

Chapter One

England, 1643

It was Jacqueline who would live in his memory forever.
Jacqueline, the one who formed his passion.
Jacqueline standing, head bowed, hands gently clasped at her waist, eyes downcast, the picture of submissiveness.

"Charles!"

He straightened automatically and turned toward Queen Henrietta Maria, proud daughter of the House of Bourbon. She was a Bourbon through French King Henry IV and Marie de Medici, and the wife and yet-to-be-crowned consort, thanks to her Catholicism, of Charles I, King of England, Scotland, and Ireland.

"*Oui, Maman,*" he said with a slight bow and the French response that he hoped would put him in her good graces. Try as he might, it seemed that he would always be found wanting in her eyes: not sufficiently French, not entirely devoted to her own interests, and, most of all, not the first of her children to be blessed with that revered name.

For the one with a claim to such a distinction, Charles James and also Duke of Cornwall, as first son of King Charles I and Henrietta Maria, had died tragically almost fourteen years before, prior to the birth of the troubled couple's second son Charles and the pair of like-named princes' several younger siblings.

Charles the Perfect: the most handsome of princes, most keen of royal intellect, most courageous of soldiers, most dutiful and loving of children, most devoted son of the Church. Or he surely would have been, had he attained even his first birthday. Of that his still-grieving mother was very certain. She made it possible for all to share the royal assessment of her firstborn's attributes by reminding them how frequently her second born now missed the mark. And none shared that parental disappointment more than the current Charles Stuart himself.

"I have asked Master Whitnell to join us," the queen announced with a summoning hand imperiously waved toward the screen over her left shoulder.

Try as he might, Charles could not quite control the trembling that ran through his body as his tutor stepped around the divider and took his place a few feet away from the queen. In Charles' experience, nothing good ever came of having his mother summon his strict taskmaster.

The stern gentleman took his place and waited, silent and stoic.

As for Charles, he stood in his mother's sitting room and observed with trepidation the triangular tableaux now formed by his mother, his tutor, and his first temptation—Jacqueline, by name—and the apparent reason he had been summoned. The entire tension-filled structure now seemed mysteriously and delicately balanced between these three: the forbidden fruit, the judge, and the executioner. But what role was he to play? Why, the penitent, no doubt, he decided as a shudder ran through his guilt-ridden body. He licked his

lips nervously.

The young prince forced his eyes away from the 18-year-old maiden, because to look upon her was to remember things he should not remember; things that could and it seemed now, would, call down his mother's wrath on his own guilty head. The probability that this was, indeed, about to happen, was so strong he felt himself reduced to the stature of a fearful child. It was another unfortunate impression he would have preferred not to have made on the beautiful Jacqueline.

For what he wanted desperately was to redeem himself in her lovely eyes and rise to the level of gallant young manhood, a man upon whom she might consider bestowing womanly graces of an intimate nature. Unhappily, however, what he knew of the maid to this point, he knew only because he was a common sneak—a "puking, pitiful spy"—as Jacqueline had hissed in his ear when she had discovered him crouched in the thick shrubbery on the far side of the palace's rose garden. From that vantage point, he had been witness to the lifting of her garments in welcome to one of his father's nameless courtiers who had rearranged the voluminous skirts and underpinnings for his carnal advantage and then had used a panting, beseeching Jacqueline for the same.

Charles had wished desperately, as the sun set that day, that he could claim innocence, but the truth was, he had overheard rumors that Jacqueline, the daughter of the woman who had been his mother's favorite servant, sometimes enjoyed dalliances in a specific location. So he had followed her in that general direction more than once, hoping to learn what he could not in Master Whitnell's classroom.

But on that particular day, only Jacqueline's fury had been on full display, and that emotional upheaval had forced him to file away the fascinating questions that plagued him for another time. Indeed, she had threatened him with all manner of unpleasant repercussions if he ever revealed to anyone what he had seen, and she had reminded him that his mother would be appalled by his behavior.

He could, all too well, imagine his staunchly Catholic parent's reaction if she knew he had spied on matters she had already made clear were sinful in the extreme outside the bounds of the duty to procreate.

Having expressed her extreme displeasure, Jacqueline had gone on that day to win the young prince to her point of view that no good thing could come of his sharing his knowledge by softening her approach. She, who stood almost on eye level with the young man, though she was older than he was by several years, had kissed away his mortification gently and hinted at future rewards if he guarded her privacy well.

