

CHAPTER 1

Here is my first memory. I am five and Mama's smooth hand enfolds mine. She stands beside Papa, while our governess holds my little brother, Louis-Joseph. Our breath clouds up before us, but we're not cold because we are wrapped in ermine-lined cloaks. I love the softness against my cheek.

My family and I stand in front of the palace at Versailles in the minister's courtyard, encircled by the Swiss guard, our private security force. We are *among* people — not on some high-up balcony — and this has never happened to me before.

I love the smell and sounds of the crowd. All kinds of people are here. Some are very well dressed. Others are ragged and without coats or cloaks on this frigid day. But all are happy. Excited.

This mass of people is what interests me the most. The crowd is enormous. Huge! It spills out from the rings of courtyards as far as I can see. I wouldn't have ever imagined that so many people even existed.

"People have come all the way from Paris just to witness this," my father remarks to my mother.

"Such numbers," she murmurs, her eyes narrowing thoughtfully

as she takes in the crowd, her royal subjects. Worry flickers across her face. Why fret on such a festive occasion? It puzzles me.

“Shall we invite them all back for a feast afterward?” I suggest, thinking that she might be concerned with the matter of how they will eat. “Wouldn’t that be fun?”

“Do you think the palace is big enough to hold them all?” Mama asks with a soft smile.

“Of course it is,” I say. “It’s the biggest place on earth! Isn’t it?”

“It must surely be one of the largest,” she agrees, nodding, “but, even so, not large enough for such a multitude as this. At least I don’t think so.”

“Please, Mama,” I beg, “these people are our subjects, aren’t they? Isn’t it our duty to feed them?”

Mama hugs me to her, rubbing my back. “My *Mousseline Serieuse*.” That’s her nickname for me. It means “serious muslin.” She explained to me once that muslin is a fabric that appears quite dainty and delicate but is actually very strong and sturdy. She says I’m like that.

Suddenly with one voice, a single awestruck breath, the crowd gasps, then coos in awe. *Ah!*

Mama squeezes my hand, and I follow her gaze into the vastness of the cornflower-blue sky. An enormous azure-blue hot air balloon floats across the billowing clouds. It’s decorated with a golden fleur-de-lis, the royal symbol of my family, the Bourbons. Below the balloon hangs an open vessel that reminds me of a wooden bathtub. I can barely make out the figures of the two men standing in it. They are so high that they look like dolls in an open case.

Around me, everyone murmurs. *How wonderful! How beautiful!*
What heroes!

“They’ve floated here all the way from the Tuileries Gardens,”
Mama tells me. “This has never been done before.”

I gaze up into her lovely blue eyes and can see the light of excitement in them. Her mounds of blonde curls are done up even higher than usual in honor of the event. A miniature version of the hot air balloon sits at the top of her coif. It seems playful and modest compared to the tiny, many-masted ship she wore in her hair last week in homage to France’s most recent naval victory at sea.

“How will they get down?” I ask.

Papa hears me. Turning, he smiles. “Watch, Marie-Thérèse,” he says. “You’ll see. We are entering a remarkable new era of science.”

Around me, the onlookers are ecstatic or terrified. Many appear to be a little of both. A woman faints. A grown man shields his eyes as though afraid he will be blinded by the beauty of the balloon.

The hot air balloon is fascinating, but it is not what I am watching. Instead, I observe the crowd as *they* observe the balloon. I have an urge to break from my mama’s grip and disappear into the field of people, become one with them. I wouldn’t dare, of course. But still, I long for the warmth of the French people. My people.

I observe the children laughing and playing, picnicking with their families on the lawn. How I envy them — their freedom.

What would it be like? I wonder.