

The Cairngorm

by Sandie Bergen

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A clash of metal rang in the cool afternoon air. A shout, followed by a metallic thump, then a burst of laughter, told me yet another knight had fallen to a couched lance.

I ignored the noise and wandered the market stalls, investigating the pieces of silver jewelry, tartan scarves and sashes, and the pies and sweets that seemed to grace every Scottish outing. Smelly hoses and equally smelly men pretending they were knights didn't impress me much. I'd never been to a Re-Creationist Tournament before, though, and thought it would be a fun diversion; a break from my ancestor searching.

I picked up a large silver brooch with a blue stone the size of my thumb nestled in the center. A cairngorm, the sign said. Easy to see what it was for. All I had to do was look at anyone in an old style tartan kilt to see similar brooches holding the material together at the wearer's shoulder. I thought Mom might like one of these. She certainly hadn't been keen on joining me on my trip, even though it had been her idea to come to Scotland to find my ancestors.

"It's your father's family dear, not mine," she'd said. "I think you'd have more fun on your own anyway. Maybe you'll meet a nice Scottish fellow. Perhaps one with a castle. You're twenty-eight now and I think I've waited quite long enough for grandchildren."

Mom never passed up an opportunity to remind me I was officially an 'old maid'. Ever since Dad died three years ago, she's been on my case. Sometimes being an only child is depressing. Trying to find a man who wasn't married, or a complete jerk, was just as depressing.

I decided the brooch was what my mother needed and paid the twenty pounds asking price, wincing as I passed the note to the smiling woman on the other side of the table. I was sure the brooch had never had silver anywhere near it let alone in it, but it looked nice. Big and flashy, just like Mom.

I tucked the little paper bag containing the brooch into my purse and slung it over my shoulder, holding it snug against me. You couldn't be too careful in a crowd like that. I wandered the stalls, dodging knights in armour, ladies in long gowns and wimples, and other women in skimpy leather outfits I was sure William Wallace had never seen; or anyone else during the first two thousand years of Christendom, for that matter. I passed one blonde girl with her chest barely contained in a tight black leather bodice, and a flimsy short skirt that an ancient Greek warrior would have been embarrassed to wear. She carried a sword in a scabbard across her back and tried to look threatening. Barbarella lives.

I shook my head and decided I needed some fresher air. I think everyone in Scotland smokes and they'd all chosen to light up at the same time, near me. A lone piper played somewhere behind me and my blood surged at the sound. Once a Scot always a Scot, I suppose. I wove around two English redcoats, and what I thought might be a Welsh bowman, and headed for a forested area past the rope boundaries of the field.

The area surrounding the town of Stirling had plenty of trees, so finding shade

wasn't difficult. I glanced up at the town itself, sitting regally on a hill, the castle peeking over the walls, and the monument to Sir William Wallace towering over all. The sun sparkled on something metallic at the top of it.

I wandered in the dappled sunlight of the small forest, enjoying the singing birds and fragrant aromas the fallen leaves produced when I walked on them. I felt like a kid again, shuffling my feet and kicking the leaves into little piles.

Then I heard something. A voice singing. Tenor. Not professional, but nice. Though I didn't recognize the tune, the words came through clearly in the crisp forest air, or as clear as old Scottish can be.

“The gypsies came to our gude lord’s yett,
And O but they sang sweetly;
They sang sae sweet and sae very complete,
That doun came our fair lady.”

The singing stopped and I crept closer to where I thought it came from. I could see nothing. Then a bird flew up out of the ground. A closer look showed a ravine with trees and heavy brush lining the slope.

“And she came tripping down the stair,
And all her maids before her;
As soon as they saw her weel-fa’ured face,
They cuist the glaumourye o’er her.”

The voice came from the bottom of the ravine. Holding onto a slender young tree - I'm not an arborist, I have no idea what kind it was - I leaned over, trying to see into the bushes below.

“O come wi’ me,’ says Johnie Faa;
O come wi’ me, my dearie;
For I vow and I swear by the hilt of my sword,
That your lord shall nae more come near ye!”

The voice lowered slightly with this refrain and I shifted my feet so I could lean over more. Today was a beautiful day in old Scotland. Unfortunately, the past week had seen rain every day, and the leaves under my feet rested on damp soil, and more wet leaves. My right foot slipped, throwing me off balance. My fingers couldn't grip the damp bark of the tree and down I went, sliding on my rump. I hit something, a lump of earth I think, and flipped, rolling down the steep incline. Flashes of light, a dark something I couldn't identify in my headlong rush, and a spray of leaves, accompanied

my fall.

