

ALANA

THE MOORLAND MAIDENS, BOOK THREE



MARYSE DAWSON

BLUSHING BOOKS

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CHAPTER 1



CARLISLE CASTLE, DECEMBER, 1093...

Jacques Legrand stood atop the keep at Carlisle and surveyed the surrounding countryside, his keen eyes taking in everything from the habitual movements of the castle residents to the wind stirring the bare tree branches in the nearby forest. His experienced gaze missed nothing.

Carlisle was a solid fortress that grew stronger day by day, the steadfast builders expanding each section piece by piece, level by level. But its strength was not only down to the structure but also reliant on the garrison who protected it.

Jacques, along with his cousins, Theo and Leon Charbonneau, were employed by King William to oversee everything, and they did so with competence. King William trusted them implicitly and they, in turn, had the utmost respect for him.

Ever since Donald Bane had seized the Scottish throne, after the death of his brother, King Malcolm III, they had become even more vigilant. No one knew if Donald would follow in his brother's footsteps and wage war against the English. He had already shown

contempt for the English by banishing all of them from the Scottish court, along with his nephews, whom he now considered a threat to his reign.

Jacques' jaw clenched. Life in the castle and in the surrounding hills looked so peaceful yet beneath lay a hornet's nest, ready to erupt.

He heard footsteps and looked around to find Leon approaching him.

"How goes it, Jacques?" Leon asked, placing a friendly hand on his shoulder.

"Nothing to report, Leon. Except to say that my bones are beginning to freeze." He grumbled, "This wind is cold beyond measure." He rubbed his hands together to try and bring some life back into them. "I am ill prepared for this northern climate. Give me the south any day."

Leon chuckled. "Come inside and warm yourself. I will send another to replace your watch."

"Aye, 'tis about time I had a break."

They descended the wooden staircase and made their way inside the keep, up the stairs and into the hall. A fire was blazing, and Jacques quickly walked up to it, placing his hands out in front of him. His fingertips tingled as they came back to life, and he closed his eyes, fully appreciating the warmth returning to his body. At six-feet-three, it was a big body to warm.

"Will you remain here to celebrate yuletide?" Leon asked, pouring him a cup of wine. "You know you are most welcome."

Jacques opened his eyes and looking into the flames, nodded slowly. "I have no reason to return south at present, and despite this unwelcome cold, I know I would enjoy the company."

"Well said, cousin." Leon smiled and handed him the cup. "We have some other guests arriving, so you will find it a lively celebration. I warrant the atmosphere will be far more convivial than Yuletide at Winchester."

Jacques nodded. "Aye, King Williams' celebrations are a little

fussy for my liking." He downed a mouthful of wine and smacked his lips. "So, do I know any of the guests? Mayhap there will be a maiden amongst them to take my fancy?"

Leon's lip twitched with mirth as he replied, "Aye, Heather's younger sister will be here."

A look of horror crossed Jacques' face. "Alana?"

"Aye." Leon was doing nothing to hide his smile now. Alana seemed to enjoy irritating Jacques, which, in turn, gave Leon and his brother, Theo, much amusement.

"That little devil?" Jacques sighed heavily and shook his head. "She needs a good bottom warming, that one."

"'Tis just in her nature to be a trifle irksome, but you have to admit, she is very beautiful."

"Aye, she is a winsome wench, but that mischievous nature of hers will get her into trouble one day. She is a little on the wild side for my liking."

"In the right hands, I am certain she could be tamed." Leon looked at him expectantly.

Jacques' eyebrows shot up to his hairline. "You are not suggesting that she and I..." He left the words hanging in the air, a look of incredulity on his face.

Leon shrugged. "Well, you are unmarried; so is she. Perhaps you are a match made in Heaven?"

"And mayhap we are not. Nay, when I marry, it will be for love and to a woman with poise and refinement. It certainly will not be to an untamed, precocious little madam!"

"It was just a thought."

"Well, prithee keep those thoughts to yourself in future, cousin."

Leon sat back in one of the chairs in front of the hearth and congratulated himself on a job well done.

He had planted the seed, now he just had to watch it grow. He lamented the fact that Jacques was not yet married. He, himself, had found his soul mate in Rhona and Theo had found his in Heather.

He wanted Jacques to share in their happiness and find a mate of his own.

