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# SARAH HEAD

## The BEAR and the Sey Lad

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The Bear and the ivy Lady Copyright©2009 Sarah Head 978-1-60054-315-9 Dark Fantasy Cover art and design by Anastasia Rabiyah

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### The Bear and the Ivy Lady By Sarah Head

Bramble roots begin my story. I was sitting on sunwarmed stones, combing through fine roots with my fingertips, turning them this way and that to catch pink streaks of colour on the new white shoots. For several moments, no thoughts troubled my mind. I was too engrossed in the wonder of the root hairs, before my fingers sank sensuously into the softness of new leaves. New bramble leaves, their barbed spines too young to scrape away skin, invited me to relish their vibrant new growth.

I lost track of time. Sun warmed my face; hedges sheltered me from any encroaching breezes. Cherry blossoms hung at the edge of branches promising to burst forth as the sun touched their buds.

It was all possible, this new growth, this spring. A month ago, life was returning even as we despaired and shivered in unseasonal snow and damp.

I was making bramble root vinegar. One bottle of garden-yielded roots didn't seem enough. Golden liquid slid sweetly down the back of my tongue, the taste hidden in acidity, but not uncouth. I wanted more. How many upset stomachs would we encounter during the year? I had no way of knowing. How many students could I share this new knowledge with over the next few months? Numbers always varied; I could not tell.

Bramble roots yielded to my knife, their leaves to my scissors until all were covered by cider vinegar and placed in a dark cupboard to infuse.

The night was warm, I was over-tired. Wearily, I climbed the stairs to bed. Enclosed in darkness, I stumbled from sleep to wakefulness and back again; my mind connecting the two with worried thoughts. They did not stay; I only registered concern. When the day was fully bright, I turned over to catch a final dream.

I was standing in my parents' kitchen on the farm, looking out over the small orchard of apple and plum trees. The Victoria plum tree was still cloaked in white blossoms, the apple tree seemingly bare beside it.

As I looked, a large, black shape rose up between the trees. It was a bear. His crooked spine straightened as he stretched his snout. Long, black fur covered him apart from his exposed belly, which was cream. I felt fear surrounding me as I heard him growl. Then I woke.

Hours later, in the safety of my working space, I could think about the dream further. Several years had passed since such a clear dream of strange animals came to me. Then it was a white horse, coaxing me to follow him across the fields. Another bear and lion sat at a table with me, but I felt no fear. They were signs, messages for me to learn from and take my own meaning. I should do so again.

It is hard to do everything on your own. I went searching for my mentor in the field by the oak wood. He was standing with his back towards me as I approached across the meadows. Such a strong imposing figure, hands on his staff, his head raised to watch a bird hopping along the ivy. I knew it was a wren from its call.

I stopped by the side of an old stone wall, not wanting to disturb Beren in his contemplation. I studied the coarse weave of his clothes, the soft, off-white trousers, the long tunic, the way his grey hair fell down his back in a smooth line, tied as it was with a leather thong. My gaze rested on soft, brown leather boots tooled by his own hand—the same colour as ploughed fields, turned over to await spring sowing.

"I know you're there, Clara." He turned towards me, a warm smile of greeting on his face. "No matter how quiet your footsteps on the grass, I always hear you."

My smile was rueful in apology. I would never reach his skill in travelling soundlessly.

"Come here." He opened wide arms and drew me into himself. I could smell the plants he walked between beside the river, heard the strong beat of his heart underneath my ear.

"It has been too long, Beren. I should have come before."

"I am always here for you. You come when you wish to come. Do not chide yourself for perceived opportunities you fear are lost. Nothing is lost or gained. You learn when the time is right, when wisdom calls."

I closed my eyes, rubbing my cheek against the roughness of the cloth; drawing his scent into me as if to keep the memory. No matter how hard I tried, I could never remember the wholeness of Beren. Often, as I fell asleep I would recall his features, the weathered skin on his face, the piercing blue of his eyes, the warmth of his smile, but I missed the smell of him and the strength of his arms around me.

I always wanted more, but when I left the glade, my other world would overwhelm me, pushing all thoughts of learning from my head. Streams of life would scream for my attention until I forgot quiet and calm to deal with them. It was only when something happened to wake me, like the bear in my dream, I would remember to seek out my old friend and learn anew.

"What is it that draws you this time, Clara?" Beren asked as we sat together on the warm grass underneath the hawthorn tree.

"I had a dream." I told him all about the bear and my fear as he sat, silently, nodding his encouragement of my tale.

