

# BETTER GNOMES & GARDENS



A MYSTY HAVEN MYSTERY

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## ONE

“You are fired.”

**M**onday at precisely 8:05 AM, I’d heard the three little words I’d never expected nor wanted to hear from my boss. Arguing with him, or explaining the reason for my decision, only made matters worse. The vein that popped out on the side of his temple indicated that he might’ve been upset.

“There’s no such thing as a Bigfoot! I specifically told you not to send this article to the printer. What did you do, Bob? You sent it to the printers. We get enough flak about printing fake news from the public, and now *this*?”

“Oh, come on, Tony, it’s a good story, and you know it. The information I got was a first-hand sighting.” I picked up the paper and pointed to my first newspaper article, “Bigfoot Sightings Confirmed in Las Vegas.”

“You told me when you hired me to make this job my own,” I said. “‘Take the initiative,’ you said. That’s what I did, Tony. Eyewitness.”

The moment Tony’s face turned blood red should have been my clue to leave his office. But no, not Bob McLarney, the best investigative reporter in Mysty Haven. I was right, and I wasn’t going to lose my job because I had uncovered the truth of all truths: Bigfoot was real.

“I gave you a chance and paid—” He inhaled a deep breath, snapped the black rim glasses from his face, and stood abruptly. Tony’s green eyes went from a happy cat-eye

green to a dark menacing green that pierced straight into my soul. “Paid for your trip to Las Vegas to write a story on Elvis impersonators. People love Elvis.”

“Yes—yes, they do. People love Bigfoot too.”

“Elvis was real, Bob.”

“And so is Bigfoot.”

Tony’s right eye twitched, not once but in a series of spasms that didn’t stop. That wasn’t what made me leave his office. I went because he lifted a crooked finger and thrust it towards the door.

I didn’t bother cleaning out my desk because there wasn’t anything valuable after one week. With my dignity intact, I waltzed out the front door with my head held high like a matador who’d won the greatest bullfight.

The job, my first since I’d graduated from college a month before, was a surprise. A Master’s degree in journalism looked good on paper but didn’t mean much to an employer who wanted experience. Tony gave me the chance to prove my worth by assigning me a lead story straight off the bat. My ambition led me to provide him with the best story the *Mysty Haven Weekender* ever ran—a real scoop. Within my first week!

Okay, so he disagreed with me. Now I was back to square one. Nothing a good cup of joe couldn’t fix, and I knew just the place: Maddie B’s, a simple, cozy little diner on the west side of town that served the best coffee I’d ever had. Maddie’s stayed busy with her regular morning cuppers and some during the lunch-hour rush. The place reminded me of a time long past, with its aluminum exterior and fifties decor. Even Maddie looked as if she’d stepped right out of a Dick Tracy comic strip.

Maddie B’s had become my favorite spot for coffee and catty conversation with the locals in the short week since I took the reporter job. At twenty-three years old, I considered myself a handsome and clean-cut guy, though even at my height of six-foot-four, I never once played basketball or any other sport. My interests were books, news, and food—in that order. Some people call me a nerd, and maybe I am, or I just like to keep informed on the latest discoveries.

Mythical creatures like Bigfoot, faeries, leprechauns, vampires, and werewolves had held my interest since childhood. I grew up with sound-minded parents who encouraged reading and exploring one’s imagination. So it’s no surprise that my imagination ran wild, then turned into a hobby, and had now led me to become an investigative reporter.

I needed a good lead on another job, and luckily I lived in a small town where everyone talked. Unfortunately, the town had only one local newspaper, and the morning cuppers had long left the café, taking any possible good leads with them.

Mysty Haven, located in the northeastern part of Wisconsin, is a quiet place, hard to find on a Google Map. In my case, it didn't even register until I was right in the village. Once I took the newspaper job, finding an apartment had been difficult. The only cheap place I could find fully furnished was a loft apartment over an empty store building in town. The rental agent stated the location was once a shoe store. That explained the leather smell. He'd also mentioned the previous tenant had left abruptly but paid the apartment and store lease three months in advance. The owner passed the free months on to me. I'd never believed in luck, but I did think that good fortune could be found in perfect timing.

Another advantage to my ideal spot was that Maddie B's Café was located only a couple of blocks away. The aroma of fresh-brewed coffee drew me like a vampire to a single drop of blood. Maddie wasn't bad on the eyes, either. She had just the right looks for a woman to make a man want to howl at the moon on a lonely night. Those deep brown eyes behind her luscious black eyelashes conveyed a sense of mystery.

It was precisely 8:35 AM, according to the red and white vintage Coca-Cola wall clock that hung on the wall behind the counter. I paused in the doorway to survey my surroundings. The existing cuppers included a tall, stocky man who sat at a quaint table to my left with his beautiful companion.

