

The Strangeness of the Day

by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

Just once, she thought, just once, she would like a little magic in her life. She believed magic was possible, on days when the sun shown through the clouds, on afternoons when rainbows dotted the countryside, on mornings when the light was so sharp it looked as if everything had been freshly made.

Not on a day like this. On a day like this, all she wanted was someone to come home to, a man to cook her meals and rub her feet, and laugh at the sheer strangeness of the day.

That was what she was thinking about as she exited the elevator into the bowels of the parking structure below her office building. The concrete structure smelled like gas fumes, and the lighting, even in the middle of the day, was a gray florescent that made her think of rain.

She rounded a corner, her heels clicking on the concrete, and saw a man sitting on the back of a 1974 Lincoln, holding a cigarette lighter in one hand, and a snake in the other.

The snake was alive, and twisting.

She swallowed, uncertain whether or not to keep walking. The man was gorgeous: long black hair, brown eyes, smooth skin the color of toffee. He wore a shimmery gray silk suit that accented his broad shoulders and long legs, and on his feet he wore cowboy boots trimmed with real silver.

Nora pulled her purse tight against her side. She would walk around the car and continue toward hers as if she saw nothing wrong.

"Who'zat?" A nasal male voice demanded.

"Probably someone on the way to her car." The responding voice was deep and smooth, soft and in control. Even without clear eyesight, Nora knew who spoke second.

A tiny man stood on the bumper of the Lincoln. The first man had slid across the hood to make room for the small guy. The little guy was perfectly proportioned, square with a pugnacious face, a nose that obviously had been broken several times, and powerful arms. He wore dark blue jeans and a t-shirt with a pack of cigarettes rolled up in the sleeves.

"It'd be nice to have a woman," the tiny man said.

His companion smiled. The snake wrapped itself around his wrist. "Things are a bit different now," he said. "You can't just have any woman."

As he said that last, his gaze met Nora's. His brown eyes sparkled as if they shared a joke.

She wasn't in the mood to share anything, no matter how gorgeous he was. She had a video deposition to take, a lunch to grab on the run, and a court appearance at 2. She didn't have time for any of this.

"Excuse me," she said, and tried to hurry past them. The little man scurried along the bumper until he could extend his small arm in front of her.

"Who are you?" he asked in his annoying nasal voice.

She had had enough of their strangeness. She rose to her full five feet four inches (in heels) and said, "Nora Barr. I'm a lawyer." She added that last so that they wouldn't screw with her.

The tall man raised his eyebrows and looked at the little man. The little man shrugged. "Told you we needed a woman," he said.

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So that was how she found herself back in her office, the two men seated across from her, looking at her degrees and framed prints cluttering the fake wood paneling on the wall. She had sent her assistant Charlene to do the video deposition, rationalizing that Charlene needed the experience, knowing that she would regret this action should that particular case go to trial. But she really didn't want to leave Charlene alone with these two -- Nora wasn't sure she wanted to be alone with them either -- but she felt compelled to listen to their case.

The little man sat like an overgrown child in her green metal office chair. His stubby legs extended over the seat, and didn't even pretend to try for the ground. Like a little boy, he put his hands on the armrests as if he were trying to hold himself in place. He watched her every move, and she wasn't sure she liked that.

The other man slid into the remaining chair as if it were built for him. He had pushed the chair back so that he could extend his long legs. His booted feet still hit the metal edge of her desk, rattling it. The snake had disappeared, probably hiding in his suit, and he had also hidden the cigarette lighter.

"All right," she said, leaning forward and folding her hands together in what she hoped was a business-like position. "What can I do for you?"

"Can you have someone tested for a witch?" the little man asked.

"That never worked," the other man growled.

"Exactly," the little man said.

Nora glanced at her watch. "I have to be in court in less than ninety minutes."

"Right," the gorgeous man said. "I -- "

"If she can't have her tested for a witch, perhaps tarred and feathered -- ?"

"Wrong century."

"Hung from a tree until she's dead?"

"Wrong century."

"Boiled in oil?"

"You know no one did that."

Nora slapped her hands on her desk and stood. "I do appreciate the comedy routine, but I also bill by the hour, and so far you gentlemen have taken up nearly 15 minutes of your free session. So unless there's a realistic way I can help you -- "

"I'm sorry." The good-looking man stood too. "I get so preoccupied I forget that the rest of the world doesn't work the way I do." He extended his hand. "I'm Blackstone."

"The Blackstone?" she asked with just a trace of sarcasm in her voice.

"Well, actually, yes, but not the one you're thinking of. He, in fact, was the imposter, but that's a long story which ended rather nastily for all concerned. He -- "

"Blackstone," she said, sinking down to her desk. This would be a long interview. "Is that a first or last name?"

"It's a surname," he said, sitting too. "My given name is Aethelstan."

"Aethelstan?" Whatever she had expected, it wasn't that.

He shrugged prettily. "It was in style once."

"A long, long time ago," the little man added.

"And you are?" she asked him.

"Let's just call me Panza," the little man said. "Sancho Panza."

She shook her head. "If you want me to do something for you in a court of law, I'll need your legal name."

