

THE SKUNK & THE BEAR

By Terry Jones

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A LITTLE SKUNK once fell in love with a bear. “You are the most handsome, the bravest and most charming creature in the whole forest,” she told him. “I love your rough fur coat, your rough voice, and your rough ways. But I see you are also a thoughtful bear, for I have often observed you sitting and thinking. I could imagine no greater happiness than to have my life bound up with yours.”

But Bear didn’t reply, for he was fast asleep. Perhaps Little Skunk would never have dared tell him all those things if he’d been awake.

Little Skunk would wait for Bear to come out of his cave, and she would watch him waking up and stretching. She loved the way he blinked in the sunlight. She loved the way he rose up on his great hind legs to sniff the breeze and the way he rubbed his snout with his strong fore paws. She loved the way his fur glistened and shook as he came down on all fours and loped off through the trees.

Her friends told Little Skunk to forget about Bear. “Bears and skunks can’t mix,” they said. “It’s ridiculous! What could you ever do for a bear? And what could a bear ever do for you?”

But it didn’t make any difference. Little Skunk still loved his great brown eyes and his pink tongue.

Then one day something terrible happened. Some men entered the forest and laid a trap for Bear.

Now Bear was a wary creature, and that morning when he stood up on his hind legs and sniffed the breeze, he could smell that men had been in the forest, so he was extra watchful. And that was how, peering around, he caught sight of Little Skunk as she gazed at him through the trees.

It so happens that bears are particularly disgusted by the dreadful scent that skunks produce, so as soon as Bear saw Little Skunk, he turned away and hurried off into the forest in the opposite direction.

Little Skunk saw how Bear had hurried to avoid her, and she felt ashamed.

“If only I weren’t a skunk!” she exclaimed to herself. “Our only gift is the gift of stinking. No wonder the other creatures of the forest look down on us. No wonder Bear shuns me!”

And Little Skunk felt a tear welling up in her eye, but she stamped her foot.

“We can none of us help what we are born as!” she said. “And since I’ve been born a skunk, it’s wrong to be ashamed of it. I’m going to tell Bear what I feel for him. Why shouldn’t I?”

And she started to run after Bear as fast as she could.

Now Bear heard Little Skunk running after him, and he said to himself: “Skunks don’t normally run after us bears. They are usually so afraid of us that, as soon as they see us, they immediately produce their dreadful stink, that makes us bears feel ill. What’s more if we get that foul-smelling scent on our skins it’ll itch like mad, and if we get it in our eyes it can blind us. And for any creature of the forest to be blind even for a short while can be a death sentence. But the worst—the very worst—thing about skunks’ smell is that if I ever got it on my beautiful shiny fur, I could never clean it off and I would stink forever!”

No wonder that Bear, when he found himself pursued by Little Skunk, ran headlong through the forest, and no wonder he failed to see the place where the leaves had been disturbed by the Trappers’ feet.

Little Skunk did not see the trap spring, but she heard the jump of the metal, and she heard Bear’s howl of pain and surprise, as the jaws of the trap clamped around his hind leg. Little Skunk burst into the clearing where Bear was caught. She saw his leg covered in blood, with the great iron trap holding him down. She saw the wide-eyed fear on Bear’s face and equally she saw the look of disgust as his eye fell upon her.

Little Skunk’s first thought was to try and get Bear free, but Bear was filled with mortal fear, and he growled and bared his teeth and tried to claw Little Skunk as she approached the trap.

“Don’t worry, Bear! I won’t release my stink on you. I’ve come to rescue you, Bear, because all this time I’ve been in love with your power and strength, the great beauty of your snout and ears, and the glorious lustre of your fur. I love you, Bear.”

That’s what Little Skunk wanted to say, but she never got the chance, because there was suddenly the sound of men shouting and crashing through the undergrowth as the Trappers burst into the clearing to claim their prize.

“It’s a big brown!” exclaimed one of the Trappers, and he raised his gun. There was a bang, and Little Skunk fled—but only till she was hidden in the undergrowth. Then she turned to see what had happened.

The Trappers were standing in the clearing looking intently at Bear. Bear himself was still standing on all fours, with his hind leg caught in that dreadful trap, but he was swaying from side to side, and now suddenly he crumpled into a heap on the ground. Little Skunk watched as the men swarmed around the fallen Bear. Next moment she saw the men kick Bear’s lifeless body, and laugh as they lifted up his limp paw and let it drop. Suddenly Little Skunk was seized by a violent anger. Who did these men think they were to treat Bear like that?

As the Trappers prised open the trap to free Bear’s leg, a wild plan entered Little Skunk’s head, and before she had even thought it through, she found herself racing back through the bushes and leaping into the clearing right into the middle of those men. The Trappers were so intent on what they were doing to Bear that they didn’t notice her for the moment. But then one of them suddenly yelled:

“Look out! Skunk!”

The men turned, and on seeing Little Skunk, they scrambled to get away. In their panic, two of them collided with one another and fell over in a heap, while the other two dived into the undergrowth without thinking. But they were too late! Little Skunk turned her back on them and shot her scent with deadly accuracy—hitting one of them from six feet away. Then she aimed again, and this time sent her spray twelve feet through the air and hit another man on the back as he struggled through the undergrowth. And still she hadn’t finished. With one last effort, she shot yet another spray of scent fifteen feet through the air and hit both the men who had fallen over each other.

