

FINE ART

"Oh, Mom. Come over here. Get a picture with this one."

Chelsea, Kristie's youngest daughter waved at her. She was standing in front of a 'Make Love Not War' circular poster on the glass wall of the De Young Museum, San Francisco.

Kristie obliged and went over and stood by her daughter while Angela snapped a picture on her cell-phone. "That one!" Angela was pointing to a "Reality is a Trip" poster in acid green. Her sister and mom scuttled over to that poster next as the camera clicked.

"My turn!" Angela cried and stuck the camera phone into Sam's folded arms and ran to join the others. "Come on Sam. Just hit the white button."

Sam stared hard at the screen a minute, figured out where the button was and hit it. Their picture instantly popped up on the screen. "Whoa, that was fast." He held the camera/phone up *to look at the picture. He had to admit, these gadgets got the best of him.*

The girls were giggling together and looking at their shots. "Gosh, Sam, you must remember all this stuff!" Angela burst out.

"Well, let's say, some of this stuff." Sam calmly replied not wanting to get sucked into a long discussion of 'the good old days.' He was more of a 'What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas' kind of guy.

Thankfully the young women and Kristie were all eager to get inside to the Degas exhibit and he wasn't forced to pull out war stories. They shuffled in with the crowd and were handed pamphlets for the exhibits.

"Tickets for Degas are to your right. The line forms to the right for the Degas Millinery Exhibit. Please line up to buy your ticket." A young woman stuffed into a grey and white uniform complete with name badge shouted at the crowd. Kristie and group split off to the right to stand in a lengthy line.

"How much are the tickets?" Sam asked Kristie. She peered around.

"I don't see a sign."

"I'll check on my phone. They have Wi-Fi in here," Chelsea replied. She and her sister got busy with their phones pulling

up the museum site. Their heads bent over, Sam mused how much these twenty-somethings looked like their mom.

"Looks like \$28 dollars."

"Each?" Sam looked astonished.

"Gosh, Sam. That's really not bad," Angela told him. "This is San Francisco after all, and these are pretty famous artists." She arched an eyebrow at him.

"Okay, okay." He waved his hands in submission. Sam would be the very first to admit he was no art expert, modern or otherwise. He stood watching the queue move slowly to the ticket counter. He consulted the brochure he had just gotten.

"Hum. Look Kristie, they have a bunch of other exhibits too. And they're free."

"Oh, Sam," Kristie turned to him. "This is what the girls came for. They really want to see the Expressionist paintings." She pouted a little. "Me too."

"Oh," was Sam's reply. He continued to peruse the brochure. "African art, Indonesian ... looks interesting."

Kristie pulled Sam a little out of the line. "Look, I know how much you hate lines and this really wasn't your idea. Would

you rather go look at some of the other stuff and then meet us later?"

Sam, keeping his head down and still examining the pamphlet said "Well, maybe that would work ...". He knew how much this little family get together meant to Kristie.

"Okay, settled then." Kristie glanced at the primitive art photos. "We'll go through the line and meet you in the coffee shop. How's that?"

"Well, that's okay by me darlin. Any idea how long this thing is going to take?" He looked at her now. His brilliant blue eyes continued to hypnotize Kristie. Then, when he smiled with those perfect white teeth that matched his white/blond hair, she'd agree to anything.

"Guard," Kristie waved at one of the many uniformed young people standing around. A young man sauntered over. "About how long does it take to get through the exhibit?"

The guard considered a moment, looked at the line and his watch. "Should take you about forty-five minutes, ma'am."

"Thank you," Kristie nodded and he sauntered off.

"Okay, so, forty-five minutes. Can you keep yourself entertained that long?"

"Yeah, yeah. I kin do that." By this time Sam had the brochure rolled up into a tube and patted her on the shoulder. "Looks like you are about to lose your girls there." He pointed to the daughters who had continued to move up with the line and were shooting their mother exasperated looks.

"Right!" Kristie gave Sam a little peck. "Coffee shop." She turned and hurried to catch up with them.

Tapping the tube in the palm of his hand, Sam wandered across the floor of the museum. It was a beautifully done, enormous modern structure. The building was a series of tall glass walls, chrome and steel structures that gave it a light airy feel. The grounds were filled with a series of lush green beds which gave a feeling of privacy, even in the center of the city.

