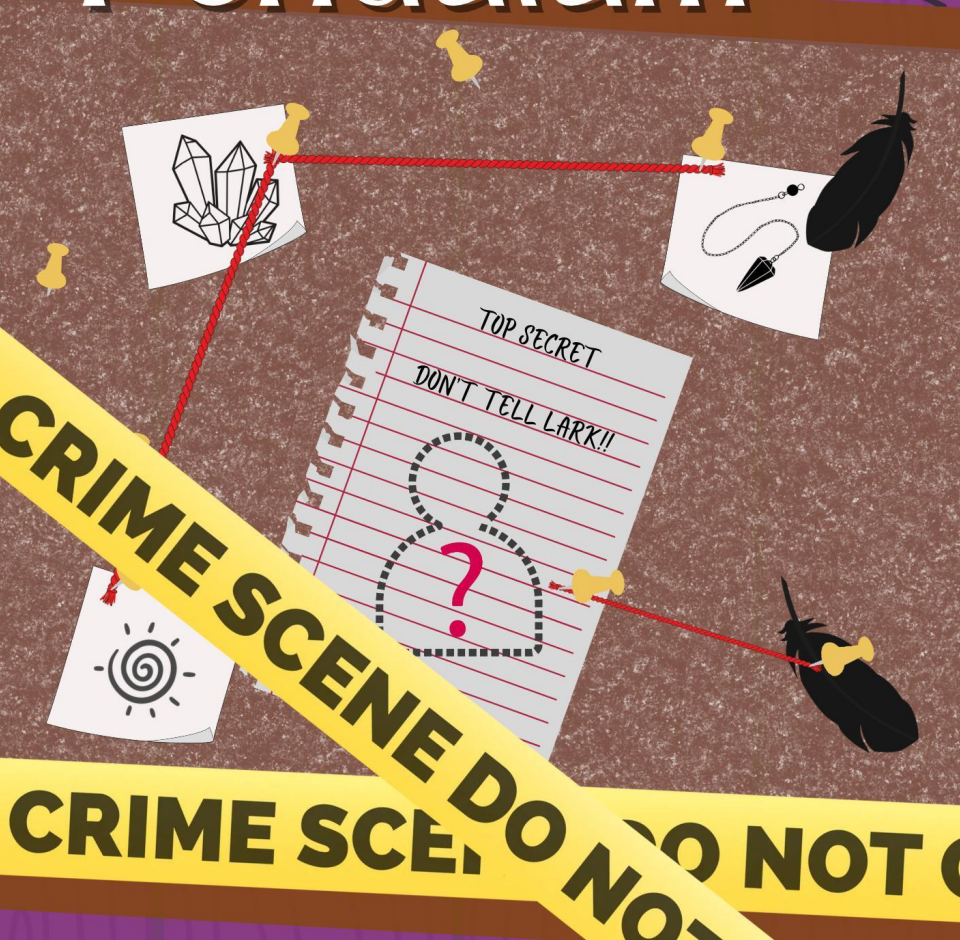
The Copper Pendulum



A Leonine Investigation tery

Elle Hartford

ELLE HARTFORD

The Copper Pendulum

A Leonine Investigations Mystery



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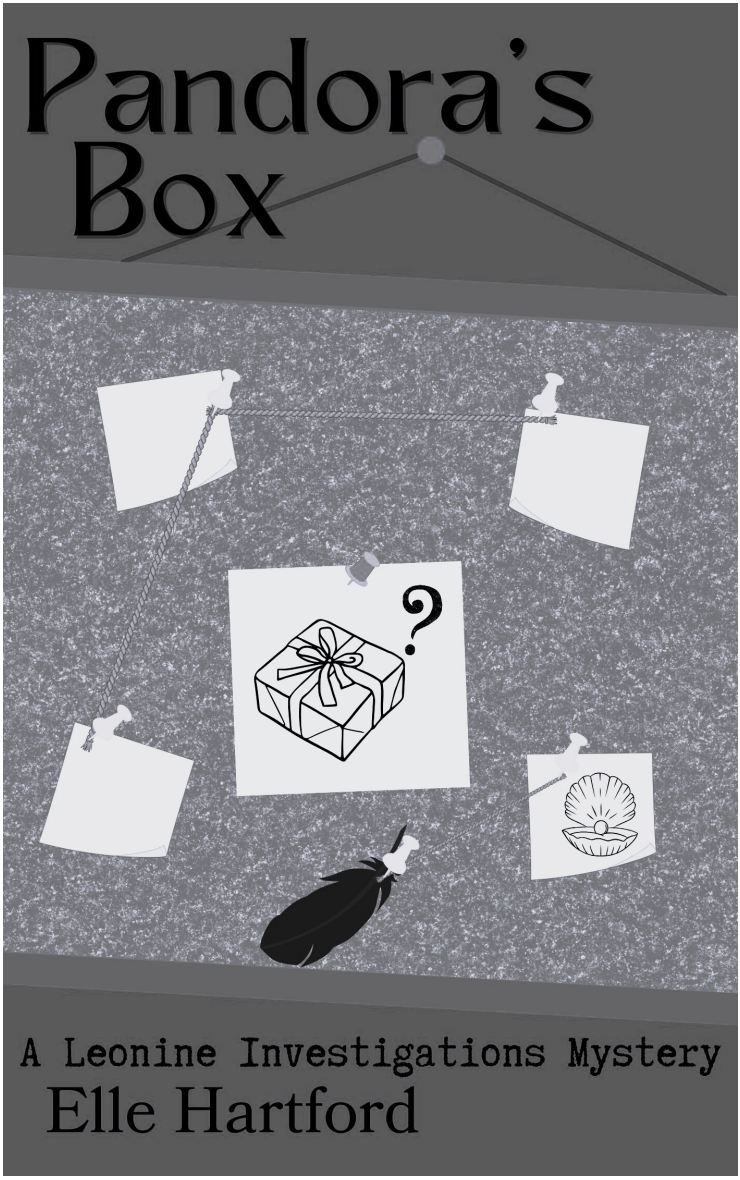
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Pandora's Box
A Leonine Investigations Mystery
Elle Hartford

Prologue: Pandora's Box

People tell the story of Pandora and her box like it's a cautionary tale. As if it had a moral, and that moral is, *don't get too curious.*

What most people don't know is that nearly every simple moral has a second part. If you tell me *curiosity killed the cat,* I have an easy answer. *Satisfaction brought it back.*

And—stop me if you haven't heard Pandora's story before—but at the end, hope was left in the box. So what's the moral then? *Get curious to make things better,* if you ask me. Only the people who know to ask questions are the ones to find the good stuff.

And as summertime came around Belville again, people were asking me plenty of things. Between you and me, I was feeling pretty smug. I'd written up my adventures with the mining industry and some mysterious tarot cards into a full serialized story, and the final chapter had come out with last week's edition. My smalltown paper was being distributed not only around the mountain, but as far away as Brass.

With work done for the day and the printing presses quiet for the night, I was ready to bask in the glow of it. There was going to be a picnic in the town square that evening, and I was starving.

But I got stopped at the door.

Once upon a time, I might have told you I was in charge of

Belville's paper. Editor, reporter, printer, person in charge. But that was back when I had my second-story headquarters all to myself. Now I'd learned better. Ever since a winged black cat had taken up residence, there'd been no question who was boss.

From her perch atop the type cabinets, Nyx meowed at me.

I had my hand on the doorknob, but I turned around to see what she wanted. Her silver eyes glowed in the shadowy room. She was looking at a pile I'd dumped on top of one of the printing presses that morning.

"Oh, right." I tugged at my newsboy cap, wondering how I'd forgotten the mail. All the gesture did was let some auburn springs escape.

I crossed back to the printing press. Used to be that all I got in the mail was ad requests and tarot cards. Now, I had a stack of letters daily. Truth be told we could have used another employee around the place to go through them all, but I still liked looking through them myself. When I remembered to. People wrote in with reactions to my big story, or tips on shady mining practices. I'd become a regular lightning rod for anything wrong in the rock industry.

Today, though, I'd sifted through only two or three letters before I realized why the pile was so big: there was a battered box at the bottom of it.

Nyx meowed again.

"Since when do you care so much about the mail?" I asked.

If only I'd known!

Not that it would have changed much if I had.

I took a look at the box. It was wrapped in brown paper, tearing at the corners, tied up with a grubby string. It wasn't addressed to *Belville & Beyond*—it was addressed to me personally, Mary Jane Leonine. Somebody who didn't know to call

me Leo, then. But there wasn't any return address.

My instincts didn't like it. Odd. I brushed one finger over the torn paper on the corner. Looked like aged wood might be underneath. But I could have sworn it tingled a bit when I touched it.

My stomach rumbled.

Across the room, Nyx stretched out her raven-like wings and hissed.

"I'm allowed to take my own time looking at my mail," I told her. "In fact, I can leave it anywhere I like. I'm the one who pays rent here, not you. So you're just going to have to deal with it sitting here until tomorrow."

I had a party to get to, after all.

I tossed the letters back on the printing press next to the box, and I headed for the door again. The staircase let me out into the alley behind the shops, but it was a short walk around the corner to the Square.

And coming around that corner, it hit me, as it often did. Belville might have been a tiny town out in the backwoods, but it had something special. The mountainside rose up on one side, the town sloped down to the lake on the other. All the storefronts lining Market Square like brightly-colored dominoes holding each other up. They knew how to do up events, that was for sure. Strings of lights lit up the giant trees in the square, with sizzling barbecues and racing children beneath them. Fireflies rose up from the grass. I was never big on *idyllic*—covering town events could sometimes be a chore—but it was home.

I joined the crowd lingering around the appetizer table outside Lavender's Tavern. I'd managed to down one mozzarella-stuffed pepper and was holding a veggie skewer in each hand

when Maggie found me.

"Leo, did you skip lunch again?" Maggie, short for Magica, was an ex-acrobat who'd settled in town to work at the salon and the paper while dating the local police officer. She was a reporter's dream. She heard everything, even when she didn't realize her own strengths.

She'd also taken her job at the paper as an excuse to mother me. Which was ridiculous, because not only was she younger than me, she was shorter, which is saying something. I swallowed the rest of my pepper. "I keep telling you not to worry about the paper when you're clocked out."

"I didn't ask about the paper," Maggie said. She used to be shy, when she started out. Now she took me by the elbow. "Come on, there's a lemonade stand outside the cafe. Did you see that I left the copy for next week's 'Around Town' column on your desk?"

"Who's not asking about the paper now?" I polished off a skewer as we walked.

"So you're saying you want to talk about something other than the paper?" Maggie's bobbed silver hair brushed her shoulders as she looked back at me. There were blooming violets entwined in the strands. "How's Lark?"

"Did I tell you we got a strange box at the paper today?"

Maggie's golden eyes crinkled. Amusement, mostly, but she was prone to worry too. "A box? From who?"

"No idea," I said. "Thought you might know something about it."

"I don't remember anything," Maggie said. "Nobody's supposed to send anything. The museum in Pine did offer to send over some brochures for us to distribute, but they haven't finished printing them yet. They shouldn't get here until next

week, I thought. I could check back through the schedule—"

"It's probably nothing," I interrupted. No need for her to go looking for the paper's "schedule," which was currently written on a napkin and probably lining Nyx's lair. Granda always said a reporter's schedule should only be in their head. It's easiest to change things around there.

"Was there a sender?" Maggie said. Still worried. "Could it be the same as the tarot cards?"

"We found out who that was, and she's fine now," I said.

"But what if it's some kind revenge or something?"

At this rate, she was going to run us both into a tree. Or a keg full of lemonade. I tugged on her arm to make her slow down. "No use worrying about it until I open it."

"Maybe we shouldn't, though," Maggie said. "Or maybe we should ask Saki to look at it first."

I did my best to stop it. "I really don't—"

"What am I going to be looking at?" Sakura, shadow witch and owner of the Pomegranate Cafe, said the words with relish. I sighed. The two were almost a pair, standing the same height, Saki's white hair bobbed just a little shorter than Maggie's, though her skin was much paler and her eyes wide, blue, and totally innocent. A look which would have suited Maggie more truthfully.

Still, Saki knew her business—both the cafe business and the less-than-lawful magic business. And she was already handing Maggie a strawberry lemonade in a sparkling cup. For me, an iced coffee, large and extra black.

"The paper got a box," I said, knowing there was no option but to cut Saki in on it now.

"The paper or you?" Her outfit today was watermelon-themed, from green headband to pink poofy dress sprinkled

with seeds. But her gaze was sharp as ever.

"Me." I lingered by the cafe's table, sipping my drink. "It's probably nothing."

"Do you know the sender?"

"No."

"Any indication of what it is?"

"No."

"Have you sent away for anything lately?"

"No. Haven't had the time." I don't shop a lot anyway, not via the mail and not in person either.

"And you're looking for advice on what to do with it?"

"No," I said, for all the good it'd do.

Saki grinned. "Good thing I have no scruples. Do not, under any circumstances, open that box, Leo."

"See!" Maggie sloshed her drink emphatically. "That's what I was going to say too!"

"It's my box," I said. "Says so on the label. I don't recall reading either of your names on it."

"Well, do you recall reading 'this is how you get cursed' on it? Because that's exactly how these things happen." Saki had her hands on her hips, letting her co-owner take over handing out drinks. Since her co-owner in this case was Mel, the local postmistress, I had an interest in keeping this conversation quiet. I might have interviewed Mel on my own to see what she knew about the box, but I knew better than to invite her to gang up on me with Maggie and Saki.

But once again my practicality struck too late. Someone else had already overheard us.

"Maggie, there you are. What's this about curses?"

The newest gang member was none other than Thorn, one and only local police officer. She came up behind Maggie and

put a friendly hand on her shoulder. This was an easy feat, since Officer Thorn was easily six feet tall and nearly as broad.

She was also still in uniform. I tugged at my cap. The last thing I wanted was to make some kind of report. To someone other than the paper, I mean.

"Leo got a strange box at the paper," Maggie said, too helpfully. "We don't know who sent it or what it is. Saki thinks it might be cursed."

"It's not cursed," I said, in vain.

Officer Thorn looked down at me. Her skin was mossy green, her eyes dark and her hair long and black. But sometimes she could look exactly as disapproving as Nyx. "You know that for a fact?"

"Yes, do tell us how you know," Saki said.

I made a face at the witch. She knew very well I have no magic of my own. "Okay, fine, I don't know."

"Did you ask Mel about it?" Officer Thorn's eyes drifted past Saki to her coworker, who was handing out lemonades to what looked like the entire local school.

"She's busy," I said, secretly grateful.

"No need for anything to happen right away, is there?" Thorn leaned over, stealing a sip of Maggie's drink. "How about you bring it over to the station tomorrow."

"You think it could be something bad too?" Maggie asked her girlfriend.

Thorn shrugged. "Might just be a prank or some kind of mistake. But we have protection spells set up at the station. It's just as easy to open it there, just in case, eh?"

"Eh," I agreed. Somehow, my coffee was already gone.

"It's a good idea," said Maggie.

"Such is the cost of fame," said Saki, who seemed to be

enjoying herself.

I waved my brass hand at all three of them. I'd lost the lower part of one arm in a printing accident long ago—long enough ago that no one seemed to remember any more. Including me. "I know plenty about the costs of reporting."

Officer Thorn looked skeptical. "Was that due to reporting? Not sure I ever heard that story."

"Never mind," I told them all. I was all set to turn on my heel and go get some more food. "I'm just saying, if I say it's nothing, then it's nothing to worry about. It's just a bit of mail. I only brought it up in the first place because—"

My dramatic exit was ruined when I turned and bumped right into Lark.

"My, my." She smiled that smile at me. The one that made my insides do flips. "I wonder, should I have a horn installed in this thing? Some lights?"

She was referring to her chair, of course. Not so much a wheelchair: it was supported atop one spinning orb, some kind of magic that looked like pure water holding up a throne. Lark herself was owner of the local mine and a fierce businesswoman, but she had a regality that was outside of all that. Her sandy skin, turquoise eyes, sea-blue waves of hair falling down her back—all perfect, as usual.

"I—I was distracted, that's all," I said. "I didn't hear you come up."

"And what were you talking about that was so distracting?"

I could hear Maggie take a breath to reply. I glared at her over my shoulder.

"Leo got a dangerous delivery today and she's determined to open it by herself," Saki said in a sing-song voice over my other shoulder.

"It's not dangerous," I protested.

"I thought you didn't know anything about it," Officer Thorn said.

Any further protest died on my lips as Lark looked at me. She had perfected the one-eyebrow arch. "We're all intelligent adults here, are we not? There will be no opening unknown boxes. Let Officer Thorn handle it. It's her job. Now. Why are we talking about work at a party?"

There was nothing left to say. Nothing else I wanted said, either. We left Saki to run her lemonade and coffee stand, and went to find the evening's main course.

It was late when I next looked around. Most of the kids had gone home to bed, and the fairy lights were bright against the night sky. The crowd was still loud, but most of the food was gone and my belly was full. And that reminded me that I'd forgotten to feed the cat.

It would have all been different if Nyx had deigned to live in my actual house. But she was strictly an office cat. I'd found her on the eaves of that building, and once inside she had settled right in.

I gave my excuses to Lark and everyone else. As I headed back to the shop, the noise and light receded. It gave me a different perspective. I had to admit it was my own fault everyone had gone after me about the box. I'd only brought it up to distract Maggie. That plan had certainly backfired.

I let myself in the back door and climbed up the stairs. Nyx was sitting at the corner of one of the windows overlooking the Square, like she had been watching the party. It was one of her favorite spots. As soon as I opened the door, though, she flew over and took a swing at my cap.

"At least I remembered," I told her, swatting harmlessly back.

I went to the office to get her food and dish. She followed me like a shadow. I left her eating on the desk.

And as I stood in the doorway with my back to her, the lights from the party outside lit up that box still sitting on the printing press.

I pulled my cap off and ran my hand through my curls. I'd told everyone it was nothing, but that was a lie. It was a mystery. A mystery I wasn't going to be able to resist.

As a reporter, I've seen a lot of stories play out. If you asked me, this is what I'd tell you: when you give people a choice, they make the wrong one.

The paper and string on the package were harmless. The wooden box looked normal. A little aged and beat up, but nothing special. It was no bigger than an encyclopedia. And I wasn't going to stand there with knowledge left on the table, no matter what anyone said about curses and pranks.

The lid of the box was shut with tiny little nails. My pen knife was enough to pry them up. There was a piece of paper under the lid. In neat cursive, somebody had written, *For the expert on mining and ores.*

Nothing else. I never claimed to be an expert—that'd be Lark more than me. But I was intrigued. Under the paper, the contents of the box were visible. Wood slats divided the box into twelve little sections. Nestled in shredded paper inside each section was a different rock. Crystal? Ore? Mineral? Each was a lump of something Lark's team might pull out of a mountain. None were silver, like the ore in the story I'd run. One was pink, one was lavender, some were darker or shinier or rougher or plain. It looked like something you'd find in a curiosities shop. Or a professor's study.

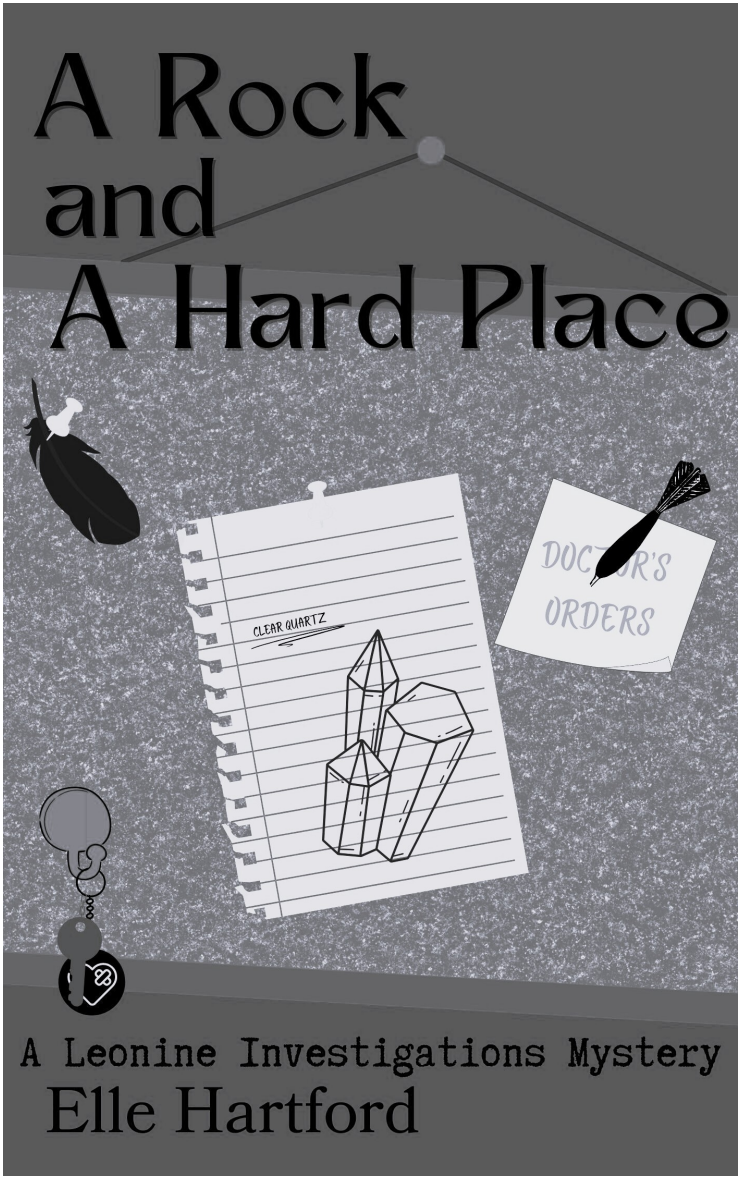
Except—it wasn't quite orderly enough. One of the bottom

corner sections had been subdivided, so that instead of holding twelve rocks, the box held thirteen. The thirteenth rock was so black that I wasn't sure there was anything there. Without a thought, I reached out to touch it, to see if it was real.