She wasn't just beautiful—she was dangerously gorgeous. Her appeal may have been the silky blonde hair that feathered lightly on her shoulders or the tailor-made, navy blue double-breasted suit she wore. Her pale, smooth skin reminded me of a porcelain doll. And that she was, a living doll who would catch any man's attention by simply walking into a room. At first glance, this woman breathed class and money. A woman of her caliber didn't look like a regular cupper, maybe an iced coffee drinker or tea sipper.

To my right, partway along the counter sat a dusty-looking elderly gentleman nursing a cup of coffee and eating some type of sugary delight. A light coating of his dust, or a yellow-grayish powder, covered his dark grey cardigan. It appeared he might have gotten into a fight with a moth or been attacked by a giant flower. I wasn't sure who had won the battle, but I would bet it wasn't him.

Behind the antique counter stood the striking ginger-haired woman who held my heart in her hand every time I caught a whiff of her steaming cups of coffee. She knew

just how I liked mine, too. Fresh and hot, with a hint of cream and a sprinkle of sugar. Amazing how she could make each cup so unique, the kind of special that made me feel as if I were the most important person in the world.

“Hiya, Bob. Back so soon? Did you forget something?” Maddie made it a point to know all her customers by name and their favorite menu items. She whipped out a spoon and had the coffee ready for me before I made it to the counter.

“Thanks, Maddie,” I hoisted a hip and slid onto a red leather barstool, leaving a couple of seats between Dusty and me. I didn’t want any of what he had in my precious cup of joe.

“Having a rough morning?” Soothing yet compassionate, like butter spreading over toast, her voice warmed my heart to a melting point.

“Was that in today’s headlines as well? Lead investigative news reporter gets fired over fact-finding evidence that Bigfoot is real?” I took a sip of coffee, savoring the aroma and flavor for a long moment before opening my eyes.

Maddie’s soft, inviting smile disappeared. “I’m sorry to hear about your job. Honestly, I don’t read the newspaper.”

The surprise hit me like a ton of bricks. Then it occurred to me that she probably didn’t need to read the newspaper.

“Of course, you probably hear enough news from your customers.” I took another sip, allowing the robust flavors to awaken each of my senses. I’d never experienced coffee like at Maddie’s. Simply put, it was a magical experience that I couldn’t explain.

She pursed those alluring red lips together and leaned in closer. “No, that’s not it at all, Bob. I don’t read the newspapers because of all the fake news.”

And that’s when the ginger dame shattered my heart into a million pieces. The fun didn’t seem like it would ever let up today. At least the coffee was still good.

Dramatically, I pressed my right hand over my heart and sighed. “Maddie, that really hurts.”

“Sorry, Bob.” She shot me a sly grin and lowered her eyes into what I considered a half-flirt mode. “You know, I’ve got just the thing to mend a broken heart. Grimm’s Bakery brought over a batch of freshly baked schnecken a few minutes ago. You know the saying: ‘A cinnamon roll is good for the soul?’”

I didn’t, but I nodded anyway. “Sounds lovely, but I’ll just sit here and wallow.” I shot her a wink, followed by a casual smile as I returned to nursing my coffee, along with my feelings.

Fake news—that’s what everyone called it these days.

I never reported fake news. I reported the truth, backed up by hardcore facts and evidence. Even in college I’d made it a point to uncover the truth and write the best papers. I didn’t just look at the surface but dug deep in the dirt to find the real meaning of my stories. I gave readers more than just the gravy — I gave them prime beef.

At the distracting noise of chair legs scraping on the floor, Maddie’s warm brown eyes trailed to the couple behind me. I glanced in the same direction to see the big guy and the high-class dame preparing to leave the table.

“Need anything else, Mr. B?”

“I’ll take some of that delicious schnecken for the road, if you don’t mind, Maddie.” The deep, husky voice was what I expected coming from a man of his stature.

“Sure thing. I’ll be right back.” Maddie tapped the counter in front of me with her perfectly manicured red nails, gave me a wink, then gracefully disappeared behind two silver doors that led into the kitchen.

Minutes later, she reappeared with a white cake box and met the big guy at the register. I couldn’t help but eye his beautiful companion one more time while they waited.

Mr. B—I couldn’t help but wonder what the B stood for. His towering height and size could mean Big, but usually an initial stood for a last name. I made a mental note to ask Maddie. Still new to this town, I had time to get to know everyone—just not today. Today, I had to find another job.

Maddie finished ringing up Mr. B, then turned to make a fresh pot of coffee as they left. But instead of smelling coffee, a horrible odor hit my nostrils.

*That smell.*

The rancid funk of a thousand years wafted from the door and punched me like a knockout in a boxing match. I clutched at the counter to brace myself momentarily until the room stopped spinning. The stench was worse than something a cat would have dragged in, perhaps something that a dog might bury. I couldn’t help it. I attempted to wave the odor away from my face, but it only worsened.

