



Pictures of all kinds of dogs covered the walls and a large, handmade poster read:



“You ready, Elsa?” Jaya asked, pulling her long dark hair off her face.

Elsa nodded eagerly. She smoothed down her paw-print-patterned skirt, opened up the club notebook on her lap, then paused. “Erm...” She wrinkled her freckled nose. “Can someone lend me a pen?”

“Here.” Harper grinned, reaching into the top pocket of her dungarees. She pulled out a pen and handed it to Elsa. Harper loved to draw and never went anywhere without a spare pen and a sketchbook.

“Thanks,” Elsa said, carefully writing the date in the club notebook.

“How come Elsa gets to take notes...” grumbled Willow, folding her arms across her red and white football shirt.

“She’s Scribbler this month,

remember?” Jaya said patiently. “You’re Picture Picker, Harper’s Arts and Crafts and I’m Speaker, aka Top Dog. We’ll swap again in a few weeks.”

Willow rolled her dark eyes dramatically. “OK, fine,” she huffed.

“So,” Jaya continued, shifting on her beanbag to get comfy. “Today’s meeting is about our class quiz. Ten questions on our favourite topic by Monday. Harper, our quiz is on puppy development. Elsa and Willow, you’re doing puppy training. So—”

“Puppies!” Willow squealed, making everyone jump.

“Willow!” said Jaya, her hazel eyes flashing with impatience. “Talking here!”

“Sorry!” Willow giggled. “I just can’t stop thinking about Lulu’s puppies. They’re going to be the most adorable balls of fluff EVER!”

Harper looked up from her sketchpad, where she’d been drawing a picture of Lulu. “It is the best news,” she said, blowing her auburn fringe out of her green eyes.

“And she’s having a scan tomorrow,” Elsa added. “So we’ll find out when they’re due!”

Lulu was a new arrival at Underdogs. She had been handed in a fortnight ago, having been found wandering along the high street, and was named after a local bakery. Her fur had been matted and dirty but after a good wash they



discovered she was actually cream and toffee-coloured, with a patch of chocolate. Nobody was quite sure what breed Lulu was but Jaya, who wanted to be a vet, had checked her dog books and reckoned she was a mix of poodle, spaniel and maybe terrier.

Lulu wasn't microchipped, so Ashani had put up posters and appealed online, but no one had come forward to claim her. After a few days at the centre, Ashani suspected Lulu was pregnant. Tomorrow's scan would confirm the details.

"I wonder what colour her pups will be?" Harper said dreamily.

"Well," Willow began, jumping up. "I think..."

Jaya glanced down at her puppy wristwatch and worked out they had only half an hour of the meeting left. "Come on,

guys. I'm excited about the puppies too but we need to sort out our quizzes!"

"OK." Willow slumped down on her beanbag. Then she shot back up *again*. She was the tallest of them all, and her springy black curls almost brushed the playhouse ceiling as she hopped excitedly from foot to foot. "Hey, how *many* puppies do you think she'll have?"







Jaya threw her hands in the air. "I give up!"

"Sorry," Willow said, jumping around.

"It's just too exciting."

"Six!" Harper cried.

Willow shook her head. "She's only little. I say four."

"Four's perfect." Elsa beamed, twirling a braid of pale blond hair round her finger. "One pup each!"

"If *only*," Harper wailed. "My parents say the same thing every time I ask – that they're far too busy and it wouldn't be fair to leave a puppy home alone all day."

"You've got more chance of your parents saying yes than I have," said Willow. "The only pet I'm allowed is a goldfish." She set her face into a frown. "No, Willow," she said in a voice that sounded just like her mum's. "We are *not*

getting a puppy. What about my nice new carpet? I don't want it covered in dog hair and muddy paw prints!"

They all laughed at Willow's perfect impression.

Jaya sighed, fiddling distractedly with one of her silver paw-print earrings. "Every time I even mention the word puppy, Mum and Dad get tense. They're always so stressed and tired!" Jaya had two sisters and a baby brother: Samana was ten, Roohi was six and Hari wasn't even one yet. The house always seemed full to bursting, and so noisy.

"I'd give anything for one of those puppies," said Elsa, a faraway look drifting into her pale blue eyes. "But Mum loves our cats too much. She's convinced cats and dogs don't mix."

"It's so unfair," Willow grumbled. "We'd



all be perfect puppy owners. We've learned loads helping out at Underdogs."

The four friends fell quiet.

"Hey!" Willow cried suddenly. "What if we work together ... to persuade our parents to let us each have one of Lulu's puppies?"

Jaya frowned. "Er, haven't we all just explained why none of them will let us?"

