

Renaissance Discipline

By

Renee Rose

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Loving Lucia

Renaissance Discipline Part One

By

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Loving Lucia

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Chapter One

Italy, 1482

Offering a daughter for marriage sounded much like hawking a horse at market. Marco sat back and listened to Don Edoardo's presentation with a healthy dose of skepticism. Beauty and obedience had already been promised. So far, not enough to tempt him.

"She knows every aspect of wine-making—she's been by my side since she was just a tot, and she's smart as a whip. With her help, you'll be producing the finest wines in just a few years."

Ah. The best argument saved for last. Don Edoardo knew just how to intrigue him.

The older man waved his hand for their wine goblets to be refilled. Marco watched him with a critical eye. Like all *nouveau-riche*, he was invested in raising himself socially. Marrying one of his daughters to Marco would do just that. As the Count of Parma, Marco's title would elevate Don Edoardo by relation. And he was offering a hefty dowry, nearly 450 florins. But the real clincher was his daughter's experience with wine-making.

"I can't believe you'd want the competition, Don Edoardo," he said drily.

Edoardo dismissed that with a wave of his ringed fingers. "I can't produce enough to satisfy the demand. There's room for other wine-makers in Italy."

Marco sighed. He really hadn't wanted a wife. Being a widower suited him just fine. But he was sorely tempted. And the girl was beautiful—he'd seen her when he was admitted. She had long, wavy red hair and big brown eyes. Her features were delicate, but she looked healthy and strong.

"You have two daughters, correct?"

"Yes, my lord—twins. The daughter I am offering to you is Lucia. She is the more...*practical* of the two. My other daughter, Celia, is in Florence right now with her aunt."

He wondered what that meant, exactly. "Is it true what they say about redheads?"

"What's that, my lord?"

"They are willful and stubborn."

He appreciated that Don Edoardo seemed to consider his answer. "Yes. I believe that's

true. But you'll find she takes correction well."

Not spoiled then, that was good. He swirled a sip of wine around his mouth to savor the full flavor. Don Edoardo had brought out one of his best—full-bodied and aged at least twenty years.

The truth was he could use the gold. He'd sunk all his capital into converting his land to vineyards and had yet to reap any profit from it. "May I meet her?"

Don Edoardo beamed at him. "Yes, of course, my lord." The jeweled hand beckoned to a servant.

The girl in question appeared shortly, and he stood for introductions. She curtsied prettily when he bowed over her hand. She had poise—she did not appear uncomfortable, nor did she blush or look like she wanted to giggle. He liked that about her. Mayhap she would be different than his first wife; after all, Edoardo said Lucia was eighteen, and his first wife had been only fifteen when they were wed.

"Would you permit us a walk in the garden?"

"Be my guest." Don Eduardo smiled magnanimously.

Marco offered his arm to the pretty girl and started off down the path to the garden. It was springtime, and the garden was just beginning to bloom—cascades of flowering vines spilling over every trellis and wall, pockets of herbs and flowers packed between the paths.

The young lady stole surreptitious glances at him from under her lashes.

"Do you know why your father asked me here, Lucia?"

"Yes, my lord."

"And what is your opinion on the matter?"

Surprise flitted across her face, but she quickly smoothed her face and lowered her eyes. Then she looked at him sidelong and flashed a dimpled grin that was astonishing in the way it lit up her face. "Verily, my lord, I am quite relieved now that I've met you."

"How so?"

"Well, I feared a doddering old man. And now that I find you're neither doddering, nor old, nor fat, nor bald..." She beamed a smile at him, and he couldn't help but laugh.

"And if I had been?"

She smoothed her face over again, the moment for conspiratorial confidences passing. "I would honor my father's wishes."

Damn it all, he couldn't help but like her. There was no denying she was everything her father had promised. He saw intelligence, wit and good humor. She was also graceful, poised and perfectly mannered. Yes, Don Edoardo had made him an offer he simply could not refuse. Mayhap he could marry her, install her at his villa and still manage to maintain the lifestyle he'd grown accustomed to in the ten years since his first wife's death.

* * *

Lucia paced the length of her chamber, twisting her fingers together. The count would arrive soon to consummate the marriage. She drew a deep breath and blew it out slowly, trying to slow her heartrate.

The count had disappointed her father by denying him the grand wedding he had imagined. Her new husband had refused to return at a later date, and insisted they be married before the magistrate that very day. The only concession her father had won was that they would stay for a banquet on the morrow. So her father had set the villa on end today in preparation for it.

