

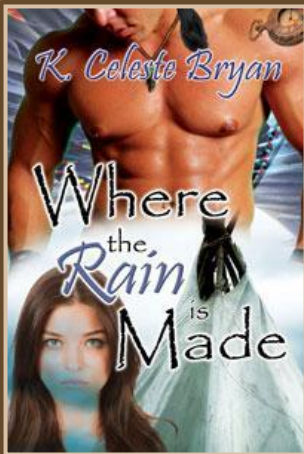
K. Celeste Bryan's Books



Sojourn with a Stranger

Publisher: New Concepts Publishing

Author: K. Celeste Bryan



Where the Rain is Made

Publisher: The Wild Rose Press

Author: K. Celeste Bryan

Sojourn with a Stranger

Publisher: New Concept Publishing

Author: K. Celeste Bryan

Erotica Historical/Paranormal

Warning: Explicit Sex



BLURB:

A Willful Beauty

Penniless when she arrives in Norfolk, her mother and father drowned at sea, Raine Brinsley would give anything to return home to her grandfather in Maine. When Derek Stafford, owner of a large plantation, offers a solution to her dilemma, she's stunned, if not outraged. She'd prefer to fulfill the contract to have his child and forget about him and his self-serving scheme. But she hadn't counted on the decadently-delicious passion he'd awakened in her.

A Man Accustomed To Getting What He Wants

Derek's only desire was to father an heir for Stafford House, thus securing his future. He didn't count on the Scottish lass with dark green eyes to interfere with his well-laid plans. But after one night in her arms, guilt, not to mention the loss of his heart, became his penance. Now he'd do anything to get her back, anything to quench the hunger and passion tormenting his soul.

Rating: Spicy/Carnal.

Setup:

Raine has been summoned to Derek's bedchamber to fulfill the first night of the contract to bear his child.

From Chapter Eight

The hour late, Raine opened the door and walked to the same chair she had occupied last night. Dressed in a light cotton nightshirt, her hair pulled back into a thick plait and secured with a black ribbon, his breath stuck in his throat.

"You tied your hair back."

She nodded. "If it doesn't suit you, I can undo it." Without waiting for him to answer, she tugged the ribbon and allowed the long mass to tumble down her back.

His cock sprang to life with that one small gesture. "I thought perhaps you'd changed your mind." He looked at the clock. "The hour grows late."

"I apologize for the lateness, but you should have expected me. I told you I never renege on a promise."

Her flippant tone annoyed him, like everything else about her at the moment, the cloudy, dark eyes, the perfect slant of her brows, the rose-colored lips, mostly, the taut nipples straining against the light cotton nightgown. "I don't suppose the thought of acquiring another five thousand dollars had anything to do with it?"

A small measure of victory found him when she squirmed in the chair. "I must admit, it played a part in the grand scheme of things."

What had he hoped she would say? Of course she'd signed the contract for the money...and her freedom. "I applaud your honesty."

She gave him a slow nod.

He handed her a glass of sherry, and she took it eagerly, downing the contents in short order. Damnation, did she have to numb herself before coming to his bed? "I saw my father this evening," he said distractedly.

She raised the glass in the air. "I imagine he's celebrating your success."

He was doomed, so ensnared by her beauty, he could only stare. Shadows danced gracefully over her curvaceous body, fell across the delicate features of her face until he wanted to crush her to him, kiss those sweet lips again, run his hands over every inch of her naked skin, die with her like he had last night. The contract and everything else paled against his lust for her. Now that he'd tasted her, spilled his seed in her, he wanted her again...and again until he either rid her from his soul or burned out faster than a star tumbling to earth. He cursed his thoughts and cursed himself. Christ, the way she looked at him stopped his heart. Rock hard, the rioting erection between his legs throbbed with need. She ran her tongue over her bottom lip, her brow raised questioningly. Was she waiting for him to respond to something? What the hell was the damn question? Something about his father.

“You asked if my father was celebrating.”

She nodded and looked at him strangely.

“No, but he’s ever hopeful a grandson will arrive in the fall.”

“We mustn’t disappoint Julian Stafford,” she said, downing the last drop of her drink. Coming to her feet, she strolled to the bed and eased down with the elegance of a falcon in flight. Then she smiled at him.

