

Mad Dash

Chapter One

Dash

The puppy and I trip over each other coming through the door, just as the phone stops ringing. I go down hard, but Andrew's voice on the machine loosens something that was tight inside me, a dry sponge in water.

"Hi, babe," I say, full of relief, as if he can hear me. Sprawled on the plank floor, craning away from the puppy's exuberant tongue kisses, I rub my sore knee and listen to my husband say, "Dash? Hello, are you there?"

I start to get up, but his tone changes. "I know you're there." He's annoyed, so I stay where I am. Andrew is mad at me? I have really whacked my knee, and now I'm seeing it as his fault.

"Dash, answer the phone, please." He sighs. What a martyr. Oh, what he has to put up with.

"We said we'd talk this evening," he reminds me. I can hear classical music in the background; I picture him in his big chair in the living room, feet up on the ottoman, enjoying his record collection without interruptions. He must be having a ball without me. "Dash, would you please pick up the phone?"

Again I start to get up, but he heaves another piteous sigh and I change my mind. "Very well," he says. Who says very well? No one but Andrew. He says "indeed," too, and "quite right," and "em" instead of "um." You'd think he was English.

"Very well, call me back, that is if you can find the time." His sarcasm is usually subtler. "But I might go to bed early," he warns; "I didn't sleep at all well last night."

I wait through a small pause, wondering if he misses me. Probably, but he won't say it. Oh, I ought to get off the floor and pick up the phone, talk, resolve things. But I stay where I am, holding the puppy's warm, panting sides. Sometimes prolonging even bad things, painful things, is better than getting them all nice and neat and settled. That's what Andrew would like, us to get this silliness behind us, tidy it up like a messy room. Put everything back exactly where it was before.

"Also," he goes on, "I've got a raging headache, so maybe you shouldn't call. It came on all at once,

I didn't take a pill in time." Now I can hear it, that pinch in his tone that means he's squinting, holding himself stiffly to ward off his migraine. If he even has one. Andrew is a hypochondriac, but I suppose an imagined headache is just as painful as a real one. A raging headache—how dramatic, like a nineteenth century heroine. If I were there with him I'd be sympathetic, though. I'd rub his neck, make him a cup of tea. Funny how bitchiness comes a lot easier when you're seventy-five miles away.

"Mrs. Melman called," he says. "I don't know what you want me to tell her. Tell anybody, so I didn't say anything. Just that you weren't here."

I don't know what to tell anybody either, even Mrs. Melman, who lives next-door. Maureen knows, but no one else. If this is a separation, it isn't real yet. I don't know what it is, and I ought to. I started it.

"I'm not going to keep talking to this damn machine. I'm hanging up." Andrew's dignity means everything to him. "They're calling for snow here, so who knows what it'll do down there. So . . . you be careful," he says gruffly, and hangs up.

Now I'm bereft. There's no pleasing me; I could have eight husbands, or none, and I'd still have this edgy, empty feeling. It's not even depression, which I imagine is at least relaxing. This is more like an illness, one that's not serious enough to warrant any sympathy. Just a long, long stretch of feeling lousy.

It started to snow down here about an hour ago. I'm surprised Andrew didn't know that, since the weather channel is one of the three he watches; the other two are PBS and the history channel—naturally; he's a history professor. The snow is what made us fall over each other in the doorway, the puppy and me. My hiking boots left wet blotches on the kitchen floor, melting snow seeping into the cracks between the old pine boards. First snow of the season. What if I were snowed in for Christmas, the unspoken date by which Andrew and I are supposed to reconcile? Snowed in at our cabin all by myself; alone at Christmas for the first time in twenty years. The thought makes me shiver. Not with dread. An illicit thrill, like shoplifting must be, or committing a victimless crime.

The dog waddles over to her bowl, toenails clicking, pudgy belly bulging from side to side. I sigh and pick myself up, go outside to retrieve the armload of wood I dropped in my haste to answer the phone. Mr. Bender, the man who does odd jobs and out-of-season maintenance on our cabin, has taken to stacking the wood he brings all the way out by the shed. He's such a surly old coot, I think he does it on purpose, so I'll have to walk farther.

