Riverside, park two blocks down on Brundage, and turn off the car. He would wait in the drivers seat until dark, when Errol and Bert, in plainclothes, would tap on his window. And they would begin.

The cloud cover that had dominated for most of the week thinned and finally lifted by dark. The moon shone cold and bright. The river along Brundage Avenue chopped up the moonlight, refracted it, reflected it like oil spilled and spreading across the river's surface, carried along the gentle current. Burnside pulled his winter hat further down his forehead and poured a second cup of coffee into the lid of the thermos, careful not to spill on his lap. His windshield had fogged up. Only two kids had peered in his

windows in the past two hours. Other than that, no activity. His stakeout seemed to have been more or less useless.

Crackling came over his radio. Bert. "Dick, you ready to do this thing?"

Burnside nodded to himself as he sipped his coffee. He swallowed and depressed the button on his radio. "Good to go," he said.

Static. "Uh, repeat?" It was Errol on the horn now.

"I'm ready," Burnside said. He let the button go. "Sorry about that," he said to the cold car.

A minute later Bert rapped on the window. Burnside counted to fifteen, as planned, before getting out. He scanned the street. Bert and Errol were up ahead, rushing across the next intersection. Otherwise: no one. Burnside yanked the hat off his head and tossed it onto the drivers seat. He shut the door gently. No lights were on inside the house as Bert and Errol approached—though Burnside could have been watching the wrong house. Two blocks was a longer distance than it ever seemed on a map, the houses hard to discern. The street was bare. Suddenly Burnside's stomach fell: maybe word had gotten out. Maybe they knew they were coming. Then he looked closer at the skinny two-stories, spaced by vacant lots. Siding was falling off, some of the porches were crooked, piles of gray snow leftover in the corners of the porch that never saw sunlight. Lights were on inside; blinds were drawn but obscure faces pressed against the window. Through drawn curtains, people all look the same, Burnside thought. Shadows begging him to ask who they were.

Burnside nodded to a face in a window and strode forward along the sidewalk,

catching up to his clouds of breath ahead. He liked it when he could feel relief pass over a scene as he arrived in uniform. But this was hardly a scene at all.

He nodded to Bert and Errol, trench coats and ball caps in the yard next to the house. Burnside flatted himself against the latticed porch and crouched. He gave a thumbs-up to Bert and Errol, who nodded back, took the stairs, and rapped on the front door.

At least ten knocks before the door opened. Burnside could hear it creak and then the pause before anyone spoke. The porch boards creaked under Bert and Errol's feet. Then Bert's familiar voice. "Hey, brother. Looking to party. Looking for some smoke."

No answer.

"We got friends inside," Errol said.

A pause. Creaking boards. Then a tapping. A foot on the boards. Maybe it was a signal? Burnside bounced on his heels. He was to wait until Errol shouted *freeze!* and then take the stairs and get into the house, seize and search, detain, question. No. Then another tap. Just walking.

And then the other familiar voice: "Y'all got badges? Shit, listen *up* in there. Pigs wanna *party!*" The cackling laugh of Sammy Slug. "That dick with you?" he said.

"Freeze!" Bert shouted and Slug loosed a grunt-laugh-squeal as Bert slammed him to the porch with a thud. Burnside took the stairs and squeezed past the threshold where Bert had his knee in Slug's back. Errol was kneeling too, binding Slug's wrists in his hand. Errol fidgeted at his belt with the other hand, going for his handcuffs. The toe of Burnside's boot grazed Slug's face as he burst into the living room.

Nothing. Not even the couch he'd seen through the window. No paraphernalia, nothing. He went through the empty dining room into the kitchen. A large pot sat on the stove burner. A white rectangle on the wall, two shades brighter than the rest of the dingy wall, three by six foot, where a refrigerator must've sat. Burnside opened a drawer, but it was empty.

"How many others?" Errol shouted in the front hall. His voice gained a lonely, hollow echo as it coursed through the bare house, and Burnside knew the answer: nobody. All the drawers were empty. Slug must have really tipped them off. Burnside peered down the sink and saw nothing. He wondered how long since they'd cleaned out. He ran his hand along the stainless sink and a film of grime came off on his fingertips.

"Who's here?" Errol said.

"No one," Burnside whispered. He took the lid off the pot on the stove. At the bottom, a circle of hardened red scuzz, the scalded remnants of tomato soup. In the back of the cruiser, Slug kept quiet as Burnside drove along the river to the city jail.

Sheriff Dudendorf and the Lake Bluff PD were able to successfully convince the newspaper that there was no story in the failed raid. Slug spent the night in the drunk tank but since the house had been almost literally empty, there were no possession charges to press, and disturbance charges wouldn't stick in a raid situation. The next week, as he cruised town, Burnside couldn't shake his vision of the room upstairs. The first room he'd opened the door to had loomed empty, weirdly large with long strips of hardwood floor running from the doorway to the far wall. Just long enough for the rules of perspective to

apply. The boards seemed set at an angle, and the room seemed to narrow at the far end, like the floors of a funhouse at a parking lot circus. The paint on the walls was pocked with bumps and drips and cracks. Nothing left in the closets but dust and pieces of stripped copper. Burnside tried to remember when he had seen anyone other than Slug in that house, but he had. He had, he was sure of it. There was the couch, for one thing.

