

Set during the Inquisition, Catherine, queen of Montalcino, rescues Isabella from a brutal rape. While convalescing, the women fall in love, creating a spiritual struggle for Catherine. Eventually, Catherine gives in to her love, marrying to cover the relationship. This intensifies the danger. The Bishop is determined to expose her. His own life a web of lies and secrecy, he seduces Catherine's naïve daughter, Sofia, into friendship. Sofia plays out the Bishop's intentions, propelling everyone toward disaster.

## **The Queen's Companion**

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— Carol Haggas, Member, National Book Critics Circle

# *The Queen's Companion*

Maggi A. Petton

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Cover photographs of Palazzo Cervini in Mount Amiata, Italy, are the property of the author.

*The Inquisition began in 1231. The last documented event was recorded in 1868. It was only in 1996 that Pope John Paul II allowed access to the secret archives of the Inquisition. He apologized for it in 2006.*

## **Chapter One**

August 1554

Five horses with riders made their way single file along a narrow path paralleling a high, rocky cliff. Few sounds accompanied the riders, as the creek normally gurgling through the canyon was dry. It was the end of a long, hot summer season. The sun seared everything it touched, drying and crisping all beneath its oven-like rays. Shimmering waves rose from the tops of baking boulders creating additional unwanted heat. Autumn was anticipated, but still too far away to provide any comfort. Nothing bothered to bloom.

Aside from the soft and steady clomp of the horses' hooves on the dry, powdered soil there was little noise. The tiny clouds of dust generated by the horses did not even have the energy to rise up to the fetlocks, but settled hurriedly as if anxious to avoid further drying. No breezes stirred the leaves. No creatures moved in the underbrush. The air was still.

The weary riders spoke not at all, keeping their mouths clamped shut, as if they might prevent the heat from scorching their insides. Perhaps their very surroundings had sapped them of the energy to speak. Maybe the disappointing journey from which they returned took too much out of them. Whatever the reason for their silent, unhurried amble, it was that very silence that caused the middle rider to stop. Instantly, the other riders halted and became alert, hands on their swords, eyes searching and scanning. Sounds. They all heard them now, muted echoes off the cliff. Human or animal, it was difficult to tell. Near enough to bounce off the rock wall, but not so near as to be visible. Grunting, like a wild pig rooting. No, too rhythmical. A moan, or was it more like a whimper? Definitely human.

The middle rider signaled the others to dismount and with hand gestures indicated that two of them circle around both to the right and the left, away from the rocky cliff. The remaining three began what could only have been a well rehearsed and stealthy approach toward the sounds. They did not have far to go. About a hundred yards from their horses, in a small, shaded clearing, they came upon a scene all too common in recent times.

Tied to a tree, lying face up on the ground was a woman. She was naked. What could be made of her face failed to reveal if she was young or old, for it was bloody, bruised and crusted with dirt, tears and mucus that looked days old. Her arms were stretched taut over her head, and her legs splayed outward and tied to makeshift wooden stakes at each ankle. It was from her that the moaning sounds issued, not of her own accord, but from the force of each violent thrust of the naked, grunting, filthy man on top of her.

The three waited for only a moment before the two circling soldiers arrived at either end of the clearing. At a subtle sign, all five stepped into the opening in the trees and laid their sword tips on a different part of the torturing party. The grunting ceased.

"Up, you vile swine," spat the soldier with his sword tip on the jugular vein of the now still man.

Slowly, attempting to save himself from the pierce of any of the five swords pressing into his flesh, the man pushed his torso up until his quickly shriveling penis emerged from the woman. Once he was standing upright, between the woman's stake-bound legs, the sword tips guided him backward without a sound. He reeked of alcohol.

"Bind his hands, but leave him naked," a female voice said. Its owner moved quickly to the bound woman. As she moved toward the body, she reached up to push back the light, cotton hood covering her head. Her long, dark hair was pulled back and tied with a ribbon at the nape of her neck. Though not beautiful, her face was striking with large, intense brown eyes that revealed her concern. She moved gracefully and with determination as she knelt next to the victim.

With swift, careful sword strokes she sliced the ropes from the tree and stakes. In a single action, she swung her cape around to cover the naked, nearly lifeless form on the ground. The battered victim seemed

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barely alive, but as her arms were untied and released she groaned and opened her swollen eyes. Through the minutest of slits she looked up.