We bought the cabin three years ago, but it might as well be three days as far as Mr. Bender is concerned. Or thirty years—we'd still be "the new people," rich Washingtonians spoiling the pristine Virginia countryside with our traffic and pollution, our estate developments eating up the beautiful old farms—never mind that Andrew and I are anything but rich, in fact we're poor now that Chloe's in college, never mind our cabin's been here since the 'forties and we have personally saved it from rotting into the mossy ground with a lot of improvements we couldn't afford. We're still "the new people" to Mr. Bender, and still not welcome.

I've become an expert at keeping the fire in the wood stove going, formerly Andrew's job. The stove is tiny, but so is the kitchen; if I close the door to the living room it's warm as a kiln in here. I sprawl in my mother's old padded rocker with her shawl around my shoulders and my feet on one of the couch pillows I use for a footstool. I love the quiet, just the hiss of the stove and the tick and slide of snow against the window. The dog, asleep beside me on the rug. Not chewing it for a change.

I wonder if I would be lonely without her. I never used to come down to the cabin without Andrew, I thought I'd be scared by myself. But I'm not, and she's certainly no watchdog. I was thinking of naming her Sock, because she has one white paw. Dogs are supposed to be especially sensitive to the K sound, I've heard. Is that funny, "Sock" instead of "Socks"? I like funny names for pets. Andrew would come up with something funny. When Chloe was little, he'd make her laugh by christening her dolls and stuffed animals Uriah or Orville, Saffron, Primavera.

But of course, consulting Andrew is not a possibility in this case. The way we got the puppy, or rather what happened afterward, pretty much squashes that option.

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We were coming home from the history department trimester break party. Exams had ended the day before, vacation was starting, so everybody was in a good mood and drank too much. Everyone but me, anyway; I probably drank too much, but I was in a bad mood.

But I've been in a bad mood since last summer, when my mother died. Then Chloe went off to college and, I don't know, I can't seem to find my footing, my old self. I go around like a ghost, no bones, no blood; I feel like I barely cast a shadow. The doctor thinks I might be hitting menopause early. Trauma can do that, she said.

Something was wrong with me that night—I mean, obviously; I walked out on my husband, apparently over a dog. The only warning I had, and only in retrospect, was that every time I looked at Andrew—who stood almost the whole night in Richard Weldon's dim foyer with his back to the wall, as far from the thick of things as he could possibly get without going outside—it was as if his outline had blurred or faded and I were seeing him in duplicate, two Andrews slightly overlapping. It wasn't the rum punch, either, because everything else was in perfect focus. It was Andrew.

He had on his uniform: khaki trousers, blue Oxford shirt, tweed jacket. And, touchingly, the paisley tie I gave him years ago, back when I had hopes of varying the uniform. Naïve me, I used to buy clothes for him. He'd get a pained expression while he'd praise my selections, sweaters, slacks, shirts in colors besides blue, and then he'd never wear them. I wonder what his students make of the uniform, I wonder if he's the butt of jokes—he'd hate that. Probably not, though. His students always love him.

He stood in the foyer with his hands in his pockets, head back, looking down his long nose at Tim Meese, his best friend, his fellow escape artist. The two oldest men in the department, not counting ancient Dr. Cleveland, and neither one a full professor. Not that there's anything wrong with that.

I always add that, like making a cross against vampires. So I don't sound so much like an ambitious, political, calculating faculty wife.

“Oh, hello, Dash,” I heard from behind me. “What an amusing cape. Where's Andrew?”

Elizabeth O'Neal, I knew without turning around. She has a low, staccato, order-giving voice that pauses in unpredictable places; if you close your eyes, you'd swear she was Captain Kirk. She slouches; she always wears black; she's not pretty in the least, not to me, but her students are fascinated by her. If the college rumor mill is right, and so often it isn't, she's having an affair with Richard Weldon. Poor Allison, his indecently young wife, who used to be one of his students. I guess you reap what you sow.

“Elizabeth, nice to see you,” I said. “Andrew? He's over there.”

“Oh, mmm,” she said in a different voice, not Captain Kirk's at all, and I looked more closely at my husband to see what she was seeing. He's handsome, certainly to me, but he's got the kind of face that doesn't exactly bowl you over with admiration, not at first when you might be distracted by his thick glasses, or put off by his everyday expression of worried melancholy. And he's tall, but you don't notice right off because of his sort of hollow-chested, self-deprecating stoop. I can see him growing old like Mr. Chips, thin and tweedy and dignified, and never losing his hair.