He rose, shucked his robe and stood over her, the undercurrents so palpable, the air seethed. “What is it you find so damn amusing?”

“I’m reminded of the saying, like *father, like son*. She placed a slender finger to the corner of her mouth. “I can’t help but wonder what sort of man you’d be today without the influence of your father.”

He dropped to the bed and loomed over her, his face so close, he saw every minute freckle across the bridge of her nose, smelt the heady scent of jasmine. “Who are you to lecture me about morality, Miss Brinsley?”

She gasped.

“You cut a deal with the devil, offered yourself up to carry a bastard for a large sum of money.”

He wanted to crush her lips, take her right now without thought or reason, without tenderness or mercy. She infuriated him! Her hand flew out and connected smartly with his face. Her eyes blazed with defiance, stunning and stirring him at the same time. Erotic images flashed before him of her rising up to meet him, long spiky lashes resting against her damp skin, hair cascading in waves around those pale shoulders, breaths coming in rapid bursts as she moaned and whimpered beneath him.

He took her mouth, not sweetly, gently, but harshly, demanding a response from her, imagining her supple body writing beneath him as he held her narrow hips firmly in his hands and buried himself between those slender legs. God help him, he couldn't be inside her soon enough, brand her his forever so she'd never forget the nights she spent in his bed.

Last night there had been no exploration of her sweet body, no lingering caresses, only a need to seal the contract before she fled from him. Tonight would be different, he wanted to touch every inch of her velvety skin, sink his fingers into the slick, hot flesh of her sex, and render her mindless with need. Like him.

His hand took her breast, kneaded and molded it until that peaked nipple quivered beneath his fingers. Her eyes were closed, her breaths short and fast. He felt her heartbeat beneath his palm and exalted in its rapid beat. She could pretend passivity all she wanted, but her body betrayed her.

Emboldened by her response his hand slid to her belly and hips, and lower until he found the soft flesh between her thighs. Instinctively, she drew them together.

"No," he said. "Don't."

Panting, and trying hard to command her voice she replied, "There is nothing in the contract that allows you do anything but...."

"And there's nothing that says I can't."

He ran his fingers over the outer folds of her sex, acutely aware of her swollen labia and hard nub. Moist heat rewarded him. Inserting his thumb and touching the sensitive peak with his finger, she moaned and moved restlessly against his hand. He continued the pressure, seeking, probing until her body trembled and her sex convulsed against his slow assault. He removed his thumb long moments later and entered her with two fingers, her sleek, hot tightness sending a surge of blood pumping through his veins. Her body arched upward and then bore down on his fingers, her breaths hard.

"Derek," she rasped on a half-gasp, half moan. "Please."

"Please what?" Finding a rhythm that matched his heartbeat, his fingers tunneled through her hot flesh amid a string of pained whimpers from her lips. "Please you want me to stop or please you want to feel me throbbing inside you."

She gasped again, whether from pleasurable sensations or his words, he didn't know. Lust raged through his blood. Never had he seen such an exquisite body, the firm, pert breasts and pink nipples, the narrow waist and slender hips. No longer aware of the candles burning in the room or anything else, there was only her beneath his hand, her hips arching up to meet it, her lips parted as she whispered his name.

He removed his fingers and positioned himself between her spread legs. Her dazed, eyes stared into his. He entered her slowly and felt a jolt of vibration quiver through her. His body throbbed with desire, hot and intense as he buried himself inside her, the silky depths of moist warmth tightly sheathing his cock. He had to pace himself or it would be over within seconds. And he wanted it to last a lifetime.

The hungry look in her eyes was unmistakable as he set a pace of plunge and retreat, time and again. One hand found the hair at the nape of his neck, grasping it tightly, the other gripped his shoulder as she undulated and gyrated beneath him. He pressed his lips against the vein in her neck, felt her pulse, rapid and strong like his as he moved inside her.

Raw desire surged through him like ocean waves at low tide. He wanted more, wanted to force her into a frantic response, make her forget their arrangement, forget she was lying beneath him for money. Cupping her buttocks, he drove into her hard, surprised she met his every thrust with one of her own. She wrapped her legs around him, pulling him deeper and deeper into her.

Her body trembled and whimpers fell from her lips. With her neck arched back against the pillow, a cry tore from her throat and her body convulsed. He felt the orgasm wash over her and exulted in the pleasure he knew he brought her. Only then did he allow his own release to come, the power of it staggering.

