
THE MOORLAND
MAIDENS COLLECTION

MARYSE DAWSON



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Rhona

THE MOORLAND MAIDENS -
BOOK ONE

Chapter 1

Cumbria, England. The year of our lord 1091...

RHONA, crouching behind a large boulder on top of Beacon Hill, squinted her eyes and peered as hard as she could into the distance, down across the craggy, stone littered moorland. "I cannot see anyone, Alana."

Alana, one of her younger cousins, huffed loudly, clearly annoyed that her older cousin didn't believe her. "I swear to you, I saw them."

"You speak false. You have made me climb all the way up here for no reason!" Rhona chided her.

"I tell you," Alana responded earnestly. "As certain as I am crouching here, I saw them. Three of them."

"Then where are they now?"

"I know not."

Rhona arched an eyebrow and fixed her cousin with a condescending look. "Do you think to lure me away from my chores? I may only be three years older than you, Alana, but it makes me far wiser. I will warrant that you simply wish me

to get into trouble with Father when he finds out I still have my needlework to finish."

Her father, as much as he admired her prowess with a bow, was trying to urge her towards more ladylike pursuits and had asked her mother to set her tasks to do. If unfinished by the time he returned, she would be punished. Her father had two ways of punishing her and those were to either confine her to the house for a whole day, which she absolutely detested, or depending how bad she had been, he would give her several licks with the dreaded strap.

"That is unfair, Rhona," Alana hissed. "Upon my soul, I saw three Norman knights. They were down there by the water's edge."

"Well, they are not there now. Come, you can aid me. Together, we will finish the work."

Alana pulled a face. "Eugh, must I?"

Rhona rolled her eyes. Sometimes, Alana acted so much less mature than she should at eighteen. "Aye, you must!" Rhona chided her, poking her in the side.

Alana leapt up and began running for home. Rhona called after her, "If you hide, I shall find you and there will be hell to pay!"

In response, Alana turned around and poked out her tongue. Rhona picked up her skirts and took after her, a broad grin on her face. She may be twenty-one but she still loved a good rough and tumble with her cousins and sister. Especially, when the air was so sweet and fresh, the autumn sun still filling the air with its warming rays. She glanced over her shoulder one last time and then stopped dead in her tracks, her jaw going slack and her eyes widening with shock.

For, there, on the stony path a little way off, were the very Normans Alana had warned her of. They were astride three enormous destriers and, worst of all, they had spotted her.

In absolute panic, she sped off, shouting to Alana to

hasten her pace. She could hear the hoof beats getting louder and louder as they approached and she whimpered in fear, spurring herself to run faster.

Her mother, Hextilda, had warned them all to be wary of strangers, most especially Normans. And with good reason, for Rhona's father was Donald Canmore, brother to Malcolm Canmore, the ruling king of Scotland.

Malcolm was a thorn in England's side, never submitting but constantly invading. When he had invaded Northumbria and Cumbria twenty years ago and put it under Scottish rule, Donald and Hextilda made the decision to move to Cumbria to begin a new life in the extended kingdom.

Malcolm had not named Donald as a successor to the throne, for he had a son to inherit the title. So, having no real reason to remain near his brother's castle, Donald had set up home further away. But living so close to the English border meant they had to be vigilant.

Rhona and her younger sister, Bethoc, had been raised in Cumbria and, for the past five years, had been joined by their cousins, Heather and Alana, whose mother, Hextilda's sister, had died from typhus. Their father, Duncan, had been killed in battle the previous year, so having no other relatives, Hextilda had kindly taken them in.

There had been a bit of rivalry at first, but they had soon settled down, and now, the four girls loved and protected each other as well as any siblings. In fact, you could hardly tell them apart, for they all had lustrous auburn hair.

They had lived in Cumbria relatively peacefully for the last twenty years. Until now.

As she ran towards home, Rhona's father's words rang in her ears. He had warned them that one day the Normans may try to take back what was once theirs and they should always be watchful, especially now the English crown had passed to King William II. Their father reasoned that he

would want to win back what his father, William the Conqueror, had lost.

Was this the time? Could this be the moment of invasion? She could feel the fear building in her chest and prayed to God her family would be kept safe.

Leon Charbonneau urged his mount onward, quickening the pace. He had his sights on the girl in front of him and had no intention of letting her escape. Her long auburn hair cascaded around her shoulders and he couldn't help but admire the glimpse of her shapely ankles as she ran ahead of him.

