

When Santa got stuck in the Chimney

December 22nd

“You’re coming to my folks’ Christmas Eve party, right?”

“Yes,” murmured Missy as she chewed on her lip.

They were getting very close to her neighborhood, and the way Eric drove, they were sure to be there in a matter of seconds.

“Huh?”

Eric turned to look at her, worryingly taking his eyes off the road. Meaning, she worried. He never seemed to worry about anything. Eric was as relaxed and flexible as a taffy pull. She was more like a jawbreaker.

“Yes, yes, watch the road!” she squeaked, almost dropping the poinsettia plant that Eric’s mom had given her to give to her own mother.

He grinned, but turned his eyes back to the road. Her inner bunny snuffled but didn’t seem unduly concerned.

Missy was a bunny shifter, dating Eric who was a wolf shifter. Apart from the obvious problems of a prey shifter dating a predator, there was also the fact that Missy was attending college, and the two of them barely saw one another. That wasn’t ideal for a burgeoning relationship, especially when the relationship included a very skittish rabbit, and a laidback, sometimes to the point of oblivious, wolf shifter. But, they were trying, and in spite of her fretting, she was happy – happier than she’d ever been. She adored her big lug of a boyfriend.

“You know you can invite your family too, right? My mom would love to meet your mom.”

She guessed that when she was given the poinsettia. Eric’s mom, Ellie was not very subtly hinting that she would like to get to know her better over dinner. Missy pretended she didn’t understand.

“Oh, really?” she said, trying to sound nonchalant but failing miserably as her voice came out in a high pitch. Her inner bunny tapped her foot in irritation. Yes, usually the two of them were very in sync, but not on this matter.

Eric’s brow furrowed slightly, knowing that to be her nervous voice. Given that she was a rabbit, he heard it a lot.

“Sure. Your family have nothing to fear from my pack if that’s what you’re worried about – everyone will be on their best behavior.”

“Oh, I’m sure they will,” she said in a rush, keen to make sure she never thought for a second that there was a chance that his wolf shifter pack would start gnawing down on her cotton-tailed relatives. “But they do usually have their own party, so I’ll probably need to leave a little early to attend.”

“What time is your family party starting?”

“I think about eight or something.”

“That’s fine then, ours starts at six – plenty of time for you to attend both.”

Eric gave her a quick smile before focusing on the road again. He put a strange inflection on the word ‘you,’ as if he was suggesting that maybe it should be ‘us’... Her bunny chattered and Missy tried not to think about that.

“Yes, it’s a big family party,” she said, putting emphasis on ‘family.’ “My grandparents are coming from Florida, and they’ll want to see me.”

Eric nodded in understanding, and with a sinking feeling, she realized they had entered her neighborhood and quickly coming upon her street.

“Yeah, my grandparents are coming too. Even my gramps and he doesn’t usually come.”

“No?” Missy muttered, trying not to chew her thumbnail down to the bone.

“No.” Eric chuckled warmly. “He hates my dad, refuses to acknowledge he even exists. Something about my dad ruining my mom’s life. He seems to like us too though. But he once offered me five thousand dollars to try and break them up.”

Missy let out a gasp, momentarily forgetting her worry. “That’s terrible!”

Eric chuckled again. “Yeah. I bet your dad probably already hates me.”

There was a slight pause, and her bunny nudged her, forcing her to laugh. “Uh, yeah.”

He frowned again, and Missy could feel the blush trying to steal over her. “Ah, you can drop me off here.”

“No, it’s fine, I’ll go right to your door.”

“No, no,” she protested, “here is fine.”

“I don’t mind. I haven’t seen your house before.”

No, usually she borrowed her mom’s car. She was just caught short today, and Eric wouldn’t hear of letting her use the bus.

“Seriously, Eric, here is fine,” Missy blurted, damn near panicking.

Without a word, he calmly pulled to the side of the road, and given that his usual driving style was manic, this was very worrying. Eric turned off the engine and shifted in his seat to look at her. Her insides did flips, partly because they always did when she looked at him, but also because she had a feeling he was upset.

“Missy,” he said.

“Yes?” she squeaked, her voice going up a further octave.

“Do your parents not know that we’re dating?”

“Well, um, you see the thing is...”

“Yes?”

“The thing of it is...”

“Aha.”

“I don’t really... No,” she finally admitted.