"You are safe," whispered the rider. The woman slipped back into unconsciousness

The surroundings revealed a small camp that had clearly been in place for several days. Bones of small animals were strewn about. Ashes from a now dead fire lay in a ring of stones. An animal bladder reeked of some fermented brew.

One of the soldiers found the woman's garments, but they were useless, having been shredded.

Another of the men picked up pants and a filthy doublet, "These must belong to him".

"Shred those, as well, and leave them on the ashes", demanded a tall, dark man whose bearing suggested he held some authority.

"Yes, Captain."

Robert, Captain of the Queen's Guard walked to the now bound and naked man

"Your name," he demanded.

The prisoner spat at the ground near the Captain's feet and remained silent. At this, the soldier controlling the man's bindings drew his knife and placed it on the man's throat.

"I will make you answer, pig!"

Robert held up his hand, nodding to his soldier. "He may be more inclined to talk after his journey with us, Remy. For now, let us get her," he indicated the woman on the ground, "to a physician. She looks like she has been through a war." Captain Robert walked over to where his queen knelt, tending the unconscious woman. "Do you think she will live?" he whispered.

The queen took a dagger from a sheath in her belt and carefully sliced through the tight ropes around the woman's wrists. Fibers from the rough hemp rubbed into her skin leaving deep, blood encrusted sores that dried and caked themselves to the rope. "I don't know." She shook her head. "The journey alone may finish her. Will you be able to carry her? Is your horse able to manage you both after this arduous

journey?" the queen reached out and gently peeled a strand of crusted hair from the puffy, unrecognizable face.

Robert nodded his assent as one of the soldiers appeared in the clearing leading their horses. The queen went to her horse and pulled a water bag from the pommel. She ripped a piece of cloth from the bottom of her garment and soaked it with water. When she knelt back down next to the unconscious woman, she placed the wet cloth on her lips. Reflexively, the mouth suckled, just a few drops, then stopped.

"You," the queen stood and walked over to the prisoner. "What do you know of her?" She indicated the near dead victim.

"She is a just a woman," he slurred. "Nothing more."

The Captain approached the prisoner and stood in front of him. With a raised eyebrow, he looked pointedly at the man's shrunken cock, then directed a cold glare into his prisoner's eyes.

"What of your mother?" asked the Captain. "Just a woman, as well, I suppose. You would likely be one of those who, in the name of all that is good, take the life of one you found defiling her."

Robert paused, started away, then turned back to the drunken sot.

"And what of your queen?" Robert continued. "Is your queen just another for men like you to defile?"

The man remained silent and sullen. As if to emphasize his disregard for life, he pissed where he stood, not caring that dirt and urine splashed up onto his own ankles.

The Captain turned in disgust and walked over to where his queen waited, again, next to the body on the ground.

With the aid of two of his soldiers, Robert was able to situate himself on his horse with the unconscious woman held as gently as possible in his arms.

"Remy, tie this blackguard to your horse," the queen instructed her soldier. "He will walk or be dragged to the castle."

"Yes, Majesty."

At the sound of her title, a flicker of fear shot through the eyes of the prisoner.

The queen mounted her horse, and the now six riders and one naked prisoner resumed their silent march toward Montalcino Castle.

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Montalcino Castle could be seen from miles away. It was nestled high into the side of a mountain overlooking the town of Montalcino. The castle itself was ringed by two high, dark stone walls. The walls abutted the sides of the mountain itself, making the guard house the only port of entry to the castle.

The castle housed a center tower that was the tallest part of the structure. Angling out from the central tower were two wings of three stories each. The west wing housed the Great Hall, the Queen's office, the kitchens and sleeping quarters for the Queen and her family. The Queen's private quarters were on the third floor. The east wing held quarters for servants and castle staff. At the far end of the east wing was a second, smaller tower of the castle keep, the prison cells, which were mostly underground, and the torture chamber.

When they arrived at the castle, Robert dragged the exhausted prisoner to the cells. Because this man was caught in the very act of committing a crime, and by the queen, herself, Robert took him directly to the lowest of the chambers and chained him to the walls. There was no need to place him in the upper cell to await further interrogation.

