

LOVE Has NO Boundaries



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THE TAIL OF A DOG

Summer Devon

Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance series

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By Summer Devon

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a free gift to you.

What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what they do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

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Photo Description

A smiling dark-haired guy in his twenties or thirties is apparently driving a car. Another man, perhaps a little younger, also with short dark hair, is resting his head on the driver's shoulder, eyes closed, a faint smile on his face. Behind them on the backseat is a dog, probably a Weimaraner, and all we see of it is the dog's big head, eyes closed, its chin on the resting man's neck. All three look utterly contented.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

This is me, the adorable one in the picture, yes the one on the left. You won't believe what I had to go through with the two cuties next to me! And what will lie ahead of us? Please help telling our story!

Thank You!

Anke

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: first person – dog's POV, sweet, law enforcement, blue-collar, lawyer, men with pets, family drama, finding a family

Word count: 10,932

THE TAIL OF A DOG

By Summer Devon

I'm not saying that I hated people, but I came within a whisker of loathing each and every one of them. After I got dumped, I learned fear. When I saw one of those two-legged assless creatures, I'd take off running.

I'd ended up in a place that stank of any number of creatures' misery. I'm an upbeat sort of a dog, so when I think of that place, I try to remember the very last time the unbearable need hit me and how I ran with a sweet-loving dog named Growler. When I buried my nose in his flanks, his smell could block the sharpest notes of desolation.

Thinking of Growler is pleasant though it does remind me of how I'd longed to be part of a pack. No other dogs came near my patch filled with broken machines, shade-less plants, and worse, those oil-stinky cars that raced past one side of my territory.

The dangerous car-filled side killed my Growler. He bit the big tire over there. Smashed flat by one of those huge cars, his body was hauled away before I had a chance to say a proper goodbye. Two-leggers—what nuisances.

After him, I ran alone. Times got hard. There weren't nearly enough rats in my acrid territory. They got smart about me, and I began losing out on more dinners.

The two-legged idiots who came to my territory ignored me unless they threw things at me, and they rarely threw anything that tasted good, sad to say. I know because I'd go back and check after they left. Sometimes they'd leave behind scraps, but usually they'd leave horrible chewy things or objects that reeked of poison even a hungry dog would reject.

The nights got cold. And then the days and nights got cold, and I slept in a little spot under a truck that never moved, next to a wall.

The very day I figured out my time was near, I met the two-legger, Shorty. I first spotted him behind an old oil barrel. He held a big chunk of something delicious-smelling and came toward me, slowly and in a submissive position. I called him Shorty because the moment our eyes met, he got down low, pretending his arms were legs too. He crawled in my direction. I couldn't imagine what he thought he was doing but then I didn't care because I could smell what he carried. Grease, and heated red meat, and oh, my dog, I still drool and get all stomach rumbly thinking about it.

As he tossed bits of the best food, ever, he murmured at me in a croaky little voice that didn't scare me, much. Not the angry snarl most people used when they saw me.

I ignored the nonsense about what a good dog I was and how sweet I looked. I put my ears back telling him I didn't care about how good I was, I just wanted that good food.

He put down a really yummy big chunk. Perfect. Even better, he backed away from it.

“All mine?” I asked with a questioning tail-wag.

He told me I was a good dog, and I took that as a *yes the food's all yours*.

I was about to eat it when a rope thumped on my head; he'd tried to throw something around my neck. I ran off, annoyed as crap, because that food he'd put on the ground smelled delicious, hot meat, warm rolls, and I wasn't going to get it.

“Horrible assless creature,” I barked over my shoulder. “Don't you bother coming back here. I'm not going to fall for that act again, Shorty.” I said that to me as well as him; because his food filled my nose with perfection and he hadn't been scary until that thing he threw hit my head.

Sometimes I needed to remind myself that people are treacherous. I'm a person-dog. I'd just naturally liked them until I'd ended up in that territory.

Shorty got up and showed he could be two-legged and tall like any other person. He no longer hunched.

“Oh, and now I see you’re a big jerk, liar,” I barked. He ignored my insults and walked after me, whistling and calling. He almost fell over a broken brick wall—he paid too much attention to me and not enough where his spindly two legs were going.

I trotted off, winding my way through the trash, hurt by his treachery. Ungainly as I was, I still managed to leave him far behind.

But then, as I got near my nest, I heard a deep bay of a shout. It didn’t come from Shorty. The next unhappy sound came from him, though, and I turned around and headed back toward the voices.

Curiosity. It might kill cats on a regular basis, but it doesn’t do dogs any favors either.

Shorty was standing with his hands in the air. One of the regulars who showed up around there, a useless two-legger who threw rocks and cans at me, stood and snarled at Shorty.

“Hand over your wallet, moron. Don’t make me hurt you.” I’d heard this person-on-person fighting before. Not my business, of course. But I could smell the fear and rage wafting off Shorty in a steady wave. I missed his friendly-happy taste. Worse, I could smell the last tiny part of his meaty food. *My* food. He’d promised.

I growled under my breath, surprising even myself by the urge to attack.

“Listen, do you want me to take this guy out?” I asked. “I’ll trade you the rest of your food if I can just take a bite out of his leg. What do you think, Shorty? Only this time, don’t throw that thing on me.”

“Tell your dog to shut up,” the rock-tossing regular barked.

“Good girl, please be quiet,” Shorty said. He said *please*, and with that soft friendliness that made me want to trust him.

I harrumphed. “If I’m quiet, will you give me the rest of that food? Will you make Rock-tosser go away? Tell him to stay away. I know what, I’ll help you convince him.”

Rock-tosser saw me sneaking closer and showed his teeth. “Here’s a chance for me to show you I mean business.”

A loud crack—I’d heard them before—and I lurched fast to the side. Something bit my tail hard. *Kkheerowr* it hurt. I yipped and cursed and I lost my temper. I dove after the rock-tosser, barking and snarling and ready to take a bite out of him, I swear I was. But then there was another loud crack, and this time Shorty gave a yelp.

The rock-tosser did one more big explosion. I finally understood that the thing in his hand was causing all the trouble. I lunged for it and he took off, scrambling over the rubbish.

