

# CLAN GROUND

NOVELS BY CLARE BELL

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# CLAN GROUND

THE SECOND BOOK OF THE NAMED

CLARE BELL



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## Dedication

To my friends, Dorothy and Donya, who were there at the beginning.





## CHAPTER ONE

**T**he gathering was to take place in the older part of the meadow, about the flat-topped stone the herders called the sunning rock. Thakur, the herding teacher for the clan, arrived first. With a glance over the meadow to see if anyone else was coming, he bunched his hindquarters and leaped up on the gray stone, then stretched out to catch the sun's last warmth. Insects droned about his ears and a rock lizard hissed at him for taking the best spot. He flicked his tail at the lizard once, then ignored it.

Thakur shifted himself in the slight hollow worn by the many who had lain there before him and felt the sun-gathered heat of the stone through the fur of his belly. He folded his forepaws beneath him and let a soft purr flutter in his throat as the evening breeze ruffled the fur on his back. Then the breeze died away and only the twilight stillness and the scent of the sunning rock rose up about him.

The stone he lay on had its own scent. One couldn't smell it when there were other, stronger odors in the air or a wind blowing, but at other times, one could catch the faint scent of ancient rock baked by sun and beaten by rain.

Thakur's purr grew softer until it faded. He felt slightly ill-at-ease sitting here where Ratha, the clan leader, would be when the clan assembled. He thought of the Firekeepers and the dance-hunt that was soon to come. The sunning rock seemed to cool beneath him and he shivered.

The dance-hunt had begun as a story, a retelling of the clan's battle against the Un-Named Ones who preyed on the herd and drove the clan to the edge of destruction. Bearing a strange new creature called the Red Tongue, a young female led the fight, striking such fear into the raiders that they trampled their own wounded as they fled. Few of the Un-Named had been seen near clan ground since the final battle. By her courage and wit, Ratha had gained clan leadership and the tale was begun to honor her.

The herding teacher was old enough to carry the scars from that fight and to recall how the story had been first told. He also remembered how it changed in the telling. Those who told it added movements to their words and the words themselves became a chant to which the tale-tellers swayed.

In the first cycle of seasons after Ratha's victory, anyone could be chosen to tell and act the story. Later, the Firekeepers, who had been given the duty of keeping Ratha's creature, claimed the honor as theirs. They enlarged it, adding more

individuals to play the parts of enemies and defenders. They added more motion, until it changed from an acted tale to a dance.

Much less to Thakur's liking was the way the story changed from triumphant to vengeful and the dancer's motions from joyous to frenzied. Somehow Ratha didn't seem to notice, or, if she did, she thought the change was unimportant. Each season Thakur disliked the dance-hunt ritual more, for it kindled in him a strange fear, one he couldn't put a name to.

Perhaps he felt the fear because his own ties to the Un-Named were too close. Though born of a clan female, Thakur and his brother Bonechewer were sired by an Un-Named male. Clan law forbade such matings and for good reason: they often produced young who lacked the intelligence and self-awareness necessary to a people who called themselves Named. Though Thakur's mother had been exiled for violating that law, the old clan leader had seen the light of the Named in the cubs' eyes and had tried to keep them within the clan. In the end, Thakur had stayed behind, while Bonechewer was taken by his mother to join the Un-Named. Because of his parentage, Thakur had never been fully accepted in the clan until Ratha's ascendancy gave him the status to which his abilities entitled him.

The high grass parted far across the meadow and he heard the noise of other herders and the sound of herdbeast carcasses being carried and dragged. The clan would feast well before the dance-hunt. They had chosen a three-horn doe and a big stag, one almost too heavy for the jaws that held it.

He watched the herders come across the meadow, their fawn and golden brown pelts melding into the colors of the dry grasses. His own coat was a dark coppery shade not common among those of the clan.

Thakur's task of teaching clan cubs to manage dapplebacks and three-horns didn't include helping to cull the animals. Sometimes he did help, for the younger herders often needed skill and experience as well as raw strength. But Thakur was willing to let the others do the killing. *Many herdbeasts have felt my teeth and there will be more, he thought. I have grown old enough to know each animal I take and to sorrow as much as rejoice in its death.*

When the herders drew near, they waved their tails at him to come and help drag the carcasses the last distance to the sunning rock. The rich smell of meat coaxed Thakur down off his perch. He hurried to seize a dragging hock, for he knew that those who helped to carry the culled beasts would be among the first to eat. Of course Ratha came before any of them, but she always left plenty.

The order in which the clan ate would change tonight, for the Firekeepers needed to keep their bellies empty to meet the exertion of the dance-hunt. The second animal the herders had culled would be saved to feed the dancers.

