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Rock My Socks Off

Jeremy Edwards

Please note that this extract contains scenes of an adult nature.

Chapter One

NORMANDIE STEPHENS HAD JACOB smiling within moments of shaking his hand.

'Normandie.' Jacob echoed the introduction. 'That's a charming name.'

'It's a silly name,' she retorted with a laugh, 'and you know it.' Normandie had no reason to know anything about Jacob or his opinions, but she seemed unshakably certain of this last assertion. 'My parents called me Brittany, and when I turned sixteen in a sea of other young Brittanys, I said, "Fuck this" and swapped it for the next French province over.'

He liked the way the word fuck had tripped off her tongue.

'It's interesting,' he said. 'As I understand it, those French provinces don't have an official meaning any more. They're culturally and historically significant, of course – but they haven't been recognised by the French government in centuries.'

She stared at him for a moment, sizing him up. 'I bet you say that to all the girls,' she finally replied.

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Her hair was a lazy shade of sand blonde. But her eyes, which Jacob later described to her as 'green-traffic-light green', harboured the sort of energetic intensity that could get you out of bed in the morning – and then straight back into bed, if you could catch up with her.

Just minutes before, Jacob had been silently resenting Brandon for inviting him to this party.

'OK, dude, if you have everything you need, I'm going to lock up,' the San Francisco satellite office contact for Hip Hip Horizon magazine had said. 'I'm supposed to drop by this party at my brother's. Come along if you want. Open shindig in a big-ass Victorian. Lots of, y'know, grad student types – you might like it.'

Jacob had tried not to take the last comment as an insult, coming from this twenty-one-year-old clubber. Brandon was essentially a glorified intern who spent all day in an iPod-and-MySpace trance; but he kept the phones from going unanswered at the token West Coast outpost maintained by HHH, and he'd fulfilled his obligations to Jacob by meeting him at the office after his flight got in.

And, since he'd had nothing better to do with his first night in SF, Jacob had tagged along to the party, stopping only to purchase a bottle of wine – of a quality that he knew perfectly well might be wasted on a bunch of twenty-something revellers.

But when he'd jumped into the vicinity of Brandon's elbow to prompt an introduction to the alluring woman who had arrived fashionably late, he was logging Brandon as a friend for life.

The first thing he'd noticed when she arrived was her look of radiant intelligence. The second thing he'd noticed was that everyone seemed to know her. And yet she had an air of self-protective aloofness. She smiled warmly at people but looked past them, laughed politely at their jokes but projected a certain reserve. And though she could not have been taller than five foot four, she gave the appearance of floating above the party.

Jacob had felt at once that she was somehow better than everyone else and more vulnerable. He had wanted to admire her and nurture her. Oh, and undress her.

He had decided that maybe he should talk to her first.

And when he did, he didn't see her eye avoiding his or hear her laughter ringing with overtones of remoteness. He didn't know how or why, but somehow he'd managed to cut through all that.

But after the introduction, she was swept away in a sea, not of sixteen-year-old Brittanys this time, but of convivial grad students. It was a good forty-five minutes

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before Jacob spotted her standing by the trolley of wine bottles, apparently deciding what to have next.

'I recommend the old-vine Zinfandel,' he said, tapping the label of a bottle that he had taken the liberty of opening half an hour earlier. 'It's excellent.'

'Thank you. I brought it.'

'Ah. I brought a Cabernet Franc, but I don't know what the host did with it.'

'If it's really good, he's probably saving it for a more important party,' said Normandie. 'He's very calculating, you know.'

'No. To be honest, I don't know him at all – though I think he was pointed out to me somewhere along the line. I'm just a tag-along, you see. He's calculating?'

'Oh, yes. Of course, I'm the same way. That's why I can recognise it.'

'Interesting,' said Jacob.

'Mind you, I'm not manipulative. That would be bad. You see the difference, don't you?'

'I think so. Now that you've highlighted it.'

'I'm not interested in making anybody do something he shouldn't do or doesn't want to do. But I want to see where things are headed, to plan and plot a course, to act with forethought and foresight and maybe a bit of cunning.'

'Got it,' he said agreeably. 'So you're not manipulative, but you are calculating. And have you made any good calculations lately?'

Normandie smiled with what looked like a mixture of pride and sexual appetite. 'As a matter of fact, yes.' She hesitated a titillating moment, as if she had a secret. 'You see, I'm an astronomer.'

'That's funny. I always think of astronomers as being tall. Stupid, isn't it?'

'Oh, I don't know. If you're tall, I suppose you're that much closer to all those ridiculous objects that are billions of miles away. Yet somehow, I manage. Poor little me, the stars just out of reach.' She let out a comical, exaggerated sigh. Then they chuckled together. Her hand brushed his elbow as she swayed slightly with mirth.

'Shall we sit down?' he said.

'Sure, Mr Tag-Along,' she answered. 'I'll tag along with you.'

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They had settled onto a cushioned window seat. Almost reluctantly, he explained to her that he was a writer from New York.

'Hmm … Jacob Hastings. Should I have heard of you?'

'Whether or not you should have heard of me is between me and my ego – or possibly a problem for my publicist,' he answered with a hint of bitterness. 'The point is that you obviously haven't heard of me. Which is fine. In fact, there are days when I wish I hadn't heard of me.'

'Aw,' she said, patting his cheek. Her manner was at once sympathetic and gently mocking, and Jacob loved it. And, of course, she had touched him.

'I think you need another drink,' she prescribed, gesturing at his glassless hands. 'Or maybe a good screw.'

'Do I have to choose?'

