



# **Finding Love Through Bigfoot**

**A gay romance by Jamie Fessenden**

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By Jamie Fessenden

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Stuart first saw the creature just about a week after moving into the old farmhouse. Thor was chained outside, barking up a storm, which he *never* did. Stuart opened the screen door and peered out to see what the hell was bothering the normally taciturn dog, when he got a whiff of something foul. It smelled swampy, though there wasn't any stagnant water nearby, and a bit musky, on top of that.

Then he saw it -- a large, dark shape crouched down where the yard turned into an expanse of overgrown pasture. At first, Stuart thought it might be a coyote or even a bear. But then he nearly had a heart attack, because the thing leapt up and ran -- *ran*, on two legs! -- across the field, and disappeared into the forest on the other side.

Stuart dragged Thor into the house, the dog straining against his chain to go after the thing, and then he called the police.

"It seemed kind of like a gorilla," Stuart told the man on the phone, though now that he was in the bright incandescent light of the kitchen, that sounded ridiculous. This was New Hampshire, not the African Congo.

"Are you sure it wasn't a neighbor's dog?" the officer asked.

"No...I mean, it wasn't a dog."

The policeman offered to send a car around to check it out, but it was after midnight, and Stuart was beginning to think he'd imagined the way the creature moved. It must have been a bear, lumbering on two legs, or...something.

Stuart thanked the officer and said he was sure it was nothing.

The next morning, Stuart went outside with Thor at his side. The massive brown and black German Shepherd nosed around at the matted grass where the thing had been squatting the night before, and Stuart let Thor drag him up to the edge of the forest, following the trail. But apart from an unpleasant musky smell that lingered in the air, they could find nothing tangible.

Several days passed without incident, and Stuart convinced himself that what he'd seen must have been some animal common to the area. Most of the old-timers in town probably wouldn't have given it a second glance. (*Sounds like you had a run-in with a black scatterbotch. Yep, they can be pretty scary to a city boy, but they're harmless, if you know how to approach 'em....*)

So Stuart busied himself with settling into the new house and getting to know the neighbors who hung out at the General Store all day, chatting about farming and the weather, as if nothing had changed in the past hundred years.

Until the night Thor woke him up out of a sound sleep. Usually the dog was content to sleep at the foot of the bed 'til morning, both front paws and his head draped protectively over Stuart's legs. But this night Stuart woke to Thor pacing back and forth from the bed to the door, whimpering.

"You really have to go that bad?" Stuart groaned at him, but he got up and threw on his robe and slippers. Then he let the dog lead him downstairs to the kitchen door.

Stuart had intended to just let Thor outside to do his business without chaining him, and then call the dog back in. The dog was well enough behaved for that. But as soon as he opened the door, Thor bolted past him, barking furiously. In the bright moonlight, Stuart saw a shadowy form stand up in the garden. (Stuart hadn't had time to plant anything, but perhaps the thing was used to swiping zucchini from the previous owners.)

"Thor! No!"

But it was too late. Thor was nearly upon the creature when it bounded into the pasture. Thor was running fast, but somehow this thing managed to outdistance him, running along on two legs again with a long, loping stride.

"Thor! Get back here, you dumb mutt!"

Stuart took off after his faithful companion without a second thought. Thor didn't know this area any better than he did, and he was terrified that the dog would chase his prey into the woods and get lost. The poor dog could wander around forever in the northern New Hampshire forests without finding a way out.

When he reached the edge of the forest, Stuart could still hear Thor's barking, and he plunged into the dense thicket of birch and aspen, calling the dog until his voice began to grow hoarse. He had good night vision and the moon was high in the sky and nearly full, but the forest was thick with shadows and Stuart soon realized he was in danger of getting lost himself, if he went any further.

He stopped moving, but continued to call after Thor, his voice growing shaky with desperation. He'd had Thor for over a decade now, and loved the dog like a child. The thought of Thor wandering around lost and alone in these woods chilled him. And what if Thor got into a confrontation with...whatever that thing was?

"Come on, Thor!" Stuart pleaded. "Let's go home, pooch!"

