

BOOK ONE

THE RAGES OF INNOCENCE

Travelers are privileged to do the most improper things.
Isabella Bird

CHAPTER ONE

AIR TIME

I've missed you so much my darling, I can't wait to be heading home again. The flight out was extraordinary. It seemed we were flying directly to the stars. I love flying at night. The only thing missing was you, your sweet face tormenting me for a kiss.

Speaking of which, I must tell you about the most unusual woman I met on the plane. She sat down, rather crashed herself into the seat beside me, with acres of bags, the most lovely and absurd hat all askew. She was out of breath and apologized hastily for what might have been obnoxious body odor but really all I could smell was the sweetest lilac perfume that seemed somehow all wrapped up in a memory of lemon verbena. I kept forgetting to ask her what exactly it was she was wearing because she kept telling me the most fantastic tales. I really felt quite like that naughty king in the Arabian nights.

She said her name is Jacqui Cericinotte. She's quite beautiful, painted with a delicate hand. Her face holds dark eyes that flash deliciously with mischievous glint. Her hair is thick and dark, lusciously curly, old fashioned thick twists bouncing fell in and around her face as she spoke. She said that she was on her way to be married to an Earl complete with a castle! I can never, ever, thank you enough for convincing me to fly first class. Did you know that they serve champagne before you take off? Nothing quite like luxury in the face of grief, the two are incompatible so the mind, bouncing back and forth between them,

unable to make one picture, is forced to choose. I chose luxury for I was full fed up with my miseries.

Sometimes I think I am the most pedestrian person, and then something like this happens and I feel that I am the perfect mate for a man who has sailed clear round the world.

She looks like a wild woman and a princess, a natural beauty indifferent to the effect she was causing, full of her own intensity of being. A tree reaching out to grab the sun and convert it to air takes as much notice to the effect it has on others. She laughed the way I have always imagined Buddha laughing when prostrate disciples humbly asked for the secret of transcendence. Joy is the secret, isn't it? Joy in life, in moments as they transpire.

Jacqui had begun her life, she said, on "the poor side of town" (!) with a remarkable mother and aunt who taught her how to find humor in the sturm und drang of life.

Jacqui's father was an alcoholic, rarely home and when home, destructive. She is quite sure she has scores of half brothers and sisters. Sad women were always showing up on her doorstep looking for Jack. Jacqui's mother Serena and Jacqui's Aunt Justina chose to be patient and comforting to these lost souls searching for their Lochinvar. Serena and Justina would gently explain that, though Jack was tall and handsome, with thick dark hair, piercing eyes and many other fine attributes, which seemed often to produce healthy and robust children, his visible beauty was, unfortunately, not the outward and visible sign of anything except natural exuberance and a fiery tempered nature.

Jack's randy nature notwithstanding, he was sentimental on holidays and often provided the women and children he could remember being related to, with treats and even occasionally dressed as Santa Claus and visited his relatively impoverished offspring all over town, returning home either excessively pleased with himself or morose.

Serena, Jacqui assumed, had ceased having consensual sex with Jack shortly after her birth. Serena had then written to Justina asking her to come live with the little family, help take care of the new baby and share a life. Justina, who had nursed their ailing father down to death, was ready for a change.

The first time Lochinvar raped Serena was a shock for Justina. But Serena took it calmly as she had taken to herbs to keep herself barren and, as she explained to Justina, and later to Jacqui, nothing in this world is without price and if they wanted the protection, the respectability, and the occasional money provided for them by the less than gentle Jack, then they must be realistic about its cost. Jacqui's father adjusted to the situation by seeking his physical release more

often elsewhere and Serena was not raped more than a handful of times each year.

Jack, however unlikely it might sound, never beat any of them, not the three he was legally related to, nor did he beat any of the others. This was so unusual in the neighborhood they lived in as to be the topic of many conversations, the recurring conclusion being that Serena had gotten a firm grip on the thorny problem plaguing the local constituency. It was argued that other wives, unable to contain their jealousy and their desire for sexual release (sexual pleasure they had given up on long ago), unable to put out or shut up, irritated their spouses and got beat for it.

The neighborhood rang with the cries of beaten women and children and in this heat the cool comedic attitudes of Serena and her younger sister shone as a beam of light streaming through a cloud filled sky.

Jacqui recalled her childhood as quite pleasant, her mother and aunt as local saints who ministered to the faint of heart. She inherited her father's thick dark hair and piercing eyes, her mother's sense of humor and Justina's sense of duty. She also inherited her father's need for companionship.