By the time all the clan herders had their turn at the first kill, twilight was past and the stars shone overhead. Despite his uneasiness, Thakur had eaten well and carried a rib bone away with him to crack and lick while he waited for the dance-hunt to assemble. Hunger was not so strong in his mind now

as it had been earlier, and, as he savored the salty marrow, he remembered the Un-Named raider that he and the other herders had chased away that morning. Near clan ground the Un-Named were few and widely scattered, but every once in a while one or two would come on their land, driven by drought and poor hunting.

Thakur didn't know why this Un-Named One had come. The stranger had lacked the strength to try for even the weakest dappleback. He was so starved that he looked like a yearling, although the length of his teeth and his ragged silver-gray coat told Thakur he was older. The herding teacher remembered the stranger's face, a face so drawn that bones of cheek and jaw showed under the sparse pelt. *I hope these three-horns were slain downwind of the Un-Named One. It would be cruel of us to make him smell what he may not eat.*

Several Firekeepers passed Thakur, carrying kindling in their jaws. They threaded a path through the clanfolk, leaving the scent of pitch pine on the evening breeze. He watched them arrange the wood in a pile and depart to fetch more. Thakur's teeth ached at the thought of their task and he felt glad he taught herding.

He listened to the sound of grunting and crunching nearby as powerful jaws cracked a stag's thighbone. He worked his own piece of rib around to the side of his mouth and chewed it absently. The herder next to him, who had broken the thighbone, sat up stiffly, his nose raised and his whiskers back.

“What’s in the wind, Cherfan?” Thakur asked, knowing his neighbor by the latter’s scent. Cherfan stiffened again and lay down. “I thought I caught a whiff of that raider we chased away.”

The herding teacher tested the breeze and found only the familiar smells of clanfolk. “Your nose must be playing tricks on you. That Un-Named One barely escaped us. He wouldn’t be able to drag himself this far. If he isn’t dead yet, he will be in a few days.”

“And I’ll be the one who has to carry him away. Phew! I get all the smelly jobs,” Cherfan grumbled and then added, “Look, there’s Ratha.”

A slim shape padded across the starlit meadow and leaped to the top of the sunning rock. At her arrival, the gathering grew quiet. Mothers hushed restless cubs and those chewing on bones put them aside. Several Firekeepers left bearing branches in their mouths, and Thakur knew they had gone to light their brands at the dens where the fire-creature was kept.

Across the dark grass, Thakur saw the flickering light of torches. Far away as they were, the approaching firebrands seemed to challenge the cold light of the stars. In the gathering circle, heads turned and eyes glowed red at their centers. A soft wail started up from many throats. It grew louder and gained rhythm as the firebearers drew nearer. The wails and howls joined into a wordless song that praised the Red Tongue. Thakur felt the cry welling in his own throat and clamped his jaws together to stop it.

Now the gathered faces were lit; shadows fled across the pale grass as if they were live creatures that dreaded the coming of the power the clan called the Red Tongue. As the shadows of tree and bush escaped into the lair of night, other forms, hidden beyond the approaching firelight, crept toward the torchbearers.

Two odors came to Thakur from two different directions. From the Firekeepers came a sharp, excited smell, an aggressive scent that stung his nose as much as the smoke from their brands. From the others, the mock enemy in the dance, came a bitter smell that brought acid into the back of his throat and dried his tongue.

The dance-hunt began. The torchbearers leaped into the center of the circle and the fire seemed to fly with them. Their faces were visible now, their muzzles outlined against the fierce light of their brands. At the opposite side of the circle, those who had no fire froze and flattened in the grass.

Thakur felt his neck fur prickle. *Every time I see this, I have to remind myself it is not a real fight. I wish they didn't do it so well.*

One of the torchbearers crossed the open ground before the sunning rock and swung his brand down to light the brush pile at its base. From the "Un-Named" side came snarls and someone leaped with forepaws flung apart, mouth open and red.

The torchbearer started and shied, pulling back his brand. Another "enemy" sprang onto him, dragging him down by his hindquarters. His firebrand fell and smoked. The clan's wail

died to a hiss. The Firekeepers charged, routing the raiders, pushing them into the darkness. But soon their opponents crept back and attacked once more.

The clan's song rose and fell, becoming a wordless chant that followed the pace of the battle. As the torchbearers stalked their night-hidden opponents, the voices hushed to a murmur. At each run and clash, they rose to a shriek.

The battle followed the chant as well, for the Firekeepers' steps came to that rhythm and those who played the Un-Named crept and flattened to the pulse of the cry. About Thakur, tails swished and paws struck the ground together. He felt himself drawn into the rhythm with every breath he took and every movement he made. He clenched his teeth and drove his claws into the ground.

