

**Beltane**  
**by Alys West**

Prologue

The gate slammed. He spun to face the woman stalking across the lawn towards him.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Maeve shouted. She was tall, with short blonde hair and sharp features. In the dim light of the full moon, she looked younger than he’d expected.

“Taking her away from you.”

“Who are you? Her pitiful excuse of a boyfriend?”

He edged backwards towards the gate. “It doesn’t matter who I am.” Scanning the garden, he searched for something he could use to create a distraction. “But I know who you are, Maeve Blackwell, and don’t think for one minute you’re going to get away with this.”

She was only a few short steps away from him now. Her lips bent into a cruel parody of a smile. “Oh, I think I will.”

Drawing on awen, the earth’s energy, he felt it pulse through the ground into his feet. Without his staff it was only a puny trickle but it would have to do. He shaped it in his mind, raised his hand and released an eddy of wind. It picked up the autumn leaves scattered over the garden. He pushed his hand out and they swirled into Maeve’s face.

He sprinted towards the gate. As his fingers reached for the handle, he was grabbed from behind. He looked over his shoulder, saw nothing.

*What the hell?*

The invisible force tightened and flung him backwards. For several terrible seconds he was airborne then his back smacked into something solid. His head whipped back, his skull connected, his teeth rattled. Pain spun nauseatingly through him as his vision blurred.

Branches towered above his head. A mocking laugh floated across the garden. Blinking, he tried to focus, to fight the barrier that held him. “My dear boy, you can stop struggling. I’m not going to let *you* escape as well.”

As she drew closer, he struggled harder. He’d massively underestimated her power, thought she was one of the Glastonbury crazies, messing with forces they didn’t understand. Seeing her cold, blue eyes he knew he would pay for that mistake with his life.

“That little trick of yours was very revealing.” She pressed a hand against his chest. “What are you?” Even through the force field he felt her drawing energy from him. Fighting desperately, his feet scrabbled against the trunk, his fingers digging into the bark. Her eyes widened. “A druid. Now that is a delightful surprise!”

“Screw you!” he spat.

Her hand whipped out and slapped him across the face. “Quiet.” She paced away across the lawn. Desperately, he tried to draw awen from the tree. His heart pounded and he could barely focus. A tiny amount seeped into his fingers. *It wasn't enough.* He fought to quell the panic, tried again. The flow strengthened. If he had enough time he could use it to break the force field. If not, he would die here.

When she turned, he saw the glint of sharp steel in her hand. She pointed the athame at his heart. “You really are the answer to all my prayers. But as you’ve dropped in so unexpectedly I’m going to have to keep you safe until I’m ready.”

“Ready for what?” But he had a terrible feeling that he already knew the answer.

“Never you mind. Now I suggest you keep still. The more you struggle the more it will hurt.” She raised the athame and pressed it against his neck. He flinched away and she pressed harder until the blade pierced the skin. “And the more I’ll enjoy it.”

Raising her hands, she spoke words he didn’t understand. The force field lifted slightly and, for a second, hope surged through him. He dragged more awen into his body, tried to focus it against the invisible bonds that held him.

Something gripped his ankle. He looked down. Roots snaked out of the ground, twisting around his legs. He struggled and a branch whipped down fastening around his neck. His hands were suddenly free. He grabbed at the branch, his fingers scrabbling to get a hold. It tightened, threatened to choke him. Trying to prise it away, another branch twined around his hands, yanking them backwards.

He fought with everything he had left. He swore and struggled but the tree was stronger. His torso sank into the trunk. Bark crept over his body and up his neck. He screamed, an agonising howl of pain. As the wood covered his face the last thing he heard was Maeve laughing.

## Chapter 1

Zoe Rose dumped her bags at her feet. On the blue gate in front of her was a sign that read *Anam Cara Healing Retreat* in purple script. Angels with outstretched wings surrounded the lettering. She pressed the button on the intercom and looked up. To her right, partially hidden behind a row of houses was Glastonbury Tor. On her left beyond the main road the ground sloped sharply down to the Somerset Levels.

The intercom crackled and a voice with a strong Australian accent said, "Hello?"

"Hi I'm Zoe Rose. I rang up a few days ago to book a room."

"Sure, I remember. I'll open the gate."

