

# Rocking Around



A Leonine Investigations Mystery  
Elle Hartford



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## Rocking Around

Good things don't come to those who wait. Good things come to those who show up every single day at the front door of the shop owned by the person they're trying to get noticed by, perhaps with cookies, hot cocoa, or other small holiday gifts.

Which is to say, I got Priya to agree to help me.

. . . And I also got a lecture from Officer Thorn about the seriousness of stalking behavior. But is it stalking if you're doing research for a story?

Maggie assured me that it was.

Feeling proud of myself for having hired such a responsible, scrupulous assistant for the first time in my long career, I shut myself in my office with promises to think about my behavior.

There was a winged black cat attacking the garland Maggie had put up over the window.

"Leave it alone, Nyx," I said. "You remember what happened last time?"

The cat pretended she didn't understand me, even though I was fairly certain—after almost two years of living with her in the office—that she did. This was the reason I didn't put up decorations myself: I knew I'd be cleaning Nyx's mess

afterward. The thought was not appealing.

I watched her on her solo quest to destroy all Yuletide decorations, and for once, I *did* think about my actions. They say that Yule, being the winter solstice and therefore the longest night of the year, is a time for reflection. Maybe it was that, or maybe it was the cold darkness on the other side of the office window that made me feel thoughtful. When I'd first found Nyx, we'd been basically the same. Grumpy. A little dangerous. Alone. Fast forward a handful of seasons and now I was still grumpy and a little bit dangerous—especially if you asked Officer Thorn. But I was hardly alone anymore. I'd just gotten lectures from three separate people, not to mention an offer to collaborate.

*Finally.* It had taken me a month to convince Priya to help research the strange box of rocks I'd gotten in the mail. Everyone else assumed she was helping me with this year's Yule paper. Around the holidays, we always put out special editions. Maggie and her fellow assistant, Wulf, were already far too excited about this one. And, sure, Priya had agreed to contribute some "curiosities" to the town's new secret gift exchange taking place in the Square on the eve of Yule. But more than that, she'd agreed to ask her contacts about boxed crystal collections—and the strange markings I'd found on mine.

I glanced behind me. On the other side of the office door, I could hear Maggie and Wulf discussing how to lay out this year's "favorite Yuletide songs and recipes" section. That was a discussion that could take hours. Comfortable, not a little proud of myself, I crouched down beside my desk and pulled the box out of its drawer.

Quartz, pyrite, garnet, amber. I'd managed to identify a full row, but the going had been tough. Not least because I had to



keep it all secret. For once, the secrecy was actually stifling. Lark could have probably identified these all in her sleep. But she was the one who would approve *least* of me dealing with an exploding, mysterious box, so I had to keep her firmly out of it. Which meant I had two more rows to go, and many more questions yet to be answered.

But with Priya looking into rock boxes and their markings, I'd made a leap forward. Finding the right expert myself would have been no better than taking shots in the dark, something my granda always said should only be done with a good headlamp and a story already in hand. As usual, he was right. The month spent nagging Priya was worth it if she could find experts right out of the gate.

Plus, it made the mayor and our readers happy to see her participating in Yule activities. Though that was purely secondary.

I grinned at my rocks, running one hand over the ones I'd researched so far. Gingerly. With my brass prosthetic safely behind my back, since I'd come to suspect that something about it messed with the magic. Whether the rocks themselves were magic, or there was some kind of curse in the box or its markings, I still hadn't decided. The next one to identify was a lump of white with black flecks. When I picked it up, I realized that the white parts were reflecting light.

"Fine, I'll help you," Priya had said. "But I'm *busy*. If you're not going to bring the box here, then just give me drawings of it and the symbols and I'll deal with those. But I'm not identifying crystals for you when I can't see them, and I don't have time to do them all one by one. Besides, I'm not a geologist. I just run a store!"

She was only busy because I'd been loitering at her door for

a month, which had created some curiosity in town. Now with gift season upon us and a bustling market in the Square, she had more customers than she knew what to do with.

But, even so, I saw her point. I *wasn't* going to take the box to her—it was too risky. I had no idea what it would do if escorted off the property, and worse, Maggie had eyes sharper than a hawk's. And this wasn't a small or light box.

As a parting gift, Priya had tried to fob me off with a book which she said could help identify crystals. Turned out, it was just a newer copy of my own *Encyclopedia of Crystals, Gems, and Metals*.

"What? You have this already?" Priya had looked aghast, but a family of gnomes trooped into her store and she didn't have time to lecture (thankfully). All she said was, "Then why don't you *use* it? Use the index at the back. Why am I telling you how to do your work? Yes, hello! Welcome to the curiosities shop."

If her "welcome" sounded harried, none of the shoppers seemed to notice.

I could have lingered and informed her that she wasn't telling me how to do *my* job. I was *doing* my job by getting her input on something I knew nothing about, so that I could one day write it all up. But the store really was crowded, and somebody smelled like they were smuggling bags of peppermint sticks on each arm, so I slipped out for fresher air.

And now I could put Priya's suggestion to the test. With the box on the floor and the speckled, shiny rock on my knee, I reached for the encyclopedia and flipped to the back.

