

Dragon Domain



Theresa
Chaze

Book two of the Dragon Clan Trilogy

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CHAPTER ONE

The water splashed against the dark sides of the bowl. She knew they were working. She felt it. The water rolled against the opposite side. Placing the bucket on the floor beside the table leg, she breathed deeply of the herb and dark soil-scented air. This was no ordinary greenhouse. The natural floor kept it connected to Mother Earth. The solar-powered heaters and full-spectrum lights brought the Sun God's fertility into the four walls even in the deepest winter. The combination gave her strength beyond herself.

Squatting, she rinsed her hands and dried them on the legs of her jeans. Her fingerprints were still dark with the outlines of soil. The same dark outlines were around and under her fingernails. They were clean. Only time and absence from working with the plants would remove the embedded particles, but that would never happen. Standing, she tossed her thick braid back over her shoulder; it swung down along the small of her back.

She crossed the room and turned off the lights. Picking up a silver candle holder, with a white candle protruding from the top, she returned to the table. Snapping her fingers, the wick lit. The glow created a circle on the table, enveloping the bowl with light. The clear image of the flame reflected off the surface of the now calm water. She dipped her hand in, scooping up a handful. Slowly it seeped through her fingers, dripping back into the bowl to create wavelets.

Taking a deep breath, she centered within herself. The power of the dragon rose within her. She felt the energy of her tail swish back and forth as her human boundaries expanded before dissolving. Lowering her hand beneath the surface of the water, her fingers mimicked the movement of her tail. The transparency darkened, reflecting back the star-decorated sky. She felt her spirit lift on the wings of the dragon. She was in the sky below the stars and above the greenhouse.

Hovering, her long neck arched from right to left, checking the Eastern and Southern boundaries. The swamp protected them from the North and most of the Western side. She saw no sign of intruders.

Several lights appeared in the cabins. One or two of the inhabitants openly stood in the windows, searching the sky. They sensed the energy currents of her beating wings. They could feel the rhythm on their skin, even if their other senses could not perceive her.

Below in the greenhouse, her hand still stirred the water; her body was programmed to do so until her spirit returned.

Off to the left, Dominic stood in the library window, looking up at her. He was biding his time. She stretched her long neck down, positioning her dragon spirit between her and her vulnerable body. Startled, he stepped backward. Quickly regaining his composure, he folded his arms over his muscular chest. With a snap of his neck, he flipped his dark hair back over his shoulder. His sky-blue eyes darkened to the color of slate. He would not openly start a battle he could not win; instead, he'd wait for his opportunity.

Her point made; Cheyenne gained altitude. In the distance, she saw the flames and smoke rising from Coyote Springs. Her sisters were there. Tucking her shorter arms closer to her chest, she flew south toward them. She was not going to help or encourage them in their meddling. But she wouldn't allow them to be unprotected either.

Since Reverend Marshal arrived, he had been trying to change the town's attitude about the farm. There had been a balance of power until Rachael Franklin publicly showed the power of the dragon. Now Marshal

had credibility. The people fear them. Cheyenne felt threatened by the interloper. Her sisters didn't understand. They thought her resentment of the newcomer was childish. But it wasn't a tantrum. Nor was it her pride. Dragons of different clans simply didn't mingle and Coyote Springs was within the one-hundred-mile radius of her den.

She circled once around the perimeter of the activity. Dark smoke mixed with steam bellowed out the upstairs windows. The firemen rushed in and out of the house like ants with a mission. The police kept the crowds at bay. It had always amazed Cheyenne how the misfortunes of others brought out the voyeurism of the masses. Standing in crowds beneath the trees or huddled in the cars, they waited to see if the occupants survived or if their bodies would be carried out. *Was it an accident? Or was this the sixth murder?*

Celeste stood among the police cars. As always, she stood straight and erect. The blue and red lights strobed, giving her momentary spotlights intertwined with shadow. Bent at the elbow, she held her arms up in front of her, palms facing away. The left was closest to her chest. The right was pointed toward their other sister, Jane. Sitting on the front seat of the patrol car, Jane's long legs stretched out the open door. She stared out the windshield at the house. They were working as a team. Jane searched; Celeste acted as an antenna and power source. Before it had always been the three of them. But more and more, it'd become them versus her. Cheyenne didn't understand.

They were not sisters of the blood, but of the soul. They had chosen each other as family. Celeste was the eldest. In reality, she was closer to being the age of a mother. In her mid-fifties, she still remembered when being Indian was a shameful heritage, whose religion was scorned by the Great White Brother. Her Hopi blood gave her patience and tolerance. The Scottish gave her the temper that made grown men quake when she was pushed too far. Her skin was still smooth, except for the tiny lines around her eyes. Her shoulders remained square. Her dark hair hung passed them to dance at the top of her thighs. Magic potions from L'Oreal kept the gray at bay. Those who've hinted it was unseemly for a woman of her age to wear her hair that long received only the point of her chin and a splattering of her hair across their faces as she turned her backside on them in careless dismissal.

