

# On the Rocks

**CRIME SCENE DO NOT CROSS**



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A Leonine Investigations Mystery  
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## On the Rocks

**Y**ou know things are really bad when the local police officer takes you to the tavern for a drink.

The fact that we were drinking iced chai tea rather than anything stronger I chalked up to said officer's girlfriend, Maggie, being present.

And maybe the fact that it wasn't even lunch time yet.

"Somebody hold on to Leo," said Lark, from across the table. "She looks like she's going to fall over."

"I'm not drunk! I'm fine." I shoved away Maggie's hand, and immediately felt guilty. She was only trying to be a good assistant—something she managed admirably no matter the circumstance. I, on the other hand, felt like—*not* like I was falling—like I was drowning, maybe.

"These're just black tea and milk," Officer Thorn said meanwhile. She looked in her glass like it might be different from mine somehow. "It's good for you."

"I didn't say you were drunk," Lark added. "You're in shock. Obviously."

*Obviously.*

"Is this how she was when that box exploded last summer?"

Wulf asked.

Wulf—my other assistant. Both were in competition for gold ribbons in Keeping it Together today. He'd been the first one to find me in the ruins of my office, flailing. He'd immediately gone to get Lark, while Maggie had retrieved the police.

Technically Lark had no business at a crime scene and shouldn't have been involved, but . . . it was good that she and Wulf now sat on the other side of the table. Even if she *was* too on point, as usual.

"That time, she was unconscious on her shop floor," Lark said to the table at large. "She's lucky this time to have friends who intervened. Aren't you, Leo? Stop hiding under your hat."

I sighed. The public scrutiny wasn't helping. And yet—I yanked my cap off and tossed it on the table. Normally I would have run my hands through the mess of springs that passed as my hair, but at the moment I felt uneven. When I'd found my office in shambles, I'd first thought of that exploding box, just like everyone else. And I'm big enough to admit it. I panicked. I shucked off my brass prosthetic hand quicker than the winged office cat, Nyx, could fly out a door and escape.

In the mess afterward, I'd forgotten to put it back on and make myself presentable. Even though this time, no exploding boxes had come to light. Yet.

Unexpectedly, it was Officer Thorn who came to my rescue. That made us even, since she was also effectively my captor—she was sitting on my left, blocking me into the booth. She'd dragged me here after interrogating me about the crime I'd been victim of. Between her being half-orc and Wulf being a *full* orc and ex-miner, we almost could have passed for a table of thugs. But Lark was glamorous even when she was annoying, and Maggie, who also worked part time at the beauty salon,

looked as proper as always.

“This time, it wasn’t a prank in the mail,” Thorn said. I thought calling a box of rocks that exploded when touched by something brass was understating it, but I kept my mouth shut. She went on, “This was in-person crime. Somebody broke into the office and ransacked it. As for what they were looking for . . .”

All four of them looked at me.

“Why ask me?” I asked. “I’m not the one who broke in. In fact, everyone here at this table has a key, except you, Officer, and I wouldn’t put it past you to have keys to the whole town squirreled away at that station of yours. So shouldn’t we be out finding somebody else?”

Maggie exchanged a look with Wulf. “She *was* like that.”

I bristled. “Like what?”

“Unreasonable,” Lark said. “We’re not going anywhere. You can’t chase down suspects. You can’t even finish your drink!”

“I’m fine,” I repeated.

Lark stared me down, her aquamarine eyes unusually flinty. “Prove it.”

I held her gaze while I took a long sip of the tea in front of me. Contrary to Officer Thorn’s opinion, though, there wasn’t just black tea in it—there was sugar and spice, too. I sputtered. “Ugh! What *is* this?”

“You really ought to drink more than just black coffee,” Maggie said. Both my assistants appeared to be laughing at me.

I took in Lark’s triumphant expression and settled back into my seat. Best to keep my fuming to myself.

“The sugar is good for after you’ve had a shock,” Thorn said. “Lark is right. After you’ve finished your glass, we can talk about action. Until then—” She turned to Wulf and Maggie. “Let’s

talk statements instead. I already have Leo on record saying she hasn't noticed anything unusual, had any threats, or seen anyone lurking. How about the pair of you?"

Wulf shrugged. *His* tea was already half gone. "Nothing but the usual complaints that come in. Letters to the editor, I mean."

