

RATHA AND
THISTLE-CHASER

NOVELS BY CLARE BELL

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RATHA AND THISTLE-CHASER

THE THIRD BOOK OF THE NAMED

CLARE BELL



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Dedication

TO THE DREAMBITERS

AND

THE DREAMBITTEN

may they find healing

and

TO MARGARET K. McELDERRY

with love and admiration



CHAPTER ONE

On matted, shadow-laced grass in a forest clearing, two wild cats quarreled over prey. They made threat-growls as each circled the other. One was the size and weight of a panther, with a faded dun coat and a ribby, rickety look that spoke his age. The other, a female, was a strange mix of rust brown mottled with orange. A black mask across her face gave emphasis to her chalk-green eyes. Her youth might have given her the advantage despite her smallness, but her left foreleg was withered and drawn up against her chest.

With her pelt of rusty black and orange and her slow uncertain manner, she resembled a newt, an eel-like creature with legs. Once those of her own kind had cruelly kicked a dead one at her, as if to show her what she was. Perhaps they were right. Often she felt as dazed and bewildered as a newt that had crawled from its clammy hole into bright sun.

She remembered the dead thing—cold, limp, and coated with slime that made it too noxious for even her to eat. It was then that the image wormed itself into her mind. From that time, she thought of herself as Newt.

Her gaze fastened on the dusty feathered bundle pinned beneath the old dun-coat's claws. It wasn't a fresh catch; her nose told her that the bird had been dead for days. The paw claiming it trembled with age and weakness. The grizzled head bent to strip away feathers.

She gathered her three good legs beneath her, preparing for a rush that would bowl the ancient male over. Carrion rank as this had repulsed her in better days. Now her belly was shrunken, and the odor of any kind of food made her drool.

The dun-coat lifted his head, fixing watery yellow eyes on her. He made sounds that were more than just growls or whines. The sounds and the way he lashed his tail created feelings inside Newt that she didn't want. She knew the old male despised her.

His noises made her feel just what she was: Ugly. Dull.

The old dun-coat tore at the rotten bird. Newt's other feelings gave way to her fierce hunger. She lunged, driving into him and knocking him to the ground. He collapsed like the bundle of sticks he resembled. She sank her teeth into the prize and lifted it. He was struggling to his feet again, making mewling sounds.

He faced her so that she looked him full in the eyes. She met there the things she had seen in the gaze of others, but

somehow his outraged stare was stronger. It asked questions—questions she could not answer.

What are you that you would take the last scrap of meat from a dying old one? Have you no respect for the ending of life ... ?

The message came not in sounds but in the fierce look from those watery yellow-green eyes. She wanted to flee with the ragged carcass, but the elder's stare held her. And, as she was imprisoned by his gaze and her growing shame and confusion, his eyes seemed to change before her, becoming those of one she knew well and hated.

From somewhere behind her own eyes, inside her own skull, a familiar nightmare swept down on her. She heard rushing, pounding, and an echoing growl that rose to a shriek. In her fevered vision, a cat-shaped apparition rose up before her with gleaming fangs. The flame-colored demon stabbed its teeth into her crippled shoulder and foreleg, waking the old pain. She struggled, but in the vision she was always smaller, weaker, unable to defend herself. The dream-creature seized her, tore her, and then threw her aside into an abyss, where she lay until the blackness lightened.

Newt woke on her side, bleakly aware that she had fallen once again into the grip of her strange sickness. Now the Dreambiter was gone. Episodes like this were half seizure, half nightmare, and totally bewildering. She found herself still moving her legs weakly. Taking deep breaths, she quieted her movements.

As her heartbeat slowed, she pulled her feet beneath her

and rolled onto her chest. She waited, dreading the light-headedness that might herald another attack. Often the dream and the illness would return, savaging her a second or third time before releasing her.

This time there was no sudden relapse. She stumbled to her feet, the contracted muscles in her crippled limb pulling as she mistakenly tried to use the leg. Her nightmare was gone. So was the old male and his feathered carrion. Newt sighed, knowing he had been able to stagger a safe distance away while she thrashed helplessly. Yet the memory of him shamed her a little less, perhaps because she knew he would have at least one more meal.

But why care about the old dun-coat? Usually she wouldn't. It was too hard to think about anything except scratching up something to eat when she could no longer bear the pain of hunger. But sometimes other thoughts and feelings thrust themselves into her narrow world, like those the old one had roused in her, making her care or shaming her because she didn't.

