



Load Bearing (Grizzly Protection: Alaska Shifter Branch #2)

Author: *Elva Birch*

Category: Fantasy

Description: When bear shifter Hunter goes to Alaska to save the family security business, he doesn't expect to find it running fine without him and he definitely isn't expecting to go undercover for a strong, capable woman who is building a controversial house in the middle of nowhere who might be his destiny.

Trixie is used to being underestimated. As a partner in a construction business, she's fighting tooth and nail against delays, weather, theft, and sabotage. She doesn't have time for romance or courtship, but she can't say no when Hunter offers to work for her and find out who's trying to destroy the project, even though he's clearly never held a hammer in his life.

Load Bearing is a short, steamy romp set in Alaska, with a grumpy shifter and a strong capable heroine, a dash of danger, and a lot of mystery!

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HUNTER

Hunter frowned up at the sleet gray sky outside of Grizzly Protection Services. Orson had raved about the weather and the sights and the sheer beauty of Alaska, but Hunter hadn't seen anything to impress him so far, and he wasn't expecting to find anything better inside.

The door tinkled like a retail shop when he opened it.

That would have to go.

A Grizzly office should inspire respect, not greet a customer like they were coming into a candy store.

Hunter gave the door a good slam behind him and was startled to find his youngest brother sitting behind a counter like he was a common secretary. "Orson?"

"Hunter! Holy hell! I mean, welcome to Grizzly Protection Services!" Orson's voice went silky. "How can I help you?"

Hunter grunted in disbelief. Orson had been sent to Alaska to take over an established company, Snafu River Security. Had he run off every employee in just a few weeks ?

"I'm delighted to see that you're as chatty as ever," Orson said, steepling his hands and then leaning his chin on them. "Did Theo send you to make sure I hadn't run the company into the ground already?"

Since that was exactly why Hunter was there, he gave a half-shrug in answer.

“I can assure you that everything is going completely smoothly,” Orson said cheerfully. “Business is booming! All the paperwork is in order! Happy customers everywhere!”

“Then why are you playing BigMart greeter?” Hunter demanded.

“The previous secretary tried to kill us, and Alex said that this was a job I could handle until we found someone to replace her.”

“You were supposed to replace Alex , not the secretary,” Hunter reminded him, though he had to admit he was curious about the story behind tried to kill us.

To his surprise, Orson didn’t fold like a wet paper bag and apologize for his failure.

“No way. Alex is the reason this company is thriving. I came in and found a lot of ways I could screw things up, and she very skillfully kept me from doing any of them.” The phone rang.

“Hang on, I have to take this. Grizzly Protection Services, how can I help you?” The cub was actually grinning, like he had no problem sitting at the secretary’s desk taking phone calls and making coffee.

Hunter didn’t like surprises. He liked it when life played out according to plan, and worked hard to make sure that it did. He had planned to come to Alaska, fix whatever mess Orson had made, whip the business back into shape, and waltz back to Colorado in time for the skiing season.

Orson pointed at a chair by the door as he chatted sympathetically with someone who seemed to be missing a cat. “Yeah,” he said cheerfully. “Try the litterbox trick before

you offer a reward. You'd be surprised how well it works."

When he hung up ("Good luck finding Sassy Whiskers!"), he pressed another button on his phone. "Hey Alex, the big boss is here to see you."

The speaker crackled in reply. "I told you the speakerphone wasn't a toy, Orson. And stop calling yourself the big boss. It confuses the clients."

Orson snorted. "No, I meant the real big boss. My brother Hunter is here to do an inspection or something. I told him you have it all in hand, but he's doing that glaring thing he's so good at."

Hunter hadn't realized he was glaring, but it didn't surprise him.

There was a slight pause, and then the voice said flatly, "I'll be right out."

"She's as good at glaring as you are," Orson said worshipfully. "Wait til you meet her."

Alex Vex was not what Hunter had expected.

She wore sensible boots and looked like she'd be more comfortable on a wrestling mat than a board room.

True to Orson's warning, she was glaring.

"Mr. Davison," she said in a frosty tone, striding to shake Hunter's hand.

He stood to greet her, and her handshake was firm and brief.

"I suppose you're here to shake things up . "

“Ooo,” Orson said. “You’re in trouble ,” he hissed at Hunter.

Hunter hesitated. He hadn’t expected this kind of dynamic. “I assumed that there would be some...speedbumps over the change in ownership and came to make sure that things went smoothly.”

“He doesn’t trust me,” Orson said in a stage whisper to Alex.

“That’s understandable,” Alex replied dryly.

To Hunter, she added, “I can assure you that everything is in order. If you’d called ahead, I could have all the accounting ready for you to look over.

I could even have sent the files by email and spared you the long trip. ” Her voice was crisp and challenging.

Hunter tried to assess their relationship.

Orson was looking at her adoringly and she was taking it as her due.

She was a handsome woman, Hunter thought objectively, if a little on the tough and inflexible side.

He preferred his women prettier and less prickly.

She didn’t look like the type who would seduce his kid brother for a promotion, but appearances could be deceiving, and Orson was a wet-nosed knucklehead who would probably fall in the thrall of anyone who gave him a smile and swayed her hips.

Alex certainly wasn’t smiling now. She looked offended, and Hunter wondered if she had some justification.

He'd expected Orson to flunk his first test in the real world and take the business down with him.

Perhaps he'd done this woman a disservice in assuming that she couldn't keep his little brother in line.

Charm was not Hunter's finest skill, but he had enough to draw on. "I assure you, I did not intend to question your competence," he said blandly, not including Orson in his assessment. "But I have found that surprise is often a useful tool in investigation."

"Are we under investigation?" Alex asked, sounding very neutral and not looking at all charmed.

"I'm merely here to do a business assessment," Hunter said, just as flatly. "It won't take much of your time."

"Good," Alex said. "This is a busy time of year and we're...temporarily short-staffed."

Hunter pounced. "I noticed some employment irregularities," he growled. Hiring felons was not something the business did on a company-wide basis.

Alex's lip pulled up in a snarl. "I will vouch for any of the men and women who work for me," she said fiercely. "We're low on staff this week because it's hunting season and they're out in the field filling their families' freezers for the winter."

Orson looked between them uncomfortably. "Maybe I could give Hunter a quick tour?" he offered. "While you put together the paperwork?"

Hunter ignored him. "I'm going to be here for a few weeks. You can put me to work wherever you have a staff shortage. I'm fully qualified for any positions in the office

or in the field.” He spared a glance at Orson. “Though I feel my skills may be wasted answering phones.”

“I’m already doing that anyway,” Orson said with a hopeful grin. “Hunter is really good at surveillance electronics,” he added to Alex. “Way better than me.”

If Hunter had not been watching her closely, he might not have noticed the twitch of amusement at Alex’s mouth.

“Don’t undersell yourself, Orson,” she told him.

“Have Mr. Davison look over the specs for the Crutchfield camera quote and show him the surveillance room. Tom can give him an orientation. It wouldn’t hurt to have another opinion on their offer. ”

“Yes, Ms. Hotpants, ma’am!” Orson said jovially as he sprang up from his seat and saluted. “I’ll show you, Hunter.”

“You call your boss Ms. Hotpants?” Hunter asked, when they were alone.

“She’s not just my boss,” Orson said cheerfully. “She’s my mate.”

Hunter came to a surprised stop. “Your...what? ”

“Like Theo! As soon as I saw her, my bear knew she was the one and only.”

Mate, his own bear agreed.

That iron-faced harpy? Hunter asked in surprise.

Not our mate , his bear assured him. His mate. Hunter was understandably relieved.

He had no desire to find a mate and wasn't sure he believed in fate anyway. Instinct was one thing. Inescapable shackles of destiny was quite another.

Hunter caught up with Orson in a few determined strides. "Why didn't you tell one of us?" he demanded. "Part of the reason I was sent here is because you've gone basically radio silent, and that's never a good thing."

"I've been busy," Orson said with a sly sideways smile. "We're buying a house."

Hunter nearly careened into the wall as they turned a corner. His baby brother, buying a house? With a mate ?

They had just come to a door marked with several warnings about radiation. There was a red ON AIR lantern above it that was lit. "Should I be concerned?" he asked, gesturing.

"Nah," Orson said. "It's just for jokes. It's fun here. You should take notes. You could learn a lot."

Hunter only scowled. He didn't like surprises.

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TRIXIE

“G rizzly Protection Services!”

Trixie looked down at her business card to double-check the number she had just called. “Sorry, I was looking for Snafu River Security...?”

The man who had answered the phone gave a chuckle. “Yeah, we’re getting a lot of that. New ownership. Don’t worry, Alex Vex is still in charge and living large.”

In the background, Trixie heard someone scold him. “Stop saying that, Orson!”

“Why? It’s true!”

“Talk to the customer already, Orson.”

“Right,” apparently-Orson said. “How can I help you today?”

Trixie sighed. “I want to get my existing security system inspected at a remote worksite near Tok. We had a compressor stolen last week and this week someone deliberately fouled a generator. Insurance wants a professional statement about the system before they’ll agree to cover it and if it’s not up to snuff, I’ll need to hire you for an upgrade in order to continue my coverage.”

“Are you looking for electronic surveillance or an on-site guard?” Orson asked.

“Probably just electronic surveillance,” Trixie said. “I’m on a pretty tight budget.”

This was already going to cost a pretty penny. Tok was a tiny town that was 360 miles north of Anchorage and 200 miles east of Fairbanks, square in the middle of nowhere.

“Tight budget,” Orson repeated, clearly writing things down. “Near Tok. They had really great burgers,” he observed. “Speedy Teddy’s?”

“Fast Eddy’s,” Trixie corrected him, as the voice in the background of the call echoed her in chorus.

Orson laughed. “Thank you, ladies! Should we send my brother Hunter down to check it out?”

“I’ve lost a quarter of my staff to college starting and another quarter to hunting,” Trixie said, before she realized that Orson was not talking to her, and that Hunter was a name.

In the background, the woman sounded skeptical.

“I don’t think we have anyone else available until next week.

” Probably, the security company—whatever name it was under this week—was facing the same staffing shortage that Trixie was.

Students were back in school, and everyone who could had a moose tag and was using the final weeks of fall to fill their freezers.

“Hunter it is,” Orson said triumphantly. “He’s going to love the burgers. Let me get your details!”

Trixie gave him the location of the worksite and a time to meet there the next

afternoon for a risk-free quote that sounded too good to be true, then hung up with a sigh.

This undoubtedly was going to cost a lot, even using their budget options, but it was better than replacing more equipment, or worse, missing the brief window of construction that they had.

If they didn't get the building buttoned up before snow started flying, it would be months before they could finish, and they'd lose the entire winter of work time.

Laying and curing the concrete pad had taken longer than she'd estimated, and now they were scrambling to get the frame erected and the roof placed before weather moved in.

The next morning, Trixie inhaled. She could smell the threat of snow in the morning air.

They were closing in on the equinox. Late September marked the start of fall in many places of the world, but meant impending winter in Alaska.

Days and nights were perfectly balanced now, but wouldn't be for very long.

Everyone in the state suddenly realized that summer was crashing to an end, and tried to squeeze the last of their fair weather activities in before the cold and dark took over.

Trixie scowled up at the sky. Dark clouds obscured the nearby mountains, even though the sky above was still blue.

Termination dust—the first visible snow at higher elevations—had already been spotted, and it wouldn't be long before that white line crept down to the worksite and

stopped the housebuilding project in its tracks.

There wasn't a lot she could do before her crew showed up, but Trixie went to set up ladders and fill the generator from the padlocked tank in the back of her truck.

The Taylor brothers were the first on the scene, arriving just a few moments after eight. "There's coffee in the back of the truck," she said. She always brewed a big pot, even though she didn't drink it herself.

The Taylor brothers—Keith and Kyle—were part of a big family known locally as the Taylor pack, and they were reliable help, all things considered.

They arrived when they said they would, worked hard, and didn't try to cut corners.

Trixie had worried about how young they were when she hired them, but although they chattered and rough-housed more than she might have liked, they showed up ready to go and were generally friendly and easy to train.

She wished she could say the same about Dylan and Sam.

She didn't know what their history was, but she purposefully assigned them at opposite sides of the site after stopping several near-brawls.

Noah, an older and experienced man from Delta, had a lot of critical things to say about a woman running a work crew, but Trixie accepted him as a relic from another age who could still get things done and let him boss around a few of the summer hires while they had them.

He needed supervision to stay on task, and clearly resented it when Trixie had to get him back to work after a break, but when he was doing it, his output was fast and high quality.

When everyone had gathered and was drinking their coffee and complaining about the coming cold, Trixie laid out the day's plan.

"I want to get the first floor completely framed in and start getting the second story subfloor down today. Tomorrow we can get the second floor framing in place and start sheathing. The truss truck is due to come in on Friday with the roof supplies. If we push, we can get it all done before the weather moves in."

"There a bonus for an early finish?"

"Trust Sam to have concerns about an early finish ," Dylan quipped.

The Taylor pack chuckled but Dylan hadn't meant it kindly and Sam turned red with rage .

"We're well past our deadline already," Trixie reminded them sternly.

"But it's going to be worse if we don't have the shell up and the basement backfilled before it starts freezing.

The finish work could be a nice cushy source of income through the winter, or we might miss our window and you guys can fight over a crappy server job at Fast Eddy's hoping you can get good tips. "

"Maybe if Kyle wore a short skirt," Keith joked.

That got some guffaws and Trixie dismissed them to their assignments.

Lifting walls was a team effort, and Trixie worked alongside them, coordinating their efforts and watching with pleasure as the structure itself started to take form.

By lunch, they were putting on the sill for the second floor as the Taylor brothers attached the outer sheathing and Noah started sealing the parts that would be underground with rolls of Bituthene.

Trixie bounced between whatever team needed extra hands and filled in nailing patterns behind them.

The group dispersed for lunch when they got to good stopping points and Trixie took a brief break to devour a sandwich and some chips.

She sat on her truck tailgate and looked at the building with satisfaction.

Sometimes, construction felt like an unending hurry-up-and-wait.

She was at the convenience of the excavator operator she'd hired, and then the concrete company.

Weather had stopped work for a week. The equipment broke, or got stolen, or even deliberately fouled.

Now, finally, there was some visible progress and she felt like they had a fighting chance to hit their goals.

When she heard the crunch of tires on gravel, Trixie immediately assumed that it was some of the crew.

Maybe they'd taken her little speech of inspiration to heart and were coming back early to get things done.

She crumpled the wrapper for her chips and tossed it into her lunch bag before she reached for her tool belt.

But to her surprise, it was an unfamiliar truck, emblazoned with a snarling bear on the door.

It took her a moment to remember the new name of the security firm she'd hired. Grizzly Protection Services, which seemed pretentious, and the man who swung out of the cab actually looked a little like a grizzly. He had a thick, scruffy beard and a scowl that it couldn't hide.

To Trixie's surprise, he was wearing a suit. Who wore a suit to a worksite in rural Alaska? Her opinion of him plummeted as he picked his way across the rough gravel towards her. He was even carrying a briefcase.

"I'm looking for a Mr. Pat Talon," he called as he approached.

Trixie buckled the tool belt around her waist and sighed. "I'm Pat," Trixie said. She had gotten in the habit of using the name for contract applications because she got far fewer unseen rejections with a male name. "It's short for Patricia, but you can call me Trixie."

But now that she had a good look at him, he could call her anything he liked.

Trixie didn't think that she would ever swoon for someone in a suit, but that was one handsome hunk of man in his wildly inappropriate clothing and face fluff.

He was built enough that he wouldn't have looked out of place in Carhartts and ratty T-shirt that was the usual worksite uniform; if he had a desk job, he clearly compensated for it by working out.

Trixie thought he wouldn't look out of place with nothing at all and was surprised by the flush of heat that ran through her at the idea of it.

He scowled at her as if she had insulted him by being a woman in charge of a construction site and Trixie told herself that he wasn't hotter for being a chauvinist. "You here to give me a quote for some security?"

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HUNTER

Hunter's first disappointment was finding that he was going to have to drive to Tok, especially when he realized where it was.

The second disappointment was that they gave him a company truck instead of letting him rent something faster and sleeker.

"Oh, you wouldn't be able to drive fast anyway," Orson laughed. "Frost heaves."

It sounded like some kind of frat boy challenge, but Hunter quickly discovered that frost heaves had nothing to do with iced drinks or vomit and everything to do with a crumbling roller coaster road. For a state that only had a few highways, they weren't in great shape.

It was an eye-opening trip with impressive vistas and a lot of trees, but the weather was poor, and the promised mountains were shrouded in clouds. Hunter told himself he wasn't on a sight-seeing expedition anyway.

Hunter usually liked solitude, but he found himself yearning for someone to share the trip with. His bear didn't understand the quips he wanted to make about the state of the road or the fact that the rest stops didn't have running water.

It might have been more fun with a companion, but Orson hadn't offered one, and Hunter certainly wasn't going to ask. Hunter wasn't there to have fun, anyway.

He left at six-thirty in the morning and still wasn't at the job site until after noon,

tired from the long, grueling drive.

He had checked the driving estimate that his GPS gave him, but hadn't really believed it.

The journey was complicated by several grueling stops for dusty, noisy road construction.

He frowned as he finally turned off the highway onto a winding gravel road. There were big hand-painted signs at the turnoff with crooked lettering: SAVE THE SALMON. DEVELOPMENT IS DEATH.

The road opened onto a gravel pad with a silver travel trailer and a half-built structure surrounded by a pit. A single beat up pickup was backed up to it, and a figure wearing a hardhat sat on the tailgate eating.

Hunter checked his watch. He was an hour earlier than Orson had scheduled him and he hadn't stopped to eat along the way.

This is right , his bear said, and Hunter was suddenly aware of an unexpected hum beneath his hunger.

Sometimes, instinct was a flash of warning or a gut feeling of unrest that Hunter had learned to listen to.

Other times, it was an urge that might not follow logic and couldn't be ignored.

