Three Little Bears

By Lish McBride

I have a hard time with shoelaces. My boots are warded against fire, water, and acid, which is more useful than you know, but shoelaces aren’t actually connected to the boot itself, and would have to be warded separately. Only, they’re too small, and honestly not worth the effort and energy it would take. They are surprisingly easy to melt, scorch, and burn if I’m not careful.

 “You’re ridiculous,” Bianca said, digging into a small bag and handing me three new packages of shoelaces she’d bought at the little corner drugstore. Since I had been busy sitting on a bench and using Sid’s knife to cut the remaining laces off, Bianca had gone in for efficiencies sake. One pair was for my boots, and two to tuck into my jacket for future issues.

 “I’m nervous, okay?”

 “I know you’re not nervous about the job. That would make too much sense.” Even though her sunglasses hid her super light gray eyes, I could still feel them examining me. Like everything she does, it’s efficient. Bianca is the deft slice of the surgeon’s scalpel. I’m more like a sledgehammer wielded by someone who was drunk and had never handled tools. Sid, my other companion for today, would probably qualify as a monkey wrench, heavy on the monkey part.

 “Why would that make too much sense?” Sid tried to dig through Bianca’s bag, only to get his hand smacked.

 “Because normal people would be freaked out by dealing with angry were-bears. Ava? No. Not normal. Therefore, it’s not the bears.”

 Sid nodded thoughtfully, and then tried for the bag again.

 Bianca smacked his hand harder. “You will get snacks when we get in the car. No sooner.”

 “Violence isn’t the answer,” Sid grumbled, shaking his hand.

 I did my own subtle check on them while I finished putting in the new laces. Sid and Bianca had both been cleared by the doctor and given a full bill of health. It was harder to tell with Bianca, what with her being so pasty to begin with, but you could still see the effects of the sickness. They were both a little skinnier, a little shaken. I didn’t think they should be working yet, but people didn’t listen to me.

 “We’re not going to crumble into dust, Ava,” Bianca said, frowning.

 Okay, so I guess I wasn’t so subtle. I finished tying my new laces and stood, stretching before our car ride.

 I must have looked doubtful because Bianca added, “Do you really think Alistair would clear me for field work if I wasn’t one hundred percent? You guys, yeah, because who cares, but me?”

 Since our boss was overly protective of Bianca, I could see her point.

 “Did that help?” she asked, climbing into the passenger seat of Sid’s van. I slid into the bench seat behind her while Sid adjusted the review mirror and settled into the driver’s seat.

 “It did actually, yeah. I’m a lot less worried about my backup collapsing and needing immediate medical attention.” I clicked my seatbelt shut and settled in.

 Bianca snorted. “Ava, you’re the back up. The idea of you talking to upset were-bears and actually calming them down is hysterical. Diplomacy isn’t your strong suit.”

 “Is it yours?” Sid asked, checking his mirrors.

 “No,” Bianca admitted. “But I’m better at it than you guys.” She started passing out snacks, because Bianca knows her audience. It took me a second to realize she was handing me double of everything. I mean, I eat a lot, but really.

 “Am I eating for two? Is there something you need to tell me, Bianca?”

 “The rest is for Olive, who’s hiding in the back.”

 There was a muffled curse, and then Olive uncovered herself and moved into the seat next to me, quickly divesting me of her portion of the snack booty.

 “How’d you know?” Olive asked through a mouthful of chips.

 “Don’t talk with your mouth full,” Sid said automatically, at the same time as Bianca said, “I pay attention.”

 Olive swallowed her mouthful of chips. “Do I have to go home?”

 Bianca pursed her lips. “That’s kind of up to Sid, but it’s okay on my end. We should be relatively safe, and we could use your reconnaissance skills and tracking.” She turned in her seat, pointing a finger at Olive. “But you listen and don’t argue with any command I give you, or you stay in the car, got it?”

 Olive saluted and then went back to her chips.

 To those that don’t know Olive, it might seem weird to let a kid come with us on a Coterie job. But honestly? I forget how young Olive is. She’s shrewd, skilled, and pretty ruthless. I wouldn’t be surprised if she took over the drove one day and became the all mighty ruler over the rest of the local were-hares.

 Once everyone was buckled up and fed, Sid eased the car into the thick summer traffic. It would start to ease up in a few weeks, only to resurge when the leaf peepers came through town. For now we drove at a snail’s pace, our windows down, sunglasses on, and hiking boots ready. It was time to go see some bears about a girl.