Alana could be the perfect woman for him. All Jacques had to do was tame her rebellious nature and she would, he was certain, become just the wife someone like Jacques needed. Only time would tell.



ALANA INGEN SAT on her horse and grumbled for the umpteenth time, causing her main guard to raise his eyes to the heavens before exclaiming, "Prithee, my lady, we are going as fast as we can across this terrain. Complaining about the time will not make it any easier or allow us to travel any faster. Unless you wish harm upon your mount?"

Alana rolled her eyes. "Of course, I do not, Jerome. I am just impatient to get to Carlisle 'tis all."

"We cannot go any faster than we already are. Mayhap, if you could muster a little patience?"

"If I must," Alana relented. They had been travelling for several hours and still had two or more to go. She hadn't seen her sister or cousin for several months and was almost beside herself with excitement to visit with them.

She was to spend Yuletide with them. Her Uncle Donald, now king, had been most reluctant to let her out of his sight, but she had beleaguered him day and night until he had finally agreed. Bethoc, her cousin, however, had to remain at Edinburgh. She had been deemed too young to travel the long distance to Carlisle and was to remain at her mother Hextilda's side.

So, Alana, accompanied by four guards, was given permission to visit for a month. A whole month. It was going to be heavenly. She just knew it. Without having her uncle's beady eyes watching over her, she would be allowed the freedom at Carlisle to do as she wished.

Since her uncle had seized the Scottish throne and moved his family up to Edinburgh, Alana had found life far more constrictive than she was used to. The castle was big and draughty—a complete change to their smaller cosier house. They had only lived there a few weeks, but already, Alana found it far too oppressive.

At Penrith, she had been able to come and go as she pleased, explore any path, wander down to the lakes whenever she chose. Aye, she had to be careful of strangers, but at Penrith, life had been peaceful, most of the time.

She desired her own freedom to do as she wished, and she was hoping that at Carlisle she would have just that.

Her thoughts moved to her sister and cousin, now both married. They seemed content with their chosen husbands. She oft thought of being married but wondered if it would curb her impulsive nature. She wrinkled her nose. At twenty-one, she was considered a little old to be unwed, but no one had inspired her otherwise. She certainly wasn't going to marry someone just for the sake of it. Nay, she would only marry for love.

An hour later, the craggy outcrops gave way to a softer landscape. Alana sucked in a lungful of the icy moorland air and stood in the stirrups to see if she could see Carlisle castle.

It was just visible, and she squealed loudly with excitement, causing her horse to toss its head, alarmed at the sudden noise.

"Take care, my lady," Jerome advised. "You do not want to be thrown."

"Aye, Jerome." She pulled a face behind his back. She couldn't wait to be free of his company and in the sanctity of the castle.



RHONA AND HEATHER greeted Alana in the main hall. They were just as overjoyed to see her as she was them.

She soon found herself settled in front of the big fire, with a glass of warmed mead in one hand and a small pastry in the other.

"How was your journey?" Heather asked. "You encountered no trouble?"

Alana shook her head. "It seemed to take an aeon to get here, though. It was not made any easier by the snow at Edinburgh. Uncle almost disallowed my departure, but I insisted. Truly, I do not like it up there."

"Oh?" Rhona queried. "You would rather have remained at Penrith?"

Alana nodded her head emphatically. "Absolutely. The castle is big and drafty and, oh, I don't know, just totally different to what I am used to. Plus, Uncle allows me little freedom. I am not allowed outside the castle grounds for fear I will be stolen away! 'Tis lamentable."

Rhona and Heather exchanged glances. "You will find it is the same here, Alana. We are not allowed outside, at least not unaccompanied."

Alana looked aghast. "But I thought I would be allowed to go where I liked here?"

Heather placed a hand on her shoulder. "Nay, sister. 'tis too dangerous."

"By the rood, I have come from one prison to another," Alana lamented. "I thought I would at least be able to roam around the countryside."

"I would hardly call it a prison," Rhona reasoned. "You can go outside, but you must take a guard."

"And what if I choose to go outside alone? Who is going to stop me?" she said defiantly.

"Me, for one," said a deep voice from the doorway. Alana angled her head to see who it was and found herself looking at Jacques Legrand, her brother-in-law's cousin. He walked towards them and inclined his head. "My lady."

He was huge, and although they had met before, she still found herself a little in awe at his size. So much so, that, for a moment, she fell silent. He also seemed more handsome than she

remembered. His long dark brown hair hung loose about his shoulders and his eyes, matching in colour, watched her steadily.

