

**THEN**

5.

On the evening of May 25, 1827, the bevy of carriages before the entrance to the Palazzo Ducale started all the way from the bottom of the Avenue that Ennemond Alexandre Petitot, Court Architect, had designed in 1759 in order to offer his city its own Champs-Élysées. A broad and central tree-lined avenue, one hundred thirty feet across, capable of accommodating as many as six carriages at the same time and, on either side, two more modest streets, decorated with benches. Ending the perspective was a lovely building, a graceful Casino decorated with large window panes, designed to be used as a place for social gatherings, and topped by a terrace with a balustrade, from which one could see the fabulous beauty of the city and its monumental buildings, but also the gentle countryside just outside the city walls.

That evening, all along the terrace pressed up against each other was a crowd of onlookers who had paid a huge amount of ducats to guarantee for themselves a view of the *beau monde* that was making its way to the Duchess's Grand Spring Ball.

If just one of those onlookers had gone to the trouble of bringing binoculars, the way one does when one goes to theater, they would have been able to aim them at the rather plain-looking carriage, dark mahogany in color and unadorned, that was being driven by a single coachman, wearing blue and red livery, and with no servant to be seen on the footboard.

The carriage in question belonged to Signor Baldassarre Contini, an official of the Duchy and rather mindful of the family budget, but also of his dignity as a courtier; so, yes, it was a modest carriage, but there was nothing really reproachable about it. Sitting on the red seats that had lost much of their sheen were a trio that would have kept the onlooker's binoculars glued to the windows.

The line of carriages advanced very slowly, and there was all the time in the world to dedicate oneself to scrutinizing the passengers.

There were three of them.

Sitting on the back seat in the most important position, which she was entitled to, was Madame Melania Contini, the wife of Signor Contini, who was showing evident signs of impatience. Her large bust rose and fell under the velvet of the ruches, and the pearl necklace she wore tinkled against the cameo she had fastened to her neck. Madame Melania Contini didn't want a single inch of her skin to remain visible at the Duchess's Balls – not because she wouldn't have liked it to, but because, as a woman of the world, she had perfected her own personal seductive strategy which, on the basis of her age, from which she subtracted the ages of the young girls who, unfortunately, populated those balls, was decidedly aimed at giving her an air of mystery .

There was one drawback to her choice of attire though: in late May, with the sort of heat that suffocated Parma, attacking it from all sides, breathing upon the city the sweltering heat of the great Po Valley, as well as its mosquitoes, there was no pleasure in wearing a velvet dress with a high neckline and long, tight sleeves. And even more unfortunately, one of the mosquitoes that had chosen to leave the countryside and travel to the city had been tormenting her for several minutes now.

"How long is it going to take for our coachman to get past these peasants?" Madame Melani Contini burst out.

Signor Baldassarre Contini, a patient man devoted to playing cards and preserving the family's harmony, quickly waved the copy of the *Gazzetta di Parma* that he always had with

him to while away the time, but that in the end had many other uses as well.

The person who would immediately have drawn the attention of the onlooker and stopped the fluctuating movement of his or her binoculars instead showed no signs of having heard. That person was a young lady of rather modest appearance, but who immediately caught one's eye.

She was seated, as was proper, on the foldaway seat, while Madame Contini and Signor Baldassare her husband faced one another on the two longer seats.

The large skirt billowing with underskirts she was wearing fanned out from the small stool so that she resembled a water lily. The young lady had wisely arranged her pannier under the roomy skirt to one side, Signor Contini's, of course, so as not to disturb Madame Melania's large thighs – so large they almost touched the seat opposite her.

As the young lady was rather well-mannered, she would never have forgotten to express her solidarity to her Host, under normal conditions, that is.

But that evening, Clementina Countess Mora of Castelgioioso's eyes were glued to the other carriages, the faces, and the marvelous hairstyles and evening gowns she tried to glimpse from the windows. And by pushing her slender and supple figure up against the carriage door, she even tried to spot the lights that announced the Palazzo Ducale at the bottom of the avenue.

Clementina shouldn't have been that excited.

But she was.