Her first memories in life were of Celeste looking down at her. Before that moment, her life still remained a void. What she had experienced for the first four or five years of her life had been forever beaten from her. When she was healthy enough, Celeste had taken her away from the Mesa. They never returned, even for Celeste's mother's funeral. Cheyenne never understood why she kept them moving. Cheyenne dreamed of settling down and creating a home; it was the last thing Celeste wanted. Twenty-five years had passed; Celeste had become her mother and mentor. Together they traveled from coast to coast, using their healing and psychic talents to support themselves.

They had met Jane almost five years ago. Celeste and Cheyenne had been helping the police find a missing eight-year-old girl. Jane had been working as a reporter for a local television station. It was through the investigation they met and become friends.

Tall, tawny-haired with the legs of a dancer, Jane was a local celebrity. Her career was successful. She had friends and family. She had a lover she enjoyed but didn't love. She had an apartment with all the luxuries; it was safe and comfortable, but it had never been home to her.

The girl had been found alive and bonds had been formed between the three of them. It was the first time Cheyenne felt as if she had found her niche and wanted to stay. Celeste had wanted to move on immediately. It was the second time they disagreed. Through a series of coincidences, Cheyenne had found the farm. It had long been abandoned. With Jane's help and the generosity of the child's parents, the sale was arranged. Only then did Cheyenne tell Celeste. Reluctantly Celeste relented. Within a few months, Jane moved in.

The restoration took almost two years of hard work and sacrifice. They became a family. Cheyenne finally had the home she had been praying for.

From above, Cheyenne watched the smoke lesson to mere wisps, which dissipated above the treetops. The activity increased. The fire department put away its equipment. The police started to move in. She continued to watch, doing her best to remain hidden from their special gifts.

Jane stood, closing the car door behind her. Scanning the sky, she spoke to Celeste. Cheyenne couldn't hear the words. Celeste looked skyward. Immediately, Cheyenne withdrew, returning to the greenhouse.

Concentrating, she snapped back into her body. For a moment, she stood, staring into the water, stunned by the rapid descent. Blinking rapidly, she tried to clear the dizziness. Her heart stuttered as it tried to harmonize the different beats. It was hard to breathe. She leaned against the table, submerging her arm to the elbow. Her stomach growled, not with hunger but with nausea. Breathing in through her nose, she exhaled through her mouth. The extra oxygen strengthened her. Pulling her hand from the bowl, she turned and leaned back against the table. Looking skyward, she searched the heavens for the Big Dipper and the security it always brought her. She found it above the main house. She imagined its energy pouring into her, refilling her. Tilting her head backward, she closed her eyes and breathed deeply.

"Cheyenne." The timid voice called from the doorway.

Her eyes snapped open. Slowly she looked over her shoulder at the child standing in the doorway. "Lisa," anger tinted her voice, "what are you doing here?"

"You told me to come." Her voice quivered. "When...when they came back. I'm scared. And you promised."

Slowly inhaling, she arched her back, lifting her heels off the floor. Exhaling, she relaxed her muscles, returning her heels to the ground. Wiping her damp and wrinkled hand on her pant leg, Cheyenne looked at the other end of the greenhouse, trying to collect herself. The child was still fragile, a budding talent that needed to be guided and protected. *But why now?*

'Dominic' came the reply.

Cheyenne exhaled, forcing the stagnant air from the bottom of her lungs. She inhaled deeply and turned toward the child. Slowly exhaling, she forced a smile to her lips. "Okay. Where is the shadow?" She extended her hand.

Lisa ran across the room, attaching herself to Cheyenne's legs. "It was in the barn."

Looking down at the brown head, she freed her hand and planted both on her hips. "What were you doing in the barn at this time of night?"

The small round face tilted up. Her hazel eyes speckled with gold sought understanding. "It called to me."

"And you went?"

"It was lonely."

"Don't you--"

Lisa shrank away.

Annoyed with herself for her harshness, Cheyenne glanced up at the dipper. She really required alone time. But now she was needed.

Tears welled up, threatening to spill down the round cheeks.

"Lisa," Cheyenne spoke calmly, but firmly, "you mustn't just follow anything. Lonely or not. Next time come get me."

Nodding, the little hand pried its way into Cheyenne's, the small fingers intertwining with the adult's. "I will. Promise. Let me show you."

"No." Scraping the tentacles from her fingers, Cheyenne cupped her chin in her palms. "It's late. I'll take you back to bed."

