

Excerpt From ... *the kennel boy*

“Geordie, Geordie, wake up!” Duncan whispered while gently shaking Geordie’s shoulder. “It’s time, Belle is ready.”

Geordie sat up, rubbing his eyes and yawning. It was pitch black outside, but then he heard a soft whining from Belle’s kennel. She had refused her dinner again that night and was restless; Duncan was restless too, waiting and watching as she panted, arranged the hay into a nest, paced, and panted some more. Eventually, Belle squatted and a small groan escaped her mouth. That’s when he woke Geordie. Now they crouched outside her kennel, watching her every move closely.

“It looks like she’s ready to push the first pup out,” Duncan whispered. He wouldn’t enter her kennel unless he felt one of the puppies was in danger, or if Belle started having problems. For the next hour or so, Geordie watched, spellbound. Belle got up, stretched, panted, groaned, and paced. They could see the ripples of her contractions contorting her stomach. At last she lay down heavily and grunted again, but this time a small dark shiny blob appeared just under Belle’s tail. She lay quietly for a moment, then turned and started licking the small sac roughly.

“What’s she doing, Da?”

“Watch closely, as the pups come out, she’ll lick them, chew the cord and eat the sac. It helps them breathe on their own. See?” Duncan pointed to the first small blob. Belle was chewing and then licking. The blob turned into a small, slick, dark gold puppy that started to mewl and wiggle.

All the rest of the night and into the gray dawn Belle continued to deliver her pups. Geordie struggled to stay awake, but dozed intermittently throughout the night. Duncan watched Belle for signs of trouble; she was young and healthy and delivered her fifth puppy just before the rooster crowed. She lay back, exhausted, after licking her final pup clean and eating the placenta. They instinctively nestled against Belle’s stomach, groping for a teat to suck on. Belle closed her eyes and started to doze. Duncan and Geordie lay back and closed their eyes, for everything went well.

A few hours later, when dawn had broken and the early morning sun shone brightly over the kennel, Duncan and Geordie awoke to the sounds of shutters opening and Simon, William and Thomas talking.

“Looks like four, no five pups.” William said, sounding like he was counting radishes from his garden.

“Wonder which ones his Lordship’ll like,” Simon Munro said, bending to get a closer look. “Two of ‘em look dark to me, he’ll want to be rid of those if they can’t hunt.”



Duncan and Geordie rose, his Da stretching and yawning, bits of hay clinging to his wild MacLennan hair standing straight up. They headed the few steps to Belle's pen and looked down. Geordie saw Belle lying on her side with five tiny puppies sleeping next to her stomach and started to get a closer look.

"Don't bother her, Geordie, the old gal is worn out and needs her rest."

"Simon's right, lad," William said, "Let's get to work, Thomas."

The Urquharts left. Duncan told Simon about the labor, opening the breakfast Jessie packed last night. He took out some hard-boiled eggs and a chunk of bread and divided them between himself and Geordie.

"I guess I'll head to the manor to let his Lordship know."

Duncan ambled off, happily munching his breakfast, leaving Simon and Geordie standing together looking down at Belle. Simon looked over at Geordie, an unreadable look on his face. Simon called to Thomas, told them what chores he wanted done, and left, heading for the fields. Thomas and Geordie began working in companionable silence. After raking the dirt entryway, Thomas leaned on his rake and asked Geordie how last night had been.

"Really good, Belle did a grand job."

"Do ye like the work?"

"I do."

"That's good, how come you didn't start as a beater?"

"I dunno, but I'm glad."

"For sure, all that running around, beating the ground with branches, trying to get the birds to fly. How's it with Simon?"

"Alright, he likes me, I guess."

Thomas looked hard at Geordie, started to say something, changed his mind, then picked up the rake again and started to work. Geordie liked Thomas a lot, he was a few years older, but not really old, like his Da or Simon.

Around lunch time, Duncan returned with another meal from Jessie, white bread and cold meat. Duncan didn't work with any of the dogs that day so they finished early. Just before they left, Duncan put some water and a small dish of food in Belle's kennel. No one touched either Belle or the pups, for it was Duncan's opinion that the mother should be left to bond with her pups. Thomas and William offered to get the food and close the kennel. As they walked home, Geordie suddenly found he was very tired. He noticed his Da walking heavily and thought maybe he was tired, too.

When they came home, Kirsty had hot tea waiting for them both. Duncan sat down in his chair by the fire gratefully. As the firelight threw dancing shadows on the walls of their small cottage, Rona, Maurice and Scamp crowded around Geordie, listening to the adventures of last night.

“Belle wouldn’t eat, and she hid from me all day,” he started out, puffed up with importance, “I woke up Da when she started whining and scratching in the hay....”

Kirsty caught Duncan’s eye as he raised an eyebrow, ready to jump in and correct his son. She shook her head ever so slightly, and Duncan let Geordie continue with his story.

“...she squirted out the fifth one. Ye know Belle ate the cords, don’t ye?”

