

## Chapter 2

Naomi was dead. She didn't know where the knowledge came from, it was just there. Nothing in the alley moved, nothing inside her moved. She forced herself to take a deep breath. Nothing. A trembling hand rose, then fell with a wet slap against her chest. The cool flesh felt torn and sticky with blood. Her mind flickered back to her last few moments of memory. The laughing yawn of teeth, blood flecked and merciless. Clawed fingers hooked into the vulnerable skin of her arms. Her rising screams. Then blood trickling over her lips, setting her senses aflame.

The last place she remembered being, the palatial Negril hotel where her sister worked, with its shimmering blue pool and equally sparkling tourists, was nowhere in sight. Instead, she lay propped up in a stinking alley, made filthier with stagnant gray water, garbage, and the smell of stale piss. The smells overwhelmed her, stinging her nose with their pungency. Only two things were the same. It was dark. And she was naked. Her back shifted against the damp concrete wall, setting off a chain reaction of pain through her entire body. Another set of smells stirred up. Fear. Vomit. Gunpowder. Death. Naomi retched into a pothole until her stomach seized up and cramped. Her limp hands twitched and slapped at her thighs. It was so quiet inside her, so quiet. Even with the agony of her body purging itself, the silence frightened her. No heartbeat. No breath. No pulse to reassure her that she was scared.

Naomi sagged against the wall, whimpering like a beaten dog while her vision swam as she became aware of yet another layer of pain, a scraping rawness that crawled up her throat, settling into her mouth and teeth. Her back jerked away from the wall. "You all right, girl?"

A hand touched her shoulder and, through her pain-filled haze, Naomi grabbed it. And kept grabbing until the person's—a man's—screams joined her hers. She buried her pain in his, tore at him until his blood splashed over her in a scarlet wave. The first incidental spill of blood across her lips and tongue lanced fire through her. Suddenly the pain in her body seemed for a purpose. She grasped more tightly at the man and began to bite and suck at his body—his wrists, face, and neck—until he was covered in teeth marks and the only blood left was on his clothes.

The pain disappeared. She pushed the vessel away and it fell in the street like an empty wine gourd. Her body shuddered with its new strength. Naomi wiped her mouth on the back of her hand and stood up. Despite her throat's soreness and the uncertainty of her balance, she felt vital and strong. Her mind didn't bother to grapple with the contradiction.

It was late. She was certain about that. The quarter moon burned against a sky strong with stars, but daylight was close. Something inside her flinched at the knowledge. Beyond her little alley, the street was teeming with traffic. People on foot, in cars, on motorcycles, and bicycles. She could smell them. Their scent was so different from her own, like soft-

fleshed fruit whose juice made her tongue swell and water. She made herself turn away from the contemplation of her next meal.

The odor of the city and its thick traffic so late at night told her that she was inland and miles away from Julia's Negril hotel. So her mother had been right. That was a sin. That's why she was here now, miles away from her mother and her baby. She hoped they were safe in bed at her sister's. Her skin suddenly yearned to touch them, to feel them close. She held on to that desire, needing it to feel connected, to feel human.

Naomi needed clothes. The man's uniform was out of the question. She couldn't very well walk around town wearing a bloody and torn police corporal's uniform. But she couldn't parade around naked either. Naomi compromised by putting on the long undershirt and little briefs that fit her like a bathing suit.

The night was balmy, with winds that teased her new skin like breath. Her hunger was far away now so she was free to feel. Voices reached out at her from the street, raised in greeting, in quarrel, in affection. She wanted that again. She wanted to live again. But right now she wanted clothes more. Naomi stepped out of the alley. A young woman walked toward her, switching her small skirted hips while her breasts moved in a seductive rhythm under her sparkling blouse. Her gaze appraised Naomi's improvised outfit, and apparently found it lacking. The girl cut her eyes at Naomi and brushed past her. Or at least tried to.

"Good evening, sistren," Naomi greeted in a new purring voice. The woman inhaled deeply as if smelling something particularly sweet, then she smiled. People moved in ebbing around them, some looking at Naomi with interest, others with sneers. But she wasn't concerned about them. Naomi used the buffeting crowd as an excuse to pull the woman aside and away. The mouth of the alley opened up to receive them.

She had tried to use some patchouli heavy perfume to mask her true womanly scent, but Naomi found it and greedily inhaled it. She was a nice looking woman. One of those types Naomi had always seen in the streets of town—whether Negril or Ochi—and longed to be. She imagined that women like this didn't obsess about the things that she did, didn't long to touch other women the way that Naomi wanted. This woman's life must be so simple, uncomplicated by forbidden desires and the pain of wanting more than she had.

"Can I have your clothes?" Naomi asked.

"What?"

"I said," Naomi moved even closer. "Your clothes are pretty." She touched the woman's blouse, incidentally caressing the swell of breast beneath the cloth. "Can I have them?" The woman drew a quick breath. Naomi didn't give her a chance to do anything more. She grabbed the woman and swung her abruptly into the wall. Her head connected sharply with the filthy, graffiti scrawled brick before she could scream. The woman's fear

rose up hot and ripe in the alley before she abruptly lost consciousness. She smelled so good. So intoxicating.