

# **The Guardians**

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**by Jim Fusilli, 1953–**

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His stepfather was a cop, and Luther Addison became one, too, determined to address the indignities the old man suffered. A prideful shell now-racking coughs led to finding a dark spot on his lung-W.E. Addison was fading rapidly, down to a fragile hundred and six pounds from a rock-hard one eighty-five. So the burly young cop chose to keep his plan a secret from his loving family.

But as he entered the living room of his parents' little colonial in Cambria Heights, Queens, he found his stepfather already knew. Same as it ever was: No corner of his mind escaped the man's insight since he began courting Lucy Addison when Luther was five years old.

"Running for president?" W.E. Addison asked. The stereo was off, and his rocking chair didn't move.

“Organization needs a president,” the son replied lightly, trying to cut the tension. He’d already given the Entenmann’s to his mother, kissing her plump cheek as she prepared the cassoulet.

“We don’t need the organization,” W.E. said, staring ahead, shoulders high, his elbows on the chair’s curved arms.

Luther removed his blue clip-on tie. “Come on, Pop. Let’s not—”

“That’s Sergeant,” he replied sharply. “Given the topic, it’s Sergeant Addison.”

The son sat in his mother’s seat, lifting the TV Guide from the soft cushion and dropping it on the coffee table next to his eight-point service hat.

He clasped his stepfather’s frail forearm. “Should’ve been Lieutenant Addison. Precinct Commander Addison.”

“Maybe so,” the old man said. “But NYPD doesn’t need—”

“Levels the playing field, Pop,” he said softly.

“Says you’re black, not blue.”

No, Luther thought, as he stood to turn on a Hank Jones album. Says we’re black and blue.

The *Times* placed it inside the Metro section, but the Post allowed the story to scream on page one: “Activist Cop in Teen Shooting.”

Her Anthony was a sweet child who took his sister to Saint Helen’s every Sunday morning, cried Rose Ciccanti, near collapse in the picture the tabloid ran next to her son’s junior prom photo. “How could they do this to my Anthony?” she wailed. “My only son.”

According to the *Post*, Philip Altomonte, a cousin, said, “They want everything, and they’ll kill you to get it.”

What Altomonte, who was known throughout the neighborhood as Fat Philly, actually said was, “These spooks want everything, and now they got cops who’ll kill you to get it.”

On the day the story broke, neither paper, nor the *Daily News* for that matter, mentioned that Anthony Ciccanti Jr., a.k.a. Little Flaps, spent eighteen months in Bridges Juvenile Center in the Bronx for his role in a scheme to rob winners in the parking lot at Aqueduct. Could’ve been worse: Their third victim was a cop who skipped duty to hit the track with a tip. The cop was carrying, but he let the crew lift his eight hundred dollars so he wouldn’t have to explain why he wasn’t on patrol.

In January, jug-eared Ciccanti was released to the bosom of Howard Beach, where the Gambino crime family reigned.

Three months later, he was dead near a Dumpster at the United Postal Service facility in Brooklyn, a short drive from his parents’ white brick house on 160th Street.

TV crews descended on the Ciccanti home, where flowers were stacked against a plaster Madonna behind an ornate fence. Their reports, which led the news at six o’clock and again at eleven, featured an ID photo of a light-skinned black man with green eyes and a smattering of freckles across and around his nose. He was identified as Luther Addison, president of the Guardians Association, a fraternal organization for black cops.

No photos of the other three policemen at the scene, all of whom were white, were provided to media. By the following morning, when the *Post* ran the charmless picture on its front page, it was widely believed that Patrolman Addison shot young Ciccanti, though his department-issued Glock 19 hadn’t

been fired. The victim had been struck three times by rounds from a Cobra FS .32, a classical throw-down piece. Addison didn't carry one.

Two patrol cars had responded to the call to the UPS site, which sat on the Brooklyn-Queens border. One rolled from the 106 in Howard Beach, the other from the 75 in Brooklyn's East New York neighborhood.

Andy Hill, an oily, permanent-boil-on-his-butt cop, was behind the wheel of the car out of Howard Beach. The other car was driven by Joe Dalrymple, who graduated with Hill from the Academy when his "always by the book, college boy, Malcolm XYZ" partner was still in high school, back when W.E. Addison was walking a beat in oven-hot Crown Heights or directing traffic at JFK, yellow slicker doing little to ward off waves of freezing rain.

