

## CHAPTER 1

The scrawny young girl stirred slightly, but it was just enough for the dawning September sun to hit her eyes, knocking her fully awake. Suddenly, she felt the need to pee and rolled over onto the hard, cold ground, crawled out of the make-shift tent, walked over to a large tree, pulled down her worn army green fatigues and squatted. Reaching into her left pants pocket, the fair-skinned white-blonde teen pulled out a small glass pipe filled with a rock-hard substance. The lighter turned the lump into a glowing ember and she took in a deep breath, holding it as long as possible. Her eyelids closed, her head tilted back, she moaned softly, then took another hit. Even matted as it was, her short blonde hair glistened in the early morning sun. She ran her free hand through it like a comb.

She stuffed the pipe back in her pocket, leaned forward, pulled two large leaves off a low-hanging tree branch and wiped herself. Crawling back into the lean-to she and Spike called home, she gently laid down by his side, but it was too late. He was already awake.

“Bitch, I’m hungry. Go git me somethin’ to eat. And gimme the pipe.”

“All right. In a minute.” She closed her eyes and rolled her head back, but the sting of his hand startled her.

“Now, bitch!”

“All right. All right.” She sat up, reached into her pocket and gave him the pipe and the lighter. Then she exited Central Park out of the southwest corner and hiked up Sixth Avenue. Just past 57th Street, she turn right into the alley, toward the back of the McDonald’s. Walking with a slow, gentle gate, Kara looked like any other punkish street

kid in her camouflage cargo pants, work boots, nose ring and white-blond hair. Eying the dumpster, she easily lifted her petite frame over the edge and fell inside, as if she'd done it a hundred times before. She ripped open a trash bag and found a few half-eaten containers of French fries, a Big Mac with only a few bites taken out of it and four Chicken McNuggets. She ate the cold, hard McNuggets, then stuffed the rest of the food in her pockets. She found four soda cups and mixed their remains together like a mad scientist, pulled the straw out and tossed it, tightened the lid, stuffed the cup in her other pocket and climbed back over the side of the dumpster.

Spike swallowed the burger in one gulp. He gave her four fries and ate the rest, then guzzled the soda. Kara seldom drank. She'd learned to live without large quantities of liquids, getting most of her fluids from a drain pipe near their lean-to in the park. She actually liked the taste of water. It made her feel like she had at least one pure, clean spot in her dirty, messed up life.

"C'mon, baby," Spike said.

"Where we goin'?"

"On a little trip uptown."

"What for, Spike?"

"Let's see if we can make us a score t'day." To Kara, a score was a dime of crack. But she sensed that that wasn't what he meant. To Spike, a score was stolen merchandise they could sell for money that could be sold or traded for crack. She wondered what store they were going to hit. I could use some new clothes, she thought. I haven't changed outta these in months. Winter's coming. Maybe I can get a one of those cute short-waste

coats. Or a hat. Yeah. She smiled at the thought of new things, soft, warm and clean against her body.

They walked along Central Park West until they came to 71st Street, then turned left. Kara looked up at the high rises as they passed, noticing the detail work along the rooftop edge of the buildings. She tried to remember if she'd ever been down this street before, ever seen these buildings before. But they didn't look familiar to her. She opened her mouth to point out the architecture to Spike, then thought better of it.

Two men carrying a couch caught Spike's attention and he stopped. They left the side door to the apartment building open as they struggled to maneuver the couch around the corner.

"Whatcha' stopping for, Spike? There ain't no stores here."

"Shut up, bitch. We ain't goin' to no stores. We're goin' in there," he said, pointing toward the door the two men came out of.

"What for, Spike? There ain't nothin' in there."

"Shhh!" he said, smacking her in the arm. "Shut up, fool! Just do what I tell you."

Kara followed him through the door and up a flight of stairs. He tried the door at the first landing, but it was locked. "Damn. Let's keep going."

After the second flight of stairs, Kara was tired. "Spike, why don't we take the elevator?"

He turned around and whacked her on the side of the head. Her body slammed against the wall. Her eyes began to tear, but she fought them back. "God, you're a stupid bitch," he said, without stopping his feet. She followed meagerly behind, careful not to upset him again. At every landing, he tried the door. When it didn't open, he kept going.

At the sixth landing, he found the door unlocked. Spike peeked through a small window in the center. The hall was quiet for a moment. Then he heard a commotion to his left.

The woman's slippers made a soft shuffling noise as they moved across her kitchen floor. She opened the cabinet under the sink and pulled out the trash can, took off the lid, and lifted the white Hefty bag out. The early morning sun burst brightly through the living room windows, then melted over the top of the couch and across the kitchen counter, casting shadows on the bag as she tied it. The knot done, she dragged the bag across the kitchen floor, through the living room and out the front door. She turned back toward the door and gently placed her hand against it to keep it from shutting completely, then headed down the hall.

"C'mon," Spike whispered, pulling Kara by the arm.

"Are you crazy? I'm not going in there!" she whispered.

He turned around and cupped his hand over her mouth. They moved swiftly toward the woman's apartment, stopping for a split second in the doorway to listen for sounds of another person, but heard nothing. Spike pulled Kara inside and pulled the door nearly closed, just the way the woman had left it. He quickly surveyed the living room and kitchen, then moved off to the right, stepping into a large bedroom. Opening the closet door, Spike squeezed inside, pulling the girl behind him. He left the door open just enough so he could see out, but no one could see in. Just before he closed it, Kara got a glimpse of beautiful clothes; there were reds and pinks and blues and shiny black things, and she longed for all of them. Spike will let me have them, won't he? She thought.

They both froze when they heard the woman shuffle back into the apartment. Kara's heart pounded so hard she thought it was going to jump out of her chest. The front door made a clicking noise as the woman closed and locked it. Her footsteps could be heard in the kitchen now. Sounds of water rushed from the faucet, then dulled as a receptacle was placed under it.

A clang of metal against the stovetop replaced the now silent water. Spike opened the closet door slowly and crept behind the bedroom door. He reached toward his back and pulled out a large pistol. Kara's mouth dropped when she saw the gun. She'd never seen him with it before. Terror filled her every muscle as Spike moved around and swung the bedroom door open, facing the kitchen.

The woman placed the tea kettle on the stove. She put the burner on, picked up a dish from the dish drain and dried it. She turned to open the cabinet door and screamed. The dish fell from her hands and shattered into hundreds of pieces. The crash of the breaking glass made her jump and she screamed again. She looked at the hardened young man in the bedroom doorway and found herself staring down the barrel of a gun.