That's when the explosion hit.

And in that instant when white light filled my vision and the world was falling backwards, I thought to myself,

That's not fair. I didn't get to the bottom of it yet.


A Rock
and
A Hard Place
CLEAR QUARTZ
DOCTOR'S
ORDERS
A Leonine Investigations Mystery
Elle Hartford

1

A Rock and a Hard Place

The problem with having the job that's your dream come true is that no one can work all the time.

That's what they tell me, anyway. "They" being Sakura, Maggie, and even Officer Thorn, who insisted that I stay at home and rest after the explosion in the shop. I'd survived, hadn't I? I didn't see any reason I shouldn't at least be in charge of the write-up. But Lark, curse her, sent one of her employees down to the office to help Maggie—and to keep me out. There was nothing for me to do but stay at home and fester.

Internally, that is. My wounds themselves healed up just fine. I hadn't been that injured anyway—I'd poked the strange black rock with my brass hand, which is almost impossible to damage. There are some benefits to fairy magic. I'd just wanted to see if something was *there.* Turns out, there was.

No, my biggest problem from the explosion—aside from house arrest—was a lingering head injury caused by falling backward into one of the printing presses. Enchanted brass is

one thing to have working for you. Iron magitech is a different matter entirely, at least when it comes in contact with your skull. Might've been that my cap and the sheer springiness of my hair saved my life.

In Lark's opinion, I should also have thanked Nyx, who flew out the damaged window to find Officer Thorn. Word is, the cat yowled so fiercely no one could ignore her. But I don't see how everyone could have ignored a small explosion in a shop in the Square either. Even if they *were* tired and probably tipsy after a town picnic.

Still. It's not like I was ungrateful. Nyx earned herself a plush new pillow to nest on atop the type cabinets that lined the shop. Like all cats, raven-winged or not, she instead preferred the box the pillow came in. Maggie fished it out of the recycling pile for her.

For a part-time employee hired on to help with research and ads, Maggie had done well. That much I had to admit. With help from Lark's lackey and Sakura's magic—to work the presses—Maggie put out a special edition while I was laid up. Not half bad. Sensationalized the mysterious box, of course. Word on the street was no one in Belville would open their mail any more without charms of protection on hand. At least the local Witch's business was booming as a result of the mess.

On my first day back, Maggie was there at the door.

She had two large iced drinks in hand, which was good news, at least. She handed me my extra-black coffee and said, "Saki sends her congratulations. Mina said she'd come by later to check on you. She promised to send word to Lark."

Maggie, five foot nothing at best, was no taller than I was. Shoulder-length silver hair intertwined with flowers did nothing to make her look intimidating, either. But the fact that

she was dating the local police officer, whom only *she* would refer to as "Mina," gave her words extra bite.

I pulled back my cap—gingerly—to glare at her. "You're helping Lark look after me now?"

"That was the agreement," Maggie reminded me.

Ruing the day I'd thought to hire an assistant, I moved into the shop. From a corner atop a cabinet, tucked into a box, Nyx meowed at me. I glared at her too. Her pillow was perfectly fluffy and unused across the room.

I moved between the rows of machines, some for setting type, some for printing the paper. Aside from Maggie's special edition, they'd been quiet for a month. Too long. That said, Maggie had clearly not been wasting time. Everything was freshly cleaned and gleaming. I almost didn't recognize it all.

"Trent said specifically that you shouldn't work with the presses yet," Maggie said, trailing behind me.

"And did he say how he expects the paper to get out on time?"

"Um, he said it doesn't have to," said Maggie. She knew I wouldn't like it. She was already shrugging as I whirled around to face her. But she went on anyway. "And I think he's right, Leo. Everybody knows you're still recovering. They don't expect you to have the same schedule and everything."

"*I* expect me to," I said, "and it happens to be *my* paper."

"Um," said Maggie, again. "We thought you might say that. But, technically, it's Belville's paper, right? *Belville and Beyond?*"

"I know what I called it." I frowned, only more annoyed when the gesture made my constant headache flare up. This talk about technicalities had the hint of Lark about it. She was far more business-minded than Maggie and the others. It was why she understood me—perhaps too well. "Where is this going?"

"We thought," said Maggie, very distinctly, like she'd re-

hearsed it. "We thought that it might be best if you only work in the office for now."

I glanced over my shoulder at the office, the only room partitioned off from the shop floor. "What you're saying is, instead of house arrest, now I'm under work arrest."

"Um—office arrest, yeah," Maggie said. "Trent didn't say anything?"

Truth was, he probably had. Our local Witch-turned-healer had plenty to say. He'd been at my flat that very morning, giving me the final go-ahead and a stock of herbal tea for my head. I'd stopped listening after he said *you're good to go, but . . .*

"I don't see him here to enforce his order," I said. But the point was moot, if Officer Thorn was planning to stop by later. Why couldn't all these people be so organized when it came to *preventing* crime and explosions?

"True, but," said Maggie, "think about it. Technically the paper kind of belongs to the town. You know how much people rely on it. But we also care a lot about you. We want to make sure that you are really okay. It's only for a little while, I'm sure. And there's still plenty of work to do in the office . . ."

We both glanced that way again. Through the open door, piles of paper were clearly visible on the desk. Because Maggie had been left to her own devices, the piles were stacked neatly. But they were still there nonetheless.

I could see how this was going to go. I didn't like it, but I'm not one to fight fate. Not all the time, anyway. Not when I have a headache. And she *had* given me coffee. I took a sip. "So what's the idea? You're going to run the presses again?"

"Saki said she could come over when we're ready. She said that now that she's done it once, it probably won't be as—um—" Maggie hid her face behind her drink. Suddenly, the cleanliness

of the shop seemed more suspect. "Anyway, she said she thinks she figured out how the magitech works now. And it'll probably only be for one run. Or . . . two."

That was suspicious too, the way they were all ganging up on me. Trying to tell me only what I wanted to hear. Sort of, anyway.

But I knew Maggie. Nervous as she might still seem, she'd learned how to put her foot down, and she was doing it now. There was no use fighting at the moment. This required a little strategy.

"Fine," I said.

Maggie perked up, surprised. "Fine?"

"*Fine,*" I repeated. "But I want whatever you've got for the next edition on my desk before lunch."

* * *

My attitude had lost its effect. Maggie was having more fun at work than I was.

I could hear her humming to herself out on the shop floor. She'd apparently decided to organize the type cabinets. It was a good idea. I'd set everything up to be alphabetical once upon a time, but these days I came across the letter, symbol, or word I needed mostly by luck.

It's not that I didn't want Maggie to be happy. Her and the cat—let them enjoy themselves, it didn't do any harm. That they wanted to be at the paper was a good thing. That was my usual opinion. But it was hard to be so magnanimous with a constant, dull headache.

Not to mention while organizing. My least favorite task. Office work inevitably meant going through ad requests,

editing, and researching articles or pulling back issues of the paper from my "archive"—a bank of cabinets on one wall. My strengths were more along the lines of making sources, or printing presses, cooperate. But leaving the premises to do interviews was off the table, as was running the magitech.

I tugged at a nearby pile of folders. Too emphatically. Papers slipped, hesitated, and then cascaded down to the floor. All I could do was be glad I'd shut the office door so no one noticed my clumsiness.

And then to be doubly glad I was alone—because the fallen papers revealed a wooden box.

It must have been moved to the office when they found me after the explosion. Set out of harm's way, maybe. Then forgotten and concealed in a stack of letters. How had Officer Thorn not confiscated it? Maybe she'd assumed it was destroyed.

But it was not. This was undoubtedly the same box. Pulling out my penknife, I reached out and flicked the lid off the box. There were those same thirteen little rocks. Glinting in the sunlight from the window like they were totally innocent.

And how *had* a box of rocks exploded? Without suffering any ill effects, too. It was something that had plagued me while I was "recuperating," and it still bothered me as I stared at the box. It could have been an enchantment or curse, of course. I'd written about some of those myself. But if so, was the magic gone now? Had it been spent?

And if not, then what was going on?

I glanced through the window cut into my office door. Maggie had disappeared. By craning my neck, I could just spot her kneeling to rummage in the lower drawer of a cabinet now labeled "LETTERS A-D." Nyx was sitting next to her, paw up to bat at little pieces of type.

They'd be there a while. I turned back to my desk.

I tucked my brass hand behind my back. Couldn't tell you why. Maybe it felt like bad luck to do the same thing twice. This time, I reached out with my pen knife again. I'd have to move the box at some point if I was going to use my desk.

What did I tell you: when given options, people make the wrong choice.

But this time my choice wasn't the wrong one at all. Nothing happened. I poked the side of the box: nothing. I pushed it across some papers. Nothing.

Maybe I'd touched the wrong rock before. Maybe there had been some kind of booby trap in the corner. Curious, I picked up the nearest envelope—empty—and crumpled it into a ball before tossing it at the rocks.

It settled on top of the upper right corner. Harmlessly.

I moved closer, flicking the envelope out of the way. The rock it had landed on was rough-hewn but mostly clear, aside from little flecks and lines. Rocks themselves had never been my forte—I was in it more for the shady mining practices—but if I'd been asked, I would have said it was quartz.

Struck by an idea, I went to the bookshelf and pulled out a reference book called *The Encyclopedia of Crystals, Gems, and Metals.* I'll be honest with you: I had no idea which one quartz would be, if any. But after a little searching through the index, I found a relevant entry:

> *Clear Quartz. Also called rock crystal or pure quartz. Abundant mineral known from ancient times. Used widely in magitech, crafting, and spellwork. Acts as an*

> *amplifier of other frequencies. Impurities in the structure can cause colorations, many of which are recognized by their own name, including but not limited to: rose quartz (pink), amethyst (lavender), and citrine (yellow). Clear quartz associations include purification, protection, new beginnings, and augmenting power.*

You could have knocked me down with a feather. Or a mineral, in this case. "Augmenting"? "Frequencies"? Was this why the box had exploded?

It remained perfectly stationary now. I looked back at that first rock—the clear quartz. That part about new beginnings—there was something there. The start of a story. I just wasn't sure what kind of story it would be.

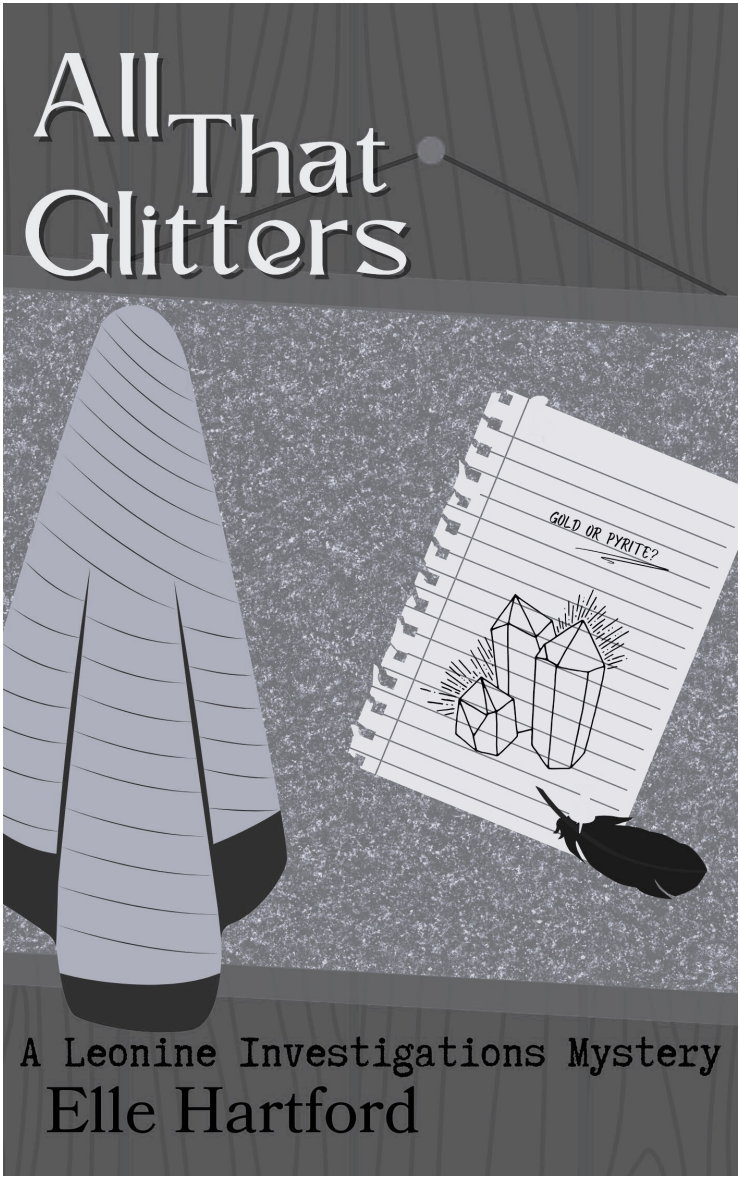
My Granda always said it wasn't a reporter's job to determine where a story goes. The job was to follow the story wherever it might lead. Maybe if I took this box one rock at a time and researched them all carefully, I'd understand what happened.

And once I knew *what* happened, I could figure out *why.*

I snapped the encyclopedia shut and looked at my messy bookshelf. If the outside of the box was safe to touch, I could keep it right there with the reference material. Hidden in plain sight. I could take my time—do this properly.

After all, whoever caused my headache and prevented me from working needed to face a few consequences.

I pulled out my notebook and began to write down notes. Orders and office arresters wouldn't keep me out of it. I was back on the case.


All That Glitters
GOLD OR PYRITE?
A Leonine Investigations Mystery
Elle Hartford

2

All That Glitters

I publish a regular edition of *Belville & Beyond* every week. Like clockwork. Like, some might say, a *respectable* paper.

Knowing what *respectable* reporter and printer I am, you might wonder, what about the rock box case? Certainly I wouldn't let it grow cold. Or gather dust on my desk.

But you can't blame *me* for the dust. The box showed up on my doorstep dusty, and the one explosion so far hadn't helped in that department. Maggie and her zeal for cleaning had made the print floor good as new, but the box itself was still hidden in my office, in the bottom drawer of my desk. (Not a very inspired hiding place, I grant you, but Maggie was the first assistant I'd ever hired who had a moral aversion to snooping, and her ethics were spoiling me.) Only I knew it was still around.

And—that was the issue. *Only I knew* that the box a) hadn't been destroyed in the explosion that put me on house arrest and then office arrest for two months to "recover," and b) had in fact been lost in a stack of papers, only to be discovered during one of my half-hearted attempts at organization. I didn't dare tell

Maggie: she'd immediately tell her girlfriend the police officer, and I'd never see the box again. I also didn't dare tell Lark.

That was the stickier issue.

Not only did Lark run the one mining business in town, she lived in the mountain itself. Word around town was she'd begun her operation in a series of caves, and lived there at first, same as her mining crews. But she'd moved up in the world—literally. Now, her crews worked a large mine site halfway up the mountain, shipping ores to the cities and to the coast. And as for Lark, she oversaw it all from her little office right in front of the mine during the day. During the evening, she retired to a home built out of the remains of an older mine site. A meeting of mountain and mansion.

Since our work together on the tarot card case, she'd taken to inviting me up for dinner sometimes. I wasn't one to turn down a meal, even if it meant hiking up the mountain.

For that matter, I wasn't one to turn down a chance to see Lark.

That evening she was perfect, as always. The glowing orb supporting her wheelchair glided effortlessly across the stone floors of her house, and her aquamarine eyes sparkled in the light from the crystal chandeliers. Why a coastal elf with skin the color of sand and hair like ocean waves wanted to live in a place where half the "windows" were just veins of shiny ore was something I'd never understand. But I didn't have to understand anything about Lark. She just *was,* and at risk of repeating myself, she was perfect.

Meanwhile, I was out of breath and my nose and cheeks were probably bright red from my walk. My newsboy cap and long jacket hadn't been a match for the weather. Fall was creeping down the mountain, and there was a definite chill in the air.

Lark noticed it too. "You haven't pulled out your winter scarves yet, hm?" She took my hat and jacket as she met me in her front hall. A gesture that always made me want to check my shirtsleeves for ink stains or tug my curls into order, though I knew both actions would be futile.

"I don't bother with scarves." I shrugged. "That's what walking fast is for. Warms you up."

"And here I thought you were just excited to try my pumpkin stew," she said.

I grinned. "It's the cornbread I really came for."

Lark led the way into her dining room. One of the grander rooms, it ran the length of the old mine, extending into the mountain. At the far end, a magical fireplace flickered. The interior wall was smooth, built of blocks left over from the mines and pummeled into shape by Lark's best masons. It was covered with art, mostly landscapes. But on the other side, the outer wall, that one Lark had left completely bare. Instead of art, the veins of the rock were visible—some dark, some sparkling. If you asked Lark, she'd probably say that *was* art.

Just looking at it made me feel guilty. I was dying to ask Lark about the rock samples I'd received in the post. If the box hadn't *exploded,* she would have been just as interested as I was—probably more. But just because there'd been an accident and I'd hit my head, now she frowned like a disappointed teacher every time the subject came up.

I'd been able to identify one sample myself: quartz, a clear, plain crystal. My encyclopedia said that quartz was known to "amplify" other energies, so the next obvious step was to figure out what the rest of the rocks were. They were all different. The one next to the quartz, for example, was a dull gold color . . . but I didn't for a moment believe that someone had sent me

actual gold in the mail. I wasn't that kind of lucky.

"Wondering if I redecorated?"

Lark was ladling out soup and I was staring across the table at those veins in the wall. I turned in my seat to share her smirk. "Love what you've done with the place. Who's the designer?"

"Geology," she said without missing a beat. "And eons of time. You might take note, Leo. It's perfectly acceptable for good things to take time."

"You don't have to give me the 'healing lasts longer than you think' lecture again. I hear it every day from Maggie and Trent. They even managed to rope your temp worker into it. Thanks for that, by the way," I said. Lark had loaned one of her employees to the paper to make up for the fact that I wasn't supposed to be running the presses by myself. With his help, the paper was back on schedule, but everyone continued to remind me of my summer injury.

"Someone has to keep an eye on you," Lark said.

"Agree to disagree." I knew she wouldn't, though. After a quick and heavenly bite of cornbread, I said, "What kind of rock sparkles like that?"

Lark looked amused. She was sitting at the head of the table, letting a spoonful of soup cool. Elegant. I knew she saw right through the diversion, but I hoped she didn't see why I was interested in it. "Many of them," she said, when I didn't back down. "Technically what you're seeing are metallic *minerals* which are naturally occurring within the rock wall."

She was way too cool when she pulled technicalities on me. "Come down to the print shop and I could sound just as fancy, explaining the magitech," I said.

Lark laughed. "I don't doubt your expertise, but even so, I doubt you're one for fancy language. How's the stew?"

"Perfect." The only thing *I* didn't doubt in that moment was that I was blushing. Highly inconvenient. I hid my face behind another cornbread muffin and continued looking at the wall. "So, do different minerals come in different colors?"

"Of course." She still sounded amused at me. "That's where many dyes or colored inks come from, you know. Different minerals. Cinnabar and hematite can both create red, for example. Lead, found in galena, or silver—like the ore you were so interested in last year—are gray, and so on."

"What about yellow?" I asked. For a moment she looked suspicious. I added hastily, "Since you're showing off and all."

