

A Novel of MARIE ANTOINETTE

DAYS *of*
SPLENDOR,
DAYS *of*
SORROW



JULIET GREY

Praise for BECOMING MARIE ANTOINETTE

“Full of sumptuous and well-researched details ... *Becoming Marie Antoinette* by Juliet Grey, the first novel in a new trilogy, gives readers a more sympathetic look than usual at the ill-fated French queen.”

—[Examiner.com](#) (five stars)

“In her richly imagined novel, Juliet Grey meticulously re-creates the sumptuous court of France’s most tragic queen. Beautifully written, with attention paid to even the smallest detail, *Becoming Marie Antoinette* will leave readers wanting more!”

—MICHELLE MORAN, bestselling author of *Madame Tussaud*

“This is historical fiction at its finest.”

—A Library of My Own

“Fans of historical fiction will eat this one up. It’s engaging, smart, and authentic. Grey has done her homework.”

—January Magazine

“Grey possesses the rare ability to transform readers to a past only accessible by imagination. *Becoming Marie Antoinette* is sure to appeal to lovers of quality historical fiction.”

—The Well Read Wife

“[A] lively, well-written promenade through pre-Revolution France ... It’s history with a spoonful of sugar—and that’s never a bad thing.”

—*The Decatur Daily*

“A thoroughly enjoyable novel, brimming with delightful details. Grey writes eloquently and with charming humor, bringing ‘Toinette’ vividly to life as she is schooled and groomed—molded, quite literally—for a future as Queen of France, an innocent pawn in a deadly political game.”

—SANDRA GULLAND, bestselling author of *Mistress of the Sun* and the Josephine Bonaparte trilogy

“*C’est magnifique!* A very entertaining read, one that I was hard-pressed to put down ... [I] am waiting (ever so impatiently) for book two in the trilogy.”

—Passages to the Past

“Smart, yet extremely engaging ... *Becoming Marie Antoinette* will please fans of historical fiction.”

—Confessions of a Book Addict

“A great read that is sure to be requested by lovers of historical fiction, especially those who enjoyed Michelle Moran’s *Madame Tussaud* and other novels about the French Revolution.”

—*Library Journal*

“Everything is so vividly described that you feel as though you are right there experiencing it all. This novel is very well written and it captivates you from the very beginning.”

—Peeking Between the Pages

“It is a captivating and well-thought-out book, and one that raises this woman of history to the point of a living person, which the reader finds easy to identify with and relate to.”

—The Book Worm’s Library

“Readers will see Marie Antoinette in a whole new light.... A sympathetic and engaging read that presents the French queen in a manner seldom found in other novels ... Anyone interested in French history will savor every page of this novel.”

—BookLoons

“[A] fine fictional account of this very real, audacious world and the transformation of a naive, unsure girl into a formidable worldly leader! Superbly done!”

—Crystal Book Reviews

“A lusciously detailed novel of Marie Antoinette’s rise to power and the decadent, extravagant lifestyles of eighteenth-century Versailles.”

—Shelf Awareness

“Well-researched and lovingly written with sparkling details—this new trilogy is not one to be missed by any lover of historical fiction.”

—Stiletto Storytime

“Completely enthralling. Although this is written as a work of fiction, every person and event was researched and so the two blend seamlessly.”

—Ex Libris

“This novel was by far the best I have read that tackles such an interesting and misunderstood queen. Grey weaves fun scandals into the history we all

know.”

—Mostly Books

“A lively and sensitive portrait of a young princess in a hostile court, and one of the most sympathetic portrayals of the doomed queen.”

—LAUREN WILLIG, bestselling author of the Pink Carnation series

“Wonderfully delectable and lusciously rich, an elegant novel to truly savor. Juliet Grey’s Marie Antoinette is completely absorbing.”

—DIANE HAEGER, author of *The Queen’s Rival*

“Maria Antonia, Austrian princess. What an amazing person. I absolutely loved each detail that Grey put into her. I could feel her emotions, and her struggles as she grew from Maria Antonia to Marie Antoinette, Queen of France.”

—Reviews by Molly

“A truly engaging novel with fantastic historical details, well-fleshed-out characters, depth and emotion. I can’t wait for the second and third books, and even though I know how it will end ... I keep hoping it won’t.”

—The Loud Librarian

“Very well written, with fantastic descriptions of life in Vienna and Versailles. Grey has done quite a bit of research, as she explains in her author’s note, and almost everything she uses is true to history. She does an excellent job of matching the personalities of Marie Antoinette and Louis XVI.”