I rolled to a stop on my back, the blinding sun in my face and my heart pounding in my chest. I heard a groan. I thought it might be me. A bird chirruped somewhere nearby, and the song continued, the voice coming closer as the verse progressed.

“Then she gave them the gude white bread,
And they ga’e her the ginger;
But she gave them a far better thing,
The gold ring aff her finger.”

The voice came from just behind me, somewhere above my head, but I hadn’t heard the rustle of leaves to mark his passage. Maybe it was because the Bells of St. Mary’s ringing in my ears hadn’t quit.

“Well, ‘tis a lassie!” said a man’s voice, in the same direction the singing had come from. I assumed it was my bard. ‘This is me lucky day.’

Odd. The first part of his speech sounded Scottish. The second part English, in an accent I couldn’t identify. Not that I’m an expert mind, but I can recognize Cockney and Liverpudlian. I listened to the Beatles once upon a time. This wasn’t one of the Beatles, though; not the right part of Scotland for Paul McCartney anyway.

“Ye might want to be sittin’ up. Yer layin’ in mud.”

I craned my neck so I could see the man I’d ‘fallen’ for. All that greeted me was an outline of a head with a halo of sun around it. I rolled over, groaning as my aches and pains made themselves well known. The stranger didn’t offer me a hand, so I crawled to my knees and gingerly stood up, weaving a little as I did.

“‘Tis a bit of a stump over yonder, if ye wish to plant yerself somewhere less muddy.”

“Thank you,” I said, wishing he’d offer a little more help. I followed his pointing finger to a half rotted stump near a small burbling creek, then put my head in my hands, more to stop them from shaking than to ease the dizziness.

“Gae tak’ frae me this gay mantle,
And bring t’ me a plaidie;
For if kith and kin and a’ had sworn,
I’ll follow the gypsy laddie.”

The voice was pitched higher as he sang this verse, in imitation of a woman. He didn’t sound too bad. The voice lowered again. “Ye have to keep yer eye on yer feet aroun’ here, missy. ‘Tis slippery after a rain.”

“Thank you for the advice.” I hoped my sarcasm wasn’t lost on him. I peeked through my fingers. Another Recreationist, a Redcoat, though his outfit seemed more

natural than the others I'd seen; not so new, more...lived in. As matter of fact, lived in was just what his clothes looked like. The edges of the coat's cuffs were frayed and the knees of his once white breeches had been patched. Everything he wore bore stains or dirt of some sort. At least someone was trying for a little accuracy.

I lowered my hands, my gaze wandering up his well-built body. No skinny city kid this one. Though he appeared not much taller than me, about five foot seven or eight, he looked like he could easily handle a sword, musket, or the dagger at his waist. When my eyes reached his face, ice blue eyes froze me in place. A shiver crawled up my spine to lodge itself at the base of my skull, making all the little hairs stand up on end. Then he smiled and the shiver went away.

He might have been an extremely handsome man, if not for the nose that looked like it had been broken twice or thrice, and there was a casual humour about him that put me at ease. I tried to place his age. Mid to late twenties I think.

"Are ye a' right, lassie?" he asked, in the sort-of Scottish accent.

"Yes...I...I think so."

He smiled again. Then continued singing in a falsetto voice.

'Yestereve I lay in a weel-made bed,
Wi' my good lord beside me;
This night I'll lie in a tenant's barn,
Whatever shall betide me.'

"Nice song," I said.

"I thank ye, my lady." He bowed with a natural flourish that he must have practiced in front of a mirror. It was perfect. He wore no hat, like the others I'd seen, and his dark brown hair brushed the high collar of his open coat. The top of his ivory shirt showed a bit of hair, and couldn't help but wonder what the rest of his chest looked like. The voice lowered again.

"Come t' your bed,' says Johnie Faa;
O come to your bed, my dearie;
For I vow and I swear by the hilt of my sword,
That your lord shall nae more come near ye!'

"Tis a true tale, ye realize. Johnie Faa was the King of the Gypsies and always got his way. Particularly with the ladies, if ye catch what me meanin' be." He winked.

I couldn't help myself. Despite my aches, pains, muddied jeans and sweatshirt, I smiled.

"I'll go t' bed' my Johnie Faa;

I'll go t' my bed, my dearie;
For I vow and I swear by the fan in my hand,
That my lord shall nae more come near me.'

When he paused, I asked, "Who was the lady?"

"That I am not able to relate to ye. Knowin' the reputation of the good Johnie Faa, pick one."

I laughed. The day was turning out to be much better than I'd hoped. My soldier settled himself on another stump, not ten feet away from me.

