

TEN

As the sun set, Steve and Max finished setting the table. They only needed to wait a few minutes after that before the two skunks poked up through the trap door. Their noses twitching at the smell of food.

“About time you two showed up,” Steve greeted them. “We were going to start eating without you. Tonight is one of Jake’s favorites, chicken wings,” Steve paused a moment, “but no buffalo or teriyaki sauce.”

Jake’s tail dropped. “No buffalo sauce? That’s the best part! What’s the point without the heat?”

Steve held up the bottle of sealed buffalo sauce. “Sixth ingredient, garlic. Last ingredient, onion powder. Making it unsafe for skunk consumption. Teriyaki has the same issue. I did find some soy sauce packets in the fridge, which are skunk safe according to Dr. Vachon.”

“You contacted my wildlife vet?”

“With Jenny’s help. We also invited Jenny to dinner. She’ll be over shortly without Blitzen. I’ve got more wings thawed and cooked than a human can eat as I had started the thawing process prior to the, um, incident. And Dad prefers thighs. The doc also said I should strip the meat from the bones and chop it up to make it easier for you to eat. She also explained what size portion you should have. That portion came out to the meat off one drummet and winget for each of you. The soy is on the side in case you want it plain, but you can easily dip it in the soy if you prefer. There’s a mini salad of mixed greens, and veggies, no onions or dressing. Foil-pack diced potatoes without the usual onions we throw in seasoned with olive oil, salt, and pepper. For dessert we have wild Maine blueberries with some plain unsweetened yogurt. We also have spray can whipped cream, but it’s sweetened and Dr. Vachon advised against it.”

Cathy’s eyes brightened up as Steve announced the menu. “You two are so thoughtful.”

Jenny knocked at the door and entered carrying a bottle of wine.

“Well, you are taking care of Jake for us,” Mas added. “He is behaving for you, right?”

“I am, Dad,” Jake replied.

The two skunks waddled up the ramp to the windowsill and made their way over to the table. Their small plates were set in front of them with a small dish between with the soy sauce. The three humans sat down around the other sides.

Cathy immediately looked up at Jenny and squeaked. “You trusted them with Dr. Vachon’s contact info?”

“I made the call, explained what happened, and only then did I pass the phone to them. Steve took extensive notes.”

Steve and Max looked at each other and then at Jenny. “You understand her?”

“Well, of course. It took a long time to learn to understand skunk-squeak, but Cathy was patient with me using her smartphone to help. Word by word.”

“Winter nights are long around here,” Cathy added in. “I don’t get as many renters in the winter. I’m surprised as the ice fishing is good on this lake and we’re not far off the state snowmobile network of trails.”

Steve nodded and turned to the two skunks. “Before I get sidetracked again, if you two swing back by before calling it a um... morning, there will be scrambled eggs once we’re up. I use a little water in mine instead of milk. Makes them fluffier.”

Cathy actually drooled. She hadn’t had chicken eggs in over a month. “You’re not trying to butter me up in the hopes of reversing Jake’s punishment sooner?”

“No,” Max replied. “We understand you have no control over the possessed game board. We really mean it in thanks for taking care of Jake and hosting us, both up here and down in your den.”

Jenny walked into the kitchen. She pulled the wine opener out of a drawer, popped the cork and poured herself a glass. “Anyone else?” she called over.

Max and Steve passed, preferring their microbrew beer. Cathy nodded.

“I’m not big into wine, but maybe Dad or Steve could spare a bit of their microbrew if it’s safe.”

Jenny pulled out a tiny tourist souvenir cup with Cathy’s name on it with a volume not much larger than a thimble. She pulled another similar cup out of the cabinet. She put the cork back in the bottle and returned to the table.

“Now remember, Cathy, this is all you can have. Make sure you have some food on your stomach first.”

“Yes, Mom,” Cathy replied in a semi-mocking tone. She dug into the shredded chicken and then carefully lapped at the tiny cup.

Steve dribbled a little beer into the other cup for Jake. “I’m guessing the instructions are the same for you, bro.”

They made small talk during the meal and learned that Jenny was a retired fifth grade schoolteacher. Cathy’s grandparents had hired her on as property caretaker in exchange for free

rent about a year before their death. Cathy simply extended it. Jenny thanked them for the dinner and bid them farewell, taking the partial bottle of wine back with her.

As proposed the previous evening, they played several rounds of team cribbage, skunks versus humans, though the humans had to help with shuffling and dealing. The humans won the first few games until Cathy figured out how they and her partner played. Then, the skunks won more games. All were relatively close games. No one got skunked. The board or whatever possessed it remained quiet in Cathy's head.