

Bigfoot Spotters Welcome

“Okay, here we are, have fun, sweetie.”

“Thanks, Mom,” murmured Missy as she glanced at the lodge.

“You’ll be fine,” said her mom reassuringly.

Missy nodded, and some of her worry must have shown on her face because her mom tinkled with laughter and tweaked her nose. It was the senior ski trip – a reward for all seniors to say well done for managing to get through four years of tortuous school. Except, while the rest of the senior class was pumped for the trip, Missy was just worried. Athletic pursuits were not generally relished by the un-athletic.

Missy had been attending a warren mating, which is why her mother had agreed to drive her up to join her class mates at the end of the first day. Which meant Missy had been worrying for two and a half hours while her mother had intermittently told her she would be fine.

“Just have fun – that’s what the whole weekend’s about, remember?” her mom said before her expression became worried. “But not too much fun – don’t get too near those predator boys. We don’t mind you hanging around Britt and her sister, but boys are another matter. They only want one thing from girls like you.”

Her nose twitched in motherly concern, and Missy’s inner rabbit thumped her foot nervously. She was a rabbit shifter, and best friends with a wolf shifter called Britt. She also had a massive crush on one of Britt’s pack mates – a rather tall, rather gorgeous, and completely oblivious wolf called Eric. She felt sure her parents would go ballistic if they found out about her desperate, unrequited love. Well, as ballistic as two small, sweet, very submissive rabbit shifters could go. Though, she needn’t have worried; in spite of her mother’s assertion that all male predators only wanted to take advantage of prey shifters girls, Missy could honestly say it had never come up with Eric. Her bunny sighed and twitched her tail. More’s the pity. Not that it should really come up – he was only a junior, and wasn’t going to be there on the trip anyway.

“Mom,” she muttered while her cheeks reddened.

“You have your whistle?”

“Yes.”

“And your mace?”

“Yes.”

“Flashlight? Penknife?”

“I have everything, Mom,” she muttered.

Her mom nodded and relaxed marginally. “Good, now, have fun and I’ll see you on Monday. I love you, cottontail.”

“Love you, too,” said Missy as she hauled out her ass and her overstuffed case out of the car.

She waved goodbye to her mom, and stared down at her case – which was crammed with all sorts of things she probably wouldn’t need. But, her parents were all about being prepared for every eventuality. Which was really a must for prey shifters – you didn’t want to be caught short when shifted as a tiny bunny. There were plenty of predators, both wild and shifters, who wouldn’t give a flip about eating bunny shifters.

Missy considered that maybe she should fake an injury. She had mixed feelings about this whole trip. For one thing, she was abysmal at sports, and she felt sure that skiing would be no exception. For another, more than half the seniors were people who looked down their noses at her or ignored her in school – so why would she want to spend the weekend with them? But, Britt had persuaded her to come, and given that all they had been doing was studying recently, she agreed it might be a nice change.

“Hey.”

“Eep!”

Missy let out an embarrassing sound as she found herself face to chest with a stag shifter called Josh Gibbs. He smirked as she tried to pretend he hadn’t nearly startled her out of her fur.

“Hi,” she responded, even as her bunny huffed.

She was somewhat wary of Gibbs. Recently, his friend, James, tried to play a mean trick on Britt to try and get into her pants, but Britt’s wannabe boyfriend, Craig turned the tables on his friend, and him, and Missy helped him do it. Since then, the stag shifters had been throwing Britt, and any of her friends, dirty looks every chance they got. Though, after the incident with Britt, Gibbs seemed to have been a bit sullen – though not openly hostile like his friends.

Mostly, the stag shifters treated her with as much disdain as the predators anyway – if not more, but Gibbs had always been a little different with her. Probably because they were lab partners – he couldn’t really ignore her when they had to work together.

Now, however, he appeared quite chipper.

“Didn’t think you were coming,” he said.

“Wasn’t sure I was. There was a warren mating and I had to go, and sometimes they last for days, but they wanted to take off on their honeymoon, so my mom offered to drop me off.”

Plus, she couldn’t think of a good enough reason not to come. She blushed as she realized she was babbling. A habit of hers and one that was usually enough to persuade the more popular kids that she

wasn't worth talking to, but he didn't appear to mind, if anything, he seemed to be getting more chipper – chippier some might say.

“Yeah, I just arrived too.”

“Really?” she asked, mildly surprised by the sudden conversation.

Sure he'd always been okay, but outside of class she didn't tend to get more than a nod.

“Yeah – my little brother was in the hospital.”

“Goodness, I'm sorry to hear that, is he okay?”

He took on a serious look that was almost pouting. If she didn't know any better, she would say he was after some sympathy. Her inner bunny was a little worried.

“He broke his arm falling out of a tree – but he'll be fine.”

Missy nodded. “I'm glad he's okay. Stags aren't really meant for trees I guess.”

Gibbs shrugged. “Guess so. Do bunnies do any better climbing?”

She shook her head. “Not going by all the bumps and bruises my younger brothers have received from playing Superman, or Wonder Woman, depending on how adventurous they were feeling.”

He laughed, quite loudly, and Missy was somewhat taken aback. It wasn't polite laughter – which she wouldn't normally have expected – it was more than polite, like he was trying to ingratiate himself to her, but why on earth would he?

She started dragging her bag, and he grasped it, easily lifting it.

“Let me help you.”

“Thanks,” she murmured, momentarily stunned by this sudden charm offensive.

Even more stunned when he opened the lodge door for her. They found their English teacher – and organizer of the trip – hovering.

“Oh, Missy, Josh, I'm glad you could make it,” said Ms. Myers.

She consulted the clipboard that she seemed to carry everywhere even at school, when she didn't have her nose in a book.

“Missy, you'll be in room 216, and Josh you're in 324.”

“Thanks, Ms. Myers.”

“I’m afraid you missed dinner, but if you’re hungry, you can go and order at the bar – just say you’re part of the school party.” She handed them pieces of paper. “Now, here are your warning lists, remember to stick to them.”

“No burning candles in the room,” read Gibbs, “I’ll try and restrain myself.”

“Sarcasm is the lowest form of wit, Josh,” Ms. Myers told him sternly.

He just smirked and Missy couldn’t help a giggle.

“Breakfast is at eight, and I would draw your attention to rule thirty-two.”