Newt hung her head, not wanting this hateful clarity of mind that came to her briefly on these occasions and added to her wretchedness. Yet, perhaps she was capable of thoughts beyond the bare needs of survival. She already knew the difference between kindness and cruelty, for she had felt both at some time in her dim past.

She shook her head to drive out some of the lingering dizziness. Sometimes it seemed as though the mist that always

fogged her mind might lift, letting her think clearly. There had been a time... once... before the Dreambiter...

No. She wasn't going to think about her nightmare. It might rise again, battering her from within.

Slowly, awkwardly, Newt turned. With her useless foreleg tucked up beneath her chest, she limped downhill.

A fresh wind blew from beyond the trees, bringing a sea smell to Newt's nose and a fresh pang of hunger to her belly. She rarely went that way, for she was reluctant to leave the shelter of the forest. But now, frustration and self-pity made her reckless.

The smell teased her, hinting that she might find something washed ashore that she could gnaw on. It sparked a memory, flickering, but strong enough to draw her. A memory of feathers scattered on sand, bleached to brittleness by the salt wind. Of fragile bones splintering between her teeth, releasing crumbled marrow. Shards of flesh, salt encrusted and hard as the bones that softened in her mouth and released an echo of flavor before they slipped down her throat and were gone.

The trees thinned to scrub, and the soil became stony beneath her feet as Newt left the forest for the coast. She hesitated, leaning forward on her good forepaw and switching her tail. Cries and wingbeats overhead made her shoulders hunch. Birds with tapered wings, gray backs, and plump white bellies soared above her. She slunk through sedge grass to low, broken cliffs that overlooked the beach.

There she crouched, feeling the wind lift the fur on the back of her neck and tease the tips of her ears. Lifting her muzzle, she tested the wind. There were queer smells of animals and other things, but no scents of her own kind. She was alone on the clifftop.

She listened to the crash and roll of the surf below. Then she threaded her way down across crumbling bluffs until her paws broke the sand-crust at the top of the beach. For a moment, she retreated, puzzled by the way the sand gave beneath her when she tried to walk on it.

She ventured out once again, feeling the loose sand grind between her pads and drag at her legs, making her limping pace more awkward than ever. For a moment, she looked back up the tumbled slope, wondering if she should turn around. Retreating was the easy thing to do. She had done it most of her life.

Perhaps something in the brisk wind challenged Newt this time. Drawing her whiskers back, she lowered her head and slogged through the crusted sand. She passed a line of sea wrack and nosed among the drying kelp and gull feathers for carrion but found nothing. Hordes of sand fleas scattered in front of her as she made her way down onto the hard-packed sand near the surf line.

The endless march of waves breaking on shore drew and held her gaze. The roar and boom of the surf and the salt spray blowing into her face seemed to dash away some of the confusion that lay like a gray mist over her mind. Frothy water

slithered up the beach and spilled onto her toes, drawing the sand from under her pads as it retreated.

She wasn't sure if the wind blowing in her face or the water stroking her toes bothered her or not. At least this place of water and sand did not demand anything of her.

Swinging her tail, Newt hobbled along the damp sand just beyond the surf line. She squinted against sunglare and the spray that stiffened the fur on her face. Looking back, she saw the wandering trail of her footprints. In the forest she would have scuffed them out, but here it didn't seem to matter. The slow crash and hiss of the sea lulled her, and she walked as if in a trance, feeling the sun on her back and the wind in her ears.

Newt's good forepaw struck a rock and she stumbled, falling onto her chest. Irritated and impatient with her clumsiness, she scrambled up and looked around. She had to turn her head to take in her surroundings, for her vision had tunneled, as it often did when she became frightened or angry. She hated that, for it felt as if the world had shrunk to only the small space in front of her, leaving the rest to be engulfed by blackness. And sometimes that small space would retreat far away, and then the Dreambiter would come.

She shook herself fiercely, as if she could free herself of the hateful vision the way she did the sand in her coat. The cool freshness of the wind in her face helped. Gradually her vision opened once again, and the warning throb in the back of her head faded. Now she could see that she had come to

a low shelf of gray mudstone, dotted with embedded shells and filled with shallow potholes. She hopped up and sniffed at a shallow tidepool. Several flowerlike objects beneath the surface startled her by withdrawing their narrow petals and huddling into gray-green lumps.