'I'll make a hap for my Johnie Faa;
I'll make' a hap for my dearie;
And he's get a' the sash gaes round,
And my lord shall nae more come near me.'

"And what, pray tell, is a 'hap'?" I asked, wishing he'd sit a little closer.

"'Tis a Scots word for a shelter."

"I gather, from your accent, that you are not actually Scottish?"

"Nae, m'lady. 'Tis grand old England I call home." A wistful look flashed across his tanned face.

"I also gather, from your clothes, that you are here for today's festivities."

A little smile turned up the corner of his mouth. "As ye are?"

I shrugged. "I'm digging up ancestors and thought I'd soak up some culture."

The soldier jumped a little, his smile disappearing. "Now why would ye be wishin' to disturb the dead, even if they are yer ancestors?" His voice lowered more, growing cold, and the sun disappeared behind a cloud. Briefly, I wondered where it came from. The sky was clear last I looked.

The shiver came back. He couldn't be serious. "I don't mean that literally. I'm just looking up who my ancestors were. My father's family came from around here."

The soldier looked into my eyes, nailing me to my stump. All I could see were two blue glaciers as he probed my soul, pushing aside that he didn't want to uncover what it was he did. I can't say what he was looking for, but it must have been an eternity before he found it. He smiled again, releasing me from my hold, and the cloud moved on. As did my shiver.

'And when our lord came hame at e'en,
And speired for his fair lady,
The tane she cried, and the tither replied,
'She's awa' with the gypsy laddie,'

“Speared?” I pictured a fat old lord in a fancy velvet get up with a spear in his hand, and stifled a laugh.

“Asked.” Then he continued...

‘Gae saddle to me the black black steed,
Gae saddle and mak’ him ready;
Before that I either eat or sleep,
I’ll gae seek my fair lady.’

“What be yer name, lass?”

“Alexandra Graham.” Thinking he might be interested in my ancestors, I added, “I’ve been able to trace my father’s family to Perthshire, in particular the area around Dunblane.”

“Dunblane.” It was more whispered than spoken.

“Yes, to a man called William James Alexander Graham. I’m named for him.”

A strange look crossed the man’s face. Puzzlement, surprise, then...it almost looked like hope. The smile returned and he broke into song once more.

“And we were fifteen weel-made men,
Although we were na bonnie;
And we were a’ put down for ane,
A fair young wanton lady.’

Those incredibly blue eyes hammered into my soul once more, then he said, “Would ye like to hear a story?”

“Does that mean the song’s over then?”

“It is.”

“What happened to Johnie Faa and the lady?”

“Apparently he was captured and hanged, and the lady imprisoned in her husband’s castle to her dying day.” He shrugged. “‘Tis an old Scottish ballad. I know not the wherefore’s and why’s of it. I only know the song.”

He slid off the stump to sit on the ground, his arms around his knees. His black boots were in dire need of a good polish and he didn’t seem to care about his clothes. He was now sitting in the mud and damp leaves he had chided me for earlier. The soldier stared at the ground between his feet for a moment.

“Have ye heard of Bonnie Prince Charlie and a’ that happened in 1745 and after?” He looked up and, when I nodded, he said, “‘Twas a bad time. After the battle on the moor, many of Scotland’s best were dead, more were hung as traitors. Still more found themselves in one gaol or another. Their wives and children were left to fend for themselves. Many starved.

“There was one family, a branch of the Grahams of Dunblane as it happens. Their manor lay not far to the west of town. The laird was too old to fight, though two of his five sons followed Charlie. To their deaths. A third son was taken as hostage for the laird’s ‘good behaviour’. The other two sons, along with the laird’s only daughter were allowed to stay at home to help with the farm.

“Now mind ye, this was only so food could be grown to feed English mouths. The laird, who had once owned a portly girth, rapidly lost his rounder aspects as he struggled to feed his remainin’ family. English soldiers rode to the farm regular to retrieve what had been grown. One young stud, name of Robert Shaw, fell for the laird’s daughter, a comely lass with hair the colour of the morning sun and skin so soft, so delicate, it put the finest porcelain to shame. Just a hint of rose blushed her sweet cheeks, and long dark lashes hid eyes of the palest blue. She was known as Bess.”

Whoever this man was, bard was an appropriate name for him. I found myself leaning forward, resting my chin in my hand as I listened, entranced.

“Robert found any opportunity to speak with Bess, completely smitten by the fair young maid. Needless to say, her father didn’t approve and took to keeping the girl in the manor house when the soldiers came by. Yet, she was just as attracted to the English soldier and would often slip out the rear door to see him.