"What if it calls again?"

"Tell it to talk to me."

"What if?"

"No, what ifs" Cheyenne pulled her toward the door. "You know the rules."

Lisa pulled her arm free, crossing her arms across her chest.

"Lisa!" Cheyenne snapped.

The girl jumped.

"You know the rules."

Looking at the floor, the child nodded. "I won't act like a brat."

"Good girl. I'll walk you to your cabin."

Shaking her head, she walked to the door. "We're sleeping at the big house tonight."

Oh, really? Cheyenne thought. *Another agreement Dominic broke.*

Slowly, turning the knob Lisa looked out the door window. "I wish I could live with Rachael."

"Why?"

"The shadows can't follow me there."

Cheyenne flinched.

The door opened and closed behind the child. Cheyenne walked to the window. It was only about fifty yards between the back door and the greenhouse. The night was quiet. The light came on as it sensed her movement. Opening the door, the child disappeared inside.

Lisa loved the farm, yet she continued to seek out Rachael Franklin, spending as much time as she was allowed in the other dragon's company. Cheyenne found it disturbing, but she didn't know why.

Tossing her braid back over her shoulder, she returned to the table. The candle had burned down into the holder. The water was clear. She picked the bowl up and emptied it into the irrigation channel. She debated with herself whether she should extinguish the candle or let it die naturally. The flame danced, sparked, and hissed into darkness. Debate over.

She looked around the greenhouse. Her eyes adjusted to the lower light level, allowing her to distinguish the plants from the night. The peace of the moment washed over her. *No people. No games. Just the quiet and softness of the night.* Smiling, she relaxed into the moment.

A barn owl flew overhead, casting an almost faint shadow through the ceiling glass. Some thought the owl was an omen of death. To Cheyenne, they reminded her of Athena, Goddess of Wisdom. It was not wise to choose one God or Goddess above another; they all had their strengths and beauty, but for Cheyenne, Athena was right up at the top.

She said a short unstructured prayer for the child. She and her sisters were good kids caught up in a bad situation. Her family didn't want to see the pain they were causing. They just wanted ownership. On the farm, Cheyenne was Lisa's port in the storm. However, Dominic took every opportunity to use the child to find a weakness in her to exploit. Lisa's nightmares and the shadows, which called her to isolated places, were becoming more frequent since she started helping in the greenhouse. Cheyenne was certain Dominic created them. But Jane and Celeste wouldn't believe her without tangible proof and she had none.

Turning on the sprinkler system, she left the greenhouse, closing the door behind her. The late spring night wrapped itself around her. This was the time of day she found peace. The crickets and frogs sang. In the distance, a dog howled. Many of the dogs on the farm answered. Several horses in the coral snorted. The earth and manure mixed together to create fertility for the vegetables to grow from. The scent offended most people. To Cheyenne, it was almost perfume.

Smiling, she headed for the barn in easy, even steps. A few yards from the tack room, she brought her guard up. So far no one else had seen Lisa's shadows, but that didn't mean they didn't exist.

Cally, named so because of her markings, stepped out of the shadows. Seeing Cheyenne at the door, she double-timed it to slip inside before the door closed. Meowing, she rubbed against the cabinet where the cat food was stored.

"Hungry girl?"

The cat answered in a long plaintive "Meow."

"Meow? Nobody says meow anymore." She pulled the bag from the cabinet and filled the dish. The hard kernels hitting the plastic quickly brought three more furry bodies from the stable part of the barn. "Don't give me that. I filled this bowl already twice today. And I saw all of you eat."

Ignoring her, they continued to crunch away.

"You're welcome." Shaking her head, Cheyenne returned the bag to the cabinet and walked out of the tack room into the barn. She scanned from left to right. The starlight gave the doorways and open windows a slight outline.

A low warning growl came from the back corner.

Startled, Cheyenne stopped, her shield coming to full strength. A horse whined. The growl became more insistent. Half turning toward the sound, she scanned the darkness. Morgan stood, protecting her pups. "What's the danger, Morgan?"

Her tail wagged once, acknowledging her presence, yet she didn't drop her guard.

Cheyenne followed the tip of the nose to the corral entrance. At first, she saw nothing. He moved ever so slightly, distinguishing his body from the rest of the shadows. It was not a spirit, at least not yet. "Dominic," she called out, "you know the rules."

"I'm not in the barn." The arrogance dripped from his voice. Stepping into the center of the gateway, he perched his hands on his hips. "It's a stupid rule."

"What are you doing here?"

He shuffled his feet but did not cross the threshold.

"Lisa—"

Cheyenne cut him off. "Knew I would take care of it!"

"Didn't your father teach you to speak with respect to your elders?"