Emotionally drained and physically spent, he collapsed against her, realizing his weight could crush her. He wanted to remain inside her forever, revel in her womb convulsing around his cock, milking the last strains of their unbridled passion.

After his breathing returned to normal, he rolled to the side and pulled her into his arms. He longed to whisper adoring words against her ear, offer praise over the joy she'd brought him. Never in his life had he been inclined to do so, but what passed between them again was cosmic, otherworldly. He knew only one thing—she had the ability to deliver him to the brink of death and back. It wasn't about the contract or merely a primeval mating, but a joining of souls, a deeply emotional mingling of spirits between virtual strangers. He couldn't explain it, but knew she'd felt it too even if she despised him and everything he stood for.

Long moments later, her voice hoarse, she broke the silence, deliberately avoiding the subject of their lustful mating. “String the clues together and you might have your answers to the ghost.”

“Clues?”

On a yawn she said, “A Bible verse, Baby and your grandfather’s name.”

His head spun while he thought about her words. “What do you think it means?”

“That’s for you to figure out.”

She knew more than she offered, but now wasn’t the time to pull it from her. When next he looked, her eyes had closed, her lovely lips slack. The rhythmic breathing and the childlike repose held his attention for the better part of an hour while he pondered the damn mess. He’d thought many times of telling his father to go to hell, and now he wished he had. He should have run hard and fast from his devious plot, like one ran from a ghost rising up from the grave. God! Lucinda’s ghost! So wrapped up in his musings about Raine, the contract, and every other aspect of his miserable life, he’d spent little time pondering Cinda’s mournful spirit. She hadn’t found peace in life, but by God, she deserved to find it in death.

Derek looked at the quarter moon out the window and arrived at a decision. He had to correct the horrendous mistake he’d made and allow Cinda to rest in eternal peace.

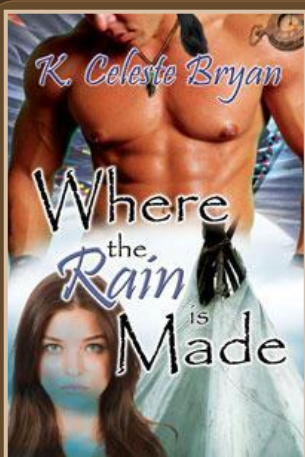
[Back to K. Celeste’s Books](#)

Where the Rain is Made

Publisher: The Wild Rose Press

Author: K. Celeste Bryan

Erotica Historical/Paranormal



Blurb:

Held captive by a decadent-looking savage, Francesca DuVall spends every waking moment planning an escape for her brother, Marsh. She never counted on falling in love with the man whose sapphire eyes cause her to tremble with unbridled passion.

Ethan Gray, the man, is a curator at a famous museum...most of the time. At other times, he's Meko, a savage warrior hurled into the past to help his beloved people, the Cheyenne. Though their worlds are decades apart, Meko, can't resist the dark-haired, green-eyed beauty he kidnaps during a raid. A brutal, savage leader of the Dog Soldiers, he has many battles to fight to save his people, but none he wants to win more than the one that will capture Cesca's heart forever.

From the windswept plains of Colorado and the harsh life of a Dog Soldier to the placid life of a curator, their love was fueled passion and kindled by destiny.

Setup:

Cesca is put under the Cheyenne sun torture for helping her brother escape from the village.

From Chapter Eight

Beat...beat...beat.

Cesca drew a deep breath when the sonorous throbs of the drum echoed across the land. A memory of Marsh running the gauntlet rose before her. The godforsaken tom-tom had beat then, too. Her eyes searched the crowd. Where is Meko? Whatever lay in store for her, she wanted to see him one more time.

A crowd milled about the center of the village, their eyes wide and curious as she walked forward flanked by Strikes First and Broken Wing. Once they reached their destination, a rumble of voices reached her. Seeing the People clustered around a tall, sturdy tree limb dug into the ground, she thought maybe they'd decided to burn her at the stake. The lack of fuel for even a small fire quickly dispelled that theory. Murmurs and whispers reached her ears, and then the subdued sounds of moccasins shifting against the pebbled earth. There were no cheers, shouts, or whistles like there were just before Marsh ran the gauntlet. She knew then, at least some of the People were opposed to the severe punishment before her.