Sam wasn't much for all this modern stuff, but still, he had to admit the place was pretty impressive. He worked his way through the historical art exhibit of the Americas. There were the Northern Eskimos and their carved walrus tusks to the Central and South Americans with endless examples of pottery and baskets. He had to wonder at the artistry of these people and the tiny figures.

He stopped to stare at a tusk carved into a cribbage game. *What rich man had that on his mantel a year or two?* he wondered.

Eventually, he got through those exhibits and decided to try upstairs.

He paused in utter fascination with the statutes and masks of New Guinea. *Unreal; these things would scare me*, he admitted to himself. He stopped to stare for a long while at a face above a shaman costume.

That is a real head, he finally concluded. *It's not carved at all. Creepy.* He shook himself. His phone buzzed.

"Almost done, K." He decided to take the stairs back down to meet the girls. Back on the first floor, he looked around for a restroom.

Better go now, then eat. Spotting the *Restrooms* sign he followed it. When he rounded the corner, he got a little confused. There were clearly two restrooms, but the Men/Women signs had been covered over. A new Gender-Neutral sign was in their place on both doors.

He could see what looked to be an extensive line with a lot of women and a much shorter line with a few men. *Looks like people have just figured this nonsense out for themselves*, he thought and followed the short line.

As expected, there were stand up urinals in this restroom, one of which he used. He paused to wash his hands and was drying

them as he came out and heard the scream. The scream was promptly followed by a resounding 'slap!' and then a gurgling/choking sound, all emanating from the Not Women's restroom.

There was still a line of women in the queue and there started to be more shouting now. "He's choking!" In a quick flash-black, Sam remembered that going into the Not Men's room, there was an old geezer shuffling into the other facility with the line of women. *Oh no*, he started to work his way into the crowd of women who were now yelling as a group.

Pushing his way through, he found the elderly man on his knees in the restroom with his hands around his own throat, turned red. Sam instantly realized the problem, grabbed the man around the back and slapped him as hard as he could. A set of false teeth flew out of the man's mouth and landed on the foot of a chubby matron. The matron saw the teeth on her foot, screamed, reflexively tossing her foot up where the teeth flew forward striking a young woman on the forehead before falling again to the floor. This young woman also screamed and ran for the door where several patrons were already fighting to get out themselves.

At the same time, several museum guards, of both sexes, were fighting to get in. Sam had laid the old man on the tile

floor on his side and was checking him for pulse and breathing. He had to block any women from stepping on the old guy in their hurry to leave.

Two of the guards finally managed to work their way in and over to the old man who kept gesturing for his teeth that had now been kicked under a sink. Sam retrieved the choppers and washed them off before giving them back. The man was now sitting up and one guard was administering a bottle of water to him by mouth.

"She said I pinched her. I never, I never. I would never ..."
The old man looked like he was about to cry. Sam got up and worked his way out of what was now a gawking crowd.

He found Kristie and the girls in the middle of the main floor gaping at the commotion surrounding the restroom. No less than five or six guards were milling around the area.

"Sam, what is going on?" Kristie demanded as he came up to them.

"Let's go eat and I'll tell you." He shooed them to the corner of the building and through the café door. They got in line and paid for their food. Angela wanted to sit outside and Sam had an exterior door open for them when they all heard a "Boom!" sound.

"What ..." Sam looked over his shoulder. "Kristie, take my coffee and sandwich. I'll be back." Mouth open, she took his food and Sam turned to go back in the main foyer. There were several loud bangs! with flashes of light. Out of the wing with the Degas Exhibit a short, black clad figure emerged. It/he was dressed in all black and red and looked like a Ninja complete with a drawn scimitar. Sex was impossible to tell as a black mask covered the face and hair.

Sam's heart stopped when he looked at the walking figure more closely and realized that dynamite was strapped to the assailant's chest. A large red, digital screen was above the tapped sticks and the numbers were counting down. People were screaming and running.

The masked figure kept swinging the curved sword at anyone that got remotely close but was eerily silent. Time slowed down and Sam wasn't sure how long he stood here, frozen. Suddenly, there was a crackling sound like a radio and the figure stopped, paused, seeming to listen, then ran through the foyer and around a corner.

"Stop him," a guard shouted. The guards couldn't seem to decide whether to advance or retreat. Sam followed at a distance.