"Your punishment will be delivered by the queen when she sees fit to deal with you," Robert spat at the man. "Meanwhile, you will be branded in such a way that all will know of your crime and be wary...should you live to see the outside of this cell."

The branding iron that Robert chose had never been used before. It held the queen's own mark, a crown encircling a one of a kind sword with an unusual cross guard. A fire burned in the corridor outside the prisoner's cell. Robert held the iron in the flames until it was red hot. When he returned to the prisoner, Robert grabbed him by his hair and held his head against the wall. The prisoner screamed in agony as the iron sizzled into his face on his left cheek. As Robert let go of him, he passed out. Robert left him dangling from his chains.

The nearly dead woman was carried up to the queen's quarters and the physician summoned.

By the time the queen made her way up the huge circular stone stairway to her quarters, the physician was already examining the



patient who now lay on a pallet near the window. As he examined her, the queen's servants attempted to tend to Queen Catherine. She shooed them away with a wave, and turned to the physician, a short, graying man with a slight paunch.

"Will she live?"

"Difficult to say, Majesty. Were you to be lying here with these injuries, I would have no doubt, but she is unknown to me. How did she come to be in this condition?"

"Kidnapped, most likely, and held captive by a barbarian in the forest just south of the great granite cliff. He had obviously been having his way with her for some time. She was bound and naked when we came upon them. I don't know how long she was there, but she has remained as you see her since we found them." As she spoke, the queen moved closer and winced as the physician peeled back a swollen eyelid to peer into the woman's eye.

"I will not lie to you," he said, "her injuries are severe. She has been beaten, more than once, judging from the varying stages of her bruises. Although she doesn't appear to have any obvious broken bones, the swelling in so many areas of her body makes it difficult to make an accurate assessment. Her backside will need to be meticulously cleaned." He turned the woman onto her side as he spoke. "Her flesh is punctured with hundreds of thorns and small pebbles." The physician removed the covering and showed the queen the woman's back. It was a mass of cuts and tiny holes.

The queen's hand flew to her mouth, and she stifled a small gasp as her insides lurched. She already had difficulty imagining how the poor soul endured the torture of her ordeal without even considering the discomfort of this additional pain. She choked back her tears.

"If she regains her senses," the physician continued, "she will need much time to heal...and I must emphasize that she may not regain her senses at all, Majesty. Without her in a conscious state I cannot determine the extent to which she may have been damaged internally."

"I understand. My servants will keep vigil and tend to her wounds. We will call for you if she awakens."

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“And you, my Queen, do you have need of anything from me? I have mixed a sleeping draught for the woman in case she awakens, and there is enough for you, as well.”

“Thank you, no. I have need of a bath only. I guarantee that sleep will not be a problem.” She managed a small smile.

Once the physician was gone, the queen directed her servants to draw her bath and then continue their ministrations to the injured woman. They were cleaning her body as gently as possible. As the dirt and blood were removed, more and more wounds were discovered. There was barely any part of her that was not injured.

A bath soothed the queen's aching body. The woman who tended her, a servant named Marie, washed her hair. Water was heated for a second bath, for the grime of many days was with the queen. When she felt sufficiently clean she allowed her body to be oiled. Following the extended camping of the past weeks, sleep came quickly and deeply in her own bed.

A commotion from her sitting room awakened the queen. Catherine had no idea if she had slept for minutes or days. She was disoriented, having spent weeks away from her castle, and had to shake her confusion away. She rose, put on a robe and rushed to the sitting room.

Three of her servants were pleading with the injured woman to be allowed to continue to tend to her wounds. Each time they attempted to approach her, the woman became more agitated and fearful. She could not speak or move easily for her injuries, but was trying to get up. She was sobbing and gasping for air. Her eyes, what could be seen of them through the swollen lids, were full of panic.

“Nooo. Nooo.” That part was clear. The rest were just garbled sounds, not even recognizable as words.

“Stand back, all of you,” ordered Queen Catherine, almost feeling the fear of the frightened woman. Instantly, all three servants retreated.

The crying woman tried to hold a coverlet to hide her nakedness. The queen did not make a move toward her, but waited without speaking. When she finally seemed to calm, the queen addressed her softly.

“You are among friends,” she said. “We have no wish to harm you.”

“I do not know you,” cried the woman. It was difficult to understand what she was saying because of the swelling in her cheeks and jaw, but the queen understood.

