

THE PUPPY PLACE

BINGO



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For Audrey

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CHAPTER ONE

And number twelve is gaining fast, but number eight isn't giving up the race yet, Charles thought, narrating the action to himself. *And now we see the young number three teaming up with number seven to pull way, way ahead!* Charles smiled as he watched fat raindrops streak down the classroom window, near his desk. He was pretending they were racing: whichever one got to the bottom first would win.

“Can you show us, Charles?”

Charles whipped his head toward the front of the room where his teacher, Mr. Mason, stood staring at him. Mr. Mason held out the marker



in his hand, inviting Charles to come up to the whiteboard and finish a math problem.

Charles squinted at the board. The numbers made no sense at all. Maybe he needed new glasses. Or maybe, he could imagine Mr. Mason saying, he just needed to pay more attention. “Um,” he said.

“How about you, Prema?” Mr. Mason asked, turning to a girl on the other side of the room. She hopped up and, smiling, went to the board. With a few confident strokes she finished the problem, then stood back, looking up at Mr. Mason.

“Exactly,” said Mr. Mason. “Does everybody get what Prema did here?”

“Mmm-hmm,” Charles murmured, along with the rest of the class. But he wasn’t really paying attention anymore. He scooted down in his seat, letting out a sigh. Rainy days at home made him



antsy—at least his mom always said so—but rainy days at school made him sleepy.

His classroom felt especially cozy when gray clouds hung low outside but the lights were on inside. The room was quieter than usual; everybody seemed to speak in hushed voices instead of yelling. The smell of damp clothes—they'd played kickball at recess—mixed with all the usual classroom smells.

Charles yawned, then smiled to himself. He was remembering last night with Buddy, his sweet brown puppy. They had curled up on the floor together, watching a movie with the rest of his family (Mom, Dad, and Charles's older sister, Lizzie, and younger brother, the Bean). Charles had scratched the white, heart-shaped spot on Buddy's chest as he tried to keep his eyes open. The movie was longer than he'd expected, and he

was having a hard time staying awake. He let out a huge yawn—and then Buddy yawned, too. It had made them all laugh. Charles had always known that yawns were contagious (if you see a person yawn, it makes you want to yawn, too), but he didn't know it happened to dogs, too.

Aw, Buddy. Had there ever been a better puppy in the history of the universe? Now, in the classroom, Charles closed his eyes for a moment, picturing his best pal. Buddy, sleeping all curled up at the foot of Charles's bed. Buddy, chasing a ball Charles threw. Buddy, begging for a treat. Buddy . . .

“Psst!”

Charles felt something hit him on the cheek and saw a rolled-up piece of paper fall to his desk. He looked over at his best friend Sammy, sitting next to him. Sammy raised his eyebrows. “Wake up,” he whispered. “You're snoring!”



Charles yawned again and rubbed his eyes. He sat up straighter and tried to follow what Mr. Mason was saying as he scrawled numbers on the whiteboard. The rain spattered on the windows harder now, all the drops melding into one sheet of water. It was really pouring. “Raining cats and dogs,” Dad would say.

Why cats and dogs? Why not kittens and puppies? Charles thought. There could never be too many puppies as far as he was concerned. Charles knew he was super lucky that his family, the Petersons, fostered puppies. That is, they took care of puppies who needed help or new homes. Each one stayed only a little while, but Charles fell in love with them all. Big puppies, little puppies, spoiled puppies, sick or hurt puppies—every one of them was special. It was so, so hard to say good-bye to the puppies when they went to their forever homes, but that was how fostering worked.

At least they had kept Buddy. Had there ever really been a question about that? As soon as he had showed up in their lives, the whole family fell in love with him. Buddy was the only foster puppy who had joined the family permanently. Sometimes Charles and Lizzie begged to keep another one of the foster puppies, but their parents always said no. It wasn't fair—but Mom and Dad were firm. If Charles and his siblings wanted to keep fostering puppies, they could only have one full-time puppy of their own. That was the rule.

“All right then,” said Mr. Mason, breaking into Charles's daydreams. “You all have a good afternoon and I'll see you tomorrow.” He put the cap on his marker and stuck the marker into the jar on his desk.

What? Charles looked over at Sammy, his



eyebrows raised. How had the school day come to an end without him even noticing?

“Oh, and don’t forget,” Mr. Mason called out, over the noise of everyone jumping up to head to their cubbies. “Robotics club starts today with Ms. Perez.”

Sammy threw a fist into the air. “Yes!” he said.

Charles groaned. He and Sammy had been waiting weeks for this club. Ms. Perez was the coolest teacher in school and—well, robotics! Obviously it was going to be amazing.

“Oops,” Sammy said. “I forgot you can’t go. Bummer.”

Charles shoved his stuff into his backpack. “It’s okay,” he said. It wasn’t, but he was trying to convince himself that it was. His mom had volunteered him to spend the next two weeks’ worth of after-school time helping out a neighbor. Ms.

Bailey had just had a foot operation and she was going to need someone to run errands, walk her dog, Annie, and take care of little chores. Today was his first day. Mom kept telling him that he was really going to like Ms. Bailey, but that didn't make up for missing robotics.

Charles walked out of school alone since Sammy was on his way to Ms. Perez's classroom. At least it wasn't raining anymore. A weak sun tried to dry out the puddles as Charles trudged down the sidewalk, head down, trying to avoid stepping on any worms.

He heard a familiar car horn and looked up to see his dad waving to him from the front seat of their van. Lizzie was already in her seat.

"Puppy!" Lizzie yelled out the car window, waving him over. "We're getting a new puppy!"