Choking Wolf stood beside the post, apparently the place where she'd be staked, in front of God and everyone. Brown Wing had gathered Cesca's long hair into a leather thong at the nape of her neck just before they left the tipi, hoping it might bring a small respite from the searing heat. A fine bead of perspiration formed on Cesca's brow; she felt it trickle down her forehead. Mentally, she'd tried to prepare herself for the ordeal, but her traitorous body trembled now like a fragile leaf caught up in the wind. She prayed for strength and courage, prayed for a quick death, if that was to be her destiny.

Strikes First delivered her to the executioner with a contemptuous sneer. Choking Wolf grabbed Cesca's wrists and cinched them with twisted ropes, then dropped to the ground and did the same with her ankles. When he rose, he faced the crowd and delivered a litany detailing her most grievous offense. Brown Wing translated with labored breath.

"We have opened our hearts and lodges to this lowly white captive, and how does she repay us? She sends her brother, my slave, fleeing from my tipi on a gift from the People. I have offered her life—with me—but Meko refuses to honor the ancient code, a captive for a captive. He has chosen this for her instead. Now the spirit of the sun will decide her fate."

Chatter rose among the masses, drifted off in the still morning air. Cesca scanned the crowd, total strangers studying her warily. Her eyes moved from the nameless faces to the same group of young maidens she'd seen just before Marsh ran the gauntlet. Black Bonnet stood among them, her eyes narrowed in contempt, a satisfied smirk curling her lips. Rage boiled up in Cesca; like it had the morning she fought with the woman. She dropped to the ground and spread her hands and legs apart, offering herself freely to the evil form of torture about to befall her. Seizing the opportunity, Choking Wolf tied her hands and feet to four stakes laid out on the ground, pinning her to earth.

Cesca tried to pace her breathing, willing her angry heart to quiet. If Black Bonnet or anyone else thought she'd cower, they had another thing coming. She sensed she couldn't afford to expend her energy on rage or self-pity, knew she needed to conserve every ounce of strength if she were to last three days under the bright orange sphere rising above her. The crowd loitered for an hour, mostly out of curiosity, but then dispersed as if nothing of significance would occur for some time. The sun beat down upon her, hot and intense, but not unbearable . . . not yet anyway. Black Bonnet and her friends circled once or twice and kicked dirt over her body. A raised stick from Brown Wing sent them scurrying away.

Strikes First's words found her. "You must go somewhere in your mind." She saw the smooth planes of the warrior's face, strong, uncompromising, and courageous. "Above the clouds where the rain is made." Like Meko, the man was mysterious. Although he didn't speak English as fluently as the dark warrior, it was more than passable when he chose to use it. Strikes First cared about her; she had seen it in his eyes during the council meeting and again this morning just before he left the tipi. His loyalty to Meko was unwavering, the bond between them unbreakable. What a strange, mystical world she'd been hurtled into.

Hours later, the sun's harsh rays seared her skin. She wouldn't think of water or beg for it, would push any thought of it from her mind. If anyone so much as offered her a drop, they'd face the same punishment. How could she place anyone in the same situation by pleading for help? She'd sing songs to herself, recite nursery rhymes, and count the days of the calendar, month by month, for every year she'd walked the earth. When it became too much to bear, she'd think pleasant thoughts, imagine she was taking a long cool dip in an icy pool of water or enjoying an evening walk under a pale silver moon.

And she would think of him, I Am The Wind. How did he acquire such an unusual name? He was brother to the wind, blowing east to west, north to south, over the mountain tops, swirling and dipping through the valleys, skimming across lakes and streams, wild and free; twisting through limbs and branches of the jack pines and rustling through the leaves of the massive oaks. It was mighty and powerful, the wind, could rip to shreds any structure, pull trees from the earth, scatter snow, and dry up rivers. It could be gentle, whisper in your ear, fan the wisps of hair at your temple or kiss your face. It struck her then, what a powerful traveler the wind was. Since the beginning of time it had existed between heaven and earth, would never retreat, had the ability to journey far and near in a heartbeat, reside in many places at the same time. Be everywhere, like him, I Am The Wind.