Her father's death and the sadness that had followed were hidden in a small dark corner of her heart, overwhelmed by the extraordinary excitement of being invited to the Duchy's most important Ball of the Season. It was a Ball that every young girl in Parma put all her hopes in. A ball filled with handsome young Hussars in uniform, with their purple dolmans decorated with gold braids. A Ball where a girl could hope to find a husband.

Clementina owed everything to Signor Contini because, without his help, she would never have been able to get inside the closed doors of the Palazzo Ducale del Giardino. Especially on an occasion such as this one, that everyone wanted to go to.

Her young heart was filled with myriad emotions. The first of these was curiosity, followed by hope, then fear.

Although Clementina Mora was not a fearful girl, the idea of being introduced at Court made her rather nervous. Clementina's mother had passed away when she was still a young girl, and she couldn't remember anything about her. She had been raised by an unmarried aunt who was also a Marchioness, who came from Volterra and had sacrificed her virginity for the daughter of a sister who had died an untimely death, as well as her amorous inclinations for Count Ilario Mora, who had been careful to show he wasn't aware of them.

The small Villa dei Conti Mora, an early nineteenth-century building in the fertile Parma countryside, contained an unspecified number of rooms, and every evening, once the embroidery or reading session had ended, Aunt Odilia and Count Ilario would accidentally brush past each other in the hallway, as each of them headed to their respective rooms. Clementina had for some time been sleeping in a tiny room that separated her aunt's bedroom from her father's, and served as a deterrent for any notion of transgression that might have crossed the minds of the members of her family. Her role as a family mediator, so to speak, had made her extremely sensitive to the nuances of emotions, to words left unsaid, to gestures not made, and in general to all the feelings that people showed without actually speaking.

She had understood that it was the closest thing to the truth that one could find in human behavior.

The education that Count Mora had chosen for his daughter was based on a solid pillar of modesty. And it enriched her with the cardinal virtue of patience.

Clementina did not attend boarding school.

Instead, she was home-schooled by her aunt, together with the Confessor Don Marchetti, who every Sunday said Mass in the Villa Chapel before the families holding their hats. She had thus been taught Latin, Greek, Classical Poetry, and Geography, the latter of which was the passion of her father, who enjoyed giving her some idea of just how great his knowledge was by pointing out to her on the large globe in his study the faraway lands of Asia, China, the Americas. What the Count didn't know was that at the age of sixteen Clementina, on the recommendation of a family friend who had grown fond of that young and intelligent girl, a prisoner in her own home, and who had secretly brought her many forbidden books, had already read *Ivanhoe* by Sir Walter Scott, and Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, although she hadn't understood much of it. But the book that had impressed her the most and that she was absolutely devoted to was by a certain Wolfgang von Goethe, and it told the moving story of a very pure and passionate love which had forever been branded in Clementina's heart.

Clementina had read the book over and over again so often that the pages of that tiny book with a dark blue cover and the title in golden lettering had partially fallen out of the cloth binding; to hold them together she had been forced to fasten them somehow so they wouldn't fly about everywhere. The title of the short novel was *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, and what Clementina wanted most of all was to meet an attentive, caring, kind, and loving man just like him. She – Clementina would reason during the night, her eyes wide open, motionless in her bed that kept the members of her family at a safe distance – imagined the life she would have, and had no intention of making the same mistake as Lotte. Like Lotte, she would allow her lover to surprise her while feeding a group of lovely children, but instead of avoiding any intimacy with the young Werther, she would grant him a bit more conversation.

Although her imagination was excellent, she could not imagine anything beyond that conversation. Nor, after all, did Clementina know much about what went on in a bedroom once the door had been closed.

“Would you be so kind as to tell your Coachman that if he doesn't hurry up by the time we get to the ball it'll be over?” Madame Melania burst out, striking the armrest with her fan. Signor Contini tapped hard on the window behind him three or four times, at which point the Coachman pulled the reins on the two-wheeled horse-drawn carriage, and after veering dangerously to one side, moved into the freer lane of the Avenue.

The result of Madame Melania's outburst was that the Signori Contini's carriage only had to wait an hour before it drew to a halt before the entrance to the Palazzo Ducale.

As the trotting of the black horses quickened, Clementina's heart beat faster. And at the same time, her small white hands covered in long blue-gray gloves were frozen.

Her gloves were her immediate concern. And what if someone, a blond Hussar perhaps, noticed that the tip of the index finger had been slightly darned?