I thought about running after him but I had to explore what was going on with my poor tail. “Ow, ow, ow,” I muttered, and licked the wound. Blood tastes pretty good except when it’s your own. This had an unpleasant rank to it. Metal and artificial heat and a poison I didn’t know. Yuck.

“Good girl,” Shorty said, but he didn’t sound as cheerful as he had before. “Good girl.”

I sniffed the air near him and got a whiff of human blood. He had an injury. I got up and went to see what was going on, testing the area with my excellent nose. He’d been bitten on the leg by the thing with the nasty scent, too.

He wasn’t about to get up and run after me; I came even closer. The food lay next to him, so I helped myself.

He grumbled to himself, words all strung together like, “Shit, shit, shit. My phone’s in the car. I shouldn’t have come out here without telling anyone.” Then he had the nerve to blame *me*. “If you weren’t so pathetic, I wouldn’t have stopped for you,” he told me.

I like that. *I* wasn’t the one who bit him on the leg. He looked like he was in pain, so I forgave him.

“Can you get up?” I asked him. “You really shouldn’t stay here.” I sat down near him because now I couldn’t control my concern. I’d been like this

before, all worried and fretful about other animals. It comes over you when you're about to whelp. But no matter how worried I might be, I couldn't drag a creature this large back to my nest under the truck. He needed to find his own kind to take care of him.

I studied his bouquet and appearance. He was a pleasant tawny color, reminding me of a pale stick, a bit of a tree I'd had to chew on. His hair was dark too, the color of Growler's eyes. I sighed. I missed Growler, but you got to live in the present.

I whimpered at him a bit, hoping it would take his mind off his troubles; it seemed to, at least until he passed out. Whoops, that wasn't good.

I heard some other two-leggers carrying on nearby. I knew that raucous uproar they took up, usually after dark. I didn't like the sound of them, so I settled close to Shorty—not too close—to see what would happen.

The afternoon had grown colder, and dark clouds covered the sky. "Shorty? You need to get up, pal."

He didn't move.

I went close, actually pushed my nose at him. Yep, I touched him. A strange moment, let me tell you. It had been ages since I'd voluntarily touched a two-legger. Fear filled me at the smell, but something else too—pity, and the desire to lie next to him, a need to soak up his heat and odor. I stretched, yawned, and curled against him. Mm. So warm, and his side fit my back. And thanks to his food, I wasn't as hungry as usual.

"Fine, I owe you. I'll wait here with you, but you better wake up soon."

I heard the screaming car that hurt my ears, and that made me want to howl. I hated that sound, even if it did usually manage to drive off the rock-tossers from my territory.

The people were yelping now, and then I heard a familiar bark—it was Fried-Food, who shouted as he bounded out of the noisy car that had stopped its horrible squealing at last. I didn't mind Fried, but Hey-there, his companion

(the one who always greeted me with “Hey there girl”), was one of the most tolerable two-leggers I knew.

Hey-there’s voice snarled at one of the rock-tossers. “Drop your weapon. Get *down*, get *down*, get *down*.”

I had to fight my instinct to lie down. He carried that kind of power when he was angry.

Fried’s bark was louder than usual, too. “We have reports about gun-shots in the area. I guess you two know something about that, huh.”

I stood close enough to see and was relieved to see Fried and Hey-there had won the fight with the others, who now lay on the ground, submissive.

I inched nearer. I was glad to see that the two-legger who’d hurt my tail was caught—but Shorty still needed help. I could hear him behind me, awake again and making small sounds. Fried and Hey-there were talking too much and too loud to hear him.

I added my own voice to the racket. “Hey-there! Hey-there! I got an injured animal over here! Come on, Hey, pay attention.”

Hey-there had his knee on the back of one of the rock-tossers and was putting silver objects on his wrists. He looked up at me for a moment. “Hey, girl, how’re you doing? I’m kind of busy and don’t have any food for you.”

Fried said, “She’s too fat as it is. How come animal control hasn’t gotten that mutt yet?” See why I don’t much like him? To be fair, he does smell of sugar and grease and sometimes has left some of his fried food behind for me.

The two of them were hauling the noisy rock-tossers up now, and seemed about ready to stuff them into the car that squeals pain.

I barked harder. “Hey-there, I’m serious about this. Come *on*, Hey.” I took a couple of steps nearer. I could smell the metal and oil of their car and my hair went up. I hate those things, and now that I knew that their car made that ear-cutting racket, I hated it more. Nevertheless, I pushed my nose forward and tried again. “I like this Shorty guy and I’m worried about him. Come see. Come on! Are you deaf? Come on!”

“Something’s bothering her,” Hey said.

See why I like him? He’s not as dumb as most of them. But apparently he wasn’t smart enough, either. He walked around the car and opened up the door to get in.

I stood on my side of the fence and frantically yelled at Hey and Fried. “Don’t go away yet. Just come take a look. I can’t leave him lying there and I really want to go back to my nest. I need to get back to my nest.”

I really didn’t want to think about what was coming. I had too much responsibility already.

“Hell. This will only take a sec,” Hey told Fried. He slammed the door shut and started toward me. Good boy!

Fried shouted about how they didn’t have time for this and they had to haul the morons in for illegal firearms and resisting arrest and yipe-yipe, yip-yip. Big whiner.

Hey ducked back through the hole in the fence and walked toward me. He crouched and said, “What’s wrong? Are you a mom yet?”

“No, no. Come on.” I turned and trotted toward Shorty.

Fried shouted, “Hurry it up.”

“I think she’s had her puppies,” Hey shouted over his shoulder.

Maybe he wasn’t so smart after all.

Fried groaned. “Christ almighty. It’s just a dog. We got work to do. Plus it’s getting dark. You’ll have a hella time finding anything in that pit.”

“A minute.” Hey rose to his feet. He pulled out a big stick from his side, and I admit I had a minute of panic. Was he going to turn into a standard two-legged and try to hit me? Then a light appeared at the end of the stick.

“Cool,” I told him. “That’ll help.” I turned and trotted away, being careful to go slow. These animals are not real speedy.