But Little Skunk still hadn't finished. She was so angry that she just turned right around and chased after those men. One of them glanced over his shoulder and shouted:

"That crazy skunk! It's coming after us! Look out!"

And they ran as if their lives depended on it.

Meanwhile back in the clearing, Bear began to groan. The Trappers had stunned him with a tranquilizer dart, but that wasn't strong enough to withstand the powerful scent of skunk. One load of scent might have been enough to bring Bear to his senses, but Little Skunk had released no less than three times the normal amount, and the stink was now so powerful that Bear started coughing and choking and his eyes smarted and he regained his senses enough to struggle to his feet and try to stagger as far away from that stench as his wounded leg would let him.

By the time Little Skunk got back to the clearing, Bear had disappeared, but she could see a trail of blood leading from the cruel jaws of the trap, across the clearing and into the forest, so she began to follow it with beating heart.

Over tree stumps, through broken undergrowth, she could see where Bear had blundered on his way, but the trail seemed to be going around in circles, and then suddenly she saw a great bulk lying beside a fallen tree.

For the first time, Little Skunk found herself feeling afraid of Bear. "After all," she told herself, "he doesn't know I rescued him from the Trappers."

Nonetheless, Little Skunk jumped up onto the fallen tree and shouted: "Bear! Bear! Wake up! You must get back to your cave before the Trappers return!"

Bear managed to open one eye and gasp: "Why are you so concerned about me, Little Skunk? What have I ever done for you?"

Should Little Skunk tell him she'd chased off the Trappers? Should she tell him she loved him?

But before she could speak another voice said:

"Now this is curious: Little Skunk deep in conversation with Bear. Well, well! What on earth is the forest coming to?"

Little Skunk and Bear looked round to see Wolf standing in the clearing gazing thoughtfully at them.

“Bears usually avoid Skunks as if they had the plague,” went on Wolf. “What could have brought about this sweet little friendship I wonder?”

“Stay away from me!” exclaimed Little Skunk, stamping the ground and hissing at Wolf. “Or else I’ll spray you and you’ll never wash the stink off your fine fur!”

And with that she turned her back on Wolf to spray him.

Now I have to tell that a skunks only carry a limited amount of their terrible stink, which is why they are normally reluctant to use it.

But Little Skunk had been so concerned about Bear and so angry with the Trappers, that she had used up all her stink and now she had none left.

“Well?” said Wolf. “If you’re going to spray me and make my fur stink forever, go ahead! I’m waiting!”

Now whether wily Wolf had seen everything that had happened or not, I don’t know, but somehow he knew that Little Skunk was helpless, and somehow Little Skunk knew that he knew. So there was only one thing she could do, and she did it. She turned and ran.

She ran so fast through the undergrowth that the branches whipped at her face and the thorns tore through her fur. But she didn’t even notice them. She ran faster than she had ever done in her life.

Wolf, however, was quicker. His long legs vaulted him over logs and fallen branches and in no time he was upon Little Skunk.

He seized her by the tail, and she turned and scratched him on the nose. But he no more noticed that than Little Skunk had noticed the thorns; all he could think about was his dinner. Wolf tossed Little Skunk through the air, and the sound of her head cracking against the ground gave Wolf a nice, cosy feeling that he would be soon be eating.

Little Skunk, however, leapt to her feet, her head still spinning, and turned to bare her teeth at Wolf, but she was facing the wrong way. A cold thrill went through her as she felt Wolf’s teeth on the back of her neck, and his hot wolf’s breath ruffle her fur!

Little Skunk knew that her last moment had come. She hissed and spat but she had no scent to drive Wolf back. Her last thought was:

“I never told Bear I loved him. He will never know it was me who saved him from the Trappers.”

And she shut her eyes and waited for Wolf to bite.

But something happened. Wolf did not bite her. Instead it was Wolf's turn to find himself thrown across the forest until he hit a tree, and slid down the trunk into a bush of brambles.

Little Skunk looked round to see Bear gazing down on her.

"Little Skunk," said Bear. "Do you know where my cave is?"

"Yes," said Little Skunk.

"Then take me to it," said Bear. "I'm so bemuddled I don't know whether I'm coming or going."

Little Skunk thought she had never been happier, as she led Bear back to his cave. Bear was swaying as he limped behind her, and he kept bumping into trees and overhanging branches, so Little Skunk led him along the wider paths that she would normally have avoided: the paths of the bear, the tiger and the leopard.

When they arrived back at the cave, Bear lumbered in and without saying a word he keeled over, unconscious.

Little Skunk looked at Bear lying there. Would he remember her when he woke up? Would he ever know that she had rescued him from the Trappers? That she had guided him safely home? Would she ever get the chance to speak to him again?

Little Skunk turned and crept out of the cave. The sun was setting and the sky was as red as the trail of Bear's blood. The sounds of the forest's night creatures filled her ears, and then she heard another sound—a soft sound like a gentle rumble of thunder. It came from inside the cave.

"Thank you, Little Skunk," said the voice.

After that, Little Skunk often visited Bear, and although they never said very much to each other, Bear never tried to avoid her. There they would sit together outside the cave, an odd couple, watching the sun go down.

AND whenever her friends scolded her and told her to forget about Bear and said: "It's ridiculous! What could you ever do for a bear? And what could a bear ever do for you?" Little Skunk would smile to herself and think:

"We could save each other's lives."