 The Evingston’s had a nice little summer cabin set back on several acres of woodland. We had to ease the van down a long, pitted, single lane dirt road to get there. There were several warning signs through the trees advertising attack dogs and the legal repercussions of trespassing. Olive pointed out several cameras trained on the road.

 “Friendly lot.” I couldn’t help but notice that several of the “No Trespassing” signs had bullet holes in them. I didn’t think that was by accident.

 “If we didn’t have express invitation to be here, I would have had us hike in under a veil. The Evingston’s have a young cub and they’re on edge. Everyone on their best behavior.”

 “Are you staring at me or Olive? I can’t tell.”

 “You,” Bianca said, turning back around in her seat. “And Olive.” We broke through the trees and entered a totally different world. The lawn was well groomed, the parking area graveled and maintained, and the rustic cabin I had been expecting was a beautiful two-story brick house that could easily eat my cabin for breakfast.

 Sid parked the van and we headed to the front door where the Evingston’s met us. Mr. Evingston, or Alan, as we were instructed to call him, had the white even smile and firm handshake of someone bred from the cradle for the life of a CEO. His wife, Priscilla, was tan and blonde and looked like she should be out playing tennis. If I hadn’t known that sometimes they turned into bears, I wouldn’t have guessed it. Priscilla looked harmless, almost submissive, until you saw her eyes. Her blue eyes told me that Mama Bear took no shit. Right, don’t underestimate Priscilla, even though she prefers to be called “Prissy.” Beau, the chubby toddler she bounced on her hip, was doing his level best to shove his whole fist in his mouth. Little Beau took after his daddy, all charm and smiles.

 Alan's smile faltered and died as he escorted us into the house, suddenly all business. "Normally, you know, we're fairly solitary. We do meet up from time to time, and we're going to be hosting several families for the feast days following the holiday."

I tried to imagine a bunch of bear families feasting together and failed. I've been to a drove barbeque. It was carnage. This would be far worse.

"We like to spend the actual holiday alone as a family." Prissy flashed a watery smile, unconsciously rocking in place to soothe her son even though he wasn't visibly upset. Were Bears were very family focused, and even though Prissy looked the epitome of East Coast debutante, she was first and foremost a bear when it came to her family.

According to the Evingston’s, the set up was pretty simple. Last night they had set out an offering for each person--porridge was traditional, and the family's porridge had been treated with dried apricots, honey, and laced with their own blood. (Also traditional.) A fire was laid in the fireplace, and a comfortable chair left near it, accompanied by slippers, a fine, thick robe, and a glass of wine. A bed would be prepared, the sheets turned down, and fresh pajamas left out. The family would leave for the night in the hopes that their local silverhair would visit and partake in their offerings.

"Someone's been here," Prissy's tone wavered and her husband put a comforting arm around her. "But it doesn't appear that they've accepted the offering at all."

“We don’t know if it was a vandal and just a coincidence.” Alan's brow wrinkled, his mouth turned down in concern. "It doesn't look like anything was..." his frown deepened. "It might just be easier if we show you." He beckoned us to follow him.

The dining room was a disaster. Porridge on the floor, walls, and encrusted on the fine linen tablecloth. Smears of honey and dried fruit dotted the furniture and walls, and we had to step around the shards of crockery. After we'd poked around the room, Alan took us to the living room, where we were greeted by a lush, green chair that had probably been quite comfortable before someone had stabbed it repeatedly and tore out the stuffing. White fluff dotted the floor, couch, and even the lamp.

 "We think they burned the robe." Prissy's voice was calm, likely because she was staring at her son, gently pushing his hair back with her fingers, and not looking at the destruction of the room.

 The bedrooms had met a similar fate. Feathers were everywhere, remnants of the down pillows. They'd even smashed the little toddler bed.

 "What's that smell?" Bianca asked, her nose wrinkling.

 "Urine," Sid and Olive answered the same time as the bear family. Ah, were creature senses. Blessing and a curse, those.

 Prissy began to cry silently as we searched carefully through the room. Bianca pulled a few, long silver strands of hair that had caught in the bedpost and tucked them into a ziplock bag. Her frown was thoughtful we finished searching the room. When we had seen all there was to see, we met back in the kitchen. Alan made Prissy a cup of tea, liberally dosing it with honey, which she held with trembling hands.

 "Did you miss any step in the ritual? Substitute any materials? Any deviation you can think of at all?" Bianca asked.