"Many yellow inks come from plants," she said. "You'd have to ask Belville's resident alchemist about that."

I couldn't tell if she was on to me. I swallowed a spoonful of stew too fast, scalding my throat. But it was too late to back down now. "You're saying you can't think of any?"

"Yellow minerals? I could name too many to count," Lark said, rising to the challenge. "Gold is the obvious one. Native sulfur is another, though you're more likely to notice the smell than the color. There's also pyrite and chalcopyrite—"

"What does sulfur smell like?" I interrupted.

"Rotten eggs. Hardly dinner table talk, I'm afraid."

And unlikely to be my sample, either. I hadn't noticed any smells coming from the box, though I made a mental note to check. And had to restrain myself from making *actual* notes in the journal in my pocket, which would have given me away for sure. "What's that about pyrite, then? Why does that sound familiar?"

"You'd probably know it better as 'fool's gold,'" Lark said, smiling wryly. "To the undiscerning eye, the two look the same."

"If that's the case then how do you tell them apart?" I asked.

"A real expert can tell by the color. But if you don't have that kind of expertise, you can do a streak test. Rub both samples on a piece of raw ceramic. Gold will leave a yellow streak, but pyrite, despite its appearance, leaves a dark one." Lark tilted her head at me. "Why do I feel like I'm being interviewed for a dangerous article?"

Once again, I swallowed too fast. At this rate, I'd be done with dinner before she'd cooled her soup. "What could be dangerous about testing minerals?"

"Where gold is concerned, people often get . . . touchy," Lark said, "as you should remember well, having dealt with mesmerized silver. What's your new assignment, Leo?"

"Nothing," I protested. "I haven't got one. Unless you count healing, right? And training this new employee you saddled me with. I'm just curious. It's a weakness."

I hadn't really expected this rambling to work. But Lark's face softened. "It *is* a weakness, at times, but it's also what makes you such an open-minded reporter. Belville is lucky to have you. Bear that in mind, won't you?"

* * *

I was still "bearing in mind" Lark's comment the next morning, when I went into work. I didn't even notice the cold.

We'd kept to safe topics for the rest of the previous evening. I couldn't say for sure if she'd figured me out or not—Lark could be canny like that. But for now, I had my office to myself, and I had a rock to test.

Sorry—a *mineral.*

I climbed the stairs to my print shop, gave Nyx her breakfast—that'd keep the nosy cat occupied for a few minutes at least—and

locked my office door behind me, for good measure. The hard part of the plan had been finding "raw ceramic." It turned out what Lark meant in her expert-speak was just a rough clay tile, one that had been fired but not glazed. They had plenty of those in the art shop downstairs. After bribing them with coffee from the local cafe, I'd been able to leave with one in my pocket.

With the piles of paper cleaned up, there was just enough room on the floor behind my desk for me to sit. I put the tile down beside me. It still gave me a little shiver, opening the drawer that held the rock box. I'd determined last time that the box wasn't going to explode any more, but still. It had made quite an impression.

But I shook the nerves aside and pulled up the lid. Using my brass hand to brace the tile, I picked up the lump of gold look-alike in my other hand and rubbed it across the surface. I'd say I held my breath, but if we're being honest, it only took a second. There wasn't any time to get worked up.

And just like that, I was holding a piece of identified pyrite in my hand.

I couldn't help but grin as I looked at it. If all rock identification was this creative, I could see why Lark liked it. There was a do-it-yourself-ness to it that might become addictive if I wasn't careful.

With the pyrite still in hand, I reached over to my reference shelf and pulled out *The Encyclopedia of Crystals, Gems, and Metals.* I had to thumb through it a bit to find what I wanted. Turned out, pyrite was in the "Metals" section:

> *Pyrite. Also known as fool's gold or iron pyrite. A metallic mineral with a cubic crystal habit, in appearance very similar to gold. However, pyrite is not as dense as gold, and its color is generally described as more "brassy." Furthermore, gold is easily scratched, while pyrite is harder and more likely to flake when met with force. Despite the "fool" association, pyrite may still be used in spells meant to attract money, luck, or protection.*

The reference to a "fool" in the last sentence caught my attention. I'd heard the name before, Lark had said it herself, but this time it reminded me of the tarot card. The "Fool" card meant new adventures or the start of a fresh cycle. I'd certainly signed myself up for that by investigating this box. I could hope it wouldn't lead to as much drama as the tarot case had, but I had a suspicion that hoping wouldn't do me much good.

Better, most likely, to have some of that *protection* energy.

A knock at the office door startled me. I tucked the book back on the shelf and, while the desk hid me from view, stuffed the pyrite into the box and the box into the drawer. The tile went in too, just in case. I popped my head up to see my new part-timer, Wulf, peering through the window inset in the door.

"What is it?" I asked as I opened it. The best distraction is a good question, that's what my Granda always told me.

"Just that my shift is starting," Wulf said. He had a tendency to talk to the floor instead of to me. A strange tendency if you think about it. As a full-blooded orc, he could have lifted me and my rocks and my desk *off* the floor, and maybe a printing press besides. But maybe he was glad to have left physical labor

like that back at the mine. "Also, Lark said to pass this along."

He pressed a package into my hands. What had been dwarfed in his large, dark green palms was surprisingly light in mine. It wasn't any kind of rock, that was for sure. I looked up at Wulf. "What is it?"

He shrugged. "Came by special express early this morning, I heard. Want me to keep setting type?"

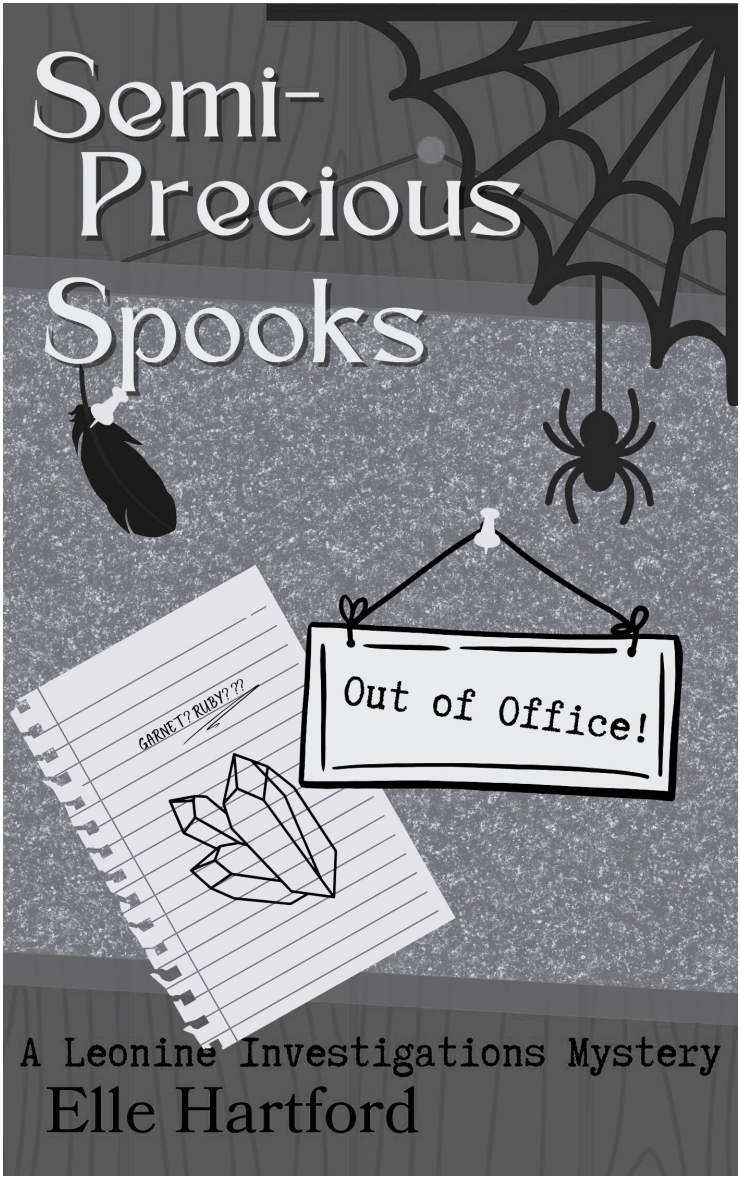
I waved him off to his work. The package in my hands was about as big as my encyclopedia, but a quarter of the weight. It was from Lark—I wasn't worried. But I *did* have a bad track record with the mail. After a moment, I decided to open it there, in the doorway. If it came from an impostor and exploded on me again, at least I'd have a witness.

I pulled off the thick white paper and let it fall for now. The box lid slipped out of my hands and onto the floor too. Inside was the most lovely cream silk scarf I'd ever seen.

Unable to believe it was real, I poked at the fabric only to find that there were other things in the box—another scarf, this one a rougher, black plaid wool. And a note. It trembled a little in my hand as I read,

> *Leo. I thought you might like to have options. You do remember that you're supposed to be looking after yourself? Lark.*

Unlike my latest rock experiment, *both* these scarves were perfect.


Semi-
Precious
Spooks
Out of Office!
GARNET? RUBY??
A Leonine Investigations Mystery
Elle Hartford

3

Semi-Precious Spooks

Market Square was full of ghosts, every tree wrapped in ribbons as black as my coffee. Samhain—or as some call it, Halloween—had to be my favorite time in Belville.

Aside from all the kids running around hopped up on sugar.

Still, the "spooky stories" edition of the paper was one I looked forward to putting together all year long. Not that I could admit as much out loud. It was hardly cutting-edge journalism. But it was a good seller, and my team deserved a break. After several months of looking after me in my recovery—or as some might call it, imprisoning me in my own office—my two assistants had proved they were nearly as dedicated to *Belville & Beyond* as I was. Nearly.

Maggie, the longest-running of the two, had suggested we look at the proof copies of "Spooks and Shrieks" on a bench in the park. For "atmosphere." Apparently shivering of cold while reading was just as good as shivering with fright. Good thing I had my trusty black plaid scarf to keep me warm.

She'd also been the one to name the edition this year. I figured it was only fair. She'd been part-time with the paper for more than a year now, and truth be told, she did good work. Granda always said that true workers get true rewards, and now that I was in charge of my own paper, I did my best to see it worked out that way.

How well it worked out in the world at large, that was another matter.

"Leo," said Maggie, from her end of the bench. She was bent over her copy of the paper, a latte steaming beside her. Her red pencil was hovering over the page. Indecision was often her worst enemy. "Should 'specter' be spelled with a t-e-r or t-r-e?"

"Neither's more correct than the other. Pick one and be consistent," I told her. "That's what matters."

"Or we could just say 'ghost,' I guess." Maggie's short silver hair fell forward over her cheeks, held in place by a purple knit cap. It looked much warmer than my own newsboy cap. I knew she'd made it herself. Should I—?

"You're doing it again," Maggie said, looking up.

I blanched. "Doing what?"

"Not thinking about work. What is it? Do you not like the stories we picked?"

"I like them fine." I watched the cheesecloth ghost nearest to us waver in the wind. Instead of looking frightful, it looked like it was laughing at me.

Truth was, for as proud as I was of Maggie (and even Wulf, our new typesetter), I was annoyed with myself. The Samhain edition of the paper was nice, sure. But I was still preoccupied with the box I'd received over the summer. All it held were twelve measly rocks. How had it been so hard to identify *rocks?*

Minerals, Lark would have said, if she was here.

But she was at her own work, and I hadn't told anyone I was looking into the box. *That* was why it was so hard.

Not to mention the fact that between Maggie's keen eye and training Wulf, I didn't have that many moments to spare.

"Leo," said Maggie.

I startled again. "What?"

She heaved a heavy sigh—impressive considering most of her bulk was a chunky sweater and oversized rain boots—and looked away, out through the park. And then she started waving enthusiastically, nearly spilling her coffee. I squinted. Obviously Maggie's golden eyes saw better than mine did, because it took me a moment to identify Officer Thorn coming toward us. I was losing my edge.

Or, maybe it was the power of love and all that. Maggie beamed at her partner as she approached.

Officer Thorn looked like she didn't feel the cold at all—as usual. She wore her police uniform and a satisfied smirk that put my guard up. After greeting Maggie affectionately, she turned to me. "Well, well. I was just on my way to the print shop to see you. I have some news you might like to hear."

"How exciting." Rarely did she look so pleased about sharing news with me when an actual case was involved.

"Ignore her lack of enthusiasm. She's been out of sorts with no new big stories," Maggie said. "Here, sit with us. Or—do you need me to leave? Is it supposed to be private?"

"It's nothing you can't hear too." Officer Thorn took the seat offered her, squarely in the middle of the bench. She smiled fondly at her partner before turning back to me, all business. I was busy wiping splatters of coffee from my scarf. When half-orc officers sit, they don't do it delicately.

"For the record," I said, "I'm not out of sorts."

Truth was, I should have been fine. Even though identifying rocks was hard—no pun intended—I'd actually managed to figure out one of them the night before. Garnet. Only took me a week or two of clandestine research to figure out *that* one, and when I finally did, I didn't see the point any more. What did it matter? At least pyrite had some fool qualities. It could make a good twist in a story. Garnet was just . . . a red rock that was not ruby. It was like fool's gold, but worse.

"Sure," Thorn drawled. "You always scowl like that. Got it. Well, here's something that may cheer you up—if you're up for it. I've been looking into your box sender."

That was a surprise.

"Thought you might be interested," Thorn said smugly.

Maggie peered around her, dropping her pencil. "I thought we'd decided to let that go!"

"It was a package in the mail that caused real damage," Officer Thorn replied, levelly. "That sort of thing does bear looking into. I said I would, and I did. It just took me a while to get any kind of answers, dealing with other police stations all across Beyond. Not to mention the mail system. Although I'm getting pretty good at those kinds of jobs, thanks to you."

She winked at me, and I frowned. "The *point* of a paper is distribution and dissemination, so naturally I deal with the mail. It's not my fault some of my mail is dangerous."

"I suppose it *is* true that the vast majority of what we get is requests for ads and letters to the editor," Maggie said slowly. "Really, you do get lots more mail than anyone else I know, Leo."

"That doesn't mean it's bound to happen that some of it is dangerous," Thorn said, still eyeing me keenly.

"Of course it does." I sipped my coffee. "Anyone could be plotting something at any moment."

"Sounds like you two have been editing too many ghost stories," said Thorn, trying out her wink on Maggie instead. Needless to say, it worked much better in that direction.

Maggie smiled. "Enough about the tarot cards, anyway. That case is closed, right? So what did you find out about the box?"

"It's not related to the tarot mess last year." As she agreed with Maggie, Thorn turned back to me. "Not directly, at least. You do have a certain *reputation* now, and that's probably what did it."

"Are you going to tell me what you know any time before Samhain?" I asked, irritated.

Officer Thorn just grinned. "Turns out it's a little bit macabre—right up your alley. Last spring, a rich and reclusive hermit living on his estate outside of Brass up and died in his sleep. Old age. So in comes the family to sort through the belongings. The family, in this case, was one distant niece. She sets up in the house, starts going through everything during the summer. Naturally she doesn't want to keep it all—the officer I spoke to said the 'collections' were literally holding the roof up in places. A real messy inheritance."

"So in the middle of her very involved clean-out, she took the time to mail me something she found?" I frowned again.

"She was a devoted reader of yours, turns out," the officer said. "Kept every copy of your mining expose articles. My friend in Brass said if he had to guess, he'd say she meant to send it as some kind of thank-you."

My frown deepened. "Why does he have to guess?"

"She died herself just a month ago," Thorn said briskly. "Also old age. Don't get any ideas."

Too late. The two most recent owners of this box had died within a span of six months?

"She was eighty-four," Thorn insisted. "The old man was one hundred and three. Stop it, Leo."

"I'm not doing anything."

"But," said Maggie, leaning forward again, "what would there be to do, anyway? Isn't the box in custody?"

Officer Thorn's gaze slid to me, and this time she looked more speculative. "I went looking for it when I contacted Brass, but all I've got is the outer wrappings."

"Maybe the rest of it was destroyed," I said on impulse. Sure, it was an opportunity to tell them I still had it . . . but why put them in danger?

"In any case," the officer went on, "chances are, she had no idea what it would do. Might have been that her uncle knew it was dangerous, but never got the chance to tell anyone. Or her uncle booby-trapped it and she never got close enough to spring the trap. Just saw some rock samples, thought of her latest favorite reporter with a rock obsession, and there you go."

Or the box was cursed and had taken them both out, and now it was looking for a third victim.

Or there was someone homicidal on the box's trail.

Suddenly, the garnet I'd identified most recently made more sense. My copy of *The Encyclopedia of Crystals, Gems, and Metals* said that garnet was used for protection and strength. Even that it was used to repel dangerous spirits and negative vibes. When I first read it, that seemed cute for Halloween, but of no real use. The book also said garnet was used in some bug-repelling powders, so I wasn't getting my hopes up.

But now, knowing that there actually might be some negative energy following the box around, a little bit of extra strength sounded just right.

"But—did your friend say what the box was supposed to be *for*?" Maggie asked Thorn.

The officer shrugged. "Just a collector's collection of samples, seems like. A curiosity. Unfortunately for Leo, this time curiosity got the better of her."

"Ha ha." I pursed my lips at Thorn's cheerful comment. "You don't know that for sure."

"True enough." More seriously, Thorn said, "That's part of why I wanted to talk to you, Leo. With both the uncle and the niece gone, there aren't any more obvious leads for me to follow up. Unless you have some insight, we've probably hit the end of your box case. I know it's not the most satisfying, but sometimes that's how things go."

"Who were they though, the uncle and niece? And who inherits now?" Maggie asked. For an instant I smiled. She might turn into a reporter yet.

"Let me see . . ." Thorn pulled a notebook from her chest pocket and checked it, rifling through pages. "Cornelius and Ambrosia Cosmos. Ring any bells? Ambrosia's heir is . . . Oh, right. No heir for her: her lawyer's selling it all off to benefit a 'lost familiars' society in Brass."

I was still shaking my head thoughtfully. "Never heard of any of it." But that didn't mean I couldn't learn more.

"That means an end to it, eh, Leo?" Thorn shut her notebook with an ominous snap.

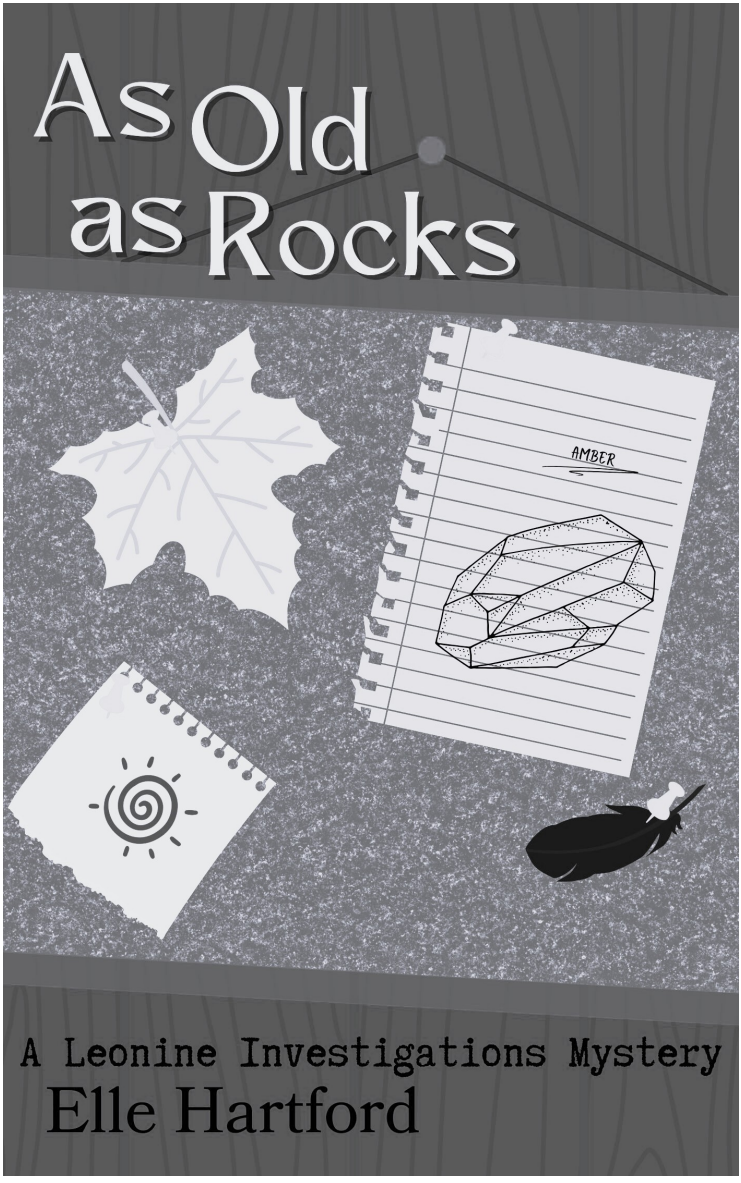
"An answer for how the box got to me," I agreed.