Her mind took a wandering path of its own by late afternoon. The relentless heat scorched every inch of her skin, exposed or not, culminating in an all consuming fire that stole the breath from her lungs. Now, she heard not Strikes First's words, but those of her father, reading Psalms from the Good Book, and prayers, fervent pleadings to the Virgin Mary. They marched forth now with clarity. Oh, Virgin Immaculate, Mother of God, from your sublime heights, turn your eyes of pity on me.

The crowd had gathered again to see how the white captive was holding up under a pitiless sun. Choking Wolf stood above her, his face awash with wickedness. Brown Wing came and went from her side, her whispered words and low chants bringing comfort. She knew the old woman never ventured far from her body, but rather stood guard like a rabid hound, daring anyone to toss a taunt or pelt her body with dirt. Once or twice Strikes First's tall, lean frame knelt beside her, his eyes filled with compassion, but then he'd rise and face Choking Wolf and the sympathy turned to hatred. But where is Meko?

She knew now, deep in the dark tunnels of her soul, that Meko came to her not from this place they inhabited but from somewhere far away. The stars? The mystical place above the clouds Strikes First spoke of? Why he had appeared in her life, she couldn't fathom, but some numinous presence had placed him in her path. She laughed, the strangled sobs of a woman possessed rising up from her belly to choke her. Oh, the perverse irony of it! It wasn't possible their paths had crossed for a timeless moment, only to have her die beneath a blazing sun. Was it? There had to be more. She couldn't die now. She knew her destiny was with him and it couldn't be over already. She wouldn't allow it to happen. She wanted to see him, touch him, feel him, taste him—one more time. Psalms Forty rode the crest of her tortured mind, Let them be ashamed and confounded together that seek after my soul to destroy it; let them be driven backward and put to shame that wish me evil.

By early evening, the searing heat pressed down on her like a white-hot fire. Her arms and legs ached as she pulled against the restraints. Choking Wolf had shown no quarter when he bound her to the stakes, so tightly she thought her limbs had been stretched to the outer limits of the village. Her jaw ached, like every bone in her body. She had to will her taut muscles to relax, concentrate on taking slow, deliberate breaths. Her skin was hot—on fire—her scalp and hair drenched in sweat, not to mention the rivulets running down her arms and legs, soaking her dress.

She hadn't uttered a word, not one. Unless unconscious, she wouldn't. The sun began to dip low on the western horizon. Her courage dipped with it. Strange lucidity gripped her for brief moments, followed by a coldness of the skin she knew was false and fleeting. She turned her head. Raised blisters appeared on her arms like tiny domes of milky puss. Water was all she could think of. Oh, blessed water. She pushed the thought from her mind, wondered how she'd ever survive two more days of this agony. In two hours, the sun would set. Surely she could stand it until then. She'd worry about tomorrow, tomorrow. She couldn't bear to think about it now. Her back cried out in misery, and every tiny movement was sheer torture now, even the blinking of her eyes.

She was living the nightmare. Her muscles twitched involuntarily, and she felt warm urine run down her legs. She was like everything on Mother Earth this time of year, lying withered and listless beneath the harsh rays. Psalms Thirty-One. For I have heard the slander of many; fear was on every side. While they took counsel together against me, they devised to take away my life. When the sun disappeared, sleep began to claim Cesca in an overwhelming drowsiness she was incapable of fighting. Just before she drifted off, she heard Brown Wing's voice. Chanting. Calling out to the spirits. Weeping. Don't cry for me, Brown Wing. Please. You'll make me cry too, and I haven't an ounce of water to spare.

She awoke in the middle of the night, the position of the moon revealing the time. Light snores came to her, Brown Wing's, and a man was praying out loud, calling on the ancient spirits. Strikes First. What in hell did he think they could do for her? I'm not one of them. Why would they help one little white girl who shouldn't have betrayed the People, shouldn't have helped her brother escape from a man who had nearly beaten him to death? She had her own God, didn't she?

A young man, his long braids adorned in ermine furs, knelt beside her. She felt his tender opaque touch, saw his translucent fingers reach out and linger on her cheek. She'd never seen this person in her life before, yet she knew who it was—Ermine Boy, the fallen warrior. Oh, dear God, had he come to take her to the spirit world? He was floating above her, his face peaceful, serene. Although young like her, he had accepted death; she saw the unspoken consent in his eyes. Don't take me. I don't want to leave yet. I've only just begun to live. She tried to form the words, Shoo! Go away! but her lips were swollen shut, the words lost somewhere in her throat.