“The soldier despaired the state the laird and his family were in and began sneakin’ food to the young lady, knowin’ full well he would be hung if caught. As the year of our Lord 1746 closed, and a new year began, the maid and the soldier decided to consummate their love. He slipped away from his barracks in Dunblane, she sneaked out of the manor house, and they met in a forest near her home. After...” He looked at me, then grinned. I bit my cheek to keep from laughing.

“Well, afterwards, they decided they should do the right thing, what with Bess possibly bein’ with child. Robert put her on his horse and they rode like the wind to Bridge o’ Allen, woke up a priest, and were wed that very night. He gave her his silver ring for her right hand...”

“Now wait a minute.” I held up my hand to stop his story. “I know for a fact that most British are Protestant. That’s what the ’45 was really all about, a religious war. Why would Robert let himself be married by a Catholic priest?”

“That, me dear lady, ‘tis an excellent question. As it happens, Robert didn’t care. Just so long as he could wed his love. If yer finished interruptin’, I will continue.”

A warmth ran up my cheeks at his admonishment. “Please do.” I settled my chin into my hand again.

“The two lovers had to be content with meetin’ when they could in their favourite forest glade. To no one’s surprise, a few months later, Bess announced she was with child. Robert was excited, but worried too. When her father found out, he knew hell would seem a pleasant place.” The man’s face darkened. “And he was right.” He stared at the ground again, lost in thought.

I waited a moment before interrupting again. "So, um...what happened?"

"Robert's regiment was moved to Stirling." The soldier looked in the direction of the castle, though it couldn't be seen. "He barracked in that very fortress." His gaze shifted to the ground again and he picked at something on his coat sleeve. "No need to tell ye, it made seein' his lady that much more difficult. One dark night, right about this time o' year, Robert loaded his saddlebags with food and headed out to see his lady. The path he took went through this forest. He didn't get far."

The man's eyes remained on the ground as his voice grew colder. I felt a chill along my spine, like someone had opened a dark crypt on Hallowe'en night. My tongue stuck to the roof of my dry mouth. I couldn't have spoken if I'd wanted.

"The laird's two sons were waitin' fer him. One jumped down from a tree, throwin' Robert from his horse. The other knocked him flat before he could recover from the fall. They tied him up and dragged him to this ravine, then waited 'til he woke up. I'll not tell ye the things they did to him. No man, no beast, should have to suffer like that." His voice, so strong and confident a few minutes before, had grown quiet and trembled as if he, himself, had suffered that brutality. Long moments passed before he roused himself. He stood, brushing off his breeches, though I couldn't see any new dirt clinging to him, then wandered over close to where I had landed.

"See this depression, here in the ground?"

I followed him to where he pointed.

"Robert lies right here. Unknown. Undisturbed. I doubt Bess ever learned what happened to him."

My friend the shiver was back, and I glanced up to see a darkening sky. I had no idea I'd been here that long. I didn't care though. The depression drew my attention and I moved closer to him, and it. He crouched down and stared at the sunken ground. I stayed standing, but my eyes were just as riveted, while my brain prayed nothing crawled out of that grave. I shook my head and resisted the urge to smack myself. I watched too many horror movies.

"How do you know all this if his grave is unknown?" There's only so far you can stretch credibility. But then, he did say it was a story.

He looked lost, forlorn, his eyes on something far distant. Perhaps something far in the past. "I know many things. I just don't know the right things."

I was about to ask what he meant by that when my bard pointed to a dark lump near the base of the tree Robert was buried under. "Does that belong to you, lassie?"

I tore my eyes from the grave. Yes, that dark lump was familiar. My purse. It must have come off my shoulder on my trip to the bottom of the ravine. I vaguely remembered a similar shape accompanying me.

"Yes, it's mine," I said, moving my feet enough to retrieve it.

"And this?" It was the brooch I'd bought for mother, now free of both my purse and it's little bag.

“It’s a gift,” I told him. For some reason, my voice sounded hollow. His story must have had more of an affect than I thought. I picked up the brooch, since he didn’t act like he intended to. He may be a good storyteller and a decent singer, but helpful, he was not.

When I slipped the brooch into my bag, he tore his deep blue eyes from it to the grave. With his back turned to me, he dug around in the dirt that supposedly covered the murdered Robert, which gave me the shivers even more. I wouldn’t think of touching a grave, let alone dig in it.

After a moment he stood, brushing dirt off something, then turned to face me, holding what he had found tight in his right hand.

“Ye said yer name was Graham and that yer ancestor was William James Alexander Graham.”