In a moment of candor, Dalrymple once told his young black partner that Andy Hill was an opportunist, and connected. "His pockets never don't jingle," he explained with a knowing wink.

Though they'd been all over the 7-5, Internal Affairs wanted him at 1PP. Addison knew there would be photographers—Mayor Koch was holding hands in Howard Beach and calling the black activist cop on the rug would play big—so to dodge the gauntlet, he took the R train to below City Hall, stayed underground, and entered One Police Plaza via its loading dock, where two Guardian Association members were in the doghouse, along with a redhead named Restovich who discharged his firearm into a Pac-Man machine at a bar in Bensonhurst.

IAD seemed surprised he looked so composed, his polyester blues pressed to a guillotine blade's edge.

Addison studied the stuffy, wood-paneled conference room as he dropped a manila envelope on the long table. He'd half expected they would do it in a box at the First Precinct, maybe cuff him to a soldered-on ring. The other half of his expectations was that this was all foolishness that would pass with an insincere apology after the real shooter was revealed.

"Luther Addison," he said, adding his badge number as he sat.

On the way in, he passed framed photos of President Reagan, Mayor Koch, and Commissioner McGuire, bracketed by the Stars and Stripes and the flag of the State of New York.

The two IAD detectives were white too.

"Where's your union rep?" asked Alderman.

"Maybe the Guardians don't provide a rep or a lawyer," said Zachary.

Addison looked at his wristwatch. "Eight seconds," he said. "Took you eight seconds to flip the card."

"Yeah, well, you knew Ciccanti was white when you shot him," Zachary said. He was good looking, boyish with sandy brown hair and crisp-cut jaw; an unlikely choice for the bad-cop role. Maybe he wasn't ready for any part of it: Slamming the Guardians confirmed IAD wasn't recording the interview.

"Check my ten card," Addison said. "I don't carry a Cobra."

Zachary, again: "You the kind of guy who puts everything on the ten card, Addison?"

"That's Officer Addison," he said sharply. "Given the topic, it's Officer Addison. And, yes, every gun I own is listed on my ten card."

"Hard case," Zachary muttered as he left his chair.

"Officer, we're just trying to piece it together," Alderman said, tapping his middle finger on an accordion folder. "I mean, it's a tough one, right?"

"It became tough when someone went to the media," Addison replied. "You're going to have to undo that and face the cover-up charges."

"Not if we make you for it." Zachary.

"I don't throw down," Addison said. "I don't shoot unarmed kids."

"Says..."

"Anyone you interview."

"Long as he's black."

Addison shook his head and, quoting Reagan, said, "There you go again."

Alderman said, "You told your CO you didn't draw—"

"No I didn't. I drew," Addison said. "I didn't fire."

"The Glock," Zachary said, his back to the table.

Addison opened the manila envelope and withdrew a notarized document. He passed it to Alderman, who read it with care.

Hearing silence, Zachary turned and looked over his partner's shoulder. After a moment, he said, "What makes a man do something like this?"

"People like you," Addison replied.

"Two tests," Alderman muttered as he reread the report. "Overkill."

After the lengthy interview at the 7-5 following the Ciccanti shooting, Addison arranged for tests that proved he hadn't fired a gun, making him the first to use the resource at City College he proposed and helped develop for the Guardians.

"That's going to the press," Addison said, nodding.

"Why's that?" Alderman asked, suddenly agitated.

Addison slid the front page of this morning's Post from the envelope. "IAD set that in motion."

Someone inside NYPD told the Post the investigation would be guided by a respect for Office Addison's "civil rights," a phrase that meant one thing to blacks and another to certain whites, including many in Howard Beach.

The *Post* headline: "Where's My Brother's Civil Rights?" Nine-year-old Angela Ciccanti in her Saint Helen's uniform. Meanwhile, Fat Philly's crew and their families marched Cross Bay Boulevard, signs in fists, demanding the medical examiner release Ciccanti's body.

Alderman asked, "Got friends in the press, do you?"