(It had once convinced him to get up at night and catch Orson trying to set off fireworks that probably would have left him with no fingers.)

Now, instinct was a feeling of contentment and rightness that Hunter had never

experienced before, pulling him like a fishing line straight for the person who was standing to greet him .

He was supposed to be here in Alaska. He was supposed to take this job. He was meant to be right here, in this moment, meeting... her?

“I’m looking for a Mr. Pat Talon,” he said in confusion.

She was shorter than he was by a head, which still meant she was a tall woman, and she was buckling a tool belt at her waist. Stiff Carhartts couldn’t hide the curve of her hips.

Her arms were obviously strong under a simple T-shirt emblazoned with what Hunter guessed was a band logo that he wasn’t familiar with.

She met his gaze with a look of amusement.

“I’m Pat. It’s short for Patricia, but you can call me Trixie. ”

She thrust her hand out while Hunter was still drinking in her face. She had lively brown eyes above tanned cheekbones and a big kissable mouth curved into a friendly smile. A few curly brown strands of hair had escaped her hardhat. “You here to give me a quote for some security ?”

Did Hunter imagine the lilt to her last word? Security was not what he wanted to give her at the moment, and he stared at her hand a moment before he remembered to shake it.

She wasn’t a shifter. There was no telltale tingle to her proximity or to her touch, though Hunter did feel an undeniable shiver of pleasure with her hand in his for a regulation-length handshake.

He still hadn't figured out how to make words, and she'd asked him a question.

"I understand you've had some thefts."

Her face was incredibly expressive and Hunter had a hard time dragging his eyes off of it to avoid staring. There was a flash of annoyance, an amused twist to her mouth, and a roll of her eyes. He didn't know what any of it meant.

"Theft and sabotage. A week ago, a compressor went missing. A crime of opportunity maybe. It was a good one. But two nights ago, someone put water in one of the generator tanks and totally ruined it. I had a security camera up this week, just so you know that I'm not a complete idiot, but it didn't catch anything except a stray dog, and my insurance company doesn't want to cover the loss because they say I didn't take appropriate measures.

I'll show you the scene of the crime. Mind your fancy shoes, there's some mud. "

Hunter had forgotten he even had feet, following Trixie as she led him over the uneven ground.

The building was in a pit, the basement not yet buried, and access to the single finished floor was by two planks over a yawning gap through an unfinished wall. Trixie scampered over in front of him. They groaned and flexed alarmingly under Hunter's weight.

"That's the camera," Trixie pointed out.

It was a standard game camera, bolted to one of the interior columns.

"Battery powered. There's no wifi here, so everything was on the chip.

It's in a locked case to prevent tampering.

Someone got up behind it and put duct tape over the lens.

They must've known right where it was to come around the back out of view, and they would have had to jump the excavation because the camera was trained on the ramp. ”

Hunter grunted, looking around the site. As a shifter, he was a little stronger and faster than a human. He could probably make the jump, but it wouldn't be easy, even for him. “You've got the footage?”

“Yeah, I transferred it to my phone.” Trixie had to stand very close to him to share the screen and find the video. “It's a motion sensor, and this is all it caught.”

The picture was grainy, clearly an infrared image. Trixie started the recording and Hunter forced himself to focus on the phone she was holding and not her tantalizing proximity.

She smells good , his bear said in approval.

She smelled, if Hunter was honest, like sweat and hard work, with a little hint of flowers. It was intoxicating and if he'd been a bear, he would have rolled in it.

And rolling with her would be...amazing. Hunter longed to see if she was as strong as she looked. Would she be quiet and docile in bed? Or would she be aggressive and forceful about her desires?

Hunter swallowed and made himself pay attention to the screen she was holding.

“Is that a wolf?” A long-legged canine loped down the drive and picked its way

across the ramp, sniffing at the floor.

The structure in the image was markedly less finished, with no exterior walls whatsoever aside from the basement, and Hunter found himself looking between the two curiously.

They had made a lot of progress in just a few days.

“Probably just a dog,” Trixie said. “A lot of locals have half-wolf huskies as pets. Regulations are really lax out here and a lot of them run free. Either way, it doesn’t have thumbs, so it can’t be our thief.”

Hunter frowned at the time stamp as the canine moved out of the field of view and Trixie moved to the next video, which was a confused blur and then blackness. “And that’s where the tape was put over the lens. That morning, the generator failed.”

“Show me again,” Hunter growled. He thought belatedly that he should be gentler about it, but he was already working on a theory.

If Trixie was put off by his gruffness, she didn’t show it. She started to replay the duct tape footage.

“The first one,” Hunter snapped, then regretted it immediately. “Please. ”

The wolf-dog was certainly dog-like. It sniffed around like a dog would, wandering convincingly to the edge of the excavation before testing the ramp and then walking over it with almost theatrical hesitation.

It was exactly the kind of act a shifter might put on if it knew just where the camera was, and there was one quick, direct glance like it was making sure it was in view.

The first time he saw the footage, Hunter had a suspicion. The second time he was positive.

That wolf was definitely their man.

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TRIXIE

Trixie didn't need a man to pat her on the head and tell her she'd done a good job, so she was miffed with herself for wishing that the security professional would praise her for her camera placement and her foresight to lock it up, even if the footage had been ultimately unhelpful.

Was he so interested in the wolf because he was clearly from out of state and not accustomed to wildlife?

"I saved the duct tape there, in case you could... I don't know, lift fingerprints off it or something?"

"We're not the police," the man from Grizzly Protection growled. "We don't have access to a fingerprint database. Did you call the cops?"

He hadn't introduced himself, but Trixie guessed he was the Hunter that had been mentioned on the phone call.

He didn't look like a hunter. He looked like a bodyguard .

He ought to be lurking behind a celebrity on the red carpet, not poking around a rural worksite, even if he did have a mountain man beard.

"I did call the troopers," she said, with determined cheer.

"But it's a one-man office in Tok. They said they'd file the report, but that they had

more important things to do. ”

“Who works for you?” Hunter paced the perimeter of the building, ducking under the temporary cross-bracing.

“The guys should be back in about half an hour,” Trixie said, looking at her watch. “They’re a good lot, all locals. I hate to suspect any of them.”

“Were you here at the time?” Hunter asked, with a glance towards Trixie’s trailer.

“I was gone with the trailer when the compressor was stolen,” Trixie said. “I was out refilling the propane and water tanks. I was here when the generator was fouled, probably asleep. I’m a light sleeper and would have heard them driving up, so they must have been on foot.”

Hunter gazed up. The first panel of subfloor had been attached on the joists above, giving some hint about the final space.

He neither agreed with Trixie nor refuted her, walking to the edge to eye the gap between the limits of excavation and the building.

The pit walls were straight up and down.

Anyone trying to scramble down and then climb up the basement wall would have left scuff and scabble marks in the soil.

Trixie figured that someone had used a ladder or boards to bridge the gap, but she didn’t see any evidence of it.

Hunter walked around the building again, glaring out at the clearing.

“This is the shortest place they might have come over,” Trixie offered, when he didn’t volunteer any suggestions.

“But there’s no sign of anything in the dirt there.

It’s a little scuffed up now, sorry, but I took some photos before we got back to work the next day.

” She started to show him her photo roll, but Hunter ignored her and knelt to peer down into the pit.

“Where were the items?” he asked when he flowed back up to his feet. For such a big guy wearing a suit, he moved really gracefully.

Trixie showed him where the equipment was now.

“The compressor was stolen before we had the subfloor down. It was right below us, covered with a tarp for the night. The generator was right here. One strong guy might have gotten the compressor out by himself, and anyone could have added water to the generator.”

“What do you use the compressor for?” Hunter asked.

Trixie stared at him. “You don’t know what a compressor is for?”

“Filling up... tires?” he guessed, looking uncomfortable. There were clearly no tires around.

Trixie took pity on him. “We use it to run the tools. The nail gun and the impact wrenches.”

“Those don’t use the generator?”

How clueless was this guy? It was a good thing he had looks going for him.

“We use the generator to compress the air in the compressor,” Trixie explained simply.

“Then we use compressed air to drive the tools.” She picked up a nail gun, racked a row of nails, and demonstrated on an exposed stud.

The nail went in with a whoosh and a thud , buried flush.

“It’s quieter than running the generator all the time and these tools are stronger and more efficient.

That kind of force takes a lot of instantaneous power, which a lot of electric tools can’t handle.

It’s safer on a jobsite than having a lot of electric wires running everywhere, too. ”

Hunter didn’t seem to take offense at her explanation, just frowned and nodded.

“So...?” Trixie said, when Hunter didn’t have a reply.

“So, what?” Hunter looked like he was having a very different conversation at the same time.

“So, is the camera no good? Is the insurance company right that I was negligent? Do I need to pay out for a higher end system? I need to get this place enclosed before the snow flies or I’m probably going to lose the contract, so I can’t mess around with things.

Just give me the bad news and let's move forward.

I cannot afford to lose anything else without recourse. ”

Hunter scowled ferociously at her. Why would he take offense at that ?

Trixie sighed. Men were fragile creatures sometimes, and she didn't understand why she couldn't just have a conversation with one without having to pet their ego.

“I'm sure you know what I should have done, let's just do it and be done. ”

“You did all right,” Hunter said unexpectedly. “It's probably one of your crew.”

Trixie felt her hackles rise. “I trust my crew.”

“You shouldn't.” Oh, there was the I-know-better that Trixie had been expecting. “I'll figure out which one it is.”

“By force?” Trixie had to laugh. “I mean, okay, Columbo, but I told the office I couldn't afford to hire an on-site guard and I didn't know you did investigations. I just need you to sign off on the camera or sell me a new one.”

Hunter's gaze was surprisingly intense. “I won't charge you,” he said. “I'll get to the bottom of this and you won't be out anything. It's a... personal project.”

Trixie was pretty sure her eyebrows reached her hardhat. “A personal project?” Was he hitting on her? Was there some long con here? “Look...”

“Hire me on as an extra hand.” Hunter's voice gave her no sort of choice.

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HUNTER

Hunter was having a hard time keeping his conversation with Trixie on track. He felt insanely like they ought to be waltzing around in the house frame, and his bear was wordlessly frolicking like he'd just eaten a barrel of rotten apples and gotten drunk.

But he was quite serious about his offer. "Orson said you were short-staffed. I'm strong and work hard, I'd be worth the wages. I'll sniff out who your traitor is and you'll be made square."

Trixie's transparent face looked skeptical. "I'm sorry, you want me to hire you as part of my crew ? You're wearing a suit at the worksite. I just had to explain air tools to you. You think you could last a day under cover? Do you even know what a Philips head is?"

Hunter must have frowned more than he meant to, because Trixie quickly added, "I'm sorry, I'm sure you're very good at... whatever you do. Wearing a suit." She flushed.

"I learn fast," Hunter said stubbornly. He truly thought this was the best way to catch the thief, and he wasn't used to people assuming he couldn't do something. He had to examine how much it stung him that Trixie clearly felt he was not up to the job.

She snorted in an unladylike way and her eyes danced underneath the rim of her hardhat. "You could be the fastest learner in the world and I could still not get you up to speed before the guys get back from lunch. Besides...?" She gestured at all of him.

Hunter had to concede that he had not prepared for manual labor.

He had planned to sign off on Trixie's system or sell her a new one that he had in the truck, stay the night in a hotel, and head back for Anchorage the next day.

He had a change of clothing that was equally unsuitable, and nothing for a longer stay. So why couldn't he imagine leaving?

"Give me a chance," he demanded, because Hunter Davison did not beg. "I'll come early tomorrow ready to go and you can orient me on your most basic tools. I'll do the grunt work. Shovel or carry stuff."

"Tomorrow is Sunday," Trixie pointed out reluctantly. "We're working six tens, but even in a crunch the crew has to have days off."

"Even better," Hunter said. "We'll have the whole day to get me up to speed." And I'll have you to myself.

She stared at him so long and so suspiciously that Hunter wanted to shake her. Wasn't he good enough? Why did he even care so much?

Then she sighed. "If I weren't desperate, we wouldn't even be having this conversation. But I could honestly use an extra day of work, even from you. Be here tomorrow at eight. Wear something more suitable. Maybe drive something less obvious."

Hunter grunted. The company decal was a magnet, so that would be easy enough to take off. "Eight," he agreed, and he thrust out his hand like they were sealing a business deal.

Her second handshake was, if anything, even briefer and stronger than her first.

“You’d better go before the guys get back if you’re planning to be undercover.”

Hunter stalked away over the rickety planks and drove out to the highway, pausing to strip off the company logo. He’d need clothing and a place to stay. There was a likely-looking hotel and a selection of gift shops, so Hunter turned towards town.

He passed Fast Eddy’s, which did not look like it offered edible food, let alone rave-worthy burgers, and went into a store a block off the highway that looked like it might have something more than tourist trinkets.

Once he was past the keychains and stuffies, there was a fairly comprehensive clothing section.

He found a pair of heavy work pants in his size, and picked a T-shirt at random (Alaska, It’s Classic , in a swoopy font reminiscent of Coca Cola).

There were some hiking socks and a few single packages of generic underwear.

His shoes were going to be more challenging.

“I need a pair of work boots,” he told the only person working the store. She was an older woman who looked him up and down appraisingly when he put his clothing on the counter.

“Closest we got is Xtratufs.” She pointed at a display of tall rubber boots.

Hunter frowned. “Can I wear those on a job site?”

“Folks wear em on fishing trawlers.” The cashier shrugged. “We’ve got steel-toed.”

Hunter didn’t really have a choice. He added a pair in his size to the pile and debated

between his personal and business credit card.

He had the authority to do this as a business expense, but he was doing it for entirely personal reasons.

For a person. For Trixie Talon. He used his private card and wondered again why he felt so solidly that this was a thing he had to do.

He could have just signed off on the insurance papers and washed his hands of it.

This is the right thing to do , his bear said confidently. But he couldn't explain it either.

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TRIXIE

The mornings were getting crisp. Puddles showed icy lace at the edges, and Trixie's breath steamed in the chilly air. The leaves in the trees were all brilliant colors now, and every morning, the first thing Trixie did was sweep them off the subfloor.

She had half-expected Hunter not to show up.

She still didn't entirely understand his insistence, and she would need to ask him what she would be expected to pay for this service.

She paid a fair wage, but he looked like his idea of that might not be the same as hers, and she wasn't going to make an exception for him, no matter how good-looking he was.

She felt her heart start to pound at the sound of a truck rambling down the drive, and told herself it was ridiculous as she swept the last of the leaves into the pit.

She wasn't a silly girl with a crush, and he had some ulterior motive that was not getting into her pants.

She needed to stay cool-headed and get the work done.

Her gaze was critical as she finished the sweeping and went to greet him. He was dressed in jeans so new they were still creased with folds and was probably regretting the short sleeves he was wearing. The Xtratufs were sensible.

“Anything missing this morning?” he asked with a growl that Trixie wondered if she should take personally.

“Nothing I caught on a quick inventory,” she said.

He looked around curiously. “It’s different.”

“Half a day of work with a good crew will do that,” Trixie said proudly.

“We got some of the sheathing up on the first floor and finished sealing the basement. The second floor deck is down, and we started to take out some of the temporary cross-bracing. You and I are going to put up some interior walls down here.”

“By ourselves?” Hunter looked alarmed.

“It’s a good job for two people. These aren’t load-bearing, they’ll just divide up the space, and we’ll cover a lot of basic work principles doing it.”

“What is this building supposed to be?”

Trixie laughed. “A multi-million dollar family home. The guy just got the land in a divorce and is building it to spite his ex, as far as I can tell. He gave me the plans, I gave him a contract. It’s been one disaster after another, though.

First, the lawyers delayed things. Then I couldn’t schedule the excavation until partway through the season.

Concrete was slow because of the weather.

I don’t know if we’ll get backfill before the ground freezes. ”

Hunter frowned around, clearly trying to picture the final shape.

It didn't look like much yet, so Trixie pointed things out.

“That's the front entrance, and there will be a two-story living room in this space.

Kitchen, dining in this wing, exercise and entertainment in that.

Second floor is all bedrooms and bathrooms, master in the middle.

Porch off the back, sized for a hot tub.

I'm surprised the architect didn't add a pool.

It's all the bells and whistles. I've got employment paperwork for you to sign. I want everything aboveboard.”

Trixie inspected his ID (a Colorado driver's license) and watched him sign her boilerplate contract with strong capable hands.

“Are you ready to get started?” Trixie felt unnaturally nervous and was mad at herself for being so weak. “You'll need a hardhat and... do you have work gloves?”

“I didn't think of gloves.”

Trixie was fascinated by Hunter's face. He looked furious, presumably at himself, but she was beginning to realize that he just had resting fury face. He didn't seem dumb behind his grumbly facade, and every so often, she got a hint of humor.

“I've got an extra pair in the truck,” Trixie said. “I buy them wholesale because someone's always forgetting theirs.”

She kitted him out with gloves and a hardhat.

“Is this completely necessary?” he asked, clamping it onto his head. “We’re not working with big equipment.”

Trixie knocked on her own. “Safety first, big guy. Don’t care how hard-headed you are. Let’s get started.” Was it terrible of her to call him big guy? She was used to a certain amount of crude teasing on a jobsite, but that didn’t mean she had to cross a line. Hunter didn’t seem to take offense.

She picked a 2x4 up off the pile and laid it across the saw horses in front of the chop saw. “The first thing I’m going to teach you is how to measure.”

Hunter snorted. “I know how a measuring tape works.”

“I doubt it,” Trixie snorted right back at him.

“People call this rough framing because they think they can get away with errors, but they add up fast. You forget about the blade width and by the time you get across the building, you’re inches off.

Check the end of the measuring tape, you know why that tab is loose? ”

“It’s... broken?”

“The tab moves by exactly the thickness of itself. Your zero point is either on the inside of the tab or on the outside, depending on whether you are in a blind corner or not.” Trixie gave the tape to Hunter. “Show me eight inches.”

She only heard her words after they were out of her mouth and flushed hot, hoping that Hunter didn’t notice.