Missy scanned the list and blushed. No females in any male occupied rooms and vice versa.

“Good night you two and I’ll see you in the morning,” she said before bustling off.

Gibbs snorted and immediately screwed up his list and tossed it in the trash.

“It’s kind of late, we should grab something to eat.”

“Umm, don’t you want to find your friends?”

She thought of the malodorous James and tried not to chitter aloud.

“Nah, they’ll...”

He stilled and stared ahead of him before grunting. “What is he doing here?” he grumbled under her breath.

She was going to ask whom before she spotted him – Eric. The undisputed object of her affection, and also someone who shouldn’t have been invited on this trip. Well, not just Eric, but Eric and two of his brothers – none of whom should have been on the senior ski trip because none of them were seniors. His older brother Darryl had already graduated from school, while his younger brother, Craig was a freshman. She wondered which one he was annoyed by – probably all three, since all of them had a hand in humiliating him and his friends.

“Missy!” called Britt as she jumped up from her place in front of the fire to run over and hug her.

She was followed with slightly less enthusiasm, but still happy expressions, by her twin sister, Gwen, Darryl, and Craig. Eric, she noted, stayed by the fire, completely unmoved by her arrival. Yep, he stayed where he was, where a couple of Gwen’s fellow cheerleaders were crowding him and making goo-goo eyes at him

Her inner bunny’s tail twitched.

“I didn’t think you’d make it,” gushed Britt, who, in her five-foot-ten, blonde glory looked as lovely as always.

“The mating celebrations didn’t last very long,” she explained.

“Come and join us by the fire,” said Britt, trying to tug her hand, “and we can tell you everything we did today.”

Missy hesitated as she noticed one of the cheerleaders stroking Eric’s arm.

“I should really take my bag up to my room.”

“You’re in with us, 216,” said Britt before she gave Craig an imploring look.

Craig didn’t need more prodding. “Eric, take her case up, will you?”

Eric shrugged and disengaged from the cheerleaders to lope over to her. Missy tried not to gurgle, but, well, even the way he walked gave her a severe case of the tingles.

Eric winked at her and then gave a blank look at Gibbs who appeared to be scowling in return.

“Thanks, Eric,” said Britt, handing him the key.

“You’re not supposed to be any female’s room,” grumbled Gibbs.

Eric gave him a cocky grin that suggested mere rules meant nothing to him. Oh, he was such a rebel thought her smitten inner rabbit.

“I won’t go in, I’ll just open the door and toss the case in.”

Gibbs sneered, “Whatever.”

“See you later,” murmured Missy, “and thanks for carrying my case.”

He perked up a little and smiled, but another blank, strange look from Eric had him scowling.

Missy didn’t dwell on either of them, and allowed Britt to drag her over the fire to tell her all about the many times she fell over while taking her first skiing lesson earlier.

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Eric flipped through the news reports on his ipad, and vaguely listened to Britt and Gwen chattering away. Well, not his ipad – one he had borrowed from a friend. Well, one he had liberated from a friend, but who probably would be fine with him borrowing it if he had asked. The guy was busy making out with the captain of the tennis team at the time, and Eric decided not to disturb him. Given that he had been chasing after her for two years, beating at her defenses, Eric thought the kinder option was just to take the ipad.

Eric wasn’t likely to ever own one until he could afford to buy one himself. His parents were of the opinion that none of their boys were not to be trusted with expensive electronics – something to do with them being destroyed beyond repair within half an hour of coming out of the box. It was why they

no longer had smart phones. Their dad said they wouldn't be allowed smart phones until they proved they were smart enough not to destroy them. Their dad often made jokes like that.

They had phones, but they were old and built like bricks, so even rough treatment from Eric or his brothers couldn't dent them. The iPad, though, was necessary for his research. No, not a school project – he rarely did research for those – this was something important.

"So Eric, how long have you been skiing?" asked Angela, one of Gwen's friends.

She and Katya – another of Gwen's bubbly friends had been hanging with them all day.

"Huh?"

Angela repeated the question, only mildly irritated that he wasn't giving her his full attention.

"First time today," he murmured in disinterest.

"Wow, you're a natural," said Katya brightly before her voice took on a deeper, huskier tone, "but I already knew that."

"Huh?"

His inner wolf snorted. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Katya's scowl but he ignored it. She was probably referring to a game of spin the bottle a few years back at some party where they had a kiss. A short game anyway, after a few spins he got tired of the girls' giggling and decided that it would be more fun to race Angela's pet guinea pigs, and then take her dad's ride on mower for a trip.

But even as he paid little attention to the people around him, his wolf barked in interested, and something managed to get through.

"What was that?" he snapped.

Missy startled like a bunny in headlights. "Pardon?" she stammered.

"What did you just say?" he demanded.

"Settle down, moron," chided Darryl along with a cuff to his ear.

He ignored his irritating older brother and focused on the increasingly uncomfortable bunny shifter. Ordinarily, he wouldn't be so sharp – he wasn't generally unkind – but both he and his wolf were interested in what she had to say.

"It... it was nothing," she muttered.

Britt pursed her lips, thinking her best friend was getting upset. Craig growled, thinking the object of his affection was getting upset.

Through a magnificent blush, Missy recounted, “I was just saying that it was kind of embarrassing at the mating celebration. Bunnies have this custom where we all have to get up and dance with our mates or boyfriends, and if we don’t, it’s bad luck for the new couple, and we kind of have to share a carrot between us.”

“Prey customs,” tutted Angela.

Katya snorted in agreement. Angela was a fox shifter while Katya was a bobcat.

Gwen growled at them both to hush.

“Well,” continued Missy, clearly uncomfortable, “I never have a partner for these events and always have to dance with my eldest brother who’s only twelve, and he dances on my feet, and now my feet are killing me because he’s getting really heavy and I don’t think I’m going to be able to ski, that’s all.”

“Couldn’t you find a date?” drawled Katya.

Missy blushed and Gwen and Britt growled. Missy squirmed as Eric stared at her. Confusion had his wolf grumbling.

“What about your boyfriend?”

Missy’s embarrassment abated as her confusion rose. “What boyfriend?”

“Don’t you have a boyfriend? Some guy from your warren that goes to a different school – some guy you’re supposed to mate with.”

“Does he also live in Canada?” snickered Angela.

Missy shook her head, her face bright red.