 Alan's face took on a thunderous cast, clearly offended by the question, but Prissy waved him off. He calmed instantly, sitting heavily in a chair by the kitchen table. I wouldn’t have guessed it at first, but Prissy was the alpha of the two.

 “How much do you know about Bruin’s Night?”

 “Not very much I’m afraid,” Bianca sounded apologetic and soothing and basically not at all like her usual self, which made me admit that she was much better at this stuff than I was. It’s not that I didn’t feel sympathy for the bears, but I wasn’t always the best at voicing such things. In my haste to get a move on, I would likely have skipped it, offended everyone, and then we would have all been eaten by bears.

 “It’s a very important holiday in our calendar,” Alan said. He reached over and took his wife’s hand.

 “It’s a feast and a party, yes, but it’s also a ritual. If our offering is accepted, the silverhair grants us prosperity,” Prissy said, handing off Beau to his father. “A lot of very important negotiations happen during the feast days. With so many of us in one place, naturally we take advantage.”

 “You seek out mates,” Sid said, wiggling his fingers at Beau. The baby gurgled and laughed.

 Alan nodded. “And broker deals, trade information, catch up. That sort of thing.”

 They were really upset, that was clear, but I wasn’t quite sure why. I know part of it was because their house had been violated, their holiday profaned, but it seemed more than that. This holiday was important, but they were already married, so no mate needed. “This particular Bruin’s night was important to you. Why?” Bianca winced at the baldness of my question. The Evingston’s looked a little embarrassed and stared at each other like they were both wishing the other would answer me.

 Olive rescued them. “They want more cubs. Don’t be thick, Ava.”

 “Is she right?” I asked.

 Prissy nodded. “We tried for a while before we got Beau, and though we love him….”

 “He was a single birth,” Sid filled in the sentence for her. “Usually they have twins, sometimes triplets.” Beau grabbed a hold of Sid’s finger and bit down on it, hard. “Ow!” Sid yanked his hand back, shaking it. “Strong little man.” Beau clapped his hands.

 “Do bears eat rabbits?” I whispered to Olive.

 She shook her head. “Not usually.”

 “That’s good.” No wonder the Evingston’s were extra freaked. Their plea for prosperity, for a bigger family, had been rejected.

 “What would you like us to do?” Bianca asked.

 Alan and Prissy both turned and looked at me. There was nothing on my shirt—I checked. I was fairly certain nothing was in my teeth. Which meant we were called in especially for me. The Evingston’s needed a firebug, and no one ever needs them for good reasons. I keep hoping one day I’ll show up somewhere and our client will say, “I have all of these tiny pies and no one to help me eat them! Help me, firebug!” But so far, that’s never been the case. Not one pie. Just death, destruction, and fire.

 I would have preferred pie.

 We excused ourselves from the Evingston’s, having gathered everything we could from the house. Whomever had wrecked the house had left a faint scent trail for Olive and Sid to follow. They took the lead as we cut through the brush and headed out into the forest. Bianca threw a veil over us so we could be extra sneaky, but sadly, the bugs still found us. Lock had given me an herbal bug repellant, which I, of course, had left at home where it was so very useful.

 “How come they aren’t biting you?” I slapped my arm, missing the mosquito entirely.

 Bianca shrugged. “I would say, ‘maybe I’m not as sweet’ but…”

 “Lies,” I said. “Neither of us is sweet.”

 “Exactly.” We paused as Sid and Olive examined the dirt for signs our quarry. “You ready to talk about what has you frazzled yet?”

 I couldn’t help it, I snorted. “Have we hit that level of whatever this is?” I hesitated on the word friendship, though deep down I think we both knew that was what it was. Reaching out didn’t come easy to either of us. I never realized how much I’d relied on my friends to do that initial emotional heavy lifting until I met Bianca. Both of us were wary, neither wanting to appear vulnerable.

 “What level?”

 “The one where we talk about feelings and boys and paint our nails black?”

 Bianca rolled her eyes. “Don’t make it such a big deal. I assume your internal hissy fit is Lock-centered?”

 “Why would you say that?”

 Olive and Sid started walking again and Bianca followed after them. Since she had to maintain the veil keeping us not only invisible but also silent, she had to concentrate so I had to bring up the rear. Silent wasn’t exactly the right word. As she had explained it once, we were still making sound. It was easier for Bianca to adjust it so the sounds we made were normal forest sounds than it was for her to make us truly silent.