For her part, the biggest disappointment was her sister Celia's absence, as she would not have the chance to say goodbye to her. But her sister was in Florence with their aunt, attempting to entice a marriage of her own.

She paced about in nothing but a robe, with her hair brushed and spilling over her shoulders. There was nothing more to do but wait for her new husband to join her. She wasn't afraid. Not really. But she did have a case of the nerves. These were moments when she wished her mother was still alive to help her prepare. Fortunately, the serving wenches in the kitchen had explained everything to her. So she was as prepared as a virgin could be on her wedding night. Or so she hoped.

The door opened, and she sucked in her breath. The count really was a handsome man. Tall and hale, with dark curly hair and a square jaw, he had warm brown eyes that observed her with an unnerving attention. She had a feeling not much escaped his notice. He had a gruffness about him that made her cautious, but she was sure that over time, she'd learn how to appease him.

He said nothing, but sat down on the edge of the bed and pulled off his boots, then took

off his shirt. The sight of the sculpted muscles of his chest and arms, the broad shoulders tapering to a narrow waist sent a flush of heat through her body.

"Come here, Lucia."

She walked to him, her gaze fluttering up to his face. She allowed her hips their natural sway, hoping she looked alluring. When she reached him, she let her robe fall open and knelt down at his feet, placing her hand on the bulge between his legs. It jumped under her hand. Following the instructions from the serving wenches, she freed his length from his pants. It was long and hard, which she knew to mean he was aroused by her. She hesitated just a little before she leaned forward and put her mouth awkwardly over the tip of it. He made a low growling sound and shuddered.

Careful not to touch him too much with her teeth, she took him a little farther into her mouth and then slid him out, then repeated the action. A salty tang pricked her tongue. She tried folding her lips over her teeth, and slid him in and out of her mouth that way, her lips making a tight sheath around his girth. From the way he jerked and groaned, it seemed to please him.

But before she could get much farther with this new activity, he stopped her, putting a hand on her head and pulling out.

"Have you done this before, Lucia?" he asked in a strange, strangled voice.

Was he questioning her virtue? "Certainly not!" She surged to her feet, flushing with anger.

Nothing would be more disgraceful than to have her new husband challenge her innocence. Her father would throw her out, and his own reputation would be ruined along with hers. Was the count playing some kind of game with her father and his money?

"I am the maid my father promised!" She glared at him. "How dare you suggest otherwise?" Because she was afraid, and that made her angry, she drew back her hand and slapped his face.

His eyebrows slammed down, and he trapped both her wrists in one large hand. He pulled her in to stand between his knees. "You will not strike me. *Ever*. Take off your robe." He released her hands so she could comply.

She spluttered, still ready to defend her questioned virtue, but when she met his determined stare, she shut her mouth. He regarded her with a face made of stone. Reluctantly, she lowered the robe, first over one shoulder, then the other, letting it fall to her feet. Though

wretchedly exposed, she made no move to cover herself, his look pinning her in place.

He took hold of her wrist again and tugged her upper body down beside him on the bed, bending her over his knee with her bottom upturned.

She went rigid, realizing his intention. He started to paddle her with the flat of his hand, and she choked on her own breath. As the sting of the slaps sank in, her indignation returned. She kicked her legs and tried to wriggle free. The count threw his free leg over her legs, scissoring them between his strong limbs. With a hand tightly around her low back, he effectively pinned her, and the fire he lit upon her backside was enough that she was starting to feel afraid, even though he used no implement but his hand.

Slap after slap landed on her poor backside, mostly concentrated on the lower part, so the pain of repetition compounded her distress. She started to lose her composure. But she refused to plead and beg—she had been in the right.

He continued punishing the tender flesh of her backside. Maybe striking him had been a mistake... As his hand smacked her naked flesh, coming down in the exact same spot over and over again, she gave up on being stubborn or even stoic.

"Please," she whimpered. "Please...please. Please stop."

His hand stilled, but to her embarrassment, he continued to hold her over his lap that way, her bottom bared and presented to him, his hand resting on her blazing cheeks. Her entire body trembled and worse, she knew he felt it.

"Lucia."

She didn't answer.

"I realize I gave offense. It was not intended, and I apologize. But even so, you will treat me with respect. Do you understand?"

She hadn't expected an apology. "Yes, my lord," she mumbled.