Her body floated down the river, clung to a twisted branch. The ashen waters swirled around her. Snakes, reptiles, the devil, rose up out of the water to clutch and grab her broken body, wrenching her from the gnarled limb. No, you can't have me! I'll kill you before I let you take me! Ghosts whispered in her ears, blew in on the wings of delusion, her mother, father and him—Ermine Boy. She closed her eyes and surrendered to tortured slumber.

* * * *

Meko was on a mountaintop miles from camp, crying out to the spirits. Deep gashes splayed his arms, signs of mourning, inflicted by his own knife. Blood streamed from the wounds, staining the earth at his feet, but the pain was nothing compared to the splintering anguish in his heart.

Strikes First was beside him, begging for her life. "Give her to Choking Wolf. She is dying, my friend."

Meko turned to him, his voice cracking under the torment. "How can I give away my heart...my soul?"

"She will live if you put a stop to it now."

"I cannot." Visions of Choking Wolf on top of her, his brown hands circling her lily-white throat as she strained beneath him nearly crumbled him. Christ, help me!

"She will always be with you, here," Strikes First said pointing to his heart.

"He'll kill her before daybreak, and you know it."

"She will die before the sun climbs over the mountain tomorrow if you don't stop this madness." He'd never seen Strikes First beg before. "She is weak and fragile."

Meko focused on the graceful flight of a hawk.

"They come now," his friend whispered, "to steal the light from her eyes."

Strikes First was met with mute defiance.

For the first time since they were children, his friend cursed him, and then walked away in a shroud of anguish.

Now he was alone again. He'd felt loneliness many times in his life, a solitary existence in the white man's world he lived in most of the time, but never had he felt so alone. Meko screamed out his agony until all the birds in the valley below took flight. His lips moved silently, calling forth the ancient chant.

I walk alone on the edge of time,
traveling far and near.

Born of the sun, kissed by the wind,
the call of the raven screams in my ear.

He felt the power of the raven course through his blood, allowed its strength and wisdom to enter his body. His vision blurred and his head felt like it was pinned beneath a boulder. Muscles in his back constricted as if his tendons and ligaments were stretched out on a tanning rack, and then his arms twisted into gnarled limbs just before shiny, black wings took their place. He was soaring skyward, above the clouds, streaming toward the sun, to the place where the rain was made. Through a great abyss he tumbled, struggling to emerge on the opposite end. The raven dipped in the heavens and arched his massive extensions for descent, slowly, like an aircraft coming in for a landing.

Stands-In-Light was waiting for him. Perched on a wooden bench in her garden, she appeared to be listening to a family of starlings as they struck up a noisy chatter in the nearby shrubs while she read from a dusty volume of *Last of the Mohicans*.

“Ethan, you returned before we called you back.” If she was surprised to see him, she hid it.

He had little concern for his disheveled, unkempt appearance. The High Priestess was aware of the harshness of time travel, had seen him after the transformation on prior occasions. “They say the sky is never bluer than in Montana.” He glanced upward trying to gather his thoughts.

“I enjoy the weather here.” She put the book down. “The seasons change, but not severely like in the other places I’ve lived,” she said forcing an indulgent smile. “I’m sure you’re not here to talk about the weather.”

He thought it best to get to the point. “I’ve failed in my mission, Stands-In-Light.”

“Your journey with the People has just begun.” Intuitive eyes narrowed to slits. “Why do you feel you’ve failed?”

“I want to stay here.” Ethan walked toward her. “I can’t return.”

When she rose, her weathered face was staid. “You’re willing to relinquish all future missions?”

“Yes.” It came quickly, without hesitation.

“You’ve sworn an oath.” The words hissed between her teeth. “Dedicated your life to the Cheyenne.”

“I give it back to you now!” Ethan paced before her like a phantom ready to disappear into the shadows. “Send another in my stead to finish the job.”

“The Sacred Council of Arrows chose you for a reason. There are others, true, but none with your experience among the People.” The High Priestess raised a brow. “Did I not tell you this?”