Her second concern, no less worrying, instead regarded a weightier subject.

The waltz.

Clementina knew, through the mysterious ways that young girls often come to know the secrets of the world they dream of belonging to, that this very modern and rather shocking dance was danced at the Court. She knew because she had read it on the sly a few hours earlier bent over Signor Contini's face as he snored under the pages of the *Gazzetta di Parma*, just as he did every afternoon.

Signor Contini, in fact, out of the kindness of his heart, had thought well to have the young Clementina, who had lost her father six months before, and her mother when she was just one year old, come to their house one week before the Ball. Signor Contini believed that the fact that there was no female figure in the Mora household who could explain society's rituals would have undermined the young girl's education, which was necessary if the introduction to Court society was to achieve the hoped-for results.

And that was to find her a husband.

Her Aunt Odilia, the Marchioness, wasn't even taken into consideration by the wise Contini who, being an old friend of Count Ilario, had been able to see the sloppiness and coarseness of Clementina's aunt with his own eyes.

Madame Melania, instead, knew everything there was to know about the Court. Actually, her husband thought, she was a real authority. Although she did not possess an aristocratic title, yet certain that she would obtain one thanks to the merits of her husband Baldassarre in his role as administrative official of the Sovereign Neipperg, Madame Melania had wasted no time. She had studied all the rules very closely. And there weren't many of them, as Duchess Marie Louise, who had been the wife of the most powerful man on Earth for some four years, as well as Empress of the French people, had not brought with her from Paris any pomposity.

It is true that her admirers went around saying that, no sooner had she arrived, in April 1816, after descending from the carriage decorated with ribbons before the Duomo, she had wept because of the ovations of the people. There were some, however, closer to the baldachin transported on the shoulders of the canons of the Brotherhood, who said they had seen her swollen face streaming with tears, and not just because of the incident one of the Pages had caused involving the train of her cloak.

What people actually said, and many believed it to be rather plausible, was that after the Court of Napoleon, the small Duchy with its population of 30,000 seemed quite modest to her. And one of the Ladies-in-Waiting, a Frenchwoman, had imprudently stated to her personal maid that the Duchess often said, there was no doubt about it, that she had come to live in the ugliest Court in the whole of Europe.

Through the attics, hallways, and servants' stairways, those awkward words had fallen upon the ears of the close circle that had formed around Filippo Magawly Cerati, the Irish Count whom her father the Emperor had brought over from Austria as Minister of the State so that he could get things ready for that inexperienced daughter, who had felt her being sent away was an offense to the city.

But enough years had gone by for the inexperienced and bored Duchess to turn into a beloved Sovereign, a learned one, and capable of turning her Parma into the most elegant Court in Europe.

The rules of the Introduction to Court society had been described in great detail by Madame Melania to the young Clementina, during a whole week of preparations, which included the selection and alteration of a ball gown (one of Signora Contini's old gowns, altered by the cook who could also sew), but most importantly the practices of curtsying, how to use a fan, and how to make gracious comments, which always had to seem innocent.

Clementina had humbly accepted each suggestion, learned all the rules, and had practiced every sort of curtsy. A half-neck bow, for the Hussars, bending her right knee for the Duchess, bending her left knee for the Bishop, the Abbess, and the High Prelates, and a half-curtsey for the eldest Ladies-in-Waiting of the Court.

And, lastly, thanks to the kind generosity of Signor Contini, she had experienced the thrill of the kiss on the hand, which seemed easy, but was instead a social trap capable of ruining many an unmarried young girl. Excess had to in every way be avoided.

One had to know how to gauge the exact amount of time in which to leave one's hand amongst the fingers of the gentleman making that kind gesture. A few seconds more and the kiss on the hand became an unpleasant thing and might even irreparably undermine the young lady's virtue and her chances of marrying well.

Not to mention the difficulty in compiling the List of Dances conceded to the various gentlemen, both because the booklet, which usually had a mother-of-pearl cover, was so small that only the gentleman's initials could fit on its short lines, and because one had to write in it while standing, and rather quickly to boot.

For Clementina that dance card in the form of a booklet was what had excited her the most, after the kiss on the hand by the overweight and bald Signor Contini.

She had practiced writing in it with a short sharpened pencil, but above all she had amused herself by imagining the faces of those who would invite her to dance.