—Medieval Bookworm

“Meticulously researched, Marie Antoinette comes to life in this first in a trilogy about her life. The reader will never look at the French Revolution in the same way again.”

—That’s What She Read

“A very entertaining and rich read, filled to the brim with historical detail. Recommended to readers of historical fiction of all stripes.”

—Raging Bibliomania

“Grey’s novel has a little bit of everything: the glitz and glamour of the French court, young love, and international politics. The most enjoyable aspect of the book is seeing Marie find her own way and becoming her own person.”

—Historical Novels Review



DAYS *of* SPLENDOR,
DAYS *of* SORROW

❧ A NOVEL OF MARIE ANTOINETTE ❧

JULIET GREY



BALLANTINE BOOKS TRADE PAPERBACKS
NEW YORK

Days of Splendor, Days of Sorrow is a work of historical fiction. Apart from the well-known actual people, events, and locales that figure in the narrative, all names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to current events or locales, or to living persons, is entirely coincidental.

A Ballantine Books eBook Edition

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Published in the United States by Ballantine Books, an imprint of The Random House Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc., New York.

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eISBN: 978-0-345-52389-1

www.randomhousereaderscircle.com

Cover design: Thomas Beck Stvan
Cover photograph illustration: Alan Ayers

v3.1

All Queens should resemble the wives of Louis XIV and Louis XV, who knew no other passions than that of doing good ... A Queen who is crowned for no other purpose than to amuse herself is a fatal acquisition to a people charged to defray the cost.

—Anonymous enemy of Marie Antoinette, Spring 1774

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Prologue

🌿 JUNE 21, 1786 🌿

On this day the sun casts the longest shadows of the year. But in the cobblestone courtyard of the Palais de Justice, they are made that much deeper by the looming scaffold erected two days earlier—plenty of time to allow a prodigious crowd to assemble, provisioned with thin blankets and enough cheese, bread, and cheap wine to sustain them. Some have come to the Cour de Mai lured by the sounds of the workmen hammering wooden boards into a raised platform that in itself betokens something sensational. There is nothing like a public exhibition to take their minds off an empty pocket. Or an empty belly. It doesn't even matter who will take the stage.

Others know precisely what, and who, they are waiting for, even though officials have refused to announce the date and time of the spectacle in order to discourage the formation of a mob. The justices of the Parlement might have known better, for that's precisely what they've wrought.

Inside her narrow cell within the Conciergerie, the prisoner has lain awake since dawn on the straw pallet that serves as her bed, her stomach thrumming with anticipation, the armpits of her shift moist with sweat. Although she has made friends with her jailers, Madame and Monsieur Hubert, she has deflected their sly inquiries about her husband and her lover. For now, her mind is not on their fates, but on her own. She, too, has heard the hammering, but she hopes it has been in vain, that there will instead be a *lettre de cachet* exiling her to some remote precinct or consigning her to a convent for the rest of her days. Until now she has been certain she could never endure the solitude, the hypocrisy, of an existence amid godly penitents of her own sex, the comforts little better than what she currently enjoys at the hands of the State.

Having lapsed into the twilight between sleep and wake she is rudely startled by the rapping of a truncheon against the wooden shutter covering the small barred window set within the door. The panel affords her a modicum of privacy from the inquisitive eyes of the prison guards. "*Allez-vous,*" a gruff voice commands.

Nothing more? From the tone of those two curt words the woman tries to parse out her destiny. Has she detected a note of cheer? Perhaps the hours ahead will secure her release. Perhaps there will be no convent. Perhaps there will be no punishment at all. The people—the people believed in her innocence. At the trial, she could see it in the spectators' faces; they expected an acquittal instead. Perhaps these past three weeks behind the stone walls of

the Conciergerie have been enough to satisfy the authorities.

“Get dressed. And hurry.” The guard lingers outside her cell. She patters across the cool earthen floor in her bare feet and reaches onto her tiptoes to slide open the shutter, peering through the bars at the soldier. He grins back through tobacco-stained teeth. “*Bonjour, ma belle.*” He flatters her; she knows she is more handsome for her thirty years than pretty.