Missy had tried to rack her brain for a good answer, but there wasn’t one, so she just admitted the truth. Humph. That was the bunny inside – she had wanted to shout it from the rooftop, but Missy knew how her parents were. They wouldn’t be mean or cruel to Eric – they wouldn’t dare – but they wouldn’t welcome him, and they wouldn’t understand why Missy wanted to be with him when there were so many bunny shifters in the world. They would try to break them up, and Missy didn’t want Eric to think that she wasn’t worth the hassle of annoying, interfering parents. She would prefer he were a little more attached to her first before she admitted the truth to them.

Eric growled softly. He wasn’t someone who was prone to anger, not like so many other wolf shifters. For the most part, Eric was as gentle and kind as a lamb – an oversized lamb with enormous muscles, but still. It was one of the reasons she adored him, because he was such a nice guy to everyone – not just predators, not just popular guys like him, no, he had time for everyone, no matter their species, no matter how dorky. Missy could count the amount of times she’d seen him angry on two fingers, but she could see he was angry now. Though, at least he was hanging onto his anger.

“Why not?” he asked crisply.

Missy nervously tugged on her scarf. “They just... they just wouldn’t be happy about me dating someone like... well, you know, a wolf.”

His eyes narrowed and she added quickly, “They’re not as cool as your parents, they’re very old fashioned. As far as they’re concerned, rabbits mate rabbits.”

“And wolves mate wolves?” he rumbled.

Her parents honestly didn’t care what wolves did, but she nodded anyway.

“We’ve been together for months. Jeez, Missy, even after all those nights at the Sunset Inn?”

Missy could feel her face bloom as red as poinsettia on her lap. Yes, she had been furiously nervous for her first time, and completely astonished to find it was Eric’s first time too, but, they had spent the night together and it had been awkward, amazing, beautiful, and the best night of her life (apart from the other nights they had spent together). They had been together a few more times after that, but not as often as either of them would have liked given their schedules, and given that the Sunset Inn was hardly cheap – but Missy just couldn’t relax at his house, given how many brothers he had tramping around all the time, and there was no way she could take him home. On the nights they were together, she just always told her folks she was sleeping over at a friend’s house...

His jaw ticked, and Missy patted his arm. "I'm sorry, I swear I'm going to tell them."

Eventually, she added silently, ignoring her huffy inner rabbit.

"Eventually?" guessed Eric.

Missy winced. "I just don't want to get them all upset in case..." The words died in her throat as her bunny sent her a definite warning that Missy couldn't fail to ignore.

Eric eyes flashed to the amber of his beast. "In case we break up?" he hissed.

"I didn't mean it like that," she denied.

"It's fine," he ground out.

"But..."

"I said it's fine," Eric grumbled. He stared at the street in front of him. "You wanna get out here, now's your chance."

Missy hesitated. "Am I... am I still invited to your family's party?" she whispered.

Eric shot her a sharp look. "Of course. I'm not ashamed of you. I want you around my family."

"I'm not ashamed of you!" she cried. Her beast chittered in horror at the idea.

He huffed, but didn't say anything else.

"I'll see you then," she murmured as she started to open the door.

She stopped as a huge hand grasped her arm and pulled her back for a warm kiss. Missy whimpered at the pleasurable assault, almost considering asking him to drive on over to the Sunset Inn that very moment. But, just as she was about to lose all her inhibitions, he pulled away, and the shuttered expression appeared again.

"See you then," he replied grouchy.

She was still dazed from the kiss as she walked into her parents' house, still reeling, and wondering why she would want to keep him a secret at all. But as she came upon her parents, her father reading while her mother knitted, she remembered. They were such small, anxious, quiet people. She wasn't sure how they would take large, boisterous Eric.

Her dad looked up and smiled. "Hi, honey. Did you have a nice time?"

Missy nodded.

"There's leftovers from dinner in the fridge if you want any," said her mom.

"Thanks, but I already ate. Umm..."

They both looked at her expectantly.

"On Christmas Eve, I've been invited to a party. I thought I could go and come back in time for ours."

“Whose party?” asked her mom.

“Ummm, it’s a friend from school, it’s his family.” Which wasn’t a lie – she had been kind of friends with Eric in school before they started dating.

“His?” repeated both her parents.

“Yep.”