Addison stared at Alderman's face, the blond mustache that didn't work, the clenching at the corners of his eyes. He was the one, not Zachary. Alderman wanted this black versus white, the easiest way for IAD to make it disappear.

"No friends in the press," Addison replied. But his wife's sister knew the principals at D. Parke Gibson Associates, an influential public relations firm. "We're just going to make certain that—"

"Who's *we*, Addison?" Alderman asked sharply.

"*We* is me and anyone in NYPD, the D.A.'s, and the Justice Department that wants to find out what happened to Little Flaps, who was breaking into the UPS depot last Thursday night with a Philips head, a box cutter, an Instamatic, and a duffel bag."

Alderman said, "The D.A. being your friend Sharon Knight. Sister is bucking for chief of the Homicide Bureau, isn't she?"

"*Sister?*" Addison held back a laugh.

Zachary put his palms on the table. "Officer," he said, "I'm guessing you know nothing you do is going to wash this away."

"And I'm thinking you've got two days, maybe three, to hook this where it belongs," Addison replied. "Once we get it off me, it'll go where it goes. Which could be IAD, could be the mayor's office, could be whoever shot the boy."

He looked at Alderman.

“A lot of heads for your plate, Detective,” Addison said, “but the black one is up and leaving.”

He sat back satisfied, the Guardians and Sharon Knight on his shoulder.

Alderman smiled dark as he leaned in.

“Let me tell you how we see it,” he said. “Kid made you run your lazy black ass. Dalrymple told you to cool down, but you wouldn’t have it, not after Flaps dropped a couple of N-bombs on you.”

“Ciccanti was at least sixty feet—”

Alderman brought up his index finger. “You pull your throw down—hell, half the 7-5 will say you carried it—and you shot him. Three times. Then you stonewalled your CO, ran to your black-ass friends at City College to kick off the cover-up, and you went out and hired some PR firm to work the press. You’ll ask the D.A.’s office to dump this on a white cop ‘cause blue ain’t good enough for you. You’ll say anything to tear us down.”

Addison stared at him.

“And that’s the way it plays,” Alderman said. “It’s 1982 and you shot a white boy in Howard Beach. You know what’s up and leaving, Officer? Your career, your freedom. Your freedom and your career.”

Steele and August were at a table in the corner near the garbage bin and a stack of orange trays. They’d pretended they hadn’t seen Lucy helping W.E. out of the cab on Ninth, leading him by the elbow and then hanging back as he made his way alone along the haphazard aisle of Formica tables and yellow plastic chairs. But when they stood to greet their old colleague, they nodded discreetly to her, gestures she returned with a pained smile.

“Mr. Man,” August said with forced cheer. The stout, coffee-light-skinned man took Addison’s hands in his. “Bony but beautiful.”

Steele said, “W.E.”

They waited until Addison angled into a seat.

“Started without me,” W.E. said when his grimace subsided.

August had been dipping a finger into a small plastic cup of barbecue sauce. “Never.”

“Hammer tied you down?”

Henry Steele smiled.

Three men old before their time, though Steele, with his shaved head and impossible taut skin, looked like he might still be dogging the Genovese family’s black lieutenants across Brooklyn and Queens. Cookie August, on the other hand, had put on twenty-five additional pounds since he left a stretch as the only black man in the Anti-Crime Unit. He was showing his age: The curly hair above his ears had gone from peppery gray to powder-wig white.

Good men, W.E. Addison knew, dedicated cops. Thank God neither of them was on the clock with stage three non-small cell lung cancer that was no longer treatable by chemo or radiation.

Savoring the mesquite-wood scent, Addison looked toward the pit. Not quite noon, which meant Smokey’s was still serving last night’s ribs. The tender meat would fall off the bone.

“Same old?” August asked as he went for trays.

Addison nodded, knowing it might be the last time.

Luther Addison was on modified desk duty until someone leaked which phone he'd answer, so NYPD sent him home. After food shopping at Zabar's for his Giselle and their baby son, he rented a black Buick Century, waited until dark, and drove the Williamsburg Bridge to Myrtle Avenue, making his way to Howard Beach. The funeral home was on 159th Avenue.

Fat Philly was working the front door, shaking hands like he was running for office. Red shirt open at the collar under a black suit, heavy gold chain on his wrist, red carnation in his lapel, gray patent leather loafers: His idea of appropriately somber for the photographers and TV crews.