But not an end to looking into the box, or the Cosmos family, or this strange estate outside of Brass.

If the box itself was supporting my efforts with a little bit of protection and strength, who was I to argue?

As Thorn said her goodbyes to Maggie and a crisp breeze

rifled through my copy of "Spooks and Shrieks," I was feeling better than I had in weeks. Because that's the best thing about a ghost story: it's proof that even when you think things are over and finished, all you need is one little clue to get everything going again.


As Old as Rocks
AMBER
A Leonine Investigations Mystery
Elle Hartford

4

As Old as Rocks

Some mysteries are infinite. Others are so mundane it hurts.

I'd spent the better part of a month investigating the Cosmos family, the once rich and reclusive collectors who had sent me a strange box of rocks. All I had to show for my efforts was a pieced-together family tree, the great-uncle's self-published autobiography, and a handful of articles in the local school paper written by the niece. And rather than topics like *how I'll one day exact revenge on my enemies with cursed objects* or *proven ways to create panic and mayhem*, the niece liked to write about *what my hometown looked like in the ancient age* and *a day in the life of a library cat.* For a family with such an expansive last name, it turned out their horizons were small.

Such was the obvious conclusion. But my granda always told me to never lose sight of the physical *point* of a story—the thing that would drive it home. And in this case, the point was that my office had nearly been blown up by that strange box of rocks over the summer. So either the Cosmos family was more

nefarious than their writings let on, or the answer lay farther back in the box's history.

I wasn't much of a historian, myself. But that's where living in a small town has its advantages.

"There's Luca, obviously." My assistant, Maggie, tapped her pencil against her chin. I didn't bother pointing out to her that she was leaning on a printing machine we'd recently used, smearing leftover ink on her apron. That's what aprons were for, and that was a lesson she'd have to learn herself. "And the mink who works with him, Frank, is pretty knowledgeable too—that's what everybody says. He's been alive for centuries I guess. Oh, and if you want someone old, there's always Lavender. Or Rhys, at Red's potion shop. But maybe don't tell either of them that I said they were *old*?"

Thanks to her other career as assistant hairdresser, Maggie was always a good sounding board for local gossip. Even if she did worry too much about what other people thought.

"I was hoping for someone less . . ." I waved my hand, the brass prosthetic catching the light. As winter settled over Belville, the print shop became darker and darker in the afternoons. Normally I liked relying on the windows over the Square for natural light. Fortunately, our work was at a lull today.

Hence my interest in finding someone to surreptitiously interview about boxes of rocks. As a rather overbearing and police-affiliated assistant, Maggie still had no idea about my little side project. But she smiled and caught my drift in this particular instance. "Connected with Red, you mean? What *is* it with you two? She's perfectly nice."

That was all very well and good for Maggie to say—the hair salon was right next to Red's shop, so they were neighbors. And besides, Maggie had yet to meet a resident of Belville who didn't

adore her. She'd even worn *me* down over time. But faced with the prospect of a meddling alchemist, I grimaced. "Call it a petty rivalry."

Maggie's grin widened, framed by her silver bob. "Does Red know you're rivals?"

"I said it was petty," I replied. Not an answer—but enough of one.

"Well, if it's going to keep you from talking to the town scholar and archivist purely because he's engaged to her, then it must be pretty strong," Maggie giggled. "Not to mention Rhys, who knows basically everything. He's like—"

"I need someone who knows *strange* things," I interrupted. I wasn't interested in hearing what Red's employee was like. Not to mention I fully realized how silly it was for *me,* a reporter, to be relying on my own employee for town gossip when I'd actually lived in Belville longer.

But we all have our strengths . . . supposedly.

"I guess you've already thought of Saki?" Maggie's good humor faltered. "That said, she—she hasn't really been herself lately."

I *had* thought of Sakura, the one and only shadow witch in town. If there was a curse on my box, she'd be the one to sniff it out. She'd been helpful in my tarot card case last year, but if I'm honest, I was hoping for intel on the box itself—not on whether or not it was magicked. I was pretty sure that it *was*. We could flesh out that lead later.

Even so, my story ears perked up. Come to think of it, I *had* noticed a lack of sparkle around the shadow witch's cafe. I'd assumed she was just busy—with the holidays on the horizon, everybody was. But had Maggie hit on a story? "Do you know why?"

"That's the thing," said Maggie, leaning over the printing press. "I don't. She came in for her hair appointment like usual and hardly said a word! It was like she was trying to keep a secret, but she *never* keeps secrets, not if it's something to do with *her.*"

Interesting. Could be nothing, of course, but—what if Sakura had also received something strange in the mail? Could she possibly be wrapped up in the Cosmos family legacy too?

If she was, it would be more than coincidence. It would be quite a story . . .

"Leo," said Maggie, sounding too much like her girlfriend.

I almost looked over my shoulder for the police. "What?"

"Don't," she added. She even shook her pencil at me. "Whatever's bothering Saki shouldn't go in the paper. Hearts should be trampled on if they're readers, but respected if they're subjects, right?"

"I told you that months ago." I was surprised she'd remembered. It was my own little code of reporting—not that I have many—but this one had stuck. An emotionally devastated reader was a hooked reader, but a devastated subject was bad press. (Unless they deserved it.) It was why *Belville & Beyond* didn't carry any but the most lighthearted gossip. I'd learned my lesson in my early years, and besides, I wanted people to focus on *real* reporting. I liked to think this choice was why my paper was so popular in towns far away from our little mountain.

"Well, it works," Maggie said. I would have suspected her of outright flattery if she hadn't added, "as long as you stick to it. You have to set an example for me and Wulf, right?"

She'd taken to doing this lately—using my newest part-timer, an ex-miner with a steady hand that was perfect for setting type, as leverage against my leaderly instincts. The terrifying thing was that it worked.

"I wasn't thinking anything," I said. I knew I was scrunching my shoulders up guiltily, and I knew Maggie knew it was a tell of mine. I caught her eye and she grinned. I huffed. "I'm going back to my office. At least my piles of paper don't throw out accusations."

"Check your town records," Maggie said to my back. "I'll finish cleaning up out here."

"I was *going* to," I muttered. I should've been the one to tell *her* what to do, but that was one of the best things about Maggie. She never needed to be told.

I shut my office door behind me out of habit. The sound earned me one lazy blink from the cat curled up in my desk chair. Nyx was darker than the dusty once-black upholstery, her raven-like wings tucked tightly along her back. She didn't relish the cold weather and spent more and more of her time in the coziest places possible. A tall task in a print shop, but she seemed satisfied.

"You're lucky I'm planning on working," I told her. Rather than fighting her for a seat, I crossed the small room to my filing cabinets.

I kept files on everyone in town. Nothing nefarious—mostly. Addresses, records of the ads they'd placed in the paper, which articles they'd given quotes for. I'd found it never hurt to be specific with a detail. Particularly when someone thought you'd done a little too much trampling on hearts.

But rather than rifling through the drawers, I paused. Sitting down between the filing cabinet and Nyx's chair, I reached for the lowest drawer of the desk.

In months of keeping the rock box a secret, I'd learned one thing. It was temperamental. That was why I knew it was magicked, somehow. After our first explosive encounter, I'd

approached it more carefully, and I'd noticed that sometimes as I reached for the box I could feel a warning tingle, like too much energy coming off the lid. The feeling was worse when I used my prosthetic.

So with my other hand, I fished the box out of the drawer and pulled off the lid. Same collection of lumps of rock as ever. Over the summer I'd started identifying them—quartz, pyrite, garnet. There was one more unknown left in the top row. I'd been distracted by the Cosmos angle.

I reached out and poked the rock in the upper right corner. It was a deep but almost see-through yellow. In fact, I could see streaks of brown and cracks running through it. More than that, I could see—

I forgot about being cautious. I stuck my nose down close to the box, peering at the corner. It was obscured by the rock, but it was definitely there—a marking on the wall of the box itself.

How had I missed it before? Most likely by being thrown backward in an explosion. But since that wasn't the case now, I pressed my luck. Quickly, I pulled my notebook from my shirt pocket and did my best to copy the marking down. It wasn't anything I recognized. A rounded symbol of some kind, with little rays coming out like a sun.

More curious than ever, I pulled the rock out of its corner and looked at it. There weren't any symbols on the rock itself, but there did seem to be markings on the bottom of the box where it had been sitting. The lines disappeared under the wooden walls which separated each sample, indicating that whatever it was covered the entire bottom of the box.

And *that* was when I hesitated. Taking out one rock at a time, sure. But taking out all of them? What if that triggered some kind of reaction—or what if I put them back in the wrong order

and *that* was what did it? The possibilities were endless, and identifying rocks was *not* one of my strengths. The likelihood I'd mess something up was high.

And if I did, and the others learned about it, they'd take away the box for sure.

But the good news, I realized as I sat there with a lump of see-through gold in my hand, was that I'd just had a flash of inspiration about who to interview next.

* * *

In no time flat I was bundled up in scarf and jacket, my curls shoved under a cap. The lump of rock was in my pocket and I was flush with triumph at having sneaked it from my office. Apparently, the box *didn't* explode when you took away one of the rocks.

Not that I'd gone all that far. I stood in the Square in front of a narrow, jumbled storefront just a few buildings down from the cafe. There in the window, looking back at me, was a statue that shone dimly in the eerie shop lights. A statue that I now knew was carved of rock. The same rock I had in my pocket. The shop owner should be able to tell me what kind of stone it was—and more. I had a good feeling about this. As the owner of a curiosities shop, Priya was exactly the kind of source I'd been looking for.

She'd run into some trouble years back, shortly after I'd arrived in Belville. Something to do with the infamous Red. Since then, she'd kept to herself—so much so that I'd almost forgotten all about her. But while she wasn't a scholar or a know-it-all like Red's friends, she just might be exactly the person I needed.

The only gamble was whether or not she could keep a secret.

The chime on the door as I entered was the only noise. I was the only person in the shop. Which was for the best, because it was so crammed full of eerily glowing orbs and dried flowers and black netting that there was barely room to move. I had to concentrate on not knocking anything over as I made my way to the sales counter, so I didn't see her as I approached. She was sitting on a stool behind the counter, lips pursed, like she was counting the seconds until I left.

That was fine—I didn't want to waste time anyway. I held up the lump from my pocket. "Hi. Priya, right? Haven't seen you around in a while. I'm Leo. What's this?"

"I know who you are." Priya, her black hair parted severely down the middle and her brows heavy over her dark eyes, squinted at my hand. "Did you pick that up off my shelves?"

"When would I have had time? No, it was in—it was in my mail," I said.

"You get strange mail."

"It's a hazard of the job. So, what is it? It's the same rock as the sculpture in your window, right?" I tugged at my cap. Priya's brown skin faded into the dimness, but her grimace stood out.

Priya glanced at it dismissively. "Amber. Is that all?"

"Amber?" I had forgotten that was an option.

"Fossilized tree resin," Priya said. "It's not a rock. It's not even a crystal."

"Every box has its exceptions," I muttered to myself. Resolving to look it up in my encyclopedia later, I fished in my pocket for my notebook and held it up for Priya to see the most recent page. "How about this symbol?"

"What is this? A quiz?" Priya's frown deepened.

"Just a bit of information-gathering," I said. "Speaking of, I'd

appreciate it if you kept it between us."

"Exactly who do you think is going to come asking?" Priya gestured at her empty shop.

Too late, I realized I might have been a bit rude. "I didn't mean—"

"I happen to *like* the quiet," Priya said. In fact, she stood, and began to circle the counter. She was actively shooing me toward the door as she went on, "I'm not keeping anything between us because I don't want it there in the first place. I don't have any need for reporters. You can go and gather your information somewhere else. Shouldn't you be good at that kind of thing?"

By now my back was to the front door. How I'd got there without tripping, I had no idea. "But if you could just make a quick identification—"

"I don't have anything to say to you."

The old days of junior reporting came back in a rush. "Just one more moment of your time—all I need is a few words—then you can get back to your nice quiet shop—"

Priya got me out of her shop with one well-placed shove. The door snapped shut in front of my face. But Priya lingered behind the glass, and when I didn't leave right away, she said, "It's a sigil from an ancient culture. Happy? Now get out of here!"

In fact I *was* rather pleased as I hustled back to my office. She might have been lying about the ancient sigil—but then again, she might not have. A lot of people were far less imaginative when put on the spot than you'd think. It was a lead worth looking into, which was one more than I'd had earlier.

Not to mention the identification of my fourth rock: amber. When I was huddled beside Nyx's chair once more, I read all about it:

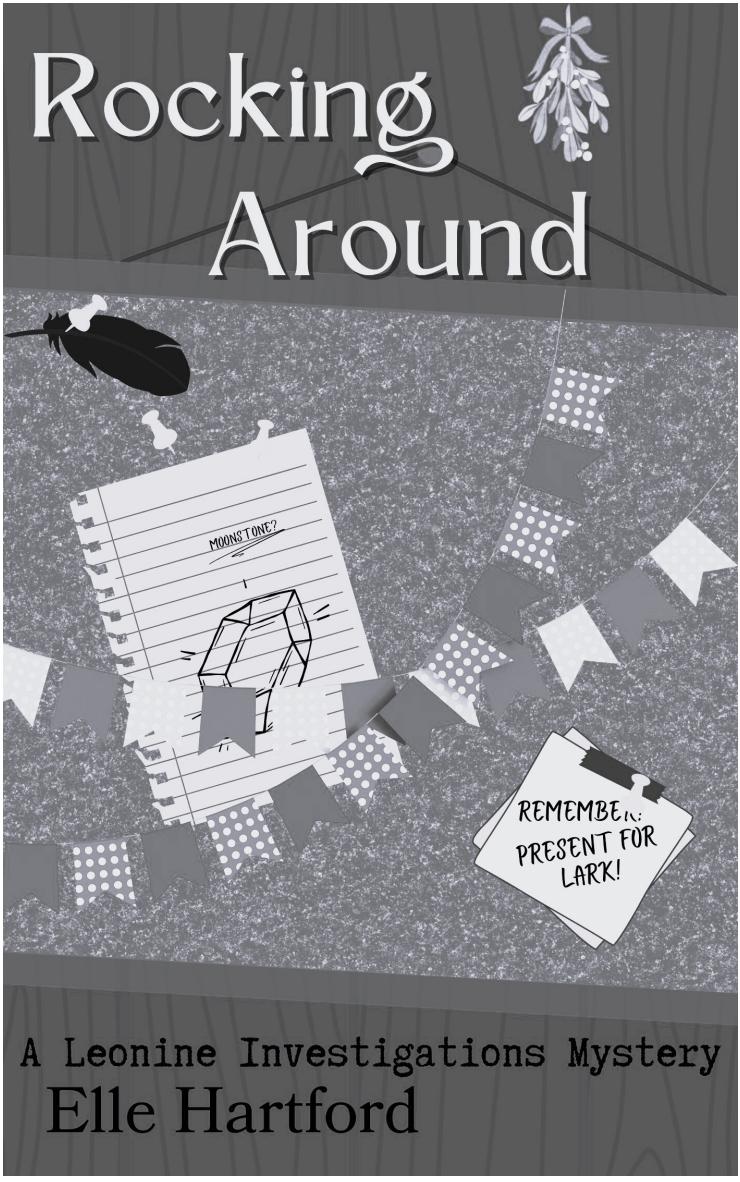
> *Amber. Though not a gemstone technically, it is likely the oldest substance used for adornment and decoration. Early cultures believed it possessed life of its own, due to its natural warmth and the occasional inclusion of small fossils. Amber can be used for many magical purposes, including protection, fertility, and luck. Because of its translucent nature, it has also been used in potions for treating the eyes or granting clear sight.*

I wondered about that last bit, but *The Encyclopedia of Crystals, Gems, and Metals* hadn't let me down so far. I closed the book thoughtfully. Priya had given me the right answer about the rock, no doubt about it. But what was this collection of rocks and not-rocks getting at? Was it just a bunch of odds and ends? If so, why draw symbols—or sigils—on it?

"Mrow," said Nyx, reminding me that it would soon be dinner time.

"I know," I told her. Maybe that little hunk of amber *was* helping me to see clearly, because I knew exactly what to do next.

The amber was ancient. The symbol was ancient. Priya had said it herself—a sigil from an ancient culture. She was about to learn that, however interesting the past might be, the *present* could be a whole lot more persistent.


Rocking Around
MOONSTONE?
REMEMBER: PRESENT FOR LARK!
A Leonine Investigations Mystery
Elle Hartford

5

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.*"

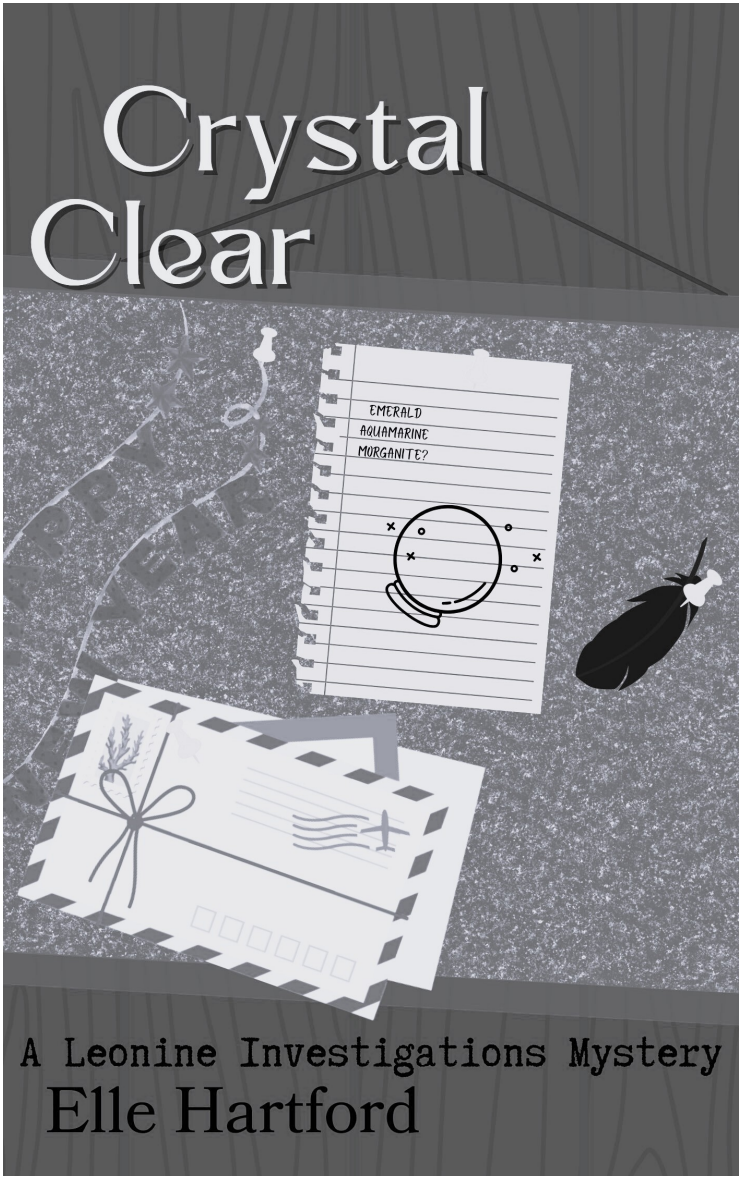
"You'll still have to. I'm looking forward to it. In the meantime, this is so much better than a card," Lark said, wigging her hand for me to take. "But we don't have much time before guests start arriving, so you'd better get moving. How do you feel about winter squash risotto and Yule log cake?"

"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.*


Crystal Clear
EMERALD
AQUAMARINE
MORGANITE?
A Leonine Investigations Mystery
Elle Hartford

6

Crystal Clear

The thing about the "new year," I find, is that it always comes two weeks late. At least.

The holidays, the parties, the recovering from parties, the reflections—it all spills over into the new year. Doesn't it? Maybe it's just me and my lackadaisical approach to organization. (That was the one thing my Granda never could teach me: adherence to structures. Or schedules. Unless it's a paper deadline, it's out the window—or in a pile on the desk.) Suffice it to say that, despite my best intentions, I did *not* take advantage of the holiday break to get all my rocks identified. Lark made me spend the break taking a *break.* It wasn't half bad, but don't tell her I said that.

