

Stone Cold

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Elle Hartford

ELLE HARTFORD

Stone Cold

A Leonine Investigations Mystery

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There's no kind of quiet like the quiet that comes when the stage is set for a big event.

“Hey Leo! We're here! Mina's in the hall with Wulf still—they're going over some last minute plans. She recruited him to help her keep an eye on things, but he's feeling very shy about it, I think he'd much rather rearrange all the type! I brought you a coffee. I know it's evening technically but you seem to drink them all the time, don't you? Are you nervous? You don't look nervous! You look perfectly normal. How do you do that? *I'm nervous!*”

I watched my assistant, Maggie, flit about the room. She dropped her shawl on one printing press, left my ceramic coffee cup on another, then realized her mistakes and gathered them all back up. With one hand she tugged at the curtains on the windows overlooking the Square, which I'd already opened. All the printing presses had been shoved to the edges of the print shop, and in the empty floor space Maggie bounced around like an unattended yo-yo on a hyper child's finger.

I took my coffee before she could abandon it on one of my very expensive machines. “Why are you nervous? It's not like you have to do any talking.”

“But they’re all going to be *here!*” Maggie insisted, her golden eyes wide. “Oh, Mina wanted me to give you this.”

She held out her hand, her fist closed over a mysterious object. Too small to be some kind of handcuffs—but then again, you can’t be too careful. “Mina” was “Officer Thorn” to everyone else, and she and I had had a rocky relationship. Even if she *was* going along with our plan tonight.

“She thought you’d take it better from me, but it’s really from her,” Maggie went on. She shook her hand. “Go on! It won’t bite.”

Never mind the fact that my *friends*, such as they were, routinely chastised me for being too careless. With a sigh, I stuck out my palm.

Maggie deposited a rock into it, and giggled. “Won’t bite’—I just realized! I didn’t even mean to make a joke. Do you know what it is? It’s a tiger’s eye. Mina said her mom used to give them to all her kids whenever they had to do a test or a presentation at school.”

I inspected the rock, glad I hadn’t reached out with my brass hand. I was still leery of touching rocks with my prosthetic. But this rock certainly wouldn’t be doing any biting. It was polished smooth, shinier even the glitter ink we sometimes used for special editions. The light ran across its surface in stripes of tan on a deep brown background.

“Creepy name, but I get the tiger reference,” I said, tilting the stone this way and that. And mentally kicking myself for thinking Thorn and I had a “rocky” relationship. “Do they enhance puns, or something?”

“What? No,” Maggie said, slurping at her own lemonade. If you asked me, she should’ve been having chamomile tea. “It’s used for courage and confidence, that sort of thing. Not that

you need any, apparently! Are you *sure* you're not nervous?"

A new voice emerged from my office. "Why should she be? I'm the one giving the lecture."

I turned to meet Lark, and I will admit, I *did* get butterflies—just for a moment.

"I got you a drink too! Just water though, since you're speaking. That's what you wanted, right? I have it here somewhere . . ."

As Maggie dug in her bag for a glass water bottle, Lark settled in front of us. She wore that characteristic smile, a smirk really, something only she could pull off while still looking so gorgeous and professional. She'd shown up at the print shop just after closing time and insisted on using my office to change into a different suit for her presentation. For anyone else whose office was right in the middle of an active mine, it would've made sense. Lark was always immaculate, though.

She also was too stubborn to argue with most times, so I'd played along.

She sat atop her wheelchair now with her hands folded in her lap, like a queen waiting to be presented with some magical fairy-blessed drink.

"Here it is!" Maggie held the bottle aloft. "And Mina's downstairs, really, and so is Wulf, I don't know what's keeping them. Is everything set up the way you wanted?"

Lark turned her aquamarine eyes to me. "Leo has done an admirable job rearranging her headquarters. Who knew there was so much space in here?"

"Wulf helped," I admitted, begrudgingly.

The truth was *all* of them had helped—Maggie, Thorn, Wulf, Lark. This wouldn't have gone anywhere without them. I'd had the idea for the lecture series and put the ads in the papers, of

course, but Maggie had personally invited most of the town, and Wulf had been the one to figure out how best to make room for chairs and a podium. Thorn was on security, of course, and Lark—Lark was our expert.

And she *wasn't* in danger. No, of course not. *I* was the one our vandal would really be coming to see . . .

* * *

“Welcome to *Belville & Beyond's* brand new lecture series on enchanted minerals and their uses! In collaboration with the Belville Mine, of course. We're so glad you're here! Find a seat anywhere you like, we'll get started in just a little bit!”

I'd told Maggie she didn't have to do any talking tonight. That had proved false.

Maggie was our one-woman greeting crew, meeting each attendee as they came up the stairs to the second-floor shop. Wulf had been stationed outside, presumably to look intimidating—something he was good at, as long as no one tried to talk to him. Actually he was waving and shyly grinning at people who came down the alley: I'd seen him do it from the office window. Since most residents of Belville attending the lecture weren't crooks, this was probably okay. If anyone *was* a crook, they'd find Wulf intimidating.