*I saw no harm in this dance when it began as a joyful celebration. But season by season, it has changed into something fierce and cruel.*

The fight grew wilder. Some of the Un-Named fell and rolled as if dead. Burns and scratches showed along their sides, beading blood. A new smell tainted the air and Thakur knew that some torchbearers had forgotten that this fight wasn't real. He shifted, flattening his ears. *Ratha, can't you see what the Red Tongue has done to our people?*

He sought the eyes that glowed green from the sunning rock, but she, like the others, was too mesmerized by the dance-hunt to look back at him.

Despite the smell and feel of bodies close about him, Thakur felt isolated. He watched the limp forms that he knew

were living, and sweated through his pawpads. He felt as though his fear made a change in his scent that would betray him as half-clan and vulnerable to the hate being howled at the enemy. Beside him, Cherfan sniffed, turning his nose toward Thakur even though his eyes remained fixed on the scene before him. Thakur tried to calm himself, knowing that his neighbors might detect his uneasiness.

In the circle, the battle split apart into individual fights as the Firekeepers stalked the remaining enemy. The combatants whirled, lunged and struck with claws and firebrands. The song and the fight grew fiercer, until the last of the enemy was driven away into the darkness. A panting torchbearer came forward to light the brush pile and Thakur could see it was the Firekeeper leader, Fessran. She tossed her torch into the tinder and flame leaped up.

He heard her voice above the roar and crackle. "Is it well, Tamer of the Red Tongue and Giver of the New Law?"

"It is well, Firekeeper," came Ratha's reply from the sunning rock. "My creature is still strong. It will defend us against the Un-Named as it did when we drove them from clan ground."

Her voice was strong, but it sounded to Thakur as though she had pulled herself from a daze. He wondered if she understood at last the dangers of the ritual that she had created. But whatever thoughts she had then were interrupted as Fessran drew back her whiskers as if smelling some new and threatening scent. She peered intently into the night, suddenly

rose from her place at the front of the gathering and left the bonfire.

Ratha sprang to her feet. For an instant, she looked puzzled, then her gaze followed Fessran's and her tail began to wag angrily, challenging the intrusion. "Hold, Firekeeper!" Ratha cried, staring into the darkness beyond the circle. "The hunt is not finished."

Silence swept across the clan as all eyes followed her gaze. Another smell filled the air, pungent and sour. It spoke of desperation mixed with fear in the form of a stranger who still lurked outside the circle. All Thakur's hairs stood on end, for he knew by the scent who the intruder was. Around him other herders bristled in response to the invasion.

Quietly the herding teacher left his place, circling around the outside of the group. He saw Cherfan and Shoman plunge into the night after the intruder. When Thakur had almost caught up with them, Cherfan reappeared tailfirst, his teeth fastened in a bony leg. With one heave the big herder yanked the stranger into the circle of firelight.

The captive made a frantic series of jerks as if he could tear the leg off and leave it between Cherfan's jaws. Then with a hoarse cry, the silvercoat twisted and lunged, his fangs seeking the herder's cheek. Thakur leaped, seized the silver's scruff and pulled his head back. The teeth clicked together in front of Cherfan's face.

Thakur wrinkled his nose at the pungent taste of an ill-kept pelt. He could see Cherfan grimace as fleas jumped from

the captive's hindquarters onto the herder's nose. More of the Named sprang on the stranger and a howl went up. The Firekeepers ran to help and were halfway across open ground when Ratha's snarl halted them. "Stop the fight," she ordered. "Bring this stranger to me."

The clan was so fevered from the dance-hunt that the scuffle continued for a few more moments before it finally stopped. Thakur lost his hold on the stranger's ruff and backed out of the fight. The herders Shoman and Cherfan emerged from the fray dragging the tattered form of the Un-Named One. There was more red than gray on his fur now. Shoman wrenched him back and forth, tearing his ruff. With an angry grunt, Cherfan pulled the Un-Named One from Shoman's jaws and dragged him to the sunning rock. The torchbearers surrounded him with their brands so that Ratha could see him. The captive squinted and shut his eyes against the fierce light.

Thakur shook his head and smoothed the fur ruffled by the fight. *This morning he was too weak to be a danger to the herdbeasts. Now he has asked for death by coming here.*

The torchbearers pulled back their brands and the captive's eyes opened. Thakur looked into them, expecting to see a dull green or yellow stare clouded by panic, and the inability to understand. He had seen it before: the gaze of animals who resembled the Named in every way except for the lack of light in their eyes.

The herding teacher flinched in surprise at what he saw. The Un-Named One's eyes shone orange. Not amber, but

a deep, glowing orange, the color at the center of the Red Tongue. In the depths of those eyes, almost masked by rage and fear, was a clarity and intensity Thakur hadn't expected.