“That’s right. Though I can’t find any record of William’s parents, only the year of his birth, 1747. He had no siblings I can find, either.”

A wistful look crossed the man’s face; a little smile accompanied it. “Do ye know, lass, what he did with his life?”

“He was a mapmaker. William spent many years in Canada making maps of the lakes in Ontario before settling in Edinburgh. He took up a teaching position there which he held till he died.”

“Did he have sons? Daughters?”

“He married a Buchanan, and they had three sons and four daughters.”

His smile grew bigger. He raised his right hand and opened it, staring at what lay there. I squinted in the gathering gloom, but couldn’t see what it was.

His hand snapped shut, and I jumped at the sudden movement. He strode quickly to the stump that had been my seat during his tale.

“I think ye will find what ye need to know at Graham House, just outside Dunblane. A girl is there, one who can help ye. Her name is Elizabeth, though ye need not ask after her. She will find ye. She’ll know ye by this.” He placed something on the stump and looked at me, that wonderful smile lighting up his features.

Fingers of evening mist wove their way between our legs, separating us. The soldier seemed to slip away, though neither of us had moved.

“How do you know?” I asked. How could he possibly know? Unless he was a Graham, too. “What is your name? Who are you?”

The fog thickened and the air grew damp and heavy. He turned, walking into the hazy night. “Do not follow me, for your way out lies behind. I doubt ye’ll wish to return on the path whence ye came. Follow the stream, ‘tis a gentle path.” Fog can do strange things to sound, and I could have sworn he stood next to me, though I watched him stride into the darkness. Still, no sound accompanied him.

I tried to follow, but my feet seemed held to the ground. Somehow, I now stood right beside the grave. My heart pounded and I swear my palms dripped as I looked

down. I expected to find Robert's skeletal hands holding my feet in place, but all I could see were leaves; leaves, twigs, and a small mound of disturbed dirt.

Night had fallen, and the idea of spending any more time next to what could quite possibly be a grave lent mobility to my feet. I ran to the stump I had sat on, then spun, wishing an answer to my questions.

"Who are you? Please tell me!"

As the thick Scottish fog absorbed my bard, I heard these words. "I am called Robert. And I was born in Newcastle-Upon-Tyne. My father was John, my mother Sarah Wells." Then he was gone.

I stood, not knowing what to do, thinking it a rare coincidence both he and Bess' love had the same name. But, when I thought about it, why would it be? Robert was a very common name. Especially in Scotland, who claimed a hero and another bard named Robert. And if he was born in Newcastle, in an area that had changed hands more often than Imelda Marcos changed shoes, then he could easily be part Scottish himself.

Then I remembered this Robert had placed something on the stump. I picked it up. Brushing ages of dirt away, I found a cairngorm similar to the one I'd bought for my mother, except this one had a purple stone and weighed more. No cheap imitation. It was the real thing.

An owl hooted and I realized I was alone with a dead man. In the dark. I glanced at the grave and I knew the soldier's tale was true. I prayed Robert would be content to remain in his grave. Resisting the urge to run and trip over something unseen, I walked alongside the stream until a gradual slope brought me out near the road to Stirling.

#

Sleep eluded me that night. I couldn't even blame strange dreams of red-coated soldiers and fair young maids. Or nightmares of ivory skeletons wearing ragged remnants of uniforms, crawling like maggots from the moist ground, grabbing at my feet and ankles. I just couldn't sleep. I was missing something from my experience, but my brain seemed as foggy as the Scottish night.

I'd closed down the pub near my Bed & Breakfast, then read through some of the information I'd found on William. I had a copy of a letter he'd written to one of his daughters telling her he'd been born in Dunblane. Why she needed to know, the letter didn't reveal. Once that bit of information had been imparted, the rest of the letter discussed the health of his wife, Jeanie, and the goings on at the university.

After that, I lay in my bed thinking about the Gypsy King, Robert, lying in a cold grave, and my bard. Actually, he featured strongly in my thoughts and I kicked myself for not asking for his phone number. Or at least arranging to meet him somewhere.

I mulled over the idea of finding Graham House and meeting with his friend Elizabeth. Then decided perhaps I didn't want to meet Elizabeth. Maybe she was prettier

than me. Maybe she was his girlfriend.

That depressed me, so I thought about Robert and Bess, and how unfair life could be. Love like theirs deserved a chance. I doubted Bess' brothers would have confessed what they did to Robert. She probably lived her life not knowing what had happened to him, perhaps thinking he'd deserted her. I briefly wondered what had become of the babe. Did the laird accept it? Send it to an orphanage? Or leave it somewhere to die? I sincerely hoped the poor little thing had some kind of life.