 “Lock is really the only time you get weird like this. I find it endlessly funny that the person who centers you most is also the person that makes you so off-balance sometimes.” Bianca held a branch so I could slip past and then wait for her to get in front of me again.
 “Cade swears that’s normal,” I mumbled.

 “Is it?” Bianca asked, frowning. “I don’t think I’d like that. Maybe I’ll stay single.”

 As was happening more and more lately, I found myself in total understanding with Bianca. We would both deny it, but we were clearly similar creatures. “It’s terrible,” I said. “And wonderful. I think I just need to adjust?”

 “So what in particular is causing your focus issues today?”

 “We have a date,” I said. I would like to say that it was said with excitement, but it sounded a little like I’d pronounced that I had the flu.

 “And that’s bad?” She didn’t look back at me, but kept her focus on Sid and Olive who seemed to be picking their way through the forest at a faster pace now. “It’s not like this is your first date or anything. What’s the problem?”

 “It’s their first date alone,” Sid said. I hadn’t thought he’d been paying attention, but since the drove is nosier than anybody, I should have guessed that he would.

 Bianca stopped. “That can’t be true.”

 “It is.” This time it was Olive who piped up. “Think about it—they live three hours apart, and when they are together, someone else is always around. Ezra. One of us. Kat. Cade. Sylvie.”

 “How do you know all of this?” I asked Olive. She shrugged. “I overheard Ezra talking about it with Kat.”

 Great, my business was everyone’s business.

 Bianca patted my arm a bit awkwardly. She didn’t touch people very often and it showed. I wondered briefly if that’s how I looked when I tried.

 “It will be fine. He seems to like you as is for some reason, right?”

 “I guess so.” I realized we’d all stopped and everyone was staring at me. I wiped some of the sweat off my forehead and stared back. “Okay, we’re talked about feelings. Can we get back to the spooky creature in the woods now?”

 Bianca let out a breath. “Yes, please.” We started walking again, Bianca and I firmly back in our comfort zones. I’m not sure Sid or Olive had any zones they weren’t comfortable in.

 The trail ended at a small cabin in what could barely be called a clearing. It was shady and cool, even now. The timbers were rough-hewn and there was no sign of any kind of vehicle.

 We paused at the edge of the wood and waited.

 “How are we doing this?” I asked. “All in at once, or should I go in from the front while you guys sneak up from the rear?”

 “Olive and I could—” Sid started to say, but Bianca was already walking to the front door. We shrugged and followed her.

 Bianca raised her hand to knock on the plain door. No window, no engraving—it didn’t even have a handle or knob.

 “Please don’t.” The voice was soft. The woman had come from the other side of the cabin. She was thin, almost emaciated, but given a few meals wouldn’t be categorized as petite or delicate. She was short but had a sturdy build. Long, bright, silver hair was pulled back into a messy braid, wisps of it clinging to patches of sweat on her face. She was hauling up what looked like a bucket of water. “I just got her to sleep.” She walked past us as if a Coterie enforcement team showed up on her door everyday. It was clear that she didn’t fear us at all.

 “Here.” She placed her palm flat on the door and sang a few words I couldn’t understand. The door lit up, suddenly made up of glowing gears that rotated and moved with the song. The woman removed her hand, the song ended, and the door opened soundlessly.

 We all shuffled into the cabin. The living space was small, though it held a small bedroom loft. No bathroom. The kitchen appeared to be a wood stove and a small table.

 “We don’t have much to offer, I’m afraid. Water. Some fruit?”

 Bianca shook her head. “No, thank you, but we appreciate your hospitality.”

 “I’m just glad you’re finally here,” the woman’s hand’s shook, and she looked so young suddenly, maybe just a few years older than me. She sat heavily in her chair. “I knew it was time. I just couldn’t—” She shut her eyes, tears sliding down her cheeks.

 “How long has she been sick?” Olive asked, handing a bandana of questionable providence out to the young silverhair.

 “Thank you.” She wiped her face, and then laughed that sharp painful exhalation of grief that sounds perilously close to joy. But I knew that sound. I knew it well.

 “I don’t know,” she said. “I was gone. I’ve been doing an apprenticeship. Metalworking. I—” She broke off again, swallowing hard and looking away. “I wanted to do something more. Live better. Not like this. I know I can’t change what I am but…”

 “You don’t want it to be the only thing that you are,” I said. She looked at me and nodded.

 “When I came back to check on mama—” She scrubbed her cheeks vigorously with her hands. “The cabin was a mess. I just got finished scrubbing everything down. My mom wasn’t always clean, but she was usually tidy. But now, now she’s up there, wasting away.”