He carefully didn't look at her, only at the tape, hooking it at the end of the board with his big hands, quickly realizing that he needed the gloves off for this part of the task.

She handed him a carpenter's pencil and he went to make a bold mark at the eight inch mark.

"Where on that line do I cut?" Trixie asked blandly.

Hunter blinked at her. "Um..."

"Which side will the blade be cutting on to preserve your measurement?"

Hunter pointed to the far side.

"How do you tell your work partner which side is live?"

"Mark it?" Hunter guessed.

"Mark it," Trixie agreed. "X marks the scrap."

"Always thought it was the spot," Hunter quipped, giving her a sly look that made Trixie suspect he had not, after all, missed her double entendre. "X marks the spot."

"X marks a lot of things. The chop saw is one of the things that runs on power, not air, so let's go meet the generator."

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HUNTER

Hunter met the generator, lovingly named Diva. “It was the last one that was big enough at Lowe’s,” Trixie said. “But she’s kind of finicky.” She showed Hunter how to start it, and talked him through the shut down and basic maintenance as well.

Then she gave him an orientation to the chop saw.

“This is electric because a saw isn’t such an impact instrument.

You want that blade spinning at full speed through the entire cut.

Here’s the trigger. It’s like a gun, don’t put your finger on it until you want it to go and don’t let go until you’ve withdrawn it from your work or you can bind the blade.

All the way down. All the way back up. Release the trigger.

Make sure your material is against the backstop on both sides before you start.

Last thing you want to do is waste a stick cutting crooked. ”

“Check it again,” she cautioned, just as he was about to pull down the blade. Sure enough, the board had shifted. He snugged the wood up against the backboard again and made the cut.

“Good,” she said, and to Hunter’s chagrin, he felt like he’d just been patted on the head. If he’d been a dog, his tail would be wagging.

I'm not a dog , his bear said, offended.

“Measure it,” Trixie said, handing him the piece he'd cut.

Hunter did. “It's...about a thirty-second off. Is that close enough?”

“For rough framing yes, for trim, it would show. Why do you think it happened?”

Hunter frowned, considering. He appreciated that she didn't just blindly give him a list of rules to follow. She was invested in him understanding how things worked. “My mark was at the edge of the board.”

“Right. What does the edge of the board do?”

“It curves.”

“Never put your measurements right at the edges. Also notice where the blade is coming down on the board. It lands in the middle here. That's where you want to put your measurements, so you're lining right up to it, not trying to eye it from the edge.”

After she declared him proficient with the chop saw, she ran through the operation of a nail gun and the basic rules of air tools, showing him how to use the quick connections.

At first, the heavy tail of the hose was a constant hassle and trip hazard, but Hunter quickly became accustomed to looping it over an arm and anticipating its heavy swing .

She walked him around inside the building. “Sheathing is the stuff on the outside. This is pre-primed OSB, a kind of heavy-duty particle board. Siding will be attached to it on the outside. Studs are the boards in the frame that go up.”

Hunter watched the tips of her ears turn red and wondered if she was as affected by his presence as he was by hers.

She was not exactly flirting with him, but Hunter caught her gaze lingering on his bare arms. It was a little chilly for short sleeves, but the two of them kept moving and the rising sun warmed things quickly.

“Sill plates go across at the top and bottom. Over doors and windows we have headers. Eight foot ceilings, what’s a stud-length 2x4 going to be?”

Hunter was still thinking about studs and he smiled slyly at her. “A sill top and bottom add up to 3 inches so it’s 93 inches.”

Trixie grinned. “Close. There’s $\frac{3}{8}$ of an inch to account for ceiling and floor. Commercial stud length is 92 and $\frac{5}{8}$.”

“Commercial studs are properly papered, I imagine,” Hunter said in a deadpan. “For breeding purposes.”

Trixie stared at him a moment and then burst out laughing. “You’re going to fit right in,” she said. Were her cheeks a little redder than her laughter accounted for?

She talked about how the exterior walls had been built on the floor, tipped up, and nailed into place. “The cross bracing is temporary, until the sheathing is fully connected to keep it from moving laterally. For these interior walls, we’ll be building in place. Can you think of why?”

Hunter looked around thoughtfully, eyeing the joists above them. “When you tip up the wall, you’re taller than the final wall, by geometry. You’re going to run into the joists above.”

“Because the wall has thickness ,” Trixie said, her eyes glowing happily. “Good job! I would have also accepted the reasoning that the temporary cross-bracing is crowding up the floorspace in here right now.”

She showed him the tricks for measuring the placement of the interior walls, double-checking every number off of her plans and by measuring again from another source.

“There are going to be little errors everywhere. Don’t let them compound.

” She showed him how to run a chalk line and snap the mark down, and then they were laying first a bottom sill and using a plumb bob to site the top sill exactly above it.

They had six studs and a door framed in by the time they stopped for lunch, and Hunter felt a remarkable sense of pride when he stepped back and looked it over.

His first few nails were sloppy; too deep or too shallow and had to be hammered in by hand, but by the end, he understood his tool and had a solid rhythm and good technique.

He was also starving.

Then Trixie took off her hard hat and Hunter had a whole new kind of hunger.

“Can I take you to lunch?” she asked.

The words caught Hunter by surprise because he’d been turning them over in his own head, trying to decide if Trixie would insist on keeping their relationship professional for the time he was working to catch her thief.

She seemed like the kind who would be firm about boundaries, even if she was

interested.

He was already sure she would be worth the wait.

With every word, he was more convinced that this was a smart, intriguing woman.

She was a patient teacher and clearly invested in her topic.

She didn't mind that Hunter was starting from scratch and she was willing to challenge him and give him tasks of increasing complexity as they worked.

She didn't pretend that she was stronger than he was or feel threatened when he could reach or wrangle something that she couldn't.

Was this falling in love? This slightly dizzy feeling that everything was settling perfectly into place? He'd never enjoyed working with someone so much before. She was cheerful and challenging to keep up with, not so much as pausing for breath between tasks.

Hunter could not imagine someone more perfect.

TRIXIE

Hunter was glowering at her like she'd just grossly overstepped and Trixie wondered if she'd imagined the moments where she thought he was standing just a little closer than he needed to watch her do something and maybe his gaze was lingering just a little longer than it ought to.

"You don't have to," she said quickly. "It's been a long morning, and I thought it was just a friendly thing to do."

"Just friendly." Hunter's voice was sexy and low, even when he was dashing her hopes.

"Fast Eddy's is a local standby, but there are also a few other food trucks that are still open for the season if you'd rather pick up something and come back," Trixie said, trying not to sound disappointed.

"Fast Eddy's is fine." Everything Hunter said sounded like a growl.

"We can take my truck," Trixie offered. Then she remembered that she was storing stuff in her passenger seat, so there was an awkward moment while she had to throw everything in the back to make room for Hunter and he stood there looking down at his boots like he was bored.

Even after a morning of hard work, he looked like he'd just stepped out of an advertisement for the jeans he was wearing.

“Music?” Trixie asked inanely, once she had turned on the truck and caught her Taylor Swift disc before it could start and kill her with embarrassment.

Hunter gave a grunt that sounded like a shrug and Trixie found a local classic rock station.

Hotel California got them without conversation into the main drag that called itself Tok and Trixie pulled up in front of the bar.

“It doesn’t look like much, but they’ve got great food,” she said apologetically, meeting him at the front of the truck.

“My treat. I often take new recruits out on their first day, to break the ice a little.” I’m not flirting , she wanted to insist, but she knew that she was a mess of mixed signals.

She couldn’t stop herself from gazing at Hunter’s gorgeous muscles, or trying to suss out what he was feeling behind his facial hair.

She never would have guessed herself to be weak for a beard, but most of the bearded locals looked homeless and Hunter looked like he ought to be on the cover of GQ.

They were seated at a bench by the window. It was fairly crowded with the regular Sunday morning crowd, and Trixie nodded to a number of familiar faces.

“We should have a cover story for you,” she said in a low voice when Hunter requested a cup of coffee and the waitress had left them with the menus. “Where do I tell people I found you?”

“I’m a tourist from Colorado, up to visit my brother in Anchorage.

His new girl knew you were looking for help, and my brother dared me to do it.

I thought it would be a chance to challenge myself and didn't have anything else going on.

Part favor, part desire to stay out of their way and see the real Alaska. ”

“A nice mix of the truth and believable fiction,” Trixie said approvingly. “I don't think we could contrive a convincing existing relationship, and no matter what kind of teacher I am, I don't think I could pass you off as a career carpenter.”

“You're a good teacher,” Hunter said unexpectedly. “I bet you could.”

Trixie flushed happily. Hunter didn't seem like the type for empty flattery. “You're a good student,” she said.

“Can I take your order?”

Trixie realized that she hadn't looked at the menu yet. “Halibut burger,” she said from memory. “Salad with ranch. Sprite.”

“Same,” Hunter said, passing over his menu.

Trixie squinted at him, trying to decide if it was a cop out, a weird suck-up, or just a coincidence. The waitress topped off his coffee and left with a chatty observation about the weather.

“So why did you really come to Alaska?” Trixie wanted to know.

“My family owns Grizzly Protection Services. We bought out Snafu River Security and sent my kid brother, Orson, to run the place. He found it capably managed by Alex Vex and is now answering phones for her. I came up to make sure he hadn't been led around by his libido and fix any mistakes he'd made. ”

“Had he? Been led around by his libido?”

“No, he’d met his soulmate.”

Trixie held her breath. Hunter didn’t say it like he thought it was a joke or an exaggeration. He said it like he believed it, and he was looking intensely at her while he said it .

Not that he looked particularly smitten. Trixie wasn’t sure the man had an expression beyond scowl. Was he attracted to her and mad about it?

Trixie honestly wasn’t sure what to make of him. “So, did the two of you grow up in Colorado?” she asked, instead of following that particular line of thought.

The waitress brought their drinks, and Hunter only grunted.

Trixie suspected that she was not going to draw childhood stories out of him easily.

“I grew up in the Bush,” she offered. “Out in the wilderness off the road system. Went to a few years of college in Minnesota, but came back and went into trade school instead of finishing.”

She waited for Hunter to ask what she’d studied, and when he didn’t, she volunteered, “I was studying economics. Thought I could solve the world’s financial problems when I was young and naive.

But you can’t fix greedy people, so I thought maybe I could change the world by building useful things.

And here I am, making impractical houses for people with more money than morals.
”

Trixie had hoped that opening herself up would invite Hunter to do the same, but he didn't offer any help. "Did you go to college?" she prodded. "I usually get a resume with that kind of information to start from at least. I'm kind of at a disadvantage here."

"Degree in business. U of M."

He didn't even bother to tell her which M it was. Montana? Missouri? Maine?

"And your family owns a string of security companies, I guess?"

"Yup."

"Oh, there's our food. "

Still unsettled by Hunter's unexpected soulmate revelation, Trixie was delighted to have food to distract her.

Hunter ate his salad and burger with the same grace and precision that Trixie had come to expect from him on the job site, and she watched him curiously, not sure how he managed not to get food in his beard. In her experience, that was the major inconvenience to a face mop.

Once they had settled into the point of the meal where conversation was possible again, Trixie asked, "Is there anything I can do to help your investigation?"

"I've got some ideas," Hunter grunted. "But first, who might want the project to fail?"

"You don't honestly think it's anything more than casual theft and vandalism, do you?"

” The idea surprised Trixie. “I mean, there are a lot of people who might target this guy; his ex for one. He’s not popular in the area, and there’s been some negative gossip about him.

You don’t move into a relatively poor rural area and build a mansion without getting some sour press.

Hiring locals for my crew helped, but he’s also got an environmental group all up at arms. You probably saw the signs. ”

“Does the house threaten salmon streams?”

He’d seen the signs. “Not even close. There’s a seasonal draw that we rerouted that a few loudmouths are screaming about, but we’re filed with all the appropriate agencies. They aren’t navigable waters or wetlands. It’s just people looking for things to be outraged about.”

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HUNTER

The food at Fast Eddy's was better than Hunter had expected from the aged facade.

The company was even better.

He knew that he wasn't doing a great job of keeping his end of the conversation up, still wrestling between his instinct that Trixie was the woman he'd been waiting for and his long-time certainty that he was better off without any kind of relationship to weigh him down.

Trixie did the lion's share of the exchange, and supplied him with all the answers he could want.

He loved watching her eat. She was so expressive, and she didn't care who knew that she was enjoying her food.

When their hands met at the ketchup, she startled back and blushed, adorably uncertain before she picked the conversation again.

She talked about growing up in the wilderness of Alaska, colloquially known as the Bush, and what a big change it was to go to the lower forty-eight. She wasn't wearing a ring, and she didn't mention a boyfriend .

"You've got a partner?" Hunter finally asked, because he wasn't in the habit of beating around the bush himself.

“A business partner.” Did Hunter imagine the emphasis on business ? “Jay. He’s out hunting right now.”

There was definitely something underlying her voice, and Hunter asked more harshly than he meant, “You’ve got trouble with him?”

“I’m a little miffed that he thought it was fine to take two whole weeks off when we were in a pinch like this,” Trixie admitted.

“He doesn’t need the meat, and it’s pretty inconvenient timing for the business.

He’s been offering to buy me out, but I’m afraid he’d run it into the ground the moment I left, and his offers are honestly insulting.

” She looked mortified. “Don’t tell him I said that.

He’s a great contractor. His work is fantastic when he does it, and he’s got a lot of amazing contacts.

He’s the one who got us this job in the first place.

He just doesn’t like putting in that final push that gets things done. You know?”

Hunter did know. “A starter, not a finisher,” he agreed.

“He really likes the shiny lure of a new project, and the honeymoon period when it’s just getting off the ground. Lots of people are like that.”

“You’re not,” Hunter guessed, wondering if this was their honeymoon period.

“Oh, no,” Trixie said with a laugh and a cute little blush. “I’m not as good at getting

things going. I'm the long-haul gal. I don't do the courtship and contracts. I unclog the toilets and pick up the dirty socks. I... think I'm starting to mix metaphors, sorry."

He could imagine a life with her, even if he couldn't imagine the pursuit.

He wanted to skip straight to having breakfast across a table from her every morning, evenings unwinding together, comfortable routine and familiarity.

He wanted to wake up with her in his bed already, not have to hunt her down and put her there.

Boring, his brothers called him, but he didn't want the glory and the chase. He wasn't invested in the win, he wanted the cooldown after the finish line.

Now he was the one mixing metaphors, and he'd left Trixie hanging in the conversation again.

She wiped her mouth with a napkin and leaned back on the bench with a groan.

"You're going to have to roll me back to the job site and prop me up at the chop saw," she joked.

"I always mean to bring back leftovers, but the food is so good."

"It was great," Hunter agreed, and when the waitress brought their bill, he automatically reached for it.

"No, no," Trixie said, and she put her hand over his. "I insist. It's a business write-off."

Hunter didn't move his hand, not because of a machismo desire to pay the bill, but because she was touching him, and he didn't want to lose that moment of casual contact. Trixie stared at him and he stared back.

"I'm not going to give up," she said quietly.

Hunter already loved that about her. He turned his hand under hers so that he could clasp it in his own and pulled it up to his mouth for a formal kiss, savoring the feel of her skin against his lips.

He'd been dying to touch her all morning, and now he didn't want to let her go until he absolutely had to. "I'm not, either."

He watched her face the whole time, cataloging her responses. Surprise, joy, suspicion, delight, confusion, and finally something like caution. Hunter finally let go of her and she took her hand back, completely forgetting about the bill between them.

She glanced around, as if afraid that someone might have witnessed the moment, but Hunter looked nowhere else, not caring if anyone saw. This was between him and his mate. He was going to make her his, and now that he'd made up his mind, nothing would stop him.

TRIXIE

Trixie almost convinced herself that Hunter's weirdly formal hand kiss had been some kind of hallucination. She paid the bill, chattered inanely about the weather, made determined conversation with the waitress, and marched to the truck without looking back to see if Hunter was following.

He was, of course. She was keenly aware of where he was, careful of their proximity when they did the awkward dance of opening doors for each other through the arctic entrance to the restaurant.

She fumbled the key fob to unlock the truck and found Hunter standing at the driver's side door, politely opening it for her.

"I... ah... this is... it's been a long time since I did this, but I should be super clear that nothing can really happen while I'm your boss.

" Trixie didn't particularly want to take the high road.

She wanted to see the rest of Hunter's shoulders without the tourist T-shirt over them, and scrape her nails down his chest. But she had to think about the big picture, and she knew better than to mix business and personal affairs.

She and Jay had almost done that dance and she'd never been sorry that she took the high road, even though she regretted it at first.

Hunter gave her such a long, thoughtful look without speaking that Trixie

immediately spiraled into self-doubt.

Was she so rusty that she'd seen flirtation where there was only chivalry?

No, she was pretty sure that no one casually kissed hands anymore, and she could still remember the brief feeling of his mouth and the tickle of his whiskers there.

She hadn't imagined all the sizzling tension between them.

"I could quit," Hunter proposed, and Trixie felt a rush of heat and relief. He really was interested. Interested enough to shirk his obligation, and Trixie felt like she knew enough about him to understand that wasn't a minor concession for him.

"That wouldn't be a record," she said as lightly as she could. "You worked a solid half day. I've had kids who weren't up to the work give up after a few hours."

Hunter frowned. "I'll catch your thief first," he promised, standing aside so she could get in the truck.

Damn them both for being honorable, Trixie thought. She swung up into the driver's seat and Hunter shut the door behind her. She would like nothing better than to take him back to her trailer and see how good his stamina really was.

He didn't say anything on the way back to the property, despite several attempts at conversation that even Trixie recognized were inane.

They finished framing the rest of the interior walls before the day's end, and Trixie was glad that the spark between them didn't seem to interfere with working together.

Having acknowledged their mutual attraction only made it easier.

If their hands brushed close, they let them touch briefly instead of startling back and then pretending it hadn't happened.

They let admiring looks linger a moment on purpose.

By the end of the day, Trixie was more worked up than if they'd spent the entire afternoon making out.