"Good girl." He patted her sore bottom. Lifting her up, he sat her on his knee. Her chin quivered and her eyes burned, but she was determined not to cry. She still felt angry, but she was not foolish enough to give him any challenge. She carefully kept her eyes lowered on the hands in her lap.

"So...who was it who instructed you on that particular....method?"

"What?" It took her a moment to remember what had happened before the mortification of her spanking. "Oh....the serving wenches in the kitchens explained how I should...do it."

"I see," he said slowly. He looked as if he were gathering his thoughts. "I confess I was just a trifle surprised because it's an act more commonly performed by...well, *puttanas*, rather than one's lady wife."

Lucia clapped her hand over her mouth in horror and felt her face grow hot with shame. She'd been betrayed by those wenches. Oh, how they must be laughing at her expense right now! She burst into tears. She had just dishonored herself horribly in front of her new husband. What would her father think of her if he heard?

The count's arm tightened around her waist, and he squeezed her in closer to him. She covered her face with her hands and sobbed.

"Shh, *bambina*. Shh. I was shocked, but that does not mean I am not extraordinarily *pleased* to have a wife who is willing to do such things for me." His voice was coaxing now.

She peeked out from her hands at him. He gazed at her kindly. She tried to discern whether he was having more of a laugh at her expense.

"In truth. Really—I am delighted. Thank you for attempting to pleasure me that way."

A fresh flush crept to her cheeks. A new heat—one between her legs, joined that of her buttocks.

The count gave her another squeeze. "We've really started off on the wrong foot, haven't we? Shall we begin again and pretend none of this happened?"

She sniffed and nodded. She was grateful for his attempt to help her recover her pride, because truly, she was completely demoralized. All her life, she'd been raised with the idea of making a good marriage, being an honorable wife and making her husband's life easier. And here she had just disgraced herself sexually and been spanked all in the first hour of being alone with her new husband.

He met her eyes as his hand came up slowly to stroke the curve of her breast, his thumb rubbing the tip of her nipple until it stood erect. She trembled as he leaned forward and took it into his mouth, sucking until she felt an answering tug between her legs. She moaned softly. His hands roamed her body, warm and sure, traveling up and down along her bare skin, creating electricity everywhere they touched.

He picked her up and laid her back on the bed, pulling off his trousers before he climbed over her. "Since you were so generous with me, I shall return the favor." He lowered his head between her legs, bending her knees up and sliding his hands under her to cup her still-burning

cheeks. He licked into her.

She gasped and jerked her hips, trying to move away from the intensity of his tongue on her sex, but his hands held her firmly in place, despite her wriggling. She moaned louder, then clapped a hand over her mouth, embarrassed of the sounds she was making.

The count lifted his head. "Uncover your mouth," he said softly. "I like to hear your song."

She let her head fall back and moaned in earnest, rolling her head from side to side as the tension within her built until she was sure she couldn't stand it anymore. Then it came—like a summer storm that rolls across the countryside—a thunder roaring in her ears, electric energy firing between her legs and waves of pleasure rippling through her body, making her arch and squeeze her thighs tightly together, trapping her poor husband's head.

He extricated himself, laughing. "That's it, *bambina*. That's it." He crawled up over her, and she opened her eyes and looked at him in wonder. He smiled, his lips glossy with her juices. He pressed the tip of his length between her legs and they locked eyes. He rubbed it along her swollen slit, re-activating every nerve ending. Her bottom still pulsed and tingled from his spanking, which for some reason, only made her more excited at the sensations between her legs.

He applied pressure at her entrance, until he'd breached the resisting flesh and fully entered her tight sheath. She sucked in her breath at the stab of pain and clung tightly to his arms, but he held her eyes and remained motionless, watching until she relaxed and let out her breath.

He rocked his hips and moved inside her, ever so slowly, never releasing her from the intensity of his gaze.

The pleasure mixed with the pain so she couldn't tell if she wanted it to stop or go on. But desire grew until she forgot all about the pain, lifting her hips to meet his, making soft grunts as he moved deeper within her. His rhythm quickened, and with it, her excitement. She wrapped her legs tightly around his back when the pressure built to intense need. She found another shuddering release.

The count cried out and stiffened, pulling out and spilling his seed onto the bed. He lowered his head and kissed her, a rather passionate kiss, not that she had any experience with kisses. His tongue licked into her lips, teasing them open. She twined her arms around his neck and followed his lead, thinking how odd it was that the kiss came after the consummation. But everything about the night had been odd, hadn't it?