He heard something rustling in the undergrowth off to his right and a little behind him. For a moment, he thought the dog had circled back to him. But his relief was short-lived, as he heard Thor barking again -- not from the undergrowth, but from somewhere far up ahead. Then he heard a low, menacing growl, and got a whiff of something halfway between a swamp and a sweaty armpit, before something huge and dark lumbered out of the trees at him.

Stuart screamed and ran.

The thing was fast. Faster than Thor, and certainly faster than Stuart. But it didn't seem particularly bent on *catching* Stuart. It seemed content to chase him and scream at him, making noises that sounded almost like a man shouting obscenities, but very guttural and not fully articulated. Stuart ran hard, dodging trees and jumping over brush and fallen branches, gasping for breath until he thought his lungs were going to explode.

At some point, he lost his slippers, but he kept running, stones and jagged branches on the forest floor cutting into his bare feet.

Then suddenly, he realized that the thing's screaming had stopped. In fact, he could no longer hear it crashing through the forest behind him. Certainly, he hadn't managed to outrun it. Had it simply gotten bored and given up the chase?

Still, Stuart was afraid to stop, and might have kept running, if he hadn't jumped a bush and collided with something warm and soft. Or at least, softer than a tree.

He grunted, the breath knocked out of him, at the same time a man's voice gasped, "Fuck!" Then Stuart and whatever it was he'd collided with tumbled forward and struck the ground.

He lay there for a minute, gasping for breath, until he realized that what he was lying on was also gasping. And covered in flannel. A second later, the man underneath him snarled out another obscenity and pushed Stuart off of him -- hard.

"What the hell do you think you're doing? You could have killed me!"

Stuart lay on his back, too exhausted to move and immensely relieved to hear another human voice. "Something...something was chasing me," he gasped out.

"What?"

"I don't...know. It was...huge and...black...hairy...."

"A bear?"

Stuart shook his head, gulped hard, and forced himself to sit upright. He could see the man more clearly now in the pale moonlight filtering down through the trees. The guy was dressed in jeans and a heavy flannel shirt. Some sort of hunter, perhaps. He had close-cropped hair and might have been handsome, but it was hard to tell in this light.

"Not a bear. It ran on two legs."

Stuart thought the man might tease him and tell him he was imagining things, but instead he jumped up and looked around quickly, searching the dark forest with his eyes. "Damn it! I don't see it."

Eventually, he gave up searching the surrounding woods and turned to look at the ground, near where Stuart had collided with him. He sighed and reached down to pick something up. "Terrific."

Stuart couldn't tell what the device was, in the dark, but it appeared to be broken, with one piece dangling from a couple wires. He hoped it wasn't too expensive, since he expected the man to demand that Stuart pay to have it repaired.

The man glanced over at him again, and it was then that Stuart realized he was sitting with his legs spread, and the robe had spread open in all the tumbling around. He also wasn't wearing a stitch underneath it.

Embarrassed, Stuart scrambled to cover himself.

The man chuckled. "My name is Jake. Why don't we get you to my camp, so you can tell me all about this thing that was chasing you?"

There was no way Stuart would be able to find his way home without help, so he followed Jake through the forest, until they came to a small clearing. There, Jake had a single man tent set up, with a campfire nearby -- currently extinguished.

"I don't usually light the fire at night," Jake said, which struck Stuart as odd. "But you look like you could use a nice campfire, right now."

Stuart had to admit that a cozy campfire, chasing away the shadows, might do a lot towards beating back the terror that threatened to overtake him. He was still lost, with no idea if Jake knew how to get him back to the farmhouse, and that thing was still out there, somewhere. He also didn't know what he would do, if Thor never managed to find his way back home.

Stuart sat on a log, pulling his robe tightly about himself, while Jake lit the fire. Jake appeared to be a competent woodsman, and he had a blazing fire going in short order.

"Are you a hunter?" Stuart asked.

Jake turned from his work to regard him thoughtfully. In the orange-gold light of the fire, Stuart could see that he was indeed very handsome, with a strong jaw, covered with a few days' of sandy blond beard growth, and vibrant green eyes. "Of a sort."

"What sort?"