Before slouching off toward the foyer, Elizabeth made dutiful chitchat about her plans for the break—Jamaica with some guy—and asked me about mine and Andrew's. “Oh, we're staying home,” I said carelessly, “keeping it quiet this year. Chloe's school is on a different semester system, so . . .” I'd only just found out, so the wound was fresh: Chloe wasn't coming home for the Christmas holidays. She was going skiing in Vermont with one roommate, then visiting the other in Connecticut over New Year's, even though it's her freshman year and we haven't seen her since Thanksgiving. She doesn't even ski.

I think that's when it started. My unwinding. Elizabeth, I presume unwittingly, put her bony finger on the most recent sore spot in my heart. But there was an older, tenderer one right under it, and by picking at the top one she pierced the tissue-thin scab over the other. Fresh blood.

The sandwich generation: I'm so tired of that expression. In the last nine months, both halves of my sandwich have been pried off and eaten. I'm the soft, squishy center, exposed, unprotected. Unsafe, that's the word. Like Bambi after the hunters left. All I have now is Andrew to protect me.

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“Didn't you see me?” I asked him on the way home, holding my hands closer to the heater for warmth. “I gave you the signal.” Everything about him annoyed me. That should have set off another warning bell, but I only remember clenching my jaw over the obsessively careful way he drove, the highbrow music station he always has to have on the radio, his utter obliviousness to my mood. The hypochondriacal loop he kept going around in about tonight's spiced shrimp's probable effect on his gastrointestinal system, the migraine he wouldn't be at all surprised to wake up with tomorrow from all

those flash pictures Richard’s wife wouldn’t stop taking—

“But didn’t you see me? You looked right at me, you couldn’t have missed it.” I’m not as practiced at giving the Let’s go signal as Andrew, for the simple reason that he always wants to go home before I do. Still, it’s not brain surgery: you raise your eyebrows and rub your left wrist, careful not to touch or look at your watch, which would give it away.

“I thought you were having a good time,” he said. There was no traffic, but he put the turn signal on to change lanes. That annoyed me, too. “You were dancing with Richard.”

“No, I wasn’t, Richard was dancing with me. Oh, God.” I slumped, overcome with exhaustion. Everything was the same, the Weldons’ holiday party, Mason-Dixon College, the ancient flirtations, the politics, the people. Nothing changed except how old we were all getting. How many more faculty parties would I have to go to in my lifetime, fifty? A hundred? I didn’t even have my friend Maureen to commiserate with anymore, not since she split up with her husband. She says that’s the only good thing about her divorce—she never has to go with Phil to another damn faculty party.

“Did you hear Richard’s giving up the chairmanship?” Andrew asked me, and I said of course I knew, it was the hot subtext all evening. You couldn’t be there and not know (I didn’t say) unless you stayed in the foyer all night and only talked to one or two of your closest friends.

“You never even moved,” I complained. “It was like your shoulder was glued to the wall. Couldn’t you just . . . can’t you ever . . .”

I didn’t finish, just sighed again and stared out the window, and I think that’s a point for me. At least I don’t nag. I used to consider Andrew’s complete indifference to office politics admirable, a mark of his honesty and integrity, but I don’t anymore. When you think about it, it’s kind of selfish. His academic career is . . . how best to put it . . . languishing, but he would rather teach class in a kilt than do anything so undignified as network, so who has to do it? Me. I have to dance with drunken department heads and pretend to like it. Our daughter isn’t putting herself through her expensive college.

“Let’s go to the cabin for the weekend.”

He finally looked over at me. “The cabin?”

That’s all, two words, but as soon as he uttered them I knew we weren’t going. And even though the idea had just occurred to me, I was suddenly convinced of the rightness of it, the urgency. It was the answer.

“Oh, Andrew, let’s go. Just us. It’ll be romantic.” I squeezed his arm, but he felt brittle to me, untouchable. My fault; I’ve been so rotten and moody lately. “We could drive down late, come back whenever we feel like it.” What I really wanted to do was go now, turn the car around, get on the Beltway and drive and drive and drive.

“Hm,” he said with feigned thoughtfulness. “I’ve got exams to grade. Plus all the journals.” He made everybody in his Colonial America class keep diaries, as if they were living during the Revolutionary War or something.