She rolled out of bed.

"Where are you going?"

"To use the privy," she said, trying to get over the embarrassment of him hearing her pee in the same room. When she was finished, she brought the candle back to the bed and pulled back the covers.

"What are you doing?"

"Making sure there's evidence of my virtue."

The count took the candle and blew it out, pulling her back into the bed. "Lucia, I just felt your proof, I don't need to see it. And the slap across my face was enough for me to believe you."

She was glad for the dark, because she knew she was flushing at the reminder of what she'd done.

"Actually, let me restate that. Your anger would have been enough. The slap was uncalled for."

If she could have crawled into her own skin to hide, she would have. "I apologize," she said stiffly.

He chuckled and drew her into his arms, stroking her hair. "It's already forgiven. I didn't mean to scold you a second time. I just wanted to be sure you understood it was the slap, not the anger for which I punished."

She hadn't known, exactly, and she was happy for the distinction.

"I don't wish you to hide your true feelings from me, just to be respectful. I am your lord and husband now."

"Yes, my lord."

"Don't worry, my lady, it may not seem so tonight, but I think we're going to get along just fine."

Lucia snuggled in against his warmth and reassurances. She felt raw and vulnerable, emotionally and physically. She would accept what comfort he would offer—in a few days, this man would be the only person she knew in her new life as a countess.

* * *

In the light of the morning, his beautiful bride surveyed the blood on the sheets with

satisfaction.

"Do you still think I doubt you?" he asked with amusement.

She flushed prettily. "No, my lord. But the servants will be looking for it, won't they?"

He rolled his eyes. "Servants be damned. And speaking of them, I think your father should punish those serving wenches of yours for the trick they played on you."

She shook her head, her big brown eyes pleading. "My lord?"

"Marco."

"Marco," she said softly. "Please, I beg you not to tell my father about..." she trailed off, clearly unable to complete the sentence without further embarrassment. "I mean, I am extremely grateful to you for taking it so well, but my father—he would not. It would destroy him to think I had behaved so disgracefully."

Something about this girl made him want to soothe her. He closed the distance between them and wrapped his arms around her. "It was not disgraceful, it was merely perplexing to me, that's all. Once you'd solved the mystery, I found it to be quite sweet. But I will not say a word to your father."

She flushed, but met his eye.

"I do hope you'll do it again? I promise you, I shall not stop you the next time."

Lucia looked at him as if to gauge whether or not he was teasing her. He placed his hand over his heart as a vow and cocked an eyebrow at her. She laughed, her natural verve starting to return. He was glad—it was a shame to see her diminished, and he regretted his part in it.

The events of the night before had endeared her to him, despite his intentions of staying as uninvolved with his new wife as possible. To his surprise, he'd enjoyed spanking her, though he regretted it had nearly ruined their wedding night. It was not that he liked hurting women. But she was so lovely with her clothes off, laid prostrate over his lap. The feel of her squirming, the allure of her perfect twin orbs—pale as porcelain, turning crimson under the onslaught of his hand, had been powerfully arousing.

Though he hadn't wanted a wife, he couldn't deny the rush of pleasure he'd had when he'd realized she belonged to him and him alone. She was his to discipline as he liked—he could turn her over his knee that way anytime he wished.

He had spanked hard, and she'd remained stoic far longer than he'd expected, and she hadn't pouted afterward. He doubted she was the sulky type. He father was right—she took

correction well.

Not that he was planning to spend his time breaking in a new wife, he firmly reminded himself. He would install her in her own separate chamber at his villa, and she could do as she pleased, as long as it didn't interfere with his own pursuits.

That afternoon at the wedding banquet, Lucia looked even more beautiful than she had the day before. She wore a green silk gown, the wide square bodice framing her bust so spectacularly, nearly every man drooled over her. Pearls hung around her neck and were sewn into the gown, and a wreath of pearls crowned her hair, which hung in long curls down her back. He was happy to see she had caught her stride again.

"Thank you, Don Fernando, we are so pleased you could come," she was saying to an elderly gentleman, who was holding her hand as if he did not wish to let it go. The man ogled the milky white flesh that showed above her bodice. To her credit, Lucia did not blush or frown, she simply redirected with aplomb. "Is that the Lady Adela over there by Don Giovanni?" She indicated with her chin. "Why, yes, it is. Are you acquainted with her? Let me introduce you..." She led the man to the lady in question and deposited him easily.