Jake laughed and rubbed his chin. "Well, you know that thing that chased you?"

"How could I forget?"

"That's what I'm hunting."

That explained his reaction to Stuart's description, as if he was disappointed that the thing wasn't still chasing Stuart. "Well, then," Stuart said, "Maybe you can tell me what the fuck it is?"

Jake appeared to be mulling that one over, before he answered, "Let me show you something."

He rolled up his right sleeve to reveal a deep, crescent-shaped scar on the skin of his arm. Stuart leaned close and realized that the scar had been caused by some kind of animal bite. "That looks nasty."

"Not as bad as when it was fresh," Jake replied, matter-of-factly. "I got it when I was patrolling the state park a few years back, working as a ranger. Some campers came into the ranger office one night, scared shitless, going on about some kind of animal that attacked them in their camp and ran off with a bunch of their food. Said it moved like a man, but it was huge and covered all over with black hair. It also reeked."

"Oh, god," Stuart said, rolling his eyes, "Please don't tell me it was *Bigfoot*. That would be *so* lame."

"Do you mind if I finish?"

"Be my guest."

Jake reached out with his right arm to adjust one of the logs on the fire, and Stuart got another look at that scar. There were two crescents, as if something had attempted to chomp right through his arm. "I figured they'd just seen a bear," Jake went on, "And they were so scared, their memories were playing tricks on them. But I drove out to take a look. At first, I

didn't see much, other than the fact that their camp had been torn apart by something looking for food.

"But I did smell something kind of rank, and that's when I turned and saw a face, watching me from the bushes. It wasn't a bear. It wasn't anything I'd ever seen before -- sort of like a man, but covered in black fur, and with a...sort of a muzzle. I lifted my gun slowly, not really intending to shoot, but...you know, just in case. That's when I was hit from the side by another one. That one beat me pretty near senseless. But not before I tried to block it with my forearm, and got a chunk taken out of it. Then it left me there, and both of them disappeared into the woods.

"I was in a lot of pain and losing blood, and I blacked out," Jake continued, "But fortunately one of the other rangers came looking for me. She took me to the hospital, and they stitched me up. The doctor said the bite looked human to him, but pretty big. And whatever bit me had fangs."

"So you vowed you wouldn't rest until the creature was dead," Stuart finished for him.

Jake snorted and gave him an annoyed look. "Do I look like Captain Ahab?"

"Just kidding," Stuart replied, sheepishly.

"Look, I don't think the 'creatures' are evil, or anything like that. Sure, one attacked me, but I was aiming a gun right at its friend, or mate. That just proves it's got enough brains to know what a gun is. Over the past few years, I've been tracking them, trying to find out exactly what they are -- hell, maybe they *are* Bigfoots or Sasquatches, though hardly anyone in New Hampshire claims to have seen one of those. At any rate, I've heard some stories and seen some evidence, and so far I'm the only one in these woods who seems to have been hurt by one."

Stuart grudgingly conceded that, if the creature had really wanted to catch him, it could have. It was probably just chasing him to give him a scare, after Thor harassed it.

*God, I hope Thor's okay.*

"You hungry?" Jake asked him.

Stuart shook his head. "No. Just worried about my dog, and damned tired. I was sleeping before Thor woke me up to go monster hunting."

"You think your dog can find his way home?"

"I don't know. We just moved here."

Jake nodded, his expression compassionate. "Well, let's hope he does. In the meantime, I can offer you a place to sleep, if you don't mind the tent being a little cramped. Then we can try to find your house in the morning."

It was a reasonable plan, though Stuart was a little uncomfortable at the idea of sleeping in such close quarters with a total stranger. Jake seemed okay, but...well, just how sane was a man who'd dedicated years of his life to hunting Bigfoot? Granted, he had good reason to believe the creature was real, but still...

At any rate, Stuart didn't have much choice. It was either accept Jake's offer or stumble blindly through the forest until morning, probably getting himself even more lost, in the process.

Jake at least gave the impression of knowing his way around these woods. He might be able to get them out of here.

"Okay," Stuart replied, his weariness showing through, "That sounds good."