She looked at her watch—she still liked having an old-fashioned dial on her wrist to mark time—and told Hunter, “I’ll clock you out at five on the dot to keep the math easy, though it’s a few minutes to go. You did a great job. We got even more done than I’d hoped.”

Hunter gave a grumble that sounded pleased.

He wasn't chatty, but Trixie was starting to be able to recognize distinct qualities to his various grunts and growls.

He had a sly sense of humor beneath his gruffness that Trixie appreciated more than the crude jests she was more used to.

She started to clean up the worksite, stacking the scrap lumber and sweeping up sawdust, and Hunter joined her in the effort voluntarily, coiling up cords and hoses.

The site was buttoned up swiftly. “Will you be okay here?” Hunter asked, as she set the camera to start capturing motion and walked over the plank to the driveway.

“I’ll be fine,” she assured him. “Nothing about any of this suggests home invasion. I’m more at danger from moose here than anything else.”

Hunter looked like he wasn't sure if she was joking. “Moose? Not... bears or

wolves?”

“Moose are way meaner. Bears and wolves will avoid humans. Moose think they run the place. And this is coming into... ah... rutting season.” Trixie reminded herself that she was a grown-up woman who could talk about nature without turning into a thirteen-year-old boy.

Hunter nodded sagely. “I can see how horny moose might be a problem. ”

Trixie couldn't quite catch her laugh before it snorted from her in a very unladylike way. The best part of Hunter's sense of humor was how unexpected it was. He looked constantly constipated, but then came out with these dry quips that hit Trixie right in the funny bone.

When Trixie had regained command of her respiratory system, she smiled at Hunter. “Thanks. For everything. It was a solid day's work, and I... appreciated the company.”

It was very quiet with the generator off and the inevitable construction sounds of a work day silenced.

Hunter was standing close, looking at her in that frowny way that Trixie had already figured out wasn't actually mad.

For a tense moment, she thought he might kiss her, and she really, really wanted him to.

“We're going to catch the guy,” he vowed. “And then we're going to see what this is.”

The promise thrilled Trixie to her toes.

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HUNTER

The three-star hotel was two stories, with a single elevator that was out of order. Hunter took a swift, adequate shower and went down to the hotel bar.

The bartender was a tougher nut than Hunter himself and had no interest in conversation, but a group of three young men who looked related came in, joined a few moments later by a rowdy woman with long, loose hair who seemed to want to pick a fight.

To his surprise, there was a tingle of instinct suggesting one or more of them was a shifter; he wouldn't be able to tell which without getting closer. Hunter eavesdropped shamelessly, nursing his craft beer and pretending to scroll on his phone.

"I can't believe you're working for the oligarchy!" the woman protested, dropping down at their table in a familiar fashion. "Was the money that good?"

"Not me," one of them protested. "Talon is a slave driver, besides being a total hag."

Hackles rose on the back of Hunter's neck and his grip on his glass tightened .

"She's okay," one of the others said, barely soothing Hunter's ire. "Just because she's not going to pay for naps on the job or let you show up stoned. It's just work, Feather. There's not a surplus of jobs in this dead end town and she's paying overtime."

"You're spineless, Kyle. It's going to be an eyesore. A blight on the town."

“It’s a quarter mile back in the woods, who cares if a billionaire builds an ugly house on their own property.”

“What about the wildlife being disrupted?”

“You aren’t drinking that Coalition for Nature Kool Aid, are you, Feather? It’s one house, not like a whole development. How much wildlife is going to be impacted?”

“It starts with a house,” Feather said ominously. “Can I get a Red Bull and rum?”

“No wonder you’re so paranoid!” one of the men who wasn’t Kyle scoffed.

“It’s not paranoia if they’re out to get you,” Feather smirked.

The conversation changed to the topic of the predicted snow and climate change.

Hunter’s pretend phone scrolling turned into actually searching for the Coalition for Nature, which proved to be a glossy-fronted nonprofit that appeared to be in the business of encouraging outrage.

They had a well-indexed webpage that featured wilderness criminals , and sure enough, there was the Carthridge house.

The Coalition claimed that the construction impacted salmon sources and threatened the rural Alaska way of life.

Most of the other projects listed on the page were industrial in nature.

Hunter’s first suspicion was that the objection was personal in nature, and the unflattering screed about Carthridge himself lent credence to his guess.

Hunter copied the link and sent it to his brother Baxter. “ I need everything you can dig up about Carthridge and the Coalition for Nature,” he typed with his thumbs.

“Another beer?” the bartender wanted to know.

Hunter was tempted, but only for a moment. “I’ve got work in the morning.” He settled his tab and took the stairs up to his utilitarian room, where he spent a long restless night wishing there was someone beside him.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:04 pm

TRIXIE

By morning, Trixie had convinced herself that she'd blown Hunter's interest in her out of proportion.

He was a difficult man to read emotions from and she'd seen more there because she wanted to, not because he was swooning over someone like her.

Maybe he'd have been willing for a convenient tumble, but anything more was just a projection of Trixie's own yearnings.

Then she remembered that his brother had come to Alaska and found a soulmate .

Trixie turned the word over in her own mouth, wondering at it.

She had never believed in love at first sight.

Attraction, sure, and Hunter was a chunk of very sexy meat.

But true connections happened over time, born from trust and mutual respect.

Surely a single day of work, no matter how deliciously competent and smart he had proven to be, was not enough to make crazy declarations about destiny.

We're going to see what this is .

Sexual tension, maybe. It probably wasn't anything more, and Trixie had to fight

down the hope that it was. She was too practical for schoolgirl dreams.

She stared at herself in the mirror over the tiny trailer sink.

Curly dark hair that never did what she wanted was standing on end thanks to a restless night second-guessing her own memories.

She finger-combed it, put it in a tight braid, and took a swift sponge-bath.

She'd head to the laundromat for a full shower after work, but there was no point in wasting precious water before a sweaty day of work and she was absolutely not going to do something that weak for any man.

She'd be wearing a fetching hard hat all day anyway.

To her disappointment, Hunter was not the first to arrive. Kyle and Keith rolled out of their battered truck and pulled on their gloves.

"You got a lot done yesterday, boss," Keith said in surprise, surveying the framework they'd gotten up.

"I was giving a new guy a shot," Trixie said. "Had to take him through his paces."

"Don't you ever take a day off?" Kyle wanted to know, while Trixie was still thinking about the paces she would have liked to have taken Hunter through.

"What?" Trixie dragged her head back into the game. "Let's get started. I smell snow and I've got the trusses coming Wednesday, which won't do anyone any good if there are no walls to put them on. Let's get the ladders set."

The rest of the crew trickled in, nursed coffees and commented on the new walls.

Trixie was glad that Hunter wasn't the last to arrive and introduced him around.

He shook everyone's hands very firmly. Sam and Noah came last in the same car.

Trixie set Keith and Kyle to finishing the second floor subfloor while she got Hunter and Dylan framing the exterior walls and then assisted Sam and Noah with the first floor sheathing.

In an absolute miracle of timing, the second floor was finished at exactly the same time they were ready to start lifting walls. "Still need to fill in the nailing pattern," Kyle said, refilling his nail gun.

Trixie cast a practiced look over the wall that was lying flat.

The studs were flush with the sills, none of them warped, and the nailing looked solid.

She checked the plans and verified a few measurements, exchanging a quick look with Hunter as she pulled out the end of the tape.

"Let's get this up," she said, pleased. "Hunter, you at the end, Dylan, there. Kyle, watch the edge. Keith, have a brace ready."

It was one of her favorite parts, lifting a complete wall and suddenly turning a deck into a room.

It was like unfolding one of those fancy pop-up cards.

They scooted it into place and Trixie bent to nail the sill down as Keith hand-hammered in a brace to hold it.

They had three of the exterior walls up by the time they broke for lunch, and the first floor was fully sheathed.

Hunter had made friends, despite his general use of grunts for communication—or perhaps because of it.

He'd worked tirelessly and selflessly, and Trixie was delighted to see that he quickly won himself a place high in the hierarchy of the team.

He might be less skilled at the work, but he had a natural sense of command that most of them reacted well to.

He was smart enough to defer to experience and self-confident enough to take correction without crumbling.

Noah immediately took him under his wing, and they piled into a truck together with the Taylor brothers for a lunch run.

Sam took his own car to meet them there, and Dylan lingered.

"I like the new guy, boss," he offered, as Trixie powered down the generator and coiled up a hose that was a trip-hazard. "Looks like you do, too." He grinned and nodded knowingly.

Trixie flushed. She thought she'd done a better job than that of keeping herself too busy to listen to her libido. It was a challenge, though, with Hunter all hot and sweaty, reaching and leaning on his tools, frowning in concentration and holding things up for her.

"Nothing is going on," she assured Dylan. "I'm a professional."

“You’re also a woman,” Dylan pointed out. “And, dayum .”

Trixie had to cover her face with a hand, sure she was the color of the red tool box.

“Don’t worry,” Dylan laughed. “He’s into you, too.”

“Professional ,” Trixie reminded him, though she was ridiculously delighted to have confirmation that she wasn’t imagining the mutual nature of the attraction. “We’re both here to work. We’re all here to work.”

“No judgement,” Dylan chuckled. “You run a tight ship and play fair. You didn’t ask him to go up a ladder any more than anyone else.” He stripped off his gloves and took a drink from his bottle. “It’s been great working for you, but you’re allowed to have fun, too. I’m just ribbing you a little.”

“Thanks, Dylan,” Trixie said frankly. “I’m glad you have my back.”

“You bet, boss-lady.”

At closing time, they’d finished sheathing half the second floor and all the walls were up.

“Damned if we aren’t actually going to make it,” Sam said as they split up at the parking lot, tired but triumphant. “I was beginning to have my doubts. ”

“Well, I never thought we couldn’t do it,” Dylan said. Trixie wasn’t sure if he was trying to be loyal or contrary. Sam stomped off.

Hunter lingered, cleaning up after the others had left.

“You don’t have to take the grunt work just because you’re the newest,” Trixie told

him with a laugh, feeling suddenly off balance now that they were alone again.

She had been able to stay busy enough that she wasn't dwelling on dreamy memories of Hunter kissing her hand, but she couldn't have missed how he strode around the worksite, looking stronger and sexier than any of the others.

"It's Keith or Kyle," Hunter said confidently, not offering to stop sweeping. "Maybe both, working together."

Trixie hated the idea. "They're good kids," she said uncertainly. "Why would they want to sabotage their own work?" It was only a little easier to think about that than the idea of Hunter laying her down in the pile of sawdust to do dirty things to her.

Hunter shrugged.

"Well, why do you think it was them?"

Hunter opened his mouth and shut it again, looking at her very intensely, like he was uncomfortable about what he wanted to say.

"Look, I'm not doubting your detective skills, but do you have any evidence?"

"They're shifters," Hunter growled.

Trixie didn't understand. "They're working ten hour shifts. Just like you and the rest of the crew."

"No, they're shifters ."

Trixie was positive now that she was missing some nuance in what he was saying, and her confusion must have been clear on her face .

“ Shape shifters,” Hunter clarified, even more growly than before.

Well, Trixie told herself, there was always a catch. Hunter was handsome, capable, into her, and completely crazy.

HUNTER

Hunter had never really thought about how to tell someone that there was an entire culture of magical people living seamlessly side-by-side with the ordinary.

He had always been quite happy not to speak of it at all, and since he could always tell if someone was a shifter or not, it was easy enough to curb his tongue around humans.

So he figured he was doing pretty well when Trixie didn't turn and throw something at him. She had plenty of tools to choose from if she did decide to defend herself.

"Shapeshifters," she said tolerantly. "Okay."

Hunter frowned. "I should show you."

"It's been a long day," Trixie said patiently. "Everything will probably make a lot more sense after a solid meal and a good night of sleep. Sourdough Campground has good meals and if you're there at 7:30, they have a pancake toss that is a lot of fun. It's kind of a tourist thing around here."

Sighing, Hunter leaned forward onto four legs and Trixie went immediately from patronizing to panic as she backpedaled frantically out of his way.

"Bearohshitohshitohshit!" she said. This time, she did reach for a tool, and she got to a hammer on the floor before Hunter shifted back and stood up.

Trixie trembled, crouched low with her hammer clenched in both hands. She stared at him with wide brown eyes and blinked several times in succession. “You. Were. A. Bear.” She said each word like it was an effort.

“I’m a shifter,” Hunter clarified. “It’s a thing.”

“A thing.” Trixie echoed, still braced for combat with her hammer. “It’s a thing.”

Hunter spread his hands. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

“You were a bear!” she said, outraged. “Do it again!”

Hunter obliged, flowing out into his larger form, and Trixie slowly straightened. “Hunter?” she said cautiously.

He nodded like a cartoon.

Are we funny? his bear wanted to know.

Trixie started to laugh weakly.

We’re funny! his bear said in delight.

Trixie took a cautious step forward and Hunter was proud of her clear courage. He sat back on his haunches and she carefully closed the distance between them. “Can I touch you?” she asked.

Hunter nodded again.

She didn’t laugh , his bear pouted.

Trixie reached forward, realized she was still holding her hammer, and put it in the opposite hand. She didn't offer to drop it. Then she carefully touched Hunter's neck, stroking the fur like he was a dog. "You're really a bear."

Hunter shifted beneath her hand and was glad that she didn't snatch it away from his human shoulder. "I'm a shifter."

"A shape shifter. "

"We just call ourselves shifters."

Hunter was crouched very close to Trixie and he stood up slowly, watching her face as she went through a dozen emotions.

Confusion. Hesitation. Disbelief. Outrage.

A flash of anger. "Are there many of you? Are you all bears?" He watched the moment she put it together. "The wolf in the video footage!"

"Probably Keith or Kyle."

"Locals call them the Taylor pack," Trixie observed numbly.

"I always thought it was just an affectation. Can you be more than one thing? Are you born with it or bitten? How do you know they're shifters?

Can you smell each other? Are you superhuman?

Immortal?" She peppered him with questions but gave him no chance to answer.

"Are you a mutant? Is there a whole race of you poised to take over the world?

Where do your clothes go?"

"Trixie..."

"Not that I'm not glad you're still wearing them," she added quickly. "It's just... this sort of upends the whole way I thought the world works. If this can happen, what else? Are there wizards? Fairies? Magic rings?"

Hunter realized that she wasn't going to give him a conversational gap, so he did the only thing he could think of, leaning over to kiss her.

The hammer dropped from her fingers and that hand slipped up to the other side of his neck as Trixie kissed him back with the passion of shock.

For one long, glorious moment, Hunter's whole world was that kiss. It was as right as anything he'd ever experienced, pleasure and instinct rolled together in one undeniable pull. Trixie was his .

"Wait, wait," she murmured against his mouth, finally drawing back. "I'm still your boss."

"I quit," Hunter growled .

"What?"

"I quit."

It didn't have the desired effect. Trixie pushed him off in earnest. "No, I still need your help. You haven't signed the paperwork for insurance, and I could use the extra hands tomorrow before the truss truck gets here."

“Hire me back tomorrow,” Hunter suggested, not willing to spend another night without her now that he’d tasted her lips.

Trixie looked at him, conflicted. “Is that... legal?”

“Who cares?” Hunter demanded. “I quit! Kiss me!”

For a moment, Hunter feared that he’d overstepped. Something flashed in Trixie’s eyes, and then she was flinging herself full force into his arms with her face uplifted.

TRIXIE

The fact that Hunter was a shapeshifter—just shifter. Whatever!—was completely secondary to the fact that he was kissing her and there was nothing keeping them apart. We're going to see what this is was apparently animal hunger. Maybe literally animal in his case.

She didn't even mind the beard, she was so desperate for his every touch and the crush of his mouth against hers.

He backed her up against one of the open stud interior walls and she had a moment to be pleased by its sturdiness before he was tugging up at her T-shirt.

Trixie willingly helped him pull it off.

One of the best things about fall in Alaska was that all the mosquitos were dead, and she didn't mind exposing more skin to him.

She didn't wait for him to unclasp her bra, reaching behind to work the hooks herself as he took his own shirt off.

His chest was everything Trixie had known it would be underneath, rippled with muscles that she scratched and caressed. Her nails were short, and he growled in pleasure as he returned the favor, playing with her uncovered breasts .

"My trailer is a little less... unfinished," Trixie suggested. "I don't want splinters in certain places."

Hunter grunted an answer and lifted her up off her feet.

He might not be superhuman in strength, but he was top end human strong, and she was on the slight side herself.

She wrapped her arms around him and happily let her carry her over the ramp.

It groaned alarmingly and Trixie had a moment to wonder if they'd made a tactical error, and then they were over, and Hunter was taking her straight for the trailer.

It was unlocked, because that was how Trixie left it if she was on site, but she wasn't going to fit through sideways in his arms. Her feet weren't on the floor for long as they hurried up the steps and back to the bed.

The space was tight for two of them, especially for a big guy like Hunter, and Trixie hadn't tidied up for company, but she was too busy to be embarrassed.

Trixie could not have said how her pants came off, except that she wasn't surprised by how dexterous his hands were after watching him work with tools for two days.

They made out for some time, touching everything exposed as they removed clothing with reverence and curiosity, interspersing with kisses and nibbles.

Had she gotten a straight answer about biting or born with it ? Trixie shivered at the reminder.

He was a bear .

A shape shifter was making determined love to her with the same mouth that had said the word soulmate , and Trixie could not believe that there was no magic in the world anymore.

There were, however, things that magic might not account for. “Condom,” she said breathlessly. “Common sense. ”

Hunter didn’t protest when she rolled to fish one out of the cabinet by her bed, though he did let one of his big hands trail distractingly over her.

It took some searching, because getting laid hadn’t been high on her list of priorities for a very long time, but he was still flatteringly hard when she found it and he took it from her when she fumbled the package.

Sheathed, he tipped her back on the bed and raised one of her legs. His cock might not be monstrous , but it filled her to perfection, and from the first touch to the final thrust, she was on a roller coaster of pleasure and she didn’t want the ride to end.