For modesty’s sake she slides the shutter back across the bars, allowing just a sliver of light to illuminate her toilette while she makes her ablutions at the only furnishings in the cell, a small trestle table and a ladder-back chair. She splashes water that has been sitting all night in a porcelain bowl on her face and *poitrine*, under her arms, and between her legs. She removes her nightcap and runs her fingers through her tangle of brown curls. In a moment of vanity, she inserts a gold hoop into each ear, lending her the defiant appearance of a *gitane*. Appraising her image in a shard of mirror, she is pleased. Then she quickly rolls on her hose, securing them with garters of black ribbon, shoves her feet into a pair of worn leather shoes, and slips her stays over her chemise, lacing them tightly in front so that her bosom juts prominently from the contours of the simple morning dress she hastily dons. A wool cape the color of drying blood, trimmed in silver *passementerie*, crowns her slender shoulders. Sliding open the wooden shutter, “*Suis prête,*” she announces. “I’m ready.”

The guard, Lieutenant Gabin, ominous enough in his uniform—the deeply hooded blue cape that all but obscures his features—unbolts the iron door and leads the way, down the steeply winding back stairs, the usual path by which the woman descends each morning to take her breakfast—a cup of chocolate and a crust of bread—with the Huberts. He enters a room opposite the jailers’ apartment. The woman, close on his heels, follows him, but no sooner does she pass through the open door than she hears it slam shut behind her, and the jagged scrape of an iron bolt imprisons her in the chamber as though she is an animal needing to be caged.

Her heart leaps into her throat as she wheels about to face the sound, only to be brutally spun around again, seized under the armpits by a pair of gendarmes. Her toes scabble against the stone floor and kick at her captors’ shins as she is hauled into the adjacent Hall of Records, where the men bind her hands and arms with cording. But they have not silenced her mouth, and she spews invectives like vomit, calling them curs and sons of whores, insulted when they only chuckle at her distress.

Tossing her head about in search of a champion, her eyes light on the saturnine face and burly figure of Monsieur Breton, the Court Clerk, and suddenly she recalls a conversation with her jailer; Monsieur Hubert had informed her that the secretary would be reading the official pronouncement of her sentence this morning. Surely if there were to be a reprieve she would not have been treated so violently. Aware now of what is to come, her anguished cries echo off the walls and columns of stone.

“*Non, non,* I will not listen to that wicked verdict! I refuse to bend my knee

while you read a judgment rendered by a corrupt Parlement bribed by my enemies to rule against me!”

No sooner do these words issue from her lips than her tormentors attempt to force her to her knees. But she is determined to resist them, and is far fiercer than they have anticipated. She fights back with every ounce of strength until she is caught by the elbows and suspended between the guards like an unruly brat while her legs, kicking angrily beneath her skirts, ineffectually pummel the air.

Monsieur Breton’s words are never heard, drowned out by the screams of the accused. Her efforts to break free of the gendarmes leave her exhausted, and she is nearly hoarse from shouting when she is dragged out of doors into the bright sunlight of the courtyard. A halter is thrown over her neck and she is tethered inside a cart that draws her to the scaffold like a calf driven to market.

What a rabble has gathered to witness her disgrace! If her hands were free she would lift one to her eyes to shield it from the sun. She would gaze at the rooftops and into the windows of the houses across the *rue* from the Palais de Justice, for at every *fenêtre* people are pressed against the glass, ogling her. It is not merely the *canaille*, the riffraff of the capital, who have come out to see her shamed, but members of the aristocracy from which she descends, who paid heavily for the privilege. She does not know what a brisk trade there has been selling prime places both in and out of doors from which to witness the execution of her sentence; does not notice a finely dressed gentleman standing behind one of the windows in the company of a particularly attractive young lady. The courtesan’s back is pressed firmly against his torso and thighs as one of his hands absentmindedly toys with her breast through her blue silk bodice. In the duc de Crillon’s other hand he holds a quizzing glass, usually an accessory for operas and dances, but today it offers a better view of the accused and of her public punishment.

Below the duc, the shadows lengthen as the hour nears noon. The cart draws to a halt near the foot of the scaffold and two gendarmes in their blue coats drag the accused up the wooden staircase to the platform where the *bourreau*, the executioner, awaits. As she fights them every step of the way, they nearly lose their footing, and when they reach the summit she scans the crowd, seeking a friendly face among the thousands of ruddy cheeks and broad grins, among the countless children pressing against the entrance gates and gilt-tipped iron railings that rim the courtyard.

