

A Daughter's Secret

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Summary: *A poignant treatment of Maryse MacArdry's last months as she discovers she has more to deal with than just having married Duncan McLain. Mainly occurring at Transha in 1107-1108 Epilogue in 1118*

July 1107

"Oh no! Wha' am I goin' ta do?" Maryse's whisper was barely audible. Her vivid golden eyes were full of disbelief and shock. What was she going to do? She hadn't been feeling well lately, and now she knew why. She was carrying a babe, Duncan's child.

Maryse knew it had been naïve of her, but she hadn't considered this possibility before now. Oh, she should have--after all, she and Duncan had lain together, even if only that one time. Well, once had obviously been enough. Now she was going to become a mother. But what would her own mother say about this, not to mention her father! How could she tell them about her child, when she had never told them about her husband?

She managed to walk out of the garderobe and sank into a nearby chair. Pressing a damp cloth to her forehead, she considered the past few months. Falling in love with Duncan McLain had never been something she'd planned--it had just happened. A few glances, some chance meetings, rides into the hills, clandestine kisses, and then... Then her brother Ardry had been killed, and one of Duncan's father's men had been responsible. Maryse could still remember her father ranting at Castle Culdi, all but threatening a blood feud in his grief. She and Duncan had known that asking their fathers for permission to marry would have been pointless, and might only have made things worse. But they weren't willing to give up on being together. Duncan had suggested a secret marriage--after all, it would be much harder for their parents to oppose their marriage if it had already taken place.

'I want to marry you, Maryse', he'd said. 'My father won't agree now, and I don't want to wait for months or years until he would. If we marry now, they can't do anything to stop us'

'But who'd hear our vows, Duncan? Ye know that there's no priest here as would.'

'God will. He's the only witness we can trust.'

So they had secretly exchanged their vows in the deserted Culdi chapel. They had spoken their vows with only the light in the Presence Lamp to hear them. Maryse had given him a golden shiral crystal that she had long worn around her neck. In lieu of a wedding band, Duncan gave her his cloak clasp, the McLain lion's head, made for him by his father. Into the back, they placed the band of braided hair that Maryse had made a few days earlier. The consummation had come afterward, in the stable hayloft; not as pleasurable as Maryse had hoped, but still nice--a prelude to the joys they would have after their union was publicly known. She and her parents and sisters had ridden away from Culdi the next morning. Maryse had neither seen nor heard from Duncan since. Now she wondered how she would tell him that their love had made a child.

Despite her worries, she couldn't help starting to dream about this baby. Would it be a son or a daughter, what would they look like?

September 1107

Two months after she had realized she was pregnant, Maryse MacArdry McLain had still not found a way to tell her mother the news. Her justifications were reasonable, she had thought. First, she told herself she just needed to find the right words, then the right time. Maryse kept putting it off; after all, she didn't want to upset her mother, not when Lady Adreana herself was pregnant. Maryse knew her mother thought of this unborn child as a replacement for her slain Ardry, and Maryse would do nothing to put the baby in danger, especially since her mother had lost several of the babies she'd borne. But Maryse knew that time was running out. She was unquestionably beginning to show her condition, and it wouldn't be long before her own impending event was obvious to all.

Her anxiety made her stomach begin to roil, and the smell of dinner drifting up from the kitchen made it inevitable. Maryse barely made it to the nearby garderobe before she vomited up the remains of her last meal.

"Maryse?" Lady Adreana's voice said from behind her. A cool cloth touched Maryse's forehead and her mother's hand rested on her neck, pulling back the long white-blond strands of Maryse's hair. "What's wrong, dearest?"

"Oh, mother," Maryse whispered, bending her head in shame. "I don't know how to tell you."

"Start at the beginning, dearest. But perhaps, first, we can make ourselves comfortable."

Maryse got to her feet and came back into the solar. She sank down in a seat and finally looked up at her mother. Lady Adreana had settled herself in another chair, and was waiting patiently, one hand resting on her swelling abdomen.

Screwing up her courage, Maryse finally blurted out, "I'm with child, mother." And sat waiting for her mother's reaction. Lady Adreana simply sat there for a little while, obviously considering what her daughter had said, and her own response.