Snow was flying past the office windows and not one, but two editions of *Belville & Beyond* had gone out already this New Year. Too late to worry about falling behind now. Maggie was out for the day at her other job, and in her absence Wulf was tidying the shop floor. My assistants were so good that they were starting to specialize: Maggie dealt more and more with

vendors and customers, and Wulf seemed to prefer anything to do with the printing presses themselves.

If it worked for them, it certainly worked for me. I dotted the final "i" and crossed the last "t" on my *letter from the editor* for the next paper, took a look around, and decided my industrious assistants had done more than enough work already. So, I tucked myself under my desk with my box of rocks and my battered old edition of *The Encyclopedia of Crystals, Gems, and Metals.* I'd just picked up my next unidentified rock and was fishing my notebook out of my pocket when the door to my office slammed open.

"What the—!" Let it never be said that a guilty conscience can't do damage. I hit my head against the desk, foiling my own attempt to stand up. Nyx, our raven-winged office cat, swooped past my limited view. "Nyx!"

"Not just her," a new voice said. Someone peered over the edge of my desk at me. Priya. "Why don't you try working *at* the desk instead of *under* it? I hear they work better that way."

"This is a covert operation," I reminded her. I scrambled up, rock and notebook still in hand, to check the door behind her before I said any more.

She'd closed the office door, at least. Priya stood in front of the desk. Her enormous fluffy coat dripped on the floor, and a silk paisley scarf was wound all the way up to her ears, leaving her dark hair to spill out in awkward loops. Her arms were crossed and she was staring at me.

The flat determination in her look answered my first question. Wulf was great when it came to setting type, but he wasn't one to get in someone else's way.

"Let me guess," Priya said. With a jerk of her chin—or more accurately, her scarf—she indicated the rock in my hand. "You

couldn't decide between emerald or aquamarine, right?"

Even startled, with a lingering headache, my ears pricked up at possible new information. I took a good look at the rock for the first time. Like all the others from the box, it fit easily in my palm and had been cut in a rough square. This one, though, was a seafoamy color. Like cloudy water, it was vaguely see-through.

"I was weighing my options," I said cautiously.

Priya smirked as she unwrapped her scarf. "They're both wrong anyway. It's all technicalities. Beryl comes in a lot of varieties, just like quartz. People come into the shop thinking quartz is the ultimate crystal, but that's just because beryl is better known by its variety names. They don't even know how they're connected."

I watched Priya toss her coat over the one usable chair in the office, praying Nyx wouldn't attack it. The last thing I needed right now was a distraction. Priya had steadfastly refused to identify any of the crystals in my mysterious box, on the basis of being "not a geologist." But if she was going to show up and be chatty, I was going to make the best of it. "Is that so?"

"You could have thought fluorite," Priya went on, "especially with one that color. But fluorite's new on the collector scene. *That* is definitely green beryl."

"Not emerald?"

All I had to do was ask, and she was off to the races. "You should be so lucky! Emerald's very valuable. But a collector's emerald would be a deeper green, and much clearer. Aquamarine would be clearer and blue, and then there's heliodor, which is yellow, and a pink one too—morganite, it was, and—" Priya faltered as I set down the rock and picked up my notebook.

"And these colors are due to different inclusions?" I knew to

ask *that* because of Lark.

But apparently my note-taking had reminded Priya that she was giving more than she'd bargained for. "If you want all the specifics, you can read about them yourself. I wrote a paper on them at university—it'll be in the library archives now. But there's plenty out there about it."

"You wrote papers on rocks at school, and you're *not* a geologist?"

"No. Yes. It was a different program, and it was a long time ago," Priya said. She'd crossed her arms again. "That's not what we're here to talk about. I got some answers for you."

"Rock answers help too. For the record." I picked up the crystal—the *green beryl*—and nodded my thanks. "But I take it you mean the box?"

Priya reluctantly stepped back to the desk. From the pocket in her voluminous burgundy vest, she withdrew a letter. Though I'd only asked her to help last month, the letter looked well-read. All the folds were worn. "I just got this from my old professor. He shares his thoughts—"

"Hold up," I said. Now I was taking notes for a different reason. "The professor who taught you not to be a geologist? Name?"

"Yes." Priya sighed heavily. She still hadn't let go of the letter. "It was an archaeology program. Okay? And no, I'm not an archaeologist now. I sell things, that's all. And I know archaeology isn't what you expected, but—but Professor Dee would know what you're looking for, so I reached out."

I accepted this, still writing. "How do you spell that?"

"D-E-E. No relation, though," Priya said. For the first time, a self-conscious smile flitted across her face.

But I didn't get it. "To you?"

"No, there was this famous occultist who had a very famous crystal and—never mind," Priya said, sighing again. "Red would have got it."

"I still think you should be friends. Bygones and all that." I made a note to look up some history if this letter of Priya's didn't pan out.

"Do you run a paper or a matchmaking service?" Priya dropped her letter on my desk. Finally. "There."

And before I could pick it up, she snatched it back. "But you can't *have* it," she added.

"Thanks for the help," I said, pointedly.

"Just—keep taking notes. I'll read it to you." Priya unfolded the letter and cleared her throat. Lucky I was already ready, because she wasted no time before reading out, "*My dear Priya, How delightful to hear from you and to know you've set up your own shop . . .* This first part isn't relevant to what you want . . . ahem. *Boxed collections are, as you know, not uncommon. Whether the box is built to house an existing collection, or a small number of stones are sold within a box as some sort of 'kit,' they are most often generic and harmless. However, your account is interesting because of the sigils included, and the mysterious provenance. I have heard, of course, of the Cosmos collection. It may interest you to know that . . .* that part is really just for me."

My pen paused. "Really?"

"Really. It's just about some old artifacts, not at all related to geology. Professor Dee tends to—wander." Priya said it like I was wringing a confession out of her. And before I could comment, she stuck her nose in the letter and kept reading. "*Unfortunately, as you know, there could be one of any number of things going on here. That the collection itself is dangerous, I doubt. The sigil looks to me like one more attuned to combination or*

strengthening, rather than destruction. This of course is based on my own cultural perceptions and you well know how limited those are . . ." Priya chuckled to herself. "He's just saying that to be funny."

I certainly didn't get the joke, but I took her word for it. Maybe. I made another note.

"*And we don't know, of course, if it was added before or after the collection was brought together. These questions of timing get so tricky, don't they?*"

"*Do* they?" I asked.

"What he means is, it's the kind of thing everyone debates about," Priya said. "Which came first, the box or the samples, that sort of thing—it's important."

"Is it? Because I'm a lot more worried about the fact that it exploded once, and seems like it could again."

"It's important because it helps us determine the *purpose*," Priya insisted. "This is the kind of thing archaeologists debate all the time."

I was beginning to understand why the profession had a reputation for being dry and dusty. I shook my head. "Okay, fine. Well the answer is, we don't know. Unless he has any more revelations?"

"*It's not quite like the ones we have here, it sounds, from your description,*" Priya started. I stopped her.

"Wait—what's that mean?"

"He's doing research on artifacts in modern use. It's sort of a hobby," Priya said. I stared. She sighed. "The university has a collection of collection boxes like yours, and other sets. But they're usually organized on a theme. Yours is . . . random."

A suspicion entered my mind. "How do you know that?"

"It's pretty obvious from you, and from your drawings," Priya said. "And before you ask, no, I don't want to get any more

involved. I have enough to deal with. Besides, Professor Dee is sending somebody."

"Excuse me?"

"He goes on," she said, like all this confusion was *my* fault for interrupting. *"Nonetheless, it could have some merits. One of my new research assistants will be in the area next month. Why don't I have him stop by and give a quick assessment? He's reasonably sharp, for a student—nothing like you were, of course—and should be able to give your friend some sound advice about where to take it."*

"I haven't said I wanted to take it anywhere." I shut my notebook. I don't like being told what I'm about to do. "I'm still doing research."

"Take it or leave it, it doesn't matter to me," Priya replied, re-folding her letter.

"And for that matter, what's with you and this professor?"

"None of your business," Priya said primly. "I've done my part, yes? No more staking out my shop?"

"I make no promises." I hesitated. Though the letter left me feeling more dubious than comforted, Priya *was* knowledgeable. "Are you sure you don't want to take a look? I have it right here."

"I really don't. I'm sure. Goodbye," Priya said, all in one breath. And just like that, she was out the door. The sheer volume of her coat nearly knocked Wulf flat into a printing press.

I watched the exit uneasily. Usually there was nothing more exciting than a new lead, but I had a funny feeling about this one. It wasn't nearly as straightforward as it could be. And neither was Priya. Her professor had known Cosmos . . . was it possible she had, too?

I added that to my fresh list of mental questions. Looking back down at my rock, I realized that though she had identified it, she hadn't said anything about what it was *for.* Typical.

Looking for a bit of closure, I thumbed through my *Encyclopedia* and did a bit of reading myself:

> *Beryl. Common varieties include aquamarine, emerald, goshenite, heliodor, and morganite. Though colorless in pure form, the name itself refers to a sea-green color. A hard mineral which can be quite valuable, depending on clarity and color. Traditionally associated with the sea, beryl is used to promote intellect, helping its wearer maintain clarity, win debates, and find lost items. Some even consider it to be more suitable for scrying and psychic purposes than its popular cousin, quartz.*

Maintaining clarity would have been nice, but after Priya's visit, this project was all muddied waters to me. I looked at the stone again. I could see why it might be valuable. It *was* a bit pretty.

"Better to be pretty *and* functional," I said to the stone. Admittedly grumpy. "So much for finding lost objects when you *are* one, eh?"

. . . Of course, that was still assuming someone hadn't sent the box to me on *purpose.* Hoping for some kind of explosive result.

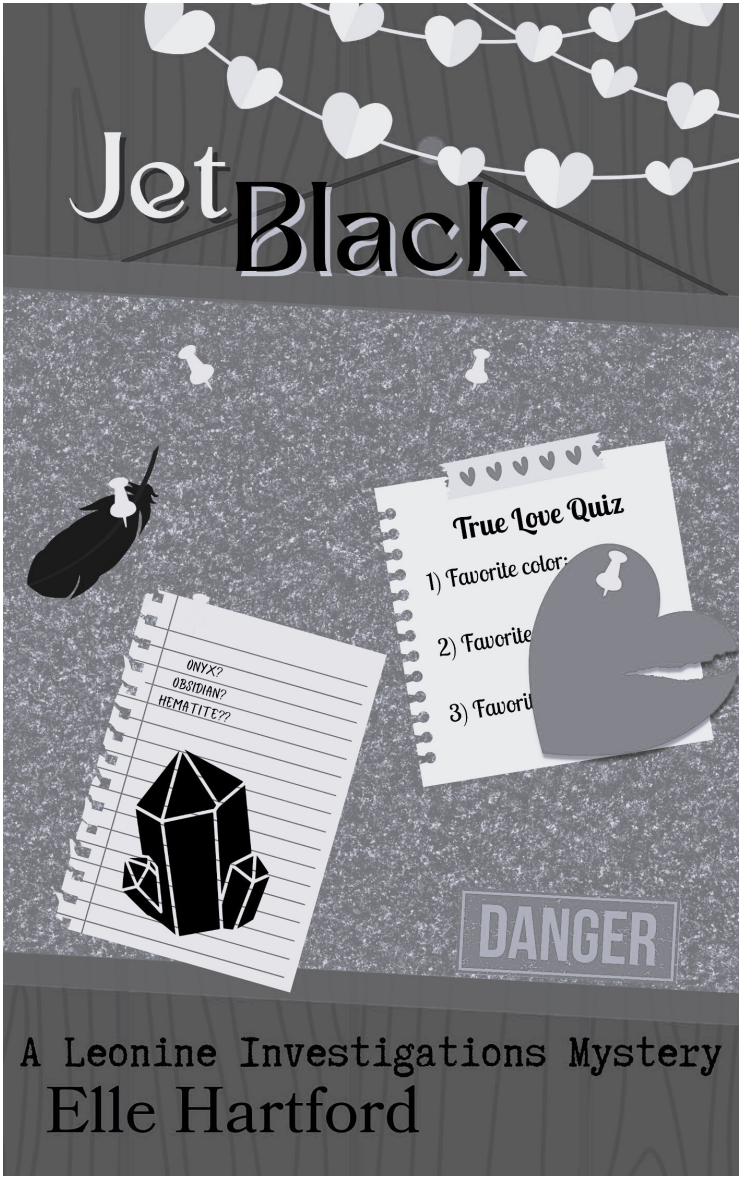
"Leo," Wulf called. I stuffed the stone in my pocket as he poked his head around the door. "Didn't you promise to go to Lavender's with us? It's just past closing time."

"Coming. Just let me tidy up." Wulf didn't know me well enough yet to find that suspicious.

I tucked the stone back into the box, and stuffed the box back

into its drawer, still thinking. Clarity, huh? Maybe it was within reach after all. If a research assistant was due to show up here, he could tell me all about the rocks . . .

. . . But he could *also* tell me more about the people involved.


Jet Black
True Love Quiz
1) Favorite color:
2) Favorite
3) Favori
ONYX?
OBSIDIAN?
HEMATITE??
DANGER
A Leonine Investigations Mystery
Elle Hartford

7

Jet Black

I'm stubborn. I know it. In moments of frustration, my granda used to call me "unteachable," and he was usually right. Which is why it should come as no surprise that despite months of being mixed up with tarot and then crystals, I still wasn't one for divination.

And divination includes *true love quizzes.*

I sat at a corner table in the busy cafe. I sipped my black coffee, and I did my best to ignore the paper hearts—the love songs—the pink-sugar-pearl-topped cupcakes. And yes, I ignored the blank love quiz on the table.

"Leo! Not pining for Sakura, are you?" Lark was smiling archly at me as she rolled up. She knew very well I wasn't. She went on, "I hear she and a certain guest of honor may stop by later. Still, the Pomegranate puts on a good show with just Mel and Glacial at the helm. Hard to believe it's been three years since their first Valentine's party, isn't it?"

"I don't recall you being present at that one," I pointed out.

"I recall *you* causing trouble, nonetheless." Lark set her own

quiz on the table, filled out in careful script, and then her gaze flicked back up to me. She was always perfectly turned out, her teal hair swept back in waves from her tan skin, her hands freshly manicured. And she was always able to make my stomach do flips.

Not to mention always well-informed. I didn't care to talk about my role in the drama of the Pomegranate Cafe's opening, and told her so. "I'm only here because neither of my assistants can make decent coffee," I added.

"Neither of your assistants should be working so late on a holiday," Lark replied.

"A newspaper's a business that makes its own hours," I said. "But, before you accuse me of being a terrible boss, don't worry. They're not. Working, that is."

"Good. Then your office will be a nice, quiet place for you to complete your quiz."

Lark raised one eyebrow at the blank piece of paper, which was not entirely hidden under my coffee cup. I knew where this was going.

But going to my office with Lark wasn't a bad thing, even if she made me bring the quiz along. As we made our way across the snowy square, I thought about how best to ask her advice. I had to have a plan.

Like all my friends—that is, like my assistant, her girlfriend the police officer, and the local Witch, whom they'd recruited to their cause—Lark disapproved of the secret investigation I had going on. Or she *would* disapprove if she knew about it. It had been more than six months now, and the strain was getting to me. I'd conducted long-term investigations before, but this one had me particularly squirrely. Maybe because it made no sense.

It made no sense because Lark was the *perfect* person to investigate a strange box of rocks with me, but just because she was a little worried that the box in question had caused an explosion and happened to knock me into a printing press head-first, she wouldn't hear of it.

In fact nobody would. Since relaying some information from a far-flung professor a month earlier, not even Priya, a shop owner who sold just the kind of curiosities this box might turn out to be, would talk to me about it. Priya's silence didn't bother me too much. She'd always kept to herself. I understood that urge. Besides, her professor had promised to send out a research assistant to take a look at the box . . . eventually.

Meanwhile, I was dying to ask Lark to at least identify the remaining rock samples in the box. She could do it in a heartbeat, I knew she could. She wasn't owner of the most profitable mine in the region for nothing. She could do it so much more easily than I could . . .

And what's worse, I was starting to realize that I *wanted* her to. I wanted her input on the case.

Could have been all the hearts in the air getting to me, of course. My office was about the only heart-free zone in all of Belville. With each stair I trudged up to the print shop door, I felt a little freer. Lark, on her specialty wheelchair, hovered behind me. Every time I apologized for not having any kind of elevator, magic or otherwise, she waved me off. I got the feeling she liked a chance to exercise her chair's capability.

"I see Wulf has been doing well," she commented as I let us in to the shop. The rows of printing presses gleamed, and for once, each drawer in the cabinets of type was tidily shut. There weren't piles of paper about. There was no spilled ink anywhere.

"I hardly recognize the place any more," I said.

Lark chuckled. "I had a feeling his organizational habits would make him a better fit here than at the mine."

"You mean you thought it'd be handy to have one of your people keeping an eye on me." I lingered by one of the presses, discarding my empty quiz onto it. Maybe I could have *accidentally* gotten it sucked into the machine and printed over with whatever article we'd most recently issued . . . If not for the fact that Wulf had already returned all the used type to the cabinets, neat and clean. "That said, he *has* been a useful assistant."

"I'm sure." Lark turned abruptly so that she faced me. She was at the end of the row, and in the dim light, there was something ominous about her look. Nyx swooped down from her hiding spot atop a cabinet and landed in her lap. Even my office cat loved Lark. "And what of the reason he was hired?"

Trust Lark to bring up directly the thing I was trying to be surreptitious about. "Er . . . It's been so long now, I barely remember."

"You could have died. *I* remember." Lark's eyes narrowed through the gloom. "Wulf kept an eye on you through your recovery, yes, but are you *certain* you've given up any idea of finding the person who sent you that box?"

My hand clenched over the top of the press, brass fingers scraping on the metal. There were times when a prosthetic, even a magitech one, was no help at all. Hoping Lark hadn't noticed the noise, I said, "Why would you ask?"

"Just something I've been thinking." Lark moved closer once more. "I might almost have gotten jealous of all the time you've spent with Priya lately. But it occurred to me that she might be of assistance on a case . . ."

Inspiration struck. "She had a piece she was asking me about,"

I said. "Made of some kind of strange rock. Black, smooth, but lighter than you'd expect it to be—"

"Priya came to you," said Lark, slowly, "to identify a rock?"

"She was more looking into the background of the statue. But of course I told her I had no idea what it was. But you, on the other hand—"

Words failed me, but I was hoping Lark would pick up the point. She always did.

Unless she was on to me. But it was too late now.

"Why come to you in the first place?"

"Probably because I have a reputation for looking into things," I said.

"And for not knowing when to stop." Suddenly, the look on Lark's face was severe. "You *are* still looking into the box."

"Why would you—"

"If it was as simple as you say, you could have had Wulf bring the specimen up to me right away. But the fact that you are being so under-handed about it—"

"I'm not under-handed," I protested. Before I could think.

Lark drew a sharp breath. "Leo. You *are* under-handed, and it's one of the things that first drew me to you. It's why you don't want to fill out a harmless piece of paper with facts about yourself. You'd rather keep your secrets close and your expectations low, well, that's fine. *That* I understand. But to *lie* so easily in a matter where you *know* I am concerned—"

This time the point hung in the air. There wasn't anything for me to say. She knew it.

And she pressed her advantage. "You *are* looking into the box."

"Yes."

"Priya is helping."

"Barely."

"Does Maggie know? Or Thorn?"

"No."

Not yet—that'd be more accurate. Because I had no doubt Lark was about to tell them.

"Have you found anything?"

I hesitated—then shook my head. "The original owner and some stuff about why people make these boxes in the first place. A strange symbol or two. But—nothing. I don't even know what all the rocks are. But if *you* were to—"

"Stop," said Lark, lifting one hand. "Stop right there. You know very well I won't. And I don't appreciate being tricked into it."

"I wouldn't try tricks if you weren't so *strange* about it," I protested.

Lark shifted in her seat, dislodging Nyx. "*I* am being strange?"

"It's just a box of rocks. It's just like the tarot card case—"

"It's a case that could get you killed," Lark interrupted. "And if you don't see why that makes me act 'strangely' about it, then there's no point in you doing your quiz."

I'll admit, this baffled me. I paused. "I wasn't really going to do it anyway."

"Fine." Lark's voice had become ice. She rolled right past me like I didn't exist. I almost thought she was going to leave in silence . . .

But at the door, she turned one more time. "The rock you're describing, Leo? It's jet."

It wasn't until she'd left, until I'd run to my office to consult my encyclopedia and record this bit of knowledge, that it hit me.

She hadn't wanted to tell me anything because she was

worried I'd be in danger.

Then she'd told me what the rock was because she was so mad at me that she didn't *care* if I was in danger.

Granda always warned me that journalism came with danger. Sometimes that means you're doing it right, he'd said. I'd taken it to heart. I'd been proud.