He, along with his brother, Theodore, and cousin, Jacques, had been watching the house night on two days and now was their moment to attack. Donald Canmore had been seen to depart that morning, leaving the household vulnerable to attack, an opportunity they were not going to miss.

King William, known to many as William Rufus, demanded the capture of Donald's two daughters and two nieces—all of them or as many of them as they could capture. They would be taken down to the south of England, where William intended to use them as hostages against King Malcolm.

King Malcolm seemed intent on taking more and more land for the Scottish crown, laying claim to the fertile English soil, but William Rufus intended to put a stop to it. Enough was enough.

Donald's household wasn't the easiest of targets but, compared to King Malcom's virtually impenetrable stronghold, it was a little more attainable. Donald's home consisted of a large central stone dwelling with one tower. Easy

enough for Leon and his comrades to attack. Even easier with Donald absent.

Spurring his horse onward, he gained ground, dust and grit flying from his horse's hooves. His quarry screamed when he tried to grab her shoulder, and she slapped his hand away. She was a feisty one and it would seem she wasn't going to come easy. He felt a surge of adrenalin rush through him. There was nothing more exhilarating than a chase — whether it was hunting food for his table or capturing a pretty wench, as was the case now.

He galloped ahead of her and, bringing his horse to an abrupt halt, he jumped down and turned to catch her.

Rhona shrieked when she saw him running straight towards her and took off down an incline. She heard him shout to the other two men, telling them to carry on and get the others.

She whimpered and half slid, half stumbled down the hill, the uneven ground hindering her escape. What did he mean, get the others? Did they mean to capture them all? She had no time to think further, for a large gloved hand settled on her shoulder, halting any further progress.

She screamed and tried to shrug him off but he already had hold of her arm and was pulling her towards him.

"Unhand me! How dare you?" she spat, her anger almost overtaking her fear. "You have no right to take hold of me."

"Desist!" Leon thundered, his voice full of authority. "Or you will have us both falling down to the lake." His voice was deep and had a slight Norman inflection to it.

"I care not! Get off me!" she yelled angrily, trying to twist her arm away from his hulking great body. His strength was far beyond her limits and no amount of pushing or shoving seemed to make the slightest difference.

"Be still, woman!" he commanded, wrestling her onto her back but, still, she fought against him. He pushed her hands down onto the ground and lay his body over her lower half so she was trapped.

With a mixture of fury and fear, she glared up at him. "Who are you? What do you want? If you mean to kill us all then you will be sorry!"

He stared back at her calmly, his dark blue eyes unwavering. "I assure you I have no intention of killing you—any of you. My name is Leon Charbonneau and I am here by command of King William."

"He has no authority here!" she said bravely. "This is Scottish soil and you, sir, are trespassing." A trickle of fear slipped down her spine, despite her resolve.

He gave a low chuckle. "You have spirit, given that you are now my captive. I suggest you come quietly and accept your fate because I have no intention of letting you free. King William demands your presence, and as one of his most trusted knights, I intend to make sure you are taken to him."

Rhona narrowed her eyes. "I will not go willingly."

"No matter. You have no choice. What is your name?"

Rhona raised her chin and glared at him, her eyes blazing with anger. She clamped her lips firmly together and refused to answer him.

He nodded his head slowly. "I see. Well, you are either Rhona, Bethoc, or, maybe, Heather or Alana, but as you refuse to tell me which one, I shall simply call you Dougal."

Rhona gasped. "Dougal?"

"Aye, Dougal."

"But that is a man's name."

"So?"

"I am not a man!"

"Nay, I can see that." His eyes shifted down her body,

noting the rise and fall of her ample bosom. She was just about to let forth a torrent of the most loathsome insults she could think of, when, over her shoulder, she heard a shriek at the top of the incline. It sounded like Heather. She tried to wriggle around but the knight wouldn't let her. "Let me free!"

"By all means." For an instant, her arms were free as he used his hands to help himself stand but by the time she had scrambled to her feet, he had her entrapped again, only this time, he flung her over his shoulder. She gasped and kicked her legs but it only earned her a sharp, stinging swat to her posterior.

"I said be still!" he growled. "If you continue, I will thrash your behind until you behave!"

Rhona's mouth gaped open at his words. The man might be a 'trusted knight' where he came from but, in her opinion, he was acting akin to a caveman. Wisely, though, she decided to keep quiet until she could see her cousin. Perhaps, together, they could manage to escape.