"It will be our secret, my young prince," she had whispered as she traced the same lips she had kissed so sweetly with soft finger tips. "Someday soon, perhaps we shall meet here again, if you prove yourself trustworthy. And then, oh, then, beautiful boy, I will show you things you cannot imagine. But you must not betray me, or it will never be as it should for you with me or, indeed, with any woman. You will be cursed forever, I promise you."

With hands strategically placed to cover the damp delight he had taken in the afternoon's proceedings, he had sworn himself to secrecy. He had kept his promise, too, partly from fear, should his mother learn he had sullied himself with such worldly knowledge, and partly so he could gain more such elucidation in some glorious future with Jacqueline.

Since he had been a veritable knight of sealed lips, then, there must be some other reason they were all here, he reasoned nervously. But what could it be?

Charles stole another glance at Jacqueline's pale face as the silence surrounding them first stretched and then began to tighten uncomfortably around him like drying leather.

"Master Whitnell." The queen's voice was stoked with the hot fury to which Charles was all too accustomed, and he knew the mystery was about to be revealed. He could not stop himself from praying that whatever happened next would not serve to humiliate him in Jacqueline's presence, whether it was related to their guilty secret or some other infraction.

He marshaled his forces and prepared to accept with dignity and bear with fortitude whatever punishment his mother was, undoubtedly, about to call down on his head. He only hoped that he could emerge from it a brave and resolute young man in Jacqueline's eyes, and that he would not disgrace himself as a foolish child, trembling to accept payment for some foul deed his parent had detected and summoned his tutor to correct.

His worst fears as to his immediate unhappy future were confirmed when the queen spoke again.

"You are prepared to dispense discipline for the shameful sin which has been committed?" she demanded of the pedagogue. All hope that the queen was somehow ignorant of his voyeuristic behavior was certainly now lost, the young prince thought. She knew; somehow, his mother knew, and she was clearly horrified that he had behaved in such a way: spying on a maid for carnal purposes.

I am, Your Majesty," Matthew Whitnell of the strong right arm responded. In the time it took to utter the words, he raised his left hand, concealed until that moment, and displayed the supple, wide leather strap with which the future King of England was more than familiar.

"Two dozen. Well laid on," the daughter of France ordered. Charles set his jaw and drew back his shoulders. Clarification as to how the queen had come by her knowledge shrank in importance as he prepared himself to pay the price for his sin stoically. He only prayed Jacqueline did not think he had broken faith with her and thus placed himself in this unhappy circumstance.

"Here," ordered the queen, pointing to her own wide, skirted lap. "And bared. I wish to see the full effect and to make certain the strap teaches a valuable lesson to all concerned."

Charles felt the blood rush to his face, detailing shame that he was about to be cast in the role of a naughty child, still fit for bare-bottomed discipline across his mother's knee. Could a more unjust and mocking punishment be devised for a sin so anchored in the adult world, he thought rebelliously.

The maid kept her eyes down, but Charles caught sight of the tear trailing slowly past Jacqueline's nose and settling in the corner of her perfect mouth. His heart lifted, somewhat, that she wept in sympathy for him already. Perhaps she would offer sweet comfort and proof of her concern when it was all over. He only knew he would bear what he had no choice about, and he would bear it so nobly that this one he now felt he loved fiercely would never forget it and would see it, and him, elevated to some higher level of respect and affection than his mother planned. For once, Henrietta Maria's noble parental goals would be stymied, if his own strength of will played any part.

"Is there something you wanted to say, Charles?" the queen demanded in her heavily accented tongue.

"No, Madame. Except that I have been true to my word and will continue to be so."

He said so with backbone stiffened, head raised as proudly as possible, and a strong sense of gratitude directed toward the beauty who had shown him what it could mean to be a man.

"What a pretty speech, Charles. A pretty but empty and foolish speech. Does it comfort you, Jacqueline?" the queen demanded.

For the first time the maid, who well knew her mistress' temper and devotion to discipline, spoke in English accented with her own lilting native French. It was somehow more gentle and appealing than the queen's outraged pronunciations in the same tongue.

"It comforts me only in so far as it does not displease Your Gracious Majesty," she said.

"Then it comforts you not at all, for it offends me greatly. Do you see that you have not only introduced my son to the most hideous of venial sins but you have encouraged him to deal dishonestly with that knowledge and to wound his mother?"

Charles' freshly discovered sense of honor demanded that he speak, but he could think of no words that would not make a grievous situation far worse, no defense for Jacqueline that could not be diminished by his mother's scorn. Best, perhaps, to let his parent finish the tongue lashing of her maid and turn her more damaging intentions on his own shrinking flesh. At least the lovely girl would know, then, what he was willing to bear for her sake. His mother could not diminish that gift, he was determined.