One of the Guardians out of the 1-13 in nearby Jamaica told him a snitch reported Fat Philly behind the scheme that landed Little Flaps in Bridges. Addison wondered if Philly was making some kind of move, knowing the TV lights would keep the real mobsters at bay.

To dodge a tail, Addison drove the Belt Parkway and over to Rockaway Boulevard to circle Aqueduct before doubling back to 159th. Then he did it again. And again, driving past the funeral home, using the mirrors to see who was coming and going.

Shortly after ten o'clock, he returned to find Fat Philly putting Mrs. Ciccanti and her daughter Angela in a limo; the fat man went inside, where he stayed even after the funeral home shut down. The crowd gone, Addison parked up the block and cut the engine.

His partner Joe Dalrymple arrived shortly before midnight.

Frowning in confusion, Addison took off his baseball cap and ran his hand across his close-cropped hair. Running no more than thirty feet behind him when a weapon was discharged, Dalrymple knew Addison hadn't taken down Little Flaps, and Addison was fairly sure Dalrymple, who'd bent left coming out of the patrol car, hadn't shot him either.

Then why a visit to pay respects, especially after the widowed mother had gone?

Sharon Knight said, "If he did it, if he's lying and playing us for fools, I'll take him down myself."

In the cafeteria at 100 Centre Street, white faces nodded. Who didn't know Knight was angling to become the first African American Homicide Bureau chief in the D.A.'s office? Breaking a black cop in Reagan's America would look good on her resumé.

She knew they'd think her ambition would help make it go away, that she'd allow it to land on Addison to curry favor with NYPD and the right-wing media. Maybe they figured they'd let her choose whether to bring it to the grand jury, and then they couldn't lose. If she got an indictment, fine. If she didn't, it'd be a public failure by an African American. Or worse, it'd been seen as a refusal by a black woman to bring a black cop to justice.

She didn't care what they thought as long as they turned over the files on Little Flaps and Fat Philly, and IAD's jackets on Hill and Dalrymple.

She told Luther Addison they would.

She didn't expect they'd be delivered by Sarah Tolchinsky, the Homicide Bureau's deputy chief.

Tolchinsky, a tall Hassidim with skin that seemed translucent, appeared at Knight's cubicle and waved for her to follow. They returned to her office where musty blinds prevented a view of the Woolworth Building.

The files were on her desk. She'd requested them before she learned of Knight's interest. Twenty-nine years in the District Attorney's office allowed her to recognize an IAD cover-up the moment it began. The photo in the *Post* told her they saw Addison as an easy mark for a frame, a patsy.

"What's more important to you? Your career or seeing this through?" Tolchinsky asked, as she closed her door.

Knight suppressed an inadvertent grin.

"Your career. You're young. Fine," Tolchinsky waved, "but let's see if we can help you and him."

She allowed Knight to use the files at a table in the corner.

An hour or so later, lost in a confusing brief crafted by one of Knight's peers, Tolchinsky heard a voice.

"Damn," Knight repeated. She quickly double-checked the dates she'd scribbled on a yellow pad, and then stared at her boss.

"What?" Tolchinsky stood.

"I—We've got it," Knight replied, wisely.

Fat Philly was relegated to page seven of the *Post*, bounced from the front page when an oil truck flipped and burned on the George Washington Bridge.

"This guy's a moron," said August, tapping the paper.

Lucy Addison had put up coffee and sliced a pound cake her son brought.

W.E. wore a bathrobe over his pajamas. His stepson, in brown slacks and sienna turtleneck, sat in his mother's seat at the table in a sunny kitchen that could barely accommodate two.

Steele leaned against the refrigerator. "He said...?"

"He told me not to worry," August replied.

"About...?"

August shrugged. "I shook his hand and told him it was a terrible thing. He said *Don't worry. It's gonna be fine.*"

"Think he made you?" W.E. asked.

"You forget I'm half Sicilian," August said. "We spoke Italian."

Luther Addison managed a smile. The three old men came up through NYPD when black men comprised about two percent of the force. They knew how to use what little they had.

