

## Prologue

*New York City – May 1978*

She had to work quickly. With her three-week-old baby now stirring in the lidless cedar hope chest that served as a makeshift crib next to her side of the bed, she knew not a moment could be wasted. The man next to her – her first cousin – groaned as he rolled onto his side, the stench of liquor having soaked completely through him. Taking a deep breath, she carefully eased from the bed. Dressed in a long T-shirt and cutoff sweat pants, she stared down at the man for a fleeting moment, feeling a punishing wave of hatred and disgust move through her. In the dim glow of a solitary night-light, she could see his graying, bare chest expanding and contracting as heavy breathing kept him trapped in a deep well of sleep. Just where she needed him to be.

Quickly and deliberately she moved. She bent over her three-week-old son, now fully awake, his tiny hands pawing the air before him. She bent closer, touched her nose to his, and made little ticking sounds with her lips. He murmured, his little hands paddling away.

She worked methodically, the plan having long been rehearsed in her mind. “Shhh,” she told him as she deftly scooped him up, wrapping him quickly in a tiny, white blanket. Carrying him, she tiptoed out of the bedroom, down the narrow hallway to the kitchen. Once there, she filled a saucepan with water and turned the burner on low underneath it. She then retrieved three full bottles of prepared formula from the refrigerator and placed them into the water. From there, she moved into the living room, set the baby on the couch, and quickly changed into a pair of faded jeans, a long-sleeve dark blue blouse, and a pair of leather loafers she had hidden under the dresser. She didn’t want to arouse his suspicions by leaving them out in the open overnight. If he saw them upon his return from the bar, no matter how late it was, or how drunk he was, he would have awakened her demanding to know why. She then reached further under the dresser and pulled out two bags, one a small leather overnight bag filled with several items of her own clothing, an extra pair of walking shoes, a toothbrush, and a hairbrush. The other bag was a larger canvas duffle bag, its bottom already lined with as many of the baby’s outfits and diapers as she could fit into it. She told herself they would not only provide extra changes, but would also provide an excellent cushion. She set the duffle bag onto the couch, lifted her son and placed him gently and carefully into the bag. She zipped it up just far enough to cover his legs, waist, and half of his stomach. He murmured, his blue-gray eyes looking up at her. She kissed him on the cheek. She was amazed he hadn’t yet cried for a bottle, and was thankful because it allowed her to move all the more quickly. “Shhh...” she whispered, “such a good boy.”

She returned to the kitchen, pulled the bottles from the now warm water, dried them and wrapped each in aluminum foil. She then moved back to the couch, slid the warm bottles, along with a roll of paper towels and a small container of baby formula, into the duffle bag near the baby’s feet. At this point, with everything completed, she tiptoed back

into the bedroom. He was curled on his side now, lost in a growling sleep. She moved over to the chair where his clothes lay thrown in a pile and reached for the wallet in the back pocket of his jeans. There she found all of the money he had – thirty-eight dollars. She slid the money into her pants pocket, which was already filled with two hundred eighty dollars. Although she turned over to him most of the money she had earned while working at a nearby bakery, she had managed to secret away a bit as well. For well over three months, she had also been pilfering from him, little by little. When he would come home inebriated and pass out, which was several nights a week, she'd take two or three dollars at a time. It soon added up.

With the money safely secured, she looked down at him one last time. She couldn't believe he was related to her mother. She felt her heart sink. She had only been eight years old when her mother had died. She had watched helplessly as her mom succumbed to the ravages of leukemia. Since her father had left shortly after she was born, the only relatives remaining were her mother's much older brother, James, and his only son, Donny, who lay stretched out before her on the bed. She had always thought of Donny as an uncle rather than a cousin because he was seventeen years her senior. While Uncle James was a decent, hard-working, caring man, she found Donny to be nothing of the sort. Unlike his father, he was hot-tempered and mean.

In the beginning, life with Uncle James and Donny was okay. Uncle James cared for her the best he could and treated her like his own. But when he died suddenly from complications of a stroke when she was fourteen, everything changed. With only herself and Donny in the small apartment, her life became one of fear and abuse. He clearly resented her and treated her with contempt. He reminded her daily of the burden she had placed on him and his father. At first, it was the verbal abuse and even the occasional slap on the back of the head when something wasn't done to his satisfaction, whether it was the dishes or the wash. Soon his behavior escalated to what she feared most – the drunken visits to her room in the middle of the night. She tried to refuse at first, but he smacked her over and over again where the marks couldn't be seen and then threatened to throw her out. She believed there was nothing she could do; she felt trapped. When she became pregnant at sixteen, he derisively accused her of sleeping with someone she had met at the bakery. He refused to believe the baby was his; in fact, he continuously denied the abuse even though it continued through her pregnancy. And when the baby came, he detested its very sight. Her fear, not so much for herself, but for her son, prompted her to begin to plan their escape long before the baby was even born.