Except that the chance discovery a few hours earlier, over Signor Contini's dozing face, had caused her to despair.

Madama Melania, in fact, had taught her the quadrille, but she had made no mention at all of the new and shocking dance that, according to the *Gazzetta*, would be danced at the Court that evening.

Duchess Marie Louise loved anything that was new, and there were rumors that she even read the works of the Marquis de Sade – now that was something to really be shocked about. The fact that the new dance involved physical contact between the dancers, that is to say, the touching of the lower parts of the dancers' bodies, and the lady's legs turning between those of the gentlemen's, had truly thrilled her.

And then there was the fact that, since the dancers in the ballroom would all be turning at the same time as the single couple on its own, the new dance was designed to make people turn their heads. And everyone knows that if a young girl turns her head anything can happen.

So excited was she by all these thoughts that Countess Clementina failed to notice that they'd already arrived at their destination. And so, when the Coachman brought the carriage to a halt, and the Duchess's pages in red and gold livery lunged forward to open the doors of Signor Contini's carriage, Clementina's heart almost stopped beating.

"Quick, quick," Madame Melania said to Clementina, as her large dark blue shape with strawberry and black lace would not be able to move until the foldaway seat had been stowed away.

Clementina gathered up her skirts, but most of all she mustered up her courage, and got ready to face, with her tiny foot in a cream-colored silk shoe, the perils of the footboard. Clementina's shoes had belonged to her dear mother; and thus shone with the splendors of

Empire style that, although it may seem impossible, had also reached as far as the Parma countryside.

Seeing her dear mother's shoes somehow comforted the young lady.

And when she lifted her head covered with tiny blonde corkscrew curls that naughtily seemed to want to escape her hairstyle, Clementina abandoned her fears and thought only about what needed to be done.

Be happy.

She waited respectfully for her paladins to take their places before her and, when Madame Melania's outfit ceased showing signs of suffering and the train had been arranged on the floor of the vestibule so that the folds were properly positioned, she took her place behind the small retinue.

They climbed the steps pressed inside a crowd of joyful people. Clementina felt dizzy from all the voices, outfits, gestures. A gentleman in uniform accidentally brushed up against a fold in her dress; he quickly stopped, in a quick bow of apology, and then vanished, sucked back into the crowd, before she could reply. It was at that moment that she clearly understood that there was one rule of society that Madame Melania hadn't taught her: that one must have one's reflexes ready.

At last they entered the first room on the Piano Nobile, and the emotion Clementina felt left her breathless. Soaring above them was a flock of plaster birds carved into the peacock blue ceiling, each of them in a different position, and each surrounded by a festoon of flowers. Her head started to spin. And when she found herself before the statue of the Duchess she would have curtsied before her if the helping arm of one of the pages hadn't pushed her back into the stream of people, in the direction of the next room, the most beautiful one of all in the Palazzo Ducale del Giardino, which bore the name "Aetas Felicior," that is, to the good times past. Clementina entered hopefully. And she was not disappointed.

The Ballroom was a fairy-tale forest. Before Clementina's eyes were enchanted landscapes, thick woods with immense trees, and clearings filled with bright green grass. In between those thick trunks, next to brooks flowing with crystal-clear water, horses with sturdy thighs chased after each other, mounted by bare-legged knights wearing golden helmets. Lily-white nymphs terrified by the knights that raced toward unknown destinies embraced herms the color of fire. One shining knight stopped and let himself be surrounded by naiads shrouded in mustard-colored silk, fleur-de-lys, and wind, yielding languidly to their caresses. Clementina was enchanted, and quickly moved her gaze to the opposite wall, where it was clear that the naiads were nothing compared to the true love that she recognized in the scene where the Knight himself, heedless of the danger, rushed to free a lovely young damsel who was only slightly more clothed than the others. Grabbing her with his strong arms he lifted her up in the air, soaring high the way loves does, taking her with him. Clementina watched enthralled as they plunged into the sparkling waters of a river that pulsated with bright blues and mysterious corollas.

"Come on," said Madame Melania, as soon as the swaying of the crowd gave her a chance to move up close to Clementina.

But the stream of people pushed Clementina far away from Madame Melania, and any attempt at encouragement was lost.