"As for you, Luther," August said, "you run about the worse sit I've ever seen." He reached for another slice of the pound cake. "I wouldn't be surprised if you turn up in some TV footage. Circling, circling..."

"It's gonna be fine," Hammer Steele repeated. "Meaning it falls on Luther?"

"Oh yeah. Especially since Joey Dalrymple showed up."

Steele looked down at Luther. "Your partner."

"And Andy Hill's running buddy since the Academy," August added.

"Andy Hill." The dark-skinned Steele grimaced his distaste.

W.E. watched his friends. Marrying Hill and Dalrymple told him they were building to something.

"Somebody says Hill's got history with Little Flaps," August said.

"Who?" W.E. asked, his voice frail.

"Hammer."

The Addison men turned to Henry Steele.

"The Genoveses say," said Steele, who tapped an old source. "Little Flaps Ciccanti ripped off Hill."

Luther let out a little cough. He said, "August 19, 1978. Aqueduct. Fat Philly's crew, including Flaps, took down fourteen hundred dollars from a sixty-nine-year-old man who hit the trifecta for the first time in his life. Same afternoon Andy Hill claimed someone stole his wife's mink out of the trunk of his car, which she parked at... Aqueduct."

"No coincidence," said August, who couldn't decide if he found Addison's thoroughness annoying or amusing.

W.E. said, "If the UPS facility in Howard Beach gets ripped off, the Feds will think the Gambinos backed it." He shook his head. "Fat Philly went to the Genoveses for protection?"

Steele nodded.

August said, "What a mook."

Steele turned to young Addison. "Stand down," he said. "This thing plays out. Fat Philly will flip any way he has to."

Addison hesitated.

"Go ahead," his stepfather whispered.

Leaning over his coffee cup, Luther Addison told them what else Knight delivered and how tests City College ran cleared him. "I think we can do this by the book," he added

"Whose book?" August asked.

Rosemary Barone worked as a secretary at Christ Hospital, a sprawling brick complex across the Hudson in downtown Jersey City. Addison was told he'd find her sooner or later in sunlight, smoking two Newports at a time and cursing ex-husbands. Imagine a rusty nail come to life, Addison was advised. That's Rosemary Flanagan Hill Barone.

"Yeah, and?" she said when Addison identified himself. He wore a gray turtleneck under a forest green corduroy jacket with gray elbow patches.

He went gentle. Jersey City had a huge African American population and he was betting she didn't much like that: All the other smokers around her were white too. The black smokers were gathered at the curb maybe thirty feet away.

"I was wondering if I might have a word..."

"*Have a word?* One? What kind?"

The white smokers tittered, their condescension sprinkled with uncertainty and quavering defiance.

He said, "It's about your husband Andy."

"Tell me he's dead," she said, scowling under a blond bouffant some twenty years out of date.

"No, he's not—"

"Not? Wrong word."

"It's about your mink coat," Addison continued. "The one that was stolen at Aqueduct."

She let loose an ugly rattle Addison took for her laugh. "You think I look like I ever had a mink stole?"

"Andy said you did. He said you left in it your trunk—"

"I left a mink stole in the trunk of my car at the racetrack? Me?" She spit. "How much did he get for it?"

"The stole you never had?"

"From insurance, wise guy."

Addison replied, and then she started spewing.

Twenty-five minutes later, her supervisor came looking for her.



“Call me,” she told Addison, as she followed the hardy black woman back inside. “I’m just getting started on that miserable pimple.”

Addison shot up in bed, certain the ringing phone meant his stepfather had passed. But someone had gotten his unlisted number, which he’d given only to his family, the Guardians, a couple of college buddies, and NYPD. Racial epithets mixed with profanity told him where the caller got it.

Wrapped in a robe, he went to his chair in the living room and listened to the traffic below on Columbus Avenue, trying to quell his anger. One o’clock and he knew he wasn’t going back to sleep. He checked on the baby, looked over the notes he made after talking to Hill’s ex, and then replayed the conversation he’d had with the old cops—the taciturn Steele, the jovial but vaguely dangerous August, and his stepfather, the reasoned, reliable W.E.

The original Guardians, he thought, as he started looking at it through their eyes.

No sense telling IAD or his CO what he’d learned about Hill.