Jake seemed to be mulling something over again. At last, he spread his hands and said, "I suppose I should tell you, before you crawl in that tent with me, since it's going to be pretty snug...I'm gay. Not that I can't keep my hands to myself, but...I know some guys would be bothered by it."

*Oh.* Stuart stared at him blankly for a moment, wondering if he should confess that he was gay, too. But maybe that wouldn't be such a great idea. Jake might take it as an implied invitation. Damn it! Did straight people have this problem?

"That's fine," Stuart said, electing not to volunteer his own orientation. After all, he wasn't planning on making a pass at Jake, so why complicate things?

Jake insisted on making sure the fire was completely out before they slept, dousing it with water from a bucket he had nearby. Then he let Stuart crawl into the tent first.

'Snug' was definitely one word for it. Jake had a small LED flashlight hanging from the ceiling, which he reached in and turned on, while Stuart tried to make himself comfortable. There was only one sleeping bag, of course, and it was hardly big enough for two people. But that was lying on an insulated pad, and there were some heavy thinsulate blankets scrunched up around the edges of the tent, along with a bottle of water and some plastic bags of clothes. The entire space had a masculine smell to it that was unmistakable, but not unpleasant.

"You can take the sleeping bag, if you want," Jake volunteered, still crouched at the entrance to the tent, as he unlaced his hiking boots and removed them.

"That's okay. I'll just stretch out beside you on the mat. Can I borrow one of these blankets?"

Jake crawled inside the tent and zipped up the door flap. "I suppose you could do that, but that insulating pad's not very thick. You'd be more comfortable -- and warmer -- if we laid the sleeping bag out beneath us and shared a blanket. Up to you."

Stuart wasn't sure if that was sound wilderness survival logic, or just an excuse to get close. Maybe it was a bit of both. But he couldn't really say he cared. Now that he was no longer pumped up on adrenalin, the only thing he could think of was laying down somewhere comfortable and closing his eyes for a while. If Jake started to get frisky in the night...well, Stuart would deal with that, when and if it happened.

"All right," he said. Then, taking note of Jake's jeans and heavy flannel shirt, he asked, "Are you going to sleep in your clothes?" He mentally kicked himself, the moment he said it. Was he *trying* to get them into a sexual situation?

"Do you mind if I strip to my skivvies?"

"I guess not."

Jake didn't bother unbuttoning the shirt. He just slipped it over his head, along with his undershirt. The cool, bluish light from the LED flashlight wasn't exactly mood lighting, but Stuart was nevertheless impressed by the muscular arms and chest revealed. When Jake shucked

his jeans, Stuart had to force himself to look away. In just a pair of black boxer briefs, Jake was as beautiful as a Greek statue. Though, even wearing briefs, it was easy to tell the similarity didn't extend to *that* part of his anatomy.

"Are you going to keep the robe on?" Jake asked, his eyes twinkling.

Stuart gave him a wry smile. "You already know I'm naked under this. I thought you weren't going to make a pass at me."

"No pass," Jake replied. "Just making sure you're comfortable."

"Uh, huh." It was true that he was already feeling tangled up in the damned thing, and it wasn't that he was shy, exactly. "Fine. But I'm not taking it off until there's a blanket over me. And you promised to keep your hands to yourself."

"Scout's honor."

"Were you ever actually a scout?"

"Absolutely. Scout's honor."

Stuart sighed and shook his head at Jake's playful grin.

They spent a couple minutes wrestling with the sleeping bag to get it unzipped and lying flat under both of them -- something they should have done *before* climbing into the tent, in retrospect -- but eventually they managed it. Then Jake took one of the thin insulate blankets and pulled it over them. Stuart slipped out of his robe and tucked it to one side.

At last, Jake flicked off the tiny flashlight and they settled down in the dark, almost spooning, but not quite actually touching. Stuart could feel Jake's warmth against his back and Jake's soft breath against the nape of his neck and felt wonderfully safe and comforted, despite the fact that he was (almost) snuggled up to a total stranger -- a man he might have considered to be crazy, had they met a few days ago -- in the middle of nowhere.

Within minutes, he was sound asleep.