The little guy shrugged. "It's not me you're helping," he said. "It's Blackstone."

She sighed. Why did she feel as if she had been taken, and she hadn't known what for? "All right, Mr. Blackstone," she said, "what can I help you with?"

"You charge what?" he asked. The question sounded rude. As he spoke, the snake stuck its head out of his shirt and looked at her as if it too expected an answer.

"Two hundred dollars an hour, plus a -- " she almost quoted her regular rate, then decided to double it because these two were proving to be so much trouble -- "plus a thousand dollar retainer."

"A thousand dollar -- ?" the little man said, strangling on the last word. "In my day, you could run a country on a thousand dollars."

"In your day, there was no such thing as dollars," Blackstone muttered.

"As I told you in the parking garage, the first hour of the consultation is free." She glanced at her watch. "However, you're rapidly running out of time."

"What do you prefer?" Blackstone asked. "A check or cash?"

"Or gold?" the little man added. She would be damned if she would think of him as Sancho Panza.

"A check is fine," she said. No sense taking currency. With these two, it could just as easily be forged, and then where would she be? The worst thing a check could do was bounce.

Blackstone put a hand inside his suitcoat and brought out a checkbook. A pen appeared in his other hand. She hadn't seen him take it from anywhere. He poised it over the paper. "To you or the law firm?"

She was still nonplused by the appearance of the pen. "Um," she said, wishing she could gather herself more quickly in this man's presence. "The law firm."

He wrote the check, signed it with a flourish, then handed it to her. She glanced at it, noting his name in bold and only a post office box for an address. It was time, she thought, to get serious.

She pulled out a legal pad and took her pen out of its holder. "Let's get your exact address and phone, starting with you, Mr. Blackstone, and then going with your friend here."

"You don't need me," the little man said. "I already told you."

"Then I'll have to ask you to leave," she said.

"I don't mind him staying," Blackstone said, leaning back as he said so.

"I do," she said.

Blackstone raised an eyebrow. The little man scowled. "You got books in the waiting area."

"Law books," Nora said.

"Good enough," he said, and let himself out.

The room felt three times larger without him. She wasn't certain how a person that tiny could fill such a big space.

"Mr. Blackstone," she said, not missing a beat, "street address and phone number?"

He gave her both with an ease that made her uncomfortable. She wasn't sure why it did; most people could recite their addresses in their sleep. But everything about him seemed strange.

"So," she said again. "How can I help you?"

To her surprise, a flush covered his cheeks. He threaded his hands together, glanced nervously at the door, and then said, "A -- dear friend of mine -- has been in a -- coma -- for -- some time. Her -- guardian -- won't let me near her, and although I've fought for that right for -- some time -- , I haven't made any progress."

"And you want me to -- what? Contact the guardian?"

"Isn't there anything legal you can do?" he asked.

"Depends," she said. "What's your exact relationship?"

His flush grew deeper. She sighed inwardly. Girlfriend. Right. But then, she had a rule about getting involved with clients anyway.

"She's -- ah -- someone special to me."

God, she hated clients like this. They wanted her to fix whatever it was, but they weren't forthcoming right from the start. Her favorite second year law professor had warned them all about this, but she had thought he was exaggerating until she hung out her shingle and began to interact with the great unwashed.

"Special." She let her tone go dry. "As in fiance? Lover?"

"No," he said. "But she will be."

She closed her eyes. Will be. He had hopes, but the woman probably didn't. Which meant he was a stalker. Why were all the gorgeous ones also crazy? She opened her eyes. He was watching her, looking puzzled.

"Look, Mr. Blackstone," she said. "I can't help you in any legal way unless the woman in question is in

some way a relative. I'm sorry, but that's just the law. You'll have to accept the situation for what it is and move on."

She pushed his check back toward him.

"You can't help me?" he asked, sounding a bit astounded.

She shook her head. "Not me, not any lawyer. You have no rights with someone who is just a friend. The guardian has legal control."

The snake stuck its head out farther and hissed softly. Its long forked tongue curled as it did so. He shushed it, and pushed it back inside his coat.

"This is becoming untenable," he said.

"I'm sorry." Her heart had started pounding hard. He had made her nervous from the beginning, but she had thought his strangeness harmless. Now she wasn't sure.

He took the check, stood, and held out his hand. "Sorry to take all of your time," he said.

"The first hour's free," she said lightly. But it had cost her a good deposition.

"Nonetheless," he said. "I appreciate your candor." And then he slipped out the door and out, she hoped, of her life. Still, as a precaution, she made notes of the entire strange meeting. Her secretary had been complaining about the dullness of the routine lately; she would get a kick out of this.

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Nora didn't think of Blackstone again. She had chalked up the interview to one of those weird experiences that attorneys sometimes had, and she had moved on. So, two weeks later, as she was leaving the courthouse after a particularly successful trial, she was surprised to receive a call from her secretary, saying that Blackstone had requested her presence immediately at an address that put him squarely in the center of the westside suburbs. Nora protested: she had told him she wouldn't be his attorney, but her secretary insisted.

"I think he's in some kind of trouble," she said.