He brought her close to whimpering pleasure so many times that Trixie became afraid she would never find release, varying his timing and his kisses with chivalrous attention to her reactions and finally, deliriously sent her spiraling into an orgasm that had steady aftershocks of bliss as he came in her at last.

It was romance book sex, Trixie thought. It was straight off the pages of a smutty bodice-ripper, complete with sweet aftercare while she was still incapable of speech or straight thought.

She cuddled in his arms after he’d cleaned up and come back to brush the hair from her face and lay little kisses all along her neck and shoulders.

“I have a shower,” she said at last, though she didn’t wash any part of him off her. “The water tank isn’t very big, so keep it short.”

“Is it big enough for two?” Hunter growled near her ear.

“Maybe midgets,” Trixie chuckled. “We’ll have to take turns. I’ve got an extra towel, though.”

She set the controls for him and tidied the bed while he rinsed off. There were several curses and clunks from the bathroom; the shower was probably like a sausage casing for someone of Hunter’s size.

Trixie followed with a strictly utilitarian shower of her own and was greeted by Hunter, still naked, holding her towel for her. He wrapped her up and kissed the top of her wet head.

“I still have a lot of questions you haven’t answered,” Trixie reminded him, toweling vigorously off before she wrapped the towel around herself, spa-style, and sat at the little couch. Hunter sat down across from her.

Hunter patiently answered them. He’d been two when he first started shifting. It was genetic; his six brothers and his father were all bears.

“Your poor mom,” Trixie observed. Hunter assured her that women were just as frequently shifters, when she quizzed him on that.

He conceded that he was stronger as a shifter but more along the lines of naturally athletic than supernatural. Trixie stroked an arm and hummed a little skeptically as he flexed it under her fingers.

“Telepathy? Can you talk to other shifters with your brain?”

“Nope. Not except with my bear.”

“Your bear is another voice in your head?”

“Frequently.”

“Is that... uncomfortable?”

Hunter looked like he was genuinely considering the question. “He’s been there since I was very little. We grew up together. I can’t imagine him not being there.”

“I don’t know how I’d feel about having someone always looking over my shoulder while I read dirty books or did dishes. Do you get equal time with your shapes? Is it like a timeshare? Or does he control a few limbs? Does he sleep? ”

Hunter chuckled. “He’s never minded my habits. We shift when we have the opportunity, but mostly he’s along for the ride. He’s never taken over, but he might get a little noisy and distracting when instinct is strong. He’s more or less present all the time. I don’t think he sleeps, exactly.”

“What do you mean when you say instinct?”

Hunter opened his mouth and shut it again, frowning. “Like it sounds, but... more. Instinct is like another sense, so describing it is like describing a sight to someone who is blind. I know when something is wrong or right, in a vague way. I can tell when I’m near a shifter.”

“Which is how you knew Kyle and Keith were wolves.” Trixie was still wrapped in nothing but her towel, but the heater was running, and the trailer was warm.

“I don’t know for sure that they are wolves,” Hunter cautioned.

Trixie told herself that she shouldn’t feel disappointed that there were a few basic limitations to magic.

“So our case isn’t quite as open and closed as I’d hoped, not that your instinct would be anything to take to the cops.

Can you bring it up in casual conversation? ‘I’m a bear, are you a wolf?’”

“It’s rude,” Hunter said, sounding snobbish. Or, maybe it was just aloof. He was such an enigma. “Shift type is pretty much on a need-to-know basis.”

It still bothered Trixie. “Why would Keith or Kyle have a vendetta against the project? I could hire them over the winter if we get the shell up in time. There aren’t a lot of job options here, and I don’t feel like I’m a bad boss.”

“You’re not a bad boss,” Hunter said firmly, scooting closer on the couch to put a hand on her bare knee. “You’re a great boss. You can boss me around any day.”

Trixie hadn’t been fishing for the compliment, but it warmed her to her toes .

“Speaking of bosses...”

“I’m not working for you right now...” Hunter leaned forward to pin her against the couch and slowly kiss her.

Trixie had wanted to ask about soulmates, but he seemed tired of questions, and he had a better idea anyway...

HUNTER

Trixie's shower left a lot to be desired. Hunter could squeeze into the space, but once he was there, even just rotating was a challenge. Bending down was out of the question, and reaching anywhere was an exercise in flexibility and banged elbows.

He briefly rinsed and dried off on his damp towel to find that Trixie (who had taken the first shower this time) was making food in the little kitchen.

"I hope you like pasta," she said merrily. She had an easiness to her that she hadn't before, and Hunter could relate. He didn't enjoy juvenile will-they-won't-they drama, and he was happy that Trixie hadn't been coy or tried to draw things out.

We make her happy, his bear said, as content as Hunter himself was.

Hunter watched her, stirring sausage and chopping zucchini and setting out plates in a little flurry of activity.

He wanted to make her happy. He wanted to always see that little smile of satisfaction at her mouth, that spring to her step. She should always be that joyful.

And it wasn't just the sex, though he took a certain amount of pride in her reactions to that. He liked working with her. He wanted to support her as a partner and helpmate.

This was the woman he wanted to marry, Hunter realized. He'd never really considered marriage for himself, because he couldn't imagine a woman he'd want to spend that much time with. Then he met Trixie and he hated not being with her.

Helpmate , his bear agreed. Mate.

“Sorry about the shower,” she said, with a merry sideways glance as Hunter dressed.
“It’s a little tight in here.”

Hunter gave a grunt, only thinking afterwards that he ought to say something polite about how it wasn’t.

But Trixie didn’t seem to expect all the conversational lies and fillers that most women did.

Maybe because she worked in a traditionally male field?

Maybe because she was perfect for him, and that was only one of the many ways.

Dressed, he sat down at the table.

Trixie drained the noodles and plated the spaghetti. “I figured you’d be hungry. I certainly got a workout today.” She slipped into the dinette across from him.

“Where would you live if you didn’t have a job site like this?” Hunter asked, once the edge of his hunger was dulled.

“I have an apartment in Fairbanks,” Trixie said with a shrug. “I kind of hate it and resent that I’m paying for it, but it’s my safety net, and I don’t have space for all of my stuff here. It’s mostly books in boxes because I never got around to building shelves.”

“You going to live here in the winter?” Hunter wanted to know. The trailer was cozy right now, but he knew that winters could be bitter and wasn’t sure how well insulated it was .

“Until the house is finished,” Trixie said. Hunter caught a hint of something wistful in her face.

“You ever think about living in a house like that?” Hunter jerked his thumb towards the frame that was looming in the twilight outside.

“That’s way more house than I’d need,” Trixie scoffed.

“If you had a family, though…”

Trixie stopped chewing. “Are we having the family talk?”

“I’m good either way.”

Trixie stared at him. “I never really thought about it,” she said softly. “I never had anyone I’d think about it with.”

“Well, now you do.”

Trixie was adorable when she blushed, but Hunter found her beautiful when she went white and then almost blue because she forgot to breathe. After a moment, she remembered to blink and exhaled slowly. “That’s a lot, Hunter,” she whispered. “I’d need some time.”

“Not suggesting you skip the condom next time,” Hunter said, honestly a little pleased that he’d evoked such a deep response in her. “Just a thing to keep in mind. I’d buy you a house like that if you wanted. I’d buy you that house.”

“That house isn’t even built yet,” Trixie reminded him. “And I’m not in the habit of letting people buy me things.” She stared down at her spaghetti for a moment and Hunter had a moment of worry that he’d overstepped before she looked up, shaking

her head and smiling. “You’re really something.”

Hunter shrugged.

What are we? his literal bear wanted to know. Is it a riddle? What are we??

That was what Hunter wanted to know, too.

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TRIXIE

Once the idea was in her head, Trixie could not stop thinking about a family with Hunter.

What would that even look like? Was he seriously offering to buy her a house?

Was it wrong that she actually wanted him to?

She prided herself on being a strong, independent woman.

She didn't need to define herself by her role in a man's life, as a mother or a homemaker.

Surely, the idea should fill her with reservations and feminist dread.

But she kind of liked the idea of having kids with this man.

What would he look like with babies tugging on his beard? Would he shave off the beard? Would Trixie want him to?

Trixie shook her head. "Let's start with simpler decisions. Are you staying the night here? The bed's a king."

Hunter frowned. "I thought I'd head back to the hotel. I didn't bring a change of clothing, and there are some things I need to do."

He didn't volunteer what they might be, and Trixie didn't want to pry. "Work starts at eight, if I decide to hire you back."

"If you decide...?"

"Hey, you quit very abruptly, without giving me any notice at all. We're nearly finished with this stage. I don't actually need a rookie like you for anything."

Hunter gave a guffaw of laughter as he realized she was teasing him, and Trixie loved how his eyes crinkled softly at the edges. "Oh, you need me for things," he growled suggestively.

Trixie flushed, grinning back at him. "Maybe you can quit again tomorrow night?"

"I'll plan on it," Hunter agreed. Trixie gathered up their empty dishes as he scooted from the dinette bench and when she put them down and turned to see how their goodbye was going to go, he scooped her into his arms and kissed her soundly.

"Sleep well," he murmured as his kisses feathered off.

"Oh, I will," Trixie promised. Her whole body still hummed with satisfaction.

She followed him to the door of the trailer.

"See you in the morning." He stood at the bottom of the steps and she had to bend down to give him one lingering last kiss as he cupped the side of her face. "Good night," she whispered.

As she expected, she slept the sleep of the well-laid, waking to the sounds of birds as the sun rose.

She made a thermos of the coffee for the crew and had a hearty breakfast of scrambled eggs, sausage, and cheesy toast sprinkled with dill.

She brushed her teeth and slathered on deodorant before she buckled on her tool belt and went out to survey the site.

Frost glittered on every surface. It had drizzled overnight and tree branches were etched with the barest hint of ice.

Where light hit as the sun rose over the forest, the rime steamed into nothing without even melting.

Trixie's breath was a cloud in the crisp air, and she went to fire up the generator and fill the compressor for the day's work.

To her surprise, Hunter was the last to arrive, coming in so late that she worried he'd taken her teasing about not hiring him back too seriously.

He came with a box of fresh donuts from the local bakery, however, and the rest of the crew was inclined to forgive his tardiness.

He was wearing a new tourist shirt that proclaimed Alaska or Bust .

The top floors were damp, but the bottom floors were mostly enclosed now.

Trixie gathered everyone up and laid out the day's plan of attack.

“We're getting the basement backfilled this morning about ten; they had a surprise opening in their schedule and worked us in early.

We'll set up the scaffolding to get the second story sheathing up after we finish those

walls.

Hunter, I want you on that team with Noah and Sam.

Dylan, you're with me and Kyle on the second floor walls.

Keith, let's get the braces down and the nail patterns finished on the first floor.

Then start drilling the plumbing and electricity penetrations.

I've got the studs marked. Go ahead, everybody snicker like you're thirteen.

"Trixie knew she was red-cheeked, and she definitely couldn't meet Hunter's gaze.

It was actually easier to look curiously at Keith and Kyle, searching for clues that they really were shifters .

"Trusses are coming in tomorrow morning, and we should have the roof up before the weekend when the forecast is for snow."

Having Hunter a floor away made concentrating easier, and Trixie stayed busy.

The excavator arrived exactly on time (a minor miracle) and backfilled efficiently around the building.

Trixie was not sorry to have the gaping pit filled in, and the day's work was another leap forward in the appearance of the structure.

Keith cut the windows out of the shell and the whole thing went from box to house as the windows opened up the space and poured light into the structure. Albeit, a house still missing a roof.

They broke up half an hour early, because the structure was ready for the next stage.

“I’m too tired to give a speech,” Trixie confessed.

“But you guys did great. Tell Esther at the Bear’s Den to put a drink for each of you on my tab.

Just one . I don’t need you hungover in the morning when we’re up in the rafters. ”

She didn’t think about the name of the bar until they’d dispersed, cheering and chatting. Hunter went with them, and Trixie told herself that was smart, that he was still trying to suss out her saboteur, and that she wasn’t sorry he didn’t immediately quit and kiss her again.

It was quiet when everyone finally left, so that she actually startled when her phone’s ring cut the silence.

“Trixie!” she answered.

“How’s the project, Trix?”

Trixie wasn’t sure why Jay’s voice grated so badly. Maybe because she’d been hoping to hear Hunter’s gravelly voice.

“Smooth sailing,” she said triumphantly. “With extra hands, we’ve got the walls up and we’re ready for the trusses tomorrow. Should have it roofed by the weekend, just before the snow. Cross your fingers!”

There was a small pause before Jay said, “Good work!” so jovially that Trixie knew something was off even before he asked, “How’d it go with insurance? The security guy sign off on it? Have you added more cameras?”

“No, we’ve still just got the one. He’s doing a little more poking, since it looks like a personal grudge.” Trixie told herself that poking wasn’t as bad as penetration had been earlier when she was addressing the crew. The whole English language was a minefield of double entendres.

“It’s that environmental group, right? Those dickheads from the lower forty-eight who think they know Alaska better than we do?”

“Maybe, but we can’t figure out the connection between our suspect and the environmental group,” Trixie cautioned.

“You’ve got a suspect?” Jay sounded wary.

Trixie reminded herself that they’d only caught him on camera as a wolf.

“We’ve got a lead,” Trixie amended. “Hunter’s going to try to get more out of him.”

“Hunter?”

“The guy from Grizzly Protection Services.”

“Can’t you just get him to sign off on the system so we can finish the claim?”

I don’t really care about the who’s or why’s.

” That was Jay in a nutshell. His interest was the bottom line and he didn’t mind if corners were cut to get a job done faster.

One reason they did so well as a team is that he generally left everything for her to do and didn’t try to micromanage her decisions.

Trixie found herself feeling annoyed. “I’m not going to ask him to sign off on the system before he’s done investigating. He’s being thorough.”

“We don’t need thorough ,” Jay complained. “We need quick.”

“Speaking of quick, I was about to run into town and use the laundromat when you called. You need anything else?”

Jay grumbled (and Trixie thought it wasn’t half as manly a grumble as Hunter managed) and hung up. It was only after Trixie had put her phone away that she realized that she hadn’t told him that they’d gotten the backfill done early. It probably didn’t matter.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:04 pm

HUNTER

When Dylan invited him along to the Bear's Den, Hunter immediately accepted. He'd rather have stayed behind and made love to Trixie a few times before bed, but he hadn't actually solved her problems yet, so it felt like cheating.

Someone had tried to sabotage the project, and they still needed to be brought to justice. Hunter wasn't going to throw away a chance to get more information out of Kyle and Keith just to get laid.

Interrogation was of his better investigation skills, but friendly socialization was not in his comfort zone.

Fortunately, Noah seemed perfectly happy to start the conversation. "So, Hunter. Where are you from?"

"Colorado." Hunter ordered a whiskey on the rocks.

Keith and Kyle ordered beers, Noah a bourbon, and Sam, sitting at the far end of the bar glowering at the screen showing a football game, ordered an Old Fashioned. Dylan had begged off with some other business to attend to.

Was he supposed to ask where they were from in return to carry the conversation? Hunter figured it was obvious they were all locals besides him.

The bartender proved to be a shifter, and he and Hunter exchanged a knowing nod when his drink was delivered.

Hunter caught Keith watching him suspiciously from the corner of his eye.

The brothers would know he was a shifter, just as he knew they were.

But they didn't know that he was investigating the sabotage; they had all accepted his cover story without question, as far as Hunter could tell.

"So, Trixie. She's pretty hot, right?"

Hunter clenched his hand around his drink. Either he hadn't been as circumspect as he'd hoped, or Noah was interested in Trixie for himself.

Ours , his bear said jealously.

"She's a fine lady, " Hunter growled.

Noah cackled. " Woo, is she! I wasn't sure when she came waltzing into town, but I'd work for her again. Asks a lot, but works just as hard and looks good doing it."

Hunter reminded himself that he was not there to stake his claim on Trixie or put anyone in traction, but to find out which of the Taylor brothers had something to gain from stopping the work.

"Guess there's some drama about the project?"

" he said mildly, taking a bracing sip from his glass.

"Saw the signs." He made a point of including Keith and Kyle.

Noah snorted. "Enviro-nazis from out of state."

Kyle took a swallow of his beer while Keith agreed, “You get that a lot up here. People who think that keeping Alaska pristine means stopping every drop of development.”

“Just ‘cause they already screwed up their own land,” Noah scoffed.

“Nothing wrong with protecting the environment,” Kyle added. “No one’s saying we should let them come in and strip-mine the place, but, like PETA wants to ban dog-sledding.”

“You don’t think they should?” Hunter asked pointedly.

That got him shouts of laughter. Noah pounded him on the shoulder. “You ever seen a sled dog ready to go? There is no abuse in those races. Mushers love their dogs, and those dogs are not happy if they aren’t running.”

“I grew up with sled dogs,” Sam volunteered. “Everyone I know feeds their dogs better than them. Only cruelty is not letting them run.”

“Cruelty is trying to make lapdogs out of hyper huskies,” Keith said. “They’re working dogs, and they love to work.”

“You got sled dogs?” Hunter asked Keith. If they were wolves, they probably didn’t.

“Dogs, but not sled dogs,” Kyle volunteered. “We’ve got a couple of sheep dogs. We’ve got barley fields off Mitner Road, right behind the property we’re building on right now. They let us know when there are animals after the chickens, or moose coming for the gardens.”

Hunter filed that information as useful. It was odd that wolves had sheep dogs, and he was sure there was a joke there somewhere, but couldn’t find it.

“Yeah, we helped build the new barn last year,” Keith added. “Trixie’s trying to convince us to go to Fairbanks to get a trade license, but odd jobs pay the bills.”

“Firefighting in the summer,” Kyle added.

“Except that it rained most of the summer,” Keith moaned.

“What do you do, Hunter?” Sam asked. “You’re definitely not a career carpenter.”

Hunter made a noise that hopefully passed for a chuckle.

“Not even. I’m up visiting my brother in Anchorage and he heard that Trixie needed a hand.