“Save me!” she implores. “Save an innocent woman, a descendant of France’s former kings!” Her eyes are wild with panic and she jerks her body to and fro in an effort to break loose from her bonds. Her cries of despair rend the air, but the people—her countrymen and -women who these past few years she has foolishly accounted her friends—have come for a show.

Like a magician revealing an illusion the *bourreau* whisks a black velvet cloth across a table, and at the sight of his instruments of torture, the accused woman unleashes another torrent of abuse against the judges of the Parlement

and the Cardinal de Rohan.

But her shouts are drowned out by the din of the crowd as the guards begin to disrobe her. For this they must first cut the cords that bind her arms. The steel blade of a knife flashes, drawn from a gendarme's leather sheath, and in an instant her wrists are free and her nails fly, aiming for the faces of her captors.

"Don't worry, *ma chère*," the executioner soothes, in a tone one might use to calm an unruly child, but she is sobbing too loudly to hear him. He removes the whip from the table. "It will all be over very soon."

The sight of the lash sends the woman into another agonized frenzy. She recalls the words of her sentence: *Condemned to be flogged and beaten, naked with rods, by the public executioner ...*

A rough hand grasps the back of her gown, holding it away from her body, and one clean slash of the knife cuts through the layers of silk. But she will not slip her arms from the sleeves, and her flailing fists are too quick for her captors to clasp. The officer warns her, ridiculously, "Stop moving! We do not want to hurt you," but she is like a frightened animal and will not heed.

The sleeves are sliced open, revealing her sweat-stained chemise. The woman tosses her head; errant tendrils fall into her eyes, eyes that are filled with tears of terror and fear. "Snatch me, I beg you, from my executioners!" she cries, reaching toward the onlookers. "It is my own fault that I suffer this ignominy—I had only to speak one name and could have made sure of being hanged instead."

Her back must be exposed in order for the sentence of flogging to be legally fulfilled. With the bravado of a showman at a carnival the lieutenant takes his dagger and splits the laces down the front of her stays. Whistles and catcalls of approval greet his performance. From there it is a simple matter to rend the flimsy batiste of the woman's shift, baring her entire torso and her high breasts.

From his vantage at the window opposite the courtyard the duc de Crillon feels his heartbeat quicken and he pulls the courtesan to him so that her *derrière* presses against his silken breeches. He had used the privilege of rank to secure this optimal view, having written to the cardinal's attorney, Monsieur Target, *I am consumed with curiosity to see this woman scourged with the rods which you, in a manner of speaking, have prepared for her*. The outer rooms of the lawyer's office, those of the duc de Brissac's *hôtel* next door, and many other edifices with a view of the courtyard, are crowded with men and women of means, nibbling macarons and sipping brandy or champagne as they enjoy the ignominious display.

The accused struggles to cover her nakedness; mothers amid the crowd try to shield the eyes of their children; but the two lieutenants grasp the woman's arms, and by extending them, unwittingly pose her in the tableau of a martyr. Derisive laughter from the rabble degenerates into all manner of blasphemous remarks. "Some Madonna," shouts one man. "*I'd* worship her!" hollers another in reply.

The *bourreau* orders the soldiers to spin the woman around so that the hooting will cease and the crowd may witness her flagellation. His victim's guilt or innocence doesn't keep him awake at night; it is not within his purview. At the first crack of the whip upon her bare back, the woman cries out, "Save me, my friends! It is the blood of the Valois they are desecrating!" The lash falls nineteen times more and with each subsequent stroke, the throng becomes less exhilarated, even bored, daring to surmise that the flogging is being carried out in a most perfunctory way. There is not enough blood. A cabbage head, lobbed from within the crowd, glances off the edge of the scaffold. The catcalls are now aimed at the executioner.

"Rather pro forma, that," remarks a disappointed English journalist, who has traveled across the Channel purely to cover the spectacle for his London broadsheet.

The woman would disagree. She can feel the raw welts rising on her skin with every stinging stroke. At last, the torment is over and she collapses to the floorboards in an incoherent blizzard of curses, cries, and tears. Her hair tumbles down her flayed back in loose ringlets.

But her punishment is only half completed. The clamor of the crowd has drowned out the sizzle of the brazier. The lieutenants hoist the woman to her feet to receive the balance of her public penalty. *To be branded upon both shoulders with a hot iron ...* The head has already been heating and the executioner raises it aloft so that the crowd can see the shape of the brand: V for *voleuse*—thief. Some cheer; others gasp; still others can be heard weeping.