It took Nora ten minutes on the freeway to get to the neighborhood Blackstone had indicated. As she got closer, she watched a cloud of inky black smoke loom over that section of town. Fire equipment and ambulances screamed by her, slowing her trip. Each time she pulled to the side of the road, she cursed slightly, and she wondered what she was getting herself into.

The exit was jammed with milling people, emergency vehicles and baffled on-lookers. The inky black smoke was rising from an area two blocks over. It looked serious.

A roadblock greeted her halfway down the street. A cop she didn't recognize rapped on her window. As she rolled it down, she said, "I'm Mr. Blackstone's attorney. He just called me."

The cop waved her through.

As she drove past the roadblock, she felt as if she had entered a nightmare. Burning bits of wood littered the road, and she had to constantly swerve around them. Several homes were on fire, their residents outside, holding hoses on them or weeping. A couple of cars parked alongside the street had large holes through their roofs and sides, as if someone -- or something -- had punched through the metal. The air

was filled with ash, and the smell of smoke was so overpowering, she continually sneezed.

The address her secretary had given her was right in the middle of the devastation. Police cars blocked the entire road. She couldn't drive any farther. She really didn't want to get out, but she felt she had no choice.

She sighed, grabbed her tennis shoes from their spot beneath the passenger seat, and removed her lucky Ferragamos. She shoved her nylon covered feet into the tennies, and got out of the car.

It was worse outside. The stench permeated everything. Bits of charred wood and flame floated down with the ash. The sky was so dark, it seemed as if a severe storm were about to break overhead. Her eyes watered. People were sobbing, police band radios were crackling voices and static, and firemen were yelling directions at each other. She stepped over hoses and blackened debris, not quite sure where she was going, but knowing she'd recognize it when she saw it.

And she did. The five policemen were standing around Blackstone. He was on a green lawn, untouched by flames, its flowers an obscene reminder of what the neighborhood had been just hours before. A woman was sprawled on the driveway face down; her position was unnatural, the turn of her head, the clawed tension in her fingers all confirmed what Nora feared.

The woman was dead.

A shiver ran through Nora despite the dry heat from nearby flames. She didn't do criminal work. She was a civil attorney; this was way out of her league.

She rounded a 1970s brown and orange VW microbus, and headed toward the police. No one tried to stop her. The microbus rocked slightly, and as she looked up, she could have sworn she saw Sancho Panza or whoever the hell he was moving behind the window. Then, when she blinked, he was gone.

She swallowed against the smoke-ravaged dryness of her throat. She had to stay focused. She had to somehow get through these next few moments and then get out of here.

Blackstone's face softened when he saw her. It had been hard lines and angles before. Now it was gentle, rounded, as if someone had changed the lighting or he had become a different person somehow. She felt the transition as much as saw it, and remembered suddenly, uncomfortably, of the transition people said Ted Bundy's face went through when he was angry.

She was in much too deep. At least she knew it.

She stopped beside one of the police officers, a middle-aged man whose soft stomach edged over his belt. His face was soot-streaked, and his eyes were red.

"I'm Mr. Blackstone's attorney," Nora said in her best don't-screw-with-me-voice. "What's going on here?"

"Nora," Blackstone said, his voice warm. "Get my partner. We're going to need your help."

"What's going on?" she asked again.

The cop looked around as if what she saw explained everything. "Your client destroyed this neighborhood." Then he nodded at the dead woman. "We're not sure what happened there. All we know is that folks placed her as alive not fifteen minutes ago."

"What are you charging him with?"

"What aren't we charging him with? Carrying incendiary devices. Arson. Murder and attempted murder, I would say."

"Nora," Blackstone said again. "Get Sancho. We need to secure the glass case and we don't have much time."

"You shouldn't be talking," Nora said. "Listen, I'll meet you at the jail. And if possible, I'll have a criminal defense attorney there as well. We'll get you out -- "

"I'm not worried about me," he said. "Get Sancho -- "

"You coming with us, lady?" the police officer asked.

"Where are you taking him?"

"Downtown," the officer said. "This one goes right to the jail. We're not taking no chances."

"Nora -- "

She pointed a finger at Blackstone. He flinched visibly. "I don't want to hear another word from you. You will not speak again until you are in the presence of an attorney. Is that clear?"

He nodded. She had no idea if they had already Mirandized him, but she wasn't taking any chances.

The cops led him away. He looked over his shoulder once and mouthed "Remember." She wouldn't forget. Even though she wanted to.

She brushed a strand of hair out of her face. The smoke was making her woozy. She didn't want to think about what he had done to destroy this neighborhood. She didn't want to think about that feeling she had gotten earlier, when she had first met with him, when she felt that he was a stalker. She wondered how much she had seen at that moment, and how much she had missed.

Well, it wouldn't be her problem for long. She would turn it over to someone else, and that would be it. Except that he wanted her to do something, something with a glass case.

She passed the VW microbus and as she did, the passenger window rolled down a crack. A tiny face pressed against it. "I'm going to your office," a voice whispered.

Sancho. She suppressed a sigh and didn't even nod as she passed him. The last thing she wanted was for the cops to investigate the microbus. Who knew what they would find inside? She couldn't believe they hadn't cordoned it off already as part of the crime scene.