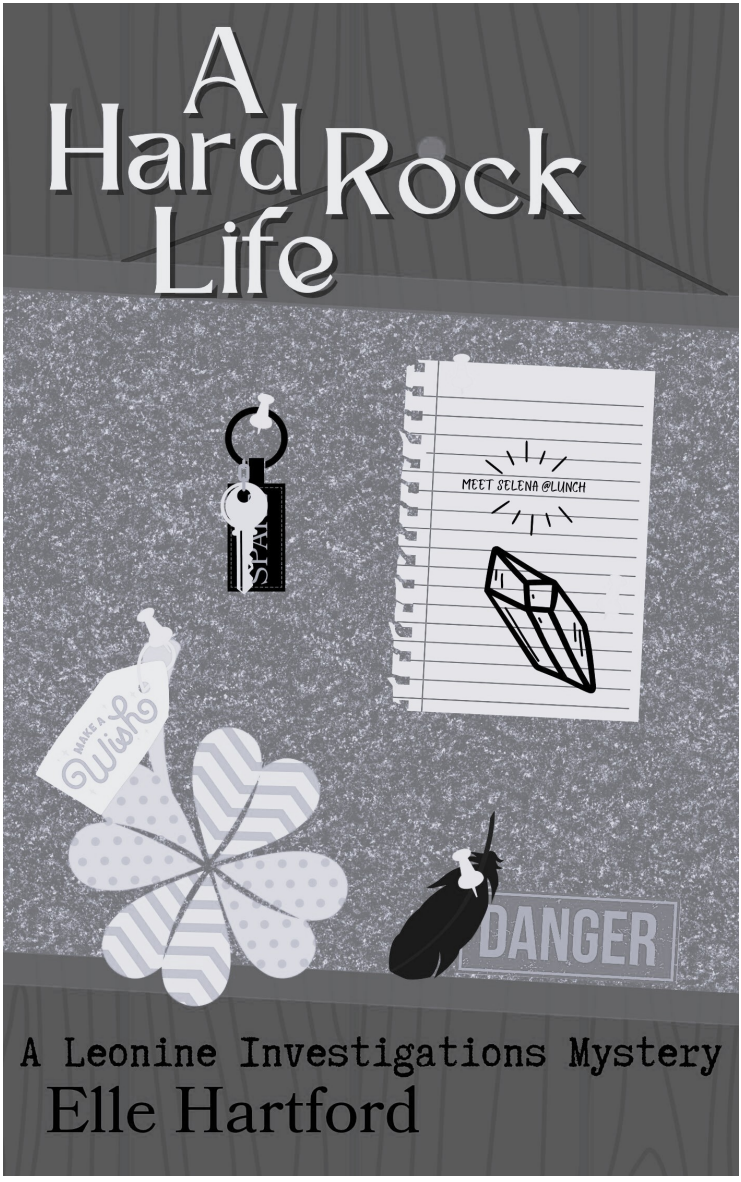
But chasing a lead down regardless of the danger now left me with a new feeling . . .

An ice-cold, deep-dark one.

And no protective rock was going to help.

The Encyclopedia of Crystals, Gems, and Metals entry:

> *Jet. Also called witch's amber. A solid black, often polished until it resembles glass, jet is in fact not a true mineral; it is fossilized wood. Throughout history, jet has been considered magical, used as offerings or adornments for divine ceremonies. When kept in close contact with a person, it is believed that jet can absorb part of the person's soul. Therefore it may be guarded closely. Jet is associated with protection, divinity, and health.*


A Hard Rock Life
MEET SELENA @LUNCH
MAKE A WISH
DANGER
A Leonine Investigations Mystery
Elle Hartford

8

A Hard Rock Life

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!"

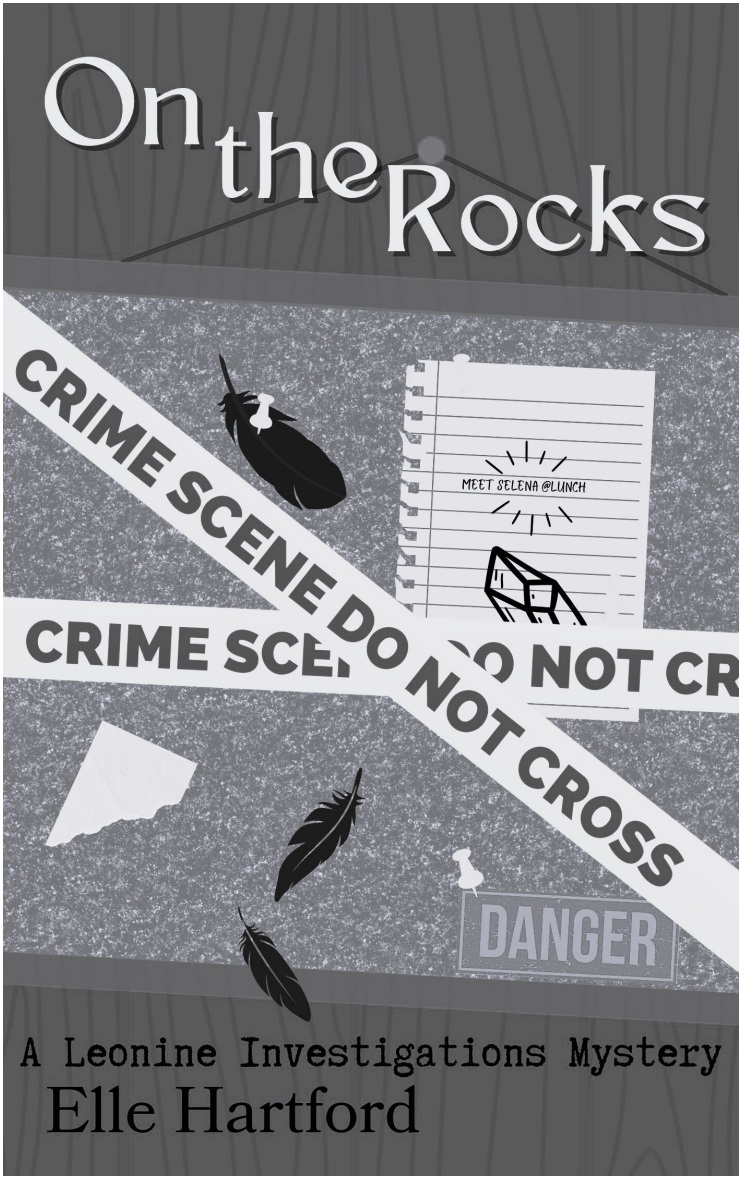
"Thank *you,*" I said, and meant it. I was already feeling lighter, watching the box go.

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.


On the Rocks
CRIME SCENE DO NOT CROSS
MEET SELENA @LUNCH
DANGER
A Leonine Investigations Mystery
Elle Hartford

9

On the Rocks

You 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 cunning 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

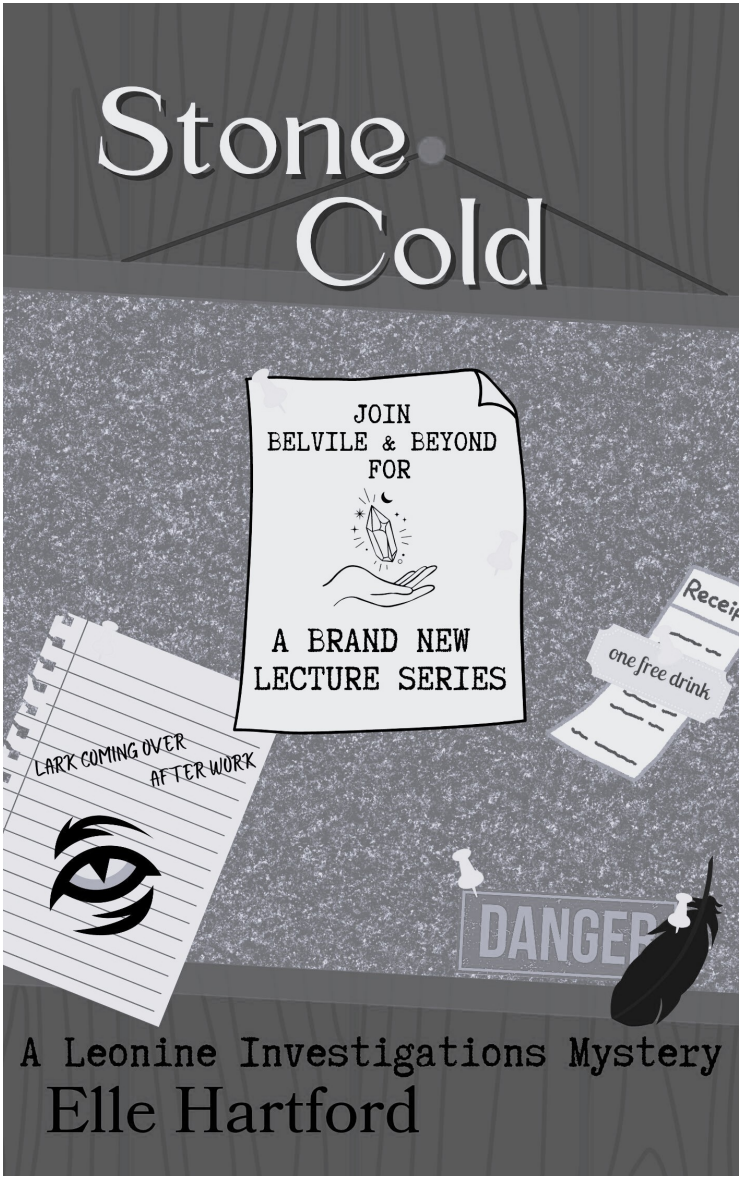
theories. Each more crackpot than the last, if you asked me. Aside from Lark's—Lark had always been a good judge of character. And Wulf's point about luck—there was something in that. Not to mention the way Maggie and Thorn played off each other, each of them strengthening the other's ideas . . .

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 . . ."


Stone Cold
JOIN
BELVILE & BEYOND
FOR
A BRAND NEW
LECTURE SERIES
LARK COMING OVER
AFTER WORK
one free drink
DANGER
A Leonine Investigations Mystery
Elle Hartford

10

Stone Cold

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 insistences 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

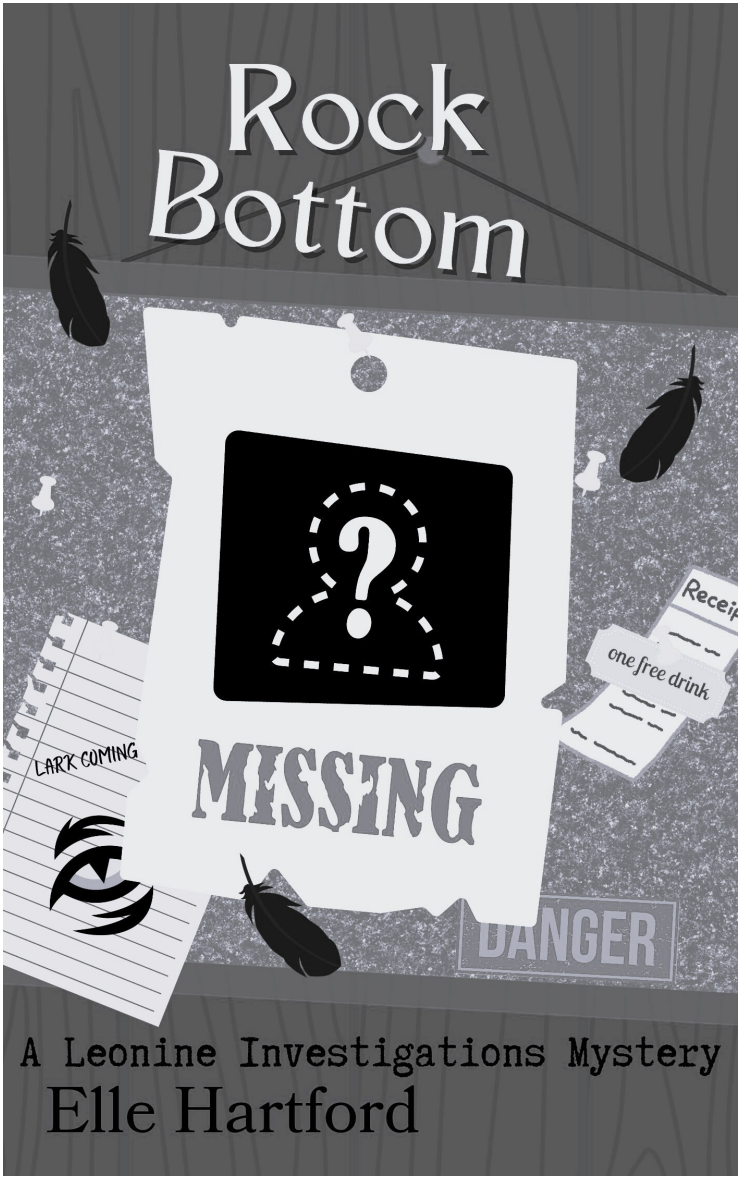
tantalizing to resist.

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.


Rock Bottom
MISSING
one free drink
LARK COMING
DANGER
A Leonine Investigations Mystery
Elle Hartford

11

Rock Bottom

Lark's talk went well. Of course.

Too well.

Even the schoolkids listened with rapt attention as she talked about mesmerized silver and other kinds of enchanted rocks. My own past with magic rocks was questionable at best, but even *I* would have been rapt—if I hadn't been staring at the heads of our suspects.

There they were, all in a row. Priya, Selene, the mysterious professor, even the pearl-wearing lady. Each with a possible motive for sending dangerous mail to the paper and then stealing said mail back.

Each perfectly, annoyingly *polite* during the presentation.

Lark was just getting to her concluding thoughts, and I had to admit to myself that I might've been hasty with this plan. Audiences were *supposed* to be polite. It was the perfect excuse for them to just sit there. I hadn't thought this through properly. I'd thought that if I could just get them here, then—then what? They'd be overcome with guilt? Obviously I'd been spending

too much time with Maggie. That kind of optimism was absurd. I never *really* thought that they'd stand up during the presentation and confess.

But apparently Lark did.

As always, Lark had a plan she hadn't clued me in on. I should have expected it, honestly.

She said thank you to the crowd, and to *Belville & Beyond* for hosting the lecture. The schoolkids skedaddled, notebooks clutched to their chests. That's when it began.

"I'm happy to take questions," Lark said, rolling her chair a little closer to the half-emptied rows of chairs. The nosy alchemist and co were still present, of course, as were all four suspects. Maggie was hovering in the cover, practically biting her nails.

The professor raised his hand. "What experience have you had with crystals whose innate properties are enhanced by runes?"

Runes? I thought of the strange drawing on the inside of the rock box. Now *I* felt like biting my nails.

Lark's expression didn't so much as flicker.

"Limited experience," she said evenly. "I deal primarily with the minerals as they come out of the ground, before they have been cut, polished, or inscribed. Though of course, the subject interests me. Have you made a study of them yourself?"

"Professor Dee's the best," said Selene, before the professor could get his mouth open. "But what I want to know is, how do you choose which pieces go on to be used for magical purposes? Can you, like, test how strong they are?"

Lark held her gaze for just a moment. Just enough for the professor's assistant to shift in her seat. Then she smiled.

"The ultimate choice is, of course, up to the purchaser,"

Lark said. "But yes, it is possible to test individual specimens. Many factors affect the suitability of a crystal for a specific purpose. There's the purity of the mineral to consider, as well as the overall clarity and the presence or arrangement of any inclusions."

Purity, arrangement, inclusions—fancy talk. Had we been alone, I would have been daydreaming at this point. But since our suspects were interested and Lark was clearly up to something—her arch smile was a dead giveaway—I tried to follow along. *Inclusions* were the extra bits that sometimes got mixed up with the main star of the show. I could just barely remember reading something about inclusions and impurities in my encyclopedia when this mess began. I'd been looking up clear quartz. But clear quartz could become other stuff, like rose quartz or smoky quartz, if it had impurities like iron or aluminum.

As I struggled to keep up to speed, Lark was still talking. "Then there is the resonance of the specimen, which I suspect is what you are driving at. That is affected by clarity and composition, but it is testable on its own. Several methods and tools have been devised. At Belville Mine, we employ a specialist to evaluate our products before we sort and ship them."

This was news to me, but Red the alchemist—and Lark's hench-trolls, hunched over in the back row—were all nodding along.

"But don't let me bore you," Lark added. That arch smile was a smirk now. She had something up her sleeve for certain. I just couldn't guess what it was yet. "Geology and mineralogy are precise sciences, it's true, but the fact of the matter is that there is a qualitative aspect to crystals, too. Buyers often speak

of a particular specimen 'calling' to them. I believe that such things are possible, no matter what our tests say about strength or resonance. Sometimes it's a matter of personal alignment or preference.

"For example." From the breast pocket of her impeccably tailored blue suit, Lark withdrew a flat, palm-size rock. It was duller than silver, almost black. I recognized it only because there'd been a lump of the same stuff in the stolen rock box. "This is hematite, as many of you know."

I couldn't be sure, but I thought I saw her wink at me. Like I was the only one present who didn't know rocks! Maggie and Officer Thorn, still lingering by the door, probably didn't know very much either.

I'd at least managed to identify eight rocks before the box was taken. Eight-ish.

"Hematite is often used as a grounding stone, to help with focus. The iron in the stone lends it an energy of strength. That's speaking generally. But I found myself drawn particularly to *this* stone, which has been charmed to enhance its energies, specifically at focusing on the plain and simple truth.

"A handy reminder in business." Lark's smile was now downright wolfish.

And at last I saw where this was going. Probably our culprit, whoever they were, did too. But with the right application of peer pressure, we could still pull this off.

"Why don't we do a bit of hands-on show and tell for the folks who've stuck around?" I said. Several heads swiveled back to look at me like they'd forgotten I was there.

Or like they were afraid to touch the stone.

"Maggie can go first," I added.

My assistant made a small noise. Something more like *eep!*

than *sounds good, boss!*. But she was the one up by the podium, and I didn't want to lose any momentum. Besides, what secrets could Maggie really be keeping?

Hopefully nothing big, for her sake. Not with her girlfriend in the room.

Lark held out the stone, flat on her hand. "Don't worry, Maggie. It is not an infallible truth spell. Its energies simply make it more difficult than usual to stray from the truth. Try it—try telling us what you had for lunch. A lie first, if you please."

I have to hand it to her: Maggie had guts. After her initial cringe, she walked right over and put her hand on top of the rock.

"For lunch today I had—I had—oooh, it *is* harder! Ihadaturtle-sandwich," she said, all in a rush. This broke the tension. Most people in the room chuckled, and Maggie herself laughed, glancing across the room at Thorn. "I'm a terrible liar anyway! Everyone knows it. I had a piece of leftover quiche and a strawberry macaron. Phew! That feels much better. Red, Luca, you have to try it too!"

I was pleased to see she got the picture. We needed more people to step up, to add pressure on our suspects. And to give them a false sense of security. I wasn't even remotely interested in what the bookseller and the alchemist had for lunch, though they did get everyone laughing when they tried to get their talking dog in on it too. William (the dog) insisted that he was inherently truthful already.

"Anyone else?" Lark held the stone out for the folks in the middle chairs.

Four heads in a row. Which would be the one to fall for the bait? Which was the one we needed? The professor with his

pompous questions? The assistant with her need to change the subject?

Priya, sitting at one end of the little group, stood and leaned forward, so that her hand covered Lark's. With her fingers firmly on the hematite she turned over her shoulder and looked at me.

"Leo," she said. Then a look of uncertainty crossed her face. She took a deep breath and started again. "I'm jealous of you. I've always been jealous of you. You have a business that the town loves. You're a part of every event, every season. Even when you don't want to be there, they drag you out, that's how much they need you. I've been here since I was born, in the shadows. But you! You're always coming and going on one assignment or another, and everyone eats it up. You're always in the light."

In the *light*?

My mouth was hanging so far open I wasn't just catching flies, I might as well have been catching flying cats.

Speaking of. For reasons only known to feline culture, Nyx chose this moment to assert her ownership of the print shop.

I'd *tried* to lock her in my office with her dinner. I'm not a complete fool. I knew that my half-feral flying cat and a crowd of innocent victims (with one guilty one added too) wouldn't mix well. But in my shock at Lark's confession—which was not at all the confession I'd wanted it to be—I'd stepped away from the office door. Its lock, never too strong to begin with, failed. Nyx shot out of her hiding spot and dove over the crowd like an oversize avenging vampire bat.

Chaos was the result.

Chairs went flying as people ducked and scrambled. William the talking dog actually *barked*, a sound I almost never heard.