“You could do them down there. Peace and quiet.”

“There’s no wood,” he pointed out, turning onto our street from Columbia Road. “We said we weren’t going back before spring.”

“We could buy some of those fake logs on the way down.”

“You can’t burn them in a woodstove. Chemicals.”

“We’ll get Mr. Bender to bring us a load of wood. Or you could chop some. I could chop some.”

“Don’t we have something, a party on Saturday—”

“Just Amy and Dan’s, and it’s an open house, they’d never miss us.”

He made his long humming sound, “Hmmm,” which he thinks I think means he’s taking the subject under advisement but really means it will never come up again unless I raise it, and then raise it again, then again, till we’re both so tired of it it’s a relief to forget the whole thing.

“Oh, never mind.” I flopped back against the seat. “I’ll just go down by myself.”

He chuckled, not taking that seriously. He was right, I wasn’t serious. Then.

We usually come and go through the front door, not the back, because we park on the street—no garage—and the back door doesn’t lead to anything except the alley behind our block of townhouses. That night was trash night, though, plus we were running late for the Weldons’, so we’d hurried out the kitchen door with a plastic bag of garbage each, dumped them in our spot in the alley, and walked around the corner to the car.

Which is all to say—what if we’d done that again for some reason, parked and then gone into the house from the back? What if we had? We’d have tripped over a dead dog on the front porch the next morning, that’s what.

Andrew had the door key, so he saw it first. “What—” he said, and started back, scaring me. I saw something black, the size and shape of a soccer ball, wedged between the storm door and the door. We’d forgotten to leave the porch light on; we only had the streetlight to see—an animal, a sweater, someone’s purse . . .

“It’s a dog,” Andrew exclaimed, bending close. He took off his gloves and touched it. “A little dog. I don’t think it’s alive.” He handed me the key, scooped his hands gingerly under the lifeless black mound, and lifted it. I felt frozen; I squinted instead of looking at it directly, the way I do at scary

movies.

I think of that, how squeamish Andrew took it up in his bare hands, dead for all we knew, while I, the great animal lover, shrank back in fear and distress. All I could do was unlock the door.

I turned on a lamp while Andrew set the dog on the rug in the living room. It lay perfectly still—but then it moved, shivered or twitched or something, and after that I could act. Silly, but once I knew it wasn't dead, I was all right.

Its eyes were open but not fixed on anything. “Is he hurt? Is he just cold? Andrew, who could do such a thing, put a dog in somebody's door on a night like this and leave it there? I think he's freezing. Should we take him to the vet? He's not even shivering. No, there, he just shivered. Are you calling?”

“They won't be open, we'll just get the answering service.”

I sat on the floor and pulled the puppy into my lap. “Call and leave a message, then.” It could hardly raise its head. The blue-black eyes finally focused on mine, but only for a second before the dog dropped its heavy little head, thump, on my thigh.

We had a dog when I was young, a stray we named Tramp. My mother let me keep him even though Daddy had just died and she was working two jobs and I was only nine and not that responsible. What a softy she was. Sitting there on the floor, I had a wave of longing for my mother that was so intense, I had to squeeze my eyes shut to keep from crying.

Andrew was talking on the phone in the kitchen. Huddled over the puppy, trying to warm it with my body, I didn't notice Hobbes till I felt his wet nose on my cheek. “Hey, Hobbes,” I said loudly, so he could hear me. He's deaf. “Hey, boy. Look here, we've got a—”

Hobbes finally noticed the puppy and jumped back—much as Andrew had on the front porch. Hobbes, Andrew's father's fourteen-year-old cocker spaniel, is the only furred creature I've ever known Andrew not to be allergic to. Which is interesting since, in so many ways, Andrew is allergic to his father.

“I left a message at the vet's,” he told me from the doorway. “They're supposed to call back. In the meantime—”

The phone rang.

“Wow. Fast,” I said, and Andrew went away again.

Under my coat and my amusing red cape, I had on velvet pants and a fancy silk shirt that buttoned down the front. I unbuttoned the shirt and put the puppy next to my skin, noticing in the process that it was a female. I pulled my clothes around her, coat and all, making a cocoon, and after a little while she wasn't a dead weight anymore. Her soft, solid body twitched, her little toenails grazing my skin, the breath from her cold nose tickling me. I got up from the floor and carried her into the kitchen.