He caught her eye and winked when she turned back, which brought forth her dazzling smile. He wondered, briefly, if her twin equaled her in beauty.

Throughout the whole affair, she was as poised as ever, greeting every guest, smiling, curtsying and generally managing the banquet as the lady of the house. Which, he supposed she had been, given their mother was long dead. It was a load off his chest to know she had the confidence and experience to handle her role as the Countess of Parma. He would not have to suffer her tiptoeing around like a little mouse, looking frightened and unsure.

He was starting to feel downright cheerful about his new situation—he had the capital now to invest in making his vineyards turn a profit. He had a new wife, which admittedly he hadn't wanted, but she certainly seemed to be an improvement over his last, and she came with the wine-making knowledge he truly needed. And she was beautiful—long legs, firm, apple-sized breasts, and a willingness in bed that rivaled the working ladies. He smiled to himself at the memory and made it his goal to convince her to give it another try that evening.

After people had been fed, the dancing began. He'd always found court dancing to be nothing more than a chore, but like every noble, had been taught by the age of twelve to dance all the important dances like the Brando, Pavan, and the virtuoso Galliard. The only one he rather

enjoyed was the Moresque, or sword dance. He went through the motions, indulging his eye by watching his lovely bride swish around in her beautiful green silk skirts. When he saw her head down the corridor toward the kitchens, he followed, curious to see how she would handle her offending serving wenches.

"More wine is needed in the hall, and it's time to bring out the pastries, please." Lucia struck the perfect tone of authority without the haughtiness that the aristocracy sometimes employed.

"Yes, my lady. If I may ask, how was your wedding night?" the chit of a serving girl had the gall to ask, not noticing his approach.

"Oh, it was perfection. Thank you so much for your advice, the count was delighted," Lucia said breezily, without the slightest hesitation.

He smiled to himself and slid his arm around her waist.

She jumped and turned in surprise. "Indeed." He nibbled at her ear. "Your advice was most appreciated."

Lucia tilted her head back to smile her thanks at him.

"I do wonder, though," he drawled. "Does your master know about your special knowledge in this matter?"

The girl paled considerably, and he leveled her with a look intended to put the fear of God into her.

"Does he?"

"I-I'm not sure, my lord," she mumbled.

He made her suffer his stern look for another long beat, before he pulled gently at Lucia, saying, "Shall we, my lady?"

The girl bobbed a curtsy and scrambled off faster than a mouse. Lucia rewarded him with one of her dimpled smiles and he chuckled, leading her back to the courtyard. As they walked, he said in a low voice, "How soon do you think we can sneak away and try out your wench's specialty?"

The poor girl looked so genuinely torn between wanting to please him and wanting to stay at her party that he laughed lightly and waved his hand.

"I'm just jesting. This is your last night to see all your friends—you may stay up as late as you like."

She beamed at him again, and he couldn't help but lean over and kiss her—she looked so delectable. All right, so mayhap he wasn't exactly setting in motion his plan of setting up a marriage in name only, but there was no reason he shouldn't enjoy what was his, at least in the beginning.

It *was* her last night to see her friends and family, but as she dallied later and later into the night, she had to admit part of her was afraid to be alone with her husband again. Everything about the night before had been embarrassing—particularly the spanking. Knowing he was going to take a firm hand with her was a bit daunting, but she was sure she could stay out of trouble and find ways to please him. He certainly had a charming side as well, as she had just witnessed.

When at last she saw him throw her a look bordering on impatience, she quickly said her *buona notte* and went to him, taking his arm to go upstairs to her chamber. She had consumed a lot of her father's wine during the festivities and found it was helping take the edge off her nerves.

When they'd shut the door, she turned to him and sucked the first knuckle of one finger, batting her eyelashes. "Now...what was it you had in mind for me this evening?"

He let out a low laugh and pulled her close. "You know perfectly well what I have in mind." He untied her bodice and let it fall away from her body.

She pulled off her own skirt. "Well, I might be willing...but only if you'll promise not to call me a whore or spank me again."

With that, she was suddenly lifted into the air and tossed easily onto the bed. A little shriek escaped her lips. The count laughed, climbing over her and pulling off her chemise. He twisted her hips so her bottom angled up and started spanking her—several hard smacks that had her yelping and jumping to dodge his hand. She reached down and covered her offended cheeks with her hand.

"You would do well to remember who is in charge here, my lady," he said with mock sternness.