Huh. Eric frowned, and his wolf snarled in irritation.

Britt narrowed her eyes at him, clearly thinking him a lunatic, and quickly changed the subject, choosing to talk about books – a subject she probably thought wouldn’t interest him. She was right, but also, he was too distracted to be interested anyway.

“So, Eric,” started Katya.

Abruptly, he stood up, and tossed the ipad at Angela, who in her surprise caught it. “Gotta go.”

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“Why did you say Missy had a boyfriend?” asked Eric, pouncing on Gibbs as he left the dining room.

He didn’t growl, didn’t shout, he just asked – quite politely in his opinion. Still, Gibbs acted like Eric had shifted to his wolf and started chowing down on his rump. His wolf considered that wasn’t a bad idea, but Eric was more interested in answers.

Gibbs pulled himself together and tried to ask nonchalant. "What?"

"You said Missy had a boyfriend," repeated Eric.

The stag shifter tried for surprise. "Did I?"

"Yes, two years ago."

Eric remembered it as clear as day. It was at tryouts for the wrestling team. Though, most of the males trying out were pretty distracted, as the other half of the gym was taken up with gymnastic displays from the cheerleading team. But even though the backflips, one of the males had spotted Missy and Britt who were taking pictures – they were on the yearbook committee, and took pictures of all the team. Or at least he thought so; Missy certainly snapped a lot of photos of him.

Someone asked what the deal was with Britt. Eric explained about his little brother, Craig. Then they all had a good laugh at Craig's expense, though none of them seemed keen to test out just how wrathful a thirteen-year-old, lovelorn wolf shifter could be. So, their attention moved onto Missy.

His wolf didn't really like that, though he liked it even less when Gibbs told everyone she already had a mate claim – a boyfriend in her warren whom she would mate one day. He'd heard of shifter groups who made mate claims when they first started shifting – it wasn't that uncommon, but not something his pack did. Still, mate claims were important things, and Eric hadn't thought much more about it, other than the fact that Missy was off limits.

Gibbs shrugged in a stiff manner. "Can't remember." But then his demeanor changed slightly. "Just stay away from her."

Eric, and his wolf, was surprised enough to do little more than just blink at the now bristling stag shifter.

"What?"

"You heard," he hissed. "You're not interested in her."

His wolf growled lowly as understanding dawned. "Are you?"

"No, of course not!" he denied hotly. "She's just a rabbit," he hissed and glared at Eric before stomping away.

Eric frowned at his reaction but he wasn't going to dwell on it. He had more important things to worry about than a grumpy stag shifter. Something stirred excitedly.

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Missy brushed out her wavy hair and tried not to listen as Katya and Angela taunted one another about who was going to get Eric first. She rather wished she hadn't been sharing a room with them, but it could have been worse. The two girls were dismissive of her, but generally not cruel – she was mostly beneath their notice.

Britt cast her sympathetic looks but didn't say anything. She knew of her crush on Eric but wasn't about to broadcast it to the world. Britt glanced at Gwen who nodded slightly.

"Ugh, get off my bed," Gwen growled at Katya, pushing her off the bed and effectively ending her boasting about how she had once made out with Eric.

Katya glared up at her from the floor. "That's my bed, you psycho!"

"Really? Silly me!" exclaimed Gwen.

She winked at Missy who tried not to smile. Gwen was beautiful, popular and a predator – she could get away with things like that. If Missy had done that, Katya would already be cooking up rabbit stew.

"I'm gonna head down to breakfast," she said, hoping that she could avoid Katya and Angela's company as much as possible – they still had to put their make up on – they'd be a while yet.

She got out of the room and let out an eep as she found Eric leaning against the wall, idly waiting. Her bunny melted a little – as usual, and then fluttered a little – as usual.

"Eric!"

His lips curled into a lazy grin. "Morning."

"Oh ummm, are you..."

She assumed he was waiting for Katya or maybe Angela, but before she could voice her dismal thoughts, he interrupted.

"So you said you weren't interested in skiing."

"Oh umm, no, my foot."

She pointed down at it as if proving a point. Truthfully, it was okay – yes, at the time, she did think her brother was breaking all the bones in it, but she healed fast.

Eric rocked on his feet. "Any plans for the day?"

"Well, I thought I might just stay here and..."

Eric nodded, not really listening. He didn't really listen. Just tended to steamroll over whatever anyone was saying. He was someone who was very much his own person, someone who didn't care what people thought of him, who did as he pleased, uncaring very much as to whether he was popular or liked, and she liked that very much. He was aloof yet somehow warm and charming at the same time. Half the girls in school liked that too, though, she wasn't aware that he had dated anyone in over a year.

"I was thinking of ditching skiing too," he said.

"Really, I thought you were enjoying..."

“Got other plans.”

He pushed off from the wall to move closer to her, towering over her small form, and grinning with all his teeth. Her bunny quivered.

“You wanna go on an adventure?”

Missy gulped, thinking of her mom’s warning, but even as she thought about it, she realized she was nodding.

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Gibbs glared as the big oaf slipped an arm around Missy’s shoulders and led her away. His inner stag rumbled in irritation.

What was that idiot doing there anyway? Gibbs had thought he would at least have the weekend alone with her to... to... Well, he didn’t know what ‘to’ would entail, but he was kind of hoping he might get somewhere with her. He wasn’t interested in having her a girlfriend – his herd wouldn’t let him live that down – but he liked her, and he was kind of hoping that she might want to, maybe, fool around a bit. But she wouldn’t pay him any attention with that damn wolf around.

Asshole.

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Missy blinked up at the sign. Bigfoot Spotters Welcome.

Naturally, when he said go on an adventure, her mind leaped to all sorts of naughty things that, of course, her prudish little rabbit would pretend she wanted no part in, though, really, she definitely did. Eric pulled off his sweater to reveal a t-shirt that said Bigfoot lives.

She looked at him askance, her surprise for once eclipsing how much the sight of all his muscles in a tight t-shirt made her tremble.

Really? He was a closet Bigfoot fan. Though, given the t-shirt, obviously, he wasn’t trying to hide it.

“Where exactly are we?” she asked as he helped her out of her coat.

