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## Glen Mor



**D**UNCAN MacLean pushed aside the thin layer of new snow and dug his wooden pitchfork into the dwindling haystack. He entered the low door of the byre<sup>1</sup> and tossed the hay in front of Spotty, the short-haired heifer. He returned to the haystack for another load. He still needed to feed the two cows. *It's February, but I don't think this hay is going to last the rest of the winter*, Duncan realized.

*Clunk. Clunk.* Duncan turned to see his friend and neighbor Iain MacDonald coming up the path, pushing a wheelbarrow. *He must be on his way to get a load of peat*, Duncan thought.

The wheelbarrow stopped, and Iain eyed the haystack. "G'morning, Duncan. Your hay won't last till the grass grows."

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1. byre: cow shed

## Chapter 1

Duncan eyed his visitor. "Tell me something more encouraging."

"Want to help me haul peat blocks today?" Iain asked. "We need more to keep our fire going."

Duncan pushed back his bonnet<sup>2</sup> and ran his fingers through his hair. "Not today. Father wants me to take some cider press parts to Grandfather MacLean."

Iain's eyebrows rose. "Wish I had a grandfather living outside this glen." He raised his arm and pointed toward the sun peeking around the mountain to the east. "Never been past the peat bog that way or to the forks the other way." Iain pointed in the other direction toward the hill where the laird's castle sat. Laird Alexander owned their entire valley, Glen Mor, near the west coast of Scotland.

"Could you get peat another day?" Duncan asked. "Then you could come with me to Grandfather's place."

Iain shook his head. "Our peat is low. My father wouldn't hear of me running off."

"I'm sorry, I can't help you today. I'll have to hustle to get back from Glen Eason by sunset." Duncan chewed on a blade of hay. "Your neighbor Finlay Oswald has hay enough to put around his little house. Wish I could get it."

"Don't ask him. He needs it to keep his house from freezing." Iain propped one foot on his wheelbarrow. "Do you hear much from your Uncle Hubert? Don't they say Nova Scotia has lots of land? You could get all the hay you wanted if you lived there."

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2. bonnet: a hat the highlanders wore

Nova Scotia—across the ocean. Duncan put his hands on his hips. “We’ve only had one letter from Uncle Hubert, and that was soon after they arrived in Nova Scotia three years ago. All three of their boys died of smallpox on the ship over, and Grandfather says it was God’s punishment for discontent. I am not risking dying of disease or drowning on account of getting more land.”

All talk of Nova Scotia ended abruptly as Duncan’s sister Janet joined them, carrying the milk pails.

“G’morning, Janet,” Iain said. “Elizabeth says she’d like you to come over and teach her letters.” Iain shook his head. “I don’t understand what gives Elizabeth the urge to learn letters.”

“Probably ‘cause Janet can read. Same as you wishing for a grandfather outside this glen,” Duncan said.

“What do girls need reading for?” Iain grabbed the wheelbarrow handles. “Should be going. Have a good day.” The wheelbarrow clunked as Iain headed toward the peat pile. Iain whistled and then burst into song.

Duncan forked hay to the two cows, Blackie and Sasta. Then he picked up the milk pail and talked quietly to Sasta as he rubbed down her udder. As soon as Sasta relaxed, he squatted beside her smooth red flank and began milking.

Janet was milking Blackie, a small, gentle, long-haired Highland cow. She didn’t give as much milk as Sasta, but she was an easy milker. Sasta had a larger build and the short hair that came from being crossbred. She was a nervous cow and a hard milker. But Duncan had a touch with cows and seldom did Sasta kick him. There was

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an understood race between him and Janet to see who would finish milking first. Once in a while he was able to outdo her.

But today Duncan didn't care. Janet had a head start anyway. Even though he was only fourteen years old, he felt responsible to figure something out about the dwindling haystack. *If we got rid of one of our cows... Blackie is the oldest cow, but I doubt Mother would want to get rid of her. Can't give up Sasta. She gives lots of milk – and she can be bred to Uncle James's bull from Ayrshire since she's a crossbreed already. Spotty – butchering or selling her is out of the question.*

Spotty was Sasta's first heifer calf that had not gone to Sire<sup>3</sup> Wallace, the tacksman<sup>4</sup>, to pay for rent. Last fall Father had been able to pay the taxes from the money he earned blacksmithing.

"Beat you again." Janet set the milking stool against the stone wall that divided the house and the byre.

Duncan said nothing.

"Duncan, why are you so quiet today? You didn't even hum!"