Even as a small child, I always had an acute sense of smell, abstruse to others and even my parents. I learned to live with it and even depend on it through many aspects of my life—although identifying the different aromas or smells and what they meant took time, practice, and understanding. Maddie didn’t seem to notice the stench, and neither did Dusty, two seats away.

“What are your plans now?” Maddie’s voice turned smooth and sweet like honey, which distracted me from the horrible smell.

“I guess it’s back to the job market.” I took a sip from the cup, breathing it in to try to overpower the corpse-odor, which seemed to be dissipating. “I do believe there is a bright side to everything,” I added. “Something will come along soon.”

“Of course it will, Bob. Sometimes the very thing we think is a curse is a blessing in disguise. Maybe that job wasn’t where you needed to be in your life. It’s a big world, and we all have a specific part. I’m positive you’ll find your way.”

“Thank you, Maddie. You’re right; I’ll find my way soon enough.”

“Sure. You’re a smart, hardworking, and intelligent man with a good head on his shoulders. Why, anyone should be happy to hire you,” she pronounced with her hands on her hips, squaring her shoulders like she meant business.

I like a woman who’s got spunk, especially one who does a superhero power pose.

“Flattery, eh? And you learned all these things about me in less than two weeks?” I chuckled and arched a brow.

“Aw, come on, Bob, you’re an investigative reporter—I bet you could probably give Sherlock Holmes a run for his money.”

“Gnomes?” Old Dusty perked up. “Mine’s gone missing.”

“No, Doug, I said Holmes.” Maddie raised her voice a bit towards him, then turned to me. “Bless him, he’s a darling, but his hearing is fading.”

“Yes, I need someone to find Charlie. I know they took him,” Doug rambled on.

“Who took him?” As always, my curiosity got the best of me.

As Doug turned to face me, I couldn’t help but notice his large eyes were almost the same color as his dark grey hair. “Doug Weaver’s the name. You’re that young reporter who wrote the story on the Bigfoot sighting, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I am. You read it?” I asked, exhilarated to speak with someone who recognized me and my work.

“Yes, and it was a load of crap,” he snapped.

And with that, I gave Maddie what I felt was a look of sorrow. Immediately she grabbed my cup for a refill.

“Eyewitness? Bug’s butt!” Doug fairly shouted. “You can’t pay attention to those soothsayers! They never know what they are talking about. They plant fake sightings, pictures, and such, then call the media so they can get extra exposure for their failing business. Blah-blah-blah. Most of the time, the truth is right under your nose.” He paused



and drifted off for a long moment, then suddenly snapped to attention, causing Maddie and me to jump. "What you need is the right case!" He whipped up a wavering index finger in the air.

I didn't care what the man said. I believed Bigfoot was real, and I would be the one to prove it.

"Mr. Weaver, I'm not a detective. I'm an investigative reporter."

"Good. I'll pay you to investigate the whereabouts of my gnome." His voice, firm and demanding as if he'd made up his mind and mine too, clearly set the stage for an offer not to be refused. "I'll pay you five hundred dollars to find him."

"Five hundred dollars?" I choked out. Who in their right mind would pay someone five hundred dollars to find a missing gnome? I eyed the aging man carefully. Aside from not hearing me correctly, I believed he might be off his rocker.

"All right, one thousand dollars and not a penny more. You come by my home tomorrow. That's 204 Brindle Lane, around ten AM. I'll be expecting you." Before I could say another word, he reached into his pocket, pulled out a wad of money, rolled off two twenty-dollar bills, and set it on the table. "I'll take care of his tab as well. Keep the change, Maddie. The schnecken was the best today."

"Thank you, Doug. Don't worry. You'll get Charlie back safe very soon." For reasons I couldn't explain, Maddie's expression touched my heart.

"Charlie?" I whispered to her as I gave Doug a nod when he walked past me and out of hearing range.

"All of his gnomes have names."

I had the crazy sensation that this case as it was a bad idea.

"Listen, Doug has one of the most elaborate flower gardens in this state. He's won countless garden contests, and several of his roses have their own subgenus, named for him or his wife. Flowers are his life's work, especially since his wife passed away a few years ago. The flowers and gnomes are all he has these days."

"Oh, wow. I didn't know. I'm sorry to hear about his wife. So, he's genuine and not—" I twirled my index finger around the side of my head.

"Doug's all there." She tapped her temple. "He misses his wife something awful. I think that's why he's a bit grumpy with new people."

"What happened to her?"

"He doesn't talk about it. He mentioned she died in a camping accident, but talking about it stresses him too much, so I let him be. I respect people, you know?"

Maybe I was a bit soft-hearted, but Doug seemed to have seen some tough times. He appeared to be the sweet grandfather type who always had a stash of candy or cookies around the house for the neighborhood kids. How could I refuse his generous offer?

Tomorrow, Bob McLarney had his first case to solve—the Case of the Missing Gnome.