

Hi! I'm Sue Straughn, news anchor at WEAR TV, and I am honored to be invited to share in your reading adventure. We'll be reading chapters 19 and 20.

Chapter 19 A Blessing of Sorts

Five nights later, at bedtime, Janie noticed the nice thing that Bat had done to thank her for coming up with the perfect name for Thor. It had taken him two days to forgive Janie for being so mean during spaghetti night and another day to come up with an idea. He'd been waiting ever since for Janie to notice, so when she called out from her bedroom, "Mom, have you seen the top part of my unicorn pajamas?" Bat felt excited.

"I did all the laundry that was in the basket," Mom answered.

"You washed the bottoms but not the top," Janie said.

"Then you must not have put the top in the laundry basket."

"Why would I put in the bottoms but not the top?" Janie asked.

"Why would I wash just the bottoms if the top was in the basket, too?" Mom asked back.

Then it was time for Bat to reveal the nice thing. "I know where your unicorn pajama top is," he said.

"You do?" said Mom and Janie together.

"Yes," Bat said. "I took it out of the dirty laundry basket."

"Why would you do that?" Mom asked.

"Because if I waited until after you washed it, then Thor wouldn't recognize Janie's scent."

Janie had been the one to name Thor. Even though Bat didn't like the idea of sharing Thor with anyone, Janie had earned the right for Thor to know who she was.

"Did you give that rodent my pajama top?" Janie's voice climbed higher and higher.

"Actually," Bat said, "skunks aren't rodents. They're Mephitidae. People used to think that they belonged in the same family as weasels, ferrets, and badgers, but this scientist named Dr. Jerry Dragoo figured out that—"

"It doesn't matter, Bat," Janie said, interrupting him. "Go get my pajama top right now."

"But it does matter," said Bat.

Janie was not interested in hearing the difference between Mephitidae and Mustelidae. She refused to listen to anything until after Bat had gone to Thor's enclosure and retrieved the unicorn pajama top from the pile where Thor slept. And when he tried to hand it to her, she wouldn't even take it.

"It smells like animal," she said.

"It smelled like animal before, too," Bat said. "Because I took it from the dirty laundry basket, and it still smelled like you."

She didn't scream, exactly. Bat didn't know what to call the sound that she made just before she spun around, stomped back into her room, and slammed the door.

Bat felt tears gathering, ready to spill. Mom came over and hugged him tight. She didn't say anything, but she rocked him back and forth in the way he liked, and after a moment Bat felt the sting of his tears begin to fade. "It was a nice gesture," Mom murmured into his hair. Bat liked the hot warmth of her breath.

"Baby skunks are easier than sisters," Bat said.

"That may be true," Mom answered. "But there are lots of baby skunks in the world, and you only have one sister."

Gently, she took Janie's pajama top from Bat's hand. He hadn't realized that he was still clutching it. "Come on," she said. "I'll teach you how to do laundry."

"Okay," said Bat. "But first I need to check one thing."

He stuck his head into Thor's enclosure to make sure the kit was settled back in after having his nest disturbed. Thor was sleeping soundly, making a noise like a tiny little snore. Bat pulled one of his own T-shirts up over Thor's body, tucking him in. Then he latched the enclosure and followed Mom to the laundry room.

"Maybe if we use extra fabric softener," he said, "and make the pajama top softer than it's ever been, then maybe Janie won't be so mad."

"I think that is a very good idea," Mom said. "And you can pour it in."

CHAPTER 20 Problems

"Earth to Bat," Mr. Grayson said.

Bat looked up. He had been staring at his math work in front of him, but he hadn't been doing the problems. Usually, Bat liked math problems, because he was good at them and they made sense. Usually, Bat asked for extra math problems when he was done with his regular math problems. But today, Bat didn't feel like doing the regular math problems, even though they were easy. Today, all Bat could think about was that time was passing very quickly, and that he still hadn't heard back from Dr. Jerry Dragoo, world skunk expert.

"You look like you're having a hard time focusing today, Bat," said Mr. Grayson.

"I'm not having a hard time focusing," said Bat.

"Let me rephrase that. You look like you're having a hard time focusing on your schoolwork today, Bat."

"Yes," said Bat. "I am focused on something else."

"He can't think about anything other than that stupid baby skunk," said Lucca.

"Thor isn't stupid," Bat said. He felt his throat grow tight with anger.

"Once my dog got sprayed by a skunk when we were camping," Israel said. "He was stinky for a week."

"Okay, okay," said Mr. Grayson. "This is all very interesting, but right now is math time. Not skunk time."

There should be skunk time at school, thought Bat. He picked up his pencil and forced his brain to focus on the math problems. Most of them were too easy to even bother working out on paper, but he showed all the steps because Mr. Grayson liked it when he showed his work, and Bat liked Mr. Grayson.

While part of Bat's brain worked with his hand to do the math work, he let another part of his brain think about skunk time. If there were a skunk time at school, like

math time and language arts time and yoga time, then maybe Bat could bring Thor with him. Maybe skunk time would be when everyone in class did research about skunks and wrote reports about skunks and built skunk dioramas.

Over the last week, Bat had spent as much time as he could with Thor, but every day he had to leave him when it was time for school. The kit's fur was growing in all over, fuzzy wild black hair with a bright white stripe down the center, from the tip of his nose to the tip of his tail. He was still small enough to fit, curled into a little ball, in Bat's two hands.

And he'd had plenty of time to spend with Thor, because Janie had barely spoken to him since the pajama-top incident. She spent all her time in her room practicing the "Off with Her Head" song for her Queen audition and going over to Ezra's house. Now an Every-Other Friday was coming, and Bat would have to go with Janie to Dad's house. Even worse, no matter how much Bat begged and pleaded and bounced up and down, no matter how clearly he explained to Mom why she should change her mind, Thor would not be going to Dad's house with Bat and Janie. This Every-Other Friday meant that Thor had already spent two weeks living with Bat and his family, and if Bat didn't find a way to change Mom's mind, in two more weeks, Thor would be leaving for the rescue center.

"Thor will be fine, Bat," Mom had said. "Laurence is going to take him for the weekend."

It wasn't that Laurence couldn't do a good job of taking care of animals, Bat thought as he finished the last row of math problems. It wasn't that Bat didn't trust Laurence. It was just that . . . well, Bat didn't want anyone else taking care of the skunk kit. What if Laurence did a better job? What if Thor was happier at Laurence's house than at their house?

And, even if Laurence was trustworthy, no one was perfect. What if Laurence put the animal carrier on the top of his car while he unlocked the door, and then he forgot it was up there and he drove away? What if Laurence went out to get some ice cream and didn't remember to lock the door to his house and someone broke into it and stole Thor? Even if everything went just right, at the end of the weekend they would be two days closer to Thor leaving them forever. Just thinking about that made Bat feel queasy, like he'd been jumping on a trampoline with a stomach full of pizza.

"Bat," said Mr. Grayson. "Do you need to take a little break?"

Bat stopped tapping his heels under the table. He pulled the neck of his T-shirt, which he'd been sucking on in the way he sometimes did when he felt nervous, out of his mouth. He set his pencil down.

"Yes, please," he said.

In the back of the room, Babycakes sat placidly licking a light-pink wheel of salt. Her ears flopped to the sides in relaxation. Bat wished he felt as calm as Babycakes looked. He climbed into her enclosure and sat cross-legged beside her, scratching behind her ears and thinking about the weekend.

If his parents weren't divorced, then he wouldn't have to leave home every other weekend and go to his dad's dumb apartment. If his parents weren't divorced, Thor wouldn't be spending the weekend with Laurence.