

EXCERPT: BIGFOOT IN TAWAS

“You want us to do what?” I asked.

Eleanor shuffled her feet. “I think he just said that he wants to hire us, Agnes.”

“Yes, I got that part, El. I just need to hear it again to make sure I heard him right.”

Billy Matlin scratched his balding head. “You’re Agnes Barton the private investigator, right?”

“Yes, and this is my partner, Eleanor Mason,” I said as I thumbed in her direction.

“Okay, well, like I just said a minute ago, I was hoping you could help me find Bigfoot. He’s on my property. I just know it.”

“Oh? And how can you be so certain?”

Billy went to his roll top desk and returned with a plastic baggie filled with brown hair. I stared through the baggie like I was some kind of CSI, mentally thinking of a lab that might do a DNA check. “How can you be so sure it’s Bigfoot and not a dog?”

“Or coyote,” El volunteered. “Might be a bear, or not. Hopefully not.”

“I’ve been feeding him, too.”

“Like how?” I asked, baffled beyond belief.

“Well, you see ... I take a pizza box and load it with food and then the next day—” He clapped his hands, startling both of us. “The food is gone.”

“Okay, so not only are you feeding Bigfoot, but he seems to eat what you leave?”

“That’s right.”

I just had to ask. “What kind of food does he like?”

“Chinese and Mexican are his favorites.”

That made my tummy rumble. “Okay. Would you care to show us about where you put the food? It might help us locate him faster that way.”

His brown eyes lit up and he led the way out his back door and into the woods. “Be careful, Eleanor,” I said. “Don’t trip on a stick.”

“Don’t trip on a stick?” Eleanor mocked. “Sometimes I think you think I’m five.”

“Sometimes you act—” I sniffled as a foul odor drifted into my nostrils. In all of my years as an investigator, I couldn’t quite put my finger on the district smell exactly, but it sure smelled like dirty feet for one, and maybe also a wet dog. Since it had just rained the night before, I figured that the woods were simply wet.

“What is that smell?” Eleanor asked me.

“It’s Bigfoot, like I told you,” Billy said, leaning his scrawny body close to mine.

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I smiled kindly, but the odor of the man about blew me over. That had to be where the smell was coming from. I nodded, not daring to speak right now since I'd have to breathe in more of Billy's foul odor.

Eleanor strode straight ahead, not the least bit intimidated, but I knew that was all an act. She just liked to show me up, and since I was lagging behind, she no doubt was trying to show me up. Eleanor came to an abrupt stop and I plowed into her back. "What on earth?" I sputtered.

Eleanor pointed to a pizza box that was near her flip flops. "Is this the pizza box?"

I stared at it with a raised brow. "It sure looks like a pizza box to me, but the strange thing about it is that it's a Jet's Pizzeria box. And we don't even have a Jet's Pizzeria in town."

Eleanor rolled her eyes. "If that is your version of being cute, you'll have to try harder to lighten this situation."

"Oh, and what situation is that?"

"That we have possibly found the dining room of Bigfoot. We'll be on all of the news channels for sure now, and not because we did something dumb."

"Speak for yourself," I said as I whisked a strand of my gray hair back. I then leaned in and whispered, "I sure hope you were joking."

Eleanor stood erect as she gazed through the pine trees up ahead. Her bottom lip protruded slightly and she backed away. "Last one in the car is a goose." She hobbled away and I just stood there shaking my head—that was until the foul odor became much worse, and the bushes ahead of me began to shake. I clasped one hand against my chest and was in such a panic that I just couldn't move. Then a raccoon scurried out and approached the pizza box, gave it a sniff and darted away, all in a span of thirty seconds. I turned to tell Billy how he had it all wrong about Bigfoot eating from the pizza box, but he was nowhere to be seen. Seriously? I grumbled as I strode back to Billy's house. I pounded on the patio door until he opened it and let me inside. "It's safe to say that Bigfoot isn't eating from that pizza box; a raccoon is."

"Oh, is that how your investigations usually go? I had no idea you gave up that easily. You had to have seen Bigfoot in the distance. The way he shook those bushes, it scared the bejeus out of me."

"Is that why you ran off then? If you had stayed longer, you'd have seen that only a raccoon came out of the bushes. From the way he was sniffing that pizza box, I think he might be your culprit. I'm positive he's the one that has been eating the food you leave out there."

"But what about the brown hair I found?"

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I stared at Billy's balding head and was thinking of asking him if the hair had fallen off his own head, but instead said, "Why don't you let me take it. I'll ask Sheriff Peterson to have it tested for me."

"Really? So you believe me then?"

"I didn't say I did or didn't, but I think I should do a further investigation into the matter just to put this matter to rest for the entire town. It's bad enough word has leaked. It might help if you quit talking to the press until I can get a handle on what's really happening here."

"But the folks from the Animal Channel are going to be here tomorrow."

"Call them and tell them to postpone your interview, unless you don't want Eleanor and me to investigate."

I searched his sunken brown eyes for a hint of something, anything that might give me a hint of deception on his part, but he just stood there until he finally said, "I can see your point. There's plenty of time to talk with them later after you find more proof that Bigfoot is indeed on my property."

I smiled and thanked Billy, leaving with the bag of hair he'd found. Once I joined Eleanor in the car, she blubbered, "Sorry for leaving you like that, but I wasn't prepared to actually meet Bigfoot today."

"It's not like he's actually in the woods, Eleanor."

"But ... but."

"But nothing. The bushes shook, but only a raccoon came out. I believe that's what has been eating the food all along."

Her lips trembled. "But, I saw his red eyes in the woods."

"Red eyes—where?"

"In the pine trees. I'm sure they belonged to Bigfoot."

I patted Eleanor's hand affectionately. "Now listen here, El. Bigfoot is not hiding in the woods in East Tawas or anywhere else in Michigan."

