

San Francisco, California. A city that's been shaken more times than a Double-O martini and lived to brag about it.

The city was shaking again today, but it wasn't the Big One everyone was waiting for. Just enough of a shaker to make my current position—head and shoulders wedged under a wrought iron bench—rather uncomfortable.

No need to brace myself. The shake, rattle, and roll faded away like a disappointed sigh, carrying with it the fear of 750,000 residents.

Oh, well. There's always next time.

Right now I had a job to do. The same job I'd been doing for hundreds of years—catch mischievous faeries and send them back over the rainbow where they belong.

I'd survived tsunamis, Mark Twain, and the stock market crash. Quakes were no big deal—except for days like today when I was out on a hunt. Tremors sent my quarry skittering for cover. One breath they were there; the next breath they were gone.

I could swear I heard a giggle as I shoved myself further under the bench. Concrete bruised my knees and a pebble dug into my palm. Would've been easier to stretch out my legs, but the current flow of skateboards, roller blades, and dog owners jogging down the sidewalk turned a simple leg-stretching into a death wish.

The stench of dead fish and rotting seaweed permeated the still fog. The park I'd chosen as hunting ground this morning was only a hop, skip, and jump from the bay. If I held my breath and listened, I could hear waves lapping against the Fort Mason piers.

The bushes in front of me giggled again.

I ignored the urge to slip an extra hand or two free of their corseted bondage. Ten hands - all mine. A veritable cornucopia of handiness. You'd think folks could appreciate all those hands, especially the guys, but noooo. All the men I'd tried to hook up with over the years had a thing about my appendages. Too many of them.

In this city known for its tolerance, I'm the only one who doesn't fit in.

Go figure.

I inched forward far enough to move the trap baited with ginger—faerie folk couldn't resist the pungent root—into position, and started to slide my left hand into the stiff, thorn-laden bush growing wild against the bench.

This was it. The decisive moment. Hunter against hunted. Trapper against trappee . . .

Reggae music burst forth from the jacket tied around my waist, scaring the bejeezus out of both predator and prey.

Cell phones. The curse of humankind.

“Hell’s bells!” I shoved my hand deep into the bushes, hoping against hope to find the critter I’d been chasing half the morning frozen into a mound of quivering faerie jelly.

No such luck.

Another round of reggae beat its way through the fog-laden air.

“Phone’s ringing.”

The phone I could ignore. The breath—pungent as an overripe fruit stall—I could tolerate.

But that voice—that smoke-laced, whiskey-sodden, I’m-dying-tomorrow voice coming only inches from my ear—sent me leaping clean out of my skin. Figuratively speaking of course. There was nothing figurative about the pain bulleting through my skull as flesh and bone smashed into the underside of the wrought iron bench.

“Ouch!”

Definitely the wrong move.

I rebounded from the head bump only to discover a hunk of fog-frizzed hair—*my* fog-frizzed hair—had glued itself to a McKinley-sized mound of used gum. From the feel of the wad imprisoning hair to bench, park goers had been making contributions to this particular repository for years . . . decades . . . eons.

The phone blared another round of reggae. Too bad I couldn’t find the darn thing—I’d heave it all the way from here to the Bay.

“You want me to get that for you?”

Who was this guy and was he talking about the phone or my hair?

“I’m fine, thanks.” The only thing visible from my rather awkward position was bushes, concrete, and a pair of oversized penny loafers.

Again with the reggae.

Time to go cell phone diving.

Whatever I chose as cell phone transporter—purse, pockets, even a holster on my belt—became this bottomless gorge the minute I dropped my cell phone in. Digging in my left pocket resulted in nothing but fifty more strands of hair being sacrificed to the goddess of used gum.

“I think it’s on the other side.”

A creepy-crawly insects-on-my-skin feeling wrapped itself cocoon-style from my head to my toes. Who was this guy anyway? Commuter? Tourist? Street person looking to spread out on my bench?

“Thanks,” I said through gritted teeth. Rapidly shifting hands, I checked out my right pocket.

“Maybe I could try to move the bench?”

“A wrought-iron bench bolted to a car-size slab of concrete? I don’t think so.” If that guy decided to give his plan a try, however, underneath the bench was not the prime place to be. I abandoned the cell phone search, shifted into reverse, and shoved both hands against the concrete. A fist-size tangle parted from my head as my nether parts gained momentum. Then I was sitting on my derriere staring up at the longest pair of legs I think I’ve ever seen.