Officer Thorn threw open the hall door and was yelling *shoo!* at Nyx, which was having no effect. Somewhere amidst it all, Lark cried out.

I charged forward over the chairs. Skar and Skaab were cowering in the corner. I could have told them, told everyone, that this was far too dramatic: Nyx had never hurt anyone—well, she'd never *killed* anyone. Not anyone bigger than a rat. That I knew of.

But I was focused on getting to Lark. As I did, something sharp and heavy collided with my head. I ignored it.

It—Nyx—made herself one with my cap and remained sitting atop my head, hissing at everyone who'd forced her to eat her dinner confined in an office.

"Are you okay?" I asked Lark.

She was incredibly disheveled, which for Lark meant that a few strands of wavy hair were in her face and her pressed collar was askew. And she was breathless.

"My hematite—it's gone!"


All Ore Nothing
drink
A Leonine Investigations Mystery
Elle Hartford

12

All Ore Nothing

I straightened slowly and looked around the room, my hand on Lark's shoulder. "Alright," I said, "which of you creeps tried to attack Lark and steal her rock?"

There was a wide-eyed, blinking pause. Long enough that I could feel individual people's reactions. Red, William, and Luca were staring at me with their heads to one side. I did, in fairness, still have a flying cat perched on my hat.

Maggie was watching from the back of the room with her jaw practically on the floor, held securely in place by Officer Thorn's protective arm. Skar and Skaab still looked like they were considering rushing the front of the room, but Lark was fine. I could feel her looking up at me askance—probably because I'd called her precious hematite a "rock."

Priya seemed just as stunned as Maggie. Even though everyone else had gone still, she toppled over when I looked her way.

That left three.

As I glared at them, the pearl-bedecked lady sighed like someone'd let the air out of her. And sure enough, like a popped balloon, she thinned out—stretched upward—

"That's enough of that, I think," she declared. But she was no longer a stout, enormous-hat-wearing lady. The hat had been lost in the scuffle, and so had the heavy, fur-trimmed coat. Now, standing up to a respectable six feet at least, a gray-eyed man in an old dress grinned insolently. "Don't you think so, Red?" he went on. "I was under the impression you solved all the crime Belville had to offer."

"Hey!" From the door, Officer Thorn rustled indignantly.

"Hey indeed," Red said, her voice dry. "Luca, William, you remember Quinn? Leo—"

"I don't care what his name is," I interrupted. "This is *my* crime to solve, sir, and right now you're my number-one suspect. Turn out your pockets!"

Next to the man, the professor popped up. "There's no need—"

And next to the professor, the assistant popped too. "Professor? I thought you said she was a donor—"

But the man was laughing. "Leo, I've been a devoted reader of yours for years. It's an honor to make your acquaintance. My name," he said, with an elaborate bow as he swept off the dress, "is Quinn E Doyle. I'd empty my pockets, but it would take far too much time."

My hand on Lark's shoulder was as much for my support as hers at this point. Under the disguise, he was wearing a shirt and vest and trousers, like some kind of gentleman.

"There's no reason fancy dress means you aren't a thief," I said.

"True, and in many cases, it probably *does,*" said Quinn E Doyle contemplatively. "But in this case, I am employed. By this man here."

I turned to the blushing professor and the sputtering assistant.

And then there were two.

Between the pair of them, they couldn't have looked more guilty. Professor Dee spread his hands—which was *still* not emptying pockets—and said, "He's a detective, you see. From Helenia? No? Nonetheless he *is* one, and I've enlisted his service to help me with—er—a rather delicate matter."

"He is one," Red broke in, addressing me. "Thorn and I have met him. That part's true, at least."

I'd already moved on from the annoying detective. I narrowed my eyes at the professor. "What kind of delicate matter involved needing to bring him *here*?"

"Ah, well . . ." Professor Dee gulped, more like a teenager than a distinguished scholar in tweed, and glanced at Selene beside him. "Usually student affairs are considered confidential, you understand, but under these circumstances . . ."

Following his drift, I glanced at the assistant too.

The last suspect standing.

"I have no idea what's going on," protested Selene, hunching over to make herself look small.

It didn't work. Quinn had stood up, and Dee had too, and both had made free with some secrets. It was time for Selene to do the same. The entire room was staring at her.

Talk about peer pressure.

"Selene," said Professor Dee. I had to hand it to him—he sounded conflicted, like he really cared. "Surely you must have realized that when the box went missing on its way from Leo's print shop, I would make inquiries. I'm afraid there was really

only one possibility—"

"Wait," Selene cried. She looked around. "That's what you all think? You all think I'm a thief?" Red and co looked confused, but Maggie and I were nodding. So was Officer Thorn, though *she'd* theorized it was someone else. "Well, if that's the case, why haven't you had me arrested?!"

"There are matters of university policy to consider—" Professor Dee coughed.

"Why do you think we're here now?" Lark said at the same time.

"I told you we should have—!" Maggie was shouting across the room.

"Because," Quinn said, cutting through the noise, "we need to know where the artifact is."

"What he said," I said, frowning at him. "Where's the box, Selene?"

There was silence as the entire room stared at her, and she stared back. As one, we all noticed that Selene's beat-up messenger bag was still hanging off her shoulder.

She must've noticed everyone's eyes drift down because she took a step back, colliding with a chair. She clutched at the strap of the bag.

"Really?" William the talking dog snorted derisively.

"It's not like I could leave it at home!" Selene sounded exactly what she was, which was so much younger than everyone else left in the room. Instead of acting chagrined or embarrassed by her admission, she went on defiantly, like *we* were the ones frustrating *her.* "I don't see what the big fuss is about anyway. It's useless. It was supposed to be some big powerful collection but I never could get it to *work*! It's broken. Not even the Cosmoses wanted it!"

"Not wanting a thing and condoning theft are two very different concepts," Quinn said in an undertone.

I glared at him. Did the man never shut up? Stepping forward, I said, "What do you mean, 'it doesn't work'? It's a box of rocks."

"It's not *supposed* to be," said Selene, who was starting to sound whiny in addition to mad. "Everyone said the Cosmos family had had it for generations because it aligned the stones' frequencies just right to make something *magic.* That's what Professor Dee said!"

Officer Thorn cleared her throat at that, which brought attention to the fact that she'd advanced towards the hapless professor and the confessing Selene. Her arms were crossed. "Rumors about magic, huh? Wouldn't *that* have been helpful to know."

"You never told me!" Priya added. I'd almost forgotten her. She was staring up at Dee with a hurt expression.

"Well, I, you see, the rumors were purely unsubstantiated, nothing academic at all, no proper studies," Professor Dee mumbled, not looking at anyone. "I happened to mention the possibility of the box resurfacing to Selene when I received Priya's letter, perhaps, but I really wouldn't have considered the legends to be trustworthy information—"

"They were *lies!*" Selene cried bitterly. "It was supposed to be my big chance—my contribution to the field! A study of something rare and unique! *But it's really just a box of rocks!"*

Dee was staring at Selene, Priya was staring at Dee, and Thorn and Quinn were watching them all with eerily similar speculative, not to say predatory looks. But for me, for a moment, time stopped.

Just a box of rocks. Selene kept harping on about that. Sure, I myself had been calling it that for the better part of a year, but I

knew when *I* said it I was being glib. Selene was disappointed—betrayed, even. And she was wrong.

I *knew* she was wrong. Because I'd seen—I'd *felt*—the box explode.

And I'd known all along what might have made that happen . . .

In that moment I realized I knew something that the fancy professors, assistants, and detectives did not.

"I'm tired of all of this," Selene went on. "I'm done. I'm not going to study or grade stupid papers any more. This was the last straw! And now you're accusing me on top of everything else!"

Her hand went to a pocket on her bag and whipped back up, now holding something green and sharp.

"A mere," Lark said behind me, softly. "A broad blade made of jade."

I was not in the mood for a lecture on the properties of jade. From the way Selene was holding it, the unpleasant properties of the weapon were clear enough.

"I'm leaving right now, and none of you can stop me!"

Nobody bosses me around. Not in my own headquarters.

Professor Dee had leapt hastily backward, taking Quinn the detective with him. They were blocking Thorn's path. Priya and Red, the local contingent, were too far away to help. I certainly wasn't going to let Lark or Maggie get mixed up in this. Maybe I could have waited for Skar and Skaab to step in, but where was the fun in that?

Besides, they didn't have the experience that I did.

I lunged forward, aiming for the space right next to Selene. The space where her bag—and the box of rocks—was. I reached across with my right hand, my prosthetic hand, as a chair caught

me in the gut and I began falling. Fortunately, Selene was one of those who don't believe in zipping their bags shut. My fingers made contact with the box and I had one thing on my mind: *explosion.*

But—maybe a little smaller this time.

I don't know if the rock gods heard me, or if the effect was muffled by the bag, or what. But it turned out perfectly.

Selene got knocked sideways and she lost her grip on the strange weapon. The rock went flying and Nyx darted after it, which was just as well. Myself, I was only partially protected by the chairs between me and the bag. Not that my cat cared, of course.

There was shouting and scuffling as the confusion cleared, but most importantly, things got done. Skar and Skaab caught hold of Selene and Officer Thorn joined them. Just about everyone else seemed to be involved in helping me up, which made the process ten times harder, as I was being pulled in all directions.

But it w*as* kind of nice.

"What? But *how?* Why couldn't *Iiiiii—"* Selene was wailing, as two trolls and a half-orc police officer marched her from the room.

"Good question," Quinn said lightly as the door shut behind them. "Why couldn't she?"

"More importantly," Lark said, much *less* lightly, "are you alright, Leo?"

In the background, William shook himself. "I've got to come to more of these lectures."

"Yeah, a lot of help you were," I muttered. "And where's my cat? I'm fine. Nothing else got hurt this time?"

"You're not fine, you're reckless." But Lark smiled as she watched me stand up straight.

"Fascinating," Professor Dee was muttering in the background. I think he was taking notes.

"But wait," Maggie said, pushing past him. "What about Lark's hematite?"

Once again, everyone in the room turned to contemplate Lark.

Who smiled placidly from her chair. "Oh, this?"

From behind her back, she drew the shiny black rock. I should have known! Not only had she set up the little truth-telling game, she'd faked it being stolen to put pressure on the room.

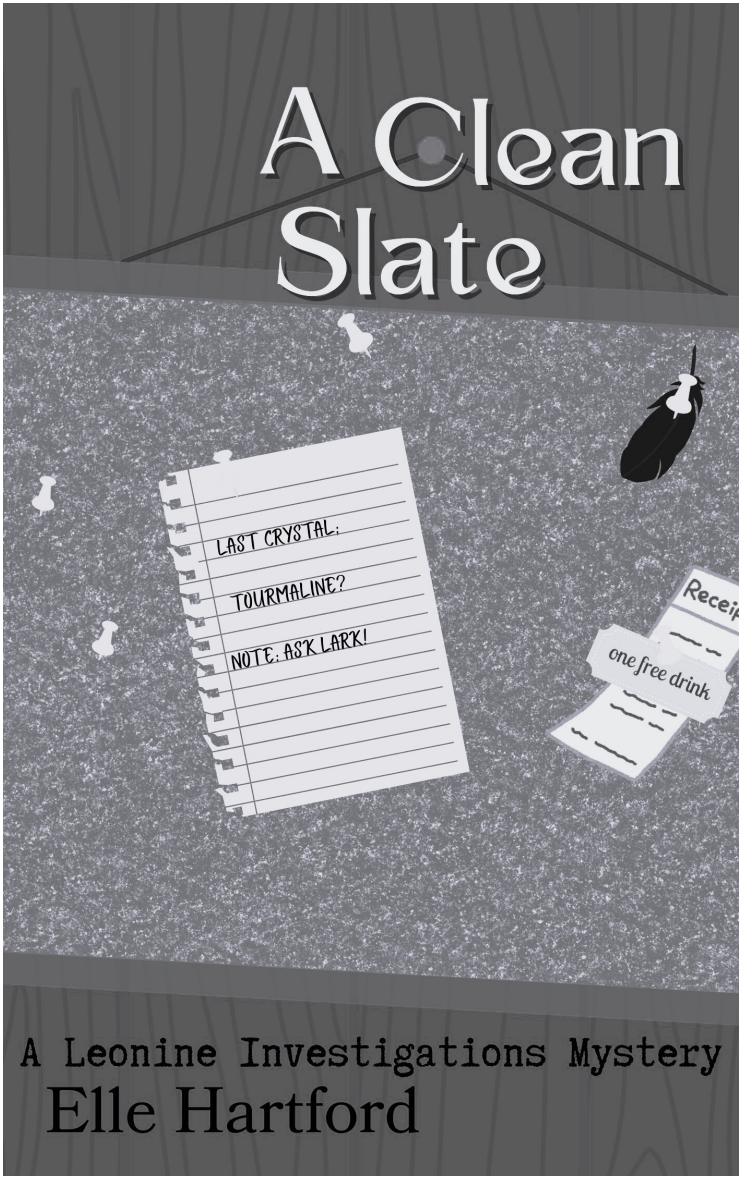
"It might interest you to know," she went on, "that the properties of jade are really quite extensive, though usually peaceful. It has a particular resonance—"

"Enough," I declared. "I've heard enough about rocks to last me a lifetime."

"Are you sure about that?" It was Professor Dee who spoke, and heads swiveled to look at him. "Because I believe I can answer all your questions."

I hesitated. Part of me—a large part—felt like saying, *no thanks.* He'd brought an undercover detective into my shop, after all! And in the past months of our own investigating, we'd effectively solved the mystery of who sent the box—the Cosmos family, why—because it was odd and I wrote about rocks, and who'd wanted it for themselves—namely, Selene, though also Dee. I was ready to leave it at that. But the allure of quotable answers for the paper was hard to resist . . .

"Oh, go on, Leo," Lark said with another small smile. "It's time we put *all* the pieces together."


A Clean Slate
LAST CRYSTAL:
TOURMALINE?
NOTE: ASK LARK!
one free drink
A Leonine Investigations Mystery
Elle Hartford

Epilogue: A Clean Slate

The afternoon sun shone bright on the Pomegranate Cafe.

This was mostly because the cafe sat on the northeast corner of Market Square, though. Not because of some metaphorical happy ending, or contrast to my print shop (which is on the western side, and was in shadow).

Lark had condoned one last conversation about the rock box, so I figured I could stand hearing a little more about properties of rocks. In interest of getting some good quotes for the paper, of course.

After her stunt the night before, Selene was still cooling her heels in Belville's police station. Officer Thorn was with her, seeing to all the paperwork that comes with dragging someone away from a dramatic confrontation scene. The rest of us had had a morning to recover—and begin writing up copy for a special edition in the paper.

For all his faults, William the talking dog had been right about one thing: once everyone read about the *explosive* lecture last night, *Belville & Beyond* would get a lot more interest in future events.

But for now, black coffee and a debrief on the cafe's front patio were the order of the day.

"I swung by Red's on my way over from the salon, but they're swamped," Maggie announced. I'd staked out a nice wide table

in the corner, which she promptly filled with several platters of cookies and pastries she'd purchased inside. "I said I'd catch them up later. I'm already supposed to remember every word, to tell Mina tonight."

Red and her friends had been little more than spectators, in my opinion, so I wasn't upset about that. But I pursed my lips at the pastries. "You planning on billing the paper for all that?"

Maggie giggled as she took the seat next to mine. "Nope! I'm billing Mina. She said to—she said consider it a bounty for ending one of Belville's longest-running mysteries."

"In that case, then." I grabbed a napkin, a dark chocolate cookie, a spinach tart, and a plain croissant.

"I should have known you two would be early." Lark, naturally, caught me with crumbs on my face. She smiled as she wheeled herself into position at the table. "And hungry, I see."

"Glacial's doing new seasonal specials," Maggie said helpfully. "And actually, Mel said she wanted to see you, if you have a moment after this."

The statement had clearly been directed at Lark, but I frowned. "What would an event planner want with Lark?"

"Help with some kind of event, I imagine," Lark said placidly, helping herself to a brownie.

"She didn't say what it was, I think it's secret still. But she did say you can come too," Maggie told me with a grin.

"Generous of her." Lark caught my eye across the table, and I knew she was referring to my previous coverage of the cafe's events.

"That was ages ago," I replied. "And Mel knows as well as anyone that any publicity—"

"I hope we're not interrupting?"

Professor Dee had finally arrived—with Priya beside him.

I swallowed the rest of my indignant defense against Lark's comment, along with half the spinach tart to help it go down. Maggie was the one to wave the newcomers into their seats and pass out pastries, which was just as well. One of her unofficial jobs at the paper had become smoothing over my—eccentricities.

That realization did stick in my craw. Especially so hot on the heels of Lark reminding me of the scandals I'd been part of during my early time in Belville. And maybe my later time in Belville, too. After all, this whole rock box thing had started with me acting too much on my own . . .

. . . Recklessly, as Lark would say.

"Quinn sends his regrets," Professor Dee said politely, over the steam of a coffee order almost as enormous and black as mine. "He gave his report to Officer Thorn and had to be on his way. Crime stops for no man, and all that."

"Or woman," I muttered.

Lark sent me a look that clearly said, *play nice.*

But Dee took it well. He smiled and went on, "Since you mention it, Leo, I wonder if we could get down to business. I'm really very interested, you see. Might I ask you some questions about your hand?"

"I suppose you mean this one." I held up my prosthetic hand, the other wrapped tightly around my mug. "Shoot."

"It's very finely made." As the others looked on, the professor stared at my hand with interest—an unusual sensation. Most people tried to avoid staring. "Brass, I take it? Magitech?"

"Right on both counts." I hesitated for a second, but both Maggie and Lark looked on encouragingly, and it *was* relevant since I'd been able to make the box explode. Twice. "I was

already a reporter at the time, when I got it. Straightforward gears and levers inside, for the most part. Just enough magic in it to help me operate the printing presses. I've never done any other magic myself. I've had a thought, a suspicion really, about the box . . ."

Beside Dee, Priya straightened. Her eyes had gone wide. "It's not the magic that did it."

"Precisely." Dee nodded at her, and continued smiling at me. Now that he wasn't a suspect, he came across as much more of a genial, absent-minded academic type. "Brass, as you may know, is an alloy of copper and zinc. The proportions of each may vary depending on the use the metal is put to, of course, but in our case the specific ratios don't matter. The fact is, Leo, there's enough copper in your hand to resonate with the frequencies created by the specific crystals in the Cosmos's collection."

Lark set down her latte abruptly, sitting back from the table. "I can't believe I didn't see it."

"I didn't think of it either," Priya told her. This revelation had rendered her more animated than usual: her whole face shone. "I was just thinking of the box as a curiosity. Even Selene must not have realized—"

"An oversight on her part, which I think we can chalk up to the shortsightedness of inexperience." Dee looked momentarily sad, but it didn't distract him from his interest. "The use of—or in this case, the need for—a conductor or amplifier for an existing energy is quite common, actually. Copper is a particularly effective example."

"A conductor—like for music?" Maggie asked, her nose scrunched up. I was glad she said something; aside from me, she was the one other lay person at the table, as far as rocks were concerned.

"A very apt metaphor," Dee said, turning to smile benevolently at her. "If we think of the collection of crystals gifted to Leo, each individual piece has its own resonance—is its own instrument, you might say. Taken together, their energies can combine to create something, for instance a melody—or, more practically in this case, an explosion—*but* they need direction in order to do so. Copper serves as the conductor's baton."

"I did think so," I said. "I mean, not all the metaphor stuff. But I did think it had something to do with my hand. They only caused trouble when I used my right hand."

"It makes perfect sense." Priya was still shining, excited. "Copper is a really common material for pendulums. I even have some in my shop."

"A pendulum, in this case, is a form of the 'baton' or, one might say, a key," Professor Dee added, seeing the confusion return to Maggie and me. "A small, polished object, dangled from a string or chain so that it can move freely as the faintest of energies directs it. In essence, it translates the energies into something we can see."

"In this case they weren't so faint, though," Maggie said, grinning at me.

Lark made a sort of scoffing noise, and turned away.

Priya, meanwhile, had turned to Dee. "Do you think it could do more than explode?"

"It is impossible to say without further study." Dee paused, and I realized he was squinting at me.

I toyed with my croissant. I did my best not to stare at Lark. What was bothering her?

All this made perfect sense, as Priya had said. Professor Dee was certainly holding up his end of the bargain, answering unanswered questions. All those metaphors and examples

would make a nice educational side bar for the paper.

And yet . . . I was uneasy. Maybe it was the simple fact of a stranger showing up and telling me something I hadn't known about myself. Or what I could do.

But it was only a little box of rocks. Not like this was *life-changing* stuff.

Right?

"Is this not a problem that lots of people with brass prosthetics have?" Maggie was asking Dee, in the meantime.