They both pursed her lips and gave each other a look. Missy rolled her eyes. She was turning nineteen soon and they still abhorred the idea of her dating. Right, because they wanted her to remain single until she was nineteen and they picked her out a rabbit to mate from her warren. Well, tough tails! She’d met all the males in her warren and they were lackluster, entitled, losers, who were expecting to be given a mate who would just cook, clean and push out a dozen kits. That wasn’t what she wanted.

“I suppose it’s okay,” said her dad slowly after much eyebrow wiggling between him and her mom.

“Great. Well, good night,” she said before trying to run upstairs, then bouncing down again to push the poinsettia at her surprised mom, then running upstairs again, pretending she didn’t hear the whispering from below.

Honestly, they couldn’t really stop her from going out. She was technically fully grown, and their attitude was starting to grate. She had upset her boyfriend to spare their feelings, but really, they didn’t seem interested in what she wanted to do with her life.

Missy flopped down on her bad face first. Christmas time should not be this stressful.

*

Christmas Eve

Eric slammed the drawer open, noisily grabbed a spoon, slammed the drawer open, stomped over to the fridge, pulled the fridge door open with maximum noise and fury, and grabbed the milk, then he stomped over to the kitchen table, dropped into a chair with the grace of boulder chasing an archaeologist through a tomb, and started pouring bowl after bowl of cereal by crunching it as if it owed him money.

His brothers Craig and Darryl goggled at him, amazed that their usually good-natured brother had turned into a diva overnight.

“Something wrong, son?” asked his dad, Hank, from over the paper.

“No,” grunted Eric through a mouthful of fruity boulders.

His mom didn’t tend to buy names products. All her sons ate a superhuman amount of food, that she said named brands would bankrupt them. Plus, they were indiscriminate eaters. There was no such thing as a four-second rule in their house. The boys had been known to eat things that had been found on the ground days after they fell there and rolled under the refrigerator. In general, his

parents kept the house very clean though – it wasn't like there was a huge amount of food on the floor waiting to be eaten.

He finished his bowl and poured another, determined to drown his sorrows in cardboard-like cereal. His inner wolf sulked.

His dad cleared his throat. "You know, son, you can talk to me about anything. If it's a puberty thing..."

Craig and Darryl burst into uproarious laughter while Eric scowled.

His mom bustled into the room carrying an enormous Santa costume. "Honey, I found it," she declared, branding the red, fur trimmed outfit.

His dad, thankfully, forgot what he was saying and focused on the Santa costume. "Ah, thanks, babe."

He stood up and held the costume against himself.

"Not sure you need all the padding this year, Dad," teased Darryl.

Hank scowled at him while Ellie growled at him to hush, and then fussed around her mate, reassuring him he was perfect and that he made a wonderful Santa. Years ago, when Eric's oldest brother was one-year-old, their dad got hold of a Santa suit, and, given their dad's love of Christmas, he insisted on really doing Santa. He would climb up on the roof, stamp around to make sure everyone heard him, and shimmy down the chimney. Hank claimed the huge chimney was the reason he wanted this house so badly.

Then, Ellie would make sure her son, or sons in later years, would get a peek at Santa before getting them off to bed. The boys had loved it for the years they believed in Santa. Though, it came to an end when Craig was five. After being sent to bed, he came back down to find 'Santa' kissing his mom, and, thinking Santa was trying to steal his mom from his dad, he went a little nuts and virtually took a chunk out of Hank's leg. But, Hank healed, and Ellie sewed up the Santa suit, and now he had resurrected the tradition for his grandsons – their eldest brother's kids.

"Just remember," said Ellie, "Terri and Mal are bringing the kids over at five. We're doing the Santa sighting early this year because of the party."

Hank nodded. "Yep, just got a bit of last minute shopping to do and then I'll be here."

Ellie sighed. "Really? You know Christmas is coming all year long – why wait until the day before to shop?"

Hank smirked. "More exciting this way."

She shook her head and walked away with Hank following her, chuckling.

When they were gone, Darryl turned to Eric. "What crawled up your butt?"

His wolf snarled, but Eric wasn't going to take the bait. "Nothing."

“So it’s not because Missy hasn’t told her parents you two are dating?” said Craig with a slightly smug look.

Eric growled and his wolf howled. “How did you...”

Craig rolled his shoulders, trying, and failing to look modest. “Missy told Britt. Britt told me.”

Britt was a fellow member of their pack, and while not exactly dating, she had a strange relationship with Craig that Eric wasn’t interested in enough to think about.

“Now he’s telling everyone,” snickered Darryl.

