

Chapter 1

Present-day Southern United States, Ravenswood, Alabama

Honeycutt Highway (formerly Eutaw Crossroads)

To outsiders, the three women picking poke salat, a southern delicacy that can be fatal if not prepared correctly, and wild onions along the side of the country road looked like relics from bygone days. The women, who were now always cold due to their loss of body fat, wore long cotton dresses. Large straw hats protected their heads from the unrelenting Alabama sun that was just rising on the horizon, painting the sky a beautiful smorgasbord of mauves, oranges, corals, and yellows. Dew sprinkled the grass and foliage and the air smelled of the unlikely mixture of pine cones and honeysuckles. Now and then, a woodpecker tapping on bark or the call of a wren or sparrow broke the peaceful silence. A motor growled in the distance, polluting the air with its sound. The women looked up, did a collective eye roll and resumed the task at hand.

“What does he want now?” one woman mumbled under her breath, stabbing her hoe into the ground with extra vigor.

They had to pay attention to what they were doing, for poke salat looked like any other weed. Mature poke salat weeds were distinctive. The stalks were tall and purple with likewise violet berries. This was when the plant was at its most toxic. Therefore, the women focused on harvesting the immature tender shoots, whose stalks were green and berries white. They used their hoes to avoid the root, which was poisonous.

All three Black women were striking. Their skin tones ranged from honey to chocolate to ebony. Their features were as diverse as their skin color—a sharp blend of Caucasian, African and Asian elements. All had beautiful high cheekbones, though some appeared razor-sharp because of the drastic weight loss. Their movements were sinewy, cat-like, and at odds with the clunky, baggy clothes they were wearing. While they looked like old women, there was something about them that belied their age.

Ceola Lulabelle Eudora Furie wasn’t the tallest of the group. In fact, she was rather petite, but still, she clearly was the group’s leader. While she wasn’t as fierce-looking as the one called Matilda, a quiet menace radiated off of her, and humans instinctively avoided her before they even got the full blast of her stormy green eyes.

Matilda “Tildy” Arvelle Arceneaux, was an intimidating presence. Even though she had a buzz cut, there was no mistaking her gender. Her high cheekbones and full, sensual lips were all female, while her alert green eyes constantly surveilled her surroundings.

The third woman, Elizabeth “Lizzie” Sarah Gadsden, was distinguishable from the others by her mane of long, dreadlocked hair. Her kind, and clear green eyes often lulled people into trusting her with their deepest secrets and her Ph.D. in psychology had come in handy on many occasions over the years.

A black SUV pulled to a halt on the road's shoulder, kicking up gusts of red dust that blew everywhere. The back door opened, and a tall, late-middle-aged, cadaverously thin man stepped out. The women's captor, torturer, rapist, and arch nemesis had arrived.

Chapter 2

Rufus stepped from the SUV, well aware of how striking he looked. His immaculately coiffed pale blond locks glowed white as a cotton ball in the morning sun. Piercing Husky ice-blue eyes coldly took in the tableau before him. He had a sensual mouth, or so he had been told, with lips neither plump nor thin. He hadn't always been gaunt like he was now, which was why it was imperative that he somehow appropriated the women's powers. Rufus remembered the day he had found his grandfathers' diaries. He'd read with disbelief as the old men described the women's mystical and wondrous abilities, recounting their attempts to harvest the magic for themselves. Obviously, they had failed to gain those powers or they wouldn't be dead. Rufus read how the women wouldn't cooperate even back then, sabotaging his ancestors' experiments. They polluted blood samples, burned down labs, and destroyed formulas. Rufus vowed to succeed where the old men had failed. If benevolence wouldn't work, and it looked like it hadn't worked one iota, then he would do whatever he had to do and to whomever he had to do it to. He wasn't ready to die. He had more money to make, more things to discover, more life to live, period. With that thought, Rufus steeled himself as he walked toward the women for what was about to be a taxing and acrimonious encounter. It always was.