I heard the wounded Shorty before Hey did. In a weak voice he called, “Is someone there?”

I barked, “Yes, it’s okay, Shorty. I got Hey for you.”

“Easy, girl,” Hey said.

“Don’t be stupid, Hey. I can smell more blood. Come on.” I did not get why I was panicking for Shorty, but I think even then he already felt like one of mine.

“Shit!” Hey must have finally heard or seen Shorty because he scrambled faster. A moment later he dropped to his knees by Shorty and instead of picking him up, he began talking into his shoulder, which growled back at him. Hey said, “There’s a guy out here. Gunshot wound, in and out, calf, looks like he’s lost blood. A mess... No, no weapons... Right. You put in the call. I’m going to—” He scabbled at his waist and pulled out some nasty-smelling rubber things he put on his hands. Hey looked over Shorty in a way that told me he wasn’t going to bite him or turn into a rock-tosser. I’d guessed right. He would help.

At long last, Shorty wasn’t my problem. I sat and scratched my ear. It was nice to let my mind wander again. I wondered if maybe Fried had some food in the car and where I could find another tasty rat. But I still had a job to do. So I stood with a sigh and walked over to stand near the guys.

“Sir? Can you hear me?” Hey was talking loud at Shorty.

“Yes. Thank God you’re here. I tried to get up and I think I must have passed out. Wow, it’s dark. I didn’t know.” He raised his hands and rubbed his face.

“What’s your name?”

“Shorty,” I said.

Shorty gave another answer. “Robert. Robert Talbot.”

“Nice to meet you, sir. I’m Officer Alvarez. Can you describe the person or persons who did this?”

Shorty began talking about red jackets and dark blue jeans. There was a lot of conversation between Hey’s shoulder and the two males on the ground near me.

I stopped listening, concentrating on my own problems, until I heard Shorty ask, “Is the dog okay? She got shot too. Her tail or backside.”

“Damn, poor thing has trouble enough.” Hey—and I don’t care that he called himself Officer Alvarez—aimed the light at me for a second.

“Get that thing out of my eyes,” I told him as I backed away.

But he didn’t notice because he was too busy with Shorty again. “No need to worry, Mr. Talbot. The dog looks okay. She’s the reason I found you. She came out and barked her fool head off.”

“Is that right?” Shorty grimaced.

Hey had settled on his knees. He’d reached out his rubber covered hands and did something to Shorty’s leg that made Shorty gasp again, then give a little shiver of embarrassment at showing discomfort, I supposed.

Shorty covered up the pain wafting from him with yapping. “I drive by here all the time and noticed the pregnant dog and decided that I’d catch her and take her to the vet. That’s how I got into this mess. When that jerk-off took my wallet, she attacked him. I guess she won’t be going to the vet’s after all—and I will be.”

Hey had balanced the stick of light on a rock and was cutting at Shorty’s clothes. He wasn’t paying attention to Shorty’s words, but I was. I remembered that word “vet” and wasn’t sure I liked it.

Hey picked up the light and peered down at the bite on Shorty’s leg. “I’ll tell you what, that was my plan too. I was going to come back here on my day off. Animal Control hasn’t been able to locate her, so she must hide when they come around.”

“Yeah, duh,” I told them. “You think I can’t smell frightened-animal all over those two-leggers? I’ve seen them in action and I’m no dummy.”

Ignoring me, Hey kept right on talking. “She’s a nice looking dog, isn’t she? I think there’s a lot of Weimaraner in there, although of course any dog from this part of town probably has some Pit,” he crooned to Shorty as he worked. He spoke in a sing-song voice, a puppy-soothing tone I’d heard once,

long ago before my eyes opened. “You know dogs too, huh? I love ’em. That hurt? Sorry. The rig will be here soon. I just wanted to make sure the shot missed the bone. Looks like it came close. It missed an artery but only just. You’ve lost plenty of blood but you’ll be fine, Mr. Talbot. Up and about in no time.”

“I’m Robert. Call me that. I’d say something about how Mr. Talbot is my dad, but no one calls him that either.”

Hey looked up into his face and smiled. A tendril of new scent from Hey reached me, something happy and interested.

Fine, if his new smell was strong enough to cover the strident anxiety, I could calm down—and they could get going.

“You two should clear out,” I told them. I was getting crabby, a bad sign at this stage. I wanted my territory cleared of other predators ASAP, even these two.

Another horrible, wailing racket was growing louder, fast, and I longed to run, but I couldn’t. I suddenly understood part of my crankiness. Until they took him away, Shorty was part of my pack, my concern. Well, isn’t that interesting, I thought sourly. The biggest puppy I ever had to deal with. I’d have some real ones soon, judging from the ache in my back. I whined louder. “Make that noise stop, would you?”

“It’s okay, girl,” Shorty called.

“Hey there, Flora,” Hey said.

I gave a sneeze-snort. I’d forgotten he called me something other than Hey Girl.

Shorty gave a weak chuckle and tilted his head to look in my direction. “I don’t think she likes that name. Maybe you should pick another.”

“Gina? Lola? Minny? Gray-girl?”

I didn’t like any of those random names either, but I was too busy scanning the area for the voices that drifted over the lot. Too many two-leggers were

coming into my area. I skulked away, but not so far that I couldn't hear what was going on.

From under my truck, I could see lights and hear shouting, but not the angry sort. I can always tell from their tones when they're annoyed. Most people-dogs are good at judging their animals' moods even better than the people themselves are.

Fried was there. "Jackson and Diamond took care of our bad guys. We have the one you described in custody, Mr. Talbot. Come on, Alvarez, our shift is almost over, let's get to the paperwork."

"The dog!" Shorty suddenly sounded upset. "She's going to whelp any day now, or maybe she already has."

"Sir, please stay on the stretcher. You've been shot in the leg." An unfamiliar high voice told him the obvious.

"I know that," he snapped. "Listen Officer Alvarez, I know it's an imposition, but could you—"

"Yes, of course. If I can find Flora, I'll make sure she's safe."

"Thank you," Shorty said. "I guess I'm more interested in worrying about her than thinking about my leg."