But just enough to set them on edge—not enough to scare them off. That was the trick. Because the whole point was that we wanted them to come in and make a mistake.

I stood at the back of the room, watching it fill up. Turned out lots of people were interested in hearing about enchanted minerals (not just crooks). The local alchemist, Red, and her partner and annoyingly chatty dog had been the first to

arrive. They sat up front. There was a contingent from the Pomegranate Cafe—probably shamed into attending by Maggie, since our daily coffee orders kept the place in business. Lark’s two hench-trolls (or as she preferred to call them, “assistants”) were lurking in the far corner, straining the chairs beneath them as they whispered to one another. In the middle rows were a couple groups of kids. Each had come with a notebook and pencil. Such preparation on the part of Belville’s youth made me think that the schoolteacher had offered extra credit for a report on the event.

Officer Thorn sidled up to me. We’d squeezed too many rows of chairs into the place to make it easily navigable for someone of her size. But it looked like we might need them all.

“So far so good,” she said. “I have to admit, Leo, I had my doubts about another hare-brained scheme from you, but this plan is turning out to be . . . rock solid.”

I ignored the pun. Pointedly. “None of our suspects have turned up yet, but there’s time yet. The only problem is, I had no idea how popular educational lectures were going to be.”

“Maybe it’s not a problem,” said Thorn.

Not what I had expected. I looked up at her, adjusting my cap quizzically. Because no, I had not succumbed to Lark’s insinuations that I dress up. I needed *something* to keep my hair out of my face. “Shouldn’t you be worried about potential citizen casualties?”

“There aren’t going to be any casualties. Wulf’s inspecting packages on their way in.”

“Oh, is that what he’s doing? I thought you were going to make him hold a welcome sign.”

Officer Thorn huffed. “Maybe that’s not a bad thing, Leo. Has that occurred to you yet? Maybe it’s *nice* that people in

town like the paper. And you.”

Nice? I glanced around at the crowd. There had never, ever been so many people in my print shop. I wasn't sure what was *nice* about it now. But . . .

My gaze landed on Lark, seated beside the podium and chatting with Red. Something in my chest swelled. Okay, okay. It was a *little* nice to see our hard work being appreciated.

“Hey, wait,” I said. “You added ‘and you’ like it’s uncertain!”

Thorn grinned, showing off sharp teeth. “Reporters are always a tough crowd.”

Before I could press her about what she meant, another group came in. For as much as we were different, in that moment we were exactly the same. The officer and I studied them as they took their seats.

Priya, who owned a curiosities shop across the Square—and whom Wulf suspected of having vandalized the print shop out of jealousy.

Selene, a wolf-eared grad student, whom Maggie suspected of acting out of greed. Rumor around town was she'd signed on as Priya's intern for the summer.

A man trailed behind them, a man I hadn't met. But even on this warm evening, he wore a tweed coat that marked him out as a professor. This was Officer Thorn's pick for vandal: she maintained that he was staying in nearby Pine, doing “research,” which apparently to her meant stealing whatever he liked from newspaper offices.

There was another person with them—looked to be a little old lady. An enormous, pearl-bedecked hat shaded her face, even indoors.

Thorn and I exchanged a look. In the month since the print shop vandalism, all of my associates—my *friends*—had voiced

their opinions about the culprit. Each theory sounded equally outlandish and equally possible. The trouble was, we couldn't pin down a motive. It could have been that the crook was looking for the rock box that had exploded in my office last summer. I'd given the box to Selene to give to the professor, ostensibly to study. But we couldn't be sure the box had ever reached him. When Officer Thorn had done her routine interviews after the incident, everyone had sworn up and down that they had no idea what box of rocks she was talking about—even Selene herself. But now we had them in the same room, at last.

Maybe they were desperate to find out more about rare rock artifacts. Maybe they wanted to know how much we knew. Maybe they planned to rub their success in our faces . . .

And maybe, as Lark had suggested, someone amongst them had been the one to *send* the box in the first place, and they had a grudge against the paper.

Which meant a grudge against *me*.

In which case, they were looking for their next chance to get even.

Even for what was the question Officer Thorn had—but to me, it didn't matter. People were always upset for one reason or another in the newspaper business. Bad coverage, good coverage, lack of coverage, you name it. After Lark and I had exposed a corrupt mesmerized silver operation the year before, *Belville & Beyond* had developed a reputation.

And now I was gambling that that reputation would help us stop more crime before it occurred. That it would be too tantalizing to resist.

Lark caught my eye across the crowded room and nodded. It was almost time. I'd go up to the front to introduce her, and

for a moment, I'd be looking the criminal in the eye.

Which would it be, lurking behind their gaze? Jealousy, greed, entitlement, or violence?

I squared my shoulders. In my pocket, my fist was clenched around that polished rock. But from the outside I was cool. Ready.

I'd face them all down. With my friends all in on this plan, there was no way it could go wrong.