Rufus surveyed his surrounding land—the tree-covered rolling hills shrouded in mist, the mountains in the distance, and Alabama's famous red dirt. He mulled that if men weren't searching for money and power, then it was for the elusive fountain of youth—a way to live forever. The clock was ticking for Rufus. He recognized he couldn't continue to survive by just harvesting the women's platelets: he had to discover their secret to immortality or he would be dead soon. *Damn them*, Rufus thought, as a multitude of emotions flitted across his eyes. His mouth turned down at the thought of the coming confrontation, but he forged on. The women's hatred and disdain for him was apparent in the way they curled their lips, raking their eyes up and down his body like he was trash and they couldn't wait to be out of his presence. They would probably find a way to rid themselves of the lethal collars he had placed on them and kill him one day. He'd felt the hold he had on them gradually slipping away through the years. He'd had a complicated relationship with the women, fraught with heated passions, battles, and threats. His immediate survival was at stake, though, and if he needed to whip, starve, tase, or otherwise coerce them, then so be it. Rufus hadn't gotten where he was in the world by being soft-hearted.

If only he'd never accepted Idia's proposal and gotten involved in creating the serum. Then, he never would have gotten sick. He could have freed these women. He could have tried to pursue Ceola and

perhaps she'd even be able to accept his love. But love wasn't going to get him his cure. He was stuck in this battle now.

Although they were technically prisoners, they had every creature comfort. He even allowed them to attend the local historically Black universities after they proved they wouldn't try to run away or pull another stunt as they had with his father. Granted, he had mistakenly thought educating them would benefit him. They were obviously smart, and he had hoped to use them as lab assistants. However, their defiant attitudes, supreme intelligence, and his ego had quickly squashed that notion. *Why won't they just cooperate with me?* he fumed. Hell, he even had that expensive equestrian center built to please Theodora, because it would please her nana, Ceola. Those women lived better than most white people in the area—hell, even the state—except for him. And had that buttered those haughty bitches up any and stopped them from looking down on him? Of course not. Well, he was done placating them. If they didn't voluntarily give him what he wanted, he'd take it, just like he had taken their daughters. He had an ace up his sleeve today, and he was sure the women would finally capitulate.

Chapter 3

Ceola watched as a diminutive woman came around from the other side of the SUV. A laminated identification card affixed to a lanyard around her neck identified her as Dr. Mariposa Vasquez, a scientist employed by Honeycutt Laboratories, Ravenswood, Alabama. There was something familiar about her, but Ceola couldn't put her finger on it. The woman held firmly onto a coltish young tween, who was taller than her by a good four inches. The scientist's veins stood out in her muscled arms, showing how much force she was really using to contain the writhing tween. The air filled with a zephyr of aromas as dueling scents wafted over the area. Among the sweet pungent aroma of ripe guava mingled in with the Ravenisha's and the pine-scented air, the musky odor of panther was undeniable.

Dr. Mariposa Vasquez appeared to be in her twenties because of her mohawk, tattoos, piercings, jeans, and Doc Martens, but on closer inspection, was older than first presumed. There was a world-weariness in her bright jade eyes, which stood out in sharp contrast to her rich, copper skin and Aztec features. Her turquoise and jade jewelry looked to be old and authentic.

The tween's eyes roamed everywhere, greedily taking everything in. Her nostrils flared as she breathed in the myriad musks enveloping her. It was as though she had never been outside before. She was desperately trying to break free of the scientist, but Dr. Vasquez held firm. She was preternaturally still as she watched the emotions flit across Rufus and the women's faces. Ceola couldn't help noticing the all-too-familiar collar circling the tween's neck.