"How far along are you, Maryse," she eventually asked.

"About five months. The babe will be born in early January, I think." Maryse paused, and then asked, "Aren't you going to ask me how it happened, how I could shame the clan so, who the father is?"

"Dearest, after bearing 10 children myself, including this one, I think I know *how* you conceived. And as for who the father is, I'd be right in saying it's young Duncan McLain, wouldna I?"

"Aye," Maryse whispered, getting up and going to kneel beside her mother. Lady Adreana reached out a hand and caressed her daughter's cheek.

"Why don't you tell me how it all came about," she suggested.

Maryse told her mother how she and Duncan had agreed to wed in secret, and had said their vows before the Presence Light in the McLain chapel in Culdi in April, the night before the MacArdry's had left.

"But what am I ta do now?" Maryse asked when she'd finished. "I canna hide it much longer."

"Let me think on it a while," her mother said.

While lying down for her daily rest, Lady Adreana Calder MacArdry found her mind whirling restlessly. Her daughter's situation would have no easy solution.

Adreana knew that Cauley would never accept Maryse's unconventional marriage as valid. Fir that matter, she wasn't sure if the church would acknowledge it either. Border tradition did allow for marriages to be declared before witnesses, and later have vows said before a priest. But this hadn't happened, and according to Maryse, there were no living witnesses. With only Duncan's and Maryse's word on what they had done, it would be too easy to say that there had been no marriage.

Given this, Cauley would view his first grandchild as illegitimate and his daughter's conduct as shameful. Both mother and babe might even be cast out of the clan. Adreana didn't intend to let that happen, but she wasn't sure what she could do about it.

Inspiration came by way of a surprisingly strong kick from the baby in her womb. Adreana smiled and considered this new option. By her reckoning, both she and Maryse were due to give birth at about the same time. There were few enough people at Castle Transha these days, so the number who would know the truth would be small. Adreana felt sure that she could count on her women's loyalty...and silence. She did feel a few minor qualms--Cauley wouldn't be pleased if he ever found out that a child he'd raised as his own was actually his grandchild. And she did regret that, with her plan, young Duncan McLain would never know about his child, and Duke Jared and Duchess Vera would never know their first grandchild, but her own family and clan came first. Adreana was sure that she would be able to gain Maryse's agreement.

The next day, Adreana broached the subject with her daughter.

"Maryse, I think we both realize that it will be quite a while before our two clans will be friends again as they were before. But we must decide what to do now. Wi' only your word, and Duncan's, about the marriage, I fear that few will believe ye. Your father likely won't--might even denounce ye and cast ye out. Ye'd have nothing, daughter."

"I'd have Duncan, and our child! Maryse exclaimed. "We'd live in Cassan or Kierney somewhere. Duncan's father has manors and to spare."

"Would Duke Jared allow his son to marry a girl cast out o' her clan for shaming them? Would he no' believe ye were trying to snare his son to ease your troubles?" Lady Adreana was trying to be kind, but Maryse had to realize how tenuous her situation could become. "Daughter, I'm no' saying that ye must gi' up your child to a stranger. Listen ta' me. My own babe is due near to the time that your's is. I could raise your babe up wi' my own, as twins.

Eventually Maryse had succumbed to her mother's persuasions, although it had taken quite a while before she would agree.

"But Mam," she said, "Duncan and I agreed to truly wed as soon as we could, as soon as the feud was over. How could I possibly gie away our first babe, even ta ye?" Maryse still dreamed that her union with Duncan could be solemnized with a Marriage Mass, and that they would then raise their child together.

"If ye and Duncan do wed someday, then we'll see what can be done about the child. But this is the best way for now, dearest, for us all." Lady Adreana soothed her daughter.

December 1107-January 1108

Christmas in that year of 1107 was quietly kept at Castle Transha. Neither Lady Adreana nor Maryse had much energy to spare for elaborate festivities, not with their babies due at any time. And with Laird Cauley and his troops still away, helping to keep the peace in Meara, there was no need for celebrations.