By the end of the month, a wave came crashing through the police department. Internal Affairs, a detective in a shared office on the third floor booking fifteen hours a week on IA business, decided, after a few weeks of research, that the best way for the department to keep tabs on the kind of things that happened in these high-risk high-value secret project situations was to install video cameras on the tops of the cruisers and instruct officers to keep them on at all times. It was what big-city departments were doing, Dudendorf said at the next Monday meeting, and he for one thought it was a good idea. The IA guy looked on while Dudendorf read from his report. It would keep accusations of brutality at bay, Dudendorf said, looking at Burnside. Burnside kept his gaze and chewed the inside of his mouth until Dudendorf looked away and began to drone on about some other thing.

That night, he had been parked two blocks away. Standard procedure in a case like that. What would the camera have picked up? The moonlight on the river, the skeletal evidence of a struggle up ahead, some figures flashing in the dark.

By May, Dick Burnside took again to cruising the breakers at dusk. Usually a couple of cars were parked at the far end of the parking lot, their owners sitting in the

grass of the breakers field. Kids who ran their fingers through the soft grass and stared out at the lake and talked in hushed voices. The lake wind whisked their talk away.

In June he got put on nights, and so he began going to the breakers at the beginning of his shifts. For a while, nothing happened—the sunset-watchers having gone home after night fell—but one Wednesday he saw something as he idled past. He parked the car, flashed the siren once, turned on the video camera, and rushed out into the windy field. Two kids stood at the edge of the breakers, near the lake as it rolled against rocks, smoking.

"Oh, fuck," one of the kids said. His voice somehow familiar. Burnside clicked on the flashlight and shone it ahead. Donny Van Zyl and Jeremy Sanford. Linebackers, graduated seniors. Both headed to Western Michigan. Forty-ouncers half full in the grass at their feet. Donny had his hands behind his back.

"Coach," Jeremy said. His mouth hung open.

"Okay," Burnside said. "Donny, let's see what you got there."

"Coach, we can explain," Jeremy said. He stepped in front of his beer bottle.

Donny brought his hands in front of him like a minister giving the big send-off at the end of a service. A glass pipe sparkled in his palm.

"Oh, guys," Burnside said. "This isn't good. Not good at all." They stood there blinking and shuffling their feet as Burnside inspected their faces. "You could be arrested for this," Burnside said. Jeremy's face fell but Donny stood stoic, the pipe still held out in his hand.

"Didn't, uh, you—didn't you go to Western, Coach?" Jeremy said.

"I want you two to march to the police car over there. I'm going to call your parents first."

"Fuck," Jeremy said. "*Fuck*. My parents." He brought his hand to his face and sobbed.

"Let's go, fellows."

Jeremy went first, his shoulders hulking up and down with his sobs. Donny followed, muttering something hard and angry.

Burnside shone the light in his face. "What's that, Donny? You think this is a joke?"

"Wait til Wilson hears," Donny said, his wet teeth shining in the glare of the Maglite. He shook his head at Burnside. "That's all I'm saying. Wait for Wilson."

"You don't need to think about that right now," Burnside said. "This is serious business. You got some bigger things to worry about."

Burnside could hear Wilson's voice traveling across the year to echo in his head: *Ain't nothing bigger than football.*

"This is the last straw, Dick." Wilson tossed a clipboard across his bare desk. "We're the premier program in Southwest Michigan. I'm sorry to do this, but I can't tolerate any undercutting."

"Undercutting?" Burnside pushed the clipboard away. "You call this *undercutting*? Those kids were doing more than drinking, Keith. MIPs were going *easy*. They could've got drug possession. I confiscated a marijuana pipe from Donny Van Zyl.

This is serious, Keith, and we went *easy*."

Wilson blinked. "Easy," he said. "You went easy."

The air-conditioning hummed from a grate near Burnside's feet. "Those kids got a *slap* compared to what they could have got. You know what even a paraphernalia possession charge is these days?"

Wilson waved him off and picked the clipboard up from the other side of the desk. He smiled at it. "This is to tender your resignation," Wilson said. "Says you have a conflict of interest. You know, with Ricky on the team and all."

Burnside took the clipboard. The smooth cool edge in his palm seemed heavier than it should have. He read it.

Burnside said, "What is this? This is bullshit, Keith."

"You wanted to counter charges of favoritism. Nepotism. Keep the game honest."

Burnside flipped the page up over the clip to see if there was more, but there was just a photocopied sheet of last year's roster masking-taped to the board. "Unbelievable." He set the clipboard down on the desk. "I'm not doing it."

"I have big plans for Ricky," Wilson said. He leaned back in his chair and straightened his collar. "Those could change."

"You can't bribe me, Keith. Think about this. This is bad. A bad fucking idea."

"Folks could know about the Washington porch."

"But I guess his day is done, huh?"

"Not necessarily." Wilson leaned forward again and set his elbows on the desk. He seemed to be thinking. "But we got what we needed out of Washington, I suppose."

"What we needed?"

"If Ricky keeps it up, Andre won't be missed." Wilson considered his words a second, and the air-conditioning seemed to get even louder. "Let him go back to dealing drugs or smoking crack or whatever the hell they do over there."

Burnside's ankles were cold.

"Now," Wilson said. "Why don't you take a look at that letter."