'...a comely lass with hair the colour of the morning sun and skin so soft, so delicate, it put the finest porcelain to shame. Just a hint of rose blushed her sweet cheeks, and long dark lashes shadowed eyes of the palest blue...' My bard certainly had a way with words. I picked up a tress of my shoulder length, mousy brown hair. I'd thought several times of dyeing it, but never found the time, or courage, to do it. My eyes are blue too, though a dark blue. Like my bard's.

I sat up and rushed to the bathroom. Flipping the light on I stared at my reflection in the small mirror hanging there. Funny how you don't really notice your own eyes when you're brushing your hair and teeth every morning and night. As I studied them, I realized they *were* the same shade of blue as the bard's. Then I wondered if they could freeze someone like his had frozen me. I widened them slightly and tried to make them intense, but all I looked like was a blue-eyed owl, with messy hair.

I gave up and pulled the cairngorm out of my purse. The old one. Bess' cairngorm. My bard had wiped some of the dirt off it, but more clung to the underside and stuck in the grooves. Back in bathroom, I used a little warm water and my toothbrush to remove every bit of dirt I could. Satisfied, I turned out the light and tried to sleep.

Dawn found me still tossing and turning. So I got up, showered, wandered down for a lovely breakfast of eggs, bacon, tomatoes, potato patties, ham, toast and a few cups of coffee. I passed on the black sausage. I gather it's something you have to grow up with to like. I then returned to my room to retrieve my purse, the cairngorm, and some stomach tablets. It was then I realized I would listen to my bard. I would go to meet Elizabeth.

A short bus trip later, I stood on the steps of Graham House, five pound entry fee in hand. It was a nice place, but not spectacular. Stately elms lined the long drive and the manor house itself, a long thick rectangle with curved stone steps leading to a peaked entrance, was drowned in flowers and shrubs. Stone cherubs frolicked amongst rhododendrons and other perennials, their blooms long gone.

A nice lady with a tight gray bun and a blue print period dress showed our small group the dishes the lairds of the manor had used, some gaudy jewelry, and various pieces of furniture spanning about four hundred years of design. I couldn't help but wonder how many oak trees had given up their lives for this place. The walls, stairs, banisters, floors, and most of the furniture were all made of it.

We wandered down one of the many halls admiring the paintings lined up on both

sides. Most were of former owners and their families, staring at us in haughty disdain. Our guide droned the names of the people in the portraits and my mind wandered back to the bard. Robert said her name was Elizabeth. This lady introduced herself as Dee, so it had to be someone else.

“And this is Elizabeth Jane Graham, who died in 1747 at the age of 17.”

My ears perked up at the guide’s words. 1747. The same year Robert died. The same year William Graham had been born. Weird. Then I looked at the portrait, a pretty girl in a heavy cream gown crossed with a tartan sash pinned by a cairngorm...with a purple stone. It must have been a popular style. I took a closer look at the girl; wavy blond hair framed an alabaster face, brightened by pale blue eyes. Bess. Elizabeth. My Robert said the girl I was to meet was named Elizabeth. Double weird. I was nowhere near that ravine, but a far too familiar shiver crawled up my spine to resume residence in the base of my skull, each hair on the back of my neck once again standing at attention.

Old musty air clawed at my nostrils and my feet turned the rest of my body to the stairs. I had to get out; but I had to know. Forcing myself to face my guide, I asked, “What did she die of?”

“Ah, the poor lass was raped by an English soldier and she died bearing his child.”

And, I was sure, died not knowing what happened to Robert. “And the child?”

“A boy. He was raised by an uncle in Edinburgh. Elizabeth’s parents didn’t want the reminder of their dead daughter, I suppose. She’s the most sighted ghost in the manor.” The guide sighed as she gazed at the portrait. “Elizabeth had left names for her child, and her grieving mother insisted the babe be called as her daughter had wished. William for her father, James for her grandfather, and Alexander, though no one knows why. Her mother’s father was Henry.”

My feet took over and I found myself in the rear garden gasping for much needed air. Heady roses, withering now, added to my muzziness. I collapsed on a nearby bench. Burying my head in my hands, I let my pounding heart attempt to calm itself. Robert was my great-grandfather, however many times removed. The pretty lady in the picture, my great-grandmother.

Shaw. Robert said his last name was Shaw. My name should have been Shaw. But how could this Robert have known that? My overworked brain threatened to shut down completely.

“Excuse me, miss. Are ye a’ right?”