There is a moment of dreadful, deafening silence as the *bourreau* approaches the woman with the glowing iron. Behind his hood, his small eyes are grim. As he clasps her by the arm the soldier relinquishes his grip, and in that fleeting moment the prisoner slips from their grasp. She bolts across the scaffold and down the wobbly flight of steps as the executioner, branding iron in hand, gives chase. Tripping on the final step the woman falls headlong, scraping her palms, and begins to writhe in agony from the lashing she has only just received. She rolls away from the scaffold, bumping across the uneven cobbles, as if by doing so she could stop the pain, but she only increases her torment. Her mind is a jumble; her only thought, to escape the executioner.

In this she has no prayer. The *bourreau* quickly hauls her to her knees, pressing the brand into the tender flesh of her left shoulder; a pale bluish vapor floats about her mane of curls. The stench causes two onlookers to vomit onto the paving stones. A nearby child hides her face in her hands.

At that moment the woman's body is seized with such a violent convulsion that the executioner is unable to steady the branding iron. The red-hot instrument misses her back entirely. The second V does not land on her right shoulder but upon the delicate flesh of her breast.

She releases a howl that rattles the glass of the windows above the courtyard and sends a shiver coursing through the spine of the duc de Crillon's inamorata. Several women in the crowd are moved to tears, but they

are nothing to those that streak the prisoner's face. Her eyes widen and her mouth gapes ghoulishly. After another prolonged spasm, she manages to rise, having harnessed all the fire of the Furies. She places her hands, stippled with blood, on the *bourreau's* broad shoulders as if to bravely steady herself. And then with a roar she sinks her teeth into his shoulder, biting through his protective leather vest all the way to the skin.

He emits an involuntary cry of shock.

Turning to the mob, the woman shrieks, "It is the queen! It is the queen who should be here in my place! My only crime is that of having served her too well!" Her spittle sprays the crowd and flecks her chin and lips like wet snow. Overcome with pain, she collapses to the ground as the blue sky above her head appears to turn impenetrably black.

How quickly those who had come to enjoy the woman's punishment take up her cry and martyr her instead! The voices of the rabble begin distinctly at first, cursing *l'Autrichienne*—the Austrian bitch. Within moments they have reached a crescendo. "Marie Antoinette is the real *voleuse*! It is the greedy queen who should have suffered this fate! *Monsieur le bourreau*, why did you not brand *her*?"

ONE

Queen of France

✎ TWELVE YEARS EARLIER ✎

May 8, 1774

TO: COMTE DE MERCY-ARGENTEAU, AMBASSADOR EXTRAORDINARY AND PLENIPOTENTIARY TO THE COURT OF VERSAILLES:

My Dear Mercy,

I understand that the death of my sovereign brother is imminent. The news fills me with both sorrow and trepidation. For as much as I account Antoinette's marriage to the dauphin of France among the triumphs of my reign, I cannot deny a sense of foreboding at my daughter's fate, which cannot fail to be either wholly splendid or extremely unfortunate. There is nothing to calm my apprehensions; she is so young, and has never had any powers of diligence, nor ever will have—unless with great difficulty. I fancy her good days are past.

Maria Theresa

✎ LA MUETTE, MAY 21, 1774 ✎

“My condolences on the passing of His Majesty, Your Majesty.”

“Your Majesty, my condolences on the death of His Majesty.”

“Permit me, *Votre Majesté*, to tender my deepest condolences on the expiration of His Majesty, Louis Quinze.”

One by one they filed past, the elderly ladies of the court in their mandated mourning garb, like a murder of broad black crows in panniered gowns, their painted faces greeting each of us in turn—my husband, the new king Louis XVI, and me. We had been the sovereigns of France for two weeks, but under such circumstances elation cannot come without sorrow.

Louis truly grieved for the old king, his late *grand-père*. As for the others, the straitlaced prudes—*collets-montés*, as I dubbed them—who so tediously offered their respects that afternoon in the black-and-white tiled hall at the hunting lodge of La Muette, I found their sympathy—as well as their expressions of felicitations on our accession to the throne—as false as the blush on their cheeks. They had not loved their former sovereign for many decades, if at all. Moreover, they had little confidence in my husband's ability to rule, and even less respect for him.