“Nor I you, and so we are on equal ground. Leave us,” she directed her servants.

The queen turned back, “I will not harm you. You are safe here.”

Slowly, the woman looked at her. The queen saw the fear slowly leave her eyes. When she collapsed back onto the pallet, wincing in pain, the queen approached slowly and sat down next to her.

“Can you tell me your name?” asked the queen

“Isabella,” was the garbled reply.

“Isabella,” the queen repeated. “You have many wounds that need attending. Will you allow me to help you?”

Isabella nodded her assent. The queen helped to position her on her side, to allow the sunlight to illuminate the woman’s badly injured backside. Sitting behind her, the queen continued what her servants had begun, carefully extracting some of the hundreds of tiny thorns and sharp stones that had burrowed their way into her skin. It was a tedious and time consuming ordeal. At times the queen’s hand cramped as she worked the pincers and she stopped often to massage her hands and fingers. Eventually the sunlight abandoned her and torches were lit.

As the queen worked, Isabella drifted in and out of a troubled sleep. She’d accepted water and the sleeping draught, but she whimpered, sometimes jerking and yelling out. When this happened she attempted to get up, but her injuries prevented her. Each time, the queen’s voice calmed her and she fell back to sleep.

Working to free every pebble and thorn from Isabella’s body, the queen wondered at the softness of the other woman’s skin. As princess and then queen, Catherine had always been tended to, she never had cause to observe or touch another body. She noticed the glistening of tiny blond hairs that covered Isabella’s arms and legs. She became aware of Isabella’s breath, how it labored in her sleep. She was astonished at the velvety feel of Isabella’s skin and how warm and fragile it felt under her fingertips.

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As she worked, the queen's mind wandered from prayer to silent meditation and back again to prayer. Her prayers were for her kingdom, her subjects, and the woman whose body lay broken before her. While her usual meditations centered on a phrase or two from the Psalms, as her eyes searched Isabella's body for tiny bits of grit and thorn, she lost all sense of herself, much as she did when her meditations took her outside of her own being. She never knew where she went at those times, only that time seemed to have passed without her participation. All she ever knew was that she returned as refreshed as if from a full night of sleep.

Catherine's spiritual life was the most important part of who she was. Being queen was the role she had been given by God, and a role she relied on God to help her fulfill. Although her kingdom, as most of Europe, was Catholic, Catherine realized that no longer could one tell who was faithful to the church because they truly believed and who appeared to be faithful out of fear. Her experiences with the religious leaders, and especially her own bishop, left a bad taste in her mouth.

Catherine's love of God did not come from the Church or the Church leaders, but from her parents. Both her parents believed in God, but from her mother she learned about the true teachings of Christ. Her mother was compassionate, accepting and kind. It was difficult to balance those traits as a ruling monarch, but Catherine attempted to emulate her mother's goodness in her role as queen. From her father, Catherine understood that being a monarch was more than just an inheritance; it was a calling. He never let Catherine forget that being queen was God-given and that she would answer to God for the ways in which she ruled. In times of difficulty, both of her parents often stole away to the church at night to pray. There she learned how to surrender her heart to God in the peace and solitude that was always absent when others were present in the church, especially the bishop.

When Isabella's back was free of the rubble, the queen had a bowl with warmed water and a cloth brought to her. In spite of the protestations of the servants, she did not allow them to perform this task for fear the woman would awaken again and become afraid.

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Gently, changing the water often, she managed to clear Isabella's entire back of debris.

Once Isabella's body was cleaned, the queen ordered healing ointments. She attempted to count the number of wounds on Isabella's body as she applied the poultice, but quickly gave up. There were simply too many cuts.

When she was finally done, she covered Isabella and had the torches extinguished.

Isabella did not wake again, nor did she stir, for three days.

Set during the Inquisition, Catherine, queen of Montalcino, rescues Isabella from a brutal rape. While convalescing, the women fall in love, creating a spiritual struggle for Catherine. Eventually, Catherine gives in to her love, marrying to cover the relationship. This intensifies the danger. The Bishop is determined to expose her. His own life a web of lies and secrecy, he seduces Catherine's naïve daughter, Sofia, into friendship. Sofia plays out the Bishop's intentions, propelling everyone toward disaster.

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