

The Dog Walker

She remembers the flowers.

The milky white calla lilies, her favorite, were surrounded by blood red roses, with sparkling specks of baby's breath peaking out through thorny green stems. Snapdragons, the tallest, protruded from the tightly packed bunch, offering their fresh aroma to the air first. The golden chrysanthemums, his favorite, were a last minute addition to the bouquet, and, because of this, they seemed a little out of place. All together, it was an odd arrangement, one she had certainly never seen before. Yet it represented all feelings of innocence, romance, happiness, desire, and fidelity. So, she admired its beauty for an extra long while.

But that was then. Now, she sits on the floor, staring at the door where he just exited with his usual gang of mutts, imagining that one of the six dog leashes would trip him on his way down the stairs.

Her nostrils flared as she began smelling something foul coming from the kitchen. She tried ignoring the powerful odor by focusing on stopping Max from licking the running makeup off of her face. She unhooked the dog's leash from his collar so he could be free to roam around. At the moment her fingertips unclasped the hook from the chain, she realized where the awful stench was coming from. She let herself remember back to the beginning.

It began as most romances do; it was fresh, sudden, and hit her like a bolt of lightning at the birth of a summer storm. She had just moved into her new city apartment, inspired by a new job and comforted in a new place with her little companion, Max. But she was fresh out of college, now living mostly alone after years of being used

to little sisters fighting over the bathroom and roommates stealing food marked for lunch breaks. She was busy and focused, and her job was demanding, so she couldn't enjoy her little apartment as much as she would have liked. And, little Max needed more companionship. That's when she met him, the dog walker.

He answered her inquiry, and showed up to her place for the first time, holding five separate dog's leashes with a grand, alluring smile plastered on his face. She took notice to the glint in his eyes, and he took notice in that. Twice a week, he came for Max, and stayed longer at the beginnings and endings of his shifts. He happily added a sixth band to his bracelet of dog leashes.

With gestures of the grandest kind, he designed new ways to charm the beautiful girl into his arms during each one of his visits. His surprises delighted her, and she could not help but fall for him. It was a perfect start to the perfect romance. In August, he brought her the bouquet. By September, the two were inseparable.

It wasn't until late December that the dog's leashes began getting tangled in his hands.

The flowers remained on her table for these months and even longer, and in her mind, they remained just as fresh as when he had first handed them to her. Even when some of their leaves began rotting and falling, she still smelt their fresh aroma, and gazed at them lovingly.

But just as the flowers had started to wilt and wither away, their color draining and smell weakening, their romance had, too, lost its passion. She hardly noticed the decaying flowers, just as she didn't notice the addition of a seventh dog leash to his wrist.

Until one day, when the spring breeze blew in, bringing a slight warm chill to the city. Work became more demanding. She had fewer hours to spend with him, and even fewer days off. Their frequent sleepovers became less frequent. He often forgot to pick up lunch for her at twelve when he came to pick up Max, and he mostly declined the dinner she brought home for the two of them to eat at eight.

The flowers in the kitchen shriveled. The dog's leashes were getting worn out.

It was a Wednesday afternoon in March when he came to her place, two hours late without explanation and with cold cups of coffee she didn't like to drink.

He handed her a new flower today, a single yellow rose, in hopes to make up for the last few weeks of his absence. She stared at the offering. The whites in her eyes reflected the dull yellow color of the rose as she stared at it.

At this time, Max had been running with one of the other dogs around her kitchen, a white poodle with a pink collar. They chased each other around the legs of the kitchen table until the dog's leashes got caught and tangled. Their efforts to free themselves sent the table toppling over, and the vase of old flowers crashing to the floor.

The yellow disappeared from her eyes and she stared into his.

She breathed and looked at the girly new poodle. The only thing she managed to say was, "She's new. Take her back to her owner. Max is staying in today."

He tried to object, but she held her gaze and wouldn't let him. Instead, she stared at the pink dog leash around the new pup. At least, she thought she was new.

She hadn't noticed before.

Tired of the silence, he picked up and left for the last time. Max began licking her face. She unhooked his leash.

The smell of the dead flowers finally reached her nose.