“I don’t know,” Andrew was saying, “lethargic, yes. I think so. Did it shiver?” he asked me.

“She’s shivering right now.”

He reported that to the vet, a man we’ve gotten to know well because of Hobbes’s arthritis. “That’s a good sign? A good sign,” Andrew relayed, “it means only mild hypothermia.”

“But what should we do?”

He held up his hand. “Yes. Right, right. Four teaspoons in a pint. But first—okay. Yes.”

Finally he hung up. “That’s the first thing he said to do, put it next to your skin.”

“Really?” I hugged the puppy closer, feeling relieved and gratified and smart. This was going to have a happy ending.

Fill bottles with warm, not hot, water, the vet advised, and lay them next to the puppy’s body, especially her chest and armpits. Don’t overheat, and definitely don’t use a hair dryer. Try to feed her a little sugar water.

We did all that. She went through a phase of violent shivering—an excellent sign, Andrew reported; shivering increased metabolism and generated heat. Gradually that subsided and she began to relax, sprawled out on a towel in my lap, her silky belly rising and falling with natural breaths. She had short, wooly-soft black fur all over, except for that one white foot.

I was asking Andrew if he thought it would be a good idea to let her sleep between us tonight so she could get nice and warm, and running names by him like Lazy, short for Lazarus, or what about Feeny for Phoenix—when he sneezed.

“Of course we can’t keep it,” he said between honks into his handkerchief, as if I’d suggested adopting a wild boar, a baby python. He was getting out the little enamel pan he heats a cup of milk in every night just before bed. I’m married to a man who drinks warm milk. The horror of that closed in on me, like being sealed in an envelope, like being buried alive. Mama! I thought—I did, I had that very conscious thought. I wanted my mother back, and Tramp, and my youth, my freedom, I felt like running away so fast and so far that nothing looked familiar.

I should’ve left right then. The die was cast, and it would’ve been easy—I still had my coat on. I’m not sure why, it seems a bit mad to me now, but I was beyond angry. I had skipped that step and gone directly to finished.

So I should’ve left, but instead I stayed to say hurtful things about Andrew’s father’s dog, already snoring again in his smelly bed beside the refrigerator, and how convenient, no, how bogus Andrew’s allergies were. Which naturally led to his hypochondria, and somehow that led to a rant about the colossal stupidity of a world order that would let a horrible old man like Edward Bateman draw one

more breath after my sweet, loving, tender-hearted mother was gone.

Andrew thinks I'm a drama queen, he was sure this was just another pointless emotional flare-up that would die out sooner if ignored, so he didn't fight back, even when I gave him a dog-or-me ultimatum.

"Dash, sweetheart," he said, "you're upset. We'll let the dog sleep here with Hobbes tonight, and tomorrow we'll find it a good home. A really good home. Now come to bed." Then he leered at me. Andrew Bateman who is not a leerer leered at me, I can only assume because my white cotton brassiere under the blouse I'd never rebuttoned had inflamed him.

"Maybe when pigs fly!"

The rest is a blur. I said some more regrettable things, then left. That felt great—I loved the whole flouncing out part, finding my purse, wrapping the puppy in a chenille throw, hauling open the front door and slamming it behind me.

Andrew immediately opened it and called out from the porch, "Have you completely lost your mind?"

If I had, it's still missing. None of the rationalizations I've come up with to explain what I did that night really work. It seemed like a good idea at the time. (But so did proclaiming myself "Dash" at age thirteen, because I despised "Dot," short for Dorothy.) The puppy—I think if I went to a shrink he might say, or she might say, taking the puppy out from under my shirt to save its life was like a ritual birth. In the last six months I've lost my mother, and I've virtually lost my daughter. Andrew was trying to rip away my last chance to have something belong to me.

Anyway, that's all I could come up with as I sped down I-66 at midnight, caught between competing urges to keep driving forever and turn around and go home where I supposedly belong. It beat Andrew's explanation, at least, made me sound more thoughtful and complicated than irresponsible and idiotic.

But it's just as likely his diagnosis is correct and I've simply lost my mind—that's still better than perimenopause. Although I don't suppose they're mutually exclusive.

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