

And Then There Was One . . .

Someone is puppy-napping cute critters, and it's up to Annie to crack the case.



“Nooooo!”

The scream jerked Annie awake. The 12-year-old sat up, banging her head on a puppy cage and sending fur and bits of paper flying.

What the kibble is going on? she wondered, glancing at her watch. It was only 6 A.M. Pawtown’s one and only animal detective had been having a nice, peaceful dream about flowing water—and it took her a second to figure out where she was.

On the shelves around her there were cages filled with animals—five red parrots in one, four mutt puppies in another, countless hamsters, ferrets, kittens—even an emu.

Now she remembered. Of course! She was in the Furry Critters Pet Shop.

Two days ago, a crook had stolen a valuable bluecoat puppy from the store. Annie had spent last night here, planning to look for clues. But she must have fallen asleep.

“Nooooo!” There was that scream again. With a sinking feeling, Annie jumped to her feet and rushed toward the sound. Two aisles over, she found Ms. Sellunow, the plump woman who ran the pet shop. She was standing next to a large cage, and her face was wet with tears.

“Are you okay?” Annie asked. Before Ms. Sellunow could answer, a tall, thin

figure sprinted through the front door. It was Tater, a man who did odd jobs around the shop.

“I was on my way to work and could hear you screaming down the street!” Tater cried, hurrying over to them. “What’s happened?”

Ms. Sellunow blew her nose into a blue handkerchief. “I just got here,” she sobbed. “A second puppy has been . . . dog-napped!”

She pointed a finger with a gold ring at the cage, which held the small bluecoat dogs—famous for their blue color. Because they were so rare and valuable, Ms. Sellunow had the only key to the cage and only she fed and cared for them.

Annie peered into the cage where the mother dog paced nervously and just one little blue puppy cowered in the corner.

“Another bluecoat is missing?” Tater asked, leaning against the big sink where the animals were bathed. “Those puppies are too young to be without their mom. They could be in danger.”

This made Ms. Sellunow sob even louder. She turned to Annie. “When I hired you yesterday to find my stolen puppy, there were still two. Now one more is gone! I thought you were supposed to be a great animal detective.”

Annie said miserably, “I am.” Or at least she wanted to be. Right now she felt like a failure. How could she have fallen asleep on the job?

Just then, a burly man wearing a fancy black suit burst into the store and stormed over to them. Annie recognized Mr. Kees right away. He owned three stores in town that sold keys and locks.

“I must have a blue puppy today, Ms. Sellunow!” he demanded. “The mayor is coming over to my house, and I need to have the best dog. I’ll pay any price.”

Ms. Sellunow stepped between him and the bluecoats’ cage. “I’ve told you again and again, Mr. Kees, I’ve already sold these puppies to Mrs. Gotrocks. When they’re old enough to leave their mother, she’ll get them. And no one else.”

Turning so red that he looked like a balloon about to pop, Mr. Kees shouted, “I’ll get one of those blue dogs. Just you wait!” He left the shop, slamming the door and speeding away in his limousine.

Ms. Sellunow was still crying. “I don’t care about money,” she moaned. “I’d never sell my puppies to a person like Mr. Kees.”

Not sure what to do now, Annie ran a hand through her hair—and her fingers touched something. She plucked free a piece of paper about half the size of an index card. “What’s this?” she wondered out loud.

Ms. Sellunow sniffled. “A clue it’s time to wash your hair?” She didn’t wait for an answer. “I’m going in the back to weep for my lost bluecoats.” With her silver bracelets jangling, Ms. Sellunow wandered off to the back of the shop.

Annie looked down at the paper in her hand. It had yesterday’s date and read:

Three Mutt Puppies for Sale! Get Them CHEAP! She never understood why mutts were sold for so much less than purebred dogs like the bluecoats. Mutts were just as good as pets.

The little sign must have fallen into her hair when she banged her head against the mutts' cage. Annie's instincts told her it might be an important clue, but she couldn't figure out how it would help crack the case.

If only Annie could think. But a loud crunching sound kept distracting her. Tater was standing next to her, eating dog biscuits that were shaped like little bones.

"I brought a sandwich with me last night," Annie said, feeling sorry for him. "Do you want half?"

"No, thanks," Tater said through a mouthful of biscuits. "I like this stuff."

Annie didn't think that was possible. She had once been trapped in the wilderness for two weeks, and she wasn't sure she'd have eaten dog treats even then.

"Maybe you should make sure Ms. Sellunow is okay," Annie suggested. Tater nodded and slinked off, still munching away.

Alone now, Annie thought about the case and the main suspects. Who could be stealing the bluecoat puppies? Ms. Sellunow had the only key to the cage, but Mr. Kees was a locksmith. Did he pick the lock on the cage and steal the puppies? And then there was Tater. Was he eating dog treats because he was desperate for money—desperate enough to nab the puppies and sell them to Mr. Kees?

Annie turned her attention back to the cage. The bluecoat mother was pacing in there, looking forlorn. If only she could tell Annie what had happened to her puppies.

Maybe she can, Annie thought, spotting something in the dog's mouth. Annie smooched her face up against the cage to get a better look. It was a piece of blue cloth.

That's when all the clues came together. The sound of flowing water in her dream, the piece of cloth, the sign about the mutts . . . everything clicked into place!

Annie let out a howl of excitement, thinking she might have solved the case. To make sure, though, she would wait until tonight to spring her trap.

Ten hours later, the shop was closed for business. The lights were off, and most of the animals were asleep in the darkness. Annie was lying on the floor, pretending to snore.

She could hear the sound of the front door opening and closing. The dog-napper was in the shop. Footsteps headed slowly toward the cage holding the last bluecoat puppy.

In the blink of an eye, Annie sat up and clicked on her flashlight, trapping the crook in the beam of light. "Hello," Annie said. "I've been expecting you."