He hadn’t said a word as he brought her there. He had rented a sled, or at least, charmed the woman renting the sleds into giving him one for free. Then he popped her on it, slipped in front of her and told her to hang on. She was enjoying herself too much to argue or ask questions. If she didn’t know Eric, she might have been worried when he arrived at this remote cabin.

“Cabin being rented by Charles over there.”

Eric pointed at a sleek male who appeared to be in his late forties. He was well dressed and well groomed, and looked like he had plenty of money to make him look both of those things. He didn’t look

like an average Bigfoot enthusiast, but then, neither did Eric, so Missy had to admit she probably didn't know what an average enthusiast would look like.

"He has buttload of money," explained Eric, "and is spending it trying to find Bigfoot."

Missy forced herself to smile, a little uncertain of how she should react to all of this. Even her smitten bunny was stumped. She looked around at all the many people chatting. There were so many of them. The cabin was enormous, but looked crowded with all its occupants.

"Oh, well everyone needs a hobby," she said weakly. She was proud of herself for managing to say that. "I collect Care Bears." Her bunny kicked her for admitting that.

Eric grinned. "There have been a ton of unexplained attacks around here recently, and a couple of hikers swore it was Bigfoot, but the picture they took was all blurry because it was snowing."

Her bunny chattered doubtfully. Why did cameras always malfunction around Bigfoot? "Oh, well that's..."

"We think we have a good shot at seeing him," continued Eric, oblivious as always.

"Yes, so..."

"Attention everyone!" called the Charles fellow, in frankly a bossy voice.

Eric maneuvered her in front of him and placed his hands on her shoulders. She smiled and blushed and, given the crowd of people, took the opportunity to nestle against him. He didn't notice anything amiss.

Charles went through a few things about the recent sightings, as well as a few safety precautions given by the local rangers. He even had a slide show of the pictures taken by the hikers, and a few pictures taken by other people of footprints that were mostly smushy blurs. Missy listened mystified while everyone else listened in rapt attention.

When he finally wrapped up, there was a mass exodus as everyone attempted to put on their coats and get out the door first. They had arrived last so were basically at the back of the cabin. Missy let out an eep as a horde of determined Bigfoot spotters launched at her. But Eric merely pushed her behind her and shielded her. People didn't tend to walk into Eric, or if they did, they didn't do it twice. Bouncing off a six-foot-eight wall of muscle was not an experience people tended to want to repeat.

When nearly everyone had left – a few stragglers were inspecting the photos of Bigfoot – Eric turned to her and grinned excitedly.

"So, let's get going. We won't go far – because of your foot, and Ms. Myers would probably have a heart attack if we weren't back by five. But, who knows, maybe we'll see him!"

Missy gulped. "Oh, umm, okay."

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“Wouldn’t it make more sense if we all went in different directions?” asked Missy.

Eric shrugged as he watched the various other spotters hovering around, covertly staring at each other in suspicion.

“Bigfoot spotters are pretty self-interested – we all want to be the one who discovers Bigfoot. So while we’re happy to chat and be friendly, it’s every man for himself out here. I mean, every one for themselves,” he corrected.

She giggled, relaxing a little, and he chuckled as her nose twitched, making his wolf growl softly. So far she seemed mildly stunned by what they were doing. But she wasn’t laughing or glaring at him in horror, so things could be a lot worse.

“Let’s go this way,” he said pointing to the woods.

She nodded and followed him. “You don’t seem that competitive,” commented Missy as they navigated a fallen log.

Eric rolled a shoulder as he helped her over it. “Not worth getting upset about. If it happens, it happens.”

“How did you get into all this? I had no idea you were interested in Bigfoot,” she inquired interestedly.

“Have been since I was six. Documentary on TV – the monster channel. After that, I was hooked,” he told her proudly.

He loved the idea of finding Bigfoot, of there being another species as yet undiscovered. In a world filled with shifters, witches, and vampires – where magic was an everyday concept that it had become mundane - the idea of there being something else out there was amazing. He was sure Bigfoot had to be a shifter though – how else would he hide so well?

He told her as much.

Missy’s brow furrowed and her nose twitched as she thought about it. “Yes, I suppose that would make more sense,” she said thoughtfully.

He grinned at her and she blushed slightly.

“Does your family know about this?”

“Sure. I don’t try to hide it. I’m the president of the Bigfoot club at school.”

Missy’s jaw dropped. “You are? I had no idea there was one.”

“Yeah, Coach Fuller is the faculty advisor – he didn’t want to be, but I threatened to quit wrestling if he didn’t agree to do it.”

“I thought you liked wrestling.”

“Yeah, I do, but I wouldn’t cry about it if I couldn’t do it again.” Wrestling was fun, but it wasn’t a patch on Bigfoot spotting for sheer enjoyment.

“How many members are there?”

“Just me.”

“Just you?”

“Yeah, I sit around surfing the web and watching documentaries for an hour a week. Plus, no one eats all the snacks I put out. Katya wanted to join but it clashed with cheerleading practice.”

Missy’s heart shape mouth pursed. “But if it was just you, you could have had the meetings whenever you...” Her eyes widened in shock as realization dawned. “You made sure it clashed!”

He snickered. “Can you imagine Katya out here looking for Bigfoot with me?”

“Not without whining about breaking a nail,” she murmured before letting out an eep. “Sorry!”

His wolf chuffed at her joke. Though, it wasn’t much of a joke – really just an observation.

“Why are you sorry?”

“I’m not usually mean,” she muttered.

“Once a year won’t hurt you.”

Missy smiled sweetly in gratitude, and his chest inflated slightly.

They walked in silence for a few minutes. He didn’t know if he ever would find Bigfoot. It seemed unlikely given that many a person had tried before him and come up empty handed. But it certainly wasn’t going to happen today. Their loud talking probably wasn’t conducive to finding a creature prone to hiding. Plus, Missy kept walking and branches and almost tripping, occasionally letting out eeps. But, he wasn’t making much of an effort. His wolf wasn’t even bothering to sniff out any wild animals in the hope that it might be the wild one he was after. Nope, his wolf couldn’t get past the smell coming from Missy. She smelled like carrot cake – his favorite cake, and given how much competition it had, that was really saying something.

“You brought me out here,” said Missy, picking the conversation up.

“Yeah.”

“I thought that you and Katya used to date.”

He snorted and his wolf growled.

"I kissed her on the cheek once during spin the bottle, and I was getting over a cold so it was a damn snotty kiss. She just goes around acting like we were... What's the name of that couple?"