A loud buzzing came from the intercom. Zoe quickly hefted her rucksack onto her back, picked up her portfolio and pushed open the gate. The scent of spring flowers immediately surrounded her. Zoe smiled. Her friend Anna had promised that Anam Cara was a haven and she wasn't wrong. The garden was beautiful. A narrow stream flowed past her feet to cascade into a wide pool filled with water lilies. Ivy clung to the high walls and climbing roses trailed over a trellis that arced over the centre of the path. A magnolia tree bloomed in the centre of a flower bed filled with tulips.

Exhaling deeply, Zoe felt tension ease from her shoulders. This was why she'd come. Earlier in the week she'd been ready to abandon her dream of being a full time illustrator and hand back the commission to illustrate the children's book on the legends of King Arthur. It was Anna who'd calmed her down and talked her into coming to Glastonbury. It wasn't just the idea of working in the place that was believed to be Avalon that had convinced her but Anna's description of the healer, Maeve. Her friend had stayed at Anam Cara a couple of times in the past year and found her amazingly wise, intuitive and nurturing. Zoe was looking forward to meeting the woman whom her usually cynical friend raved about.

Following the path past a single storey building, Zoe headed towards the cream pebbledash house. As she stepped through the trellis, the ground floor of the house became visible. Outside the French windows was a stone table with a circular top of grey granite.

Stomach clenching, Zoe froze.

At the centre of the table was a vase filled with leaves and twigs around which clustered feathers and crystals. Four fat purple candles with blackened wicks stood at the edge like points on a compass.

A shiver crept up her spine as memories of blood, terror and despair flooded through her. She blinked. Took a step back and looked again. She'd seen this table before. Not the stuff cluttering the top of it; that she didn't remember. But the table was locked in her memory and she didn't know why.

She glanced back towards the gate. She didn't want to stay here anymore. As she was about to move a loud voice said, "Zoe! How lovely to meet a friend of Anna's."

A tall, thin woman walked down the path from the house. She had short blonde hair highlighting remarkable cheekbones in a face that could be anywhere between forty five and sixty. She wore elegant clothes of glacial blue and ash grey that flowed around her narrow figure. A silver pendant with a large white stone hung around her neck.

The woman stretched out her hands. "Welcome to Anam Cara."

Zoe stepped towards her and found herself being hugged as if they were old friends. The hug lasted a second or two longer than felt comfortable and when the woman released her Zoe hastily pulled away. Her gaze rose to the woman's face. Her eyes were a washed out blue with bloodshot rims. Watery and unfocused, they seemed at least twenty years too old for her face.

Zoe swallowed hard. Who was this woman? Whoever she was she knew instinctively that she didn't like her. "It's nice to be here," she said. "I'm looking forward to meeting Maeve. Anna's told me so much about her."

"My dear child." The woman laughed. "I'm Maeve!"

Zoe's face stiffened as she tried to stop her smile slipping. "Oh! Sorry. I didn't realise." This woman was nothing like Anna's description. She'd been expecting an earth mother dressed in tie-dyed clothes, probably with hennaed hair and wearing a lot of crystals.

"Helena will help you with your bags." Maeve gestured to the plump girl in her mid-twenties who stood by her shoulder.

"There's no need," Zoe said. "I can manage."

"I'm sure you can, dear. But you're here to relax, remember. Helena will take them up to your room." At Maeve's words, Helena came forward and Zoe reluctantly relinquished her luggage.

"What brings you to Glastonbury, dear?" Maeve said, heading back to the house.

"I'm an artist. I'm illustrating a children's book on the legend of King Arthur. I'm... well, I'm hoping to be inspired by Glastonbury. You know, the Isle of Avalon and all that." She tried to sound confident as if she did this kind of work all the time. She wasn't going to tell Maeve this was her first commission for a decent sized publisher that was actually paying her market rates.

"And have you been here before?"

"I came to the festival a few years ago."

Maeve gestured dismissively. "That's not the same thing at all. The festival is an abomination on our doorstep. Causes nothing but disruption. The locals can't abide it."

Unable to think of a tactful response Zoe kept her mouth shut. Opening the door to a large half-glass porch, Maeve added, "You must show me some of your work, my dear. It's a blessing to have creative people in the house. They bring such positive energy with them."

Behind the healer's back, Zoe screwed up her nose. She was pretty certain her energy was anything but positive. In the hall, Maeve lingered for a moment before a large mirror. After running her fingers through her blonde hair, she strode up the wooden stairs. Zoe trailed behind. On the right, at the top of the stairs, a pine door stood open.