Turning away from him, she crept back out of the bedroom and returned to the living room. She took out an already written note from her pocket, and placed it on the end table next to the couch. It simply read: *We have left. Don't come looking for us. If you do, I will call the police and tell them what you did to me.*

With this done, she promptly hoisted her little leather bag over her shoulder, and then gently picked up the duffle bag. She kissed her now sleeping son one last time before making her way out into the predawn streets of New York City.

An hour later, she was sitting on a crowded southbound train to Baltimore. Her son, now out of his duffle bag cocoon, was lying across her lap, sucking heartily from a bottle. A few minutes after leaving the apartment, he had fallen back asleep. But when he awoke the second time right after boarding the train, his wails filled the entire car. Now, fully sated and quiet, she drew him close to her. This was the first time she had had a chance to take a deep breath and concentrate on him. After all, he was what all of this was about. She snuggled

him up to just below her chin, kissed him and hummed softly as he drank. This day, she knew, would define their entire lives. She was hopeful for his future, but dreaded hers. She was overwhelmed with fear, confusion, and uncertainty. Donny had forced her to quit school when she was sixteen, so that she could “carry some of the fuckin’ burden.” Uneducated, alone, and virtually destitute, she knew little about raising a child and had no one to whom she could turn. She knew the two hundred and seventy dollars she did have would be gone in no time. She had looked on a map and, for no real logical reason, decided that Baltimore would be her destination. From Baltimore, she would catch a bus and go as far south as her money would permit. If she transferred to a bus, she reasoned, she would be harder to trace.

The baby murmured and let the bottle slide from his mouth. She dried his lips gently with a paper towel, and then held him as closely as she could. She loved him beyond anything she could describe. She rocked him, kissed him, and watched through the windows as the world flashed by.

Before she knew it, the baby was asleep in her arms, and she felt the train begin to slow as Baltimore’s Penn Station approached. She quickly bundled the baby back in his blanket and placed him carefully in the bag. She would wait until half the train had emptied and, as discretely as she could, blend in with the crowd as she exited. One thing she had learned about herself – she could go virtually unnoticed in the world. And this was what she was counting on today.

After the train stopped, she waited for about three minutes, and then made her exit. As she had hoped, Penn Station was bustling with the morning rush. Carrying the duffle bag carefully in both hands, she moved through the crowd like a ghost. She moved past the long ticket counter, studying it intently. Good, there were four women working. She then looked to where the restrooms were located. She saw them down a small corridor near the ticket counter. She moved quickly to the front of the station and saw what she was looking for – a row of phone booths. And just as she hoped, they were hidden from the view of the ticket counter. Perfect. She turned and, while counting out the seconds, headed back toward the restrooms. She made it to the ladies’ room in twenty seconds.

Pushing open the door, she saw that it was crowded; three of the four stalls were in use, and there were four women at the sinks. Luckily for her, the last stall was empty. She pushed open the swinging door and slid the latch to the lock position once it was closed behind her. She set her small leather bag on the floor next to the toilet, and then slid the baby out of his duffle bag. He was now just awakening, and starting to cry.

“Shhh,” she whispered, “shhh.” She then pulled one of the bottles from the bag and began to feed him. He murmured, his little body relaxing in her arms. She pulled him close, her voice soft in his ear. “I love you, my beautiful boy. I’m sorry for bringing you into my ugly life.” She paused, her whispered voice cracking as tears poured down her cheeks. “There’s so much beauty in the world, we just need to be strong enough to find it.”

While standing with her back pressed against the closed door, she snuggled the soft skin of his face next to hers, and rocked him back and forth. She was determined to wait in that stall until she could hear that the bathroom was empty.

And she did just that. She waited, whispering all the while her love for him.

And she hummed...

*Twenty minutes later...*

“Do you think I’m a strange looking man?” sixty-one year old Mitchell Humphrey asked, meaty lips parting into a grin that exposed teeth the shape of tiny tombstones and yellowed by more than forty years of cigarette smoke. As was usual for a Tuesday morning, Mitchell stood across the counter from the two ticket agents, a wrinkled Orioles baseball cap pulled down tightly over his head, revealing wisps of slightly greasy, grayish white hair flaring out from underneath it.

Betty Sanders, from her position behind the counter, couldn’t help but giggle. After eighteen years as an employee of the railroad, things like Mitchell’s weekly visits, which had occurred regularly now for nearly two years, were a bright welcome. She didn’t dislike her job, although its monotony weighed heavily on her. There were, however, moments that deviated from the job’s routine and made it more bearable. Mitchell’s appearances were one of them. He would stroll in at the end of his shift as a night watchman at the nearby parking garage, and instantly brighten the morning. On most days he worked from 4 p.m. to midnight, but on Mondays he worked the graveyard shift. It had become his routine to stop in at the train station every Tuesday morning on his way home to buy a newspaper at the inside newsstand. It also became part of his routine to stop by the ticket counter and chit-chat for a little while before heading on his way. He would usually arrive just after the morning rush. This morning was no different.