Others of the Named had seen it too. Suddenly the invader had become more than a scavenging animal.

Thakur saw Ratha lean so far down from the rock he thought she might tumble off. Slowly the Un-Named One lifted his muzzle to meet her stare. The silvercoat opened his mouth and Thakur tensed, ready to spring to Ratha's aid if the Un-Named One attacked her.

What came from the stranger's jaws was not a roar of challenge nor a whimper of fear, but words in clan speech.

"Not bite. Not claw," he said in a hoarse voice. "Came to clan. Not to kill."

The words were awkward and ill-spoken, but understandable. This time Ratha did slip and had to scramble to regain her seat. The other clanfolk stared at each other in disbelief.

"No kills." The silvercoat put out a stiff forefoot. "Sniff paw. No deer-smell. No horse-smell. No blood." He kept the leg extended, although it trembled from weariness.

No one else moved. Thakur saw Ratha look toward him. "Herding teacher, you know the scents of our animals better than anyone else. Tell me if what he says is so."

As Thakur approached the crouching silvercoat, she added, "If there is even a trace of a herdbeast's scent on him, he will die now by my fangs."

The herding teacher circled the Un-Named One, smelling him carefully from all sides and trying to ignore the stench from filth and festering sores. He pawed dirt away from between the toes so he could smell the soil without the other's odor intruding. When he finished, he stood back and said, "He has eaten only roots and grubs. There is no herdbeast smell on him."

Ratha peered down at the orange-eyed silvercoat. "So Thakur says you have made no kills on clan ground. Why have you come here?"

"Clan is fierce and strong. Clan eats while Un-Named grow thin and die. This one, Orange-Eyes, not ready to die."

The hostile muttering faded. The Un-Named One glanced about. "Orange-Eyes is clever, like clan. Not afraid. Should be with clan." Boldly he added, "Clan needs Orange-Eyes."

Ratha recoiled and spat. "We have no need for a mangle-ridden scavenger who thinks too much of himself."

"Orange-eyes has sores because no food. Eating will make better."

"I told you we don't want you. Now go."

The Firekeepers drew their brands aside to let the Un-Named One slink away, but he turned instead to Ratha. "Now this one wants only to die by clan fangs. Let ugly herder with kinked tail come forward and kill Orange-Eyes."

"Gladly," Shoman growled from the back. Thakur felt Shoman push past him roughly, leaving his fur rumpled.

"Shoman, keep your place!" Ratha narrowed her eyes at him, then at the Un-Named One. "So you think you are clever

and brave enough to join us.” She raised her head. “Fessran, the dance-hunt is unfinished. Let the Firekeepers take their place.”

Again the ritual started, the quarry now a single enemy. At Ratha’s order, not a claw touched Orange-Eyes, but the torchbearers’ steps took them close to him, and they thrust their brands at him, flaunting the Red Tongue’s power. Each time a flaming torch came near the Un-Named One, he jumped and shuddered, but he held his ground. The Firekeepers’ lunges came closer until fire licked silver fur. Orange-Eyes fell on his side, no longer able to keep his balance, but he refused to either flee or cower.

Fessran, sitting next to Thakur, never took her eyes from the stranger. Her tail curled and twitched with suppressed excitement.

“Enough!” Ratha cried.

The torchbearers fell back. The silvercoat crept to the base of the sunning rock. Thakur heard the murmurs around him and knew that the stranger’s courage had impressed even those who bore the greatest hatred for the Un-Named.

The silver lifted his streaked and smeared muzzle to Ratha and stared directly into her eyes. “Orange-Eyes is worthy. Orange-Eyes stays.”

She crouched on the edge of the rock, her lips drawn back to show the tips of her fangs. For a moment Thakur thought she would pounce on the Un-Named One and shred the rest of his face for his impudence. As green and fire-colored eyes

met, Thakur saw in Ratha's gaze a reluctant and surprised admission of respect. There was a further moment of tension between them; then she wrinkled her nose at the stranger and relaxed.

"All right, Orange-Eyes is worthy," she said. "He stays, at least for now." She got to her feet, cutting off the mutters and growls of astonishment and outrage. "The gathering is ended. The Firekeepers may eat now. To your dens, the rest of you. There are still beasts to herd and day will come soon."

She waited until the group had begun to disperse before calling, "Thakur, come to the sunning rock."

His tail curled in surprise. Ratha jumped down and stood beside Orange-Eyes. The Un-Named One had regained his feet, but only by leaning heavily against the base of the rock.

"Clan teacher," Ratha began, "since you have the most patience of any of us, I ask you to take charge of him for the night. Give him some meat from the Firekeepers' kill and show him the stream where he may wash the blood away. If he is still alive tomorrow, bring him to my den."