She climbed over hoses, and returned to her own car. It was covered in a film of ash. As she settled into the driver's side, she turned on the wipers. The ash smeared all over the glass.

He had destroyed a neighborhood and maybe killed a woman. Was this because Nora hadn't helped him? Or was something else going on here, something she didn't entirely understand?

She started the car, and executed a series of small Y-turns in the tiny space, careful not to run over any hoses. The situation looked grim. Houses were still burning. She wondered how many would be gone by nightfall.

If she had to lay a bet, she would bet on all of them.

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She was shaking as she drove back to her office. Shaking and slightly woozy from the smoke. Her nylons were ripped and she didn't know how she had done that, and her best suit was covered in soot and ash. She smelled like charred wood, and she doubted that smell would ever come off.

Traffic was horrible -- backed up for miles as people gawked at the smoke, and pulled over for the occasional ambulance. When she got herself together enough to speak, she called her secretary and had a conference call with Max Raichelson, the best defense attorney in the city, maybe in the entire state. She and Max had been close in law school -- she had even hoped he would ask her out -- but nothing had come of it. After graduation, they had gone their own ways.

He agreed to meet Blackstone ("you're kidding, right?" Max asked) at the police station.

The problem was no longer hers. Except she didn't tell Max about Sancho. And she didn't want to think about him either. She wanted simply to get on with her life as if nothing happened. She knew that would be impossible, but in the spirit of pretense, she flicked on the radio to get her mind on something else.

Instantly a shrill female voice, filtered through a phone line, grated on her nerves. She was about to flip away, when a professional radio voice broke in and clearly hung up on the caller.

"Crackpots," the announcer said. "We have a situation and all we get are crank calls."

"Several dozen of them, though, Dave," said a professional female voice. "Don't you think we should pay attention to them?"

"No," Dave said. "To recap, there's been an incident -- "

He started to describe the neighborhood she had just left, adding nothing to what she already knew. Fortunately he didn't have Blackstone's name and he didn't seem to know about the dead woman. At that moment, the radio was reporting that no one had died.

"-- another caller from the neighborhood," the woman announcer was saying. "And this one we both happen to know. It's Rick Ayers, our morning news announcer. Rick?"

"Stefanie." Rick's voice crackled over the phone lines and through Nora's radio. She had turned off the main highway, but traffic was still backed up. It was dark as night around her. The smoke had settled over the valley. "Even though Dave thinks the other callers are cranks, they aren't."

"Come on, Rick. Two people fighting with fire? It gets out of control? A big wild fireball battle like something out of Tolkien? We're supposed to believe that?"

Now they really had her attention. Nora glanced at the radio as if she could gauge its truthfulness just by looking at it. She was still shaking.

"Fraid so," Rick said. "I was across the street. I got the kids out and down the block as fast as possible. There were two people involved -- a man and a woman. The man had been coming out of the woman's garage. He had a glass case in front of him, and it appeared to be full. That's what got my attention. He wasn't carrying the glass case. It was floating in front of him."

"And what were you drinking this afternoon?" Dave asked. It didn't sound like banter.

"I wasn't. He put it in an orange and brown VW microbus when the woman comes out of her house and lobs a ball of fire at him. He deflects it, and it lands on a neighbor's house. That's when I got the kids and sent them down the block, knocking on doors. I think we got the place evacuated by the time the fire fight started in earnest."

"You mean to tell me...?"

Stephanie pulled into the underground parking lot beneath her building and momentarily lost the signal. Instead of regaining it, she shut off the radio, not really wanting to think about what she had just learned.

She had wished for magic. She simply didn't like the form it was taking.

She pulled into her normal parking space, opened her door, and heard a clang. She frowned, wondering if she had hit the car next to her.

Only it wasn't a car. It was a brown and orange VW microbus.

Sancho or whatever the hell his name was crawled from under her door. "Man am I going to have a headache," he said, one hand cradling the side of his face.

"What's going on?" she asked again.

"You don't want to know."

"I'm supposed to know," she said. "I'm supposed to help you."

"Let's go to your office," Sancho said.

She sighed and grabbed her briefcase. She decided she was enough of a mess to forgo the heels. Indeed, when she got to her floor and exited, wandering down the hall, Sancho behind her, her secretary squealed.

"Are you all right, Ms. Barr?"

"Fine," she said. "Although I could use a couple of bottles of water, pronto. I don't think I've ever been this thirsty."

Then she showed the little man into her office, and closed the door. He headed toward the chair he had used before. She didn't know how he had managed to stay soot-free from all the smoke and fire, nor how the microbus had gotten to the garage ahead of her.

"I won't do anything for you," she said, crossing around to her desk and placing her briefcase on it, "until I know your real name."

He placed a birth certificate, a social security card, a passport, and a driver's license on her blotter. They all showed his name to be Sancho Panza, and the driver's license and passport photos confirmed that the name belonged to him.

She shoved them back at him, more angrily than she would have liked. "I don't deal in fake i.d.," she said.

"Neither do I," he said.

