

**AT HER COMMAND**

by Marcia James

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THE MINI K-9**MARCIA JAMES CAN'T RESIST THE NEWEST, TINIEST POLICE HELPERS TO HIT THE STREETS**

Move over, German shepherds and Doberman pinschers! There's a new breed of crime fighter. Law enforcement agencies are adding toy dogs to their K-9 units. No 10-pound weaklings, these miniature hounds have the same keen senses as their big brothers, combined with the ability to search smaller, tighter spaces for everything from drugs to explosives.

The partnership between police and specially trained dogs has a long, proud history. In 1888 in England, two bloodhounds were used to search for Jack the Ripper. And large breeds, such as Labrador retrievers, have been trained for everything from crowd control to cadaver recovery. It's not surprising these valiant dogs have found their way into fiction, such as romantic suspense author Iris Johansen's search-and-rescue dog series and mystery author Virginia Lanier's tracking bloodhounds.

In the early 1960s, South American officers chose smaller dogs to search ships for smuggled coffee. And the Belgian Malinois, a lighter, quicker version of a German shepherd, has been used by the military for years. But toy dogs were initially deemed too fragile for crime fighting.

U.S. Customs officials employ beagles to sniff luggage for banned items, praising the pooches' pleasant dispositions. Some law enforcement agencies, sued by suspects who claim large K-9 dogs damaged their property, are considering smaller breeds too. But an Ohio police department holds the record for the tiniest drug-sniffing canine: six-pound Midge, a Chihuahua-rat terrier mix. Midge, who has her own tiny vest and goggles for riding on the sheriff's motorcycle, has been a PR phenomenon. Adults, including county jail prisoners, ask to pet her, and she's a hit at schools. Midge shows youngsters you don't have to be big to make a difference.

Many officers, however, are embarrassed to have a tiny K-9 partner, finding the mutts un-macho. The potential for humor in such a situation proved irresistible to me, so when I wrote my comic romantic suspense, *At Her Command*, (Cerridwen Press) I gave my DEA agent heroine a petite drug-sniffing dog. Smokey, a Chinese Crested hairless, goes undercover at a D.C. sex club with his mistress. The villains don't suspect such a cute pet could be a threat. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and Chinese Crested dogs have dominated the national Ugliest Dog Contest for several years. But Smokey's unusual appearance is part of his appeal. And the talented canine plays an important role in both the book's suspense and romance. -- *Marcia James*