"You are older in age, but not in wisdom." She snapped back.

He lurched forward but caught himself before he crossed the threshold.

"Others are beginning to see you as I see you."

"I know who my friends are." He growled, his voice emanating from deep in his throat.

"They not as many as you think!" Cheyenne snapped back, taking a step toward him. "The only one you are fooling is Celeste. She thinks you love her. But you just want the farm!"

"Lesbian bitch!"

"That's good. How long did it take for your tiny mind to think of it!"

His fists clenched.

"Just because women find comfort and support among themselves doesn't mean they are lesbians. But of course, you couldn't understand. You only think with the head between your legs."

He growled.

Morgan answered him in kind, positioning herself between him and her pups.

Reaching behind, he focused on Morgan. "Keep out of this!"

Morgan howled but did not back down. Immediately the other canines on the farm answered her.

Pulling his hand around, he crossed the threshold. "I said shut up!" The blade was barely visible in the darkness.

"Get out!" Cheyenne snapped, advancing toward him.

Two dark shapes jumped the corral fence. Within seconds, they had crossed the distance. Large and teeth-bared, Jerry's Shepard and wolf hybrid canines, Jasmine and Walter squared off with Dominic.

"This isn't over." He hissed.

"Anything happens to Morgan or her pups. We blame you."

His eyes shone red in the dark. "We never hurt our own."

"Is that what the knife was for?"

Morgan's teeth shone white in the darkness, a warning rumbled from her throat. The other two harmonized.

"I was just protecting myself." He slowly backward the corral archway.

Jasmine and Walter followed.

"They don't believe you. Neither do I."

Backing out of the barn, he spun on his toes and marched into the darkness.

Walter positioned himself within the shadows near the corral door. Jasmine backtracked, finding other shadows to blend into. They intended to stay.

Briefly, Morgan nuzzled the palm of her hand before returning to her pups.

"It's all right, girl. He won't be back tonight. And if I have my way, any other night." Mentally, she made a note to herself to call Jerry; he would need to know where Jasmine and Walter were. Hopefully, he would allow them to stay until morning.

He had become so unpredictable since Selene took the kids and left. He had come home from the boatyard and they were gone. The only note she left simply told him not to look for her. He had come to her crying, wanting to know where they were.

Cheyenne honestly didn't know. Only he didn't believe her. There had been nothing she could say to change his mind. He withdrew from his old friends, accusing them of plodding against him. Instead, Dominic became his new best drinking buddy. They were physical opposites; Where Dominic was tall and lean, Jerry was short and burly. Many nights they'd sit on Jerry's front porch, drinking themselves stupid. In the morning, Jerry would be sprawled out and Dominic would have disappeared.

Cheyenne missed his friendship. Their conversations were now limited to the work that needed to be done on the farm and the common lineage of their dogs.

Stepping out into the night air, she looked up. The Big Dipper still hung in the sky. She enjoyed the peace of the moment, not knowing how long it would last.

Bunched together at the far end of the corral, the horses stomped and snorted. Several whinnied. Cheyenne sensed their fear. *They would be happier in the stalls tonight*, Cheyenne thought. Slowly walking towards them, she hummed nothing in particular. The horses began to calm down.

CHAPTER TWO

Celeste leaned back into the shadows. She didn't like being left behind. It was just as well. The smoke outside was more than enough for her to deal with. Nervously she swished her hair over her shoulder and began braiding. *She didn't understand. Why had Jane received the images? Of the two, I have always had a clearer sight.* But her gift was fading more every day. Each morning, her visions were cloudier, less accurate than the day before. At first, she thought it was illness or overwork. She had taken time to herself, trying to restore her strength. It didn't help. If anything, the deterioration increased. She suspected it was the crossover time between the phases of life. Long past maidenhood, her mother phase spanned a great portion of time, if now it was time to begin the crone time of her life. *No!* Part of her screamed in pain. *No, not yet.*

Two officers walked past her toward the house. They broke stride long enough to visually verify her identity before continuing.

She felt their distrust and anger roll toward her in waves. She shook it off and forced herself to bless them. *It would be so easy to reach out and open their minds. So easy, yet so self-destructive. They didn't try to understand. But to forcibly open their minds would do irreparable damage to their brains and my soul.* Combing her fingers through the braid, she freed the long strands from the loose knots.

She felt useless. Jane no longer needed her to confirm her sight. Cheyenne no longer came to her for advice and comfort; she had found her own answers. Most of the people, who had come to her for wisdom, now went elsewhere. *When did I lose control?* She stopped the thought. Part of her knew the answer; it was too painful to face.