"Batman and Robin?" suggested Missy.

He hooted with laughter. "Nah, nothing so interesting, I meant like Romeo and Juliet. Haven't had a girlfriend in, jeez, couple of years now."

He hadn't been clamoring for a girlfriend. He had somehow contracted a reputation at school for being a ladies man, but he wasn't sure how. He liked Bigfoot first, wrestling second, and sometimes for a change, he was also kind of into woodwork. Girlfriends had hardly been high on his list of interests, probably because they interfered with the other things he liked. Though, he didn't have any worries about Missy in that respect.

"Katya seems interested," grumbled Missy, "so does Angela."

Eric stopped and rubbed the back of his neck. "Yeah, don't know why. If they knew the real me they wouldn't bother. Let's take a break."

Missy nodded and sank onto a log gratefully, pulling out a bottle of water. She offered it to him and he took a swig. Yeah, probably would have been a good idea to bring some water. Though, if desperate, he could always eat the snow.

"My last girlfriend thought I was nuts for all the Bigfoot stuff. She was probably right."

"Oh, I don't know about that," she said shyly. "Did she dump you because of it?"

"Nah, she moved away – think she was relieved. I asked her if she'd be on the lookout for Bigfoot in Canada, but I don't think she was impressed by that." Eric chuckled, remembering the look of horror on her face. Anyone would think he had asked her to be on the lookout for the Loch Ness Monster – which also existed.

Eric gave her a long look. "You don't necessarily believe Bigfoot's out there."

Her cheeks reddened. "Well, I... I'd be thrilled if he was, but not surprised if he wasn't."

"Good answer."

He held out his hand to her, and with a deepening blush, she took it.

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Katya elbowed Angela sharply.

"Ow, what did you..."

Katya rolled her eyes and hissed at her to hush. "Look over there!"

Angela looked up and growled as she saw Eric talking to that... that dumpy prey girl!

Katya and Angela had been looking for Eric all day. He was nowhere to be seen at the skiing lessons, and had been awol at lunch, and they, in spite of both donning tiny bikinis, were disappointed that he wasn't in the sauna.

But now he had just rolled into the lodge with that bunny shifter! What the hell?!

They watched as he led Missy toward the restaurant. Un-freaking-believable!

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Missy shuffled from foot to foot while her inner beast chittered impatiently. Maybe it was her imagination, but she could have sworn that Eric had been flirting with her yesterday. Okay, so maybe he was just being friendly – so few boys had ever flirted that she wasn't sure what it looked like – but she was certainly enjoying the attention, and wouldn't mind it to continue for a little while longer. Which was why she was standing outside his door, waiting for him to emerge so early in the morning.

The door opened and she inhaled, smiling in spite of feeling like she ought to act cool. But as her bunny twittered expectantly, she rationalized that she had never acted cool before, so why start now?

But, her bubbly excitement halted as Darryl sidled through the door. Apparently, he had been allowed to come on the trip as some kind of chaperone. She had almost choked when Gwen told her that – he was surely more irresponsible than the entire senior class put together. It was supposed to be his mom, but stayed home to help with her grandkids who were both sick. So, Darryl graciously offered to come in her place. Yes, a free skiing trip and the chance to make out with his girlfriend was surely a decider in that, and as Darryl smirked knowingly at her, she sorely wished it had been his mom there.

She blushed and looked at her hiking boots.

He leaned back into the room. "Eric, someone to see you, bro."

"How did you..." she started, wondering how he knew for certain it was Eric she wished to see. But the knowing look just intensified, and she realized that Eric was probably the only person on the planet who didn't know she had a massive crush on him.

Darryl winked and loped away, just as Eric crashed through the door, pulling his Bigfoot t-shirt on. A wide smile blossomed on his face and her embarrassment was forgotten.

"Hey."

Missy gulped and her bunny swooned at the just-woken, tousled wolf standing before her. "Hi, I umm, wondered if you wanted to get an early start."

Eric looked her up and down. Today, she was prepared for the Bigfoot hunt. She had stuffed a backpack full of snacks, water, a notebook, and a camera. As well as a few things that the rangers advised her

about when hiking – like a flare gun, and a knife. Plus, she had all the things her mom sent her out the door with every morning.

He looked down at the bulging backpack.

“I umm, thought it best to go prepared.”

Eric nodded. “Great, let’s go.”

“You should grab a sweater... and a coat... also, you’re not wearing shoes.”

Eric hooted with laughter. “Good thinking. Give me ten seconds.”

He crashed back into the room, causing a ruckus that elicited many complaints from his other roommates, but he was with her and ready to go in ten seconds, and her bunny flipped in excitement.

*

“Where on earth did he go?” demanded Katya.

Angela scowled at her. As if she would know any better than her. Angela woke up when that stupid Missy girl was sneaking out of the room. Angela had thought to follow her, leaving Katya behind, but Katya woke up when Darryl – the idiot – arrived, trying to rouse Gwen for an early breakfast. Katya spotted her and soon wheedled the truth out. Now, they were looking for Eric and the dumb bunny, but they seemed to have disappeared.

“That cow, Missy, has made him go somewhere,” snarled Katya, momentarily forgetting that a five-foot-three bunny shifter couldn’t really physically force a six-foot-eight wolf shifter to do anything they didn’t want.

They both jumped as they heard a rumble. Angela inwardly groaned as Gibbs joined them. She didn’t particularly like him or his friends, particularly as his friend had slept with two of her fellow cheerleaders and then dumped them the next day. He was dick – and Gibbs was a dick by association.

“They went off on a snow sled,” he grumbled.

Katya scowled. “It’s disgusting the way Missy chases after him – she should get it into her fat head that he isn’t interested.”

Gibbs glowered. “It’s disgusting the way he leads her on when he isn’t interested.”

The two started arguing and Angela rolled her eyes, uninterested in what either had to say. She’d had a crush on Eric for months – half the females in school did, but no matter what, he didn’t seem to take the hint. Up until a couple of weeks ago, she was dating a lynx shifter, but then he started making noises about how he had to mate someone from his pride, and he dumped her. Now he was dating some mousy, ugly lynx from his pride, a d if she took up with Eric that would really make him jealous.

“Did you see which way they went?” she asked impatiently.