Intrigued, she poked at them with her good forepaw while she lay on her side, trying to get them to emerge and wave about again, but they remained sullenly closed. She got up and went on.

Newt had come to a terraced area beneath a low cliff where slabs of mudstone formed a series of shelves stepping down to the sea. The tidepools on the higher shelves held only more reclusive water flowers and a few empty shells. The lower pools lay near enough to the waves to fill as the surf rushed in and drain when the water retreated.

The brine swirled high around her legs and splashed her belly as she investigated these pools, and she found them filled with swimming, scuttling, and crawling creatures. Spiny sculpins eyed her from niches between rocks. Little crabs danced away sideways when her shadow fell on them. Pearl-shelled snails, waving their horns, glided over mats of purple algae.

She waded from one tidepool to another, her sudden fascination with the inhabitants not just the result of curiosity. The rockfish looked as if they could provide a few bites of food. The seasnails were much easier to catch, but their shells were tough and weren't as easily cracked as the more fragile shells of land snails. She nearly broke a back tooth trying to crack one and at last spat it out in disgust.

Newt noticed that each wave seemed to roll in farther than before, slowly submerging the lower tidepools. She wasn't ready to leave yet; she had spied a big sculpin lurking at the bottom of a brine-filled crevice. Settling herself on her side, she plunged her good forepaw into the water after the fish. It scooted away much faster than its large head and clumsy fins had suggested it could. She made another swipe. The fish evaded her, slipping tail first into the deepest part of the crevice and making pop eyes at her. An attempt to claw the sculpin out ended when its spines pierced her pawpad.

With a dismayed yowl, Newt pulled her paw out and floundered away, leaving the tidepools to the rising water. She scrambled over the mudstone terraces back to the beach, her stomach still grumbling and her pricked forepaw stinging.

Feeling vulnerable, she sought shelter in a cave beneath an outcrop of sandstone. She collapsed on her side, brought her bleeding pad to her face, and licked it. A vague sense of dread came over her. With one foreleg crippled, even a minor injury to the other could keep her immobilized, unable to hunt for food or fresh water.

A dull sense of outrage made her bare her teeth and flatten her ears. She whimpered—and trembled at the sound of despair in her own voice. Laying her cheek down on her throbbing forepaw, she sought sleep but found only a fitful doze.

The Dreambiter came, not in a rush and hiss as it had before, but quietly, stealing up behind misted half-dreams.

It was huge, and Newt was tiny. Sometimes the Dreambiter wore a pelt of flames, but this time it was a shadow, lit from behind by the colors of sunset. Only the eyes shimmered green, and the look in them was not hatred but anguish.

Newt knew a moment of pity for the Dreambiter, but that instant fled as blood-red light caught and stained the apparition's fangs. The teeth plunged into her flesh and kept going, striking deep into the center of her soul, ripping a shriek from her throat. Pain bloomed like an ugly flower, grew and grew until she thought even in her dream that this was the end and that the Dreambiter would take her.

But it was a dream, and although the vision could give pain, it could not give death. The final injustice was that she did wake, only to find the bleak landscape of her life before her once again. Ghost-pain danced through her neck and shoulder, through the scars of the old bite, and out into her contracted foreleg, making the stiff muscles spasm. She rolled on the leg to ease the cramping.

Lying on the sand in her shallow little cave beneath the overhang, she tried not to think of anything at all. Often her mind would oblige her by going completely blank, but this time it dwelled on her nightmare. There was something about her memory of the moment before the Dreambiter's attack that tormented her. In the vision she turned into someone smaller, weaker, yet more agile and not burdened by a lamed foreleg. And there was a difference in her mind too, for she sensed, though only fleetingly, that her thoughts at that time were

not as blurred or misted by confusion as they were now. She had been whole; now she was broken. The Dreambiter had destroyed more than just her front leg.

Newt woke from a sleep she had no memory of entering. The pain in her leg had faded, to be replaced by restlessness. She tried out her spine-pricked paw and found that the fire had gone down to a dull ache. Slowly she limped northward up the beach.

High tide covered mudflats and shell beds in the cliff shadow near a river mouth. As she wandered, skirting waves that broke high on the flats, she heard a grinding sound followed by snuffles and snorts. She halted, swiveling her ears. A fishy sea-animal odor teased her nose. Then another scent came, mixed in with the wind. Newt couldn't identify it, but there was a meaty odor that hinted at food.

Her reflexive swallow started her stomach churning and cramping. She had been about to withdraw, but now, driven by hunger, she had to go on. She limped toward the noise.