The strong breeze was finally clearing away the smoke-tainted air. Closing her eyes, she breathed deeply, trying to clear her lungs. There was a new scent, familiar yet irritating. She sneezed. Her nose was stuffed. The tickle in her throat quickly became a dry cough that shook her body and hurt her chest.

A hand grabbed her shoulder. Frightened, Celeste jerked away from it, clumsily spinning around.

Startled, Jane stepped backward. "Celeste. What's the matter?" Are you okay?"

Celeste nodded.

"Did you sense something?"

"Yes." Celeste lied. She hadn't even sensed Jane; that had never happened before.

"What did you see?"

"I'm not sure what to make of it." Celeste stalled. "Tell me what you saw in the house."

Jane looked at the ground. Reluctantly, her gaze shifted to the upstairs bedroom window. "It was him."

"I know."

Jane's eyes snapped back to Celeste. "We have to catch him. He's getting more brutal."

"Why do you think it is a he?"

"He?"

"Before you always referred to the person as the attacker. Not he or she. What changed?"

"I don't know." Her head tilted forward, her hand reaching up to brush the tawny strands behind her ear. The fingertips stopped on the pulse point behind the lobe. Her eyes lids half closed; the pupils moved rapidly beneath them.

Celeste had seen this reaction from her before. Sometimes the information came so fast that she didn't have time to consciously remember it; instead, she just stored the details for later. By partially closing off her other senses, she could flip through the stored information. It could be mere moments to a long intermittent search, which took days.

She looked past Jane at the house. The front door was smashed off the hinges. The second-story windows were broken, some by the heat, others by the firemen venting the smoke. A single wisp of smoke rose from the hole in the roof above the bedroom where the body had been found. *The firemen--persons*, she corrected herself, *speculated that is where the fire had been ignited, then artificially spread throughout the house with an accelerant.*

Which meant arson. She snorted to herself. *Some people just had to make things more complicated than they were.*

Maxie stood next to his partner, Sammy, just short of the corner of the house. Detective Maxwell O'Connell--bright, handsome, red-haired pagan man, who called himself Pagan, but only in private. He had not yet come out of the broom closet. The door was kept firmly shut by the fear of losing credibility. He had worked hard and loved his job. His co-workers already teased him for allowing Jane to help. *What would they say or worse do if they knew how he spent his full and new moons? How many promotions would disappear, especially now the House of Christ was putting on pressure?*

His sister had brought him to an herb class to alleviate his concern over her choice of treatment. Her AIDS couldn't be cured, but Annie decided to emphasize living well, instead of existing for as long as possible. At first, he had been angry, vengeful in his attack of the treatment. It had been Cheyenne who had cornered him, forcing him to see the pain he was heaping on his sister. He had blown up; Cheyenne had returned fire. Celeste had never been so proud of her daughter. Maxie had stormed off and didn't return to the farm for nearly a month. Jane had found him wandering around the stream where Annie had found peace. He had cried in her arm. Together they spread her ashes on the banks.

A fireman--person, she again corrected herself. She shook her head; *I'm too old to change her vocabulary to be politically correct.* The fireperson walked between Maxie and Sammy, dragging the still dripping hose.

Detective Sammy Davies had a spiritual power about her. Yet, she was a non-believer. She could instinctively dig up the information she needed from a scene or witness. She just knew how to ask the right questions. Celeste had tried to tell her, to help her train her gifts. Haughtily the young woman had told her it wasn't necessary; she wasn't psychic, just an excellent detective. It had planted the seeds of dislike in Celeste. She was an Elder, deserving of respect. But what Celeste found more disturbing was her inability to read the younger woman, whose brown eyes with flecks of gold had forced her more than once to look

away. The two of them were a perfect team. From their body language, Celeste frequently wondered just how intimate the partnership was.

"Celeste?" Jane touched the older woman's shoulder. "I trust him."

Caught off guard by her sudden ability to read her so easily, Celeste turned around. "Then why aren't you open and honest about your relationship? Why are you hiding it?"

Planting her fists on her hips, her eyebrows arched, forming an exclamation mark line in the middle of her forehead. "Not now?" Jane hissed. "Why do you always bring it up and the most inappropriate times?"

Startled, Celeste crossed her arms across her chest as to protect herself from the words. *How could they treat her like this?*

"Celeste." Jane's hand dropped to her sides. "Why didn't you tell me Cheyenne was watching over us?"

"She wasn't here."

Jane pointed to the area above the tallest sycamore tree. "I saw her." The blue eyes stared down at her, searching, and probing. Angrily, she pivoted toward the house. "I have to talk to Maxie."

"Wait!" Celeste grabbed her forearm. "Why did you think it was a man?"

"I caught a glimpse of him in the mirror"

"She saw his face?"

Jane sighed. "No. She only saw a vague glimpse. Brown hair and a full beard."