"It's well-documented in the academic world," the professor said. "But really only in niche situations. You have to understand, the vast majority of people aren't running across such explosive artifacts in their daily lives."

I could feel everyone looking at me, even Lark. I looked up and shrugged, managing a slight grin. "Perks of being a reporter."

"Good thing you're also a reporter with people looking out for you!" Maggie added.

I had to agree on that.

Priya and Professor Dee lingered for a little while, but I was preoccupied with my own thoughts. When Maggie offered to take them over to the paper headquarters and write up their interpretations of what had happened, I was only too glad to give my blessing. Wulf was there looking after the place, and I knew he'd keep everyone in line.

Not that there was any chance of danger. In fact, when Priya hesitatingly offered to put the box on display, securely in her shop, I promised to genuinely consider it. I liked that option a lot better than Professor Dee's idea of study, somehow.

The three of them left, and for a moment the patio was quiet. Though it was bright out, there was a chill in the air. Fall was

coming.

"You didn't want Dee to go over it? He'd be able to tell you everything about it," Lark said eventually. But she was looking at the mound of pastries left on the table, not at me.

I shrugged again as I sat up. "Doesn't feel right, somehow. I like the idea of keeping the box in town better. Maybe I've grown fond of it."

"Fond?" Lark's gaze flickered to mine, and she shook her head. "Of course you would. Hoping to study it all on your own, no doubt."

"It's not like that. Really," I said. And I meant it. "I had a whole year of investigating, and look how far it got me. There's some things I just never would have figured out on my own. If there's still some things left that I don't know, I guess I'm—I'm kind of okay with that."

"Really?"

"In this case. This case only."

Lark laughed quietly. "Well, that is something, I suppose."

I waited, but she didn't say anything more. My newfound equanimity in the face of unanswered questions did not extend as far as her mood, though—not now. "What's bugging you?"

Lark sighed. She took her time before admitting, "I really didn't see it, Leo. I should have. I know all the basic principles Dee and Priya were talking about."

"I know you know," I told her. "You've lectured me on that kind of thing more than once."

"But I didn't even think of it," she continued, frowning now. "There being copper in your hand—of course. It's so simple. I feel so *foolish* for not noticing."

"To be fair, you work in getting raw rocks out of mountains," I said. "Not all this business of polishing them up and playing

tunes—"

"Leo, you were *in danger* and I didn't see it—because I was so *silly*—I didn't even remember to consider your hand!"

I paused. "It's not something you think about?"

"It's not. But it should have been. I could have stopped you—"

"Wait." I took a deep breath. "You couldn't have done anything, not the first time it happened. Remember? You weren't even there. But we can change that. I can let you know about weird things that come in, in the future."

"I appreciate that. But—"

"Wait, I'm not done," I interrupted. "Also, Lark. The fact that you didn't think about it . . . I'm glad."

"You're *glad*?" She stared at me.

I held her gaze. It's not that I didn't want her to be part of my investigations—I actually did. This was about the way she saw me, that she *didn't* see me as someone to worry about. At least for this particular reason. I trusted her to figure that out. "I'm glad," I repeated. "In fact—thank you."

Lark's eyes widened, then softened. She understood.

"You're welcome," she said softly.

"Good." I smiled at her, and slowly, she smiled back. "Now that that's settled, I wonder what our next mystery will be?"

At that, she laughed. "As long as it's *ours,* I'm not too concerned."

Bonus Quiz: Are You A True Rockhound?

Leo certainly doesn't think of herself as a "rockhound"—or, geology enthusiast—but several of her friends would identify that way! Lark, Priya, even Professor Dee and Selene prove to be valuable sources of information (when a battered old encyclopedia won't do the trick).

But how about you? If you read *The Silver Deck,* you know the drill! Read on for a diagnostic quiz (for entertainment purpose only—no exploding boxes, okay?). Find out if you'd be hanging out with Lark on the mountain, studying crystals from the coziness of home, or avoiding them altogether by answering the questions below:

1) I collected my first rock when I was . . .

A. hold up, rock collecting? Why?

B. four years old! Although, looking back, it might have been a shell . . .

C. a baby, basically. My family still tells embarrassing stories about it.

D. too young to know what it was, but I was cute back then. Now I have thousands.

2) I believe decorating with crystals is . . .

A. weird?
B. a clear sign you're an interesting person.
C. meaningful, but I do try to be tasteful about it.
D. inevitable. Does it count if my house is made of rock?

3) To me, a day spent hiking and looking for new samples is . . .
A. probably part of an abduction plot.
B. the best! As long as you don't get lost . . .
C. not necessary. At this point, the crystals find me.
D. just another day at work—but I love it.

4) If you asked me to identify a sample, I would . . .
A. laugh.
B. make a guess, but secretly check one of the five guidebooks I always carry.
C. silently judge you for not knowing how to identify it yourself.
D. *love* to go on at length (provided you're not just mining me for information for your paper).

5) My favorite crystal is . . .
A. you're kidding, right?
B. clear quartz—it's *so* useful!
C. a specific strain of jade that comes from one small part of the world.
D. always changing, but I have certain specimens that remain very dear to my heart.

How did you do?

Tally up your answers: 1 point for each "A," 2 points for a "B,"

3 points for a "C," and 4 points for a "D." Once you have your number, find the range it fits into here:

5-9 Points: Leo

You're not a rockhound. You've probably already forgotten all the crystal names in these pages, and are proud! After all, there are plenty of other things in the world to study (especially things that are inside).

10-14 Points: Selene

You know a bit—just enough to be dangerous, in fact. Proceed with caution, or hit the books for a little more wisdom before rockhounding all by yourself!

15-19 Points: Priya

You know quite a bit, but chances are good you don't like to advertise it. The last thing you need is people following you around, asking you questions.

20-25 Points: Lark

You know the things, and you're not afraid to get dirty. Bonus points if you're tough but secretly soft-hearted and loyal to your less-enlightened friends!

Bonus Story: Leo Vs. The Pomegranate

The following excerpt is from Worthy in Love, *Pomegranate Cafe novella #1. In this chapter (and a half), Mel narrates her first encounter with Leo and* Belville & Beyond *while on her newspaper route, shortly after agreeing to help with a Valentine's event at the cafe.*

* * *

. . . To distract myself, I tried to take a little more interest in my route. It was newspaper day, which meant I picked up a weekly edition of the local paper from Leo, a one-woman reporter and editor and printer. I then delivered it to all the businesses along the Square during my afternoon rounds. Many copies went to Lavender's Tavern, of course, so I stopped there first. By the end of the round, I usually had a paper to keep to myself. I think Leo printed extras on purpose, but I *had* made a point of setting up a subscription when I came to town. After all, what better way to get to know a small community than by reading its weekly news? And to add to that, my father might have disowned me if I didn't value the local paper. In fact, I knew that my parents had a copy of Belville's news delivered to their home in New Dale by a special magical express every week. Normally it was a savored, quiet moment, reading the paper in the Square at the end of my day.

But today I didn't make it all the way through my route before I found myself reading an article, flabbergasted. It was a headline below the fold on the front page that had caught my eye.

> *True Love Sparked by Saint Valentine's Feast at Pomegranate Café?*

At first I was just idly curious. I had a few steps to go until my next stop, and I was feeling so mixed up that honestly I had forgotten the name of Sakura's café. But then I noticed the little illustration that went beside the article.

It was a drawing of *me.* Holding up a heart mobile with none other than the man I'd kissed last night, who subsequently wanted nothing whatsoever to do with me.

So then of course I stopped walking that very minute, and I had to read the whole thing.

> *Pomegranate's opening is shaping up to be the event of the season, if not the year!*
>
> *Owner Sakura, 26, plans on hosting a themed dinner on Saint Valentine's Day. Price of admission includes lovers' pasta, wine, delectable baked goods, and most unique of all—access to the special auction.*
>
> *"We've got a variety of gift baskets and presents to auction off," Sakura says, "but the real prize of the evening is a date with Ryuko."*
>
> *Ryuko, 31, is a familiar—and elusive—face around town. No doubt the bidder who wins a free dinner with him would be rewarded with an incomparable look behind the scenes*

> *of that handsme glower! However, bidders looking for true love may be disappointed. It seems that something's blooming between event coordinator Mel and the bachelor in question. Mel, 32, recently settled in town and working as the new postmaster, was not available for comment. Word on the streets is that the couple works well together, and one look at the decorations in the Pomegranate proves this to be true. One anonymous source even mentioned late-night visits . . . planning sessions for the auction, perhaps?*

I dropped my stack of newspapers on the ground.

This is when I *really* needed some fairy godmother guidance.

Because if Ryuko didn't kill me, then my mother definitely would.

* * *

I have to admit, I did think about chucking Leo's papers straight into the lake.

But of course, the fish probably wouldn't have appreciated that, and knowing my luck, some magical lake creature probably would have appeared to take its revenge. Although really, that might not have been such a bad thing. I might have better luck with a lake creature than with Sakura and my mother . . . and Ryuko.

And my feelings.

That's actually why I took the rest of the afternoon off. Not because of the paper exactly, but just because I knew I had a lot of processing to do—and I also didn't feel up to looking

anyone in the face. Fortunately, the ever-dependable Katia was happy to take up the slack. I didn't even head home, because I knew Ryuko would still be there. Instead, I took off toward the boathouse, still in my uniform and everything.

Paddling helps me clear my mind. Out on a lake or river, watching the birds along the shore and the fish under the waves, seeing the wind ripple the water and listening to the movement all around, I really feel like I am part of *life.* I'm not sure if that makes any sense, especially to people who prefer to stay on dry land. But it's something I've always loved, ever since I was a kid. Of course, it wasn't a very lady-like habit, so my parents had never been too pleased about it. But now that I was an adult and living on my own in a new town, I'd devoted myself to the sport.

I was pretty good, in my own way, but it's not like I was a champion rower or anything. I was just out paddling around in an old canoe, really. I never went too far from shore. Just going back and forth was enough, skirting the coastline, feeling that chilly spring breeze and trying to get all of everyone *else's* opinions out of my head. *How do* I *feel about all this?*

By the fourth lap, I was starting to feel calm enough to where I might actually be able to think straight. By the fifth lap, I was considering courses of action. I could give up and leave Belville . . . or maybe just leave for a little while? No. Those were admitting defeat, something I had no interest in doing. I could . . . talk to someone? That sounded terrifying, but I probably *ought* to, at least to Sakura . . .

Funnily enough, just as I was thinking of the shadow witch, I noticed a small clump of figures waving from the dock.

One was short and wearing vibrant red, visible even at a distance. One was gangly and hanging back a bit. And the final

one was tall, and it made my heart skip a beat.

So, I recognized them, of course. But I didn't row toward them. After all, my canoe was already pointed in the opposite direction, and I still wasn't a very slick navigator. And besides, what could they have to say to me? How could they have found me? It was probably all a coincidence, and they were just waving at each other.

From a few feet away.

Okay, maybe that didn't make sense. I knew that at the time, and honestly I probably *would* have turned around and headed in, out of curiosity—or guilt. But just as I was getting the prow of the canoe to come around, and I was parallel with the dock, I looked over my shoulder and noticed that someone *else* was now on the lake.

Two someones.

I watched with deep misgivings as Ryuko and Sakura's rowboat lurched toward me.

"You really don't have to do that," I called, as they came within hearing range. "I'll come in."

"Like heck you will," Ryuko called back, over his shoulder. He had one oar, and Sakura appeared to have wrestled the other away from him, because she was rowing at an awkward angle that definitely wasn't helping their boat. "You saw the article, didn't you?"

"I did," I confirmed, still yelling to be heard over their splashing. "But it's not like I was going to stay out on the lake forever."

Ryuko snorted, and it sounded an awful lot like, "*Says the woman who's always trying to run away!*"

"Hey!" I protested, my shame and confusion turning quickly into offended pride. "You're just jealous you can't run, because

you have a bad leg!"

"I'm fine now. Trent fixed me," he shouted back.

"He's not fine!" Sakura interjected, sounding breathless. "Can we have this conversation on dry land, please?"

"*You* can go back. You weren't invited in the first place," Ryuko told her.

"Can we all just be nice?" I called, exasperated.

But in my exasperation I'd failed to account for something, and that something was the speed with which Ryuko was rowing. Even though their progress was haphazard and uneven, it was still *progress.* And since I hadn't moved, they were progressing right for me.

A second after I noticed this and started to panic, it was too late. Ryuko and Sakura's boat crashed into mine. I didn't even have time to think before I went tumbling over the side away from them, into the frigid water.

And when I came back up, I wasn't the only one in the lake.

"You shouldn't be here," I yelled at Ryuko, spitting water. We both clung to the edge of my empty canoe. *His* boat was still perfectly fine, bobbing nearby, and hardly upset, since it had rammed me head-on.

"I came in for *you,*" he spat back. "You're welcome."

"So now we're *both* freezing? Why should I be grateful about that?"

"You should be grateful I don't go around making as big a deal out of things as you do!"

"How is jumping in after me, when I'm perfectly fine on my own, not making a big deal of things?"

I thought this was a very good point, and when Ryuko didn't answer at first, I felt triumphant. But then I realized that we were both hanging in the air, held aloft by black tendrils of

magic.

"*Neither* of you are fine!" Sakura shouted at us. She had her hands uplifted and spread as she worked the spell that had plucked us from the lake. "You're both going straight to Trent's to get treated for hypothermia, and so help me goddess, if you step out of line one more time I'm putting a twenty-four hour watch on you both!"

I might have argued—and I was sure *Ryuko* would have argued—but now that we were exposed to the wind, I realized how cold it really was. The sun was already setting. My teeth chattered too rapidly for me to form words.

The next hour was a blur. Much as I wanted to stay on my own—okay, so maybe Ryuko was a *little* right about me running away—there was no way I could have properly cared for myself. Somehow—probably sheer force of will—Sakura got us both to Trent's official witchy residence, called "the Hut," which wasn't too far from the lake. There, Trent took over, making us change into dry pajamas and sit by the fire while he made herbal teas and foot baths. He must have grumbled quite a bit about food, I think—whether for us or for him, I wasn't sure—because at some point Sakura disappeared, promising to get dinner and more hot drinks.

"We're fine," Ryuko growled after she'd left.

"Yeah," said Trent dismissively. He hovered over where we sat in two mismatched wooden chairs, mere inches from the blazing hearth. "That didn't work on Saki, and it won't work on me either. Just because I'm not scary when I'm mad doesn't mean I'm a pushover."

The way he said it made me laugh. But when I did, Ryuko glanced sideways at me, like somehow I was taking sides against him.

Well, I'd had enough. I frowned back. "What? Stop looking at me like that. None of this is my fault. You didn't have to come out onto the lake."

"And you didn't have to try to go and use your injured arm, either," Trent added to Ryuko. "You know I'm all tapped out, healing-wise. At this point you'll probably end up with your wrist fractured again, and pneumonia on top of that."

"Wait—that was a joke, right?" I asked, but Trent was already running back down to his cellar, where apparently he kept all kinds of herbs for just this sort of occasion. I looked back at Ryuko. "Tell me that was a joke?"

His dark green eyes seemed to waver for a minute as he looked at me. But then he just glared at the fire, and I decided that anything I might've seen was just reflections of the dancing flames. "I didn't fracture it," he muttered unhelpfully.

"Oh, gods and goddesses." I slumped in my chair as the reality of the situation set in. "Why doesn't this town have a proper doctor?"

"Because it's the sticks," Ryuko said. "You didn't have to move here."

"I don't even know what we're fighting about any more," I said, my exasperation coming back in a wave. "Can we please just call a truce?"

"Yeah, do that, at least while you're in my house," Trent said as he reappeared. "It's too small in here for fighting. I got some more elderberry, to help ward off fever. And I was kinda kidding," he added, smiling kindly at me as he sat down beside us and started throwing dried leaves into the fire and into the hot baths for our feet. "It's not as bad as all that. And if it *does* turn out bad, then after I get some food—finally—and some sleep, I should be able to reverse the damage."

"You must be a really good healer," I said, calming down a little as I watched him work. Back in New Dale I'd seen both doctors and magical healers, and while some were as ambitious as Trent seemed to be, most had to scale back their efforts to enable them to treat many different patients.

Trent shrugged bashfully. "In school I always thought it was kinda boring, but now that I see how useful it is in town, I kinda like it."

"He's gotten really good," Ryuko said firmly, and unexpectedly. He sat up, but still avoided my gaze. "This'll all blow over."

"Of course it will," Trent agreed. "No lasting harm done."

This was reassuring, at least. As Trent sat back, poking at the fire, I took a sip of my tea. Between the steaming mug, the smoking fire, and the borrowed flannel pajamas and blanket around my shoulders, I was starting to forget what being cold had ever felt like in the first place. And the tension was finally easing from my shoulders a bit.

"Why were you all out at the dock?" I asked, impulsively.

Trent looked at Ryuko, and when he didn't say anything, explained, "I was just following Ryuko and Saki. I'd stopped by your place to check on him. Hope you don't mind, by the way."

"No, that's fine," I assured him, thinking *well, Belville may not have a proper doctor, but at least the local healer makes house calls.* It was clear that Trent cared about *both* Sakura and Ryuko, and that made me like him all the more. Anyone who could care about Ryuko had to be a determined soul.

"Cool. So, while we were there talking, Sakura came by and mentioned how no one'd seen you in a while. Then she let it slip about the paper . . ." Again, Trent glanced at Ryuko. Again, Ryuko said nothing. "It, ah, seemed like maybe the article might have made you upset."

"It did," I agreed. Having Trent there made the words easier to say. "This whole day has been kind of a mess, in my opinion. But I really wasn't running away or anything."

Well, I was *considering how to live here without ever encountering Sakura or Ryuko again, but does that really count?*

"Yeah, no, I don't think we actually thought that," Trent said, as the voice of reason. "I think maybe . . . well, I think Saki feels bad about it, to tell you the truth. I don't think any of this has gone how she planned."

"Are you saying you came down to the docks to apologize?" I asked slowly.

"Well, I think that's what Saki had in mind. That's just me thinking that, though. She didn't actually tell me that. As for Ryuko . . ." Trent glanced at his friend once more, and Ryuko finally looked over at him. An unspoken hint seemed to pass between them, because Trent abruptly stood. "I'm going to go see about more feverfew for another round of tea."

In his wake, I stared at Ryuko. And, finally, Ryuko lifted his gaze to me.

"I didn't know anything about it," he said, his voice a little raspy.

"I know. I mean, I figured you didn't," I said at once, leaning in despite myself. "It really doesn't seem like your style."

The corner of his mouth crooked up. "Neither is jumping into lakes after ladies."

"But that, you did," I said, smiling. "And I probably shouldn't have given you such a hard time for it. Your heart was obviously in the right place. Honestly, I probably owe *you* an apology for the way I reacted."

Ryuko looked surprised, whether by the apology or something else, I couldn't say. He hesitated. After a moment, he said,

"Listen, Mel . . . Sakura's been a real pain, and I don't agree with some of the things she's done. But just because I'm mad at her doesn't mean I'm mad at you. You know that, right?"

Now *I* was surprised, and it was because of the gentleness in his voice. I hadn't really seen that side of him before, not fully. And I hadn't expected him to make the distinction. "Well, I—I do get that," I said, a little uncertain. "But I thought—last night, I thought you might be mad at me specifically."

His brows knitted together. "Why? We already went over how you had no idea about the wine. That was my choice."

"Of course, that's totally up to you," I agreed hastily. "That's not really what I meant. I was thinking more because of—well—I know this whole situation has been something you didn't want, necessarily, and I wasn't trying to make it harder or anything, or trying to complicate things. I wasn't sure if you—maybe you thought I—got too close."

"Too close?" His eyes widened.

"Right. By kissing you," I said in a rush. "I know it's not anything you thought should happen, probably. I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable. I'm really not trying to take advantage of you or anything, I swear. I just—well—I mean I actually did have a really good time with you, and I know we argue a lot too, and all, but—"

Fortunately, as I groped for words in the silence, both willing myself to say and *not* to say *I like you*, I heard footsteps outside. My mouth clamped shut at once. *Salvation!*

"Dinner!" Sakura called, as she opened the front door. Her gaze swept over us by the fire, and I couldn't help but think of the night before. My cheeks flushed.

Apparently, though, Saki was preoccupied. "Where is Trent? Don't tell me he left you two alone!"

And very, very faintly, so that only I could hear, and even then I doubted I heard it at all, Ryuko murmured, "Gods forbid *you* do the same."

About the Author

Elle adores cozy mysteries, fairy tales, and above all, learning new things. As a historian and educator, she believes in the value of stories as a mirror for complicated realities. She currently lives in New Jersey with a grumpy tortoise and a three-legged cat.

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