

Sharks Tooth

Minerva Noodle had never known a greater torment.

She had the missing piece; the motive needed to send the killer of her dearest friend to a well-deserved fate. But could she give up her precious prized possession?

Still raining. She let the heavy drapes drop closed and sighed. What's the difference? She thought, moodily. It was as dark out there as it was in the house. *Hells Bells!* She exclaimed aloud, startling Wingnut, a six year-old garden cat with the disposition of a junkyard dog, into a frenzied tumble off the breadbox. He stood on the counter and hissed his displeasure at Minerva's outburst.

At exactly 8:49am the first of eleven grandfather clocks began its rhythmic announcement of the hour, which wouldn't actually arrive until the last of clocks had chimed. She must get a move on if she was to accomplish the task she'd assigned herself!

She quickly emptied all but one strategically placed bowl meant to catch water dripping from her ceiling, leaving one bowl untouched in case Wingnut got thirsty in her absence. Rain or no rain, she had to get to Rocky's and find something—anything—that would provide motive for Rocky's coldblooded murder; anything but that from which she would positively not part.

Wingnut was back in his spot on the breadbox as Minerva tugged into a heavy U of A sweatshirt. A remnant of her past and faded through the years, the sweatshirt was warm and the perfect finishing touch on her 'cleaning Lady' disguise, devised on the off-chance that anyone asked what she was doing at Rocky's "Two Screws and U-Bolt" yard.

Her first step out the front door was into a puddle as her dusty umbrella opened in a burst of polka-dot confetti that floated softly down to her wet Sketchers. Tossing the useless umbrella handle, she yanked the hood of her sweatshirt over her head and dashed to the Jeep.

Protests aside, the jeep started and the driver's side wiper still worked. She was in business! Until two blocks from Rocky's yard when a bus sped by and she could have sworn on a cross she saw Wingnut perched on the backrest of the very last seat before the rooster-tail engulfed the jeep, obscuring all but her dash from view. In response to her rising panic, "*Hang in there, Minnie.*" She whispered

By the time she pulled into Rocky's mud-slickened yard she had convinced herself she had *not* seen Wingnut on that bus, though a niggles of doubt remained in her heart. Nearing the door to little more than a shack that served as Rocky's office, Minerva failed to avoid a puddle that turned out to be a toddler-sized pothole filled with mud which quickly sucked her right front tire down into its murky depths. *Hell's Bells!* She pounded the steering wheel. The rain was coming down in sheets of fat drops that splashed in the mud and splattered her jeans as she made her way to the office door. She was digging in her purse for the key Rocky had given her when she realized the door was ajar. *Now what?* It took only half a second for her to decide to go in anyway.

The smell of used oil, old grease and orange-scented hand cleaner permeated the dank and dusky anteroom. Minerva was pretty sure it was a muffler she stumbled over to reach the light switch. She flipped it on to no avail. But she knew the office area was farther back, if she didn't kill herself trying to get there.

The light in the actual office area did work and was heralded by the distinct hiss of none other than Wingnut; sitting on the middle of the paper-strewn desk, tail swishing in the perturbed fashion of a tapping foot. The cat had after all, been born and raised in Rocky's yard. Minerva supposed a little possessiveness was understandable, but when he hissed again she waved him off "Beat it, Fur-ball!"

When the cat curled up at the corner of the desk, she began searching the drawers. There had to be a clue somewhere. It was inconceivable that someone would be murdered over a mere trinket; a trinket that actually only mattered to Minerva because Rocky had given it to her.

She shoved the last drawer shut in frustration and fingered the delicate gold chain on which dangled the shark's tooth. No bigger than a common paperclip, it was one of perhaps hundreds in Rocky's eclectic collection of silly old shark fossils. *So, why should it matter?*

In his own messy way, Rocky had been adept at bookkeeping. *But what else had he been up to?* She leaned back in the old leather chair and gazed at the dusty photos that dotted the paneled walls, black and white images of Rocky fishing off the coast of Zihuatinejo, Mexico; a place he'd said they'd go one day.

Wingnut suddenly stood and stretched. Minerva leaned forward and folded her arms on the desk as the cat strode purposefully across the desk and nuzzled her face with his. *Well, this was a first!* She barely registered the latest bout of rain pummeling the tin roof as she stared into Wingnut's olive-green eyes. Then he hopped upon an especially high stack of papers and a tape recorder began to play.

Rocky's gravelly voice was taught with anger "Look, Whip. I got nothing, for no amount of money—I got nothing!"

"Hey, I'm a fair man, Rocky." A slight lilt to the words did nothing to mask the menace in the other voice. "We both know you have it; the proof is written in all the journals. I'm prepared to offer you more than you could ever spend."

"You got the wrong fisherman, now get out." Rocky growled

"Well, my friend," there was the sound of the side chair scraping on the floor "I'd hoped it wouldn't come to this." there was the sound of a single gunshot.

Minerva jumped and Wingnut leaped from atop the pile of papers as old Duck Hamper called from the front area "Miss Minnie? You in here?"

She quickly switched the recorder off and slid a few more papers on top. Her heart hammering, she replied "Back here, Duck. Just finishing up."

"Saw your jeep outside, pushed it outa da pothole." Duck said from the doorway. All three strands of hair were plastered to his scalp and a raindrop wobbled from the end of his slightly-bulbous nose before he brushed it away with a gnarly fist.

"Oh! how thoughtful, Duck. Thank you. By the way, did you by chance leave the front door open this morning?"

"Ah, no. Don't have no key, Miss Minnie."

Minerva nodded. Duck lived in an old camper propped up on blocks at the very back of the expansive yard full of old cars and equipment; no longer good for anything but the parts they may or may not still contain. It was Duck's job and sole livelihood to watch the yard. *So, surely he saw something!*

"Duck, has there been anyone else here, in the office?"

"Ah no, Miss Minnie. Just you, just now." he shifted his weight to the other foot "And the Cops and some friend who didn't even know that Mr. Rocky never married."

"What? What friend? Did he ask about me?" Minerva's heart was pounding again.

"Ah, no. Just if he was married, I told him no, not ever. He seemed peed about that, like it mattered for something. "Duck pulled a greasy cloth from his pocket and honked into it "Will that be it, Miss Minnie?"

Flooded with relief, Minerva could have danced him around the room. Instead she said “No, that’s it. Thanks, Duck. Thank you very much!”

Duck offered a quick nod and shuffled out the door as Minerva looked around for Wingnut, who had vanished after leaping off the desk. She stuffed the recorder in her purse and hurriedly locked the door behind her.

The rain had at last subsided in time for a red and black-striped sunset as she walked to the jeep where Wingnut waited on the hood. “Care to ride home in style?” she asked.