"I'm thinking."

"About going to Grandfather's today?"

"No, about Spotty and Sasta."

When Duncan finished milking Sasta, he took the milk into the house. As he stepped inside the front door and set the bucket on the cupboard, six-year-old Helen

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3. Sire: a title similar to Sir or Mister

4. tacksman: a man who owns or leases a portion of land. He may pay rent to the laird. He also has tenants, or crofters, under him.

grabbed the rope dangling just outside the door. The rope was attached to a cowbell, and Helen's copper-colored pigtails bobbed as she pulled the rope to call the family for breakfast. Using a large cowbell for the dinner bell had been Duncan's suggestion, and he was pleased that it worked.

Father and Arick emerged from the smithy. Young Arick often spent time in the smithy, pumping the bellows whenever Father needed him, but mostly peppering him with questions not even Grandpapa Campbell would have been able to answer.

Arick skipped to Duncan's side. "I'm going to Grandpapa's today," he said, smiling up at his big brother.

"Yes, I know," Duncan told him. Grandpapa Campbell lived just down the road, and Arick was going for his first reading lesson. For years, Grandpapa had been teaching lads from far and near how to read.

Mother ladled steaming porridge into wooden bowls as the family gathered for breakfast. She set them on the metal-clad trunk standing close to the fire ring in the center of the room. A chain fastened in the rafters held a cooking pot over the fire.

Little Effie looked up at Mother. "Me help too." Mother took seven spoons out of the cupboard and handed them to Effie. "Put a spoon in each bowl."

After the family gathered in a semicircle, seated on the cowhides covering the hard-packed dirt floor, Father prayed for each one present, for the extended family, for saints and sinners, crofters, lairds, and kings, as he did each morning.

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Duncan ate his porridge slowly. He needed to ask Father about the hay, but there was no use asking Father anything till the meal was finished.

"Father, the hay isn't going to last till the grass grows," Duncan said as soon as Father's bowl was empty. "What will we do?"

Father stroked the copper-colored hair on his chin, now streaked with gray. "I was afraid the hay wasn't enough for three animals."

He reached for the Bible. "If the cider press parts I am smithing for Uncle Seamus are profitable, we should be able to lease more land next summer—if anyone has extra land to lease."

"That doesn't help us now," Duncan replied.

"We could butcher one of the cattle," Father said.

"I've been thinking on it. Not Spotty or Sasta."

"And not Blackie either. I like to milk her," Janet inserted.

"She's just an old glen cow," Duncan retorted.

"She's not a kicker like Sasta."

"Stop that, children," Father said firmly. "Blackie is the oldest cow, but I am not sure we should butcher her. I'll do a little thinking."

Father handed the Bible to Mother, since he could not read well himself. When the passage was not familiar to him, he asked Mother to read it.

Mother read slowly and distinctly from the Book of Deuteronomy. Periodically, Father would say, "Stop. Repeat that last verse, please."

"Here's our answer," Father murmured, after Mother had repeated the phrase, *ask thy father*.



Duncan sat up straight. *Which grandfather would Father ask for advice about the cows?*

When Mother had ended the reading, they stood and Father ended the devotional time with a prayer of thanksgiving.

After the prayer, Duncan dug out a pair of thigh-high socks from his pile of clothing on the shelf under the box bed.<sup>5</sup> He would need extra protection on the cold trip to Glen Eason. Wouldn't Grandmother be pleased to see him wearing the socks she had given him on Hogmanay?<sup>6</sup> He laced up his brogues<sup>7</sup> and hurried out to fetch Brown, the horse.

Father was in the byre, checking the cows. "We'll have to get rid of one of the cows," he said as Duncan entered.

"Blackie? Please not Spotty or Sasta."

Father hooked his thumbs in his belt. "Ask Grandfather today if he has some ideas. Be respectful and don't get angry if he suggests something you don't like."

Duncan untied Brown from the post beside Blackie's head and led him to the cart. *What advice can Grandfather MacLean give? He's a good blacksmith, but he only has one old cow.* Duncan was sure he knew more about cows than Grandfather did.

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5. box bed: a bed with curtains or wooden panels around it for privacy

6. Hogmanay: The Scottish celebration on the last day of the year. Giving gifts was one of the traditions practiced on this holiday.

7. brogues: sturdy leather shoes

## Glen Eason



**D**UNCAN hitched Brown to the cart. He had just hopped onto the cart when Mother stepped out the door. She handed him a cloth tied on the four corners. "Here's an oatcake for you and a bit of cheese for Grandmother."