"What have you learned so far?"

"There were bears in England centuries ago. The animal disappeared from our shores long before the Romans invaded, but our ancestors would have known its ways. Even King Arthur was thought by some to be named for the Celtic bear-god, Artos."

"That was then," Beren said, "but what does the bear mean to us now?"

"It is hard to tell." I tugged my cloak around my knees as a keen wind blew along the valley. "Most of the thoughts I encountered do not come from this land, but across the ocean. They tell us bear has played a prominent role in many Native American cultures. It is said they are considered a highly desired ally and spirit helper because of their fearless power. They believe the power of the Great Spirit lives through this animal. In some traditions, bear is the spirit keeper of the West, the place of maturity and good harvest. Maybe that is why he comes to me now."

"What does this sign bring with it?"

"They say bear offers gifts of strength, introspection and knowledge. Unlike other animals that are active during a specific time of day, bear chooses both day and night. This symbolizes its connection with solar energy, that of strength and power, and lunar energy, that of intuition. Maybe he comes to show me how to develop both energies within myself."

Beren looked thoughtful, tapping his boot with a fallen twig.

"Have you considered the nature of the bear itself, Clara? I know your roots are in Warwickshire. Do you think only of the dancing bears of the Middle Ages set in the county's badge?"

"No!" The thought of the muzzled bear, chained to the ragged staff hurt me deeply. "A bear should be wild and free!"

Beren smiled, touching my face with the back of his hand. "So should you, Little Shining One. Maybe the bear comes to show you how to be wild and free?"

I shivered, feeling the truth of his words running through me.

"There is maybe one more thing." He paused, pointing to black clouds coming towards us, a brilliant window of sunlight streaming through their midst. "You said the bear in your dream had two colours, black and white?"

I nodded.

"Maybe there is also balance to be considered. Male and female, tamed and free; there are so many things your dream could bring you. They are such simple things, our dreams, and yet imbued with such complexity it can take a lifetime to unravel the inherent truth."

"What should I do?"

Beren stilled, as if listening for the answer in the wind rustling through the trees behind us.

"You will know. He will come to you again. If you have courage, you will go with him and learn more."

"Will you be there?" In my heart I craved the safety of his arms and wisdom. I was not sure I could travel along this path without him.

His arm stretched around my shoulder, hugging me with calm reassurance. "You know I am always here. When you are not here, sometimes I am there with you, watching, noticing. If your need is great, I shall be with you; never fear."

I stood up, drawing my cloak around me as fat raindrops began to splash upon the grass. When I turned to bid Beren goodbye, he was gone, leaving me to find my own way home across the fields, pondering his words as I walked.

Life continued on an even keel for the next few weeks: the usual round of training, teaching, and supporting others whilst trying to care for myself. Although I was busy with my herbs, planting seeds and harvesting others, I saw no sign of other opportunities to further my dream investigations.

I was planning a field workshop on my parents' farm. It is an hour's journey from my home to theirs. I was late starting, travelling through the fading, evening light. As I

turned into the village, roads were wet, the sky lit by lightning rods and echoes of thunder.

One of the drinks to taste the next day was nettle maceration. The plants needed to soak overnight before yielding their iron-red brew. There would be no other chance to gather them, so I donned protective gloves and boots and went to open the gate into the field.

The night was dark, the only light coming from an ancient railway lamp at the top of the drive. I could smell the moisture left by the departing storm. All around me, the sky crackled with electricity, before being broken apart by the thunder cracks rolling overhead. Diligently, I picked the nettle stalks, resting my bundle on the sharp stone commers on the wall. When I had enough, I looked over to the horizon, watching another burst of lightning cross the clouds. Just as the brilliance faded, I thought I saw the familiar shape of the bear standing in the field across the road.

When I looked again, a man stood on the roadside near a young ash tree. He was tall with curly, black hair framing a round face. His nose was long and his lips, thick and sensuous. It was hard to judge his age. His large frame and broad shoulders spoke of maturity and strength. He smiled, his eyes crinkling as if amused by my considered gaze.

"Do you always pick nettles this late in the evening?" His voice was deep, yet soft, as if carried on the disappearing storm.

"Not usually, but this is the only time I have if I am to make a cold infusion for tomorrow. I want to give it to my students, something new for them to try."

"Will you bring me some when you are free?"

I agreed without thinking and he walked off into the darkness. I heard his footsteps going in the direction of the next village.

I closed the gate, and then took my harvest into the house to cover with cold water in a bowl I placed on the floor. I gave no thought to my mysterious stranger, nor his request. It was as if he had always been part of my life. If there was something I could offer him, I would do so.