Leon skilfully and agilely climbed back up the hill, her weight doing little, if anything, to hinder him. She watched the ground go past beneath his boots and wondered what King William had in store for them.

Leon reached the top of the hill and looked to his brother and cousin, both astride their mounts with two other girls secured in front of them on each saddle, their hands tied in front of them, their mouths now gagged.

"Where is the fourth girl?" he asked.

"Nowhere to be found."

He muttered an oath and Theodore spoke quickly. "Make haste, Leon," he urged, darting a glance over his shoulder.

"Aye, Theo. I am going as fast as I can but this is one feisty lass," Leon said, heaving Rhona off his shoulder and letting her feet drop to the ground. He had thought his threat of a spanking might make her compliant but it seemed she had been simply biding her time for the right moment.

Rhona shoved him with all her might, her two small hands pushing against his broad chest and, caught off guard, he stumbled backwards a pace. She took off towards home, her long auburn hair whipping behind her. Muttering an expletive, Leon hastened after her, his long stride covering the distance between them in no time at all. His steely arms wrapped around her and she was captured once more. She shrieked loudly, calling for help whilst doing her best to fight him off, kicking her feet out and trying to bite his hands.

"God, give me strength," Leon growled, hoisting her off the ground. He placed her under one arm, still kicking and struggling and took her over to his horse.

"Let me go! Let me *go!*" Rhona shrieked, doing everything in her power to thwart him.

"Here!" Theo threw Leon a length of twine and he expertly tied Rhona's wrists together.

"You will regret this!" Rhona hissed, narrowing her eyes with fury.

He placed his hands beneath her elbows and lifting her off the ground, placed his face inches from hers and, his eyes dark, he growled, "Nay, you will be the one with regrets, my feisty miss, if you misbehave again."

She pursed her full lips but her hazel eyes still spat fire at him. He set her back down and turned her around, before gagging her with a piece of cloth tied around her head. He ushered her towards his horse and she tried to dig her heels in, pushing her small frame against him but he just pushed her harder so she had no choice except to comply.

His cousin, Jacques, urged him to hurry. "We have tied

them all up at the house but Donald could return at any moment."

"Aye, I am going as fast as I can." He picked Rhona up and set her upon his horse, agilely mounting behind her. With a swift kick to the horse's flanks, he set off towards the south.

Rhona may not have had her hands free but she did everything else in her power to try and stop the powerful knight from kidnapping her. Throwing her head back, she tried to catch his chin with the top of her skull and inflict damage but she was too small. So, she resorted to bashing her head against his chest and moaning loudly through the gag.

Unfortunately, it didn't seem to have any effect on the hulking great oaf so she tried to kick her feet back against his shins. She received a little satisfaction when he swore loudly but it still did nothing to deter him. He simply urged his horse to go faster.

She looked down at the arms encompassing her as he held the reins. Covered in chainmail, they looked huge. He wore leather gloves, but even so, his fingers looked long. Like the rest of him. He was bigger than her father, who was, himself, just over six feet tall.

As they travelled across the miles, her anger dissipated to be replaced by fear. Why did King William want her and her cousins taken captive? What use were they to him? She thought hard. Her father had no claim to the throne so he was no real threat. Well, he hadn't been a threat. He certainly would be now, though. She pictured her father's rage when he found his daughter and two nieces had been taken.

King William would rue this day.

She focussed on the two horses in front of her, watching the turf fly in their tracks. Her two cousins were hidden by the bulk of their captors but she knew they would be just as scared as she was.

For the moment, she resigned herself to her current situation, deciding that staying alive was far preferable than falling to the ground and being trampled upon or breaking a bone in the fall.

As she was jostled around, she thought hard on how she would escape when they came to a halt, because if this knight thought she was going to give in easily then he could think again!

After several hours travelling, Leon called ahead to his companions, "We will make camp just outside Grassington. We should reach it within the hour."

"Aye. I could do with a rest, as could the horses," Theodore agreed. "I think we are far enough away now to be safe."

Leon felt the girl in front of him shift angrily. She was a fiery wench, with eyes full of mischief and daring. This was no milk sop of a girl. Far from it. But it was not a surprise, for Canmore strength was in her soul. A clan known for their spirit and resilience.

It was a shame the fourth girl had evaded them. He correctly surmised that it was Bethoc they had failed to capture, for she was only eleven, and these three girls had the curves of women.