“Things have changed, ancient one.” He’d get down on his knees and beg if need be. “I can’t bear to go back...to that...to watch—”

Her eyes softened. “It’s the human element of your soul crying out.”

“It’s not!” Ethan said with a shake of his head, his eyes a silvery mist. “It’s all of me, every part of my being, raven or human, and I can’t turn from it. It consumes me, resides in my blood, and steals my every thought, walks with me in dreams, even...” He was too choked up with emotion to finish.

A benevolent expression crossed Stands-In-Light features as if at this moment she was just a mere mortal who had feelings after all. “Continue.”

“Even lives between the whisper of life and death.”

“You must go back!” Her dark brown eyes turned cold and unwavering. “Even if you choose to live among them for as long as you’re granted human life, even if you choose to die among them, you must go back!”

Ethan raised his hands in the air level with his waist. He knew she had the power to force him to return. “I would rather die,” he said bowing his head.

“If she can endure, so must you.”

His head came up. “You know about the woman?”

“We know everything, Ethan, everything.”

“I can’t watch her die, and I can’t relinquish her to this man.”

“Can you think of nothing to save her?” Her eyes seared his soul, compelling, all-knowing. He stared into them. “Tell me, Stands-in-Light; tell me how to save her.”

“No, Ethan.” She shook her head. “You have the spiritual duality of the raven in your veins, use it well.”

His words were desolate, void of hope. “I can’t make it rain. I can’t make the sun go into hiding.”

“No, you can’t,” she said resolutely placing her hands on her hips, “nor can I.” She looked toward the clouds. “If I could, I would.”

“How then, tell me?”

“You alone must find a way to save her now.” She turned her back on him, a clear sign the meeting was over.

“You have the answer, why will you not tell me?”

Stands-In-Light whirled around to face him. “Because if I do, you’ll never realize how close you came to losing her—”

He had never interrupted a member of the Council but felt compelled to drive home his point. “—but I am losing her, and I can’t bear witness to it.”

“As I was about to say,” she said, peering over her glasses. “It’s more than just losing her. Have you ever felt such wholeness with another, examined your own soul when you searched her eyes?”

“Never have I loved like this.”

“And you won’t ever again, not in this world or another.”

Her words stabbed at his heart. “Then take pity on me, help me.”

“I will not.”

Desperate as he was, he opted for a different approach. “There’s more, High Priestess, you must know that.”

“You speak of things to come in the future concerning the woman?” Her spine stiffened, and he sensed by her body language she wished to avoid venturing down this road.

“Yes. I don’t know what the visions mean, but she’s in them.”

She blew air through her lips, long and drawn out. “We do not have the power to change history—you of all people must know that. Have we ever sent you back to alter it?”

He shook his head.

“Then don’t ask me to interfere now.” She began to walk away. “If you want her badly enough you’ll find a way.”

She strolled into the house, closing the door behind her. He heard the lock click, saw the shade shimmy down to cover the small window.

Ethan sat in her garden for over an hour, his mind roaring in confusion. He went over every word from Stands-In-Light’s lips, returning to the most profound. “You have the spiritual duality of the raven in your veins, use it well.”

* * * *

Beat...beat...beat. The drums rolled, sounding to Cesca as if they were shot down from the heavens. It must be the second morning of my torment; a new day arriving with a merciless sun again. Not a cloud in sight. I can barely open my eyes now. They must be swollen and seared, like the rest of my body. Water...water. Don’t cry out, please, don’t cry out. Don’t let Choking Wolf see you whimper and beg, you milk-livered coward. His evil face loomed over her. She felt a kick to her ribs, knew he wanted to know if she still lived. She opened one eye and spit, but it lacked the power to reach him. A closed fist loomed before her face, but the iron grip from a bronze hand forced it into submission.

Strikes First’s voice came to her through a fog. “If you touch her, Meko will kill you.”

I Am The Wind. I Am The Wind. His name crept from every crevice of Cesca’s mind, coursed through every drop of blood in her body.

The agony was unbearable. She tried to clamp her lips together, prayed she wouldn't cry out. The sun was at its highest, brutal and without mercy. She could no longer lick her lips; no longer feel her arms or legs. She tried to wiggle her toes. Numb. God, I'm dying. So soon? She thought certain she'd last at least two days. She never put money on three, not after the anguish on Brown Wing's face when the verdict came down. She'd seen the pain and torment in Meko's eyes as he rested on his elbows above her, as if looking at her for the last time. She knew now, he was.

