

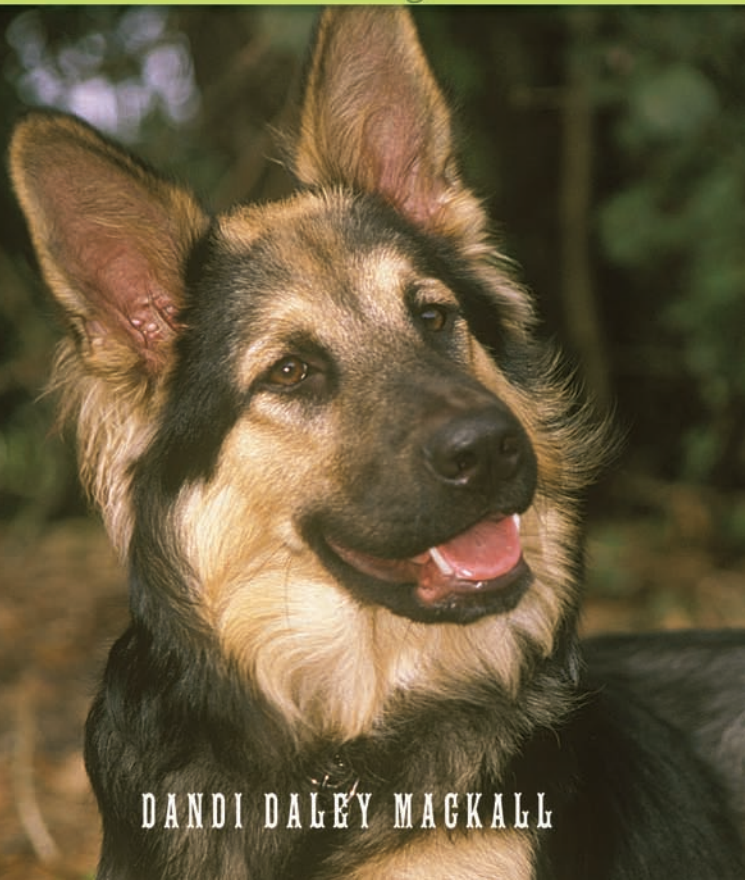
S * T * A * R * L * I * G * H * T



Animal Rescue



Mad Dog



DANDI DALEY MACKALL

Mad Dog



Tyndale House Publishers, Inc. • Carol Stream, Illinois

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ONE

IF THE WORLD had any idea how mad I, Wesley “Mad Dog” Williams, am at it, the sun would be too scared to show its ugly face around here.

I squint up at the giant burning ball of fire that’s making me sweat through my T-shirt. Nothing to do but hustle up the frying-hot sidewalk and take the steps two at a time. I have to pass under the big sign I’ve walked under dozens of times. It still gets to me. Black letters over the door read, “Nice Animal Shelter.”

Right.

This place is no shelter. And there’s not an animal in there feeling nice.

The problem is, the whole town is named “Nice.” A great place to live if you like ice-cream socials and community picnics.

I don’t. But I’m not living in Nice forever. Not even close.

As soon as my mom gets out of rehab, I’m moving back to Chicago, getting a job in the city, and finding an apartment with a little backyard for Rex, my dog. And I’m going to train a dog for Mom so she can have one of man’s best friends all to herself.

Nice, Illinois, is about the last place anybody from my old crew in Chicago would expect to find me. That’s for sure. Nobody in Nice calls me Mad Dog. But Mad Dog is still how I think of myself. The handle fits, even in Nice. Maybe *especially* in Nice.

I glance up again at the Nice Animal Shelter sign. Some joke. I’ve seen my fair share of ugly in my 14 years on this planet, but I’ve never seen nothing uglier than a dog pound. And that’s what this is, no matter how you call it. It’s a dog pound. Pounds are like death row for the innocent, without trials.

I take a deep breath, yank the door open, and walk in. A blast of cold air hits me. You

can bet the “Nice” animals don’t have air-conditioning in back. Even out here in the lobby, with crisp, cool air blowing through like March winds, it smells like rotten cat food and ammonia.

“May I help you?” asks a blonde I’ve never seen before. Her skin is so white I can’t believe she’s ever seen the sun. Not this month anyway. Not August in Illinois. I’ve seen snow less white than this girl.

I figure she must be new, maybe a temp. Everybody who is anybody gets out of town in August.

My mom used to talk about taking a vacation to Florida. That was back when I was young enough to think Disney World was cool and the Mouse was real.

“Dog warden in?” I ask, walking up to the big desk in the center of the lobby.

“He’s out all week on vacation,” she answers. “Would you like to fill out an application to adopt a pet?” She holds up a one-page application I’ve filled out a couple dozen times before.