“I’m serious!” Mitchell was insisting, holding out his arms. “I mean look at my arms. Look how short they are in proportion to the rest of my body. Let’s face it, I have little dinosaur arms.”

Betty and her coworker, Patricia, who was issuing tickets to an elderly couple, laughed. She apologized to her customers as she handed them their tickets for the 10:05 a.m. train to Philadelphia. With a smile, they glanced at Mitchell as they moved away.

“And then I got this belly,” he was explaining, patting his protruding, T-shirt covered abdomen. “Now this, I blame on my ex-wife. She drove me to drink. I got at least a keg stored down here.”

“What got you talkin’ about your...” Betty paused, searching for the correct phrasing of her question, “how shall I say, unique physique? You’re usually filling us in on the news of the day.”

Mitchell leaned onto the counter. “Some kids laughed at me as I was walking over here,” he confessed, appearing to hold back his own laughter as he thought of what they had said.

“What’s so funny?” Betty asked, admiring how easy it was for him to be self-deprecating.

“They called me Homeless Hank.” Then he straightened, waved his hand over his completely disheveled appearance. “Tell me truthfully ladies, do I look homeless?”

The two women grinned. “Why of course not, Mitch,” Patricia assured him as she reached to answer the phone that was ringing on the counter next to her.

Mitchell leaned again on the counter, laughed openly now. “Damn kids...” he said as he unfolded the Baltimore Sun. “I haven’t read the paper yet, Betty, so I’m not up to real time on the news. I’ll be able to give you my take though in a few minutes.” Then he tapped the counter. “But one thing’s for sure, I feel bad for those kids who laughed at me. With the continuing energy crisis, our political machinery still trying to heal from Watergate, and all of

the turmoil in the Middle East and elsewhere, things aren't going to get any easier for the generations to come."

"But doesn't every generation say the same thing?" Betty offered. "That the world, from their perspective, is going to hell in a hand basket."

Mitchell shrugged. "I suppose that's true. Those in the thirties were recovering from the Depression. Those in the forties had to live through a world war. The fifties with Korea, McCarthy, and the growing Cold War..."

"And the crazy sixties..." Betty began, but was interrupted by the sudden ringing of the telephone. She looked over at Patricia, but she was again busy with customers. "Excuse me for a moment, Mitchell," Betty said apologetically.

Mitchell nodded and began to thumb through the paper.

Betty picked up the phone on the third ring. "Amtrak. How may I help you?"

A long silence came from the other end of the phone.

"How may I help you?" she repeated.

"Ma'am?" a girl's young voice crept through the receiver.

"Yes."

"Ma'am," the girl said in a soft, trembling voice, "I just left my little baby in the women's bathroom. He's only three weeks old. Ma'am, please make sure that somebody loves him."

Betty's eyes narrowed. "Who is this?" she asked, but by the time she uttered the words, the phone was already dead in her hand. She stared down at it, a perplexed look settling on her face.

"What's wrong?" Patricia asked.

Betty shook her head, and slowly replaced the phone back onto the receiver. "That was strange," she said, glancing toward the corridor where the bathrooms were located.

"What is it?" Patricia wondered.

"Watch things for me, will you, Patty?" Betty asked as she headed around the counter.

"Sure. Is everything okay?" Patricia called after her.

Betty moved quickly toward the restrooms, her heart beginning to race. As she made her way across the lobby, she encountered men entering and exiting the men's room; she saw no women entering or exiting the ladies' room. When she pushed open the women's restroom door, she immediately noticed a brown duffle bag sitting on the counter between the two sinks. To her amazement, it appeared to be moving. Taking a deep breath, she slowly moved toward it, and as she did, she saw that the zipper had been drawn open. A moment later, she was staring down at the blue-gray eyes of a baby. Wrapped in a tiny, white blanket, he was wide awake and staring up at her. Betty's hand moved up to her mouth, her breath halting for a moment. "Oh, baby..." she then whispered, gently reaching down to lift the boy into her arms. He whimpered softly as she nestled him against her. "Shhh," she whispered, slowly moving back out of the bathroom.

Patricia, clearly seeing what Betty was carrying in her arms, quickly made her way across the lobby toward her, followed closely by Mitchell. A moment later, the two joined Betty in the center of the lobby, all three pair of eyes staring down at the child in her arms.

"It's okay, sweet baby," Betty soothed, "It's okay..." Then she looked up at Patricia. "We'd better call the police."