The following morning, while the sun was bright but not yet overpowering, I poured the nettle infusion into two bottles. One I placed in the fridge and the other in my rucksack along with other materials destined for the workshop.

It was a glorious day, filled with eager questions and curious students. I sent them out into the field to search for plantain and they lay in the long, warm grass picking leaves or watching bumblebees busy themselves amongst the flowers.

When everyone had left, I remembered my promise about the nettle drink. Where should I take it? On the round

table in the porch where the postman dropped letters, I found a small card. It was edged in brown leaves and the message was hand written.

I am looking forward to drinking your nettles. Please bring them to the Long Barn when you are ready.

Artur

I knew the dwelling, an ancient barn hugging the skyline above our fields. The air was cooler now, so I set off along the road to deliver my promised gift. No one mentioned its conversion, but I thought nothing of it.

Artur was working in the garden in front of the house as I came near. I brought the bottle out of my backpack, ready to hand it to him across the gate, but he told me to follow the path around to the front door and let myself in while he finished tying up the new grapevine against the high, protective wall.

I have to admit, I was curious to see what changes had been made to the barn. I remembered it from my childhood when we used to keep sows sheltered there during farrowing time or young calves before they were let out to graze

on spring pasture. The pitched roof space had been filled with hay and a white barn owl lived in the rafters.

I lifted the latch and opened the front door. Steps led down into the long, low ceilinged living room. Two windows overlooked the garden and a stable door was propped open on the far side.

Two wing-backed, brown leather chairs stood either side a wide stone-clad fireplace, with a large, comfortable, leather sofa in the middle of the room. The walls were cream with pictures of trees hanging opposite each window. A large vase of perfumed flowers stood on a pedestal, filling the room with their fragrance.

Artur came in from the garden, wiping his hands on brown, moleskin trousers. He was wearing a loose, cotton shirt, the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. He smelled of hard work, sunshine, and warm earth. I wanted to be close to him.

"It's a beautiful room," I said, holding out the bottle. He smiled, taking it from me, so his long, thick fingers brushed against mine. I nearly jumped, so great was the shock. I could not remember the last time someone touched my hand that way.

"Did your wife arrange the flowers? They're beautiful."

Artur looked at me strangely. "I have no wife. The flowers were to please you. If you think them beautiful, they have succeeded."

I felt my face turn red, but luckily, Artur disappeared through the central door into the other part of the house. He came back with a bucket of ice and two glasses which he set down on a small table in front of the fireplace.

"Will you join me?" He waved me into a chair and I sank back into the opulence of the upholstery. He placed ice at the bottom of the glasses and poured the rust-coloured nettle infusion over the ice as if he were pouring a fine, vintage wine. As he gave me my glass, our fingers touched again. This time, the world stood still for several long moments as I stared into the deep brown eyes of this perfect stranger, losing myself in the whirlpool of possibilities he offered.

"To us," he said, clinking the two glasses together. I blinked, my mouth suddenly dry, as if his words unleashed some hidden fear in me. I sipped the drink, letting the ice cold liquid slip down my throat and quench my thirst.

He sat down in the other armchair watching me watch him. He tasted his drink and smiled. "It is good, stronger than the last one you brewed."

I wondered how he could have known this was only the second time I had made the maceration.

"The nettles were more mature."

His smile became broader. "Like you, a mature woman who knows what she wants. Maybe the lightning helped release their minerals. It is a long time since I saw anyone picking herbs in the wake of such a storm. I knew I must make your acquaintance." He crossed his legs, revealing sun bronzed skin and bare feet with long, sensuous toes. My fingers itched to touch them. "I'm glad you came."

I tore my gaze from his feet stammering, "I was told you would return. I am here to learn."

"What is it you wish to learn?"

My palms were slick against the leather. My feet ached to touch the soft white pile of the carpet on the floor. My mind fought with my body to control the passionate pictures threatening to overwhelm me.

"Can you show me how to be wild and free?"

He looked at me for a long while, his face almost amused at my request, but his eyes were serious.

"Is this what you truly wish?"

I used the nettles to give me time in which to create a response. "I know I have a path," I told him. "I feel my feet against the warm soil and sometimes they flinch from the sharpness of the stones, but I continue forwards. Sometimes grass grows over the path, and interesting flowers entice me to wander in their meadow, or people call to me to stop and join them."

"Or stop and help them when they fear to help themselves." His deep voice shocked me with its truth, but I nodded.