"Totally understandable." Hey's voice still had that pleasant puppy-soothing quality.

Things squeaked and thumped. I peered out and saw that they'd hauled Shorty up and onto a rolling thing. "Just relax, please, sir," one of them said to him, but he leaned around her and called to Hey, "What's your first name, Officer Alvarez?"

"I'm Javier. I'll stop by the hospital and give you a report about the dog."

"Really? But that's too much. You're already doing enough."

"I'd like to."

"You would? Excellent. Thank you." For an animal that had been bitten by a shot, he sounded pretty cheerful. He lay back on the rolling white thing.

The noise died away and I crawled back to the warmest spot I'd found, ready to rest. I'd miss Shorty and his warm side, and I longed for more hot food. Still, less responsibility was fine with me.

I dozed until the pains grew sharp enough to wake me up and I knew my time had come. "Come on, kids, let's get you out and about," I said.

I was just cleaning up the second little one when a car door slammed.

"Hey girl, hey Flora." Hey called to me using that sing-song voice he'd used with Shorty. "I made a promise, girl. Don't make me break my promise."

His voice came and went as his footsteps crunched or thudded around my space. The light flashed and vanished, flashed and vanished.

Maybe he might have given up and gone away, which would have been fine with me. I was so not in the mood for company. But then a particularly sharp pain shook me and I yipped. I think it was the pup the size of a big rat, the one they call Moose. But never mind that—back to Hey and his annoying interruption of a very private time.

The light shone right in my eyes. He squatted down and stared into my face.

"When you're all bent down like that, I should call you Shorty," I told him crossly.

He didn't pay attention. He scrambled closer. "*Hijo de puta!* It's happening."

I growled but I was not about to get up and leave. He'd just have to keep his distance or I would bite. Don't get me wrong, I'm not normally a biter, but this was not a normal moment.

He seemed to know I was not in a good humor because he didn't get too close. Yet he didn't go away either. He settled on the ground nearby and talked to me now and then. He was a large shadow, looming and waiting, but with a cheerful scent of anticipation.

I didn't pay a lot of attention to his words, friendly and soothing, but I have to say I was grateful he kept watch while I pushed out those pups.

Even then I thought he'd chase off any rock-tossers or puppy-killers.

At last the final puppy was out and cleaned up. Done. Whew. Exhausted, I closed my eyes. But then I heard the soft glug, smelled water, and a second later, Hey became my favorite creature in my world. He nudged a bowl that reeked of plastic and water at me. I drank and drank, and nothing had ever tasted so good. Not even Shorty's meaty food.

"You're doing a wonderful job," he crooned at me. "Such a good job, *mamacita*."

I grunted my agreement and closed my eyes again. Something touched my head and I started, ready to bite or flee, until I smelled Hey's calm intention. He scratched my ear. Of course I can scratch my own ear, and I do, frequently. But there is something about a hand that just feels right. It's as if they built those hands just for that job and Hey was a total natural. His fingers reminded me of all the ear scratchings I'd had back when I was very young.

I forgot about the puppies, I forgot that I was hungry again. I only leaned against his hand. It had been so long. I felt that happy peace that only a good ear and chin rub could give. Okay, the fatigue from first taking care of Shorty and then my pups helped me slide into the peaceful zone. And I could smell the pleasant ease that touching me gave Hey. The tranquility of a good scratch goes both ways.

I heaved a sigh of relief and relaxed.

I should have known it was too good to be true.

The little squeals of protests alerted me. "Mom? Mom? Mom?"

I opened my eyes. "Hey! Bad, Hey-there! What are you doing? Put those back! I worked hard for those things. Put them back."

He kept telling me I was a good girl. I didn't want to lunge at him because I might hurt my children—that's right, he was touching my puppies. He was putting them in a box.

And then I noticed that the two-legger assless son-of-a-bitch had put something around my neck. Oh, *rawr*, I'd been outsmarted by one of those!

He didn't have to drag me out because he had my babies. I came along, muttering threats. "You hurt them and you're dead meat, Hey. I mean it."

We stumbled through the dark to...

...A car.

"No, I hate cars, Hey. The last time I went in one of those I ended up losing everything," I half growled, half begged him. "One killed Growler. Don't let it kill me."

But then he put the box of my children in the back and I had no choice. We mothers are like that. Completely led by our teats. I climbed wearily in. "At least it isn't the wailing car," I grumbled to myself as I picked my way over a blanket.

"Mom! Mom! Mom!" the pups squealed. I settled near their box, watching the blind little nuisances, hoping my scent would calm them as much as their fragrance settled me.

I can't really remember that long ride. I growled at Hey over and over about how much I hated cars and I hated him and his hypnotic hands.

It was only when he led me into a house that I stopped shaking. We went upstairs into rooms that were warm and smelled like Hey and cooked meat—I began to suspect that this wouldn't be so bad after all.

He put my children down on a nice enough nest—not nearly as nice as one I'd make of course. But I could finally get at them. I dug the blankets and towels around us to the right shape, then sniffed and licked each pup, and tasted that they were okay.

Hey left us in the tranquil warmth and the dark and returned with food and water for me.

I growled to let him know my babies were off-limits, but then I went for the food, telling him, "All right. All right. I've calmed down, Hey. I'm not holding this incident against you. Just leave the pups alone."

He didn't seem to resent my setting limits, and he didn't touch the pups. "Wait until I tell Robert about you," he said.

“You mean Shorty,” I corrected him as I gulped the last of the crunchy bits of food.

He sat in silence watching us for a while. Then he said, “That Robert’s a nice guy, but I suppose you know that, hey, girl? I went to the hospital to make sure he was okay. Those eyes, man. I’m a sucker for hazel eyes. Who knew? Don’t get me wrong, Flora. I’m not supposed to notice this shit, but the guy had a great bod, even in a hospital gown. Too bad he’s a totally naive moron to go wandering into that part of town alone.”

I gave a tail thump to say I agreed with him. Ow, my tail hurt. My communication was going to be severely limited.

Hey kept talking. “I got to say the guy is brave. He didn’t complain about pain, and that wound had to hurt a helluva lot.”