For a moment, everyone stood still, scenting each other. Ceola's inner alarm sounded on high alert as she and the other Ravenisha caught a whiff of La Panthère Noire and some other unidentifiable scent on the still, humid Alabama air. She thought this woman wasn't what she seemed, but she appeared to be somewhat kindred, not a threat. Ceola's brows knitted in confusion. When she inhaled the woman's scent, her nasal passages detected no whiff of La Panthère Noire on her. She had smelled her pleasant overripe fruit-like scent before, but for the life of her, Ceola couldn't remember where. Whatever the case, she would have to monitor the woman, though, because there was something odd about her. Something otherworldly. That only left the young one. Yes, the familiar pheromones were emanating from her, but before she could investigate further or even fully examine the girl, her body fell to the ground, racked with pain. Ceola had been so intent on studying the newcomers, she hadn't even noticed Rufus advancing on her and the other Ravenisha.

Suddenly, Elizabeth and Matilda also doubled over in pain and dropped to the ground, spasming. *Damn that man*, seethed Ceola. Why was he torturing them before they'd even done anything to him? Damn him to Hell! That explained why he had enfeebled them. He knew they couldn't fight or change in their current weakened state and the strangers would distract them. *The snake*, she raged inwardly.

"Y'all, I can't bear this pain much longer," Lizzie gasped in a voice so low and shaky they barely heard her even with their heightened hearing.

"Be strong, Lizzie," Matilda croaked. "Don't let him break you."

"I can't, Tildy. Our bodies have gone too long without the change...without fresh meat. We're aging faster and faster and—"

Ceola screamed. The caterwaul that tore from her throat gave way to a deep growl, as her voice got lower and seemed to be coming from a place deep down inside her. She and the other women clutched their stomachs and rolled around in pain. As they mewled and writhed about on the ground, their hands morphed into clenched claws, hair grew over their bodies, and their eyes became cat-like. As their canines grew, spasms made them bite their tongues and blood poured from their mouths. Just as quickly as the pain came, though, it ended, and the women lay impotently on the ground, soaked in sweat, blood, and tears. Their features reverted to normal, except their worn faces seemed to show even more wrinkles. Ceola slowly got up and faced Rufus, lips in a thin line, nostrils flaring as she struggled for breath. Rage overtook the pain.

"Rufus, you low-down sonofabitch, why can't you just greet people like a normal person? Done having fun with us?" Ceola began advancing toward Rufus.

"Ceola," Rufus sighed, "you know I abhor harsh language. It's so uncivilized and uncouth coming from such beautiful women's mouths. Besides, is that any way to talk when a minor is present? I see I'll have to teach you a lesson, as usual." Rufus used the remote in his hand to shock Ceola again. She fell to the ground, nothing but the whites of her eyes showing as blood-flecked spittle ran from her mouth. Her body shook and trembled and then went still, the heaving of her chest the only indication she was still alive.

Rufus turned to the horrified girl and sneered. "Look at her. There's your nana, gal. The magnificent warrior. Go say hello." Rufus shoved the girl forward. Ceola's eyes fluttered open, and she appeared dazed as she tried to sit up.

The tween rushed over to Ceola crying, "Miss Ceola, are you all right?" but not before glaring at Rufus. Something passed between them when the girl touched Ceola, and in the blink of an eye, she flicked out her tongue and licked the blood from Ceola's mouth.

Ceola's vision gradually sharpened and focused. "Cleo?" Ceola moaned, but no, this girl had piercing light blue eyes and white-blond frizzy curly hair—not to mention her being lighter. Otherwise, she could have been a doppelgänger of her daughter, Cleo, or even her granddaughter, Theodora. Ceola's eyes widened as understanding slowly dawned.

"You twisted, sick sonofabitch," she snarled at Rufus while she slowly rose to her feet. "You imbecile. You could cause all kinds of mutations."

Rufus merely looked through Ceola and the others, only the coldness emanating from his eyes betraying his genuine feelings. "I can't be too stupid. I'm not the one in bondage on what is basically a large preserve, now am I? You *Negresses* have been on this property since after The War of Northern Aggression and yet you've never escaped."

The women looked at each other, faces scrunched in confusion at the mention of the word *Negresses*.