"This is my stellar room," Maeve said. "All of the rooms have a theme. It challenges perceptions which is vital when you're working on the plane of the spirit."

The room had white walls and a midnight blue ceiling decorated with silver stars. The bedside lamp and mirror were shaped like stars. The bed linen and curtains were blue with yet more stars – gold this time. A print of Vincent Van Gogh's 'Starry Night' hung above a double bed.

Unable to repress a grin at the decor, Zoe walked over to the window. At least she had a view of the garden and the Tor. She glanced down. And she couldn't see the weird stone table from here.

Turning to Maeve, standing in the doorway, she said, "Thanks. It's... special."

Maeve's mouth pressed into a thin line, her eyes narrowed. "You'll have karmic wave healing during your stay."

The words were a command, spoken so emphatically that Zoe felt compelled to say 'yes, of course.' Opening her mouth to say the words, she thought *what...?* Glancing up, she met Maeve's cold, glassy eyes. Goosebumps prickled the back of Zoe's neck. Quickly looking away, she said, "What's karmic healing?"

"Karmic wave, dear. It's a wonderfully deep and holistic healing that works emotionally, spiritually and physically. All my guests have it while they're here."

"Oh, yes. I remember now. Anna said she'd had it." Her friend had experienced a strong reaction and been under the weather for a day or two afterwards. Zoe couldn't afford to lose that kind of time. She had a deadline.

"Which day do you want your healing?"

"I'm not sure I can fit it in. I'm here to work."

"It will help you with your work. You do look a little tense, dear, and I'm sure that isn't helping you be creative."

Zoe crossed her arms. Maeve couldn't be more right but she wouldn't give her the satisfaction of knowing it. "I really don't think I've got time."

"Don't decide now, dear," Maeve said, her watery blue gaze fixed on Zoe. "See how you feel in a day or two when you're more relaxed and in tune with being here."

"Sure if you like. But I don't think I'll change my mind."

"We'll see." Maeve smiled a little smugly. Striding across the landing she turned a corner and disappeared down a shadowy passage.

Zoe closed the door with a little more force than necessary, headed back to the window and looked up. The grey tower was a reminder of the mediaeval abbey that had once flourished on the Tor. The turf

terraces winding around its lower slopes seemed like a path climbing to the summit. Being this close to the Tor, the myths of fairies, dragons and druids that seemed absurd in London suddenly weren't so unbelievable.

Her gaze dropped to the garden. So far it was the only good thing about Anam Cara. Maeve was nothing like she'd expected and the stone table was weird beyond belief. Chewing on her bottom lip she tried to figure out why it seemed so familiar. She'd not been to Glastonbury before, not stepped foot inside Anam Cara before today. So why had the table made her feel so inexplicably terrified?

Dropping onto the bed, she stared up at the stars on the ceiling. Why had she let Anna talk her into this? She couldn't even find somewhere else to stay. Maeve had insisted that she pay for four nights in advance and that had cleared out her bank account. She'd had to borrow the money for the coach fare from Anna.

She tugged her hair out of its ponytail. She'd have to try to make the best of it. At least Glastonbury was as wonderfully alternative as she'd expected. On the walk from the town centre she'd passed a shop selling witchcraft supplies, been handed a flyer for a goddess workshop, and seen a man with long grey hair and a beard clad in sky blue robes.

Grabbing her bag, she pulled out her mobile. Tapping her finger on the screen she dithered over what to say. Not wanting to tell Anna she'd taken an almost instant dislike to the healer whom her friend found so inspirational she eventually settled on "*Just arrived. Glastonbury fab. Anam Cara not exactly what I expected. Ring soon x*". Then she sent short – journey fine, arrived safely - messages to her mum and her sister, Mia.

When she couldn't find any other reason to linger in her room she headed for the kitchen in search of a cup of tea. It was a relief to find that, among the extensive selection of herbal teas, Maeve had Tetley's.

Holding a mug she wandered out into the garden. Two wooden recliners with white cushions stood on the lawn in the afternoon sunshine. Zoe pushed off her pumps and stretched her legs out. Her head fell back as she enjoyed the warmth of the sun on her skin. It was late April but it felt more like June.