Something woke Stuart, just before dawn. He wasn't sure what, but he had an anxious feeling, as though he'd heard something in his sleep but hadn't quite registered it. He noted briefly that Jake had broken his "no touch" rule and had one arm draped protectively around Stuart's chest. But Jake's deep breathing indicated he was asleep, and his hand wasn't roaming, so Stuart couldn't say he minded.

Then he heard the noise that had awoken him -- the sound of a large animal moving around outside the tent. It was moving quietly, and from what Stuart could tell, poking at the remains of the campfire, grunting occasionally. Was it the creature? Or a bear? Both could be dangerous.

Stuart thought about waking Jake, but he was afraid to make any noise. It wasn't long, however, before he realized that Jake's breathing was no longer deep and even, and his hand had tightened against Stuart's chest. He was awake now, and listening.

Stuart knew enough about bears to realize that charging out of the tent to confront one would be foolhardy. Likewise, beginning a confrontation with one of the man-things on hands and knees, crawling out of the tent, would likely be a bad idea, too. Jake seemed to concur.

They remained still and silent for a long time, listening to the animal wander about the camp, until the sounds drifted away.

Then Jake got up slowly. In the faint gray light that was filtering through the tent, Stuart saw Jake motion for him to remain quiet. Then Jake unzipped the tent door and peered out into the gray morning. After looking around, he slipped outside.

Stuart waited for the sound of screams or growls or gunfire (though he hadn't actually seen a gun anywhere), but when all remained quiet, he couldn't resist poking his head out. Jake was standing at the edge of the clearing in nothing but his underwear, looking ethereal and beautiful in the morning mist, as he scanned the woods for any sign of the animal.

Stuart climbed out of the tent and went to join the ranger.

"Something was here," Jake whispered, "But it's disappeared."

"Do you think it was a bear?"

"No. Look."

He led the way to the fire pit, where something had clearly disturbed the logs and ash. There were several prints around the area -- some very clear -- of bare feet that looked basically human. But they were enormous. When Jake placed his foot near one, careful not to obscure it, Stuart could see that the print was several inches longer than Jake's foot.

"Damn it!" Jake said, still keeping his voice low, "I wish I had my camera."

"Where is it?"

"In my knapsack. Currently, in two pieces."

Stuart remembered the device he'd knocked out of Jake's hand the night before and thought it best not to say anything further about it.

"I've got some plaster," Jake went on. "I can whip up a batch and make casts, at least. Just be careful where you walk."

For some reason, Jake seemed to be carefully avoiding looking at Stuart. That's when Stuart looked down and realized he'd crawled out of the tent without grabbing his robe. "Oops!" He laughed, embarrassed, covering his crotch with his hands. "Sorry. I wasn't thinking."

"Can't say I mind," Jake replied, the twinkle back in his eye, though he was still averting his gaze. "Not at all."

Stuart turned to go back to the tent, then stopped halfway and told Jake, "I suppose it isn't really fair of me to keep pretending I'm straight. I'm not."

"So now you're going to run around naked for the rest of the day?"

"Well...no. It's not related. I just...."

Jake chuckled warmly. "I hate to tell you this, Stuart, but I kind of figured it out."

"Really?"

"Really. Now, why don't you go grab your robe, or a blanket? I'd liked to get these casts poured. After that, we can figure out how to get you home. I'll bet your pooch is already there, waiting for his breakfast."

As nice as it would be to sit in his cozy kitchen again, nursing a cup of coffee -- hopefully, with Thor safely curled up on his nearby dog bed -- Stuart felt a little disappointed.

Would Jake just drop him off at the house and disappear back into the woods on his bizarre quest? Would this be the last Stuart ever saw of him? It was absurd to say he'd grown fond of the man in less than a day, but...there was definitely something about Jake that Stuart found intriguing.

When he got to the tent, acutely aware that Jake was probably getting a pretty good look at his naked butt, Stuart bent down to open the tent flap. Then he stopped, his breath catching in his throat. There was that rank smell of sweat and dampness again, carried to his nostrils on a shifting breeze. And when he slowly turned his head, he saw it.