In the frothing shallow water covering the flats, Newt caught sight of an animal that was totally strange to her. It looked immense, whiskered and blubbery. Creases formed in the rolls of fat around its neck as it swung its head from side to side. Its muzzle was wide and pushed in. Short but massive tusks protruded from beneath a loose, slobbery upper lip.

As she watched, taking in the details of the animal's appearance, she wished she could capture the impression in a

way that would keep the images in her mind from fading. She sensed that such a way existed, though she didn't know what it was. Another of her kind had once tried to teach her.

A memory came to her, a picture of a copper-furred face with amber eyes. She remembered a warm tongue that washed her, a male scent, and a deep purring voice. And then the face in her mind started to move, the mouth opening and making sounds. The same sounds came repeatedly until the thought had risen in her mind that the sounds were supposed to mean something. And she had been on the verge of understanding them just as the Dreambiter had attacked, driving the kind one away and burying her dawning awareness under an avalanche of pain.

Yet that memory remained of a gentle voice trying to encourage, to teach. She opened her own mouth, startling herself by making a noise between a growl and a whimper.

The strangeness in her voice frightened her. The edges of her vision started to close in. The Dreambiter stirred but did not rise. Newt's fear gradually faded.

She became aware of the sea-creature staring at her. It humped itself farther inshore and began raking a submerged shell bed with its tusks. Each time the water receded, exposing shellfish, more of the fleshy food-smell drifted downwind, drawing Newt closer. At first the blubbery, tusked beast seemed to have no legs at all, but then she caught sight of a stumpy, flippered forelimb. The creature itself had an oily stink that caught in Newt's throat and made her grimace, but

the aroma coming from the crushed shellfish enticed her.

With a startled grunt, the blubber-tusker heaved itself upright and stared at her with eyes spaced so far apart they seemed about to fall off the sides of its pug-nosed face. She could see its nostrils twitch as it caught her scent. The hair rose on her nape.

The blubber-tusker lowered its head, lumbering a few paces back. Emboldened by the animal's retreat, Newt started forward. One step at a time, she limped down the sloping flats, trembling with hunger. She had almost reached the shell bed when the creature bellowed and wriggled toward her, its heaving motion sending ripples through its blubber.

On three legs, Newt scampered shoreward, terrified that her pursuer was about to catch her. Instead the beast had come to a stop, puffing and blowing. It slapped the water with a stumpy hind flipper, roaring at her. Newt's first reaction was surprise. Here was a creature that she could actually outrun, even at her limping pace.

The realization gave her courage, and instead of hobbling away, she stayed, watching the blubber-tusker shake its fat neck at her. Again she ventured nearer, ignoring the animal's deafening roars. She nosed the edge of a broken clamshell, tasting what was inside. A shock of delight went through her when the meaty flavor spread over her tongue. In a sudden frenzy, she attacked the shell bed, clawing open damaged shells and swallowing the rubbery meat inside, nearly breaking her fangs in the rush.

A splashing, roaring commotion sent her scooting away, a clamshell still wedged in her jaws. In her urge to eat as much as she could, she had forgotten the blubber-tusker. Again she kept well away from the creature's lumbering charge, and it halted, quivering, blowing out through its whiskers in frustration.

Newt waited until it had gone back to raking the shell bed before she mounted her next raid. The fact that the huge beast was slower than she was gave her a mischievous joy. She spent the afternoon scavenging from the plundered shell beds and dodging the walrus. At last it lumbered seaward, dived into a wave, and was gone.

As sunset streaked the beach in silver and gold, Newt padded back to the cave where she had napped. Her belly was full enough to ease hunger cramps, though this food was different from anything she had eaten before, and her stomach gurgled.

When she reached her cave, it looked much friendlier. With food in her belly and less pain in her foot, her mind felt clearer. She decided that she disliked the beach less than other places. For the present, this part of it was hers. She limped backward until her tail lay against a block of sandstone and sprayed the rock with her scent.

Newt flattened her ears and snaked her head back and forth, suddenly fearing that someone would come and take this place from her. She waited, stiff and tense. Nothing hap-

pened. Waves rolled in and washed out. Birds drifted down the sky with distant calls.

She crawled into the cave, making a nest for herself in the warm sand. She wondered if the tusked sea-animal would return to the shell beds, and while she was wondering, drowsiness crept over her, drew her head down on her paw, and coaxed her into sleep.