"The guards will not allow you past the gates." He continued. "And neither will any of us."

She finally found her voice. "For what reason?"

"Safety. Heed me well, my lady. There are many hidden dangers outside."

Something in his tone made her bristle. Talking to her as though she was addle-brained. She didn't have to listen to him, and she certainly wouldn't. But for now, she would keep quiet. Let him think she would abide by his command but she had no intention of actually doing so. During her visit here, she intended to explore, so explore she would, with or without his permission.

She arched an imperious eyebrow and turned her back on him dismissively, sipping on her cup of mead. She heard him speak to Rhona about Leon's whereabouts before he left the hall but she refused to give him any further attention. No one told her what to do, unless it was her uncle. For, if she incurred his wrath, there were consequences which usually meant a sound thrashing. No one else would dare do such a thing. So, if she did go outside the grounds, what could they do? Absolutely nothing. Content in that knowledge, she smiled and reached for another pastry.

"These are divine, Rhona. Who made them?" Alana asked, wiping a small crumb away from her chin.

"We have a wonderful cook. I will introduce you to her tomorrow, when you are rested. Would you like me to show you your room?"

Alana pointed at Rhona's distended stomach. "Are you certain you can manage? That looks extremely uncomfortable."

Rhona laughed. "I do feel a little cumbersome every now and then, but showing you to your room will be no hardship, I assure you. I am not unwell, just simply with child."

"She has more energy than I have," Heather admitted. "But come with us, we shall both show you and get you settled. Oh, this is so

lovely having us all together like this. It would have been nice to have Bethoc here as well, but at least we have you."

"And we shall have a wonderful Yuletide!" exclaimed Alana, jumping up. "Now where is this room of mine?"



THAT EVENING, Alana found herself seated in between Jacques and Heather at the long table in the hall where dinner was being served. She ate with gusto, thoroughly enjoying the delicious food that Carlisle's cook had made for them. Reaching for another slice of meat, she heard Jacques say, "You have a fine appetite, my lady."

"Aye, what of it?" Her eyes flashed at him, not knowing if he was being judgemental or merely making an observation.

"I meant no malice." He continued, noting her tone. "It is just nice to see a woman who enjoys her food."

"Meaning I am fat?" She arched an eyebrow.

Jacques frowned. "Nay, I never said that. You take umbrage far too easily. Take it as a compliment."

"The fact that you think I am fat?" She pretended to be affronted. The chance to irritate him too good an opportunity to miss.

"God's bones. You are difficult," he exclaimed.

"Nay, 'tis you who is being difficult, my lord. I would never have thought you to be so rude." She coughed into her napkin to stifle her laugh, but when she looked up, he was giving her a steady, heavy-lidded look, having caught on to her intention.

"I see you are still as mischievous. I would warrant a trip over my knee would cure you of that." He picked up his goblet and casually took a sip.

Alana's mouth twitched. "That would never happen; my lord, for you would have to catch me first. As you can see, I am petite and nimble, whereas you, my lord, are a great lummo!"

He put down his goblet and turned his full attention on her.

Fascinated, she watched as his eyes turned dark. "I am not one to turn down a challenge, so beware our next encounter, my auburn-haired maiden."

Alana's smile faltered. This wasn't going as planned. He was turning the tables on her, and she didn't like it. She prodded his arm. "You jest, surely?"

"Do I?" He took another sip of his wine. "Well, now, you will just have to wait and see."

Alana eyed him warily and glanced at his hands. They were huge like the rest of him, and she didn't fancy them landing on her posterior.

"I was only having a bit of fun," she grumbled.

"At my expense, aye." Before she could respond, he shot her a devilish smile, vacated his seat and left the hall.

Alana stared after him. Would he truly spank her? A ripple of excitement went through her and she frowned. Why did that thought arouse her so? She looked down at her goblet. Perhaps it was the strong wine she had supped this eve; it was obviously dulling her senses, for a spanking was something to dread, surely? Confused by her thoughts, she turned to her sister, Heather, and engaged her in conversation, avoiding any talk of Jacques entirely.



THE NEXT MORNING, Alana arose bright and early, donned her clothes with the help of a maid named Sarah and made her way to the hall. Apart from the servants, everyone was still abed so, descending the stairs, she decided to venture outside.