So did mine and *I* wasn’t whining.

“Oh and we grabbed the guy who shot the two of you, you’ll be glad to hear. What do you think? You like our Robert, girl? They say dogs are good judges of characters, but I’m not sure I believe that.”

I licked the bowl and looked up at him with my best Sad Girl eyes, even though I was sure that wasn’t going to get me more food.

A light in front of his face flashed. “A picture of you and your puppies to show Robert, *mamacita*. I’m going to go see him in the hospital tomorrow.”

He settled on the ground near me, but not too near the pups. Smart man. “They’re going to let him out and maybe he’ll come visit you soon. I can only hope, right? You think maybe he likes guys? Hmm? I got that vibe, but maybe that’s because... Well. I’ll admit this to you, if you don’t tell anyone; it might be I wanted to see that because I’m lonely. At least I have you for company now, eh? *Aiee*, I can only guess what the landlord would say. Puppies in the closet.”

His magic fingers were at work on my head, while below, the pups gathered close and nursed. I sighed and leaned against his stroking hand. This

was right and good. I hadn't known how much I'd missed the hands and the admiring voice of a person. I gave Hey a "thank you" lick on the hand.

My lick also said "Just let me stay here a while until I get my babies hunting on their own, sweet Hey. Thank you, thank you." I was too tired to do my full gratitude ritual, but this was good.

I felt so relaxed I didn't even protest much when he started poking around my poor bitten tail.

Okay, I jumped and growled when he put something cold and painful on it.

"Whoa, girl," he said, in that firm voice that already seemed to have too much control over me. "This will help, I promise."

Sure enough, when he wrapped it in some cloth, it did seem to feel better.

I waited until he turned off the light, left the room and closed the door before I ripped the thing off my tail and gave the wound a good licking. Even better.

The pups and I relaxed into heat, softness, and the fragrance of serenity, and I felt fine for the first time in many long days.

I barely noticed Hey when he climbed into the bed near our nest. I liked breathing in tune with all of my pups, including the big one in the bed.

The next day I was allowed to explore the rooms that smelled like Hey and contentment. Hey didn't like the fact that I relieved myself on a rug and told me so. Not that I got the gist of his bellowing right away. It took a while to figure out what he wanted because that rug smelled perfect. Someone else had left a marker there.

"What should I believe?" I told him. "You or my nose? Sorry, Hey, but I've known my nose a lot longer."

He put the leash on me, and we had a bit of a tussle about who got to decide where we went. But I didn't like leaving the pups long. I gave in to his yanks so I could go back fast. I had a lot of work to do—we had a new territory to explore and I had to leave my mark. "I'm here," I peed my hellos. "This is my territory and I am here. You will leave me and mine alone."

Other than small details, Hey and I did well together. I think it's important to be polite, let people know you appreciate them, and by dog, I felt grateful to Hey. I stood on two legs looking out the window at a raging storm and told him thank you with several licks. "The pups and I will do our duty by you, Hey. We will protect you and this territory. If there are any rats, I promise to share. This is a solemn oath."

He patted me. Not as perfect as a scratch, but I liked it.

He talked as he stroked me. "Do you think I should take Robert flowers? Naw, too sappy. I could take him food, but I don't know what he likes. Turns out he's a lawyer, so he probably has fancy-ass taste. I don't know squat about him, except he likes dogs. That might be an idea. A book about dogs. Good idea. You're a big help, Flora."

I told him, "Glad I could help, but I am not a flower. I'm thinking Girl would be a fine thing to call me. Hey Girl is even better because I think you and I belong together, Hey. We could share a name."

I don't know what time of day it was—our nest didn't have a window—but I was snoozing with the pups when Hey burst into the room, yapping fast at me. "Robert says hello. He's going to be fine. He liked the book I got him, by the way, smart thinking on my part." He settled on the floor next to me and scratched me a bit, still talking. "That Rob has a gorgeous smile. No wonder you trusted him. He's a couple years younger than me. And he's got a lot more education than me. You think that's a problem? Naw, I'm jumping the gun, of course. We just sat and talked. They're letting him out later on, and he promised to come see you and the babies and go with us to see the vet."

He got up and began to pull clothes out of the closet over our heads. The word he'd used, *vet*, made me nervous again, and I didn't like what he was pulling on over his skin, either. The blue clothes that smelled of old fear and anger—he wore those clothes in the wailing car. I'd gotten so used to him in clothes that only smelled of Hey, contentment, me and my new world; I didn't like the reminders of that old life. Hey was mine now and I didn't want to share him with that fear-reeking territory.

He knelt by me again. “I’m going to work and I’ll be back before you know it. You and the babies can rest, all right?”

I licked his chin and liked the way his short prickly fur on his chin tasted. He rose too tall to reach so I sighed and stretched out. If the babies got too demanding I could retreat up to the bed. Hey seemed to think I shouldn’t go up there, but if he insisted on leaving, he shouldn’t whine about what happened while he was gone.

He put the absurd and heavy thing around his middle, all clanking and thumping. Although I did like that light stick and the smell of leather, he also carried the thing he called a gun, and I’d know that sharp metal smell anywhere. My poor tail had a very faint hint of it still.

He leaned down and patted me again. “The vet appointment is right after work tomorrow. Robert is going to come along. That’ll be nice for both of us.”

“Not really,” I told him, but he was gone. Another day with nothing to do but lick puppies and tear off the newest bandage.

Bliss. I did not miss the rock-tossers or rain at all.

I will not talk about the next day’s visit to the vet. In the name of love, I prefer to forget some of the more nightmarish things Hey and Shorty have had done to me, usually at *that* place.

I’d rather think about how nice it was to see Shorty again for the first time after we’d met and shared that meaty food. His name didn’t fit him anymore—he was even taller than Hey. The things he used to make an extra set of legs, crutches, were frightening, and I protected the pups from them with some really vicious growls.

“Bad dog,” Hey said.

“No, it’s okay.” By then Shorty had put aside the stupid big stick crutches. He sank down to my level, so it was okay.