“Permettez-moi de vous offrir mes condoléances. J’en suis désolée.” I giggled behind my fan to my devoted friend and attendant Marie Thérèse Louise de Savoie-Carignan, the princesse de Lamballe, mimicking the warble of the interminable parade of ancient crones—centenarians, I called them. “Honestly, when one has passed thirty, I cannot understand how one dares appear at court.” Being eighteen, that twelve-year difference might as well have been an eternity.

I found these old women ridiculous, but there was another cause for my laughter—one that I lacked the courage to admit to anyone, even to my husband. In sober truth, not until today when we received the customary condolences of the nobility had the reality of Papa Roi’s death settled upon my breast. The magnitude of what lay before us, Louis and me, was daunting. I was overcome with nerves, and raillery was my release.

The duchesse d’Archambault approached. Sixty years of rouge had settled into her hollowed cheekbones, and I could not help myself; I bit my lip, but a smile matured into a grin, and before I knew it a chuckle had burbled its way out of my mouth. When she descended into her reverence I was certain I heard her knees creak and felt sure she would not be able to rise without assistance.

“Allow me, Your Majesty, to condole you on the death of the king-that-was.” The duchesse lapsed into a reverie. *“Il était si noble, si gentil ...”*

“Vous l’avez détesté!” I muttered, then whispered to the princesse de Lamballe, “I know for a fact she despised the king because he refused her idiot son a military promotion.” When the duchesse was just out of earshot, I trilled, “So noble, so kind.”

“Your Majesty, it does not become you to mock your elders, especially when they are your inferiors.”

I did not need to peer over my fan to know the voice: the comtesse de Noailles, my *dame d’honneur*, the superintendent of my household while I was dauphine and my de facto guardian. As the youngest daughter of Empress Maria Theresa of Austria, I had come to Versailles at fourteen to wed the dauphin; and had been not merely educated, but physically transformed in order to merit such an august union. Yet, there had still been much to learn and little time in which to master it. The comtesse had been appointed my mentor, to school me in the rigid rituals of the French court. For this I had immediately nicknamed her Madame Etiquette, and in the past four years not a day had gone by that I had not received from her some rebuke over a transgression of protocol. Just behind my right shoulder the princesse de Lamballe stood amid my other ladies. Our wide skirts discreetly concealed another of my attendants, the marquise de Clermont-Tonnerre, who had sunk to her knees from exhaustion. I heard a giggle. The marquise was known to pull faces from time to time and kept all of us in stitches with her ability to turn her eyelids inside out and then flutter them flirtatiously.

“Who are you hiding?” quizzed Madame de Noailles. My ladies’ eyes darted from one to another, none daring to reply.

“*La marquise de Clermont-Tonnerre est tellement fatiguée,*” I replied succinctly.

“That is of no consequence. It is not *comme il faut*. Everyone must stand during the reception.”

I stepped aside. “Madame la marquise, would you kindly rise,” I commanded gently. With the aid of a woman at either elbow she stood, and the vast swell of her belly straining against her stays was as evident as the sheen on her brow. “I believe you know the comtesse de Noailles,” I said, making certain Madame Etiquette could see that the marquise was *enceinte*. “I am not yet a mother, mesdames, although I pray for that day. I can only hope that when it comes, common sense will take precedence over protocol. And as queen, I will take measures to ensure it.” I offered the marquise my lace-edged handkerchief to blot her forehead. “As there is nowhere to sit, you may resume your former position, madame, and my ladies will continue to screen you from disapproving eyes.”

I glanced down the hall, noticing the line of courtiers stopped in front of Louis a few feet away. There was much daubing of eyes, yet only his were genuinely moist. Then I returned my attention to the comtesse de Noailles. We were nose to nose now; and I was no longer an unruly child in her custody. One mother who scolded me at the slightest provocation was sufficient; I had no need of a surrogate. “You and your husband have served France long and faithfully,” I began coolly, “and you have devoted yourselves tirelessly without respite. The time has come, therefore, for you to take your congé. My husband and I will expect you to pack your things and retire to your estate of Mouchy before the week is out.”

Her pinched face turned as pale as a peeled almond. But there was nothing she could say in reply. One did not contradict the will of the Queen of France.

“The princesse de Lamballe will be my new *dame d’honneur*,” I added, noting the expression of surprise in my attendant’s eyes and the modest blush that suffused her cheeks. I had caught her completely unawares, but what better time to reward her loyalty?