“I’m on file.” I hear my own voice like it’s someone else’s. The words come out sharp as

blades and cold as hailstones. I tell myself that I've got nothing against this girl. I'm just angry at the people who let their animals end up in a place like this.

The girl looks worried, though. I'm not big, but I *am* black. A definite minority in Nice. *She'd* be the minority in my old neighborhood, the projects on the south side of Chicago.

Anyway, I know there's no hint of friendly on my face. So chances are I'd be making this big-smile cheerleader nervous, no matter what color I was.

"Why don't you have a seat over there and fill out the application?" The girl holds out the paper again. "It should only take you a few minutes." Her smile is back. "We have a full load of pets to choose from today."

Somehow, knowing that death row is full doesn't make me feel like smiling.

Before I can tell her this, the skinny woman who runs the pound on Thursdays comes in through the silver double doors behind the desk.

With her come the cries and barks of strays caged and waiting for their fate. Tomorrow, Friday, is execution day at the pound. They

call it “putting them to sleep” or “euthanasia” or “putting them down” or just “taking care of it.”

The skinny woman is wearing a gray uniform that makes her look like a mail carrier. Her name’s Wanda, unless she always wears somebody else’s uniform. *Wanda* is written in yellow letters on her front pocket.

“It’s you again, huh?” She says this without smiling, and I like that. At least she’s not a fake.

Wanda turns to the receptionist. “Wes is okay. You can always let him come through. We keep applications on file for him. He works with the Coolidges on their farm. You know. That animal rescue outside of town. Starlight Animal Rescue.”

“You work *there?*” the blonde girl says.

“Yeah.” She seems so blown away by this news that I’m tempted to tell her I don’t just work there. I live there. But she probably couldn’t handle that.

“Do you know Hank Coolidge?” She’s wide-eyed and just short of panting.

Hank is my 16-year-old . . . what? Foster brother, I guess. He’s the only real son of the

people I live with, the Coolidges. Right now there are four of us—three fosters and Hank.

Every girl in Nice seems to have a crush on Hank. I don't get it, but there it is.

"I know him," I admit finally.

"Will you tell him Lissa says hi?" she asks. She makes me think of a collie puppy I found a home for a few months ago. Way too eager, but most people go for that.

Instead of giving her the promise that I'll be her messenger boy, I turn back to Wanda.

Wanda gets it, I think. She heads back to the silver doors and nods for me to follow.

The dogs hear us coming and start yapping and barking. Canine SOS calls drown out all other sounds except the banging of wire cages.

"So how's it going, Wes?" Wanda shouts over the howls.

This Wanda character is okay. But I'm not about to let her all up in my business. Or anybody else neither. A "how's it going?" from anybody always gets an "I'm all right" from me.

Still, for a second, I think about answering that question for real: *How am I? Well, my mom's*

still in rehab. I haven't seen her since February, haven't talked to her in three months, two weeks, four days—but who's counting? I don't know if I can wait nine more days to see her in person. That's when she'll walk out of that rehab place. I had to leave the only home I ever knew in Chicago, and now I'm in foster care, living on a farm with a local teen idol named Hank and two foster girls, one with cancer and the other with attitude. The only place I hang out is this pound, where they kill most of the animals I can't take with me. So how am I? You figure it out.

“I'm all right,” I answer.

The stench of the pound back here is so strong I can feel it on my skin. It makes me want to take a long, hot shower.

“What's up with this one?” I ask, pointing to a medium-size, white, short-haired mutt with a rat's tail. She's curled in the far corner of her filthy cage.

Wanda's a head taller than me. I have to stand on tiptoes so I can see the dogs in the top row of metal cages. The dog I'm pointing to hasn't moved since we got back here. But her eyes are sharp. She hasn't missed a move I've made since I walked into this pit.

“That quiet one? Not sure,” Wanda answers. “We thought she was sick when she came in. I kept her quarantined for 48 hours. But there’s nothing physically wrong with her. She got scooped up in a canvass across the tracks, up north.”

“Terrier mix?” I guess. I’m also guessing the dog’s smart and maybe four years old.

Wanda sighs, and it makes me think she really does care about the dogs they catch. Maybe. “I was hoping the owner would come for this one,” she says. “She’s so pathetic. I showed her to four people looking for a pet, but they wanted playful.”

“Did they wind up with puppies?” I ask. It’s what most people want. Everybody thinks they can do a better job raising things than somebody else did. They don’t even think about what’s best for the dogs. They only think about themselves.

“Exactly,” Wanda answers.

I move down the row of cages because I have to. I have to keep moving. If I don’t, I think I might kick something. Anything. It just makes me crazy that people do this to animals. To dogs that never hurt anybody.

I wish I could take all of them with me.
Set every dog free, like in one of those cartoon
movies.

But I learned a long time ago—life is no
funny cartoon movie.