“I’m fine, it doesn’t matter,” snapped Eric as he got up and virtually threw his bowl into the sink.

He kept telling himself it didn’t matter, but honestly, he was pissed. He’d thought that she saw them heading in the same direction that he did, but, maybe not. Maybe she was expecting them to break up.

“To be fair to Missy,” said Darryl evenly with just a hint of an evil glint in his eye, “I wouldn’t want anyone to know I was dating you either.”

“It’s not like that,” he hissed as his wolf pawed the ground.

“Britt isn’t ashamed of me,” declared Craig proudly. “Her mom knows about me.”

“Because she’s part of the pack, idiot. She’s known you since you were three and you ran around, naked, and yelling out loud that you had a penis.”

“I never did that,” huffed Craig, though, he didn’t say it with much conviction.

“Besides, if she wasn’t ashamed, she wouldn’t lie to her psycho brother that she was going to the mall every time she came over to study with you.”

Craig jabbed a finger at him. “She doesn’t lie because she’s ashamed, just because she...”

“Doesn’t want you to get turned into wolf puree by the psycho brother,” supplied Darryl with understanding.

He was dating Britt’s sister, Gwen, and he too lived in fear of the aforementioned psycho brother. Craig didn’t really blame them. Rumors abounded about the brother being in prison for murdering someone, and there weren’t many who doubted the rumors. Most were just surprised that the rumor was only about him murdering one person – that seemed tame compared to what they were all sure he was capable of doing.

Darryl shot him another evil look. “What’s Missy afraid of? That her parents might try and turn you into a vegetarian?”

Eric growled at his brothers, who were laughing uproariously again. Dicks.

“Boys, you coming?” yelled their dad.

Darryl and Craig got up to leave while they tried to control their mirth.

“You’re going Christmas shopping?” grumbled Eric, his curiosity overtaking his annoyance.

“Yep, gotta get something for Gwen,” replied Darryl.

“I gotta get something for Britt,” added Craig.

“Haven’t you already got her like twelve things?” said Darryl.

Craig smiled a little dreamily. “I want to get her something else.”

Darryl rolled his eyes and the two of them left, forgetting about Eric and his pain. Eric decided to take his pain to his bedroom and lie on his bed and mope.

*

A few hours later, he was still there, moping, when his eldest brother Mal burst into his room.

“Hey, dummy, where’s dad?” asked Mal.

“Out shopping,” muttered Eric, staring at the ceiling.

“Crap.” Mal exhaled.

Eric glanced at the clock and realized it was almost five, and in a few minutes, his nephews would be shepherded into the house expecting to see Santa.

“Mal?”

They heard Mal’s mate, Terri, calling up the stairs, and crying and demands to know where Santa was shortly followed this.

“Mal, I could really use a hand down here.”

“Where’s the Santa suit?” asked Mal urgently.

“Don’t know.”

“Mal!”

Eric pulled himself out of self-pity long enough to be kind. “Go, I’ll find it.”

Mal grinned. “Thanks, dummy.”

Eric rolled his eyes, seriously regretting the momentary kindness. But, as annoying as his brother could be, his nephews deserved the same fun Santa memories he had. So he found the Santa suit and in his parents’ bedroom and donned it with very few reservations. It was a little tight on him – he was larger than his father, but he doubted the kids would notice.

Then, he went up to the attic and climbed out onto the roof, as he had done many times before, pulling the bag of presents with him. Course, he hadn’t ever climbed down the chimney before, but he was sure that if his dad could do it then so could he. He peered down and noticed a metal ladder. Huh, easier than he thought. So he pulled himself over the edge and started to descend.

*

Missy chewed on her lip as she knocked on the door. Eric hadn't disinvited her from the party, so she assumed she was still welcome. She had agonized over telling her parents, but just didn't have the courage to do it over breakfast. Horrifying her parents was just not something she could do over a plate of maple pecan waffles.

Yes, she was a coward. But what if Eric did want to break up over this – telling them would be pointless then! Though, at least she would have a reason as to why her heart was completely broken.

She needed to talk to Eric - that was for sure. That was why she had come early, so she could talk to him on his own. Though, no one appeared to be home, except, her inner bunny could scent him – his gloriously spicy smell was present. Also, there seemed to be noises coming from inside the house.

Oh, was that a yell for help?!

Fearing for her wolfy boyfriend, urged on by her usually timid bunny, Missy tried the handle and walked right into the house.