"Enough of this foolishness, then. We shall see who wants to play again at this game of 'romance,'"—uttered with formidable scorn—"when Master Whitnell has used up his supply of sting."

The queen gestured to Jacqueline. "Come here, girl. Come here now, you miserable creature."

Charles attempted to swallow through a bone-dry throat, stunned at the sudden turn of events.

"Yes, my Queen," said the maid.

It was then that Charles realized that all eyes were focused on the voluptuous beauty as she moved toward her fate. By the time his brain had finally made sense of the scene, the tantalizing maid was standing beside his mother, raising with her own hands a skirt that he suddenly noticed was not supported in usual fashion by a rich array of stiff undergarments.

Young Charles watched in horrified fascination as his heart's desire bunched the simple outer garment and the linen chemise against her sides at waist level, framing the pale and perfect mounds he had seen far too little of during that magical romantic afternoon. What he wanted, and now wanted desperately, even more than in his fevered night time imaginings since then, was to stroke, fondle and squeeze those fulsome globes.

The fierce hunger gnawing in the parts of his body to which Jacqueline had fully awakened him was at war with the sudden shift in circumstances his brain was trying to process. He wanted to protest, to gallantly reclaim the punishment he had thought would be his, to become Jacqueline's bright, white knight. But relief and lust grappled with each other in such war-like manner within his youthful body that he could only gulp noisily and with complete lack of refinement and try to minimize his body's all-too-observable reaction to the stimulation stretching out before his hungry gaze.

For Jacqueline, with one swift sidelong glance at him through tear-glazed eyes, was placing herself across the limitless expanse of the queen's gown and grasping both a front

and back leg of the simple, armless chair where her sovereign was seated.

Her long legs anchored her on the opposite side nearest Charles, at least until the prince's mother gestured irritably toward a small footstool across the room and the tutor hastened to fetch it. When he slipped it beneath Her Majesty's right foot, it had the effect of elevating the tightly clenched domes resting uneasily on Henrietta Maria's royal petticoat-padded knee and, at the same time, causing the unfortunate Jacqueline to lose touch with the floor. Still not quite satisfied, the queen urged her new maid into an even more precarious position and, with her own hands, draped the girl's garments so that they afforded a clear field of operations for Master Whitnell.

Pleased with her efforts, she glanced at her son and her gaze fastened on his hands, cupped over the manhood whose arousal he was no more adept at disguising than he had been in the rose garden.

"Shameful," she pronounced. He felt the blood rise in his cheeks, even as it throbbed through his penis.

"How many times have you watched this maid's sinful behavior?" she demanded.

"On-only o-once," Charles said and his voice quavered. He prayed it was an answer that would meet with her approval and wondered if she planned to mete out the same or a worse punishment for him, now that he had confessed his sin.

"And did you then think yourself a man when it was over?"

"I don't—I m-mean—that is, I d-didn't—"

The self-justifying words did not actually stick in his throat because they never made it that far, his brain having refused to supply any acceptable response.

"Well, this is where your searching in sinful places has brought you, boy." His regal mother rescued him imperiously, spreading her bejeweled hands wide above the lengthy expanse of Jacqueline's pale beauty as though he needed help in focusing his attention.

"It is well known that males lack sufficient self-control to turn aside from sins of the flesh," she went on, "especially when that flesh is presented so freely and is aided in the effort by the very talents of Satan, himself. That a young woman of my household should so forget herself as to tempt that degree of control is beyond understanding, however. I knew your mother well, Jacqueline du Fernier, and I can assure you she would beg me to chastise you well for your shameless behavior. If she knew that punishment would not only drive you away from such additional folly but also serve as a constant reminder to the future king of this realm of the need for self-control and the ugliness of its loss, she would urge me, I am certain, to make this not a single instance of justified punishment, but a daily reminder."

There was a soft moan of protest from the young woman bent so unceremoniously over her lap.

"Indeed, I advise you to think well on that possibility while you undergo correction, Jacqueline. Your attitude will help me determine whether that might prove to be the best course of action for the good of your soul. And as for you, my son, I can assure you that before we are done here today, the sight of Jacqueline's charms that may have excited your fleshly appetites these past few days will become, instead, a constant reminder of the depths of degeneracy to which some have shown themselves willing to descend. And I promise you, such sights as this," and here she skimmed a hard hand across the crest of Jacqueline's twin nether charms in such fashion as to set the cheeks wobbling gently, even as she produced a mingled sound of crisp smack and surprised squeal, "will never serve to inflame

you again, but will always remind you of your obligation to limit yourself to no fleshly contact, even with your future queen, except for the purpose of getting children on her for the good of your kingdom."