She glanced at it again. The driver's license had the supposedly unduplicatable holographic sticker just under the photo. The passport was old with several stamps already inside. If it had passed customs, it was good enough for her.

"I still don't believe it," she said.

"You don't have to." He settled in his chair. "Just help us."

"I already got a defense attorney for Blackstone."

"Fine," Panza said, as if he didn't care. "The most important thing is the glass case."

"Yes," Nora said. She took a recorder out of her briefcase, then closed the case, and set it on the floor. "I understand that he levitated it out of someone's garage."

"How he got it isn't your concern," Panza said. "Helping him with it is."

"I don't deal in stolen property," she said.

"It's not stolen," Panza said. There was a knock on her door. "Come in," Nora said. Her secretary brought in four cold bottles of water.

"Need a glass?" her secretary asked.

Nora shook her head. "Thanks."

Her secretary left. Nora offered one bottle to Panza, but he declined.

"I really don't want to be involved," she said.

"You're already involved. You identified yourself as Blackstone's attorney. People will come to you."

It was a weak argument, as arguments went. She opened a bottle of water, and took a long, long drink from it. The coolness felt good against her parched throat. The smoke and heat had dehydrated her.

"Why did Blackstone destroy that neighborhood?"

"He didn't," Panza said.

"Someone did," she said.

"Don't worry about it," Panza said.

"I have to worry about it." She ran a hand over her face, felt the soot flake off. "People make jokes about lawyers having no ethics, but that's not true. I can't help him and stay true to myself if I know he destroyed that neighborhood."

Panza clenched a fist, hit the arm of the chair, and then shook his head. "What if I told you everything will be fixed?"

She laughed, and felt its bitterness. "That can't be fixed. Not in the way I would want."

"And that is?"

"To make it seem as if today never happened. But people don't forget. Even if everything were made better, people would remember and -- "

"Say no more." Panza stood in the chair. She was constantly amazed at how small he was. "We can do that."

"Sure," she said. "And pigs fly."

"Not without help," he said, and he seemed perfectly serious. "Now. Assist us."

He wouldn't go away. And no matter how ethical she got, the images wouldn't go away. She might as well see what they wanted. "Tell me what you need," she said.

"I need you to store our microbus," he said.

"You can do that."

He shook his head. "We can't know where it is. Only you can know. You'll store it for us, and then when we come and get it, everything will be safe."

"It doesn't sound legal."

"It is. All you have to do is find a garage, rent it, and keep the microbus there. We might not come for it for years."

"Years?" Nora asked.

"Years." He reached into the breast pocket of his shirt and removed an envelope. The envelope was four times the size of the pocket. "This should cover rent for the next twenty years, plus your fees and time, based on the estimate you gave Blackstone when you first met. If it takes us longer to get the microbus, we will send more money."

She took the envelope. It was too thin to be holding cash. Instead she found a very ornate check for a very lot of money. It was issued by Quixotic, Inc. and signed by Sancho Panza. "I'll have to verify the funds," she said.

"Of course."

She took the envelope, stood, and walked to the front office. There she had her secretary call and verify the check. It was good.

She came back in, tapping the envelope against her hand. The little man was still standing in the chair. He was watching her. She closed the door and leaned on it.

"Here's what I'm willing to do," she said. "I will take your money, and put it in a special account. I will have the rental for the garage removed from that account, and my monthly fee. I will keep the keys here, but I will not inspect the microbus. I will not touch the microbus after I take it to the garage, and I will not relinquish the keys to anyone but you or Mr. Blackstone -- ever. Is that clear?"

"Will the account bear interest?" Panza asked.

"Yes," she said.

"And who gets the interest?"

"Probably the person who owns the garage, when you don't come back in twenty years," she said.

The little man smiled. "I like you," he said. "If Blackstone's heart weren't imprisoned, I bet he would too."

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After Panza left, she dictated the necessary instructions to her secretary. Then she went home, showered, changed into jeans and a sweatshirt and drank another gallon of water. Her eyes were still red. The smoke cloud remained over the city. Even though she had cleared her own lungs, the smell of smoke went everywhere with her. She shut off the radio because she couldn't stand the constant jabber about

the "Battle of the Wizards" as one of the stations had dubbed the day's events.

She found a brand-new garage complex on the edge of town, and signed a year's lease with an option for renewal. Then she drove back, got the microbus, and took it to the garage. It drove like a VW Bug -- an old VW Bug -- that was about to explode. Something weighed the back down, and made corners difficult. But she didn't look. She didn't want to.

She parked the microbus in the garage, pulled down the door, and locked it with a brand new lock that required a combination and a key. Then she took a cab back to her office.

It was getting dark, and she could no longer see the smoke.

As she was walking in the door, her phone rang. Her secretary was long gone. The main room was dark. She stumbled against a chair as she reached for the desk, and managed a shaky hello, just as she realized she should have let the service get the call.

"Nora?"

It took her a moment to recognize the voice. "Max? How did it go with Blackstone?"

"Buy me a drink," Max said. "No. Buy me fifteen drinks, and pour me into a cab. I really don't want to go home."

That bad. It was that bad. And she had already helped him. She had already implicated herself by taking care of the microbus.

