



The Chocolate Lab

By **ERIC LUPER**

Scholastic Inc.



For Elaine
(who has put up with my Cocoa-like
antics for many years)

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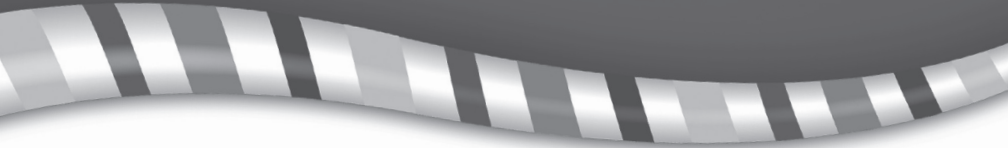
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Chapter 1

Doggy Disaster



There are two kinds of people in this world, the kind who like dog licks and the kind who don't. I'm that first kind. I like the feel of sloppy, smooth dog tongue on my hand. I like warm dog breath in my face. I like knowing each drop of slippery slobber means my dog loves me no matter what. Most days my mom and dad are dog-lick people, too.

But not today. Today my parents want nothing to do with Cocoa's tongue or any of the rest of him. Today they just want a do-over so they can keep Cocoa out of the chocolate laboratory

at the back of our chocolate shop and away from the display my mother was working on for next week's big Chocolate Expo.

"That dog . . ." my mom says as she looks at what's left of her workshop. "That . . . dog . . ."

Those are the only two words she says, but I can tell the rest of them are bunched up inside her mouth and want to burst right out.

I try to change the subject. "Did you ever think how amazing it is that we have a *chocolate* Labrador retriever with a *chocolate* name who lives in a *chocolate* shop who goes completely bonkers when he smells *chocolate*? It's like a miracle right here in our own house!"

And it's true. Cocoa may not be allowed to eat chocolate, but he can sniff it out from a mile away. When he does, he gets more excited than a cat with a noseful of catnip. I guess Cocoa is like me that way, because when I get an idea I

can't sit still until I do something about it, too. Maybe that's why I know what he did is not actually his fault.

"I just wish our little miracle pooch would stay out of the workshop," Dad says. "How many times have we told you to put Cocoa in his crate when Mom is working?"

"I did," I say. "I remember locking it and everything."

"If you had locked Cocoa's crate, he wouldn't have been able to do this," Dad says. He dumps a tray of chocolates into the garbage. The smushed, smashed, totally mangled candies slide into the can with a *thumpity, thump, thump* louder than Fourth of July fireworks. Call me crazy, but I think they still look yummy.

"This isn't the first time, Mason," Mom says. "You're going into fifth grade. What have we told you about responsibility?"