Two hours later, he was knocking on Joe Dalrymple’s apartment door.

“You shouldn’t be here,” Dalrymple said. Roused from bed, he was wearing boxer shorts and a Yankees T-shirt.

Addison encouraged his partner to step onto his fourteenth floor balcony, which overlooked downtown Forest Hills.

“Cut your losses while you can, Joe.”

Dalrymple didn’t know Addison had a temper. “I don’t—”

Addison held up his hand.

“What?” Dalrymple said. “What do you think you know?”

“I know Andy Hill worked a deal with Fat Philly and held a grudge against Ciccanti.”

“Oh. You know?” he sneered.

“Little Flaps jacked him in the Aqueduct lot, and he gave up eight hundred dollars.”

“Never. Andy wouldn’t give up a dime, especially if he was carrying.”

Addison said, “Easier to get Fat Philly to return the eight hundred and then double dip through insurance.”

“You don’t—”

“And Hill lets Fat Philly stay in business as long as he kicks back.”

Dalrymple frowned.

“We’ve seen his jacket, Joe. IAD looked at him. The insurance company called on the mink claim. He didn’t tell you?”

Dalrymple hesitated. “Take it up with Andy,” he said finally.

“Hill is tight with the Gambinos, and Fat Philly going to the Genoveses puts him in the middle. Maybe you too.”

That was out-of-the-air conjecture, but both cops knew Hill was dirty. Killing Fat Philly’s Little Flaps told the Gambinos Hill was still their boy; at the same time, it kept Fat Philly’s business in Hill’s pocket.

As for setting up a fellow member of NYPD...

“Black man bothers you so much, Joe, you want to take his career?”

“Get lost.”

“That’s it, isn’t it? Hate owns your soul, Joe.”

“Listen to yourself,” Dalrymple said. “Black this, black that, and I’m riding with you. You’re a pain in the tail, Luther, and you don’t get it. There’s no room for you. None.”

“In what? No room for me in what?”

Shivering in the late-night air, Dalrymple said, “Nobody’s going to stand by and let it happen. NYPD ain’t going equal opportunity, Luther. Your father knew to shut up, but you...” He stopped. “Hell, Luther, you know this.”

“So I’m a killer, Joe? I killed that kid?”

“It is what it is—”

“Hill knows I’m riding with you,” Addison said. “He remembers all the times you told him what I said. He figures two birds: He gets Ciccanti and you get rid of your partner—”

Suddenly, Addison’s heart crashed, his stomach jolted, and he understood it as clear as if his stepfather had told him what had happened.

He grabbed Dalrymple and rushed him to the balcony’s edge, bending him back over the rail.

“Luther!”

“Hill pulled the throw down to shoot me, didn’t he?”

“Luther, wait—” Dalrymple was halfway into the night, dangling a few hundred feet above the concrete, parked cars, and prickly bushes below.

“I go down, you take out Ciccanti and the Cobra throw down winds up in his hand.”

“For God’s sake, Luther—”

“To kill off the Guardians,” Addison barked. “To keep it—Say it’s so.”

“Luther, Jesus—”

“Say it!”

“Luther,” he screamed, “Luther, yeah, all right. But I saved your life, Luther. Andy set you up. You and Ciccanti. Two dead, but when I heard, Luther—”

Addison spun his partner and tossed him to the balcony floor.

“Luther, listen. I told him, we can’t shoot a cop. I told—I mean, I didn’t want you dead.” He scrambled to his feet. “I wanted you gone. Shut up, gone, not dead. You’re ruining this good thing, you and your other nig—”

Addison stepped hard and slapped Dalrymple across the face. Panting, he stared as his partner crashed into the sliding-glass window and tumbled back into the apartment, pulling a curtain off its rods.

“That story about Hill and Little Flaps at the track back in ‘78 is in the morning’s *Times*,” Addison said. “So you have a choice. You call IAD now and make good. Or you take a few steps back and get a running start on a dive off this balcony.”

Dalrymple stared up at Addison, who glowered, spittle flying with each word, chest heaving.

As Dalrymple crawled backward toward his bed, Addison said, “Pick up the phone, Joe. Pick it up before I think better of it and toss you off the balcony myself.”

