

A Hard Rock Life



A Leonine Investigations Mystery
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It was the kind of spring that felt like winter in disguise. Maybe that was just my mood, though.

After my disaster of a Valentine's Day, nothing in Belville seemed right. My cheerful assistants were suspect, my winged cat was always more smug than cute, all my open cases made no sense. I'd lost interest in writing articles for and running the newspaper. That was how I knew something was really wrong. Journalism had been the one constant in my life forever.

I'd even forgotten what day it was.

On my morning walk from the office to the coffee shop, I was accosted by shamrocks and green streamers in the Square. Had I remembered it was a holiday, I wouldn't have ventured out. I tried to turn up my collar and hurry on . . . But the local police officer saw me. She was, as usual, the head of the park decorating committee. She threw a paper shamrock at me like a disc hurler. The glittery green frivolity lodged itself against the bill of my cap.

I yanked it down, ready to discard it in the nearest recycle bin. I may have been in a foul mood, but I knew better than to litter. Especially with Officer Thorn still in eyesight.

And that's when I noticed there was a gold tag attached to

the shamrock. *Make a Wish!* it read. Still without stopping my march toward coffee, I turned to glare at Thorn over my shoulder.

“Lucky you,” she shouted across the Square. “You found a four-leaf clover! Don’t waste it!”

I did not dignify this with a response.

But as I thrust my hand in my pocket, I could feel the spare key there . . . The spare key that had been waiting there for a month. I knew what the right thing to do was. It wasn’t something I could just *wish* would happen. I had to do it myself, and that was the problem.

It wasn’t until I was standing at the corner of the cafe counter, waiting for my extra-large extra-black coffee, staring at yet *more* shamrocks hanging from every available surface, that it occurred to me: maybe I ought to wish for a little courage.

It was laughable, really. Ironic. Courage was usually the thing I had in spades. Courage was what had gotten me into trouble in the first place. Except . . .

Okay, so maybe it wasn’t my *courage* that had made Lark so upset with me. It was my *reckless, heedless disregard of everyone else, friend or foe.*

I still wasn’t entirely sure how the two were different, but I did know it mattered to Lark.

And after a month of misery, I knew Lark mattered to me.

I took my coffee to go. I shuffled past Officer Thorn and her squad of decorators, using the paper shamrock as a shield. And then I took the familiar path up the mountain, toward the mine.

Lark was in her office, as I’d known she would be. Unlike me, she was a very responsible and predictable business owner. Like me, she had two very devoted assistants, who almost refused me entry. They’d managed to turn me away a few times in the past

month. This time, though, I had that silly holiday decoration. I gave it to Skar, one of two massive trolls, and did my best to ask innocently, “What would you wish for?”

Skar looked at Skaab, the other assistant, also a massive troll. “What’s *your* wish?”

Skaab rumbled. “What’s *yours*?”

While they stared at each other, I slid between them and through the door to Lark’s office.

“Leo.” She didn’t look up from the papers on her tidy desk as she said it. Her hair was falling over her cheek in waves. She sounded tired. “I thought I made it clear there’s no need for you to come here.”

I buried my hands in my coat pockets again. “I, uh . . . I have something for you.”

When she looked up her aquamarine eyes were wary. “I hope it’s a second paper shamrock, so that my assistants don’t spend the entire day trying to pass a ‘wish’ between themselves.”

“You heard all that, huh?” I tugged my newsboy cap up and down over my curls. “It wasn’t mine. Just something Officer Thorn threw at me. Anyway she said it was lucky and I thought—”

“She *threw* it at you?”

“I wasn’t going to stop, so she didn’t have a choice.”

“Still, one does wonder if that is proper law-abiding behavior,” Lark mused.

“In any case,” I said, a little desperate at this point, I’ll admit, “I have this set of keys for you. If you want.”

Lark blinked.

Her lashes were dark and perfect like always.

“What I mean is,” I said hastily, “I know you’re mad about the rock box case. I mean—the box of crystals.”

Lark pursed her lips. “The box from an unknown sender which was clearly booby-trapped and gave you a concussion when you opened it, yes.”

“Yeah—that one.” This wasn’t going the way I’d imagined. But short of jumping out the window into the mine yard, there wasn’t anything for it now. “So, I figured, I don’t really need to know who sent it anyway.”

Lark continued staring. She had a point. Nothing I’d said yet made sense.

“Or what the rocks are. The crystals,” I said, rambling now. “It’s pointless, right? There’s always going to be people out there who read *Belville & Beyond* and send in weird stuff. It doesn’t matter, not the way *you* do. It’s not a real investigation anyway. I have a meeting later with somebody Priya knows and I figured I’d just give them the box and be done with it. And you can have a key to my office if you want. So you can see I got rid of it. No more hiding.”

Lark set her elbows on her desk, her delicate hands one on top of another. “It wasn’t just about the box, Leo.”

“No, I—I know that. I know I’ve been—reckless. I see that.”

Her face softened a little. “You enjoy the reckless part of your work.”

“Sure, I do. But if it worries you—” I swallowed. “I *don’t* enjoy doing that. I—I’m sorry. Really.”

“I see.” Lark waited one moment. If she had waited two, I might have gone ahead and jumped out the window anyway. Instead, she smiled. “Technically, Leo, that box *is* pointless. All the samples it contains are rough-cut cubes. No crystal points are included.”

Now it was *my* turn to stare. Trust Lark to know the lingo I did not.

“And I will be taking that key.” Lark held out her hand, her smile growing. “Though for the record, I trust your word. When is your meeting?”

“Lunchtime. I should head out if I’m going to make it back.” I pulled the key from my pocket and handed it over.

“Excellent. You’re free for dinner, then? I hear they’re doing a shepherd’s pie special at the tavern. And, Leo?”