Her mother and father were standing before her, their arms open, their mouths moving in slow motion, "Francesca...Francesca." Walking toward her through a pale mist, laughter creased the corners of their eyes. "Come, our darling little girl," they beckoned, "walk with us in sunshine, splash in the cool mountain stream. You saved Marsh." God, she wanted to go to them, yearned to fall into their open arms.

For the first time since Choking Wolf had staked her to the earth she tried to speak, but it felt like her tongue had been cut from her throat. She wanted to say goodbye; goodbye to Brown Wing, to Strikes First, to him. She must be almost dead. A low murmur of gentle voices hummed around her—she felt them, heard them—followed by strangled sobs and cries for mercy filtering through a waterfall, hovering over her, crawling beneath her. Then chants of praise echoed in the air.

He'evonehe!

He'evonehe!

For me? Who'd be calling out my name?

He'evonehe!

He'evonehe!

It roared in her ears—a unified cry from the People, but too late for Francesca Duvall. Take me, God, I cannot endure another minute. A death chant rang in her ears; she recognized it as the same one they sang for Ermine Boy. Oh, Lucifer, Strikes First was circling her as he danced; his voice strained and pathetically remorseful. "Father, have pity on her. Nothing lasts long except the earth and the mountains."

I Am The Wind. I Am The Wind. His name drifted on the subtle breeze, fanned her searing temples.

In that infinitesimal moment between life and death everything became crystal clear. Cesca was cognizant of everything around her, beneath her, above her. Hadn't she read somewhere hearing is the last sense to leave one's body? She heard everything now—women wailing, babies crying, Brown Wing sobbing, the People shouting her name, Strikes First chanting, his every word distinct and recognizable, Choking Wolf laughing, his moccasins pounding the earth in a victory dance. But not the dark warrior. He'd given her to the merciless sun.

Then she heard the thunderous flailing of a million wings. She struggled to open her eyes, sticky and swollen shut. A tiny slit afforded her blurred vision. Dark shadows dipped in the sky, soared, glided, hovered above her, their wings arched against a red-orange palette as they blocked out the sun. Blocked out the sun? Oh, Cesca, poor girl, you really are losing your mind. She watched uncomprehendingly as the birds chased the sun away—red-tailed hawks, their massive wings open in graceful flight, the ravens, shiny black and sleek, screeching their outrage, golden eagles, their beaks splashed in brilliant yellow, and black-billed magpies, their white bellies dancing across the heavens. Look Cesca, they've formed a shield, a great canopy to erase the sun's harsh rays! Blessed relief.

Cheers and whistles rose among the Cheyenne. Beat...beat...beat...beat...beat...beat. Frantically now, the tom-toms cried out their triumphant strums. The air was rent with screeching—the birds, crying out their fury over the offense transpiring below. Above her they hovered, wing against wing, head to tail feather, magnificent and powerful.

Through crusty lids she watched the evil warrior, Choking Wolf. He pulled the arrows from his bow case, fired in rapid succession. So swift, so steady. Swoosh...swoosh...swoosh—harried whistles of sucked air. Skyward the feathered shafts sailed, a relentless stream of missiles. Don't shoot them! Please don't shoot them! They've come to save me! Choking Wolf was on his knees beside her, his raised tomahawk inches from her face, cold and gray like the sky. Go ahead! Finish it!

Thank you, my friends the birds, for trying to save me. Cesca sagged against the ground, every muscle in her body surrendering to the cold wind of death that blew in and came to steal her heart, her spirit, her soul.

She'd forgotten his ability to appear out of nowhere. I Am The Wind. She felt his presence now with every fiber of her being. Her mind screamed out his name. She writhed against the restraints. Then all went silent. She heard a strangled moan. Shock crossed Choking Wolf's features. Blood spurted from a large gash across his throat, arced and pumped, a crimson stream splattering his cheeks, running down his neck. Dear God, blood is everywhere, covering the ground, soaking his shirt, drenching me! It trickled into her mouth, warm and sticky. Ermine Boy was back, his arms open, beckoning her, just before she lapsed into a cold, dark void, blacker than she'd ever imagined.

[Back to K. Celeste's Books](#)