She found Eric's brother on his hands and knees with his head in the chimney shouting, "Wriggle about, get yourself loose."

"What do you think I'm trying to do?" rumbled an aching familiar voice.

"Umm, hello?" called Missy.

"What?" Startled, Mal banged his head on the chimney and pulled back to look at her with an annoyed expression.

It was then she noticed the black boots wagging about in the fireplace.

"Eric?! Is that you?" she cried, running over to the fireplace.

"Missy?" replied the muffled voice from within.

"Yes, what are you doing in there?"

"He was coming down the chimney to be Santa for my boys," explained Mal as he got up, rubbing his head. "He, ah, he got stuck. Usually my dad does it. Apparently, he's a bit wider than him."

"Oh," whispered Missy faintly.

There wasn't much to say when finding your boyfriend stuck in chimney dressed as Santa.

"Don't worry, Terri took the kids to our house so they don't have to see this," added Mal.

Missy stared at him. That actually wasn't worrying her half as much as the fact that her boyfriend was stuck. Mal must have realized that from her expression. He coughed, awkwardly, and said he could just go and check on Terri.

“Are you okay?” she asked to the fireplace.

“I guess,” it replied.

Her bunny chittered frantically. “Not a great situation,” he murmured, considering how to get him out.

“You could just tell your parents,” grouched the fireplace.

Missy’s jaw dropped, and even her rabbit was surprised by the response. “I meant the fact that you’re stuck. That’s a little more important than my parents not knowing about you, isn’t it?” she said in exasperation.

“I’ll get out of here one day – you may never tell your parents!”

Missy sighed and her nose scrunched in frustration.

“Is your cute nose scrunching?” teased the fireplace.

“No.”

“Liar,” came the chuckled reply.

“Eric, I am going to tell my parents, I just...”

“You just weren’t sure how long we’d be together,” humphed the occupant of the chimney.

“Well, yes,” she admitted, “and I knew that if my parents met you it wouldn’t be long. Because I know they won’t be happy about us being together, and the last thing I wanted was for them to drive you away before you...” She took a deep breath.

“Before?” prompted the fireplace.

Her bunny wagged her ears encouragingly. “Before you had a chance to think that I’m worth all the hassle.”

The chimney was surprisingly silent and she found herself growing unusually impatient with every second that ticked by. “Well?” she prompted uneasily.

“Ah, babe,” he chuckled, “I know you’re worth it. Of course, you are. I’m just lucky someone likes you is willing to give me a chance. I just figured you were ashamed of me. I mean, I know I’m not good enough for you, I just didn’t want you to know you.”

Missy giggled and teared up a little. “That’s not true at all.”

“Yeah, it is – I’m fine with not being good enough, by the way. I can handle it, because I love you, and I’m not letting a tiny thing like that get in the way of us being together.”

Missy’s hand flew to her mouth. “You love me?” she gasped.

“Yeah, of course, have I not said it before? Because, yeah, I do.”

“I love you too!” she gushed.

“Good,” came the smug reply.

She placed a hand on the fireplace, wishing she could hug him.

“We need to get you out of there,” she said determinedly.

“I’m lodged in here pretty tight. Maybe Mal could climb down and pull me out.”

“I’m on my way,” she said determinedly.

“What?! No, babe, it’s dangerous, don’t...”

She didn’t hear the rest. Nope, she was determined to give her boyfriend a big hug and a kiss, and nothing like a little danger was going to stop her. The usually frightened of everything bunny inside her didn’t quail once as she climbed the ladder, nor as she inexpertly clambered inside the chimney, and definitely not as she started climbing down the wonky metal ladder inside. Though, she will admit to a little wobble as she lost her footing. Yes, at that point, she squealed, Eric roared in alarm, and, with a thud, she landed on him, dislodging him from the chimney, and they careened to the bottom of the fireplace, a tangle of limbs and soot. But as dirty and achy as she was, all she cared about was her hug and her kiss.

*

“Are you ready?” asked Eric as he squeezed her hand.

Missy couldn’t entirely hide her nervousness, but she smiled up at him and squeezed back.

“As ready as I’ll ever be.”

Eric grinned. “Love you, babe.”

“Love you too,” she breathed with feeling.

He winked and they walked, hand in hand, in her family’s Christmas Eve party. A time when most of her family would be drunk on eggnog seemed like the perfect time to introduce them to him, and besides, she didn’t want to wait a moment longer.

The end