Steele and August couldn’t decide, so they both went, and they found Fat Philly solo in a booth in a diner on Cross Bay Boulevard.

Little Flaps Ciccanti’s funeral mass at Saint Helen’s was due to begin in two hours.

“What?”

Steele and August knew how to walk it so no badge was required. They eased in across from Fat Philly, his three eggs over easy and home fries in marinara sauce.

Luther told them Flaps was carrying an Instamatic, so they knew the kid went in for more than he could carry in a duffel bag.

“The Gambinos can’t decide whether to pull off your head first or just stick it up your butt while it’s still on your shoulders,” August said.

“As for the Genovese family...” Steele had learned it was often better to let a worm’s imagination complete his sentences.

“Andy Hill is talking,” August said. It wasn’t true—W.E.’s kid said it was Dalrymple who rolled over—but a plausible lie well told was at least as good as fact. “You want the Genoveses to back your move on the Gambinos’ turf, and they’re supposed to do it for a couple hundred Gs’ worth of mink stoles?”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” Fat Philly scoffed as he pushed a butter-laden piece of toast into a yolk. “Flaps was on his own, looking for baseball cards or something. Who don’t know that?”

“Flaps cases the plant and he can keep anything he can carry,” Steele said. “You and the crew go back a couple days later when everyone relaxes. At least that’s what you told the Genoveses: UPS is moving stoles—sable, lynx, and upper-end mink from Russia and Finland.”

“You got nothing,” Fat Philly said unconvincingly. “Mink stoles, Russia...”

“You believe they won’t hit you in church,” Steele asked.

“Who?” Fat Philly said.

“That is the question, isn’t it?” Steele.

“No, I mean who is—”

August said, “Both. They’ll kill you twice.”

“Or three times,” Steele added. “Once the Ciccantis find out you tipped Hill that Little Flaps was alone.”

“Whoa. You’re saying I set up Flaps—”

August said, “You set up Flaps. Yeah.”

Fat Philly slammed his palm on the table, sending coffee over the cup’s side. “I knew it. I knew it,” he said. “This is our thing, not your thing. Our th—”

Without breaking eye contact, August drove a fork an inch into the back of Fat Philly’s hand.

Handcuffed and perp-walked, Andy Hill’s photo was on the front page of the News. The *Post* had turned its attention to a meeting between Reagan and the pope.

Addison drove out to Cambria Heights, retrieved his stepfather, and brought him all but roundtrip. He had considered taking him late to a jazz club, the Vanguard, maybe, or Sweet Basil’s, but they were both tired of being the only black men in the room minus the musicians on the bandstand. He wanted their time together to be nothing but contentment. So back to Smokey’s.

Over fall-off-the-bone ribs, W.E. Addison said, “Luther, it’s time for me to say good-bye to my grandson.”

Addison tapped his stepfather’s hand. “I know, Pop. Next stop.” Once again, he tried to make it light. “First we’ve got to wipe that barbecue sauce off your face.”

The old man looked at his stepson, who he couldn’t have loved more had he been his own blood. His tired old heart still swelled from the pride of knowing he could do right by him one last time.

They sat quiet, surrounded by the chatter of students and suits on hand for an early lunch. W.E. sipped tart lemonade from tall Styrofoam.

“Got what you need, Pop?” He hadn’t told him about Hill’s murderous plan. Steele might’ve figured it, since he told him to stand down, but there was no reason for W.E. to know there were cops who wanted his stepson dead.

But W.E. knew, of course he did. Same as it ever was.

“It’s a good thing, son. The Guardians. If a man like you is at the top.”

Luther tilted his head. He’d begun to think otherwise—Dalrymple told him his advocacy put a wall between the two of them when they should’ve worked to be as close as any two partners; and Sarah Tolchinsky, white and a devout Jew, chaperoned his cause through the D.A.’s office. Sharon Knight said Tolchinsky was the one who made the call to the mayor’s office to set him straight.

Hell, even Steele’s snitch was white.

“Pop,” Addison sighed, “I’m thinking I’ve got to look deep before I decide.”

“You get yourself good people like Hammer and Cookie and you’ll be all right.”

As Luther Addison nodded, W.E. ran a paper napkin across his lips, hiding from his stepson a smile of everlasting satisfaction.