I looked up into pale blue eyes set in a perfect oval face. Blonde hair fell past narrow shoulders. I took in the porcelain skin and dusting of red on her cheeks. I also caught the pretty blue gown she wore before my vision grew dark. How I remained sitting I’ll never know. When I could see again, Elizabeth sat beside me, a wistful smile on her face.

“Are ye a’ right?” she asked again.

All I could manage was a nod. Ghosts don't exist; they're just figments of people's over active imagination. Marsh mist. Tendrils of fog on a dark night. Beings that live on the edge of dreams. Yet, faced with reality, how could I deny it?

A few gulps of fresh air and I attempted to speak. "You...you're...I..." It wasn't working. Another few minutes and I tried again. "You are...uh...a ghost?"

She smiled, a gentle smile full of honesty and grace. "I am Elizabeth. Something has drawn me to you, though I know not what."

Somewhere in the foggy depths of my stupefied brain, it registered. The cairngorm. Sitting up and shaking my head to clear it, I steeled myself and looked straight at her. Elizabeth appeared solid, her pretty smile decorating a prettier face. How could someone so 'real' be a ghost? Weren't they supposed to be ethereal, ephemeral things that flitted around scaring people, then vanish just as quick? Weren't you supposed to be able to see through them? She just seemed too normal, too solid. Yet, she was the girl in the picture. I had to give her the cairngorm, feeling sure that was what Robert had intended.

Then it hit me. Robert. My Robert. No, her Robert. Not one ghost, but two. My vision swam. Gritting my teeth, I forced my brain to sort itself out, to find a place where this could happen. The edge of dreams. That was where I had to retreat to if I was going to make it through this. Robert needed me to be strong. I had to give the cairngorm to Elizabeth.

"I...I have something of yours. A soldier named Robert gave it to me."

Elizabeth's eyes widened and her delicate hand flew to cover her mouth.

"Robert!" The name came out as a whisper, but I heard it clearly. I turned to rummage through my purse, taking a lot longer than I should have, but I needed to coax my brain into working properly again. A ghost. Two ghosts. I had spoken to two ghosts. Elizabeth needed the brooch. I didn't know why, but if that was what Robert the Bard wanted, that was what he'd get.

Taking a deep breath, I turned back to the ghost, to Elizabeth, and held out my hand, showing her the cairngorm. Her eyes widened, and she reached out. Her right hand, as solid as the rest of her, hovered over the brooch, yet, she didn't touch it. I waited, wondering why not. On the ring finger of that hand I saw a thin silver band. Plain, with none of the decorations I'd seen on other period pieces. The type of ring an ordinary soldier might be able to afford. Robert's ring.

"'Tis my brooch," she said, her voice little more than a breath. Still, Elizabeth hesitated.

My hand started to shake and I tried to will it steady. It didn't work; too much shock for one day. I set the brooch down on the bench between us. In an instant, Elizabeth snatched it up. Holding the cairngorm in both hands, she stared at it as if it held the key to her soul. Perhaps it did.

Tears fell from her pale blue eyes, and I wondered why she hadn't taken it sooner.

Maybe she couldn't. Perhaps ghosts can't touch the living, despite the stories I've heard. It would explain why Robert, who seemed a proper gentleman, didn't help me up or retrieve my purse. It might be that they can't touch real things.

But then, they both had held the brooch – and so did I. Perhaps it might be because the cairngorm had been buried with Robert. It was a part of him. My head hurt and my hands shook so hard I clutched my purse to try to hide it. Elizabeth raised her head, her gentle eyes now hard and penetrating; the same look Robert had given me when he looked into my soul.

“Your name. Please, tell me your name.”

I couldn't have refused if I wanted to. “Alexandra. Uh. Umm. Alexandra Graham.”

“Graham. A Graham of Dunblane?”

“I...I think so. I'm a descendant of William James Alexander Graham, born in 1747.” And I was looking at his mother. Why was I not running for the bus? Screaming my lungs out? She was a freaking ghost! But my bottom remained glued to the bench.

Elizabeth's eyes took on a gentle cast once again. “I used to watch him play in these gardens. He would visit twice a year, his birthday and Christmas. I watched him grow. I miss him.” Sadness briefly shadowed her lovely face, then the smile returned. “Granddaughter, with this brooch I can now find my Robert.”

My mouth found a will of its own and I heard myself say, “Why...why me?” Surely others must have walked that ravine. “Why didn't Robert give the brooch to someone else?”

“Blood calls to blood. He couldn't have given it to anyone else.” She stood and I blinked in surprise at how small she was, barely five feet and thin as a...ghost. Or something.