Her gaze became intent. 'And here I was just half an hour ago, telling myself I'd have to go home alone and dial my own number for kicks.' She stood up. 'But first things first – another glass of Zin for the mysterious, underexposed author.'

Jacob admired her ass as she crossed the room. He decided it was an ass of confidence.

Soon she had parked it back on the window seat.

'You know,' said Jacob. 'I'm usually a one-drink man. The second drink is not unheard of for me, but it's a delicious exception.'

'I like that,' said Normandie. 'Delicious exception.' She appeared to relish the phrase, much as she was relishing the wine on her tongue.

'It's true,' he continued. 'Like many one-drink people, I've discovered that when I have that second glass, I imagine that I'm enjoying myself more, even if I'm not.'

She looked like she was about to protest, but he caught her eyebrow in mid-ascent. 'In this case, however, I promise you that I am actually enjoying myself as much as the wine makes me think I am.' He patted her knee, in a gesture that both of them knew meant more than simple reassurance.

'It's a good thing I have a PhD, Jacob Hastings. Not everyone would be able to follow your double-talk.'

He laughed. 'At the moment, you're the only one who needs to follow it. Everyone else can go to the movies, as far as I'm concerned.'

She took another sip. 'So what's your claim to fame, as a writer?'

'My claim to fame is that I'm one of the world's foremost authorities on the history of typography. Unfortunately, that's also my claim to obscurity.'

'I never tolerate obscurity in my life,' said Normandie helpfully. 'It just won't do.' She took a decisive gulp.

'Normandie Stephens, are you the sort of woman who always has spare light bulbs on hand? Answer carefully, because a yes may plunge me into love.'

'With me, or the light bulbs?'

'Why are you here?'

'It's where the free food and drinks are,' Jacob explained. 'Besides, all the other houses in the Haight were locked.'

'Smartass.' She said it like a term of endearment, a testimony to how comfortable they'd become in the course of an hour on the window seat. 'I'll try again. Why are you here in San Francisco?'

'To get laid.'

'Long way to go for it. Are you intent on doing it on the Golden Gate Bridge, or something?'

'No, the paint job would clash with my polka-dotted pyjamas.'

'Polka-dotted pyjamas? No deal. Unless we actually get to poke the dots.'

If there was one kind of woman Jacob could fall for, it was a woman who could trump him at repartee. 'If it's all right with the dots, it's all right with me. I'm serious, though.'

'About the pyjamas?'

'About all of it. Look, I could have told you I came out here to write a magazine article – and I did – but I turn down offers like that all the time. I took this particular one because it was in SF, and SF seemed like a good place to get laid after a rather discouraging spring in New York.'

'That's logical, I guess. For a non-scientist. Did you have anyone particular in mind?'

'Did I have someone in mind? You mean, as in before I boarded the plane?'

'Yes.'

'Not do I, as in at the present moment?'

'No – that one I know the answer to, I hope. Otherwise we've been wasting a perfectly good window seat.'

He could feel the sexual electricity charging the air around their wine-buoyant heads. 'Good point. I just wanted to make sure I was answering the correct question. Isn't that something you scientists are always talking about? To get the right answers, you have to make sure you choose the right questions?'

'That's "Who Am I?" you're thinking of, not science. But never mind. I've decided I like the other question better.'

'The one you already know the answer to.'

'Yes.'

'Typical scientist.'

They laughed long enough that other people looked their way, wondering what could be so funny on a window seat for two.

'So,' said Jacob when they'd quieted down, 'why are you here?'

'It's where the guys in polka-dotted pyjamas are.'

'That's all right,' he said. 'I don't care why you're here so much as I care that you're here.'

'I should tell you, though. It may not be interesting, but it is only fair.'

With an old-fashioned wave of his hand, he encouraged her to proceed.

'What's this?' She imitated his gesture, making a quizzical face.

'I was simply indicating that I hoped you'd continue talking. It was supposed to be courteous.'

She chortled into another sip of wine. 'I guess it is, in an old-school, no-longer-recognised-by-the-French-government sort of way.'

'Are you making fun of me?'

'Of course.' She patted his thigh, and Jacob became even more comfortable with being made fun of.

'Actually, Jacob, would you do it again?'

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'What – this?' He imitated her imitation of his quaint gesture.

'Yeah.' Her voice sounded slightly husky now. 'Yeah. Maybe it's sexy after all.'

'Let me know when you've made a final decision about that.'

She stood up. 'Let's get out of here.'

'So you're writing a typography-related magazine article.' Normandie's voice had a crisp, refreshing lilt to it as they walked. The extra bit of projection she gave to make her voice carry over the traffic added an attractive, theatrical quality to her remarks.

'I wish!' was his reply. 'When was the last time you read a typography-related magazine article?'

'I – uh – I'm afraid I don't get much time to read, aside from professional journals.'

He smiled appreciatively, taking his gaze off the stretch of sidewalk ahead of them to meet her eyes. 'Oh, you are smooth. No,' he sighed, 'the assignment I've taken cannot, by any stretch of even an astronomer's imagination, be described as "typography-related". It's about rocking horses.'

'How cute!'

'Rocking horses may, in fact, be cute. Personally, I find them repellent, but I won't argue that point with a woman I'm hoping to go to bed with shortly. In any event, you have every right to find them cute, and I hope you have a nice day for it. However – and on this I must insist – being required to write 5,000 words about rocking horses is not cute. It's not even polite.'

'This may be a silly question … but they are paying you, right? And you did voluntarily accept the assignment, yes?'

'That's two silly questions.' He took her hand and pulled her into the doorway