 “She rejected the offering from the Evingston’s,” Bianca said softly.

 The woman closed her eyes. “It’s time then. She’s done.” She stood up, painfully slow. “Is one of you? Can you?” She sniffed. “I don’t want to do it, you understand?”

 “We’ll handle everything,” Bianca said.

 We were escorted up into the loft. It was a tight fit for all of us, but we managed. A frail older version of the woman lay in the bed, covered in blankets despite the heat. She reached out her bony fingers and grabbed her daughter’s hand. “Marta, my little Marta. I left it for you. It’s all for you.”

 “I know, mama.” Marta leaned in and kissed her mother’s forehead.

 “Don’t cry, my little Martingale. You will be a fine silverhair. I couldn’t be more proud.” She squeezed her daughter’s hand. Marta leaned in and kissed her mother one last time before she left the loft. I heard quick steps as she ran from the cabin.

 The old woman stared at us. “Children? I have worked hard. I have done my duty, and I get children?”

 I think if she’d been able, she would have spit on the floor.

 Olive sat on the bed, Sid a close shadow behind her. “All are young to you, grandmother. We are not an insult. We are a gift.”

 The old woman looked confused, but less angry now. “How are you a gift?”

 “The Firebug will free you. The caulbearer will keep you quiet. The drove will escort Marta to her offering. As it should be, as it has always been.”

 The old woman patted Olive’s cheek. “I like you. There’s some candy in the jar downstairs. Help yourself on your way out.”

 “Thank you, Grandmother.” And then she left, taking Sid and Bianca with her.

 Now it was my turn to sit on the bed. “Are you sure?” I asked.

 “I am old. Tired. You don’t know how tired. I have no prosperity left to give. The bears have used me up.” I must have looked upset, because the silverhair grabbed my hand, her touch cold and papery. “The bears are my children as much as Marta is, and it has always been the way of the silverhair to give up everything they can for their children.” She paused, her mouth tightening. “I don’t regret it, but still…tell Marta—” She coughed and I held a glass of water to her lips. “Tell her to hold a little back for herself. A slight deviation from tradition, perhaps, but that is how people grow.”

 “I’ll make it quick,” I said, squeezing her hand.

We stood outside as the cabin burned. I made it as hot as I could. There would be nothing left but a melted stove and ash soon. Bianca made it so all we heard was the crackling of flames and the soft, wracking sobs of Marta.

 “How did you know?” I asked Olive. “How did you know what to say?”

 Olive shrugged a single shoulder. “That’s how the story goes.”

 “The story?”

 “Once upon a time, there were three bears,” Marta said, her voice ragged. “A mama bear, a papa bear, and a baby bear. They had the forest and all it had to offer, but the mama feared for her baby. More and more people were coming in, taking the lands that were theirs. She cried to the goddess for help. The silverhair came down and asked why she cried so, as it was not in a bear’s nature. When she told her, the silverhair felt great pain in her heart for the bears, and as she had no children of her own, she took on the bears as hers. She braided her own silverhair into their shaggy coats, giving them a little bit of herself. They were still bears, but now they could also be as the humans were and keep their own lands.” Her voice was stronger now, but the tears were still coming. “The bears promised never to forget her and to always offer her a place in their home as the revered ancestor she now was.”

 Which meant that on holidays, she got the best meal, the best spot by the fire, the best bed, just like I would do for Cade when he was older.

 When the cabin was nothing but ash and rubble, we walked Marta back down to the Evingston’s. Though younger than Prissy and Alan, she was treated like a respected grandmother or aunty. She was ushered into their home, a bath drawn, and a clean robe found for her. While we’d been gone the bears had been busy, and while not totally returned to order, there was a marked improvement.

 We stayed and helped with the upstairs rooms. Tonight was the Evingston’s last shot at the offering, and it had to go off without a hitch. We left before dinner, wishing the Evingston’s well, and getting hugs from a grateful Marta. She hugged me last, pulling me to her with surprising strength. Maybe it was the weight of her mother’s impending death lifted from her, but Marta already looked healthier, stronger, and fitter.

 “Thank you,” she said. “It was how she wanted to go. Tradition and all of that.”

 “That’s all well and good, but don’t forget to keep a little bit of you in all of it. It’s what she wanted, too.” I hugged her back just as hard.

 We were quiet until we were back in the van, everyone feeling somber and reflecting.

 “What did she mean,” I asked. “About that was the way her mother wanted to go?”