"But we could help each other," Willow said, her eyes shining. "To come up with ideas to bring them round?"

Elsa grinned. "Let's do it!"

"I'm in," Harper said. "How about you, Jaya?"

Jaya hesitated. She was pretty sure her parents would say no, whatever she did.

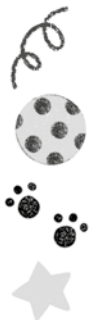
Then again, she'd give anything for a puppy. It had to be worth a try. "OK.

I guess so."

"Brilliant!" Willow reached out to high-five the others. "Let's call it ... Operation Perfect Puppy!"

"Operation PAWfect Puppy, you mean!" Harper chipped in.

"Love it!" Willow beamed. "Operation PAWfect Puppy is GO!"





kitchen, with Hari gurgling away on her knee as Dad made faces at him.

“Hey, whirlwind. How’re you?” asked Ashani.

Jaya hovered in front of her. “I’m fine! How’s Lulu?”

“She’s great. I have some news!”

Jaya held her breath.



“The vet confirmed she’s pregnant and ...” Auntie Ashani hesitated, a smile spreading across her face, “she thinks there will be six pups.”

“Six! That was Harper’s guess!” Jaya cried. “But are you sure?”

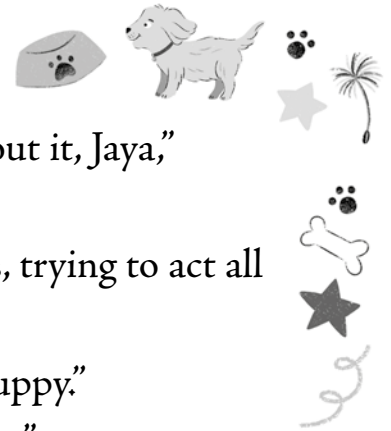
Auntie Ashani nodded. “At least six. They’re due in about three weeks. But the vet’s worried Lulu might be feeling stressed at the rescue centre and has recommended peace and quiet until the puppies arrive.”

“So where will she go?” asked Jaya, reaching for a chocolate biscuit from the open tin.

“She’s moving in with me, this evening. I’m going to foster Lulu!”

“No way! We’ll come and see her every day!” Jaya exclaimed. “We could even look after her while you’re at Underdogs and—”





“Nice try,” Mum interrupted. “But you’re not skipping school.”

Jaya frowned. “We can pop round though, can’t we?”

Auntie Ashani smiled. “Of course, but the key thing is for Lulu to get some peace.”

“Absolutely.” Jaya’s mind was whirring. “I can’t WAIT to tell the others!”

“Honestly, Jaya,” said Dad. “Do you four ever think about anything other than puppies?”

Jaya took a big bite of her chocolate biscuit. “Not often,” she mumbled.

Dad laughed. “I didn’t think so!”

“Imagine the cuteness, though.”

Jaya closed her eyes and smiled as she thought of six mini Lulus. Then she opened one eye and stole a glance at Mum. “I just hope they find better forever homes than Lulu did.”

“Don’t even think about it, Jaya,” said Mum.

Jaya widened her eyes, trying to act all innocent. “About what?”

“About us getting a puppy.”

“What? But Mum, I—”

“There’s just no way. We’ve got our hands full as it is. Looking after you four is enough, without a puppy in tow.”

Jaya looked pleadingly at Dad.

He turned to Hari and pulled another funny face. “What do you think, Hari? This place is so chaotic. Would we even notice a puppy?”

Mum glared at him. “Are you kidding?”

Dad held up his hands in surrender.

“OK, you’re probably right.”

Suddenly Jaya didn’t feel like finishing her biscuit.

Auntie Ashani reached over and



squeezed her hand. “How about you and the others visit Lulu at mine tomorrow after school?”

Jaya looked doubtfully at Mum. “Could you ask the other parents if that would be OK?”

Mum nodded.

“We can give Lulu a nice... Oh no!” Ashani jumped up as Hari sent his beaker of milk flying across the table.

Dad caught the beaker as Mum moved in with the kitchen roll. In the flurry, Jaya escaped into the garden. Mum’s stern words rang in her ears and the joy she had felt about Lulu’s scan and seeing her again dripped away like the spilled milk. Mum really didn’t want a puppy. It seemed Operation Pawfect Puppy was over before it had even begun.

Jaya stomped through the overgrown

grass. She stopped to pick a feathery dandelion clock and held it up to her lips, screwing her eyes shut. “I wish I could have one of Lulu’s puppies,” she whispered. Then she opened her eyes, blew the dandelion seeds and watched as they drifted away on the breeze.