I paused on my way out the door.

Lark’s gaze had gone soft again. “You matter too.”

* * *

Phew. The relief of having gotten that key out of my pocket was even better than caffeine. I think I floated back into town. The office was empty—Wulf was out for lunch, as was the cat, Nyx. (I *did* feed her, but she had been feral once and still liked to hunt.) It wasn’t Maggie’s day to come in. I’d set up this meeting for a time when I’d be alone originally because I was trying to keep the case a secret. But after Lark and I fought, everyone knew I was miserable, and one way or another, I told them all why. They all knew I’d got caught looking into the box. Wulf, Maggie, Priya—even Maggie’s girlfriend, the “green thumb” police officer. Probably the whole town at this point. I couldn’t be bothered to care.

Especially not when I’d see Lark again at dinner.

I even opened a window, I was feeling that relieved. The air blowing in was cold, but fresh. Perfect for a fresh start with no crystals involved.

A knock at the office door brought me back to earth. “Are you MJ Leonine? I’m Selene. We had an appointment—I hope you don’t mind, I just came in . . .”

I turned to see what kind of person this graduate student was. She'd been referred to me by a professor of archaeology, in turn referred by Priya. Priya had been cagey about the whole thing—but of course, I wasn't on the case any more, so nobody's caginess didn't matter.

Selene wasn't a bit cagey, anyway. She had big white wolf ears and a pin on her plaid jacket that read *werewolf pride*. That and the messenger bag at her side, bursting with books and covered with more pins, seemed to about sum her up. Her white hair was chopped short around her fluffy ears, and she had wide dark eyes behind half-moon spectacles that were so on-theme I suspected them of being props.

But, again. No suspicions mattered, since I wasn't on the case.

"Come in, Selene. Call me Leo, everyone does. I'd say pull up a chair, but as you can see, we're in the middle of spring cleaning." That was a lie. There were piles of papers on every surface, but that was because I'd been too despondent lately to even do my usual bare minimum of filing. I reached into the lower drawer of my desk. "I'll just hand this over, and you can be on your way."

"Really? That's great. I just, ah . . ." When I looked back up, Selene had fished a notebook out of her bag and held a pencil at the ready. "I just thought I'd get some notes from you about provenance?"

I sighed. I'd hoped this would be easy, but far be it from me to turn away someone who took notes. "Wish I could help you, but that's actually what I'd reached out to the Professor for in the first place." I let the heavy box rest atop a pile of back issues on my desk between us.

"So you really have no idea where it came from?"

"None." I watched Selene make note of this.

“How about I just take a look? See if anything jogs your memory for any other details?” As she suggested it, she reached out and opened the lid to reveal the rows of crystals inside the box. I kept my hands firmly behind my back. One, a brass prosthetic, I still thought had somehow triggered the original explosion.

Selene clearly wasn't worried, though. She dug out one of the crystals from the middle. “Oh, look! Selenite. We share a name! It was this crystal that got me into geology and then archaeology in the first place. Well, not *this* particular one,” she added, grinning lopsidedly over a milky-white, almost flaky-looking rock. “But you know what I mean.”

Did I? Here I was, doing my best to let go of all interest in the box . . .

“Some ancient peoples used it as a gift to exchange between lovers for reconciliation,” Selene continued enthusiastically. “Nowadays, though, it's mostly recognized as a good charging stone.”

I had no idea what that meant, and she'd inadvertently reminded me of Lark. I reined in my curiosity. “I never even managed to identify them all. Sounds like they'll be in good hands with you.”

“Oh, absolutely!” Selene tossed the selenite lump into the air, still grinning, like she might break into a juggling routine.

Her grin faded, though, when she failed to catch the rock. It landed with a *crack* on the edge of the box and immediately split in two.

“Oh, no! That's the problem with a layered mineral—when you hit them just right—oh gosh! I am so sorry about that,” Selene said, looking guiltily from the broken crystal to me.

I shrugged. “Technically it's yours now. Or your museum's,

or your Professor's . . ."

"The museum, where Professor Dee works," Selene supplied brightly. "Oh, what a bummer though, that was such a nice sample. Here, why don't you keep this half? Maybe it was meant to stay with you."

"No thanks, I really don't need—"

"Think of it as a memento!" Selene was too excited to notice my reluctance.

"I'd rather forget the whole thing—"

"So! There really isn't anything else you remember?" If she'd had a tail, it would have been wagging.

I sighed heavily again. "Nothing. All I can tell you is, best of luck. Someone did tell you it exploded once, right?"

"What? Oh, yes! Professor Dee mentioned that. Very interesting. Do you recall—"

"I don't," I said firmly, thinking of shepherd's pie with Lark. "Is that it?"

"Oh, I do have a Deed of Gift for you to sign. Then that's it! Now . . . Where was it . . ."

Selene rummaged in her bag but managed to produce a relatively un-wrinkled piece of parchment. A cursory glance confirmed it was standard university-type stuff. I duly signed on the dotted line.

"Perfect! I'll leave you with this copy, and I'll take this and the box," Selene said, sweeping everything cheerfully into her bag. "It was nice meeting you! Thanks for doing this!"

"Thank *you*," I said, and meant it. I was already feeling lighter, watching the box go.

Of course, I didn't realize until she was down the stairs that she had in fact left a lump of selenite on my desk. I thought about running after her . . . then heard the door at the bottom

of the stairs slam shut. There was no way I was catching up with someone who had her energy.

“A gift for reconciliation, huh?” I considered the rock. After a moment, I stuffed it into my pocket where the key had once been.

The thing to know about being a reporter is that once the job has chosen you, it never lets go. Once a reporter, always a reporter. You can’t turn it off.

But maybe—just maybe—you *could* teach an old reporter a few new tricks.