He studied the top of his captive's head. Her silky auburn locks cascaded around her slender shoulders and he suddenly had a desire to touch it. Frowning, he admonished

himself. She was his captive—nay, the Crown's captive, and therefore, out of reach. For the moment, anyway. Disliking where his thoughts were leading him, he urged his horse into a canter.

They reached the outskirts of Grassington and brought their horses to a standstill near a small copse with a narrow stream running through it. Leon dismounted first and, reaching up, lifted Rhona from the saddle. She was still as rebellious as earlier, the long ride seeming to have done little to quell her temper.

"I am going to remove your gag but only on the proviso that you remain quiet. If you start shouting, I will put it straight back on. Do you understand?" he told her.

She nodded, and he stared at her for a full few seconds, deciding if she would comply before turning her around. He untied the gag and she immediately spat it out, making noises of disgust. Jacques and Theodore had already done the same to the other two girls, and the three were ushered forward to a grassy spot where they were made to sit down.

Leon pointed his finger at them. "If you know what is good for you, you will remain quiet. If any of you starting shrieking or hollering, the gags will go straight back on. Be under no illusion that I mean what I say."

The girls nodded, watching him warily. Turning his back on them, he spoke to Jacques. "See if you can trap us a rabbit or hare. Theo and I will get a fire going."

Jacques was better than any of them at procuring fresh meat. He, for one, was starving. They had been on the road for days and, each time they had stopped, Jacques had managed to get them fresh meat for the spit. It had kept not only their energy levels up for their mission ahead but their spirits, as well.

He began gathering twigs and small branches from the edge of the copse. What he would give for a comfortable bed

rather than the hard ground. Only another few days and he would be back in his own rooms, with a grateful king and more coins to fill his purse.

Every now and then, he glanced over to the three girls. They were whispering together, no doubt plotting ways to escape, but their hands were still tied and Theo was within feet of them, watching their every move. So even if they did try and run, they wouldn't get very far.

They were all comely lasses but his captive intrigued him.

As if she knew he was thinking of her, she turned to look at him. She arched an eyebrow, and tilting her small chin stubbornly, she shuffled around until her back was to him.

He chuckled to himself and picked up some more wood. She would be fun to tame. Like a high spirited filly. He found his thoughts turning to Matilda, the daughter of a wine merchant in Fearnham, a small village near the castle. The woman seemed intent on having him for a husband. But, although winsome, he balked at the idea. She had proven herself to be selfish on occasion, a trait he abhorred in anyone, let alone a future wife. Nay, as much as he enjoyed the dalliance, she would never become his wife.

Satisfied with his pile of twigs and wood, he walked over to Theo and, between them, they began to prepare a small fire.

Rhona twisted her wrists for the umpteenth time, trying to break her bonds, but apart from causing friction burns, they simply wouldn't budge. The Norman bastard had tied it too well, it would seem. She darted a look at him again, wishing the fire he was stoking would suddenly leap up and engulf him. But no such luck.

Heather spoke quietly so the men couldn't hear. "How

are we going to escape? We cannot let them take us to King William. Once there, we will be imprisoned with no hope of ever getting away."

"What do they want of us?" hissed Alana. "We are of no use to them."

Rhona shook her head. "If they think to use us as hostages against King Malcolm, I wonder if our uncle will even care, let alone send someone to rescue us."

"Fie, Rhona!" exclaimed Heather. "Speak not so harshly of Malcolm. He will come to our aid. He must!"

"I wish I had your confidence, cousin," Rhona replied. "But we have not seen him for years. Wherefore would he help now? He and Father are not so close."

"Shhh!" hissed Alana. "The other man is coming back."

Three pairs of eyes followed Jacques as he walked back to camp. He had two dead rabbits slung over his back, which he gave to Leon.

"I hope they give us some of that meat," Alana said, eyeing the carcasses greedily. "I am so hungry."

Rhona rolled her eyes. "You are ever hungry, Alana. Help us formulate an escape plan, rather than think of your stomach."

Alana pursed her lips before snapping, "It would do us well to escape on a full stomach and not wither away from starvation trying to find our way back home."

"Escape?" said a deep voice. The three girls looked up in shock. Theo stood right beside them. "There will be no escape." He set his foot on a log next to them and leaned closer. "You are the king's prisoners now, and with us three watching over you, you will be going nowhere without our say so." His eyes bore into theirs before he turned on his heel and went to assist his brothers with the food preparation.

Rhona glared after him, more determined than ever to return home. Somehow, they would succeed.