The guy actually had the temerity to clap.

I leapt off the sidewalk quicker than a monkey on speed, twisted my ankle, and landed—in a sitting position—on the bench I’d just been imprisoned under. Not a bad move, though totally unintentional.

I dug the phone out of my pocket, and crammed it to my ear.

“This is not a good time,” I said, trying to decide whether ankle, head, or bottom end hurt more.

“You’re supposed to be home, not out gallivanting around,” Fifi said. “He’s going to be at your apartment any minute.”

Oops.

“I’m running errands,” I lied. I didn’t want to be home right now. Being home meant meeting the man my sister thought was ‘Mister Right.’

Then again, she thought every man was Mr. Right.

I chewed my lip and scanned the guy standing way too close in front of me. Halfway through the toe-to-head visual review something popped in my neck. This was no ordinary man, no way. This guy was a giant.

Not that I was jaundiced or anything. Tall people, not sorta tall—really, really tall—have always intimidated me and not just because I can barely see myself in the bathroom mirror. I grew up around small. Small is good. Small is beautiful.

I tried to back away, but the bench held me prisoner. Ignoring the guy didn’t work. Every

time I looked away, my eyes looked back.

He smelled of yesterday's fruit salad and fog, not a bad combination. Even with damp, tousled hair and a day-old beard, the guy was more than good-looking. He was . . . elegant.

Not a word I thought I'd use to describe any member of the human race. But there was something about the guy in front of me that lent itself to the description. Dark hair. Long, but not horsey, jaw line. High cheekbones. Deep-set hazel eyes more green than brown.

And a smile broad and innocent as a kid's.

My heart kicked into overdrive about the same time something sucked my lungs dry. Talk about tunnel vision. For a long—make that very long—moment no one else existed.

Then Hunk-a-Chunk broke the spell.

He climbed *onto* the bench and started pulling gum from my hair. The fog horn sounded a melancholy note as spearmint-enriched bubblegum added a special tang to the dead fish and gingerfied air.

“Look.” I reached up with my free hand. Tried to grab the persistently plucking hand. “I prefer picking at my own hair.”

“Excuse me?” my sister said.

“Nothing,” I said, juggling the phone while glaring over my shoulder. The guy kept grinning and picking. “Quit!”

“Who are you talking to? You're out hunting again, aren't you?”

Oops twice.

“No,” I said, way too fast. “I told you. I'm . . . running . . . errands.”

I slapped the guy's hand. He drew back, a puzzled look on his too-handsome face.

Time to make like a banana and split. I tried to stand up and failed miserably. Something about a giant hanging onto my hair.

“Don't worry,” I said to the phone. “I'm just a few blocks from the apartment.”

“You can't fool me. I'm your sister. You're out on a hunt,” Fifi said. “You mess up this dating thing again and we'll be sent packing. Illegal aliens are not in vogue right now. They're looking for any excuse to get rid of us.”

“Enough already, Sis-O-Mine. I won't mess up. Not this time. I promise.” Didn't matter that we'd been in this country for years—hell, we'd been here before there was a country—Fifi and I were aliens, born and raised just the other side of the rainbow. With new immigration laws

being bounced around government halls, Fifi was convinced that if I didn't get married to a local citizen soon, we'd be headed back home.

Thing is—neither one of us could remember anyplace but the Bay. San Francisco was home. We couldn't get deported.

Neither one of us would survive.

But staying meant marrying a human. The very thought made me shudder.

Fifi had no problems snuggling with humans. She would've jumped into the marriage bed with all four paws. And that was the problem. My big sister was a dog—literally. At least in this world. The City was tolerant of religion, politics, and sexual preferences, but we both had a feeling the good citizens would draw the line at human/dog relations.

That left the marrying part up to me. I'd been around humans too long to want to marry one of them, especially with their extra-hand-a-phobia, but at least I looked human. Sort of.

What felt like another hundred strands of hair twanged from my skull. I whirled around and found myself staring into a pair of emerald-flecked eyes. Hunk-a-chunk tipped his head sideways and gave me a quizzical look.