Charles had never had cause to question his mother's wisdom or word on any matter in his short life, and yet, his body was adamant that this was one instance about which Henrietta Maria was either totally ignorant or completely dishonest. He committed himself to obscuring all traces of suspicion from Her Majesty's mind, however, willing the trio simply to move through the scene being played out in his presence before he totally disgraced himself.

The queen might be loathe to air her son's dirty laundry—and increasingly stained it had become of late—and his tutor would certainly hesitate to call attention to bad behavior he should have anticipated and prevented. The unfortunately erotic Jacqueline would surely not be foolish enough to attract disciplinary attention twice by sharing any details of the morning's scenario, but his mother's sitting room buzzed with the constant, faceless presence of any number of other servants and court members who would be only too delighted to replay the entire disciplinary scene for appreciative friends. Charles desperately wanted to provide as small a part in the story line for himself as possible.

The queen, who justified what took place in her own marriage bed by the uncomplaining, orderly, and plenteous delivery of royal offspring on a regular basis, was determined to recall her erring son to a position of purity and piety, beyond any of her other responsibilities. Happily, she felt she might accomplish that goal, along with bringing the wayward daughter of her dear former first maid to repentance for her disgustingly licentious behavior—behavior being discussed in virtually every corner of the scandal-hungry palace—by stripping away Jacqueline's allure as a young woman and reducing her to the status of a disobedient child.

No stranger to such correction in the Bourbon court of her own girlhood, she had gained new respect for its effectiveness as her own innocent babes grew into willful and rebellious children who would be under her influence for all too brief a time.

Let Charles get a good view of Jacqueline reduced to a naughty, squirming, squalling, red-eyed, striped-bottom child; let him consider how easily he might find himself in the same condition. Henrietta Maria doubted problems of such a nature would surface in his own young life any time soon.

Intent on impressing every facet of the scene upon her wayward son, the queen stiffened her shoulders and caught her son's eye.

"Come here, Charles," she ordered.

The boy started, tearing his guilty eyes away from Jacqueline's creamy white, tightly clenched bottom and trying to understand what his mother wanted of him.

"Do not test my patience, *mon fils*, and do not make me repeat my instructions."

Charles took a half dozen steps toward the trio, his heart hammering.

Close enough to view the landscape upon which his tutor would shortly begin to paint broad stripes of stinging pain, he noted the perfect symmetry of the promiscuous girl's twin globes. But sight was not a sufficient sensual reminder for the queen. She reached across the unfortunate maid's back and, seizing Charles' hand, drew it down firmly until his palm made contact with the servant's plump right cheek. He made to draw back, horrified and fascinated at the same time, as Jacqueline uttered a surprised and shamed squeal of protest, but Henrietta Maria maintained a firm grasp on his wrist and kept his hand in

contact with the smooth expanse of guilty flesh.

"Touch her naughty bottom, Charles. Yes, that's it, both sides. How does it feel?"

"Like the softest, smoothest silk," he was almost foolish enough to say aloud as he fought the temptation to pat and squeeze and even press his lips to the fulsome expanse that was cool to his touch.

"Well, Charles?" the queen demanded.

"I d-don't know—that is—she—it—" He swallowed noisily and tried again. "She m-must be very c-cold," he mumbled miserably.

"Indeed. Well, that is a circumstance that will not long trouble her, I can assure you. You will count, Charles. There, Jacqueline, you wicked girl. You see how merciful I am that I spare you that task? But it is only because I fear you cannot go above three or four, or nine or ten, at most. For if you could, you would surely have counted to thirteen and realized my son is not yet a man to be privy to your shame or seduced by your charms. Is that not so?"

Charles' eyes slid to Jacqueline's face, turned ever so slightly toward him, though on the level of his knees, as she fought the humiliation to which she had been reduced. He sensed that further contact with her could only work to their detriment and withdrew his hand guiltily, using it to shield the hints his body was offering up about the ineffectiveness of his mother's methods. The girl remained silent, yet that faint air of rebelliousness still draped her like a cloak, Charles marveled.

The queen's eyes narrowed. "It seems you must count to thirty then, Charles," she said, "since Jacqueline declines to give us her opinion."

Jacqueline shook her head frantically, causing her enticing bottom to jiggle most alluringly. "No, n-no, I beg you. I b-beg your par-pardon," she quavered.

"*Oui*. And you shall beg with even more enthusiasm, and soon, I am quite certain."