Gibbs nodded.

“Then let’s go stop them from doing something stupid.”

Angela marched toward the sleds, hearing the crunch of snow behind her as they both followed.

*

Missy peered at the footprint. “I don’t know, it kind of looks like a bear print.” She straightened, wide eyed. “Oh no, do you think there are bears out here?”

“Yeah,” Eric replied mildly.

“What?!” Her nose scrunched and she looked around, as if searching for danger.

His wolf chuffed and he chuckled. “It’ll be fine.”

“Spoken like someone who isn’t a tiny bunny shifter,” she grumbled.

Eric placed a hand on her shoulder. “I’ll protect you,” he told her earnestly.

She looked into his eyes and smiled sweetly. “Just as long as you protect yourself too,” she murmured.

They locked eyes for a few moments before she blushed and looked down. “You should take a few pictures. I’m going to measure the size of the footprint.”

Eric raised his eyebrows as Missy pulled out a camera and handed it to him, before taking out a measuring tape and jotting down the measurements. He was surprised, and mightily impressed, and very pleased at how Missy was throwing herself into this. He generally didn’t plan for any of his Bigfoot expeditions – he just threw himself into it without any preparation.

“You came prepared,” he commented in approval.

Missy shrugged. “That’s thanks to my mom – she says a bunny always has to be prepared.”

She finished her notes and put her book into the backpack. Eric pulled it onto his shoulder. He obviously offered to carry it – the thing was so big, it would have toppled Missy.

“So what kind of attacks have happened recently?” she asked. “You said that’s there were a lot around here recently. By the way, how did you persuade Ms. Myers to let you come on the trip? It’s supposed to be seniors only.”

Eric rolled a shoulder and gave her a cocky look. “Coach sorted it out for me and Craig. We told him we wanted to come, and he thought, given that we are his star athletes, we deserved it. He smoothed it out with Ms. Myers. Reckon she has a huge crush on him - he could get her to do anything he wanted.”

Missy gave him a dark look, and he considered that he had said something inappropriate, but he wasn't entirely sure what. His wolf rumbled uncertainly so he quickly moved on.

Eric cleared his throat. "I've been reading the news reports. There was one incident where a guy was trying to break into a woman's house and he swore something big and hairy stopped him. Then there one where this drunk guy was pursuing a woman, and he swore something big and hairy stopped him."

"Sounds like Bigfoot's quite the knight in shining armor," she said with a wry smile.

Eric frowned and his wolf grumbled, not liking the way she said that, or that she seemed so pleased by it.

"Come on." They walked for a few minutes in silence until she made a few mewling sounds. "You know if you've had enough, just say the word and I'll take you back to the lodge. I love tramping around looking for Bigfoot, but I get it if you don't."

"No, I'm enjoying myself."

He beamed and her cheeks bloomed red.

"I just have a stone in my shoe."

She turned an even darker shade of embarrassed as he kneeled in front of her. He held her leg while he divested her of her shoe and got rid of the offending stone. She giggled uproariously and her foot wiggled as she proclaimed she was ticklish.

When she finally calmed, she scrunched her nose in thought and pointed at a tree. "Look, there's broken branches here."

They took a closer look, and indeed, there were a lot of branches broken, clearly by something lumbering through the branches, rather than something like the wind merely moving the branches.

"Something big came through here," he murmured.

"It could have been a bear," she said, slightly anxiously, but then she relaxed and added, "but then, it could have been Bigfoot."

Eric smiled. "You're right. Nice one, eagle eye. You could be quite the little detective."

Missy shook her head, pretending she wasn't so pleased. "Well, my family loves that show Monk – we have the DVDs."

"Yeah?"

"Yes, it's nice and there's no gore or swearing and ummm... well, we are rabbit shifters." Missy coughed to hide her embarrassment. "Take some pictures and I'll make some notes."

His wolf chuffed in pleasure.

*

"How's your foot?" asked Eric.

Missy glanced at him in surprise before she flushed, remembering that it was supposed to be injured. Or at least, semi-injured.

"Oh ummm, ah... okay."

"Not actually injured, right?"

Missy shook her head. "Well, my brother bounced up and down on my feet pretty hard, but no, they're fine. I just didn't want to embarrass myself while trying to ski. People would have laughed at me."

"You shouldn't worry about what people think," he said mildly.

"That's easy for you to say," she blurted and she was about to apologize, but his questioning look made her blurt a whole heap of other things best left unsaid. "You're a giant wolf shifter, you're handsome and friendly, and a star athlete. You can do whatever you want and nobody bats an eyelid, even something as..."

Thankfully, her bunny put her oversized foot down before she blurted out the rest, though, he could guess where she was going.

"Even something as goofy as Bigfoot hunting?"

Missy cringed. Eric was the last person on earth she wanted to offend. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be – you're right, it is goofy."

"You used the word goofy," she retorted.

Eric laughed heartily. "And I don't care, I enjoy it, so I do it, and maybe I'll never see Bigfoot, but hey, at least I'll have done something I enjoyed." He stopped and took her arm, halting her. "You really shouldn't worry about what people think."

Missy nodded. "You're right." Though, she probably would have agreed with absolutely anything he said.

"Also handsome apparently," he teased.

"Oh, I'm..." Drowning in mortification?

"Don't say sorry, I enjoyed hearing that. Gorgeous girls don't tell me I'm handsome every day."

"I bet they do," she scoffed and then blinked at him as she realized what he said. Her bunny preened, but her first reaction was denial. "I'm not gorgeous."

Eric grinned. "Yeah, you are."

She tried to voice another objection, but none wanted to come out. Wasn't it always something she wanted – for Eric to think her attractive? Well, yes, obviously – that desire was even greater than when she was seven and she wanted a unicorn. Her rabbit yipped ecstatically.

His brow creased thoughtfully. "Do you really not have a boyfriend?"

Missy raised her eyebrows. "No. You said that last night – why would you think I did?"

He hesitated. "Just someone said you did."

"Who? I don't have one, I've never... ah... Well I uh, I have in second grade but he was just using me to get my milk."

"Milk seducer," he growled with a surprising amount of force that it made her giggle.

He relaxed at her laughter and even joined in. She watched in fascination as his hand ran down her arm and closed around her hand. He had such big, strong hands.