"All right," she said. "Where?"

"Grady's."

Grady's. It had been the law school's watering hole. She hadn't been there since she graduated. At least she was dressed for it. She grabbed her purse and took her car down to campus.

It wasn't hard to find Max. He was the only man over thirty in the place. Even if he weren't, the silk suit in a bar filled with jeans, t-shirts, and tattoos would have been a dead giveaway.

He sat in a booth in the back, and looked as if he had already had a few drinks. She slid in across from him, and a tired smile crossed his lined face. She had liked Max more than she cared to admit. He had made quite a name for himself. They had always exchanged pleasantries when they passed in the courthouse, but they hadn't had time for much else.

She had missed him. She hadn't realized how much.

A waitress with studs in her eyebrows, cheeks and nose made her way to the table. Nora ordered a beer, and found that she had to choose a microbrewery instead. Finally Max ordered for her -- and paid for it.

When she protested, he grinned. "You got me the case."

"You asked me to buy," she said.

"I've just made more money for doing nothing than I've ever made for doing something," he said.

She frowned.

"I cashed one very large check on the way back from the jail this afternoon," he said, "and I verified the funds before I did. It's good. I'm supposed to give some to you. Finder's fee."

He slid a check across the table. She gasped at the amount. "Max -- "

"No," he said. "Don't argue. After what I saw today. Don't argue."

She rubbed her eyes. "What did you see?"

"I saw police forget a crime was committed. I saw a dead body get up and walk. Your friend Blackstone promises me I'll remember all this, but he says no one else will. No one else -- except you."

"Tell me," she said.

And so he did.

* * * *

"The coroner's office is in the basement of the main police station," Max started.

"I know," Nora said.

"Well, I wasn't sure," he said. "You never know what civil attorneys know about the criminal system. I got to the station at the same time the corpse of that woman did, and as I was walking to the elevator, the ambulance had pulled up in front of the double doors." The attendants opened up the ambulance doors, and were starting to remove the body when it sat up.

Everyone jumped and then one of the attendants said, "Well, that happens sometimes."

But what didn't happen was the body unhooking itself from the straps and getting off the gurney. Max was already in the elevator. The woman joined him.

She was like nothing he had ever seen before, long dark hair with a streak of white along the side, a black robe untouched by the smoke and long curved fingernails, almost like talons. The doors closed as the attendants came running forward. Max huddled in the side of the elevator, planning to get off on any floor.

The doors opened on his floor and he hurried off. The woman hurried behind him. Max veered toward the sergeant in charge. Several police officers tried to restrain the woman. The attendants were running up the stairs, yelling.

Max asked to see his client, and was led into an interview room. Blackstone was leaning against a chair, feet out. He smiled. "You must be the attorney Nora sent," he said. "Sorry to have wasted your time."

"Are they going to let you out?" Max asked.

"You'll see," Blackstone said.

At that moment, the woman somehow burst through the locked door. "Where is she?" the woman shouted.

Blackstone shrugged.

"I know you know," she said.

"Actually, I don't." He seemed very calm. "You think after a thousand years this would grow old, Millicent."

"I will not let you have her."

"You won't let anyone experience true love," he said. "But she's somewhere even I can't find her."

The woman crossed the room, and before Max or anyone could stop her, she grabbed Blackstone's head. She held it with one hand and sparks flew all around. She frowned at him, as if she were trying to pull every thought from his head. Then she cursed and shoved him away.

"You won't get away with this," the woman said. "I will find her."

"You have fifteen years, Millicent, and then she's on her own."

"She's too young."

"She's too beautiful. Women leave home well before they turn one thousand. You're just jealous."

The woman narrowed her eyes, and waved an arm and disappeared.

Blackstone stood and took Max's arm. "There's going to be chaos in a moment," he said. "Just follow my lead."

Then a police detective came into the room. "Max!" he said. "What are you doing here?"

"Showing me around," Blackstone said before Max could answer. "I hope you don't mind."

Max was stunned. This was a man who had been under arrest a moment before, and no one seemed to notice. In fact, at that point, Max checked Blackstone's wrists for cuffs and saw none.

And then Blackstone calmly led the two of them out of the precinct and into the parking garage. The ambulance attendants were sitting on the edge of the microbus, looking winded.

"You didn't call for an ambulance did you?" one of them asked Max.

"No," he said.

"I don't get it," the attendant said to his companion. "How did we end up here?"

Then Blackstone led Max to his car, and gave him the check "for his time and services" instructing him to split it with Nora. "I'm sorry you had to see this," he said. "You can't forget because you were in my presence when everything reverted. And Nora can't forget because then -- well, then I'd be, as your generation so quaintly puts it, screwed. But we did as she asked and put everything back the way it was."

"What's going on here?" Max asked.

"You don't want to know," Blackstone said.

"But I do," Max said.

"All right," Blackstone said. "But it's not my fault if you fail to believe me."

* * * *

"Well?" Nora asked. "What was going on?"

"You know," Max said, leaning over his fourth beer. His words were becoming slurred. "When I drove here, there wasn't any smoke. And no one said a word about anything on the radio. It was strange. So I swung over to the neighborhood. It looks fine. No burned houses. No ashes. Just flowers and porches and electric lights."