Something soft brushed against Zoe's hand. She opened her eyes to see a large white cat rubbing its body against the chair. "Hey, puss." Zoe clicked her fingers. The cat looked nonchalantly at her and then strolled across the lawn curling up elegantly in a patch of sunshine. The itch to draw was suddenly intense. Hoping the cat wouldn't move, she ran upstairs and grabbed her sketchpad and pencil case.

Back in the garden the cat remained in the same spot. After studying him for a few minutes she started to sketch. It felt good. She'd missed this effortless flow during the recent weeks of artist's block. The cat moved and yawned. She tore off that page and started again, sketching his face, unearthly pink eyes and short, sharp teeth.

The breeze freshened. A gust eddied around the garden, rustling her pad and lifting the first sketch. It drifted across the garden but, with her focus locked on the cat, Zoe barely noticed. She tore off page after page as she sought to capture the essence of the animal.

When the cat eventually strolled away, Zoe sketched a last few lines and looked up. The light had changed and suddenly she felt chilly. Pulling her thin cardigan around her, she walked across the grass to retrieve the page that had blown away. It lay on the ground in the dim shade of a large tree. She bent, picked it up. Straightening, she gasped.

There was the face of a man in the trunk.

It looked spookily real. Nothing like the usual images of the Green Man carved in stone or wood. It seemed totally organic as if the tree had sprouted a face. She reached up to trace its contours with her fingers. The face was handsome with a wide forehead, straight nose, strong cheekbones and a square chin. The unseeing gaze of the deep set eyes was fixed on the house. The mouth was twisted into a grimace as if the face was in pain. Zoe ran her fingers over the untidy, wavy curls of his hair. They made him seem so lifelike, as if he would speak at any moment.

“Are you the spirit of this place?” she whispered. It should have seemed weird to be talking to a wooden face but actually it didn’t. Something about the Green Man felt familiar. “I bet you could tell me about Maeve. What is her problem? I mean I just don’t get it. Anna said she was wonderful but I *really* don’t like her.”

Zoe giggled as she realised that the most words she’d spoken since arriving at Anam Cara were to a tree. Was this the hippy, Glastonbury effect working on her already? Because oddly enough, it didn’t seem weird at all.

She reached up and touched his bark covered cheek. “I think you are a tree spirit,” she whispered. “And maybe I’m being ridiculous but who cares? I need all the help I can get. If you do wishes or anything like that then please help me. I need to be inspired and I mean, *really* inspired. These King Arthur pictures have to be as good as anything I’ve ever done because this is my big chance. Please, please don’t let me blow it.”

She stared at his blank eyes. A long moment passed. She was sharply aware of the rough texture of the bark beneath her fingers, the smell of damp earth, the birds singing in the branches above her head. “Thanks for listening,” she breathed.

Inhaling deeply, she leaned her back against the trunk. If she was really honest she’d been tense for weeks. She wasn’t enjoying life as an aspiring artist any more. She’d expected that by now, four years after graduation, life would be easier. Yet she was still working two other jobs just to pay the rent. Being constantly on the brink of bankruptcy was no joke. It was fine when she’d first left Goldsmiths because her friends were penniless too but now they were all, Anna included, busy climbing career ladders and their salaries made her income look like pocket money. Her friends were no longer happy with ‘all you can eat buffets’ and restricted view seats at the theatre. They had the money to enjoy a different lifestyle and Zoe, still determinedly chasing her dream, felt left behind.

When this commission had unexpectedly come her way she’d believed it was her big chance. Until everything she drew was unoriginal, uninspired or the sick ghost of someone else’s work. She spent hours at her drawing table with nothing to show for it except eyes red from crying and mountains of

discarded paper, fit only for recycling. If she couldn't break through the block while she was here she had no hope of delivering the commission and her dream was dead. She'd have no choice but to get a proper job.

"Zoe! What are you doing?" Maeve called, her voice high and sharp.

Startled, Zoe looked round. The healer stood by the recliners, hands on hips, her face creased into lines of controlled rage. Reluctantly Zoe pushed away from the trunk and walked towards the healer.

"What were you doing by that tree?" Maeve's foot tapped impatiently.

"One of my drawings blew away. I went to pick it up." She glanced back at the wooden face; saw that his empty eyes watched her.

"Oh!" Maeve's hands slipped from her hips. "Have you been working on your book?"

Holding up the sketch, Zoe said, "Actually I've been drawing your cat."