"I'm not the one experiencing a hunger so deep, it's gnawing at me from the inside out, am I? I'm not the one standing here picking weeds to eat from the side of the road like old nigger women used to do, am I?" He shocked Ceola again. This time, she crumpled to the ground and didn't move, her dress falling in limp folds around her.

Having had enough, Matilda stood up to her full six feet two inches and got in Rufus's face. To his credit, he didn't back up.

"Cut the bullshit, Rufus. I know you didn't just call us niggers. You know damn well we're not stupid. You also know we could leave if we wanted. But we made a promise centuries ago, and unlike some people, we keep our word."

By now, Tildy's neck was rolling and her spit flecked Rufus's face. "I'm tired of your bullshit. So stop." She stabbed him in the chest with her finger, her nose mere inches from his nose.

Rufus shook his head and sneered right back. He flourished his remote in Tildy's face and she slapped his hand away.

"Fool, we could have gotten these collars off and you'd be none the wiser a long time ago," Tildy snarled, rolling her eyes, just before Rufus shocked them all again. Ceola didn't even move a muscle, still stunned from the last jolt.

"No, I don't think so, or you would have removed them," Rufus responded slowly, a smile spreading across his face. "You still haven't figured out how to remove the collars without activating them to kill you, and you still haven't a clue where your daughters are located."

After the women recovered from the latest shock, they glared at Rufus, canines bared, the hatred emanating off of them so thick, the air seemed heavier and harder to breathe. The tween and Dr. Vasquez stood uneasily, frozen, with their backs to the SUV.

Ceola finally stirred and stood up. She seemed none the worse for the wear, except for wet sweat areas on her dress and spots of blood speckling it. She was, however, pissed. A fearsome vibe radiated from her thin body, and she seemed on the verge of exploding. Massive canines filled her mouth, and her eyes had contracted down to slits.

"You're getting on my last, last nerve, Rufus Beckett Theodis Honeycutt," Ceola rasped in a bass alien voice. "Shock us again and see what happens. You should be afraid, Rufus, very afraid. Do you really want to release the she-beasts in us, and I mean *all* of us? We may have the energy to change. We may not, but do you really want to find out? I dare you, you little punk-assed bitch. You're only alive now because you have our daughters. And these collars may or may not kill us in our beast forms." Ceola growled sinisterly and held Rufus's gaze until he looked away first. Wrath roiled off of her in waves. She wanted to eat Rufus so badly.

Rufus looked around and realized if the women did muster up the energy to change, he'd never make it back to the SUV in time. "F-Fine, it's not worth my time arguing with your foul-mouthed butts, anyway. I came here to tell y'all the time has come for the young generation to break the bonds from y'all old crones and make their contribution to the prosperity of science." Rufus's icy gaze settled on the tween, Fredi. "My new vessel here is ready, and it's time y'all done finally earned your keep. Your old blood just isn't doing it for me anymore."

Lizzie scented the air, spitefully taunting, "I don't know, oh great pale one. You smell even sicker to me. You must be desperate to heal yourself and prolong your miserable life. Why should we care if you're dying?"

"You better care if you ever want to see your daughters again."

The tween looked at Rufus as if truly seeing him for the first time. Her mouth formed an *O*, and she put her hands on her non-existent hips.

“Vessel?” the young girl snarled, feeling empowered through the sheer proximity of her kin as she watched the shameful exchange. “Fuck you.” A scream tore from her throat as Rufus calmly shocked her with the remote for the collar attached to her neck. He did it again, just to be evil, as it was clear he had incapacitated her with the first shock. The tween’s eyes rolled up in her head, and she dropped to the ground, unconscious.

When her arms flopped on the ground, an IV port attached to a vein came into full view. The flesh around this port was purple, black, and dark red. Tears filled the women’s eyes and they gasped. They had to use all of their self-control not to rush forward, tear Rufus to pieces and finish him once and for all. Perhaps Rufus sensed it was time to take his leave, for he nodded to the SUV’s driver, who had been standing outside his door with his gun drawn. He walked over, picked up the tween and unceremoniously threw her into the back of the SUV.