In the bushes just off to the left side of the tent, a dark face peered at him, mostly obscured by leaves, but the eyes were unmistakable. And human.

Or almost.

Stuart began to back up slowly. He wanted to call out to Jake, but he was afraid of what the creature might do, if he made any loud noises. Was Jake still watching him?

"Jake...." he hissed, his voice as low as possible.

"I see it. Just keep backing away slowly."

But before Stuart had taken another step, the thing leapt out of the bushes and charged at him, screaming inarticulately. Jake screamed in turn and tried to run, but found himself stumbling over the cold fire pit. He fell and struck the ground, just as another dark shape came leaping out of the bushes to his right.

It was Thor. The dog barked ferociously at the man-thing and struck it full in the chest. Both animals went down in a ball of fur and fangs and claws, snarling and screeching, as they tumbled over and over in the dew-covered grass.

Stuart felt strong hands underneath his armpits, as Jake lifted him up and half dragged him away from the fighting animals.

"Thor!" Stuart shouted, as soon as he caught his breath again. "Come!"

Surprisingly, the German Shepherd obeyed him this time -- or at least, he halted his attack for a moment. The creature took advantage of this to scramble away and plunge into the undergrowth. Thor looked as if he wanted to give chase, but Stuart called him sharply again, and Thor reluctantly came to his side.

Jake made certain that Stuart could stand on his own, before releasing him to rush after the creature. Stuart was so deliriously happy to have Thor back, that he barely noticed Jake's disappearance. He kept scratching the dog's ears and hugging him, alternating between, "Who's a good pup?" and "Don't you ever run off like that again!"

Thor, for the most part, seemed unharmed by his adventure. He had some burrs in his fur that Stuart picked out and he smelled like he'd rolled in something disgusting. But there was nothing wrong that a bath wouldn't fix.

Eventually, Jake returned to find Stuart sitting on the log by the fire pit, wrapped in his robe, with Thor lounging by his feet.

"He got away," Jake muttered.

"What were you planning on doing, if you caught him?"

Jake shrugged. "The plan, all along, has been to document the creatures, if I could -- pictures, video, castings, fur, scat. Whatever I could find. Since my camera is currently busted, I was just hoping to...I don't know. Maybe grab some fur from it, or something."

"Well," Stuart said, matter-of-factly, "You could try looking at your feet."

Jake gave him a puzzled look, before glancing down. He was standing right where Thor and the creature had fought, and all over the grass lay tufts of black fur.

Three nights later, Stuart sat in the dark on his back porch, watching the waning moon creep across the sky, wishing he could have a cup of coffee. But Jake wouldn't allow him to drink coffee outside on their vigils, in case the creatures were spooked by the smell of it.

They'd managed to find their way back to the farmhouse, with a compass, a map, and a little help from Thor. Then Stuart had suggested that, since the creature had appeared twice in his backyard, it might be productive to set up a stakeout there -- or whatever hunters called waiting for their prey to show up.

It turned out that Jake did, in fact, still have a job as a park ranger, and only had a couple weeks' vacation each summer to go traipsing about in the woods in search of "monsters." He'd have to get back to work by the end of the month. And Stuart's house was a more comfortable home base than his tent, so it hadn't been hard to convince him.

Stuart leaned forward in his deck chair and reached out a hand to brush the side of Jake's rugged jaw, as Jake sat hunched forward in his own chair, watching the pasture intently, clutching Stuart's cheap digital home movie camera. The ranger had shaved, so he just had a bit of stubble, and even that was surprisingly soft. Jake smiled, closing his eyes and pressing his cheek against Stuart's hand.

"You're being distracting," he said, good-naturedly.

"It's almost morning. I think I might go to bed." The two of them had continued to share a bed, since returning to the house, though Stuart had still been holding off on having sex. Part of him thought it was a little silly to keep resisting his desire for Jake, but he didn't want a one-night stand -- or even a one-week stand. He'd moved to the country to get some stability in his life, and that included his relationships. He was growing fond of Jake. But would the ranger-slash-monster-hunter stick around?