I didn’t have a lot going on, and it sounded like a challenge.

” That was exactly the story he’d contrived with Trixie, and he didn’t see a reason to deviate or elaborate.

“Doesn’t really answer the question,” Noah pointed out. “What do you do when you’re not moonlighting in Alaska?”

“Lay off,” Keith advised. “It’s clear he’s a dilettante.”

Everyone looked at Hunter to see if he’d take offense, and Hunter just shrugged. “I do odd jobs that sound fun.”

“He’s not stuck up like a billionaire,” Kyle said skeptically. “The privileged don’t get their hands dirty. I think he’s running from the law.”

“Nah,” Sam said. “He’s dodging a mad dad with a shotgun. He’s making Trixie blush

and swoon, probably there's a string of girls behind him."

That made everyone laugh, including Hunter.

"You're not the settling down type, though, are you?" Noah guessed. "Well, don't go breaking Trixie's heart until the job's finished. The pay is too good."

Hunter drained the last of his drink. "I wasn't planning to break her heart," he said gruffly.

"Oh, it's serious, then," Keith teased. "You've got intentions?"

Hunter scowled at his ice cubes, not sure how the conversation had gotten so entirely out of his control. He was usually much better at investigations than this. "She's my boss," he said, trying to make it sound regretful. It wasn't like that had stopped him yet.

"We're just joshing you," Noah said kindly. "Trixie is alright, and she looks at you like she wouldn't mind you putting in some overtime."

"I need another drink," Hunter said desperately.

TRIXIE

Trixie was used to being alone. She had grown up off the grid and had entertained herself for her entire life. She didn't need—and thought she didn't want!—constant companionship.

But she found herself missing Hunter.

Not just for his gentle touches and electric kisses, but for his presence .

He didn't say a lot, but Trixie was always confident he was listening to her, and he never left her feeling like she was dominating the conversation or letting it flag.

He was interested in her. He respected her.

Trixie could admit that she was flattered by the hot look in his eyes and found the attraction mutual, but she would have been happy to have him across the table from her talking about the day's work.

The day's success felt empty without someone to share it with.

After dinner, Trixie did a tour of the dark building, standing in the open doorways imagining the finished space.

It was going to be a beautiful house, whatever its checkered origins were.

There were still ladders in the place of stairs, and Trixie climbed to the top floor and

stood looking out.

They hadn't put down the decking for the porch yet, but she could sit with her legs dangling out of the space where glass doors would be, gazing at the purple twilight over the mountains.

There might be northern lights that night, if she stayed up to see them.

She loved that this location was far enough away from civilization that the sky wasn't polluted with streetlights.

Stars and planets were already starting to sparkle overhead.

She could hear the intermittent highway noise, and felt her heart leap in her chest as one of the vehicles turned off onto the gravel drive. A pale truck came into view and Trixie knew that it would be Hunter.

She didn't want to look desperate, so she remained in place.

To her surprise, Hunter seemed to know exactly where she was, not going to her trailer first. He climbed up and sat beside her without comment and it seemed perfectly natural to scoot up against him and drink in the warmth of him as he put an arm around her.

It was chilly now that the sun was gone, and Trixie's padded flannel wasn't doing the job.

She wished she'd put on a hat because her ears were starting to ache with the cold.

"I didn't technically hire you back this morning," she told him lightly. "Does that mean I don't have to pay you for today?"

She felt his chuckle as much as she heard it. “Saves me the trouble of quitting now, I guess.”

As warm and nice as he was against her, Trixie sat up and drew back. “Hunter...”

“You want to know what happens next,” he guessed.

“I’m pretty transparent,” Trixie said wryly.

“I’d like to take you to Colorado,” he said unexpectedly. “I want my family to meet you. ”

“To stay ?”

Hunter was quiet for a moment, looking out over the dark trees at the sky. It was velvety black now, speckled in bright stars. There were a few smudges of paler clouds near the horizon. “I don’t think so,” he said slowly. “I like this place. It feels like home.”

“You should spend a winter here before you decide,” Trixie cautioned. “The cold isn’t so bad, but a lot of people can’t handle the darkness.”

“I could,” Hunter said, with all the confidence of someone who had never experienced a month of 20-hour nights.

“Wait and see,” Trixie chuckled. “Today is fall equinox. The days and nights are equal now, but see how you feel after winter solstice.”

Trixie was watching the clouds, not convinced that was what they were, and gazed at them until she could see their movement. “Those are northern lights,” she said. “Not great ones.”

Hunter's arm around her tightened, and he stared at them until Trixie worried that his eyeballs would dry up. "Blink," she reminded him. "They'll still be there."

He chuckled, and looked at her instead. "So will I." He leaned in and kissed her, slowly and firm. "Wherever you choose."

They weren't in a particularly safe place to make out more than that, so Trixie didn't complain when Hunter stood and drew her up with him. "We should take this inside," he murmured.

"Gladly." She was also still cold.

He didn't offer to carry her down the ladder, which was good, because Trixie wasn't sure that even he could do that without killing both of them.

Trixie's brief reservations that she must have misremembered what a good lover he was were washed away the moment they got into the trailer and shut the door behind them.

Hunter knew exactly what he wanted, and Trixie wanted exactly the same thing.

Kissing and petting turned to stripping off inconvenient clothing, and then he was crawling over her on the broad bed.

His first strokes were careful and gentle, but as she cried out and begged, he slammed harder into her until they were both finally spent and satisfied.

Trixie cuddled into Hunter's warm side, loving the feel of his flesh under her fingers, and the tickle of his beard. He smelled like wilderness and work, and just a little of whiskey.

“How’d it go out with the crew tonight?” Trixie asked. “Any headway on our case? Are you still sure it’s Keith or Kyle?”

Hunter’s shrug made her head move. “Could be, but I’m not sure. Couldn’t figure out any motivation for them. Just mischief, maybe?”

“Expensive mischief,” Trixie snorted. “And I feel like they’re not bad kids. I don’t want to suspect any of my crew. I worked hard to put them together.”

“You’re good at that,” Hunter said, his voice just a rumble.

“Mischief? Suspicion?”

“Building a crew. You haven’t been here long, and they all respect you. You got them working as a team and that’s not a minor feat. You’re a good teacher. You’re a good leader.”

Trixie felt a wave of warmth roll over her and she squeezed Hunter gratefully. “Thanks,” she said softly. “That’s nice to hear. Maybe I will hire you back tomorrow.”

HUNTER

Hunter had not slept overnight with anyone in a very long time. His few overnight stays in previous relationships had been awkward and—he quickly learned—came with baggage of expectations afterwards.

But he didn't think he'd wake with any regrets to find Trixie in his arms. She snored the smallest amount, a cute, steady little hum that was more comfortable than annoying. Her dark curls splayed across her pillow and she didn't wake when Hunter brushed them lovingly away from her face.

It took all of Hunter's self-control to leave, but he had work to do and didn't want to risk disturbing her to do it.

The truck sounded loud in the silence as it started, but although Hunter looked hopefully back, the lights in Trixie's didn't come on and she didn't come out to call him back.

It was ridiculous of him to think she would.

He put the truck in gear and drove away, following the now-familiar roads to the sterile hotel .

He had an email from Baxter:

When did you start watching soap operas?

Carthridge and the Coalition for Nature are top notch drama.

Carthridge is a multi-billionaire who could probably give Dad a run for his money.

Got his riches in the travel industry when it was booming and then got out before the restrictions got heavy.

He's had a string of hot young wives, including his latest ex, Mrs. Tiffany Amberly Carthridge...

who is a major donor for a certain environmental group that will not shock you. You were right that it was personal.

She's in Florida. He's got residences in South Carolina, Arizona, Montana, and Washington State that make the place you're building look like a hovel. The divorce looks like it hurt him pretty badly. Two of the places are on the market with million-dollar pricetags.

How's Alaska? Staying warm?

There were links to Tiffany's social media, Carthridge's public trust listings, and some lawsuits that Carthridge had been involved in, including three paternity suits.

Hunter typed a brief answer, knowing that because of the time zones, Baxter wouldn't see it until morning.

Thanks.

Tiffany, in her glammed-up selfies, definitely didn't look like the type who was up here doing the damage personally. She'd probably paid someone, and getting that kind of information would require a warrant, but none of this was enough information

to bring in the troopers yet.

Hunter leaned back in his chair. Keith and Kyle were still his first suspects.

They'd mentioned working odd jobs, and this definitely qualified.

If money was tight and the offer was right, they were both young and dumb enough to try something.

And they were shifters. Hunter just didn't know what kind.

Nap? his bear said wistfully.

It had been a long several days of hard exertion. Trixie drove him hard on the jobsite, and he returned the favor in bed. He was sated and tired.

These clues would last until morning, and tomorrow was going to be another long day.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:05 pm

TRIXIE

“Hey, boss.” Dylan was the first to arrive, and he went straight for the coffee. “Truss truck still coming this morning?”

Trixie frowned at her phone. “Yeah, they’re on their way from Fairbanks and should be here in about thirty minutes. Sam’s texted in sick.”

She looked up just in time to see a flash of something she couldn’t identify cross Dylan’s face.

Concern? Trixie didn’t usually care about gossip, but she had a lot of unanswered questions about their history that she was dying to ask.

Did they fight over a girl? Tok was a small town with an even smaller dating pool.

“Good thing we got Hunter,” Dylan said with a shrug. “He’s turned out okay.”

Trixie was pretty sure her face gave away exactly how okay he’d turned out, because Dylan grinned. “Sure,” she said, as blandly as possible. “It’s good to have the extra hands.” It was almost like he did have extra hands when they were making love .

Dylan nodded knowingly, and they both turned as Keith and Kyle drove up, Hunter right behind them. “Speak of the devil.”

Trixie told herself to be professional and play it cool as she waved to them to park well out of the way. It wasn’t long before Noah pulled in, too.

“Big day, crew!” Trixie said, when they all had their coffee and were milling about ready for directions.

“Most of you have done this before, but here’s a rundown of how it works for the new folks.

” She pointed up. “The trusses for each wing will be delivered all bundled together on a crane truck and set up right on the walls. They’ll be laid down flat at the end and we’ll be lifting and walking them one at a time down the length of the building to put them in place from the far end.

This is a risky operation, I don’t want to see anyone without a hardhat on at any point today.

Slow down if you have to. It’s not worth meeting a deadline to take a tumble; we are absolutely not rushing this.

I’ll be on the walls with Keith and Kyle.

I want Hunter and Dylan with ladders on the floor to help support and fasten the trusses in place.

Noah, I’ve got the wet walls on the first floor measured out.

Sam’s out for the day, but you can get some of that done solo and once the trusses are tacked in, I can leave Keith and Kyle to do soffits and come give you a hand. Any questions?”

Everyone nodded their understanding and scattered to prepare.

Trixie caught several sly looks as she showed Hunter how to place the pre-cut

blockers snugly between the trusses and tack them into place.

She reminded herself that she wasn't showing any favoritism; she always trained the newbies herself so they didn't learn any sloppy habits.

“You'll be doing all the sill fastening with a nail gun and we'll be putting up purlins—the boards that run along the top between the trusses—with hammers.

You don't want to be dragging heavy hoses up there before everything is secured.

This, believe it or not, is one of the most dangerous points of construction.

A lot can go wrong.” Noah watched the demonstration, nodding along approvingly and looking slightly smug.

The truss truck came exactly when they said they would and Trixie clambered up to the top of the walls to take point while Noah took the dangling guide line and helped maneuver it into place.

“Boss?”

Trixie ignored the first call, but not the second.

“Boss!!”

Keith and Kyle were chatterboxes, but they rarely raised their voices, so when Keith echoed his brother, Trixie signaled to the crane operator to stop lowering the trusses. “What is it?” she asked, trying not to sound cross. It was one thing not to rush, but quite another to be dragging things out.

“There's a problem with the studs at this end!”

“What kind of problem?”

“You gotta see it.” Keith and Kyle were at the end of the wing where the trusses were being lowered, ready to scurry up and connect them once contact had been made.

Trixie walked carefully back along the wall to the ladder as the crane operator leaned out and hollered, “What’s up?”

“Give me a minute!” Trixie hollered back, hurrying down. “This had better be good,” she warned Keith...and then she saw why he’d called her.

The studs in the corners and all along the short wall had been cut partway through from the power penetrations, back against the sheathing where she wouldn’t have noticed it until too late. “Shi?—”

Trixie wasn’t an engineer, but she could guess the weight that the studs would safely take in their current compromised state before they buckled.

It was possible that the wall would have held under the trusses, but it was more likely that they would have crumpled and failed, and the failure would have taken half the wall, the trusses, and probably Trixie herself when they broke.

Who knows what further damage would have occurred when the sheathing ripped off.

A dozen of the most critical studs had been very deliberately sabotaged.

“I got other deliveries!” the crane operator hollered. He couldn’t see through the sheathing on the second floor, so it probably just looked like they were standing around chatting.

“Hold on!” Trixie dashed for the other end of the work site, stopping to inspect the

studs at regular intervals.

Only the delivery end had been damaged. Someone knew when and where the trusses would be placed.

This damage hadn't been there the night before, and it had been done with surgical precision and in such a way that they wouldn't be noticed easily.

She went back and out through the porch opening where she'd sat with Hunter the night before.

"Change of plans!" she shouted. "We're putting the trusses at that end. " She pointed imperiously.

The crane operator swore and grumbled, then retracted the boom while Noah walked the guide line in.

The driver had to get out of the truck and draw in the outriggers, cussing like a sailor, but it wasn't long before he was repositioned at the far end of the building and the trusses were dropped without drama onto the waiting walls.

"That could have been bad," Trixie said, when the delivery truck was gone.

"Noah, Hunter, we need that wall ripped out and rebuilt. Keith, Kyle, I owe you. That could have killed someone. We're behind again, but let's get to work and see if we can close the gap.

I'm good for all the overtime I can legally offer and dinner as well.

We'll stage a pile of trusses there"—she stabbed a finger at a bay far enough from the end wall to be sturdy—"and start working back from there.

It adds a step, but not like hauling them up one by one would have. ”

Keith and Kyle swarmed back up onto the walls and Noah went to get new 2x6s for the replacement studs.

“Could have killed someone , or could have killed you?” Hunter growled, when the others were out of easy earshot.

“There’s no reason to assume it’s that personal,” Trixie said, but the idea had occurred to her. “Anyone could have been collateral.”

“But you would have been up there, the closest.” Hunter’s voice was flat and unforgiving.

“I could have sent anyone up,” Trixie said with a shrug. But she wouldn’t have. She was always working point on her jobs, and she was slighter than anyone else, with a natural head for heights. “Hunter...”

“I didn’t protect you.”

“It turned out okay,” Trixie said. It was flattering that Hunter looked incredibly bent out of shape at her near miss, and she wanted to indulge in a hard embrace to chase the last of the shock from her limbs, but she was a professional, and so was he.

She lowered her voice. “We might need to expand your search, though. Keith and Kyle were the ones who pointed it out.”

Hunter frowned and glared down the building. Keith and Kyle had already unwrapped the trusses and were starting to walk the first one down the building, Dylan beneath them keeping an eye on their level and spotting them towards the bay that Trixie had indicated .

“I’m up,” Trixie said, and she risked a quick squeeze of his shoulder. “Go help Noah replace that wall. We’ll stage six of them here,” she commanded as she raised her voice. “Then we can start building backwards. Dylan, hold the tape, we need to make sure this measurement is perfect .”

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:05 pm

HUNTER

Hunter threw himself into the work to drown his sense of responsibility.

If he'd stayed around the night before, maybe the saboteur would have seen his truck and decided against risking the damage.

If Hunter was worth his salt as an investigator, he'd already have found the culprit and brought him to justice.

Trixie called the incident in to the Tok trooper when they broke for lunch, and Hunter balled his hands into fists as he listened in on the conversation and heard them brush her off.

"There's nothing on my camera," she said, discouraged, when she'd hung up.

"But I had it trained on the generator and tool boxes, not a blank wall. There was nothing to steal there. I didn't hear anything last night, but it was done with hand tools, so I probably wouldn't have.

And we've already rebuilt the wall, so it's not like we have a lot of evidence for them to look at.

I wasn't going to hold up the project to dust for fingerprints.

The expense was pretty minimal, we were lucky.

It's on file, they'll send someone if they have free time, but it's more likely this is just a file that will be cheerfully ignored. "

"I don't think much of your local sheriff," Hunter admitted.

Trixie looked conflicted. "He's a state trooper. And I mean, he's got a tough job. It's probably someone local, and I'm the outsider. This is an unpopular job. And no one was actually hurt. He's on the brink of retirement, so he wants to rock the boat as little as possible."

"You like it here, though?"

Trixie's face softened. "I really do. I'm going to miss my trailer here when the house is handed off. I love the area. I like the people, except for the jerk trying to run us off. It's going to be a beautiful house." She sounded wistful.

"You'd live here?"

She shook her head too quickly. "It's too much house for me. I'd have to...I don't know, turn it into a bed and breakfast. Hire a cook and a maid."

"Is that a bad thing?"

"It's a beautiful dream," Trixie said softly.

"They're talking about bringing a rail line this way, and it could bring in a lot of tourists.

There'd be a lot of building opportunities.

Maybe I should let Jay buy me out and strike out on my own.

Combination bed, breakfast, and building company!

” She laughed it off, but Hunter thought there was a look of longing behind her eyes before she finished her lunch and launched directly back into work.

He didn’t linger to try to make plans that night after the work day, but drove back to his hotel and booted up his computer.

How could he tie Tiffany ex-Cartridge to any of this?

Setting the environmental company on the project with bad press was one thing, but deliberate sabotage was a whole new ball of yarn, and Hunter had no proof, not even anything slightly circumstantial.

Was Sam involved? It was convenient that he’d called out sick that day.

He still knew that Kyle and Keith were shifters, and he knew that a wolf was responsible.

If he could verify that they were wolves, that would put him a step closer to proof.

Google maps gladly showed him the layout to the Taylor farm.