"There are so many other things claiming me, I lose my way. I forget where the path is or how I should find it. I cover my feet with thick boots and although they save me from the sharpness of the stones, I cannot feel the path breathing beneath me. I am lost."

"You wish me to find the path for you?"

I shook my head. "No, it has already re-appeared. A dream-bear woke me. My feet are walking again. They brought me here."

He got up from the chair. "Then here you stay, until you wish to leave. You will join me in a meal?"

What could I say? He went back into the kitchen and brought out fat vine leaves, stuffed with piping hot cheese and meat spilling out onto white china plates. He placed them on a low, white table accompanied by freshly baked bread and a forager's salad; dandelion leaves, sorrel, chickweed, fat hen, chives, mint, and marjoram, the flavours tart and fresh upon my tongue. I spread newly churned butter over thick slices of bread, to soak up the fragrant sauce. Every morsel of food stimulated and nourished me like sunlight after a dull, damp winter.

He bade me take off my shoes and we sat, crosslegged on cushions, eating with only a spoon and our fingers. When I complimented his skills, he waved them away, but his eyes twinkled. For dessert he brought out syllabub in tall glasses topped with candied angelica and violet flowers, their petals so richly dark against the pale cream, the golden centres shining.

As we finished the last mouthful, the deeply golden rays of the sun began to change colour.

"Come," he said, holding out his hands and pulling me to my feet. "It's time to bid the sun farewell."

We stood leaning against the garden gate, breathing in the scent of honeysuckle. Beyond the fields, the village slept, while on the top of the hills, the huge ball of molten red sank inexorably towards the treetops. We watched in silence as the sun rested for a long moment on the horizon then slowly slipped beyond until only a glittering crescent remained.

Then the sun was gone for another day, leaving me aching for lost light. I was mesmerised by the inevitable descent, suddenly conscious of the warmth of Artur's body behind me and the gentle weight of his arms around my waist.

I let out a long sigh, consciously letting myself relax against him. A soft breeze ruffled my skirt, bringing the chimes of the nearby stable clock upon the air.

"Nine o'clock," he said, his voice warm against my ear, "still time for you to walk home in the light, should you wish to go."

"And if I stay?"

"It will always be your choice, Clara. Your presence pleases me a great deal, but if you stay, you will change. Spending time with me always changes others."

I turned so I could see his face. "I would not have come here without accepting such a possibility." I felt a hunger rise inside me as I lifted my face to his and closed my eyes.

His first kiss was feather light, as if a leaf had brushed against my lips and tumbled away in the breeze. My eyes fluttered open to find him watching me. The second kiss placed his lips on mine—firm, secure—like his arms encircling me. Then the fire began.

The first touch of his tongue poured molten heat into my core. I did not want to breathe. I only wanted to be devoured; to become part of him, to know his touch, his taste, his scent until it overwhelmed me.

As he broke the kiss, I was left gasping for air, only his arms preventing me from collapsing on the ground.

"Come," he said, guiding me back into the house. "When the moon is full, I will take you to bathe in her light

and be transformed, but first you need a softer light to shine."

He sat me in a chair beside the fireplace before shutting both halves of the stable door and lighting six huge pillar candles around the room. As I watched the soft flames flicker, Artur brought me another glass of iced nettle infusion, and stood over me until I finished every drop.

He took the glass from me, placed it on the mantelpiece, and drew me to my feet with both hands.

"Tell me what you wish, Clara."

There was no hesitation in my voice. "To know you."

He brought my hands in turn to his lips, kissing the backs in soft acceptance, then to the fastenings of his shirt.

With trembling fingers, I released the buttons one by one, placing my hand on his chest as each new area of skin was revealed. My fingers encountered soft, black hair, curling in thick profusion to echo his shoulder length locks. As I pushed the shirt off his shoulders, his bare, muscular arms relaxed by his side, each one covered with the same, black hair, rising and falling to my fingers' touch.

Once more, his hands caught mine and brought them to his belt buckle. I looked up at him, a question on my lips, but he merely smiled and nodded. This was not the first time I had seen a man unclothed, but Artur's scent and overwhelming presence made my fingers tremble like a young

girl's. I felt his hands on mine, steadying them, then he drew me to him and held me close, so close, all I could breathe was his scent and it steadied me.

This time, the belt pushed smoothly through the buckle and slid down to the floor. His moleskin trousers soon followed. When I reached for his waist, thinking to hook my fingers under a further garment, there was nothing there. My questing palm met only soft, fur-lined skin, supple and smooth, powered by unyielding muscle underneath.