The comtesse lowered her gaze and dropped into a deep reverence. “It has been an honor to have served Your Majesty.” The only fissure in her customary hauteur was betrayed by the tremolo in her voice. For an instant, I regretted my decision. Yet I had long dreamed of this moment. From now on, I would be the one to choose, at least within my own household, what was *comme il faut*. As the comtesse rose and made her way along the hall to offer her condolences to the king, I felt as though a storm cloud that had followed me about from palace to palace—Versailles, Compiègne, Fontainebleau—had finally lifted, leaving a vibrant blue sky.

At the hour of our ascension to the throne, after the requisite obsequies from the courtiers, we had fled the scene of Louis XV’s death nearly as fast as our coach could bear us, spending the first nine days of our reign at the Château de Choisy on the banks of the Seine while the innumerable rooms of Versailles were scrubbed free of contagion. Yet I was bursting to return, to begin making

my mark. No one alive could recall when a queen of France had been much more than a dynastic cipher. Maria Theresa of Spain, the infanta who had wed the Sun King, was almost insignificant at court. She spent much of her time closeted in her rooms drinking chocolate and playing cards with her ladies and her dwarves, and had so little rapport with her subjects that when they were starving for bread she suggested that they eat cake instead—this much I had learned from my dear abbé Vermond, who had instructed me in the history of the queens of France when I was preparing to marry the dauphin. The mild-mannered abbé had accompanied me to Versailles as my reader, to offer me spiritual guidance, and he still remained one of my only confidants.

In any case, Maria Theresa of Spain had died nearly a hundred years ago. And her absence from public life had afforded Louis XIV plenty of opportunities to seek companionship in the arms of others. They, not his dull queen, became the arbiters of taste at court.

My immediate predecessor, Marie Leszczyńska, the pious consort of Louis XV who passed away two years before I arrived at Versailles, had been the daughter of a disgraced Polish king, forced to live in exile. She bore Louis many useless daughters, but only one dauphin to inherit the throne—the father of my husband—and he died while his papa still wore the crown. Like the queen before her, she endured a shadowy existence, maintaining her spotless propriety while my husband's *grand-père* flaunted his latest *maîtresse en titre*. No one noticed what she wore or how she dressed her hair. Instead, it was Madame la marquise de Pompadour who had defined the fashion in all things for a generation. And then Madame du Barry, Louis XV's last mistress, set the tone, but there was no queen to rival her—only me. And I had failed miserably, never sure of myself, always endeavoring to find my footing; desperate to fascinate a timid husband who could not bring himself to consummate our marriage. I had wasted precious time by allowing the comtesse du Barry to exert her influence, over the court and over Papa Roi, much to the consternation of my mother.

Yet I was determined to no longer be a disappointment. Not to Maman. Not to France. In the aftermath of Louis XV's demise, the comtesse du Barry was now consigned to a convent. Her faithful followers at court, the "Barryistes," would simply have to accustom themselves to the absence of her bawdy wit and gaudy gowns.

The condolences of the nobility at La Muette marked the end of the period of full mourning. When the last of the ancient courtiers had risen, the king and I made our way outside to the courtyard where the royal coach awaited us. I dared not voice my thoughts to Louis but I felt as though we had spent the past ten days in Purgatory and now, as the gilded carriage clattered over the gravel and out onto the open road toward Versailles where we would formally begin our reign, we were finally on our way to Heaven.

I had first entered the seat of France's court through the back route in every way—as a young bride traveling in a special berline commissioned by Louis

XV to transport me from my homeland. How eager he had been to show me Versailles, from the Grand Trianon with its pink marble porticoes, to the pebbled *allées* that led past the canals and around the fountains all the way to the grand staircase and the imposing château that his great-*grand-père* the Sun King had transformed from a modest hunting *boîte* into an edifice that would rival all other palaces in Europe. And oh, how disappointed I had been on that dreary afternoon: The fountains were dry, the canals cluttered with debris, and the hallways and chambers of the fairyland château reeked of stale urine.

How different now the aspect before me as we approached the palace from the front via the Ministers' Courtyard. The imposing gateway designed by Mansart loomed before us, its gilded spikes glinting in the soft afternoon sunlight. I rolled open the window of the carriage and peered out. Then, turning back to my husband, giddy with anticipation I exclaimed, "Tell me the air smells sweeter, *mon cher!*"

"Sweeter than what?" Louis looked as if he had a bellyache, or a stitch in his side from a surfeit of brisk exertion. As neither could have been the case, "What pains you, Sire?" I asked. I rested my gloved hand in his. He made no reply but the pallor on his face was the same greenish hue as I recalled from our wedding day some four years earlier. He was terrified of what awaited him, fearful of the awful responsibility that now rested entirely upon his broad shoulders. And as much as I desired to be a helpmeet in the governance of the realm, I was no more than his consort. Queens of France were made for one thing only. And *that* responsibility, I was painfully aware, I had thus far failed to fulfill.