It was close behind the Cartridge property, though the road access was a long way around.

After considering for a little while, Hunter left his truck prominently in front of the hotel and went out the back door, wandered over a block, and then took off into the forest. He shifted as soon as the trees closed around him, and snuffled his way towards the farm.

He approached from the back, sticking to the fringe of the forest. Keith had said they had sheepdogs, and he heard one of them bark as a cloud of birds took off.

Hunter shifted between bear and man, circling the farm curiously.

There were broad, empty fields that looked recently harvested, and several pastures of cows and alpacas.

It was an interesting mix of animals for a pack of wolves to keep, Hunter thought.

Closer to the house was a series of big, arched greenhouses that also looked like they were being buttoned up for the winter.

One of them, at the far end of the fields, reeked of weed, but that wasn't illegal here.

Just as Hunter was wishing he had a smaller, more subtle shift shape so he could get closer to the house and see what was happening, someone came out on the porch and yelled, "Dinner! I'm not saving you any if you're late!"

Hunter, shifting to take advantage of his better human eyesight, assumed it was a few squirrels at first, streaking for the house, then thought they might be weasels.

He finally realized they were meerkats , a solid half dozen of them that swarmed out of the bare field and rose up as boys from Keith's age to barely in their teens.

They rough-housed and hollered and pushed into the house door, the promised sheepdogs howling and playing along.

Hunter could not be positive that Keith and Kyle were both in the mix, but if they weren't, brothers that looked exactly like them certainly were.

Hunter didn't do statistics like his brother Baxter, but he knew a likely thing when he saw it, and it was incredibly likely that Keith and Kyle were meerkats. He would have to go back to Trixie empty handed.

Thinking about Trixie seemed to cause a pang of sudden, unexpected anxiety and Hunter recognized it as instinct exactly as his bear gave a snort of concern. Something was wrong. Something was wrong with Trixie, and he had to go help her.

He shifted as he turned, and then crashed through the trees as a bear, the cold, mossy forest floor crunching beneath his paws.

TRIXIE

Trixie was already in a dark mood when she saw Jay's number flash up on her phone that evening. "Trixie," she answered shortly.

"Trix! What's this about more sabotage?"

Trixie set her jaw, hating the shortening of her nickname as much as Jay's accusing tone.

"Someone sawed halfway through a bunch of corner studs. It would have crushed the wall if we'd put the full weight of the trusses there in the morning like we'd planned.

We're incredibly lucky that Keith noticed it.

Someone could have been seriously hurt!"

Jay was quiet a moment. "So did we miss the truss delivery? Or will we have to haul them up one by one? That's going to slow us down a lot."

"I had them put on the other end of the house," Trixie said. "We got backfill early, so there was access."

"What? Why didn't you tell me?" Jay sounded genuinely annoyed.

"I thought you didn't like having to micromanage things. "

“It isn’t micromanaging to keep me in the loop .”

“You know what would be more helpful than giving me a hard time about actually getting things done? If you were here . Sam didn’t show up today, and if it hadn’t been for Hunter, we’d be further behind than ever.

There’s snow in the forecast tomorrow and we could use an extra set of hands in the worst way.

If it’s not in the way of your other plans, you know. ”

Jay was silent long enough that Trixie wondered if she’d crossed a line at last. Jay’s general willingness to make half the profits from the projects she was working her ass off on alone had galled her for a long time, but she’d always kept her resentment in check.

After all, he was usually the one who got them the jobs in the first place.

She usually preferred to have him off the jobsite, because he didn’t take direction well.

“I’m back in Fairbanks,” he conceded. “I could come out tomorrow, about noon, and give you a hand.”

“That would be great,” Trixie said, with honest relief. “I’d really appreciate that.”

“Let me know if there’s something you want from Fairbanks,” Jay said. “I’ll be happy to bring it with me.”

“We’re pretty well stocked,” Trixie said. “We’ve got the roofing materials on hand. Thanks.”

“Of course, Trix. Where would we be without you!” When he turned on the charm, it was hard to be mad at him.

“See you tomorrow, Jay.”

Trixie’s brain would not stop returning to the mystery at hand. Who was behind this? If it had been Keith or Kyle, why would they bring the damaged studs to her attention? Who had the most to gain if the project failed? Why did it have to be this project ?

She was thinking so hard about the puzzle that when she came around the corner of her trailer towards the building, both she and the big bull moose who was standing by the tarped roofing material were surprised.

“Oh, no!” Trixie said ferociously, recovering swiftly. “Look, I know about shifters, and you are not going to get away with accidentally damaging the custom-cut roofing material that I need to finish this job!”

The moose snorted and bunched its shoulders, ears pointed flat back, and at any other time, Trixie might have considered that a warning. But she was done being threatened and she was done being nice, and she wasn’t going to let a shifter try to bully her into quitting when she was so close .

She marched forward. The moose was taller than she was at the shoulder, an absolutely massive creature with a huge rack that gleamed white in the murky twilight.

“What are you going to do?” she asked him.

“Trample me? I’m not afraid of you, and you can’t stop me from getting this done.

Whoever is paying you, it isn't enough. You have to know that this is the wrong thing to do. ”

The moose lowered his head—sheepishly?—and moved its weight from hoof to hoof as he snorted again.

“Look, let's just have a nice conversation in English and you can tell me who's behind this and I don't have to mention you to the state troopers.”

Trixie stood with her hands on her hips, refusing to be intimidated by the moose shifter's bulk. “You're not fooling me, asshole. And you're not scaring me off.”

The moose fainted forward and Trixie nearly broke. It might be a shifter testing her nerves, but it was a big moose, probably 1500 pounds, with an antler score of at least 250. It was dark, and Trixie was alone and unarmed .

She was also absolutely fed up and she stood her ground, crossing her arms before her defiantly even though the surprise half-charge sent adrenaline coursing through her body.

She gritted her teeth as the moose swung aside and moved in an agitated circle to face her again, pawing and snorting.

It really was behaving in an awfully moose-like way, and doubt sent fingers of cold dread through the heat of Trixie's anger.

“Oh shi?—”

She dove out his path at the last moment when he charged in earnest, and his antlers swung so close that Trixie felt them scrape her flannel shirt as she scrambled over a tarped pile of supplies.

The moose stomped and Trixie rolled away, searching for better cover as she heard him return for another infuriated pass at her.

Then there was a thundering sound and a snarling growl that she would never be able to forget.

The moose gave a bellow of outrage and Trixie turned her head just in time to see a galloping golden bear hit the moose full in the side and knock him off his feet.

The moose sounded like a faulty air raid siren and the bear was roaring; paws and hooves were everywhere.

Before Trixie had time to even be afraid, Hunter was backing off and the moose was lurching to his feet, both of them panting and growling.

Thin ribbons of blood stained both fur and hide, but neither of them looked badly hurt.

They circled each other for a moment and Trixie realized that Hunter was moving deliberately so that he was between her and the moose.

The moose backed slowly away and finally turned to lope off into the brush, the sound of him crashing through branches fading away into the other night sounds.

Hunter shifted and Trixie darted forward on trembling legs. “Are you hurt? Are you okay? ”

He raised a hand to his head. “Bastard kicked me and got a lucky swipe with his antlers, but it’s not bad.

Shifters heal fast.” He staggered a little when he tried to walk, and Trixie realized that

she was too weak from shock to support him, and indeed, her legs could not support herself.

Trixie pulled him down with her when they gave out and burst into hysterical sobbing laughter.

“I thought it was a shifter. I was so sure. He was standing right there, where he could have smashed up the roofing materials we need. I feel so stupid. You’re hurt! It’s my fault!”

“I’m okay,” Hunter assured her. “I’m okay. You’re okay. Everything is fine.” He wrapped his strong arms around her and held her until she could stop crying. “Everything is fine.”

He helped her up, and although he limped, he could walk to the trailer and he tolerantly let Trixie work out her fear and frustration by cleaning his scalp wound and fussing over his leg.

“I’m sorry,” she said, when she could speak coherently again. “That wasn’t a shifter, was it?”

Hunter shook his head. “And neither Keith nor Kyle is our guy.”

“I couldn’t see why they would point out the damage if they’d done it,” Trixie said.

“They also aren’t wolves.”

“They aren’t? But everyone calls them the Taylor pack.”

“Other things apparently come in packs. Like meerkats.”

“Meerkats? Aw, they’re cute. And wow, that actually fits them really well.”

“Shifters often share some characteristics of their animal companions.”

“Like dog owners who look like their dogs.” Trixie realized she still felt a little hysterical and knew that nothing was as funny as she thought it was. “Do you want a drink? I have a bottle of rum. Hot Tang and rum is one of my favorite drinks.”

Hunter nodded, then grinned. “I’ll take your hot tang any day.”

HUNTER

Hunter didn't think his joke was that funny, but Trixie laughed so hard that she had to sit down in his lap, and that wasn't the worst thing in the world.

When she had wiped her eyes and recovered enough to stand up again, she made hot orange tea with a healthy slug of spiced rum. It was dark out, and Hunter looked out the window, squinting suspiciously at the sky.

"Are there northern lights out?" Trixie asked, handing him a steaming cup.

"Can't tell," Hunter admitted. He couldn't tell what was glare on the window and what was cloud.

"Let's go see." She put on a wool hat on her way out and shrugged into an insulated flannel jacket. "I don't have a coat that would fit you, but I have a spare hat."

Hunter gratefully took the offered hat. It had been warm enough with the sun up when they were working hard, but it was well below freezing now, and he was glad to curl his fingers around a warm cup.

Trixie made a show of looking around for the marauding moose, then they went up to the unfinished porch deck to sit and look at the sky.

"It's supposed to warm up a little tomorrow and then snow," she said, squinting up at the stars. "We're cutting it really close."

“Trusses are almost finished,” Hunter said, trying to sound encouraging. “What’s next, roofing?”

“Purlins first, to attach it to,” Trixie said. “It’s a small enough roof that it doesn’t need panel sheathing, so it should go pretty quickly. We could finish tomorrow. I think we will. If our luck holds.”

“It’s not luck ,” Hunter grumbled. “It’s hard work. It’s your hard work. Don’t undersell yourself.”

Trixie snuggled into his side, warm and comfortable. “Thanks,” she said simply.

When they finished their drinks, they toured the house.

“Tell me what you’d do with it,” Hunter commanded.

It had changed even more since he started working, and the rooms were all in their final shapes now, with windows and walls in place.

It was uninsulated, and a brisk breeze blew through the open doorway out onto the porch upstairs; the glass doors were already boxed and ready to install, but Trixie wanted to wait on that until the roof was finished to minimize the chance of damaging them.

“I’d turn this wing into rentals,” Trixie said, as they wandered through it.

“Each one has an en suite bathroom already. The other wing I’d make my personal space, and I’d convert that entertainment room to a shop and put in a garage door.

You could use it all winter for making custom cabinetry.

One of the upstairs bedrooms would be a library.

The master suite is way too big. I'd carve it into a bedroom and an office.

Stairs, of course, not ladders. Oh, there are lights, look! "

Hunter had been watching Trixie as they circled the house and he looked up now to find that the sky above them was starting to swirl .

Pale streaks had saturated into brilliant green, and they danced to unheard music, fading and intensifying unpredictably. There were little hints of purple and magenta at the edges of it, and sometimes it was bright enough to light up the whole house.

"That's a show for you," Trixie said triumphantly. "People pay a lot of money for tours that aren't half this good."

Hunter drank it in, watching the lights through the rafters. It was almost a shame to put a roof on the house, the view was so good.

"You're shivering," Trixie observed. "Let's not get hypothermia the day before a big push. Also, I think the rum is hitting me and I should make dinner before I fall over."

Hunter followed her back to the trailer and sat down out of the way as she bustled around the tiny kitchen making a meal for the two of them.

He liked their cozy domesticity. He liked the way Trixie looked, reaching for dishes.

He liked the warmth of the trailer, and the way Trixie paused for kisses as she worked.

Den , his bear said happily. Wherever she is.

After dinner, he made love to her, slowly and deliberately, delighting in all the sounds and moves she made. “Do you mind if I stay the night?” he asked, tracing the side of her body. “I don’t know what the rest of the crew would think.”

“Maybe they’ll just think you got to work first?” Trixie suggested with a giggle. “Oh, who cares what they think. Please stay.”

Hunter never slept so well in his life.

TRIXIE

Trixie smelled snow in the air as soon as she rose, and it scared her up out of a bed that she would much rather have lingered in.

Without consulting, she and Hunter had a quick, hearty breakfast and went to get started before the workday technically did.

They had finished the trusses and purlins before the rest of the crew arrived, and Hunter gave the roof construction over to Noah, Keith, and Kyle.

He was too big to comfortably scramble around in the rafters and admitted that he didn't exactly enjoy heights.

Noah had installed metal roofing before, and he took point on the job while Keith and Kyle brought up the panels and held them in place.

Sam, Dylan, and Hunter finished installing all the windows and hanging the doors, except the glass doors, and put half the decking down on the second floor porch.

Trixie felt like she was everywhere at once doing everything.

Her hands ached with the cold and the work, but by noon, they were nearly done.

"We're going to make it," she said, her breath steaming as she panted. "One push after lunch to finish the porch and the roof, and we made it."

“Do you mind if I take the afternoon off?” Hunter said, to her surprise. “I started early and I’ve got some things I want to check on.”

“Yeah, you definitely deserve a break,” Trixie said, checking her watch. Jay said he’d be here by now, but he was habitually late. “Jay’s coming after lunch and we’re probably going to be done early anyway. We did it.”

Hunter apparently forgot that they were trying to be discreet and bent to kiss her, startling back when Sam wolf-whistled at them. “Oops,” he said.

“You want me to fire you again?” Trixie offered in a whisper.

“You didn’t fire me,” Hunter said with a smile, equally quiet. “I quit.” But he bent and kissed her in earnest that time, not caring who saw. The crew applauded and cheered, and Trixie blushed and waved them off.

She was still in high spirits after they all came back from lunch and started tackling the last tasks: buttoning up the site for winter work, hauling half the supplies into the house, and tarping anything that would remain in the yard.

The first flakes of snow were falling when Jay’s very tardy truck pulled up and even the sight of his scowl couldn’t dampen Trixie’s spirits.

“Check it out!” she called. She introduced him to the crew and he—somewhat grudgingly, Trixie thought—shook everyone’s hands.

He seemed to get more and more sour as Trixie showed him what they’d done.

“The glass doors can go in after snow if necessary. The porch still needs rails, and of course there’s still the insulation and all the interior work, but that can all be done off season.

The electric drop is ready to go, and the septic and the well just need to be hooked up.

It will be move-in ready by Christmas, no problem. ”

“It had to be done before the end of the calendar year for financial reasons,” Jay admitted. “I didn’t think you could do it, though.”

“Happy to disappoint,” Trixie said with a laugh, but Jay didn’t join her in mirth. “You’re just in time to do nothing, unless you want to put those doors in.” Her jibe was in jest, but it occurred to her that it was honest. Here was Jay, showing up after all the hard work was finished.

“Give the crew the rest of the weekend off,” Jay suggested, except that it didn’t sound like a suggestion. “You’ve been paying enough overtime.”

Trixie wasn’t sure who had pissed in his cereal that morning, but she wasn’t willing to let him dampen her high spirits. She hugged each of the guys on the crew, and noticed bemusedly that not only had Dylan and Sam made up, they were holding hands as they walked back to Sam’s truck.

Then she was alone with Jay. “Anything else on your mind? Sorry you drove all the way out here from Fairbanks and were too late to do anything.” It sounded more pointed than she meant it to.

“I needed to make the trip anyway,” Jay said gruffly. Trixie had gotten used to Hunter’s flavor of gruff and greatly preferred it. “Let’s go upstairs and enjoy the view.”

“Sure.” Trixie let Jay go first up the ladder out of habit; she knew that he was the sort to ogle even if he meant nothing of it, and she was inclined not to give him a view he didn’t deserve.

“I want you to consider that buy out, Trix,” Jay said, drawing her towards the gaping hole where the glass doors would be.

Was he still harping on that? “You have to admit it’s a pretty insulting offer,” Trixie said firmly. “I’m a big player in this partnership, and you’d be going away with all the capital and leaving me hung out to dry. I thought you would be more fair than that.”

Jay had never liked it that Trixie was perfectly fine with setting her own boundaries and saying no to projects that she didn’t feel comfortable taking.

She thought at one point that it was just because she was a woman and it threatened his sense of masculine power, but over time she realized that he just really hated it when anyone said no to him.

He’d made as many enemies in the field as he had allies with his rather short-sighted ideas, and Trixie might have considered the buyout if she could have the company name and the clients.

“You always were a bit of a bitch, Trixie,” Jay said mildly.

“We don’t need to degrade to name-calling,” Trixie protested. “I’m pulling my weight.”

“Are you trying to say that I’m not ?”

To Trixie’s surprise and dismay, the look that Jay leveled at her was not just cold, but red-hot with rage and hatred.

“Why are you here, Jay?” Trixie asked in sudden dread.

“To burn this place down to the ground with you in it.”

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:05 pm

HUNTER

There was a brand new electric car parked in front of the Bear's Den, looking very out of place among the pickups and beat-up Subarus.

Hunter frowned at the temporary plates, and texted the number to Baxter to look up. Often, if something didn't belong, there was a reason for it.

It was early, but it was also a Saturday, and there were more people at the bar than Hunter expected.

Most of them were already drinking. He scanned and immediately saw a familiar face: Feather, the woman from his first night in the bar.

She was the type who would buy an electric car thinking it was more environmental.

She was also wearing a brand new North Face jacket over her torn jeans.

A vehement hippy rolling in unexplained sudden money?

Hunter didn't need instinct to tell him something suspicious was afoot here. From across the room, he glared at the man at the bar next to her until he got uncomfortable and left, then casually took his stool, ignoring Feather to order a beer for himself.

Feather looked up at him cautiously as he sat. She was drinking something in a tall soda glass and smelled faintly of weed and new car. She was also a shifter.