He was beautiful, standing there in the flickering candlelight. I took a step back, wanting to drink in the wonder of the sight before me. All I wanted was to touch and savour each part of him—to smell and nuzzle and taste until I knew him as well as I knew myself.

He did not let me stand for long. His hands were busy with my clothing, stroking, smoothing, unfastening until I found myself in his arms entwined upon the sofa; fingers touching, skin sliding, tongues tasting, my senses awash with him.

There may have been words softly murmured in my ear, or sounds from throats drowning in new emotions, but I cannot remember them. It was scents I remember: the smell of human sweat, of garden toil, of soil, and grass, and open air. The scent of honeysuckle wafting in through open win-

dows. A scent I could not identify, but which reminded me of ancient bark crushed between my fingers.

Then as our joining progressed, it was not scents I recall, but colours bursting upon my mind: greens and deep browns, oranges, reds, and paler greens. I'd seen colours before at the height of passion, but never such as these, such depth, such texture, exploding into sight like soundless fireworks drenching me with feelings, turning my body into rays of light dancing around the room and disappearing into the heavens above.

As I lay within his arms, purring my gratitude, he bent his head to drop soft kisses once more upon my skin.

"Is this enough for you?" he asked, his lips against my fingertips, "or would you have more?"

My eyelids flickered open and I saw him watching me.

"Is there more?" I could not think of anything to delight my senses as much as what he had already given me.

Artur nodded, his eyes half closed as his fingers stroked my skin. There was no part of me he did not know.

"Will you trust me?" he asked.

I could tell it was no ordinary question. This was my turning point. If I agreed, I could not turn back. If I denied him, there would be no second chance. It was my choice.

"I trust you."

My words hung in the air for long seconds. Artur stood up, holding out his hand to me. I put my palm in his, feeling small and insignificant within his strong grasp.

He led me out of the house into moonlit fields. We walked through growing grass, through sleeping flocks of sheep, beside a family of deer, all without disturbance. My feet felt no moisture from the dew, no stones, no thistles, no nettle stings, yet I knew they were there, hidden within the grasses.

Down the hill we went until we reached the small grove of trees beside the spring. I could hear water dancing into the brook, following its ancient path towards the valley stream.

Once more, Artur took me in his arms. This time it was his tongue which explored me, searching into every crevice, every hidden, secret place. Wherever his tongue touched, a stem of ivy grew, weaving its way inside me until I was covered in green leaves and dappled shoots.

"Embrace me!"

With my last vestiges of human strength, I flung myself around Artur's body, feeling his soft, warm skin slowly transform into the cold, gnarled hardness of an ancient hawthorn tree. Strong, ivy roots burrowed into the ground at the base of his trunk, peripheral roots clinging to his bark and

eventually forcing their way inside. He and I were joined in a way I would never have imagined possible.

It was spring. I was aware of days growing longer. Winds blew around us with a promise of warmth, their power diminishing. We basked in the sun's strengthening rays. I sensed new, juvenile leaves with their characteristic palmshapes unfurling along the length of my climbing stems, turning their bright green surface towards the sun.

These new leaves shone with youthful vibrancy while more mature leaves grew a new shape, losing their lobes and thickening, forming a huge green mat which hung from the hawthorn tree's branches. I knew there was no need to worry about predators. Nothing came to eat my leaves or gnaw on my branches. I could feel the poisons in my leaves forming a wall of protection around me. I was safe. Nothing could move me from my chosen place.

I noticed fresh green leaves of the hawthorn growing amongst my own. I felt how the tree leaned over, burdened by my weight as well as his. Soon the air was filled with the sweet scent of his pink tinged blossom, white petals blazoned across the coolness of his shade, deep red stamens jutting out to brush their pollen against any visiting bumblebees.

I breathed through each leaf surface; oxygen from the air entering my cells as waste carbon dioxide diffused outwards. In every green surface the alternate process

continued—photosynthesis, the great gathering of carbon dioxide and water using the sun's rays to transform the elements into simple sugars, releasing oxygen back into the atmosphere.

I felt sugars being transported along my xylem and phloem, to be stored in each cell and used to feed upon as need arose.

The year continued to turn. As his blossoms faded, so did each seed begin to swell on the edge of every slender stem. Elder trees near us produced huge, white flowering beacons amongst their green leaves while wild roses bore delicate pink petals amongst their thorns. We all basked in summer heat, as seeds swelled and grew to maturity.