I pressed Louis's hand in a gesture of reassurance. Just at that moment, the doors of the carriage were sprung open and the traveling steps unfolded by a team of efficient footmen. "*Sois courageux,*" I murmured. "And remember—there is no one to scold you anymore. The crown is yours."

The Ministers' Courtyard and the Cour Royale just inside the great gates were once again pulsing with people. The vendors had returned to their customary locations and were already doing a brisk business renting hats and swords to the men who wished to visit Versailles but were unaware of the etiquette required. The various *marchandes* of ribbons and fans and *parfums* had set up their stalls as well. I wondered briefly where they had been during the past two weeks. How had they put bread on their tables while the court was away?

My husband adjusted the glittering Order of the Holy Spirit which he wore pinned to a sash across his chest. But for the enormous diamond star, his attire was so unprepossessing—his black mourning suit of ottoman striped silk was devoid of gilt embroidery, and his silver shoe buckles were unadorned—that he could have easily been mistaken for a wealthy merchant. As we were handed out of the carriage into the bright afternoon, at the sight of my husband a great cheer went up. "*Vive le roi Louis Seize!*" How the French had hated their old king—and how they loved their new sovereign. *Louis le Désiré* they called my husband.

Louis reddened. I would have to remind him that kings did not blush, even if they were only nineteen. “*Et mon peuple—my good people—vive la reine Marie Antoinette!*” he exclaimed, leading me forth as if we were stepping onto a parquet dance floor instead of the vast gravel courtyard.

They did not shout quite as loudly for me. I suppose I had expected they would, and managed to mask my disappointment behind a gracious smile. When I departed Vienna in the spring of 1770 my mother had not so much exhorted, but *instructed* me to make the people of France love me. I dared not tell her that they weren’t fond of foreigners, and that even at court there were those who employed a spiteful little nickname for me—*l’Autrichienne*—a play on words, crossing my nationality with the word for a female dog. Didn’t Maman realize that France had been Austria’s enemy for *nine hundred years* before they signed a peace treaty with the Hapsburgs in 1756? Make the French love me? It was my fondest hope, but I had so many centuries of hatred to reverse.

The courtyards teemed with the excitement of a festival day. Citizens, noisy, curious, and jubilant, swarmed about us as we made our way toward the palace. A flower seller offered me a bouquet of pink roses, but I insisted on choosing only a single perfect stem and paying for it out of my own pocket. Sinking to her knees in gratitude, she told me I was “three times beautiful.” I thanked her for the unusual compliment and tried to press on through the crowd. After several minutes of jostling and much waving and smiling and doffing of hats, we finally reached the flat pavement of the Marble Courtyard and the entrance to the State Apartments.

For days I had imagined how it would feel to enter Versailles for the first time as Queen of France. I rushed up the grand marble staircase clutching my inky-hued mourning skirts, anxious to see *my* home, as I now thought of it—*my* palace. Would I view it through new eyes, now that I was no longer someone waiting—now that I had *become*?

Like a caterpillar bursting from its chrysalis, I emerged into the Salon d’Hercule, with its soaring pilasters topped with gilded acanthus leaves, and glided airily through the State Apartments, appraising them with the keen eyes of ownership, noting immediately which wall coverings and upholstery were faded or threadbare—or which simply were not to my taste—and were therefore in need of replacement. I had nearly forgotten how much the chimneys smoked. Something would have to be done about the intolerable soot that coated every surface with a patina of black grime every time a fire was lit.

By now I was trailed by a phalanx of attendants, and suddenly I found myself giving them orders, commanding this *petite armée* to remove this and cover that and “Send for the royal *tapissiers!*” *Everything* would be redecorated, befitting the splendor of the glorious new reign of Louis XVI! My imagination was swirling with color. The Queen’s Apartments had not been occupied in six years, and to put it bluntly, Marie Leszczyńska had not been a stylish woman. If I was to give birth to the future king of France in her former bedchamber,