“Ewww, no!”

“God’s truth! Right, Da?”

“Right.”

“When can we see them?”

“No one is to bother the pups. They’re to be left alone until I give the word,” Duncan said rather gruffly to his children, looking especially hard at Geordie. After dinner, Maurice and Scamp started pestering Geordie to see the pups, but mindful of what his Da had told him, Geordie said they would have to wait. Scamp whispered scornfully, “What, we can’t just look at them? You just don’t want us to see!”

Geordie protested, “No, you heard Da!”

“Lookin’ won’t hurt.” Scamp wouldn’t let up. Geordie stole a look at his father dozing in the chair by the fire. Feeling very important, he whispered, “Alright then, meet me at the oak tree around lunch time tomorrow and I’ll take you to see them.” Mollified, the boys went to bed without protest.

The next morning, Geordie and Duncan started for the kennel at the usual time, and the first thing they did was check on Belle. The food was gone, and the water was low. Belle lifted her head and looked at them. Three pups were sucking on her teats, the other two lay sleeping. Belle’s eyes were clear and her tail thumped on the floor.

“Good girl, there’s a good girl,” murmured Duncan as he slowly eased himself into the kennel. He carefully picked them up one by one and examined each one in detail; all the puppies looked healthy with no visible defects. Their eyes were shut tight and to Geordie, they looked a lot like the otters that played in the pond, all shiny and wriggly. Duncan waved Geordie in and showed him how to gently palpate Belle’s uterus to help her body heal. Belle bore their ministrations with stoicism; she even licked Geordie’s hand, drawing a smile from them both. Duncan lifted one of the pups up high.

“See this? These pups are important to his Lordship.”

“Why?”

“He’s been breeding dogs since he came here, he wants to create a new retriever. I think we’re getting close,” he answered, setting the puppy back down, “He keeps records, this is the fifth litter.”

They both headed out to start work. Around mid-morning, Duncan took several dogs to the training fields and said he’d be back at lunch. Geordie rushed through his chores and headed for the big tree, looking around nervously to see if anyone saw him. Maurice and Scott were already waiting when he ran up.

“Let’s go, then,” panted Geordie. He was having second thoughts about disobeying his dad, but hoped a quick look wouldn’t hurt.

They trotted towards the kennel and approached Belle’s kennel quietly. Belle looked up at them as they all stood around the gate and looked in.

“Look at that!” said Scamp. Geordie elbowed him roughly.

“Quiet!” he hissed.

“Are they all girls?” whispered Maurice.

“Nae, four girls and one boy,” Geordie whispered back.

“Do they have names?”

“Not yet.”

They stood watching Belle and her puppies for a while. Belle, clearly trusting Geordie, dozed while her pups wiggled about, their eyes still tightly shut. The children were so absorbed in watching the pups that they didn’t hear Simon come in.

“What are ye doing?” Simon barked, an old hunting rifle in one hand. Scamp and Maurice took one look at his bearded face with its halo of hair, his gun, and turned and ran for home without uttering a sound. Simon looked at Geordie.

“Don’t bring yer brothers here again, understand?”

Geordie swallowed hard, nodding. Was he going to get a beating, like Thomas? He felt he deserved it, did Simon know his Da expressly forbade him to bring them to see the puppies?

“We’ll be goin’ on a deer hunt this week, the first one this fall.”

Geordie couldn’t believe his ears, was he not in trouble at all?

“I need you to check every lead...”

Simon went on about the extra work necessary before the hunt. Geordie nodded, thankful he was safe for now. Duncan returned late in the afternoon. Geordie chose not to tell his Da about Simon, knowing his brothers wouldn’t blab.

“Go get the old musket in the storage room,” Duncan said.

They kept a variety of old guns in the small storage room at the back of the kennel. Geordie ran back, returning just as quickly, looking embarrassed.

“Um, Da, which one is the old musket?”

“Ye don’t even know yer guns, it’s time you learned how to shoot.”

They walked to the field, the ammunition bag banging against Geordie's thin frame with the ancient musket in his hand. Duncan showed Geordie how to pour gunpowder into the barrel, followed with a handmade bullet. The final steps were tamping the bullet down with the ramrod and cocking the hammer.

"Da, why are you shooting the gun here, so close to the kennel?" he asked, as his Da guided the musket's position on Geordie's shoulder.

"The pups would be useless for hunting if they were gun-shy," Duncan answered. Geordie swung the barrel up to aim at a stand of trees 60 yards out, feeling very manly. "Even though they're deaf now, they feel the noise." 'Bang!'

"Ow!"

The guns' report startled Geordie, kicking the handle into his shoulder with some force.

"There, now you've fired a gun!"

As they headed back to the kennels, it was on the tip of his tongue to ask his Da about Simon, why he was so mean and then so nice, but Geordie told himself he could handle Simon on his own. Probably something he didn't need to trouble his Da with. The problem was, Geordie had no idea who he was dealing with, nor how far Simon would go when crossed.