In fields nearby, grasses and flowering plants shed their seeds, long stems mown and laid to dry in the heat. Machines and people came to bind the hay together, carrying it away to feed animals in leaner times. Barley and wheat ripened to a glittering gold, their heads drooping as the seeds ripened. Soon they, too, were harvested and taken from the fields, the gold turning to brown with autumn ploughing.

Daylight shortened now. Around us, berries were beacons of red in the sunshine. Hips and hawes vying to see which could glow a brighter red. Birds came to feed from the hawthorn's branches, carefully pulling off the berries and eating them until the leaves turned russet, then brown, before

dropping onto the earth below, leaving bare twigs around which my ivy stems swirled and gripped more tightly.

As Earth began to turn away from the sun, other plants withered and died. Now was my time to blossom. Green-tinged yellow flowers appeared on my mature branches, opening their umbels to foraging insects, rewarding each one with tiny sips of sugar-rich nectar. I opened my heart to all bees and other insects still flying or crawling around in the shorter autumn days.

All too soon, bitter wind and rain blew across the hawthorn tree making me shiver in the cold and wet. I would not lose my colour, no matter what strength the sun. During the shortest, days my berries ripened into rich, black balls. Once more birds came to feed. I felt their satisfaction as they plucked the berry, dropping it into their gizzard so their tiny crops grew thick and fat with my nourishment.

It made me smile inwardly to think they were doing my business for me. Once the flesh was ripped from the seed, it would pass through the bird in another place, a new piece of soil. My children would grow and prosper without me. Ivy would continue.

The world turned again. Rain turned to snow, ice, fog, and back to rain. Fields were ploughed and planted or lay flooded in valleys. Gradually water receded, light extended, and new leaves and shoots began to unfurl once more.

I knew I had lived as a tree around a tree for a whole turn of the wheel. I knew warmth and cold, movement and stillness, light and dark, richness and scarcity.

I also knew my presence was killing the hawthorn tree. Slowly, but surely, I covered more of him, my weight forcing him down towards the ground, my leaves covering his so less blossom formed, less berries ripened. He had given himself to me.

It was the bear's roars I heard first, echoing around the valley as he ran down the hill towards the trees. I felt his long claws ripping my stems from the tree trunk, pulling my fronds away and off, leaving them hanging in the air. Each slash of his paws severed another link to my roots. If they all went, I would die.

"Time to come back, Clara." I heard Beren's voice underneath me, and suddenly I was dropping through the branches into his waiting arms, coughing and gasping as ivy left my lungs and eyes, allowing human senses to return.

Beren held me close, wrapping my naked body in the coarse weave of his spring cloak. He carried me over to a clearing and set me down by a warm fire, feeding me sips of water and gruel until my strength returned.

It was a long time before I could use my voice. Words had lost their meaning, but one day, I heard the creaking of branches in the wind and began to sing—a haunting

sound of leaf and branch, of bud and flower and berry, of tree and root and life and death.

Beren told me later it was then he knew I would recover.

No one noticed my absence. It was as if my altered state existed only in my own mind. When I visited the Long Barn, it lay derelict as it always was. A windswept path led from the stable door to the outer doorway into the field. The cherished garden was covered in young trees, their seeds brought in by the wind. Only the stone walls remained. Each entrance was guarded by elder trees, their understory by seed bearing nettles draped in goosegrass—each step rewarded by smarting stings. There was a price to pay for coming here.

Leaning against the ancient, sun-warmed stones, I felt their strength and shelter against the unexpected storms of life. In gratitude I gathered elderflowers and rose petals to drench myself in their scent—a constant reminder of my precious learning—knowing nature from the inside out.

Where bramble began my story, so wild rose brings it to a close. Both plants travel where they will, no matter what lies in their path. Both protect themselves with thorns to stab and rip the unwary passerby, but I have no need of such violence. In the joy of the wildwood, my journey continues.

#### About the Author

Sarah J Head is an accomplished writer and herbalist specializing in fantasy tales set in the heart of English countryside. Spending over twenty summers in Cornwall visiting ancient sites, has given her a deep understanding of myths and legends from long ago. Brought up in the Cotswolds on a small arable farm, educated in Warwick and Birmingham, Sarah now goes all over England telling stories which help people to cope with various life events. She writes novels, short stories, poetry and articles which reflect her experiences and opinions. Sarah has travelled widely, living in New Zealand, California and Canada, but always returns to her Warwickshire roots, where her family has lived for the past 600 years.

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Also available by Sarah at loveyoudivine:

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