Maeve bent to look at the sketches scattered on the recliner. "And are these Persia as well?"

"Yes. I got a bit carried away but he's a joy to draw." Zoe gathered up the sketches and handed them to Maeve. "So elegant. I love the way he moves."

"She," Maeve said as she leafed through the sketches. "These are very good. Very good indeed. This one in particular is remarkable." Maeve held out the picture of the cat yawning. "You've captured the spirit of Persia. Most people just see the smooth coat of the domestic cat but you've caught the killer within."

"I'm glad you like it." Seeing the pleasure on Maeve's face, Zoe said impulsively, "You can keep it if you like."

"How kind. Thank you, my dear." Maeve's smile warmed her watery eyes.

Perhaps they'd just got off on the wrong foot, Zoe thought smiling back. Maybe in time she could come to like Maeve as much as Anna did. "I was just wondering, the face in the tree over there, is it a Green Man?"

"Yes but it's a modern interpretation." Turning her back on the face, Maeve couldn't have made it any clearer that she didn't want to talk about it.

Irritated by the healer's response, Zoe folded her arms and continued. "I was just admiring him. He's most unusual. I love that he's got hair rather than the usual leaves around his head. Makes him look so realistic."

"It's really not that interesting." Maeve spoke slowly, emphasising each word. Her eyes narrowed, staring directly at Zoe as if trying to imprint a message in her brain. Again Zoe felt the strange compulsion to agree and was about to say 'yes, you're right' when she remembered that the Green Man intrigued her.

"Actually I'd like to draw him." She gestured towards the tree. "The light's wrong now but maybe tomorrow if it's a nice day."

Maeve blinked and then her face tightened. "I thought you said you were working on a book on King Arthur. A Green Man won't help you with that."



“I’ve got some freedom with the inner covers and I think he would work well there. You could say the Green Man is one of our remaining links to the world of myth and folklore,” Zoe said improvising quickly. She had no definite plans for the inner covers but this could work. It was as good an idea as any she’d had so far. She wasn’t pushing this just to annoy Maeve. Although that was rapidly becoming an unexpected bonus.

The healer’s eyes narrowed. “We’re about to start the evening meditation and as it’s such a lovely day we’re going to meditate around the Earth Mother’s Altar. *You’ll join us.*” She spoke the final words with calm emphasis. Again Zoe felt the strange compulsion to agree. She blinked and looked away from Maeve’s glassy blue eyes.

“It’ll be good for you,” the healer said. “You must open your mind to release your creativity.”

“Where’s the Earth Mother’s Altar?” As the words left Zoe’s mouth she had an uncomfortable feeling she already knew the answer.

Maeve pointed to the stone table. “It’s over there, dear. You saw it as you came in.”

Zoe shook her head. “Then no. Thanks. I’m going to walk into Glastonbury and get something to eat.”

“Tomorrow then!” Maeve said, as she walked away. It sounded like a command.

Goosebumps again prickling the back of her neck, Zoe watched Maeve cross to the granite table. What was it about the damned thing that freaked her out so much? She ran back into the house and grabbed her bag and jacket. She wanted to be out of here before the meditation started. She didn’t want to witness what went on around Maeve’s altar.

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Dropping three cushions on the ground around the table, Maeve took a box of matches from her trouser pocket and lit each of the candles. There would be only Tanya and Helena for the meditation. It was hardly worth doing at all.

She’d such hope of the new girl. When she’d hugged her she’d caught a flicker of silver in her aura. Silver was always enticing as it indicated awakening of the cosmic mind. She’d expected an opportunity for further investigation during the meditation.

Until the girl turned out to be impervious to her powers of persuasion. Her strength must be waning faster than she’d realised if a slip of a girl could withstand her so easily. Zoe looked waif-like and delicate with her flowing brown hair and big, doe eyes but she was infuriatingly resistant.

That this girl – the only one for years that she couldn’t influence - had noticed the face and, even worse, was clearly fascinated by it, made for an unwelcome complication. She could only hope that the girl’s interest would be transient. If not, Zoe would have to be watched.

Settling cross legged on the cushion, Maeve reminded herself that she only had to maintain her careful facade for five more days until Beltane. After that, if all went to plan - and after six months of meticulous research and preparation there was no reason to think it would not – she’d be strong enough to no longer need what her guests unwittingly gave.

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