"That's what I saw too." Celeste added quickly. "I just didn't know where it fit in."

Again, Jane's blue eyes centered on Celeste, the pupils widening and then narrowing. The softness of her features tensed, giving her a hardness Celeste had never seen before. Celeste reached out, touching the younger woman's shoulder; using her empathy, she tried to search for the cause of the anger she was sensing.

"Don't!" Jane jerked away and crossed the yard.

Stunned, Celeste watched her. For the first time, she noticed the amount of weight she had gained, but it only served to accentuate her feminine curves. Even angry, her body moved in a sensual way that attracted the attention of every man she passed. No longer a size seven, but more of a size fourteen, Jane could still get the blood to rise in a man without trying.

Frustrated, Celeste turned away. *Men used to look at me in that way. They had found me desirable. Now-now, Celeste chided herself, I'm not old, just older, not dead. I'm still desirable.* Inhaling deeply, she tried to center herself, to find a place of peace. It kept slipping away from her. The harder she reached, the faster it disappeared, leaving only an empty void.

A car door slammed. Her eyes snapped open. Dominic was walking up the sidewalk towards her. A woman officer intercepted him. He tried to push past her.

"Officer, wait!" Celeste shouted, trying to keep the situation from getting out of hand. "He is with us."

She stepped aside, keeping both of them in her line of sight. "Why didn't he say so?"

"Why didn't you ask?" Dominic snapped.

"Enough!" Celeste interceded. "I've been waiting for you." She lied. In the past, she had always believed lying brought nothing but trouble; she was rapidly changing her mind.

Glaring down at the officer as he passed her, Dominic marched across the distance. Leaning forward, he kissed her cheek.

His male scent made the heat rise within her. The pressure and warmth of his large hands on her back gave her a sense of protection. He lifted her up onto her toes. The self-doubt was pushed away. He tilted her head up. Their eyes met. His eyes were as blue as the summer sky. Even as children, he had always understood her needs. She hadn't realized how much she had missed him until she found him on the front porch a little over six months ago.

"You needed me. I felt it." His voice deep and smooth stated a fact.

Celeste nodded.

He pulled her closer. "They're working against you."

"I don't want to believe that." Celeste felt the tears well in her eyes. *Cheyenne was the daughter the Grandmother Spirit had not blessed my womb with. I had deserted my family to keep her. I had entrusted her with Grandmother's teachings and prophecies that no other outsider had been given. Even when Cheyenne chose the path of the Dragon, I loved her and tried to understand.*

"Celeste." He whispered. "Leave the past behind you." He gently released her.

Her heels returned to the ground, but she remained close to him. "I don't want to forget."

"They have. You're an elder. They don't have the right to question your wisdom. Not them. Not anyone." He tucked the long strands back behind her ear.

The strong scent of manure drifted up. Backing away, Celeste looked downward. "Dominic, what's on your boots?"

"Lisa saw a shadow in the barn."

"Please tell me you didn't."

"No, but she tried taunting me into breaking my word."

Celeste looked up into the blue eyes. "I'm sorry. I wish the two of you could make peace."

"It's not your place to be sorry." He reached out and touched her forearm. "It's hers."

"Celeste?" Jane's voice held a tinge of anger.

Celeste turned toward her.

"What is he doing here?" Maxie and Sammy stood on either side of her sister. Her entire posture spoke of her anger.

Again, a shiver ran through Celeste's body. There was something about the female detective that made her uneasy. It was her eyes, which seemed to be able to dissect a person, ripping through to their deepest secrets. Those eyes focused on her.

Celeste stepped back behind Dominic, trying to elude them.

"This is a restricted area!" Maxie snapped. "You know that Celeste."

Energy passed freely between Maxie and Jane. Its power nearly made it a visible force. The heat of their passion wasn't good for either of them. But Jane wouldn't listen to her warnings. He was spiritually gifted. He needed to be taught slowly by someone who had the experience that Jane lacked.

Celeste felt the gold eyes on the side of her face. "Dominic." She tried to ignore them, to again use Dominic's body to shield herself, but the gold eyes continued to find her. Anger rose within her; *how dare they triple-team me!* "Jane," she demanded, "why are you doing this to me?"

"She's not doing anything." Maxie interceded. "It's our rules. Not hers."

"We're helping you." Celeste snapped, the anger rising in her voice. "And Dominic helps us."

"I don't want his help." Jane interjected, the anger rising in her voice. "I told you before. He interferes--"

"Why don't you trust me anymore?" Dominic stepped closer. "Don't listen to Cheyenne. She doesn't like me. I don't know why. That's why she lies."

"Cheyenne has never lied to me."

"Are you saying I have?" Celeste countered angrily.