They were quiet for a few beats, and when he finally spoke, his voice was low and husky. "Last couple of years, I thought you had a guy waiting for you – some kind of mate claim going on."

"Who told you I did?" she asked in curiosity.

"Doesn't matter. Some guy."

"He must have had me confused with someone else."

"Yeah, that must be it," he replied sourly and then shook his head. "Can't believe you were single this whole time."

"Yeah, because rabbit shifters get all the boys," she murmured.

Then he kissed. Both woman and rabbit stilled as the wolf kissed them. He bent down – well he had to given their height differences, and he pressed his lips to hers. It was nothing x-rated. It was just a soft, brief kiss, and... and... it was the greatest moment of her life! Her bunny bounced around, only lamenting how quick the kiss had been.

Eric pulled away, giving her a curious look. He probably wondered how she would react. Her natural move, when surprised, was that of a stunned mullet, and she didn't disappoint.

"You kissed me!" she breathed.

He relaxed. "Yep, sure did."

"Eric Tanner just kissed me. He just leaned down and kissed me."

Amusement danced over his lips – which she now knew to be incredibly soft, perfect lips. “Yes, that’s an accurate recap.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah, wow,” he agreed proudly.

“I didn’t think you knew I existed.”

He frowned. “You’ve been tutoring me for two years.”

“Well, okay, yes, I knew you knew I was alive, but I didn’t think you knew I really existed.”

Eric looked at her thoughtfully. “Going by what you just said, I’m starting to wonder if you are the right person to tutor me.”

She slapped his arm – it was like hitting hardened concrete. “You know what I mean.”

“Not really. You’ve been tutoring me while I was hoping that you broke up with your boyfriend so I had a chance.”

Missy looked at him wondrously while her rabbit simpered. “You wanted a chance with me?”

“Yeah,” he admitted nonchalantly – as if he wasn’t absolutely rocking her whole world!

“You don’t think it was weird that I never mentioned my boyfriend?”

Eric huffed. “I was glad you didn’t, and besides, I’m not a smart guy – you’ve been tutoring me for two years and I still haven’t learned anything. Well, apart from that thing about the Boston Tea Party inventing Boston Cream Pie.”

Missy tried not to wince. “Maybe I’m not a good tutor.”

He smiled leeringly. “Maybe I spent our sessions trying to look down your top.”

“Eric!” she exclaimed.

He chuckled and leaned down to kiss her again as snow started falling around them.

*

“They can’t move that fast – not given how stubby her legs are,” growled Katya.

Gibbs rumbled, but not very loudly. He didn’t really want to spend time with either of these females, but if one, or both, could throw themselves at Eric and distract him from Missy, Gibbs would be grateful.

They found where Eric and Missy left their sled, and had apparently proceeded on foot through the trees. They were trying to track them, but it was snowing quite heavily now, and that combined with a

lot of other scents of wildlife and whatnot pretty much masked a wonderful, innocent rabbit shifter and the oaf who was leading her astray.

“Maybe we should turn back,” said Angela doubtfully.

Katya snarled at her as she forged ahead, stomping away in spite of the fact that she had no idea where she was going, or that she couldn’t see more than six inches in front of her.

“We can barely see where we’re going,” added Angela defensively.

“Maybe she’s right,” muttered Gibbs.

He had to consider the fact that Missy wasn’t an idiot – true, she had awful taste in males – but she wasn’t foolhardy about other things. She probably would have turned back by now too. He was sure Eric was an idiot, but Missy had common sense.

Katya growled at both of them. “Suit yourself! But I’m not leaving. I’m not...”

Katya’s words were lost as she disappeared out of view.

Angela and Gibbs gasped, but before they could do anything, the ground gave way beneath them.

*

“I’m sorry we didn’t find anything,” said Missy.

Eric grinned at her and she blushed. He took hold of her coat and pulled it a little tighter around her, ostensibly because the snow was really coming down, but mostly because he was enjoying himself, and would take any excuse to touch her. His wolf howled happily.

How many times over the past year had he looked at her, thought she was cute, and then grumbled as he remembered she already had a mate claim? He’d known Missy a good few years, but it wasn’t until he turned sixteen that he really started noticing her. He started noticing her sweet smile, the way her nose twitched, how she was nice and kind to everyone – even the ones who didn’t deserve it. Even dickish stag shifters. Grrr.

He wasn’t like his brother, Craig – he didn’t have his first shift, look at her, and decide they were destined to be together. His brother was downright nuts in his pursuit of Britt. But yeah, whenever he looked at Missy, his wolf had a strange yearning when it came to her - one that he had been trying to ignore, but well, he didn’t really see why he should now. Nope, he had a lot of ideas of the things he wanted to do with Missy – curling up in front of a fire with mugs of cocoa sounded pretty good for a start.

Not letting her freeze to death was probably a better start grumbled his inner beast. Eric concurred with that and briskly dusted the snow off their sled, except... it wasn’t their sled. Theirs was blue and this was red.

“Ouch!”

Rawr! Eric bounded over to Missy, who was rubbing her shin. She had hit a large lump covered in snow. He dusted it off and realized it was their sled. He took a long sniff and recognized one particular scent.

“Someone else is out here,” said Missy in her worried voice. It was the same voice she used when wondering whether there were bears. She sniffed at the sled and gasped. “I think I can smell Angela’s perfume.

“Yes,” he growled in agreement. Nothing could quite mask that noxious scent.

He glanced up and down, hoping Angela, and probably Katya, was about to appear, but no such luck.

“Should we look for them?” wondered Missy. “I think we should look for them.”

Eric growled. He didn’t really want to, not because he was an unkind person, but because he didn’t want his little bunny to be in any danger. If it was just him, he would bound off in search, but he wasn’t sure about Missy – he didn’t want her to freeze for the sake of a pair of females who wouldn’t even give her the time of day.

“You stay here, and I’ll...”

“No, I’m coming too,” she argued.

“Nope, too dangerous.”

“But I...”

Their argument was cut short by a strange animal-like sound. Like a growl crossed with a grumble.

Missy grasped his arm. “Do you think that was a bear?”

“Don’t know,” he muttered grimly as his wolf bared his fangs.

“We should...” She paused. “Did you hear that? It sounded like someone was calling for help.”

“I heard. Stay...”