“I am delighted to see you, Shorty,” I told him by allowing him to touch my head. Oh, yeah, he was as good as Hey at finding the right spot with those hands of his. I felt so grateful I wagged my tail even though it still hurt.

He pulled me close, and I let him.

“She needs a bath,” Hey said. “They’ll give her one.”

“She’s lovely.” Shorty pushed his face against my neck. He breathed me in as I breathed him too, and at that moment I knew he was as much mine as Hey ever could be. I had two wonderful animals.

“I love you,” I told him. My kind are prone to falling in love hard and fast. “I love you and I am going to climb on your lap now. Yes, pat me there.”

Shorty only grunted a little as I climbed on. “You are so sweet. I knew you would be once you stopped being afraid,” he said.

“Have you seen my babies yet? I’ll let you look at them but please don’t touch them— Hey! No! What are you doing?”

He was loading them into a basket. I remembered then. The vet’s office. I whined. “Dog, oh dog. Do we have to?”

We did.

And as I said, I’d rather not talk about it. The bath, the sharp little bites in my backend that left my side stinking of something toxic, the nail clipping, the messing about with my teats and ass—a long list of indignities took place that day. And they did things to my pups that left them tired and trembling and calling for me.

“It is a good thing I love you,” I called from the back of the car as Hey and Shorty drove me away. “That was unforgivable.”

I nuzzled a couple of pups until they squeaked into the place I wanted them.

“They didn’t need to muzzle her,” Shorty said, indignant—but not nearly as indignant as I felt at the memory. He was bunched in the front seat of the

car with his big sticks and looked pretty uncomfortable. Good. Served them right.

With a big sigh, Hey glanced back at me. “I know. We’ll find another vet.”

“Or, better yet, we call that over and done with,” I growled.

They ignored me as they usually do.

“I’m really grateful for all you’ve done, and I especially appreciate the ride, Javier, but I can take care of her now.” Shorty twisted in his seat and looked over at Hey, not me, even though he was talking about me.

I nudged the biggest pup and got him to yawn. “Cute, right?” I said proudly. “Nothing cuter than baby tongues except maybe those baby butts.”

But Shorty was still gazing at Hey, not me, with a big smile. “I’m used to her,” Hey protested. “And she’s way better about not doing her business in the apartment.”

“But didn’t you say you’re not allowed to have pets?” Shorty exuded hope and the thicker sugary smell of yearning.

Hey made a fun gasping noise but it wasn’t playful. “Yeah. It’s true. All right, you should get custody. Aw, damn, I really will miss... her. And, hey, wait a sec. You can’t take care of her yet.”

“I can hire someone to help until I get better.”

We stopped for some reason. The car starts and stops a lot and it’s annoying. Hey looked over at Shorty. He spoke quietly, like he did to me late at night. “No. Don’t hire someone. Let me. I’m invested in this, Rob. I care about her. I like her. A lot.”

I gave a gusty sigh of disgust. “You’re looking at him, not me. Don’t lie to us. We know you like him a lot. Only an idiot wouldn’t smell what you two do near each other.”

I laid my head down and thought of the wild wondrous time when the hunt for pleasure and release drove me and Growler together. Those two up front smelled like need in the worst way. Their mingling aromas had almost even

drenched the fear, hatred, poisons and pain in that horror of a place known as the vet's.

I wondered how they could stand to be so close without at least a nip or a lick to relieve the ache I could smell between them.

We stopped at a new territory. A bigger house with bigger windows. It smelled too clean, like someone had scrubbed signs of life from it. I liked Hey's place better—a nose could stay busy there for hours.

My claws had been clipped, yet they still clicked on the slippery wood floors.

"This place is huge," I said. "Too open and exposed for the pups."

I had to walk from room to room because Hey carried my babies as Shorty gave him a tour.

"Put the pups down," I said, but they ignored me.

"I'm sleeping down here in my office," Shorty said. "Just for a day or two until I get used to the stairs or I stop using the crutches."

Even though the day had turned to night, there was too much light and air in Shorty's house. I'd gotten used to nice, private, closed places. I went up some stairs looking for a good place for me and the babies. Hey followed after me.

"It's okay, let her explore," Shorty called from down below.

I stopped to take a dig at the carpet. It felt excellent under my paws. Mm.

"No, Flora!" Hey scolded.

I stopped because his voice had that effect on me. But I couldn't help a little sneer. "I don't smell *you* here. This is Shorty's territory. Why do you get to tell me what to do?"

"We're going back downstairs," Hey muttered. He shifted the box of puppies in his arms and I went into high alert.

"We need to get settled." I nudged his thigh.

He took the hint and started down the stairs, talking under his breath. “This house is huge, huh? Rob drives a goddamn Toyota so how was I supposed to know he had so much money?”

“Your place smells way better.” I sniffed the carpet just to show him. “Ew. Practically no aroma at all. In your territory, I can smell cooked food all the way from the door to my den, Hey. That’s delicious. Much better.”

The people decided to settle me in the kitchen. Sure it smelled like food, but it also smelled like nose-deadening cleaner, which I hated then and still dislike now. And the whole space way too big and exposed. I didn’t get a vote though—they put up fences at the doors. *Baby-gates* they called them, but my babies didn’t need anything so tall.

“Do you like your new bed?” Shorty asked me. “I bought it at Petco. I had a field day there.” He leaned over and thumped the side of a plastic container that had some kind of mattress in it.

“This smells like someone’s misery and chemicals. Where are the towels and blankets for me to scratch into place? All right, I’ll stop complaining. I am not a whiner. This is okay, but as soon as these guys eat some dinner, I want to go back to Hey’s place.” I licked at a puppy, pushing it into place. “Puppies need a bit of clutter, Shorty.”

The lights went out. The two men left the kitchen.

“Where are you going? In Hey’s place, he keeps me company,” I whined after them.

“You’ll be fine, Flora,” Hey called.

I sighed. “I don’t count this as the very best day ever, guys. The vet and now this.”

“Mom? Mom? Is that you?”

I forgot what I was upset about when I realized that one of my pups had swum out of the nest. I wished I could show Hey or Shorty how smart the puppy was, but later.