"Max," she said, worrying that he might lose complete control before he got to the point. "What did he tell you?"

"He said that fairy tales are true. Sort of."

"Great," Nora said leaning back.

"And we got in the middle of Snow White and the Seven Dwarves. Only there was only one dwarf. And she didn't bite into a poison apple. It was a spell. But the glass case was correct -- "

"Max." A chill ran down Nora's back. "From the beginning."

"Blackstone is a wizard." Max ran a hand over his face as if he were trying to hide the words. "Over a thousand years ago he fell in love with a witch's daughter. Only the witch didn't want anyone near her daughter, so she hid the daughter with her assistant, a magical dwarf named -- "

"Sancho Panza."

Max looked at her strangely. "Merlin, actually. After the great Merlin of old. But the dwarf was a good friend of Blackstone's, and he managed to get Blackstone and the girl together. What they didn't know was that the witch had put a curse on them so when they kissed, the girl passed out. Merlin knew the girl would die if she didn't get back to the witch to remove the spell, but Blackstone outsmarted the witch. He put the girl in a glass coffin. She would remain as she was, not alive and not dead, until the spell was removed. Merlin knew the witch's spell would wear off after fifteen years if the witch didn't know where the girl was. But before they could hide the coffin, the witch stole it. Over the centuries, Blackstone has stolen it back. But he's never been able to hide it from the witch. She's telepathic. She's always been able to pull the information from him. Until now. As long as he doesn't know where the coffin is the witch won't either."

"Shit," Nora said.

"You know, don't you?" Max asked.

"I have a hunch," Nora said.

Max held up his hand. "Well don't tell me. I don't want to be any more involved than I already am." He got up and swayed once. "I told you what I know. Now I'm leaving."

"Max, we have to investigate."

He shook his head, then caught the table to hold himself in place. "It would raise too many questions," he said. "Like, if there is a woman in a glass coffin in your possession, is she dead? And if so, are you an accessory after the fact? And if she isn't, what then? Do we believe she's been alive but asleep for a thousand years? And isn't that Sleeping Beauty? Doesn't the prince get to wake her with a kiss? Where did this going to sleep with a kiss come from? It seems all wrong to me."

He stumbled forward. "I am going home to pretend this was all a drunken fantasy."

"And the money?" Nora asked.

"I'll pretend I defended a mobster and it was so traumatic I forgot all about it." He wandered out, clutching the back of booths for support.

She sat there, trembling. He was right. She had said she wouldn't investigate what was in that microbus. But now, it seemed, she had no choice.

* * * *

She had to go to her office first to get the key to lock she had put on the garage. As she drove, she noted a full moon over the town. The air smelled fresh, with the trace of night flowers. She paused before making the turn-off to her office, then drove down the freeway to the neighborhood.

Streetlights were on the entire way, and the roads were clear of debris and emergency vehicles. As she pulled onto the residential streets, she saw the silhouettes of houses trailing off into the distance. Some had lights on. Many, by this time, had their lights off. Vehicles were parked in the street as if they belonged there.

She pulled over to the curb, parking between the two houses where she thought, but wasn't certain, the microbus had been parked earlier. She got out and wandered to the lawn, recognizing its greenery and its flowers from the afternoon. This was the place. She would bet her practice on it. And yet the neighborhood stood around it. Nothing was destroyed.

A porch light came on at the house behind her. She frowned. That house probably belonged to the radio personality. He had seemed like the nosy type. She slipped back into her car and drove away.

A feeling of disorientation that had nothing to do with the beer swept through her. Maybe when she got back to her office, she wouldn't even find a key. Maybe in the morning, Max would deny having this conversation with her. Maybe none of this had happened.

Maybe.

But it felt as if it had.

She pulled into the parking garage beneath her building and got out of her car. As she walked, she passed a 1974 Lincoln. A little man stood on its fender, and a tall man leaned against its hood. He wore a shimmery gray silk suit that accented his broad shoulders and long legs, and on his feet he wore cowboy boots trimmed with real silver. A snake peeked its head out of his sleeve.

"You know," he said in that rich warm voice of his, "if you get the key and go to the microbus, I'll simply have to follow you. And if I follow you all of this will be for naught."

"Max tells me there's a woman in that glass case."

"And she's alive," Blackstone said. "She's been asleep for a thousand years. If you help us, she'll sleep for fifteen more."

"Why can't your friend get the information out of my brain?"

"Because it's not there," Blackstone said. "Right now, all you have is supposition. She could probe, but her powers won't let her unearth supposition. They'll only unearth fact."

"The fact is I have your microbus. She'll know that."

"You have my microbus," the little man said. "Sancho Panza's microbus."

"And we all know that's not your name," Nora snapped.

"No," the little man said. "You suspect that's not my name. You know that I have all the legal documentation to prove that it is."

She smoothed a hand over her hair, and took a deep breath. "This afternoon," she said. "I saw a destroyed neighborhood and a dead woman. I saw the police lead you away in cuffs."

"Yes," Blackstone said.

"But you're here, and the neighborhood's back the way it was, and Max says the woman's not dead."