She rubbed at her smarted flesh and smiled, her mood not dampened. "My lord, you have a heavy hand."

"Yes. And you'd best learn not to provoke it."

Her smile faltered for a moment as she tried to determine if he were serious or not.

He seemed to note it, because he leaned down and kissed her. A generous, reassuring

kiss.

Knowing the count desired a repeat performance of her mouth on his manhood, she went right to work on that endeavor, rising to her hands and knees and unfastening his trousers. Emboldened by the wine, she found it easier this time. She gripped the base of his cock and flicked her tongue under the rim of the head.

The count groaned.

Encouraged, she took his length into her mouth, sucking.

"That's it, *amore*."

She picked up speed, moving her mouth forward and back along his cock, enjoying herself and the power to pleasure her new husband.

He urged her to move faster with his hand at the back of her head and while it frightened her to have him take control this way, she didn't resist.

She was totally unprepared for his climax, however. The warm salty stream that came pouring out caused her to yank back in shock, gagging as she spun around with her back to him.

"Spit it out," he said laughing. He was still chuckling when she turned back around—a silent shaking of his shoulders, as if he were trying to contain himself but just couldn't keep it in.

She giggled, too. He opened his arms, and she tumbled into them, happy she'd done something right.

They climbed into bed, and she fell asleep to the feeling of his fingers gently stroking her sex without demand. She woke to the same movements, along with the sensation of Marco's hardened sex pressing against her backside. He spooned her, his larger body curled around and framing hers. She liked the feel of him lying with her like that—so different from sharing a bed with her sister.

It didn't take him long to show her a new position for making love as he took her from behind while she lay on her side. One which started out with him fondling her nipple and ended with his strong hands holding her shoulders in place so he could thrust deeply into her. Though she felt like he would tear her in two, the pleasure filtered through the pain, as it had the night before, and she cried out at the same time he did, her sex tightening with satisfaction as he spilled his seed on the bed again.

Marco rolled her onto her back and leaned on his elbows over her. "My lady. We need to have a little talk."

Her belly involuntarily clenched. "Yes, my lord?"

"Are all those trunks in the corner there really meant to come with us to Parma?"

She laughed, relieved it was nothing serious. "Is it too much to bring?"

"I'm afraid it is, *cara*. You may bring three trunks. No more. So I suggest you get busy re-prioritizing. We will leave after breaking fast." He gave her bottom a slap as she rolled out of bed to obey him.

* * *

Marco watched as Lucia bid the household farewell. The servants all gathered outside, along with her father to see them off. She kissed both cheeks of a good-looking young man whom he hadn't met and squeezed his hands, murmuring something.

His lip curled of its own accord. Odd. He hadn't ever been a jealous man. He purposefully strode over to make the acquaintance.

"My lord, have you met Tomasso, my father's steward?"

He put a possessive arm around his wife's slender waist. "No, I haven't."

Tomasso bowed. "Congratulations on your marriage, my lord."

He inclined his head and forced himself to thank the young man before leading Lucia to the carriage. Her father gave her one last embrace and offered his hand to help her up, but Marco stepped in and grasped Lucia's waist, lifting her up. He liked the feel of her lush form under his hands, the way she blushed every time he touched her. He wondered how long that would last.

He was torn between sitting beside her, where he could feel the warmth and soft curves of her body against his, or across from her, where he could study her lovely face. Since it was a long carriage ride, and he could do both, he started across from her.

Her long red hair fell in loose waves across her shoulders, framing the angelic face. She smiled and waved as the carriage driver started off, then settled her hands in her lap and looked everywhere but at him.

"No tears, *amore*?"

Her mouth curved into a wistful smile. "No, my lord. I'm only sorry that I could not bid farewell to Celia, my sister. But perhaps she will be able to visit us in Parma?" She ended the sentence with a question and hopeful look.

He waved his hand. "Of course she may." In fact, he hoped his wife found her own entertainment and social life in Parma, as he preferred his independence.

Lucia stole nervous glances at him from under her long lashes. If he were a better man, he would put her at ease. But he wasn't that husband. He rather enjoyed the deference she showed him and wanted to keep it intact. He'd chosen his first wife because he thought she'd be different from his domineering mother, who had hen-pecked his father to no end. His bride had been meek in nature, but alas, it did not come with an eagerness to please. Rather, she seethed anger and resentment, skulking in corners and darkening his villa with her very presence. It had not been a happy marriage in the least, God rest her soul.

This one, he hoped to start off on the right foot.