



The
Chocolate
Lab

TUG-OF-WAR

By **ERIC LUPER**

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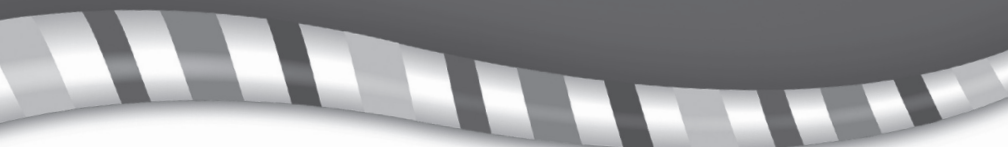
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Chapter 1

Without a Paddle



People always complain about the smell of wet dog. When something is damp and musty, people say, “Ew, it smells like wet dog around here!” They spray lemony spray in the air, burn candles that stink like pumpkin spice, and sprinkle baking soda all over the rug.

As for me, the smell of wet dog fills my nose with memories of summers in the creek behind our house. It reminds me of long walks in the rain with my chocolate Labrador retriever, Cocoa—my best buddy in the world. No, I think

the smell of wet dog is the best, second only to the smell of melted chocolate.

The problem is that both of those smells—melted chocolate *and* wet dog—might be yanked right out of my life if Cocoa doesn't settle down and start behaving. My family is counting on rebuilding this old mill so we can make chocolate using an old Cabot family chocolate recipe. If Cocoa can't keep out of the way, we'll never save our candy business.

I bury my nose deep in Cocoa's fur and look at the pile of lumber he just knocked into the water. Then, I look up at Mr. Dave, the carpenter Grandpa Irving hired to restore the old mill.

The broken beams above us barely hold up the ceiling, which is filled with gaping holes. Garbage and dead leaves litter the floor. Out the door that faces the stream, a broken

waterwheel hangs crookedly, like a sad emoji. I was the first to support Grandpa's ideas about restoring the mill, but now that I've actually been inside, I'm not so sure anyone should make chocolate in here . . . ever.

Several long pieces of lumber drift downstream.

"Cocoa's really sorry," I tell Mr. Dave, hugging Cocoa close. He drags his wet bologna tongue up my cheek. "One of your workers is drinking hot chocolate and the smell makes Cocoa go bananas."

"That dog . . ." Mr. Dave says, his cheeks burning bright pink. "That dog . . ."

Just then, Grandpa and Hannah march in. Grandpa is carrying a rolled-up parchment and a large cup of coffee. His beat-up tricorne hat sits crookedly on his head. Hannah looks worried.