"Surely this wasn't because someone's mad about the decorations on the Square," Maggie added. "And we just had just managed to tidy up the office, so if there had been anything of value, I think we would have found it."

She sounded wistful—not about the valuables: about the tidying. It was true my office had been in an atrocious state this spring. It had taken Maggie the better part of a month to get it sorted out. Most of that work had been reminding me to file things.

"Leo," Lark said reprovingly.

"What?" I did my best not to sound guilty. "I gave the box away, like I told you. The university has it by now."

"And you don't have any other hiding-holes?"

"None!" I took a sip of my tea to prove it. The sweetness still made me want to wince.

"Unfortunately, I don't think we should move on to looking for other motives," Thorn said. "Not yet."

From the pocket of her uniform, she pulled out a squarish lump of green rock and set it on the table.

I groaned.

"Before you say anything," said Officer Thorn, which was good because Lark was definitely about to say something—something disapproving, "I found this in the alley behind the print shop. Discarded, along with some crumpled envelopes and an old notebook of yours, Leo."

"So whoever searched the office dropped it on their way out?"

Maggie frowned.

“Seems too lucky to be true,” I said into my drink.

To my surprise, Lark chuckled. When I looked up, she waved a hand at the rock. “It’s aventurine, Leo. It’s considered to be a ‘good luck’ stone.” Looking at Officer Thorn, she added, “It’s very common these days. Usually you find it on the market as a talisman for luck, as I said, but it’s also sometimes used in potions for eyesight and perception.”

Officer Thorn leaned forward. “You think it’s a coincidence? Something the perp brought along to help them out?”

“It certainly might be useful,” Lark admitted, eyeing the stone. “But that rough cut is too much like the other specimens in Leo’s box to be ignored. A talisman would more likely be polished.”

“Why take Leo’s box back to the office you’re going to search?” Maggie asked.

“It’s not my box any more!” I protested.

Nobody listened.

“Depends who it’s meant to be lucky for,” Wulf said. “Right? Them, or us?”

“Maybe they intended to plant the box back in the office, but were interrupted,” said Lark, who could be downright calculating at times.

“But then how would it also randomly open and let one rock fall out?” Maggie added.

Officer Thorn held up one large hand. “Good points, all,” she said. “But let’s focus on the main thing for now. The box of crystals has something to do with the vandalism. What that is, we can’t say for sure yet.”

There were approximately two and a half seconds of thoughtful silence. I took another sip of chai. It was growing on me.

But then Maggie leaned back in, her hand on the table. “What

if it was what's-her-name? Selena, or Selene? The assistant who came to get the box last month? Maybe she wanted to find out what you actually knew about it, or something!”

I leaned back. “She took the box, what more would she need?”

“Maybe it was Priya,” Wulf said. “Maybe she didn’t realize Selene had taken the box. Maybe she wanted to come and take it for herself, and thought you wouldn’t notice. She could even have planned to replace it with rocks from her shop instead?”

“She wouldn’t touch it with a ten foot pole when I was asking for her help,” I said.

“Maybe she was acting. Or maybe,” said Lark, “it was the same person who sent the box in the first place. Someone who clearly has some grudge against you. They wanted to know why their creation hadn’t worked, or hoped to play an even more dangerous ‘prank.’”

“But—” I couldn’t rightly say there weren’t people in the world with a grudge against me. This protest died in my throat, and I took another sip of tea to cover it up.

“Again,” said Officer Thorn, patiently, “these ideas are good. But have you considered . . .”

She looked at me, and before I could head her off with yet another protest, she said, “Maybe it was the Professor at the university who was supposed to get the box, and never did. Or maybe he *did* get it, and wanted to see what else you have—what was the phrase—‘squirreled away!’”

I officially gave up.

I leaned back further in my seat, taking my drink with me. The four of them all leaned over the table, debating their theories. Each more crackpot than the last, if you asked me. Aside from Lark’s—Lark had always been a good judge of character. And Wulf’s point about luck—there was something

in that. Not to mention the way Maggie and Thorn played off each other, each of them strengthening the other's ideas . . .

I watched them for a minute. Assistants, onlookers, police, I'd called them. But Lark had called them friends.

And as usual, she was right.

As a matter of fact—just thinking of it gave me an idea.

“Hold on,” I said, interrupting the debate. I leaned in once more. “Whoever it is, I couldn't say. But I'm willing to bet that if they're up against all of you, then their luck has run out. And I think I know of a way we can flush them out . . .”

