

EIGHT

Once he could tell that his father and brother were asleep, Jake squeaked quietly. “You still awake, Cathy?”

“Yes, barely,” she replied groggily.

“May I talk to you privately for a moment out in the living room?”

“Can it wait until evening?”

“I don’t think so.” Jake carefully squirmed out of the pile and made his way back into the common room.

Cathy followed trying her best to shake off the grogginess. “So, what do you need to discuss that can’t wait?”

“This,” he waved over himself with one forepaw, “and the board. I have a bad feeling we’re not going to change back when you said we will.”

“Why do you think that?”

“I didn’t just sandbag in that game.” He hesitated for a moment. “In my panic, I threatened the board.” He looked down a moment in embarrassment. “And I was too scared to admit that to you when you first came to comfort me.”

“You what?” she squeaked snapping fully awake trying to not raise her voice so as to not wake the others.

Jake cowered back slightly at the force of her question. “I was so scared of that bewitched board, Cathy. It gave me a twenty-nine hand and sixteen crib in the opening round. I think I had one hand below sixteen after that. In the last round, I panicked. In my mind all I wanted to do was start a fire and throw the board in it, especially as I felt myself change.”

“Jesus Christ,” Cathy cursed quietly.

“I understand if you want me to leave. I haven’t deserved your hospitality like the others. You’ve been so kind while I’ve been phony through this.”

“Jake, you said it yourself. You were scared. “Forty-five points plus whatever you pegged in that first round? No wonder you were scared. I’ve seen it toss off twenty-nine’s in a double skunking of me before, but never in the opening round. I might have freaked out too if that had happened to me early on. I forgive you if you’re sincere that you wouldn’t have carried it through.”

“Do you think the board would let me?” Jake shook.

She stared at him for a moment. “No, I doubt it.” She sighed. “Come on.” She started heading to the door leading up into the camp. “It’s well past a skunk’s bedtime, but I agree, this can’t wait.”

“Why are we going back up into the camp?”

“To have a conversation with the board, of course.”

“What?!” Jake exclaimed but she was already out the door. He had little choice but to follow.

She led him back up the ramps and into the camp. She pointed to a narrow ramp that blended in with the wainscoting near the human entrance door. The ramp led up to the windowsill for the row of windows facing the lake. From there it was easy to get to the table as it was pushed against the sill. Once they were both on the table, Cathy sat up and laid a forepaw on the cribbage board. She looked towards him. He hesitated for a moment and did the same as her.

“Close your eyes and try to blank your mind, Jake.”

She closed hers. He followed her lead and sat there. He had a hard time trying to clear his mind. The board actually felt warm under his forepaw. He felt her tremble enough to feel it through the table. “He told me he was scared,” he heard her mumble. “Please don’t do that to him.” She sighed. “Thank you.” She pulled her paw off the board. And turned to Jake. “Did you catch any of that?”

He shook his head negatively. “Just what you mumbled.”

“It’s nearly as bad as you feared for you.”

“I’m a skunk for good, aren’t I?” Jake’s tail sagged.

“No, but if you had tried to carry through on your threat, then yes. In addition, you’d have lost your human memories and you wouldn’t have any musk glands.” She shuddered at the thought of a disarmed skunk. “Instead, you’re a skunk until you agree to leave and never return. I’ve never felt the kind of animosity I just felt come from the board. I think there was a bit of jealousy mixed in there from you using your own board the other evening.”

Jake nodded at his fate. “And my father and brother?”

“It is as I had predicted. Thirty hours. They’ll change back late this evening unless they wish to remain skunks longer. The board likes them. They were very sincere in their yearning to become temporary skunks to come visit me. They had wanted it to happen to cheer me up, not for their own curiosity or fun. If they wish to remain feral longer, they may chose so.”

“So, what the fuck lives in that board? A demon?”

Cathy shrugged very human-like and yawned. “I don’t know. Maybe you can ask it yourself this evening if it will talk to you. Come on, let’s get to bed. We’ll break the news to the others this evening.”

“You what?” Steve squeaked in disbelief in reaction to the news.

“I told you, Steve. I was very scared.”

“What’s done is done,” Max responded. “We’ll leave in the morning so you can be human again, Jake.”

“No.”

“What?”

“You heard me, Dad. No. I’ll slug this out until Saturday morning. I’ve already fucked up enough. I’m not going to ruin the rest of your fishing trip over my momentary bad choice. You taught me never to run from my problems, Dad. Turning tail and running now only lets the board win on its terms. I need time to figure this out and maybe renegotiate those terms.”

“I promise I’ll take good care of him, Max.” Cathy jumped in. “We’ll visit every evening and you can tell him how the fishing was for the day. Maybe we can play a few two-person team games of cribbage. Skunks versus humans.”

Max looked towards Jake who shrugged. “Well, how much worse can the board punish me if I get skunked again?”

“Very well.” Max turned to Cathy. “It’s very kind of you to take him under your,” he paused a moment. “foreleg instead of wing?”

“Close enough. Yes, I’ll take good care of him as promised.” Cathy chirped. “With that settled it’s time for your next skunk lesson, grooming. Skunks are very clean creatures despite our smelly reputation due to our musk. Properly grooming your fur will not only keep it from getting matted, but it brings out the natural oils that help keep it shiny and semi-water resistant in the rain. I usually start around my footpaws and work my way up, saving the tail for last. So, like this...” She started to lick between her toes and the others after a moment of watching her mimicked her actions.

After the grooming session, they foraged out in the forest. Once they had full stomachs, they again spent time out on the rock chitchatting while staring up at a rare night show, the Aurora Borealis. At some point Steve and Max noticed they were slowly growing in size.

“We’d best get back to the camp.”

“You can, or you can spend more time as a feral skunk,” Cathy replied, “per the board.”

They looked towards each other and then towards Jake.

“Please go back and go fishing tomorrow. You shouldn’t have to remain like this because of me.”

“Very well,” Max replied to his son. “We’ll head back and get some rest. We’ll see you tomorrow evening.”

“Considering how long you spent as skunks, you should be able to understand us the rest of the week,” Cathy added. “You won’t have to get skunked at cribbage again unless you want to have a bushy, striped tail.”