“He didn't desert you, Elizabeth. Bess. Uh, Grandmother. Ummm...he was killed, and, couldn't come to you.” I was embarrassed at how pathetic that sounded.

Her smile crinkled her cheeks right up to her eyes. “I suspected that might be the case, my granddaughter. I know he loves me.”

My granddaughter. She looked ten years younger than me. I stifled the urge to giggle.

“'Twas my brothers, was it not?” she asked, the smile faltering.

I managed a nod.

“I thought as much.” The pretty smile disappeared completely as she cast her gaze to the east. I looked where she did, spotting the family graveyard beyond the gardens; the place where Elizabeth's body rested, and those of the brothers who had murdered her husband.

Drawing herself up straight, Bess turned her back on the graveyard and faced west, towards Stirling, and me. The smile quickly returned. “'Tis long past time I joined my Robert. Thank you again, my granddaughter. Alexandra.” She hitched her skirts

slightly.

“Uh, before you go...” I stood up, too, somehow finding my legs, and looked down on my distant ancestor. “Robert’s middle name, it wouldn’t be Alexander, would it?”

“Why, yes. Yes, it is.” She moved closer and beckoned with her finger.

I leaned down and she bestowed a kiss on my cheek. I felt nothing, not the touch of her lips, not the cold, chilly sensation people said accompanied a ghost, nothing but a warmth in my heart, knowing I had done right. She walked to the west, past the house to the road, and I lost sight of her. She was there, then she wasn’t, though I can’t say exactly when she vanished.

#

The trip back to Stirling passed in a blur. All I could think about were Robert and Bess, and how wonderful I felt. My shaking stopped just before Bridge of Allan, replaced by a giddiness I couldn’t control. I must have grinned like an idiot all the way back. As we entered the city, I thought of the ravine, the grave, and my great-whatever-grandfather. I wondered if Elizabeth had made it there yet. Was ghostly travel instantaneous? Or did she have to walk all that way?

I had to know. The late afternoon sun found me back in the ravine sitting on the stump I’d inhabited the day before. I stared at the grave, no longer fearful. My great-grandfather would never hurt me. The inevitable fog drifted in on silent wings, filling the ravine with the mist of dreams.

“Lang ha’ we parted been,
Lassie, my dearie;
Now, we are met again,
Lassie, lie near me.
Near me, near me,
Lassie lie near me;
Lang has thou lain thy lane,
Lassie lie near me.’

I grinned as the fog let go of Robert. Even knowing he was dead, and my great-grandfather, I thought him a good looking man. I heartily wished I could find someone like him. I’d be wearing his ring on any finger he wanted and have so many of his babies my mother wouldn’t know what to do.

Robert knew she was coming. All it took was one look at his smiling face. He shone. As he approached, he kept his eyes to the east. At first I thought he couldn’t see me, but just as he passed, he turned his head slightly, and winked.

The mist in front of him formed another shape, much smaller. Elizabeth wore the cream dress and tartan sash I'd seen in the portrait, the cairngorm riding proudly on her shoulder.

“The dangers of battle, love,
How could they fear me?
Thy wishes were wi' me,
And fate wadna steer me.
Near me, near me:
Lassie lie near me;
I'd woo'd thee and wedded thee,
Lassie lie near me.”

Just as he finished singing, they met. Robert gathered his beloved in his arms and leaned down to kiss her. I shifted my eyes to the leaf strewn ground, not wishing to intrude any more than I already was. When I looked up, they stood before me. I jumped.

Robert laughed. “‘Tis time for us to go, lass. Time, and long past time. We thank ye, with all that we have.” His deep blue eyes sparkled more than any sapphire could have dreamt of, and a warmth spread through me such as I have never felt in my life.

Elizabeth stepped forward, placing her small hand over my heart, not quite touching. “I see what is in thee. You are a good person, Alexandra. You shall find what you seek, and soon.”

They turned to the west, holding hands, and strolled up the ravine.

‘O, seven lang summers
Thy love had to sue thee;
And, seven years banish'd,
Again must I woo thee?
Woo thee, woo thee;
Ay, look on thy husband, love,
Say, maun he woo thee?’

“Ye need to ask?” Elizabeth exclaimed. “Nay, my love, don't waste time wooing me. We have much to catch up on!”

Robert's rich laughter echoed off the banks, as they melted into the mist.

The songs are real traditional Scottish songs.

From 'Johnny Faa' –

yett means gate; *plaidie* is a blanket or shawl; *weel-fa'ured* is good looking; *cuist* means cast; *glaumourye* is a spell or witchcraft

From 'Lassie Lie Near Me' –

lain thy lane means lain alone