Blackstone's smile was small. "We live differently from you, Sancho and I. And we don't really die."

"So you're saying what I saw was real."

"For that moment," he said. "But you asked us to fix it, to put it back. So we did."

"For the record," the little man said. "She was the one who destroyed everything, not us."

"What if she's the one who is in the right?" Nora asked.

"You don't even know what the battle's about," Blackstone said.

Nora crossed her arms. "Enlighten me."

"Love," Blackstone said. "It's about love."

"Seems to me it's about possession," Nora said. "There's a woman who has been asleep for a thousand years because her family and her boyfriend are fighting over her. Seems to me that she has no say in this matter."

The little man put his face in his hands. Blackstone frowned. The snake hissed at her.

"What happens if I raise the coffin lid?" Nora asked. "Will I wake her up?"

Blackstone shook his head. "You'll destroy my spell, but not death spell. If you open that coffin, she'll die."

"Lovely," Nora said. She started for the elevators. Midway there, she stopped. "If all of this happens in fifteen years, why did you pay me for twenty?"

Blackstone hadn't moved. The snake had wrapped itself around his arm. The little man had disappeared along the side of the Lincoln. "I didn't pay you," Blackstone said.

"Why did your friend, then?"

Blackstone raised his beautiful silver eyes to hers. "The world has changed," he said. "She's been sleeping for a thousand years. It'll take her time to adjust, time to find herself again. She'll need to make decisions, need to make choices, and she can't do make good choices when she first wakes up. Five years may not be enough. You might get a renewal after that."

"You expect me to babysit?" Nora asked.

"I expect nothing," he said. "But my friend here expects you to find competent help for any problem that might arise during your service to him. If that's too much to ask, tell us now. We'll find someone else."

Nora pushed a strand of hair off her face. The hair still smelled faintly of smoke. "The battle between you and this woman, this witch, is over?"

"It will be," he said, "if she can't find what she's looking for."

"And she won't find it," Nora said, "as long as I help your friend."

"You could say that." Blackstone lifted an edge of his sleeve. The snake crawled inside.

"That's giving me a lot of control over something that's important to you," Nora said.

"Yes." Blackstone stood. He seemed taller than he had before.

"Why?" she asked. "Why me?"

"Because," he said. "You believe just enough to take a chance."

"Believe," she muttered. Could he hear thoughts too? Had he known what she had been thinking the day she met him? She shook her head. She couldn't believe that. It was one thing too many. "What happens to you?"

But her words echoed in the empty garage. Blackstone, the snake, the little man and the Lincoln were gone. She rested a hand on a rusted Beamer, more to hold herself up than anything else.

"I guess that answers my question," she said. She stared at the elevator, and thought about the key on the wall in her office. The key with the combination taped to it.

She could look now and satisfy her curiosity. Or she could do what she was supposed to do, and let things alone. She believed that a neighborhood burned down. She knew the neighborhood was fine now. She had seen it. Just like she had seen it burn this afternoon.

And that was the secret: she could no longer trust her senses. What if she went inside that VW microbus and found a glass coffin? And what if a woman were inside? And what if she opened it and ruined the spell? She wouldn't know how to find Blackstone or his little friend Sancho. She wouldn't know how to make everything better again.

Her own car keys were digging into the skin of her right hand. She started back to her car. She wasn't going to go. And it wasn't because of true love. Or fear that she might ruin a spell.

She had been given a strange gift these last two weeks. Someone had shown her that magic could exist. What if she went to that microbus and there was no glass coffin inside? There was no woman? Would she have to question everything she had seen? Would she want to?

When she reached her car, she got inside, and picked up the phone. Before she even knew what she was doing, she asked directory assistance to dial Max's home number. The phone rang six times. She was about to hang up when Max answered.

"Max?" she asked.

"You looked," he said.

And in that response she felt a deep and profound relief. She hadn't imagined any of this. Or if she had, Max was suffering the same delusion.

"No," she said. "but I'd realized we had skipped dinner. You want to go?"

"Now?" he asked.

"Yes," she said.

"Is this ... a date?"

There was enough hesitation in his voice to make her hesitate too. But dating Max was something she had wanted to do since college. And she had never taken the initiative before. "Yes," she said.

He laughed. "Who'd've thought -- after a day like this -- well, maybe wishes do come true."

"Max?" she said.

"Sorry," he said. "Muttering. I'd love dinner. I think I'm a little more sober than I was before."

"I'll pick you up," she said. "In ten minutes."

She hung up before he could say no. And then she realized he wouldn't. Two shy people, finally getting their wish. She wondered if that was part of Blackstone's payment, and then decided she wouldn't think about Blackstone any more.

She leaned her head against the steering wheel and giggled. She was the one who wanted a little magic in her life, just once. And she had gotten more than a little. She had gotten too much.

Be careful what you wish for, her grandmother used to say.

Well, Nora's wish that day two weeks before had been a two-fold wish. She turned the key in the ignition. Max wasn't going to cook, and he probably wasn't going to rub her feet unless things moved faster than she expected. But he would certainly discuss the strangeness of the day with her, and that would be enough.

For now.