He poked his head around the corner that way the Ninja had gone and realized it was a pair of elevators. A large sign read Observation - 9th Floor. *Weird, he's going to blow us up and then takes the elevator?*

Sam could swear that he heard a helicopter. *I'll take the stairs. What the hell, only nine floors.* Huffing and puffing he got up to the ninth floor and saw a group of people huddled in a corner. Large pane glass windows framed awe inspiring views of the San Francisco Bay. He didn't see the Ninja. He looked at the people. One man just pointed to a door on the far side of the room. It was marked Emergency Exit Only - Keep Out, in large red letters.

Sam went to the door and could see it wasn't completely closed. Cautiously, he peeked out. There was a loud Whoosh! Sound and the air knocked him back. A Blackhawk helicopter swished upwards; a small black Ninja figure dangled from a rope cord below the chopper.

Sam could see that the bay door was open and two men were busily pulling the Ninja into the open door. The chopper did a left swoop and headed out to sea. He shielded his eyes against the sun but could see no identifying marks on the bird. He didn't have a camera on his phone so he couldn't get a picture. He closed the door. By this time, the guards had gotten over

their fright and were spilling into the observation room like ants.

Sam went back down the way he had come. He could hear the sound of sirens in the background as he made his way back to the coffeeshop. *Man, I could use that sandwich now!*

"#"

An hour later, sandwich eaten, coffee drunk and an endless series of high pitched blabbing questions from 'his girls,' Sam had separated himself from them and given SF Police the short bit of information he had.

In wrap up, he told them, the whole incident started with a girl getting pinched in the gender-neutral restroom, an old man got slapped so hard it knocked his false teeth loose. He started to choke on his own teeth. That blossomed into the Ninja suicide bomber who, it appears, wasn't a bomber at all.

The museum employees and curators had closed the museum for the day and were frantically cataloguing everything to figure out what, if anything had been taken. They still weren't sure.

A Miss Jones, PhD, of the museum staff had tracked him down and given him her card and asked for one of his "Just in case." They exchanged cards and agreed to speak again if anything developed.

"Well, can you believe all that?" a stunned Chelsea commented as they worked their way back to the car. "Wow, and I though LA was bad. Whew!"

"Yeah, but it was kind of fun, wasn't it?" Angela added. She turned to Sam. "Somehow these things always seem to happen when you're around. No wonder Mom likes you so much."

"No, your mother likes me because she has good taste. Isn't that right Kristie?"

Kristie tossed her dark blond curls. "That and he makes a good fried egg sandwich."

Sam shrugged with a 'what can I say? look. They laughed.

"#"

Later, they were all back home in Tranquility, CA in Kristie's kitchen. The girls had both disappeared to their respective rooms and Sam and Kristie were alone. Standing at her granite topped island, she poured them both mugs of coffee.

"You know you really scared the shit out of me chasing after that guy."

"I know sweet. But, I really didn't think he was going to blow anything up if he was also running for an elevator. Didn't make sense."

"Still, wish you wouldn't play hero all the time."

"I know, I know. I'm okay though. We're all back home. Give me a hug." He pulled her close and she reluctantly let him. At that very moment, Sam's phone rang.

"Shit." He looked down. "415 area code. Maybe I should get this."

Kristie grimaced and went back to her coffee.

"Sam Reynolds. Yes. Yes, Ms. Jones. How are things? It was a what? Let me get a piece of paper." He gestured to Kristie and she handed him a notepad and pen.

"Let me spell that. R e n o i r. Renoir, French, right? Yeah, got that part. At the Milliners, 13" by 9". Is that worth a lot of money?" There was a pause. "Well, yes, I would say that's a lot. Sure. Well, it's kind of late now. Tomorrow? Yup, will call you first thing. Thanks, no problem. Talk to you then."

He hung up the phone and looked at the note. "It was a painting by this Renoir guy. It was switched during all the commotion with a fake one. Very close to the original. That's why they didn't know right away what was gone."

Kristie gaped. "Renoir, unbelievable."

"Guess so," Sam replied. "Like I always say, what I don't know about art ..."

"Would fill several volumes, right, I remember. Wow, this is big." She looked at him. "What does Ms. Jones want from you?" She eyed him cautiously.

"Well, since I did see the Ninja guy and I did see the getaway chopper, and since I do a little PI work ..."

"She wants you to help them get the painting back," Kristie finished.

"Well, something like that," Sam replied with a smile.

"Oh, Sam Reynolds, I can never take you *anywhere!*" Kristie shook her head and they both laughed.

END