"Use the index." Priya had made it sound easy. This book had more indexes than a box full of cards! I got past the "Further Reading" and "Listed on Page ??" sections to find that there were near a dozen lists, multiple pages each. Crystals by

the month they were associated with; crystals by the element they were associated with; crystals by the intention they were associated with. I caught a glimpse of garnet under the “strength” subheading in that one, and smiled to myself. With another flip of the page, I found something more useful: Crystals by Color.

Much better. I found the “White” subheading, and began reading the names. Howlite, opal, quartz . . . I’d already dealt with quartz, and I was pretty sure this wasn’t it again. There were several dozen names in this list, though. I had time while Maggie and Wulf dreamed up the Yule layout, but not *that* much time.

I read through the list again, this time using the *separate* index to then look up the crystal’s description in the book. It wasn’t a pretty process—more like a mess of trying to hold pages open and squinting at tiny page numbers—but I got lucky. Easily the bottom half of the list was just “white this” or “white that.” But I didn’t have to go through those. I hit the description for moonstone and knew I’d found the one.

*Moonstone. Also known as hecatolite, white moonstone, rainbow moonstone, peach moonstone, or blue moonstone. A feldspar mineral with reflective properties, often leading to a tinted color or prismatic effect. In raw form, may have black or gray inclusions. Long used in jewelry and as a talisman while traveling or invoking the moon’s protection and guidance. Associated with intuition, insight, and divination.*

In my experience with tarot last year, I'd had about enough of divination. The intuition thing was a big "no thanks." But I had to admit that reading about moonstone so near the darkest day of the year was fitting.

So near a holiday—and I hadn't as much as sent Lark a card. That little bit of guilt and wondering at the back of my mind shoved its way to the forefront.

But only for a moment. Before I could dwell on it—or, more accurately, look up the next rock in the box—somebody knocked on my office door.

"Just a moment," I called, shoving the rock into the box and both book and box into the drawer. I shoved myself off the floor and headed for the door. "It's Nyx," I said, yanking it open. "She's in a mood about the decorations. So did you figure out the . . ."

It took about that long for me to realize it wasn't Maggie who had knocked. Maggie and Wulf were still deep in their discussion at the other end of the print shop. Instead, I was facing down a massive stranger with a mane of chaotic hair, wild eyes, and a long pointy tongue.

The apparition spoke. "Have you been good?"

"Excuse me?" I blinked. I looked over at Maggie and Wulf to see if they saw it too, but they were ignoring me—and my visitor.

"Have you been good?" It repeated.

"How about you mind your own business?" I said.

The creature nodded its shaggy head, almost sadly. Then from nowhere it produced an enormous sack. And the next thing I knew was darkness.

\* \* \*

I opened my eyes and was met with a riot of Yule lights, evergreen boughs, and bows.

I reopened my eyes and the setting snapped into place. Lark's office, usually a well-appointed wood-paneled room at the heart of her mine's operations—now apparently a haven for all things Yule.

"Happy holiday," said the woman herself. "Though, not for *you*, perhaps. I hear you've been up to all kinds of things. Lying, sneaking, coercing participation in town events . . ."

"Sounds like another day at work to me," I replied. By gingerly tilting my head one direction, then another, I found that I was in one piece. And sitting atop a burlap sack beside a benevolently twinkling Yule tree.

"Ah, and that brings us to your worst offense," Lark said from behind her desk. "Grouchery, grumpiness, and general crankiness."

"Hey!" Slowly, I caught up with the situation. "*You're* still at work. And anyway Yule isn't for another few days. You can't—"

"I am at the office for a special appointment," Lark interrupted. She waved one elegant hand at the window. My curiosity got the best of me and I looked. Outside, that awful horned apparition grinned at me—and then removed its mask to reveal an average troll, one of Lark's miners, no doubt. They waved cheerily at their employer and ambled off.

"You set me up," I realized.

"Let's not give me all the credit. Maggie, Wulf, and Officer Thorn all had their part to play. Mostly by ignoring a bit of holiday fun." Lark's smile was smug and, as usual, too gorgeous for her own good.

"This was 'fun,' was it? Remind me not to go to one of your parties."

"I won't have to."

"Good."

"Because you're already coming. You don't have a choice." Atop her enchanted wheelchair, Lark sailed out from behind her desk, extending her hand to me. "Come along. You didn't really think you could get away without even sending me a card, did you?"

"I've been . . . distracted." That bit of guilt came back in force. Before I took her hand, I had to admit it. "Listen, I—I really am sorry. I let work take over my better impulses. Not that you'd think I have any, but—maybe I do. I'd've come up with *something*."

"You'll still have to. I'm looking forward to it. In the meantime, this is so much better than a card," Lark said, wiggling her hand for me to take. "But we don't have much time before guests start arriving, so you'd better get moving. How do you feel about winter squash risotto and Yule log cake?"

"If you're cooking them? Pretty good." I grinned as I reached out and clasped her hand at last, letting her lead me out the door and toward her mountainside home.

"I ought to make *you* cook," Lark said lightly. "But I'd hate to treat our guests that way."

"I'll be the cleanup crew," I promised. All thoughts of rocks and crystals and secret boxes faded away.

All except one last little niggling of wonder about *intuition*.