"How do you know for sure?"

I sat there for a moment considering that, and replied with, "Because Bigfoot just doesn't exist."

"Maybe you're right, but does that mean we're not investigating the case?"

"Of course we are. I was just telling you not to worry is all. Billy gave me the bag of hair and I'm going to see that it's tested. It's the only way we'll ever know the truth for sure."

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“Humph, I can’t imagine where we’re gonna get it tested.”

“I planned to ask Sheriff Peterson if you need to know.”

Eleanor outright laughed. “I can’t wait to see his reaction when you ask him, but what make you think he’ll help us at all?”

“Why wouldn’t he?”

“Well, for one, he doesn’t care all that much for you.”

“Nonsense. Our relationship has improved since we’ve helped solved quite a few of his cases. I dare say that he depends on our sleuthing abilities.”

“Hah, I’ll believe that when I hear the man say it. He hasn’t ever even thanked us.”

I tucked my gray hair behind my ears. “He doesn’t have to. It’s a given.”

I drove straight away to the Iosco County Sheriff’s Department in relative silence since I just knew Eleanor thought I was nuts, but she’ll see when the sheriff tests the hair that was found.

“You want me to do what?” Sheriff Peterson asked, as he leaned forward in his swivel chair with a clang of metal as the wheels of his chair strained beneath the sheriff’s bulk.

I held the baggie full of hair, poised to hand it to the sheriff. “Do a DNA test to see if this hair belongs to Bigfoot.”

He smiled and shook his head. “So you’ve been out Billy Matlin’s place, eh?”

“Yes. He hired us, in fact.”

Peterson swiped a palm over his dark hair that was quite damp. “For what? To deliver me a baggie full of dog hair?”

“No, to find Bigfoot of course.”

Eleanor spoke up and said, “I told her she was nuts, but what do I know?”

He laughed. “Billy Matlin has called me out there already, so spare me the details. He gave me the whole story already.”

“I know his story seems odd, but what if Bigfoot really is roaming the woods of Tawas?”

“All I know is that man has been getting folks riled up with his Bigfoot farce of a story. Sure, he’s been leaving it food, which, by the way, isn’t smart to do since it might lure an animal you just don’t want anywhere near your house.”

“Like what?” Eleanor asked.

“Raccoons, for one. Or even worse, a black bear.”

Eleanor bit her fist. “I knew it. That must have been what I saw lurking in the bushes, Agnes.”

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“You said you saw red eyes.”

“I’m not sure what I saw exactly, but it scared me, bad.”

“Getting back to the baggie, Sheriff. Can you have it tested to see what kind of hair it is?”

Peterson leaned back in his chair. “So you want me to use county resources to test that baggie of hair?”

“Yes, of course. Isn’t it your job to investigate suspicious animals roaming around?”

“Not unless it has attacked someone or committed a crime.”

“What am I supposed to do with this bag of hair?” I asked as I shook it.

“Beats me, but I can’t test it.”

I stomped out of Peterson’s office, ignoring the snickers of the deputies who stood near the sheriff’s office who had obviously heard our exchange of words.

Once we were back in the car, I couldn’t think straight. “Maybe I should check with the DNR. They might have some idea how to sort this out,” I said.

Eleanor hung onto her big black purse and shrugged. “Beats me, but it can’t hurt to check, I suppose.”

I whirled from the parking lot and made way onto US 23. I remembered that DNR officers congregated at the Whitetail Cafe, so I made my way onto Newman Street, which had many local businesses situated on either side of the street. I parked alongside the curb and Eleanor and I clambered out.

The plate glass window had a picture of—what else but a whitetail deer—with the name Whitetail Cafe above it in bold letters. I entered and waved at Dorothy Alton who was here with her husband, Frank. In the past, Eleanor and Dorothy didn’t see eye to eye, but these days things have gone much smoother.

I scanned the booths and took in the aroma of bacon and eggs cooking on the grill. The cafe was only open for the breakfast and lunch crowd, closing at two in the afternoon. I finally spotted the Department of Natural Resources officers in a booth a few feet from the door, noted by the army-green slacks and gray shirts they wore.

Eleanor fidgeted until I elbowed her ahead of me as we approached the booth. “Sorry to bother you, officers,” El started. “But my friend, Agnes, here would like to report a strange animal in the area.”

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I showed them the baggie with the hair. “I was wondering if you could help me determine what animal this hair might have come from?”

The larger of the two, who moved his plate into the middle of the table, said, “Take it easy now. I’m trying to eat here and would rather not get any of that hair in it. Lord only knows what you have there.”

“It’s Bigfoot hair, or we think it is. The thing is, we’re not sure and wondered if you could test it to determine if it does indeed belong to Bigfoot.”

The DNR officers tried unsuccessfully not to laugh. “I see. Well ... you see, that’s not our job.”

“Not your job?” I gasped. “What is your job, then?”

“We’re in charge of protecting natural resources and many other things you wouldn’t be all that interested in since it’s not related to Bigfoot.”

The other man put a finger in the air, and added, “Unless someone was planning to kill the beast. Bigfoot isn’t considered a game animal, so that would be right up our alley.”

I stared at their nametags now. “Is that right, Patrick?” I addressed the larger man.

“Yes, Derek is right. Give us a call if you think that’s happened and we’ll be all over it.”

“But since Bigfoot is not real, I don’t suppose we’ll be hearing back from you,” Derek said with a wink.

I would have liked to give them both a piece of my mind, but it would be a waste of breath. There was just no way anyone would believe Bigfoot was real unless we had something more to go on, so I left with Eleanor hot on my heels.

“That went just as I expected,” Eleanor said. “We need to call in the big guns.”

“Such as?”

“Ask Trooper Sales what he thinks.”