A thin dark string wound its way around and into her heart. "*She betrayed you.*" It whispered.

Celeste found a new freedom with its message. "Jane, after all that we've shared... all I've taught you--"

Jane retreated back behind the detectives. "Why must you always make me choose?" Her voice quivered. "I love you both. I trust you both!"

"Another time!" Maxie snapped.

"You trusted me before." The darkening blue eyes fixed on Jane. "What happened?"

"Get lost or get arrested!" Sammy marched forward, completely blocking Jane from Dominic.

Dominic shifted his focus. "What's the charge?"

"Impeding an investigation." Sammy's lips curled into a slight smile.

"You'll never make it stick."

"It'll be fun to try." The brown of her eyes receded, being engulfed by the gold. "Sergeant!"

Celeste panicked. *I can't lose my only ally.* "Wait. We'll leave." She tucked her hand around Dominic's arm.

"Celeste." Jane reached for her. "You don't have to leave. We need you."

Celeste looked up at Dominic. "Take me home."

He nodded. Gently covering her hand with his, he led the way, pushing a path clear between the threesome.

Celeste kept her head down. She didn't want to see the hurt in Jane's eyes or her own reflections in the golden-brown mirrors of Sammy's. Part of her felt regret, but the new and growing part of her laughed with satisfaction. Caught between tears and a savage delight, she continued to allow Dominic to lead her. Peripherally she watched the activity slow to a halt as they walked passed. Some snickered. Dominic pulled her closer. His strength and his scent made her dizzy.

Another dark string found its way into her heart, making her stronger. "*She betrayed you,*" It repeated. "*They used you for your gifts. They owe you.*"

As they walked, her back straightened. Her gaze focused forward. They still stared. Talking just loud enough for her to hear their voices, but not their words.

Dominic opened the truck door and helped her into the seat, closing it behind her. He walked around the back to the driver's side.

Through the windshield, Celeste watched the activity resume. The lights flashed blue and red. Jane stood among the detectives, looking at her. In her mind, Celeste heard Jane ask "*why?*" Celeste closed her eyes. A tear slipped from beneath the lids, quickly followed by others. She didn't bother to wipe them away. She didn't answer the question Jane continued to ask; she didn't have an answer.

The engine roared to life and the truck shot backward. She didn't want to see; she didn't want to know. Dominic drove in silence. The sounds of the city and the smoothness of the road gave way to the roughness and quietness of the country.

Celeste leaned back in her seat. Her body stubbornly refused to relax. Looking out the window into the darkness, she watched the view change. More trees and fields. Fewer houses. A dog barked and ran part way down the drive as they passed his home. Combing her fingers through a handful of hair, she separated the strands into three sections and began to loosely braid them.

Dominic reached out and dried the dampness on her cheek. His touch was warm and comforting. Gently, he traced her cheek. The callus of his large hands felt rough against her skin. Throughout the decades she

had known him, he had always been a working man and proud to be so. Let some take the charity of the white man, but his child of Mother Earth could earn his own way. She smiled at the memory. His palm slid down her shoulder, tracing her arm down to her hand. She released her hair and their fingers intertwined. It was more intimate than a kiss.

They rounded the bend and turned onto the dirt road. The truck jumped and bounced among the potholes.

Dominic slowed down. "If you arrange for me to use the tractor, I'll grate the road."

"I'll ask Cheyenne."

"It's your equipment as well!"

"Please...."

"When," his fingers tightened their grip, "will you start taking what belongs to you?"

"I'm tired."

He stopped the truck. Throwing it into neutral, He swiveled on the seat. "Make her leave. It's the only way."

"You don't understand. It's not possible." She had tried to tell him the truth in the past, but he refused to listen. Part of her was afraid that Cheyenne was right; that it was the land he wanted, not her.

"We'll make it possible." Anger tainted his voice. "Together we can do anything."

Celeste lifted the latch. "Good night."

He reached over her and pulled the door shut. "I'll drive you to the door."

The back of his arm pressed against her chest, holding her in the seat. His eyes gleamed with the light from the dash. She felt his warmth against her skin. Time regressed. She was sixteen again. Butterflies bumped against the inside of her stomach. He licked his lips. Bending her arm at the elbow, she reached up and lightly touched his arm. The pressure increased on her chest. His scent filled her nostrils. Her hand dropped to the inside of his thigh, sliding her hand upward in small circular motions. He was ready for her. She pulled the zipper down. He grabbed her hand, kissed the back, and gently placed it on her lap. He opened the window and threw the truck into gear. It lurched forward. For no apparent reason, he had rejected her.

Stunned, Celeste stared out the windshield. The house grew in size as they drove closer. Most of the windows were dark. The truck followed the drive around to the back.