In the morning, Shorty showed up to let me out. He had a sizeable territory in the open air, but someone had put up big wooden barriers so you couldn't go past its back. "You should knock down this big fence," I advised as I sniffed and marked my signature and greetings along the edge. "All this wood is in the way. I can hear what's happening on the other side, but there's no way for me to get over there and protect you." I gave a few experimental shouts to see if anyone answered.

"Hush, girl," Shorty said. "Some of the neighbors are sleeping."

We went back into the kitchen where we had breakfast together. I watched the world outside the glass door and wished I could take on the squirrels that came right up on the deck.

After breakfast, Shorty drank coffee and tapped on his computer in the kitchen. He kept his bandaged leg up on a chair. The pups woke and called me, but they didn't have that frantic sound that made me have to go to them.

"Yo, Shorty, where's Hey? How come he didn't take me back to our territory?"

He didn't answer of course.

I could smell Hey's scent on his skin, but not all over. I'd expected the sweet, thicker layer of scent two-leggers wore when they mated.

Shorty rubbed my back with his uninjured foot and we relaxed together. I liked the sound of his tap-tapping and the occasional whiff of his interest in something on the computer. Life in this territory was calm and good. No sounds of cars came into the big house, only the jeering calls of birds outside. Shorty let me go out and take care of that problem. It felt great to chase squirrels for the sheer fun of it.

After that, Shorty and I wandered around the house for a while before I went back into my nest to give the more annoyingly energetic pups a snack.

The bell rang, announcing an intruder.

"Hush," Shorty told me as he got up and made his way to the front door. He closed me into the kitchen with the baby-gate, and not a door, so I could

still see down the long hall to the door where a blurry figure stood outside our house.

“I’ll get ’em, Shorty,” I bayed. “Let me out of this place and I’ll rip you to shreds, intruder! Get in here so I can crunch down on your bones and rip out your entrails and— Oh, hello, hello, Hey! Nice to see you! Glad you’re back.” I switched from aggressive to delighted fast and easy. I am one adaptable animal. “You smell like unhappy people though,” I told him. “I can smell it from here. You ought to stop driving around in that car with Fried. No one you talk to is glad to see you.”

He came down the hall and almost at once I caught the other scent on him, resentment and unhappiness, but this had his signature; it didn’t come from a stranger he’d met that day.

“Nice to see you, Flora.” He vibrated with irritation. When he didn’t look at Shorty, I could tell the trail of his emotion was directed at Shorty, not me, but that didn’t stop me from apologizing to him with a quick lick and a flip, flip of the end of my tail. I can’t help trying to make things better with the guys.

“Do you want some coffee?” Shorty asked.

“No. Thanks. I don’t think I’m sticking around.” He scratched his face and I smelled his disappointment layered on that anger.

Shorty didn’t get it—I swear two-leggers are cute but sometimes dumb. “How are you?” he asked.

“Fine.” Hey straightened and tucked his fingers in the big loop around his waist, his face bunched into a scowl. He didn’t even glance at my pups.

Shorty finally smelled the anger as well. And he seemed to get that Hey was mad at him. “Are you going to tell me what is wrong?”

I joined the conversation. “Did Shorty take a dump on your floor, Hey?”

Shorty leaned over and stroked my head, but I could feel his distraction and smell his concern. I leaned on his legs to tell him, “Here’s the deal. Stop pooping inside. It makes Hey crazy for some reason.”

Shorty said, “We’re making Flora nervous. Come on into my study and talk to me.”

“There’s not much to say. Does the name Officer Lamont mean anything to you?”

“Oh. Well.” Shorty’s smell changed from embarrassed to angry with one breath. “Javier, for God’s sake, I know what’s wrong and I don’t think it’s worth this fuss.”

“What’s wrong is that you didn’t tell me. I found out today when one of the guys talked about what a hardass that lawyer Talbot was in the courtroom. Some cop I am. It took me a while to figure out he meant *you*. You took Lamont apart on the stand and let a goddamn gang-banging fool back out on the street. Tell me this: If the guy who shot you and Flora had enough money, would you take him on?”

“Take him on? Let me,” I said. “I’ll show him what he can do with that biting thing of his.” One of the pups began *keyeeking* when it stumbled from the nest. I went over to haul it back in.

Of course the minute I turned my back, the two-leggers took off, climbing over that cursed baby-gate and leaving me alone in the kitchen.

I listened to them talk in the distant room.

“I told you I was an attorney.”

“You didn’t say anything about being a defense lawyer.”

“Yeah, well, I got tired of divorce cases. I did mention that. So here’s a bad news alert, Javier—lately most of my practice is defense. Thank God that’s not against the law or you’d arrest me, huh?”

They had a long discussion about who liked and respected the Law more. I thought maybe they should stop worrying so much about what Law liked and maybe give each other a lick or two.

“Do you want me to apologize for my job?” Shorty growled.

“No of course not.” Silence for a time, and then Hey talked, but with less of a growl in his voice. “I just wish you had told me. It’s like a lie, not telling me. I had figured we were friends and I wanted that...” Hey breathed in hard through his mouth. “And more.”

“More?” Shorty was so quiet I had trouble hearing.

“Keep it down,” I told the biggest pup, who, as usual, was whining about wanting more food.

After a long silence, the scent suddenly changed from disappointment to the perfume of anticipation.

“See, I really do like you and I thought maybe you—” Hey’s words stopped.

That’s the drawback to using only your voice for talking. Something happens to your mouth, like someone else licking it, and you can’t say anything. Those guys needed tails or better ears or something. Their faces and interesting eyebrows did a bit of talking, but not nearly enough.

I perked up when their odors did more talking and anticipation turned into something stronger—a nice rich smell that made me want to join them.

“You’re right,” Shorty said. “I didn’t want to tell you right away because you’re a cop. I figured you’d turn tail and run.”

Hey heaved a sigh that even a room away I could hear had a ring of *let’s play* in it. Some of their sighs are easy to understand. “You really think I’m that shallow? Come on. I know you guys are the scum of the earth, but I’ll get over it. Now the fact that you have a buttload of money is a real problem because—”

“Don’t be a jerk.” The play note was in Shorty’s voice too. “I know you want me as much as I want you.”