She exited the keep, and stepping past the burly guard on duty, she walked down to the outer bailey. The air was cold, making her breath appear as white mist when she exhaled. Fascinated, she blew softly, watching the wispy cloud disappear each time. It was cold but nowhere near as cold as Edinburgh. Living there was not to her liking. Why her uncle had to proclaim himself king, she knew not.

She would rather they had lived at Penrith as they were, but her uncle had deemed otherwise.

She pulled her woollen cloak tight around her shoulders, drawing the hood snug against her face to keep in the warmth as she strolled nonchalantly around, surveying her surroundings. The wooden boundary fence was high to keep out intruders, and after a thorough inspection, it seemed there were only three gates to exit the castle, one of those being the main gatehouse.

She pulled a face. She had thought that she might be able to climb over the fence somehow and have a little freedom, but staring up at the height of it, it seemed an unlikely task. A sudden idea came to mind—unless, of course, she could find a ladder. She was small and nimble and had climbed many trees and ladders in her time. This would be no effort at all. She looked around until her eyes fell on a barn. With quick strides, she was inside and scouting around. Within minutes, she had located not just one but two ladders. Thrilled, she grabbed one and began to lift it.

"What are you doing?" a deep voice asked from the doorway.

Alana dropped the ladder immediately and spun around. Jacques had appeared from nowhere and was now staring at her with his hands on his hips, a puzzled look on his face.

"I was...just...seeing how heavy this ladder was!" she explained quickly.

"How heavy it is? Wherefore?"

"Just out of curiosity. We have some at Edinburgh and I wondered if it was as heavy, 'tis all."

Jacques strode over to her and, from his lofty height, peered at her flushed face. "What were you going to use it for?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know very well what I mean." His eyes bored into hers and she found her breathing suddenly a tad erratic.

"I assure you, I was not going to use it for anything. I merely wanted to test its weight," she maintained.

"I have heard some lies in my time but that is truly up there with

the best." He placed a hand on her shoulder and asked, "What did you intend to scale?"

She licked her lips that had suddenly gone as dry as dust. "Naught!"

"You will tell me the truth or I will spank it out of you! In fact, I owe you a spanking for yester eve, and now that I have you..." He left his words hanging in the air, and before Alana could even think of escape, he had her face down over one raised knee.

She struggled but he had her securely held under one arm, whilst the other was already in the process of pushing her cloak aside so he could get to her skirts. She kicked and protested, but in seconds, her skirts were raised and his hand had made contact with her bare bottom.

She sucked in a breath at the sudden intense pain, but before she could even think of crying out, another had already made impact.

"Oh! Ouch!" she shrieked, finding her voice. "This is unjust!"

"Nay, my troublesome minx. This is deserved, well and truly."

His hand fell again and again, creating a burning heat that had her squirming to escape. His hands were made of iron; she would swear upon it. Each smack seemed harder than the next. And her face screwed up with pain as he continued to blister her bottom.

She was breathing heavily by the time he stopped, but he didn't release her. "Now, you will tell me what you intended with that ladder."

"I told you."

He gave her a sharp smack and she yelped in response.

"I can continue this for a long as you like. It is up to you," he remarked.

His hand was resting on her heated skin and she could hardly think straight, let alone talk, but she knew she had to give an answer. She emitted a heavy sigh and muttered, "I wanted to climb the fence."

For a moment, there was silence as he digested her words. "You wanted to climb the perimeter fence? Are you addle-brained?"

"Nay!"

"Then tell me—how did you intend to get down the other side?"

Alana's face fell. "I had not really thought of that yet."

Jacques shook his head. "You deserve more than my hand for your behaviour, young lady." He threw her skirts down and dropped his knee, so she could stand back up. She placed a hand beneath her cloak and rubbed her sore bottom, her face sullenly looking up at him.

"And you can take that look off your face or I will take a switch to your backside," he warned her.

Alana's eyes widened and she immediately looked contrite. He raised a long finger and pointed it at her face. "It is for your own safety that you are disallowed to go outside the castle grounds. Promise me you will not even think of doing so again?"

She nodded and swallowed hard. Her bottom hurt like hell and she wanted to go straight back to the solace of her chamber.

"Then go, but heed me well."

Without a word, she turned and practically flew out of the barn towards the keep, intent on putting as much distance as she could between herself and Jacques. He was an ogre and she hated him.