“Nuh-uh, I’m definitely coming too.” She dove into the backpack and pulled out flashlights and a flare gun. “I’m not letting you run off to get hurt.”

Eric sighed at the stubbornly cute expression on her face. His wolf humphed, though, he did have to admit that he wasn’t keen on leaving her alone – what if a rabid bear turned up while she was waiting for him? What if that idiot, Gibbs showed up and tried to persuade her to date him instead? Yeah, he’d scented Gibbs on the sled too, but hadn’t mentioned that to Missy. He was half-hoping the lying jackass would get eaten by one of the aforementioned rabid bears.

“Just stay behind me,” he ordered as he took her hand and started striding toward the noises they heard.

Missy trotted behind him, using him as a windshield, and when he stopped abruptly, she collided into him.

“What’s... oh, holy Easter egg!” exclaimed Missy as she laid her eyes on what had surprised him.

“It’s... it’s...”

He tried to make words, but they wouldn’t come out. For once, he was completely lost for words. Even his boisterous wolf was silent in amazement.

Both Eric and Massy gaped at the sight before them. A huge beast with mottled brown and white hair appeared to be dragging Angela out of the ground. He had to be seven and a half, maybe eight feet tall. Not bigger than the largest bear on the planet, but still pretty big, and that was where the similarities ended. It was more man than bear, though an overgrown, overly hairy man with a huge head and long arm. Not to mention the feet – as expected, given the name, they were damn big.

“Eric,” murmured Missy squeezing his hand.

“I know.”

“It’s beautiful.”

His wolf snapped out of his reverential trance at that. This thing could only be called beautiful in the broadest terms possible – in the way that watching an orca whale devour a penguin could be called beautiful. It could be considered beautiful because it was nature and the creatures were wild – even though it wasn’t beautiful in the least. At least, that’s what his inner beast thought – and not just because he was jealous either.

“Camera,” she said.

“Yeah, camera.”

“No, camera – take a picture,” she said under her breath urgently.

“Oh, right.”

He still had the thing hung around his neck, safely ensconced under his sweater. He fumbled trying to extricate it while keeping an eye on Bigfoot as he appeared to fish Gibbs and Katya out of the hole too.

Eric quickly snapped a few pictures and the beast looked up, howled, and took off like he was on fire.

Missy clutched at his arm, panting slightly – he assumed she had been holding her breath like him. “Oh my... that was... that was... incredible!” she squealed excitedly.

“Yeah, it was!” cried Eric, sweeping her into his arms and kissing her soundly.

If it weren't for the fact that it was snowing heavily, and that three of their classmates were groaning and in need of help, it would have been a perfect moment.

*

"See? Can't you see it's Bigfoot?"

Britt gave Missy a doubtful and slightly worried expression as she looked through the photos on the camera.

"All I see is heavy snowfall and a brown smudge."

Missy took the camera back and flicked through the photos, chewing on her lip. "I guess they're not that clear, but it was definitely Bigfoot."

"Umm hmm."

Britt exchanged a glance with Craig who was just as doubtful, though he wasn't as restrained. He placed his index finger next to his temple and moved it around in circles.

"Ignore them," rumbled Eric as he slipped an arm around Missy and dragged her closer. "No imaginations."

Britt pursed her lips at Eric. She thought that Eric was leading her astray. Missy knew that for a fact, because when they finally returned, Britt had said as much. Britt assumed that because Missy had a crush on him she would do whatever he wanted. Well, she didn't really know whether she would or not – he hadn't asked her to do anything outrageous yet. Her bunny sighed. Yes, yes, more's the pity. But while she had, at first, thought Bigfoot hunting was kind of silly, now she was super pumped to get out there and try again.

Gibbs, Katya, and Angela were fine. They had superficial bruises from falling into a huge hole but their shifter genes would heal them. Eric confidentially told her he thought the hole was probably a Bigfoot trap made by Charles, but he didn't want to get the guy in trouble so they decided to keep that fact to themselves. Gibbs might have sustained one or two head injuries as Eric roughly dragged him back to the sleds too, but she was sure he would heal.

When they finally got back to the lodge – with Gibbs, Angela, and Katya strapped to the sleds – Ms. Myers had been beside herself. When she was sure they were all okay, she plied them with blankets and cocoa until they were in danger of getting heatstroke and needed to go to the bathroom every five minutes. Ms. Myers wasn't a shouter, so Coach Fuller had done the shouting, telling them how reckless they were, and how they could have been seriously hurt and so on and so forth.

Missy and Eric hadn't paid much attention, they had been too eager to question the other three about their encounter with Bigfoot. Sadly, none of them seemed to recall anything after the fall. Angela and Katya were furious with Eric, blaming him for what happened, telling him it was clearly all his fault. He didn't waste time arguing, just grinned at them until they stomped away in a huff. Gibbs, meanwhile,

had just been surly, and glared at Eric – he too seemed to think what happened was Eric’s fault, though, Missy didn’t really see how it could be his fault. Again, Eric just grinned at him until he left them.

They then had to endure much teasing from his brothers, a lot of smirks from Gwen, and disapproval from Britt, but they were finally relaxing and telling them all about seeing Bigfoot. Of course, none of them believed them. Gwen laughed uproariously when she found out about Eric’s hobby, while Britt just smiled politely as she might at someone who told her they were the reincarnated soul of Sherlock Holmes.

Eric took her hand and led her away from everyone else. His brother made a few wolf whistles and he gave them the finger, but nothing seemed to dent his good mood.

“Pretty amazing day, huh?” he murmured.

He smiled lazily and pushed a lock of hair behind her ear. Ooh, as if her bunny wasn’t already melting.

“I know. I still can’t believe we saw Bigfoot! We need to think about what we’re going to do next.”

Eric chuckled. “I meant about us.”

Missy blinked up at him and he seemed to falter for a second.

“I didn’t just imagine those kisses, right?”

She blushed in pleasure. “No, they were amazing too.”

“Just not as amazing as seeing Bigfoot?” he teased.

She giggled. “No, I think they may have him beat.”

“So, I got something to ask you. Something important.”

Her bunny thumped her feet excitedly. “Yes?”

He looked down, breathed in and out and then looked into her eyes, and, in a serious tone, asked, “You wanna be vice president of the Bigfoot club?”

Missy cried with laughter and nodded. Eric swooped in for a kiss and her bunny fainted in happiness.

The end