Dr. Vasquez opened her mouth as if to say something but closed it. Her jade green eyes flashed with lurking menace, and if Rufus had bothered to look at her, he would have seen her eyes’ pupils narrow into cat slits. She climbed into the back of the SUV and comforted the incapacitated girl, but not before a look passed between her and the other women.

Rufus opened his door and paused before he stepped inside. “Call in Theodora and the others. And don’t try to lie to me. Ozzie told me about their birthmarks. You understand me, Ceola? I will tell you one time only, and to prove to you I’m not the heartless bastard you think I am, I’ll give you a week with your she-bitch grandchildren to get your affairs in order. Not that you have any affairs to get in order,” Rufus snickered as he sat down and closed the door. The back window silently rolled down. “Never forget. I own everything around here, and I mean everything. And, I have your daughters. Just remember their lives are in my hands.”

“Whatever Idia is having you do to that poor chile isn’t going to work, Rufus,” Ceola voiced. “Your only hope of developing your magical elixir is to work *with* us.”

Rufus scoffed, “How touching and magnanimous of you. I tried working with you once. Remember? You just let me worry about things and do as I say.”

Ceola swallowed her pride and tried one more time. “You know, Rufus, you don’t have to treat us this way, like—”

“Like animals?” Rufus chortled. “Oh, the irony. But that’s what you are in every sense of the word—animals. Is that not the truth? Goodbye, Ceola.”

“Then why do you want to be like us so badly?”

“I don’t have to explain anything to you, Ceola.” He nodded at Elizabeth and Matilda. “The same goes for y’all, too. It’s not my fault your own people sold you to America. One week.” Whistling, he pressed the button, and as the window slid silently up, he motioned for the driver to leave. Ceola raced after the SUV, watching her grandchild’s tear-streaked face turn around and stare at her, her arms reaching out to her as she ran after the vehicle.

“Whew, chile, I tried,” Ceola panted. They gathered their things and began walking up the windy road back to their home. “My God, I didn’t know Cleo had given birth to another child. I don’t even know my granddaughter’s name. Did you see the way she reached out her little arms to me?” Ceola sobbed before collapsing on the road, which was already hot as an oven under the scorching Alabama sun. Her sister-friends helped her up, and they continued walking.

"We've got one week to get those girls ready. Lord, we are truly doomed," lamented Elizabeth.

"At least I've taught them everything I know about fighting and battle strategy," Matilda said. They walked on in companionable silence.

"Did we really spend all these years in bondage for nothing?" Matilda pondered. "Waiting, waiting, waiting for the rise of the Ravenisha. Were we wrong to pin our hopes on the shoulders of this New-Generation?"

The women stopped for a moment to rest and then continued walking. When Ceola broke the silence, it was with a timbre of determination.

"I don't know about y'all, but I'll be damned if I'm going to allow that evil man to defeat us. He is right about one thing, though. The time to break these bonds is here. That bitch Idia promised us we'd be free. Instead, she's taken our children. Now she wants our grandbabies? This means war! And what's with him talking in that old white southern vernacular? Ugh! When we get back to the house, Tildy, please ask Leona to summon Lieutenant Allensworth. We need him and his men here yesterday. Also, notify the sheriff to prepare because the shit is about to hit the fan. Lord, I just hope that baby girl licked up enough of my blood just now. There may be hope for us yet, sistahs. We'll get back at Idia. And once we do, we can carry on what La Panthère Noire has always wanted from us. We can rule this land, and all others, as Ravenisha. Rufus and Idia done picked the wrong women to fuck with. We are warriors! We are queens! We are Ravenisha!"

They raised their fists in the air and gave the Ravenisha war cheer, their ululations and roars singing on the still air.