Arick hurried out of the house. "May I ride with you as far as Grandpapa Campbell's place?" he asked.

"Hop on," Duncan said, fingering the reins.

As soon as Arick had both feet in the cart, Duncan guided Brown onto the dirt road with its thin layer of snow. He thought about the cider press parts behind him in the cart. *Almost enough money to lease more land*, Father had said. *Where in this glen is extra land?*

## Chapter 2

He mentally surveyed each dwelling and croft.<sup>1</sup> Behind their own croft lay the larger tack<sup>2</sup> of Sire Wallace, who held the lease from Laird Alexander. Sire Wallace rented out the smaller crofts to the rest of the people of Glen Mor. Uncle James Campbell lived nearby and managed the Wallaces' cattle. The MacDonalds were the nearest neighbors to the west, and their old cottage sat on the edge of Finlay Oswald's field. Finlay's field produced hay to feed one old horse. Across the road was another old cottage, wedged between the road and the riverbank.

"Duncan, you're not listening." Arick yanked on Duncan's coat. "Why did Father make me promise to call Grandpapa, *Master Campbell*?"

"I don't rightly know." Duncan rubbed his hand over his mouth. "Perhaps because Grandpapa Campbell taught Father to read when Father had given up ever being able to learn. And then he let him marry his only daughter too."

"Look at Finlay Oswald's place," Arick said. "He's got hay stacked around his house. Why does he do that? We should get it and then we could keep our cows." He looked up at Duncan. "How many cows would you like to have?"

"Oh, about three good milk cows and half a dozen long-haired Highland cattle for beef." Duncan craned his neck, mentally calculating the size of Finlay Oswald's hayfield. *Wish we could rent it, but it's not likely we could. He's got relatives in the glen.*

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1. croft: a small farm with only a few acres

2. tack: a farm or a piece of land held on lease, or yearly rent; also the lease agreement itself

Duncan let Arick off at the end of Grandpapa Campbell's lane. Arick bounced to the door of the cottage. Finally, he was old enough for his "book learning," as Father called it.

Grandpapa Campbell's croft was only large enough to keep a few sheep. Duncan passed the stone kirk<sup>3</sup> and parsonage, and several more cottages of tenants who worked for Laird Alexander. The tenants had only enough space to keep a few sheep or a cow and to raise some of the leafy green kale that was a major part of their diet. One of these tenants was Mother's brother John Campbell. At every croft Duncan could think of reasons it would not work to lease it to raise hay.

But there were other glens.

Duncan passed the last of the tenant cottages, and then the road curved around the knoll. Duncan gazed at the laird's castle and the large fields surrounding it. Would the laird let them rent some of the land around the castle? Never. He would not let a tenant encroach on his big fields.

Duncan guided Brown across the shallow River Mor and headed up the steep hill. When he reached the top, he could see several more hills ahead. Once he reached Glen Eason, he paid extra attention to the size of each croft. They were even smaller than the crofts near his home, crammed next to each other with the steep hills rising just behind them. Only the tacksman's croft had an open field around it.

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3. kirk: a Scottish word for church

## Chapter 2

Duncan smiled as Grandfather MacLean's house came into view. Duncan and his family had lived in the smaller house in Grandfather's backyard until only three years ago. When Uncle Hubert's family had moved to Nova Scotia, Duncan's father Malcolm had taken over the blacksmithing shop his brother had left behind in Glen Mor, and they had moved into Uncle Hubert's house.

"Indeed, look who's here." Grandfather MacLean, bald and roly-poly, swayed from side to side as he approached the cart. He examined the cider press parts. "Your father worked fast and did a grand job. Seamus will be happy."

Grandfather carried the parts to his smithy at one end of the big barn. "Now, Duncan, you must come in and have an apple. Grandmother will want to hear all about your doings." Grandfather led the way to the large thatched house.

Duncan's mouth watered. Nowhere but at Grandfather's could he get an apple in late winter. Grandfather was the only one in the glen who boasted an orchard in his backyard. He had eight apple trees, some old and twisted with age, some still too young to bear fruit. Duncan got the cheese from the cart and followed Grandfather. "Grandfather, umm, Father wanted me to ask you..." Duncan began. But Grandfather did not seem to hear him, and besides, now they were at the house. Maybe later.

While Grandfather polished two apples, Duncan handed the cheese to Grandmother who sat on the rocker. "Mother sent this for you," he said.