“Aren’t you one of the guys working the Carthridge project?” she said suspiciously.

“Quit,” Hunter said shortly. It was technically true. Trixie never had officially hired him back.

Feather raised her glass to him. “Good,” she said. “That project deserves to burn.”

Burn our mate? Hunter’s bear said in outrage.

Hunter tried to evaluate her statement around his snarl of anger. Did she only mean it rhetorically, or was she truly planning to escalate to arson?

“Nice car,” he growled, testing his theory. Shame if something happened to it.

“Zero emissions,” Feather preened.

Hunter figured it probably wouldn’t do any good to point out that the power plant making the electricity it ran on made plenty of emissions for her. He hadn’t seen a lot of turbines or solar arrays here.

“I hear you got some alternate opportunities,” Hunter said, glaring at his beer without drinking it.

Feather looked nervously at the bartender, who was at the far end of the bar glaring at a sports game on the television. “Where’d you hear that?”

“Let’s just say... I’m in the business.” Hunter suddenly hoped that she wasn’t dealing drugs; there were other ways to get shady money. But his bear, more attuned to instinct than he was, seemed to think that they’d found the cause of Trixie’s woes.

Feather’s eyes narrowed. “You don’t say.”

“I’d like to meet your contact,” Hunter said boldly.

“Oh, I haven’t met him,” Feather blurted. “I mean... ah... I don’t know what you’re talking about. ”

She was really bad at this, and Hunter was really good. “You tell me who he is and how to get in touch, and I’ll pay you twice what he is,” Hunter said firmly.

Greed bloomed in Feather’s eyes. “Yeah. I mean. Sure. His name is Jay. I can give you his number.”

Jay.

Like Trixie’s slacker partner Jay .

All the pieces fell into place at last. Jay had been trying to buy Trixie’s share of the business out.

Maybe he thought that money was better served trying to drive her out of it.

Feather was an easy target, poor, young, and outspoken, and she already had an established vendetta that played right into Jay’s hands.

And Jay was supposed to be showing up that afternoon to work for Trixie.

Hunter shoved back his stool and threw a twenty on the bar. “I’ll be in touch,” he snarled at Feather.

To his dismay, Noah was pulling up at the bar, which meant he wasn’t at the worksite with Trixie. Another truck was right behind him with Sam and Dylan, their antipathy apparently set aside.

“You missed the big finish!” Noah called. “Got the roof up! Made the cut! Smell that snow? It can come now!”

“Don’t taunt the universe,” Sam warned him.

“Where’s Trixie?”

“Back at the site,” Dylan said with a shrug, getting out of his truck. “Her partner Jay is there swinging his dick around and taking credit for everything. She said she’d take us out to dinner on Monday to celebrate.”

Hunter was already pulling himself up into the cab of his truck, swearing.

TRIXIE

For the third time in not even as many days, Trixie realized that her life was in peril. The first time had been prevented by Keith and Kyle. The second time, Hunter had rescued her from an ill-considered encounter with a moose.

This time, she was keenly aware that she was alone on the jobsite with someone who despised her, who was bigger and stronger than she was, and could probably make her death look like a tragic accident. Especially if he was willing to burn down the evidence.

“Look, you can take all the credit you want for this job,” she said coaxingly. “Take the extra overtime out of my share, if you want. I was never in it for the glory or the money.”

Jay was advancing on her, and Trixie had nowhere to do.

He could beat her to the ladder, and the only other way out was through the open doorway onto the unfinished porch with no rails.

Did he have a gun, or had he trusted his superior strength to take her out and wanted to make it look like an accident?

There was a screech of tires from the highway, and then the spit of gravel as someone took the drive too fast. Hunter? Trixie clung to the belief that he might get there in time. She just had to delay Jay.

Unfortunately, Jay had also heard the truck and knew his window of opportunity was narrowing. He darted forward to grab Trixie, and Trixie stomped on his foot with all of her weight.

He wasn't wearing steel-toed boots, and he howled in pain and rage as Trixie darted to the side, trying to get to the ladder.

She made it to the stair opening and leapt for the top rung recklessly.

It rocked in place and Trixie had a moment of hope before Jay caught up with her and hauled her back by the arm, knocking the ladder over altogether at the same moment that a truck door slammed outside.

He punched her hard in the side and she gasped for breath.

Trixie struggled, kicking at Jay and trying to twist free. "You're not going to get away with this!"

She heard Hunter curse and holler her name, and she shrieked his in return.

His footsteps were heavy on the floor below them and Trixie heard the scrape of the fallen ladder. Trixie fought with all her might as Jay twisted her arm painfully behind her and dragged her to the gaping hole in the wall.

"Let her go!" Hunter roared. He was on their floor, however he'd gotten there. Maybe he'd climbed up as a bear, but Trixie's eyes were blurred with tears. Her shoulder and elbow felt like they might be twisted right out of their joints and her whole side was hot with pain where Jay had punched her.

"He plans to burn it down!" Trixie shouted. Jay had rightly expected to be able to overpower her, but he hadn't counted on Hunter.

“You come close and she’s over the side,” Jay said, twisting Trixie’s arm until she had to cry out in pain.

This, Trixie thought furiously, is why you always have safety rails up. So that crazy business partners can’t threaten to throw you off of buildings.

“You’re a shifter,” Hunter snarled, keeping his distance. “You know that I am too. I could tear you into pieces.”

“Yeah, but she’d hit bottom first.”

Trixie was in agony, but she wasn’t willing to let Jay use her to manipulate Hunter. She fought him furiously until she could twist in his grasp and bite down on his shoulder. She might not be a shifter, but she still had teeth.

“Shit!” Jay flung her away from him and Trixie reeled, straight for the edge of the porch.

Trixie heard thundering steps and Hunter launched for Jay.

For one dizzy moment, Trixie was not sure who was who or where she was.

Her foot fell on open space and she was in a cartoon moment of pinwheeling arms before Hunter’s big hand caught her by the wrist and pulled her in, even as he swung his other fist towards Jay.

The porch trembled under Trixie’s knees and she turned to see them tussling at the edge.

Jay was hopelessly outclassed, and for one awful moment, Trixie was sure that Hunter was going to drop Jay right off the building.

It might not kill him, but it would definitely be something they had to explain to a trooper, and it would probably be a worker's comp situation, since they were on the job site.

Trixie found herself caring more about the paperwork hassle than Jay's health.

Before she could intervene, Hunter was hauling Jay up onto the deck and then holding him down by the neck. Jay lay still.

"Why'd you do it?" Hunter demanded. "What do you gain from stopping the house from being finished?"

"I thought she'd give up," Jay whined. "I figured she'd take the buyout I was offering if it was hard enough."

Trixie felt a wave of exhaustion wash over her. "If you hated working with me so much, why didn't you just say so?"

"It was never working with you," Jay snarled. "It was working for you. Everyone says what a great foreman you are, how amazing you are. Great boss, perfect leader. It wasn't my business anymore! No one ever said anything about me because you were hogging the spotlight!"

"Why didn't you do something!" Trixie said in astonishment. "You could have been out there running the jobs at any point! I was picking up all the work because you weren't there doing any of it."

"Why should I?" Jay coughed.

"You didn't want to do any of the labor, you just wanted all of the praise." Trixie was disgusted. "So much that you were willing to sell your soul to get me out of the way."

Did you think that the business would get anywhere without me?"

"I don't need a bi—" Jay choked as Hunter's hand tightened, and he hammered on the floor until Hunter relaxed it. "I don't need anyone else. I know all the right people and can get whatever jobs I want."

"Except that you can't, can you?" Hunter's voice was a low growl.

"They all wanted Trixie!" Jay snarled. "I told them she was leaving and they wouldn't sign the contracts without her!"

Trixie was appalled and betrayed. "You told them I was leaving ? After I told you I didn't want the buyout?"

"I was going to get rid of you one way or another," Jay said sullenly .

"And that's when you stepped up your sabotage from annoying to life-threatening," Trixie said, horrified.

Jay looked suddenly cagey. "I didn't threaten anyone's life ."

"If that wall had collapsed, someone might have gotten killed," Trixie pointed out.

"Trixie might have gotten killed," Hunter said in a dangerously quiet voice.

"You paid that hippy kid Feather to foul the generator and cut the studs. She was the perfect choice because if she got caught, it looked like it was just part of her existing agenda. And she was a wolf shifter, who could come and go without leaving evidence."

"Well, I guess you're a little smarter than you look," Jay scoffed.

Hunter didn't rise to the bait.

"What do we do with him?" Trixie asked numbly. She liked to believe the best of people, but Jay had definitely crossed a line here. "What do we tell the cops?"

"You could just let me go and no one needs to know anything," Jay said desperately. "There are a lot of parts of the story that won't add up."

"You're not just going to walk free," Hunter promised.

Trixie's eyes were still blurred with pain, but she watched as Jay suddenly seemed to boil in place and change into a furred shape with snapping teeth and slashing claws. He was smaller than a bear, but just as fierce, with a weasel face and muscular build.

A wolverine, Trixie realized, just as Hunter dodged back from his swiping paw and shifted also.

HUNTER

Wolverines were nasty, fearless fighters who would often take on a bear over a meal and win, but only in cases where the bear had nothing to lose.

And Hunter had everything to lose.

That was his mate that had just nearly been tossed off the unfinished porch, and Hunter had had a visceral reaction to the idea that Jay would burn down the house as part of his unhinged vendetta.

This is our den, his bear insisted. We built it for our mate!

Hunter couldn't spare the concentration to argue semantics with a bear that didn't understand property ownership; he was trying to keep his eyes and tender nose out of Jay's reach and still get a grip on something meaningful with his own pointy parts.

He didn't want to kill Jay, but Jay seemed to have no such compunction; his bites were deep and determined.

Hunter rolled Jay under him and nearly took them both off the porch, saving them at the last moment with claws in wood planks.

Jay gave a squeal and let go, and Hunter pounced.

His bear arms had considerably more reach than wolverine legs, and Jay scrabbled and snarled and scratched uselessly at Hunter's thick fur.

They were at an impasse, Hunter unwilling to end Jay, but Jay uncooperative about surrender.

“Watch out!”

Hunter looked up to find Trixie holding a nail gun in both hands. She was carrying it backwards, not connected to the hose, and while Hunter watched in awe, she used it like a golf club to hit Jay in the top of the head, rattling his teeth and knocking him out cold.

Hunter shifted back to his human form.

“That,” Trixie panted, “is why we wear hardhats on the job site.”

“You are amazing,” Hunter said in awe.

“And you’re bleeding!”

His fur had not protected him from all of Jay’s strikes, but Hunter ignored his own injuries until they had trussed Jay up with duct tape tight enough to hold him in either shape and hauled him down the ladder.

“We’re turning him over to the authorities,” Hunter said reluctantly. “We shouldn’t let him die of exposure.”

“It would be a lot easier,” Trixie complained, hauling her half of the body. “Can’t we just cover him with a blanket here and call the troopers to come get him?”

Hunter conceded that this was a fine plan. They could corroborate that Jay had attacked Trixie, and Hunter was certainly injured. He could get Feather on a stand to testify against him, though he wasn’t sure how reliable a witness she would be.

They left Jay in a heap on the first floor with everything but his head tucked under an army blanket and stepped outside to make the call.

The trooper arrived with sirens and lights by the time Trixie had cleaned out most of Hunter's gashes. "I hope he didn't have rabies," she said sourly.

Hunter recognized the man at once as another shifter. He was a silver-haired man who looked like he'd seen more in his life than he wanted to, and they exchanged crisp, frank details about the incident.

The trooper went in with his gun drawn and came out shaking his head. "He's gone. Looks like he shifted the duct tape with him to human and got out the back."

Trixie looked from one of them to the other. "You're a... wait, you can shift stuff with you? How does that even work?"

"I never thought about it that direction," Hunter admitted. "But I take everything I'm wearing and holding with me as a human, it makes sense that it works both ways."

"I'll put a warrant out for your partner," the trooper said with a sigh. "But it seems likely that he'll make a run for it. I've got a contact with a shifter agency that takes care of cases like this. I'll give him a call and see what he can do. You need medical assistance?"

Hunter shook his head. "It would bring up more questions than anyone wants."

"You, ma'am?"

Trixie shook her head. "I think I'm fine. Unless you need me to go in for evidence?"

"Shifters handle things a little differently," the trooper said with a shrug. "They'll

make sure he doesn't cause any more trouble."

Hunter shook his hand and saw him back to the patrol car.

"This poor house," Trixie said. "It's not even finished yet, and it's seen more drama than a soap opera. "

"I'm going to buy this house," Hunter said thoughtfully, to his bear's delight.

Trixie stared at him. "You're serious."

He grinned at her. "I've never built anything before, and frankly, I've gotten attached. Would you like to live with me here? Maybe get married? Fill it up with kids and tourists and books?"

Trixie's face glowed. "You've got a funny sense of courtship," she said, laughing. "Let's just skip straight to the house, why don't we. You know there's a lot of work left to do, right? There's the plumbing and the wiring, all the insulation, not to mention drywall, painting, and trim."

"I'm not afraid of hard work," Hunter said firmly. "I finish things."

"You don't even know if Carthridge wants to sell!"

"Anything is for sale at some price," Hunter said expansively. "You just have to make the right offer."

Trixie's face twisted. "Not like Jay."

"His was an insulting offer," Hunter said. "Even before the threat of arson. Hopefully, mine is a little better than that."

“Much better,” Trixie assured him, and then she stepped into his embrace. “I love the idea,” she admitted. “I love the idea of a home with you.”

Our den, with our mate , Hunter’s bear said.

Hunter wasn’t sure which one of them was most content.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:05 pm

Trixie and Hunter moved in on Christmas Eve.

They didn't have more furniture than a mattress on the floor in the master bedroom, but the kitchen was done and stocked with ingredients for a big holiday dinner.

The room that would be Trixie's shop was full of unopened boxes, from Hunter's home in Colorado and from Trixie's apartment in Fairbanks.

It had been a joy to pick colors and finishes to her own taste, instead of staying to a bland, marketable beige or indulging a client, and Trixie loved the bright tiles in the bathrooms and kitchen, and the warm wood trim.

Most of the floors were heavy-duty vinyl, tough enough for kids or claws. Even bear claws.

"There's so much roooooom in this kitchen," Trixie sang, making her hot Tang with rum and all but waltzing from end to end. They had already eaten several meals in the house, and broken in the mattress recreationally, but this was their first night sleeping there.

Hunter was sitting in a lawn chair facing the front windows.

A tool box acted as a coffee table, and a second lawn chair cozied up next to it.

Trixie handed Hunter his cup. It was dark outside; they saw more of their own reflections than what was on the other side of the glass, but hadn't hung curtains yet.

Winter solstice had come and gone, and although the days were getting longer again, it was hard to tell.

“Thank you, Mrs. Talon,” Hunter said, collecting a kiss with his cup.

Trixie had kept her name—more because she hated how much paperwork it would be to change it than from any feminist independence—and she refused to wear a ring. “I’d lose it,” she said. “It would come off in work gloves or snag on a tool and take my finger with it.”

Trixie was getting better at reading his expressions now, and although he glowered, she didn’t think he minded either of those choices. She settled into the other lawn chair and gazed fondly at their reflections.

They had married quietly in Colorado, so that his family could easily attend, taken a weekend to honeymoon in Aspen, and returned to Alaska to get right back to work.

Trixie had hired a few of the crew for big tasks—blowing insulation into the rafters and hanging the drywall—but most of it she did with just Hunter.

She took intense personal pride in the project, and enjoyed the solid partnership most of all.

Hunter did consultation for his family’s security business, and worked closely with the local trooper now.

The trooper’s talk of retirement was more serious now, and Hunter was looking into the education that it would take to qualify for his job.

Trixie thought he’d be a perfect small town cop.

He was strong, not prone to drama, and unfailingly fair. Being a shifter certainly

didn't hurt.

Trixie had a few jobs lined up after the new year already; a kitchen remodel and finishing a basement. The Tok locals had accepted her as one of their own, and she had already done several small repair jobs on the side in return for salmon and moose to fill her new freezer.

Hunter was looking at her face in the window reflection, a sly little smile at his mouth behind his beard.

"What are you grinning about?" Trixie asked, taking a spicy sip of her Tang.

"I'm thinking about your Christmas present," Hunter said.

"I thought the house was my Christmas present," Trixie protested. "We said no gifts!"

"We said no expensive gifts," Hunter chuckled. "This was very cheap."

"Oh good," Trixie said, wiping her brow dramatically. "Mine for you is, too. Do we get them now or do we have to wait until tomorrow?"

"Have you been naughty or nice?" Hunter teased her.

"I've been very, very good," Trixie promised.

Hunter downed the last of his Tang and stood up, the lawn chair creaking in relief as he rose. "Come see," he said mysteriously.

He bundled up and gestured to Trixie to do the same, then led her out to the back of the house.

“You made me a dog sled?” Trixie knew that Hunter had been researching woodworking that went beyond the housebuilding that she’d been teaching him, but this puzzled her. “We don’t have any dogs.”

Hunter held up an enormous harness, far too big for the biggest dog she’d ever seen. “It’s a bear sled.”

Trixie laughed so hard that she fell over in the snow holding her sides. “I love it!” she declared, when Hunter pulled her back up to her feet. “I love it!” She kissed him soundly. “I can’t wait to take you for a spin.”

The second kiss was slower and lingering, and Trixie sighed into Hunter’s warm embrace. “I still have to give you your gift,” she reminded him.

That required dragging him back into the house, out of their winter gear, and upstairs. (There were actual stairs now, with wrought-iron railings.)

She handed him a box and Hunter eagerly opened it and pawed through the tissue paper. “There’s nothing in here,” he said in confusion.

“That’s because I’m wearing it,” Trixie told him, and his eyes lit up.

“Are you sure this wasn’t expensive?” he teased, when he’d slipped her shirt off over her head to admire the lingerie.

“Per inch it was pretty spendy, but there aren’t very many inches of it,” Trixie laughed.

It didn’t stay on very long at all.