The greenhouse was dark, as was the barn. Cheyenne was about. Celeste didn't know where; her energy seemed to be everywhere. *So it was true*, Celeste thought, *she did take flight. Why didn't I sense...the thought trailed off, quickly followed by an unreasoning sadness and growing anger. "Cheyenne needs to leave."* It was irrational. She knew it. But she couldn't stop the thought.

The truck stopped. Her head bobbed forward, freeing her mind for a few moments.

"I have to get back to the kids." His fingers tapped against the wheel; the gold of his ring gleamed in the moonlight. "Meredith complains I leave them with sitters too much."

She reached up and traced the outline of his jaw. He jerked his head away. Sadly, she withdrew her hand and opened the door.

Dominic caught her arm. "It's not what you think." His voice was raspy and harsh in the peaceful setting.

"I don't know what to think." She slid off the seat.

For a moment, he held on to her arm. "You'll understand soon. I promise."

Celeste freed her arm and slammed the door. Pivoting on her heels, she marched inside. Suddenly her bones ached. She was soul tired. All she wanted was a cup of tea, a long, hot bath, and her bed.

The ticking on the grandfather clock in the dining room echoed in the otherwise silent house. Moonlight streamed in the window giving the kitchen an irradant glow. The message light flashed on the machine. *Do I want to know?* Three calls were listed on the caller Id. She pushed the arrow. Franklin, Beverly. *What does my sister want now?* The remaining two were anonymous.

The familiar voice filled the kitchen. "Celeste. I'm concerned about Rachael. I've had this feeling for a long time. She says she's all right. But I keep being pulled back to Coyote Springs. Are you okay?" Her voice trailed off for a moment but continued in a more regretful tone. "Did we do the right thing? Celeste, I need to know. I'm afraid for her and I don't know why?"

The fear in her sister's voice re-awakened her own feelings of guilt, which she didn't understand. *How could Dominic and I have known Cheyenne would have reacted so negatively? Coyote Springs did need the store.*

"She is just as much a daughter to me as the ones I bore." Beverly continued. "I'm trusting you to take care of her." The message ended.

She deleted the message. *There were some things Jane and Cheyenne didn't need to know.* The next message was dead air, ending with a click of the receiver.

The third beep brought Jane's voice. "Celeste. I'm sorry." She hesitated. "Seeing Dominic surprised me." A muffled voice in the background distracted her for a moment. She continued her voice at a slightly higher pitch than before. "I won't be back to the farm tonight. I'll be at Raven's if you need me." The message ended. The machine beeped and the tape began to rewind.

She's lying, Celeste thought. She's not at Raven's, but at Maxie's. Should I call and confront the lie or let her believe she'd gotten away with it?

"Are you going to call?"

Startled, Celeste jumped back against the counter. A squeak of a scream escaped her lips.

Cheyenne stood just inside the archway of the dining room. The moonlight framed her outline but concealed her features. "You could expose the lie. But there is that silly rule of what goes around comes around. Are you hiding something, Celeste?" Her voice was like a purr with words.

Celeste inhaled sharply and squared her shoulders. "What are you doing here?"

Cheyenne sauntered closer, her fingers trailing across the buffet, her attention absorbed by the act as if it was the most fascinating action. "Why shouldn't I be here? It's my house."

"Cheyenne!" Celeste snapped, beginning to feel like a trapped mouse.

Her fingers stopped at the corner. Her elfish face slowly tilted upward to meet Celeste's gaze. "What did you and your sister do to bring Rachael Franklin here?"

"None of your business!" Celeste snapped back, no longer caring to deny her involvement.

"Did Jane know?" Her voice was soft, but it hurt her more than a screaming fight. "Did you follow the rules or are you claiming elder privilege again?"

"I've always done what I thought best."

"Elder Privilege. Just as I thought." Her hand dropping to her side, Cheyenne walked through the dining room into the kitchen. "It's your consequences." She continued toward the back door but stopped at the threshold. "Dominic broke the rules again. Once more and he's gone."

"It wasn't his fault. You baited him--"

Without listening, Cheyenne walked out, allowing the door to slam shut behind her.

Frustrated, Celeste picked up the teakettle. Her first inclination was to throw it at the back door. Common sense took hold. *It would just be another mess to clean up.* She returned the pot to the stove with a clatter. Crossing the room, she flipped open the machine's lid and popped out the tape. Slipping her fingernail under the brown ribbon, she snagged and yanked it from its housing. She threw the remains in the trash. *The problem was temporarily solved.* She took a new cassette from the drawer, slipped it into the machine, and began recording a new message.

Tomorrow I'll visit Dragon's Den and begin making Rachael Franklin my new best friend. No one needs to know what I did or why. I'll just have to be careful what I say and to whom.