Fortunately, Jack hadn't pressured him, remaining content with cuddling at night and making out...well, whenever they felt like it. Which was a good bit of the time. It was clear that he wanted more, but he was a gentleman. Now, he nuzzled Stuart's hand and kissed it, causing Stuart's pulse to quicken.

But before it could go any further, a movement caught Stuart's eye.

"In the garden," he whispered urgently.

Jake was instantly alert. Moving slowly, he brought the camera to his eye and Stuart could hear the barely audible whirring of the telephoto lens. The camera had a "night vision" feature which would hopefully be sufficient to capture footage of the creature.

Stuart held his breath -- or at least, breathed very quietly -- for the next few minutes, while the creature roamed among the garden. Thor was barking furiously from inside the kitchen and scraping at the door with his front paws, but the creature seemed to be aware that the dog was confined and not a danger. Jake filmed it, until it got bored and wandered back into the pasture, then somehow disappeared. Perhaps it had ducked down low in the tall grass.

They waited a while longer, but the sun was rising now, and the creature didn't return.

"Let's go inside," Stuart said, at last, and Jake reluctantly followed him.

They were tired, but the sighting of the creature had them too excited to sleep, so Stuart put a pan of milk on the stove to make hot chocolate, while Jake reviewed the film footage. It wasn't wonderful -- some intriguing shots, but nothing clear enough that a skeptic wouldn't be able to dismiss it as possibly being some other common animal. Stuart had allowed Jake to use one of the empty rooms in the house to lay out the evidence he had with him, and this footage would be added to the plaster casts of footprints, hair samples and other miscellaneous evidence Jake had gathered over the past week and a half.

Jake hadn't moved in, of course. It was too soon for that. He would return to his trailer in Littleton, NH, in a couple days. But Littleton was less than an hour away, and Stuart had secretly begun to fantasize about what it would be like if Jake *did* move in, eventually.

"What now, mighty hunter?" Stuart teased, as he set down a stoneware mug of cocoa in front of the ranger. "Do you intend to capture one?"

Jake didn't seem bothered by the teasing. He simply lifted the mug and took a sip. "No, I don't think so. I'll keep gathering information; studying them. Maybe someday I'll publish something, but if I did now, you'd probably have a dozen Bigfoot hunters squatting in your pasture before winter. I doubt you'd like that."

"Absolutely not!" Stuart said vehemently, as he took a seat across from him. Thor had decided the two men were being boring now, so he was curled up under the table, sleeping soundly. Stuart wedged his stocking feet under the dog to warm his toes.

"I really just wanted to prove to myself that I hadn't been crazy about what attacked me," Jake admitted. "Now that I've finally seen one up close in broad daylight, I know I was right. They do exist, and I suspect there's a...clan or tribe, or whatever, living in these forests. Maybe next summer I'll try to track them and find out where they live. But for now, it's enough to know that they're there."

He set his mug down and reached across the table to take Stuart's hand. "I'm also glad they brought me to you. And Thor, of course," he added with a smile.

"Of course." Jake didn't know what to add to that, so he settled for returning Jake's smile and gazing affectionately into those beautiful emerald eyes.

Later in the day, while Jake was busy writing up his notes about last night's encounter, Stuart made a quick run into the center of town -- about five buildings on either side of a dirt road. He nodded at the two old men sitting by the unlit wood stove, just inside the entrance to the General store and they returned his greeting with friendly waves.

As he stood at the counter, paying for his small basket of groceries, he couldn't resist asking Sam, the owner, "Has anyone around here ever seen a big black animal in their fields at night? I couldn't see it clearly, but I don't think it was a bear."

He thought he might sound foolish, but Sam gave the question serious consideration. "Big black animal? Maybe. Hey, Tom!" he called to one of the old men, "Isn't that what Jessie Parker saw a few weeks back?"

The old man nodded. "Yep. We don't see 'em often, but they come around, now and again. Big and hairy, and walkin' around on their hind legs. Smelly things, but mostly harmless, long as you leave 'em be."

"Really?" Stuart asked, surprised. "Do know what they're called?"

"Well...there's some long Indian name for 'em, but I can't remember it. Round here, we just call 'em black scatterbotches."