“I might, but, Rob? Part of why I was upset is that I thought you don’t trust me to be more than a roll in the hay. I don’t do quick fucks.”

“Mm. Me neither.”

“The mutual attraction—”

“The *huge* mutual attraction—”

“It isn’t the only thing that matters. I mean what do we have in common?”

“A rescue complex when it comes to dogs? Custody of Flora and six puppies we need to find homes for? I am sorry about the lie of omission. Now, give it a rest, officer. Leave the arguing to an expert. Here’s my strongest argument...” The aroma went straight to hunger now. They both groaned and I could smell Shorty’s statement of *mine, give me you now*.

The main trouble with my guys is, I know they’re not very good at speaking the fragrance language, so I figured I’d try a little verbal interpretation.

I gave them some encouragement. “Attaboy, Shorty. Tell him what you really think. Good boy, Hey. Don’t forget to take that dumb belt off.”

Hey said, “We’re worrying Flora—she’s whining.”

“She’ll be fine,” Shorty murmured. I heard the soft sound that sometimes meant they were calling me.

I got out of the basket and some of the pups dragged along. The little buggers were getting strong.

More of the kissing sounds came from another room and I figured out Hey and Shorty weren’t calling me.

I turned away from the door to amuse myself by watching the loose pups swim around on the floor. The kids got really upset, so I picked them up and dumped them back in the nest and told them to settle down. “Greedy little pups,” I told them affectionately. “You just ate.”

I left them and got a drink, dug around under the stove and fridge looking for snacks. There was nothing. Shorty really needed to get some lessons in housekeeping from Hey. I went back to the nest for a nap.

I had to wait quite a while before Shorty on his crutches and Hey on his own two bare feet shuffled into the kitchen. Shorty opened the back door for

me. I ran out into the brisk night air. I could smell snow coming. The last time I'd seen snow, I'd been locked away, alone and cold, shivering on a stone pad listening to the endless yelping cries and conversations of the dogs around me. That was before I ended up in the territory with Growler. And now...

"This is a vast improvement," I told the night sky.

The guys eventually came outside and stood in the brown winter grass with me.

"Just in time!" I told them.

I have a ritual of thanks that I like to go through at least once a day. Now I really had something to focus on: my very own lovely assless two-legged boys. I knocked my head against Shorty's leg, ignoring his "Ow!" because I had to tell him, "Thank you for the meat when I was so hungry. Thank you for the nice nest, even if it isn't as nice as Hey's place. Thank you, thank you."

To Hey, I said, "You are a good boy, Hey; I am so very glad to know you. You're nice to my pups and I love the way you scratch my neck."

I wove-walked around the two of them with my chanting ritual.

They got into it too. "Who's such a good, good girl? You're such a pretty girl, such a good momma."

"You bet I am. Did you see how some of the pups' eyes are opening?"

"Your puppies are so cute, we're thinking of keeping one," Hey informed me. He must be learning my language since he stayed on topic.

"Whatever you want, but don't keep the big one. He's a real pain. Always wanting to nurse, always climbing around when everyone else sleeps."

Guess who they kept? People are idiots sometimes. Sweet, endearing, but sometimes not big in the brain department.

I admit that once I got him off the teat, Moose stopped being such a nuisance. I'm in charge and he knows it.

He's not in the picture I'm showing you because he's asleep on the seat behind us, passed out after running for miles. That's our pack after a long walk in some woods where I got to tree more squirrels than I'd ever seen before in my life—and our territory has plenty of 'em.

Yes you're right, that's us relaxing in a car. Me in the car, happy. Really—see how blissed and peaceful I am on Shorty's neck? Funny, huh?

Turns out I can handle rides, as long as Hey or Shorty are with me and we're not on our way to the V-E-T. They've taken to spelling it, as if I don't understand everything they say. Silly but cute, those animals.

When I have both of them with me in the car, I can relax completely. I love it when the whole pack rides in the car together to the woods or the salty water. Adventure! Fun! Squirrels! Barking! Water! I love it all, and tell the two-leggers every day.

The story isn't entirely happy; we never made it back to Hey's. My two-leggers must have gone there—they came back smelling of the place. But I guess they thought they shouldn't haul the pups with them. No pups meant no Hey Girl visiting her old territory so she could say goodbye to the first spot she ever felt completely happy.

True, some of the objects from Hey's territory moved into the new one. When I want to remember those days, I climb on the sofa they brought back from Hey's house.

Don't get me wrong. I love Shorty's territory, especially now that all three of us have claimed it—or rather I should say four, because Moose does count, unless he tries for one of my chewies or wants to play too long. “A little play is fun,” I snap at him. “But enough is enough, pup.”

Fine, yes, I admit I like having another dog around, even if Shorty and Hey would have been enough.

More than once we've driven in our car past the place where I found Hey and Shorty. I've caught that acrid scent of desolation that hangs like a fog there. But we don't stop, thank you, dog. My insides go empty, an echo of past misery and hunger, when my nose catches its signature.

I remember the rock-tossers, and I whine my sorrow and anger that seemed twined with every smell from those old days. Of course when I do that, Moose wants to know what the matter is.

“What’s the matter, Hey Girl? What’s going on?” Once he got off the teat, he stopped calling me Mom. I still get to call him pup.

I told him all about the lack of pack that means no smells of contentment. I tried to tell him about the hunger created by the cold and the loneliness, but he didn’t understand. Because I want to think of good things as well, I told Moose about Growler and the times we had together. Moose said the nights running in the asphalt and weeds might be pleasant, but he’d rather live with our pack. “I’d miss Hey and Shorty too much,” he told me.

I agreed with him.

THE END

Author Bio

Summer Devon is the alter ego of Kate Rothwell, who invented Summer's name in the middle of a nasty blizzard. At the time, she was talking to her sister who longed to visit some friends in Devon, England—so the name Summer Devon is all about desire. Between them, Kate and Summer have written books that have won a number of awards. She writes m/m stories on her own, as well as m/m historicals with Bonnie Dee.

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