 “That’s how it goes in the old stories,” Sid said.

 “I thought Goldilocks got away,” I said. “Or was she eaten? I can’t remember.”

 Olive shook her head. “Those are the newer versions, where Goldilocks’s is a jerk kid. Those are for humans. In the original story, her hair isn’t gold, it’s silver and they burn her to death at the end. That’s what she meant. You’re tradition, too, Ava.”

 Great.

 “I’m sorry it wasn’t tiny pies,” Bianca said, fishing her shades out of one of her pockets.

 “How did you know?”

 “You kept mumbling about them. It wasn’t hard to figure out.”

I had to shampoo my hair twice to get the smoke smell out. I didn’t really have time to dry it the human way, and I was afraid to do it the firebug way. I was so amped up I’d probably burn off all my hair. Fitz, our resident kelpie, used his nimble fingers to braid it and pin it to my head as Bianca put a little eye make-up on me—hers since I didn’t really own any. Sid and Olive supervised. I had told them several times that they could go home. They hadn’t moved. Apparently there were going to have a movie night with Cade at my house while I was gone so they could all wait up and grill me when I got back.

 No pressure or anything.

 When Lock actually knocked—didn’t walk in as usual but knocked like a proper date—my panic level was so high I thought I’d throw up. Which is why Sid and Olive opened the door and Bianca shoved me out it right at a very surprised Lock.

 “Back by one,” Bianca said.

 “Midnight,” Cade said with a smile. “She has work in the morning.”

 Olive and Sid just gave Lock death-stares and Fitz did that weird thing people do where they point at their own eyes and then at you in that vaguely threatening, “I’m watching you” motion.

 Then they all shut the door with a loud click and I was alone with Lock. He looked, well Lock always looked good, but he’d put in a little extra effort. The blue short sleeve button-up shirt brought out his gray eyes and he’d shaved and everything. I had the sudden overwhelming urge to lick him. Sparks and stars, I was going to screw this up bad.

 Then he smiled, a slow easy smile, and I knew for certain I was going to be a mess all night. I should make an excuse and go back inside. There was a loud click as the lock fell into place, and I knew without a doubt that Bianca had just locked me out of my cabin. I was the little bird being shoved out of the nest.

 Lock stepped up close and pulled me in, his hands sliding back to cradle the back of my skull. He smelled like pine forest and Lock. I don’t think I’d ever noticed the way someone smelled—really noticed—until I’d met him. He leaned down a little so our eyes were even. “I will knock over my drink.”

 “What?”

 “At dinner,” he said, gently messaging my scalp. “And after that, maybe I’ll drop some food on my shirt for good measure. Then I’ll say something terrible and maybe trip over something. But I refuse to be rude to the waitress and I promise to tip.”

 “What are you talking about?”

 “You had that look on your face, cupcake. That ready-to-bolt look you get when you’re really freaked out. When I said our date was going to be perfect, I just meant we’d really enjoy it. It’s not a pressure thing. You don’t have to be flawless.” His grin went crooked. “Let’s face it, flawless and you only have a passing acquaintance anyway.”

 “I hate you.”

 He laughed. “Feel better now?”

 “Yes, thank you.” And I did. The pressure and panic had vanished. This was Lock, and he knew me better than anyone. It was going to be okay.

 “We’ll do this our way, okay?”

 “Okay.”

 He leaned in and I stopped him, my fingers on his lips. “Hold your horses there, hoss. The kiss traditionally happens at the end when I’ve deemed you worthy of such things.”

 “Tradition, huh? Do you really want to wait until the end of the entire evening?”

 I pulled my hand back. “Not really. I mean, it’s a little weird because I’m sure everyone is peeking through the curtains and watching us.”

 Lock spun us around, his back now facing the cabin. “There, now they can’t see you at all. Okay?”

 I nodded and he kissed me.

 The date was perfect and we hadn’t even left my house yet.

 The kiss ended when Sid started cat-calling us through the door. Lock lifted up his hand so Sid could see his extended middle finger. I may or may not have set Sid’s pants on fire. (But only for a second.)

 I didn’t make it back by curfew, but hey, that’s tradition, too. Lock didn’t knock over his drink, but he did laugh so hard he dropped some marinara on his shirt. Then I laughed so hard I choked on my cake, having to cough a bite up into my napkin. It was a mess.

 An absolutely perfect, wonderful, swoon-worthy mess, and I promised him I’d think about a second date. Maybe.

THE END