As the first day of the New Year dawned, Lady Adreana writhed on her bed as the contractions rippled through her body, each one stronger than the one preceding it.

"I'm so afraid," she whispered to Morna, the clanswoman who was wiping her brow. Morna, who had been with her Lady for more than twenty years, knew why. Lady Adreana had been brought to delivery of a child nine times before this one, and six times had seen the child die, either at birth or shortly after.

"Ach, dinna fear, milady," Morna soothed, "the babe will be born livin' an well--I've Seen it."

Morna was proven right. Just after midday on the first of January 1108, Lady Adreana MacArdry was safely delivered of a healthy daughter. Later that same night, her daughter Maryse's labor began. The delivery was long and hard. As the pains continued, almost without respite, Maryse struggled to keep her spirits up.

"I canna do it," she panted. "Just leave me alone."

But the midwife, Maelis, would not oblige. She kept after Maryse to focus and to push, reminding her that the babe wouldn't be born without her efforts. But the afternoon wore on, with the birth no nearer, and the young girl had begun to bleed some. Maelis sent for Lady Adreana who, although still weak from her own delivery, came at once to her daughter's bedchamber.

"Maryse," she whispered, stroking her daughter's brow, "ye must see your child born. The pains will pass, but ye must push. Wee Caldreana wants to meet her niece or nephew."

Just after midnight, on what was then January 3, Maryse was at last delivered of a living, healthy son. "Dhugal," she breathed, when asked what name she wished him to have. With her grandson safely born, Adreana gratefully returned to her own bed to rest and to nurse her own newborn daughter. But her rest was short.

Later that morning Maryse began to bleed again, much more heavily than before, and a high fever soon developed. The midwife, Maelis, as well as Morna and other servants, tended Maryse all that day and into the evening. Just after vespers Morna sent young Jamie for Father Justus the Parish priest, for they feared Maryse might not last the night. He had arrived and given solace to the sorrowing household and offer prayerful comfort to Lady Adreana. An hour after Matins he gave Extreme Unction to Maryse, then remained at the foot of the bed praying for her.

Lady Adreana, who had not left her daughter's bedside throughout the vigil, sat beside her daughter unable to give any comfort other than her presence. "Oh, Maryse," she breathed, "I dinna want ye to die. Ye should live for years ta come, and see yer son grow, and hae other bairns too. I dinna want ta loose ye, but I dinna want ye ta suffer either." Adreana began to cry, and through her tears she beseeched Uriel, the Archangel who guided every soul across the divide to death, to come and take her daughter gently on. As the bells began to toll Lauds, Maryse's breathing began to falter, and Adreana could almost feel the Archangel's presence, like a warm blanket bestowing comfort and peace.

"My Lady," came the tentative voice of the castle priest, Father Justus as the last bell of Lauds fell away into silence, "I'm sorry, My Lady, but she is gone." Lady Adreana nodded tears running down her face, but did not reply, as the priest began to intone the prayers for the dead.

In the early hours of the morning, Adreana wept as she sat beside her dead daughter, Caldreana in one arm, and Dhugal in the other. How tragic, this death was. Adreana looked down at her dead daughter and made a vow. "I promise ye, Maryse, that he will know the truth someday. Dhugal will know that he was your son and Duncan's. I swear it."

Epilogue

1118

Lady Adreana Calder MacArdry lay on her deathbed and considered one last thing she must do in her life. "Fetch my jewel case," she instructed her maid Geillis. The girl obeyed swiftly. Adreana told her to look and find a cloak clasp shaped like a lion's head. Once it had been found, the Lady of Clan MacArdry gave her instructions.

"This is to be given to young Dhugal. Tell him that his father gae it to his mother on the day they married." This was all Adreana could do to fulfill her promise, made ten years ago at her daughter Maryse's death. She had heard through clan gossip that Duncan McLain was now a priest, and newly named tutor to the Crown Prince of Gwynedd. Perhaps one day he and Dhugal would meet at Court and Duncan would recognize the brooch. Adreana didn't know if it would happen, but wanted a reunion between long-lost father and son to happen, if it was meant to.