

**THREE
DAY
FIANCEE**

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MARISSA CLARKE

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For Mae, who found the power to walk away

Chapter One

The perfect day for Caitlin Ramos started with a steaming shower at exactly five fifty-five, a double-shot espresso from Zeke's Deli at six forty-five, and a twelve-minute walk up Sixth Avenue where she'd begin her first appointment clean, caffeinated, and on time.

Today was *not* a perfect day.

She'd known it was off to a crappy start when she discovered there was no hot water in her building, so she broke the land speed record with the quickest (and coldest) shower in the history of mankind. Then, her ancient hair dryer tripped the breaker, forcing her to not only lose time, but wake her roommate when she stubbed her toe on the desk chair on her way to get to the breaker box in Fiona's bedroom closet.

What got her through the icy storm of both her roomie and the shower was the idea of a delicious, hot espresso, but that was a point in the loss column too. Zeke's Deli had a

hot water issue because it was in the same building, and due to some health code BS, they couldn't serve anything but pre-packaged food and cold bottled drinks.

Mourning her missed espresso, she shoved the chilled can of Mountain Dew into her coat pocket and bolted out the door that slammed behind her with a clatter of nerve-jangling bells. Taking a deep breath, she assured herself this was the last break in the day's routine. All was well. Caffeine was caffeine, right?

A garbage truck ran the red light as she crossed Sixth Avenue, thankfully missing her by inches. However, the mixture of mud and whatever nastiness had oozed into the street from the trashcan outside a newsstand didn't miss her.

"Watch it!" she shouted, returning the driver's hand gesture. She was grateful to be out of Georgia, but New York City would take some getting used to after five years away.

She pulled out her phone and checked the time. Still on schedule.

Tucking her coat tighter, she picked up her pace. And then, in keeping with the rest of her morning, the sky opened, drenching her from head to toe with icy drops. Good thing she'd fought so hard to get her hair dry this morning. She gritted her teeth, cursing her bad luck and her prodigal umbrella sitting warm and toasty next to her apartment door. At least the rain would wash off the nasty brew splashed on her boots by the garbage truck.

Shivering, she ducked under a small awning, crammed her phone in her pocket and zipped her coat, for whatever good that did at this point. Water slithered down her spine and between her breasts. Raking aside the wet, blond hair

plastered to her forehead, she took a deep breath. So far, today had sucked big time. Nothing had gone right, and Caitlin was pretty sure the suckitude was only beginning. With a growl, she pulled her coat hood over her head and dashed the remaining half block to her first client's building. The rain stopped right as she hit the door, of course.

At three minutes to seven, she entered the lobby and nodded at Fred, the doorman. He'd seen her come and go twice a day for the last three months, so she didn't even need to check in or out anymore. Animal Attraction, SoHo's premier boutique pet care service, had a contract with several clients in this building, which made her job much easier than that of a typical New York City dog walker.

Dog walker. She shook her head as she mashed the elevator button. Who'd ever have thought it? She should be a licensed accountant by now with a nice salary and benefits. But no. She had to get all stupid and quit college to run off with the "love of her life."

She'd trusted her heart and Gary Southwick, and both of them had let her down big-time, leaving her with a broken heart, a broken career plan, and a broken bank account.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid," she chanted, stepping off the elevator. But she'd never be stupid again. Never, ever, ever would she let a man control her again, and she knew it would be a long time before she'd ever trust a man—or her heart. Which was why dating was out. Not that she'd had time for it since she'd returned. After finishing her degree online while working full-time, she dove right into her CPA exam prep. Maybe she'd have time for dating after she sat for the exam in April. Until then, she was following her mom's orders from when she used to take Caitlin to the store as a

little girl. “Look, don’t touch.”

Her boots made *squick-squick* noises as she strode down the long hallway to the unit at the end.

She liked to snap the leash on Beauregard, a huge Saint Bernard, at exactly seven. Labeled a problem client, Beau was on his third agency and had blazed through his fair share of walkers, the latest of which was Rick, a co-worker from Animal Attraction. Caitlin and Beau had hit it off immediately, and he’d never given her any trouble, so she’d found Rick’s stories of the dog’s misbehavior hard to believe. She checked her phone when she pulled out her keychain. She still had one minute. At least one thing was going right—she was on time. She slid her key in the lock and froze.

Bark-bark! Crash.

She’d never known Beau to break anything before. Heck, he usually just laid around and slobbered. Sometimes even getting him to go out for a walk took a treat or two.

Crash. Thump-thump-thump. Ahooooooooo! Woooo! WOOF!

Great. A cold shower, stubbed toe, blown breaker, no caffeine, close encounter with a garbage truck, soggy feet, wet hair, and now this. Whatever *this* was.

A chill shot down her spine as she lifted her hand to knock, then stopped. Beauregard’s owner was never home at this time of day. He left for work before she arrived. What if someone had broken in?

Her fingers tightened on the key as she debated whether to call 911 or go tell Fred in the lobby.

“Beauregard, stop! Sit! Stay!” a male voice shouted from inside. Well, at least it wasn’t a burglar unless he was

doubling as a dog trainer. Score one in the win column this time. She relaxed fractionally, silently unlocking the door and opening it just a crack to peek in.

Oh, man. Score ten in the win column.

The hottest guy she'd ever seen was chasing Beauregard around the living room wearing nothing but a bath towel—and the towel was hanging on for dear life...not that she blamed it; she'd hang on to that fine backside for dear life, too, given the chance. He was tall, with dark hair and a build that was lean and toned and screamed long-term gym membership. She bit back a laugh as Hot Guy and his six-pack abs hurdled the coffee table in an attempt to catch Beau, who lumbered to the far end of the room, drooling. She might have been drooling, too, as he lunged for Beau and missed.

“Look don't touch.” Yep. And she was getting a good look. She grinned, realizing her crap day had finally turned around.

And then a couple of things happened at once. Beau noticed her in the doorway and launched toward her at full steam, no doubt to give her his customary slobbery greeting with uncustomary zeal. As the dog passed the center of the room, Hot Guy reached out and grabbed his collar, causing the muscles across his broad chest to bunch up as he attempted to slow the dog—the attempt didn't slow anything, especially Caitlin's heartbeat. The day had done a total one-eighty. Win all around. No need for caffeine now.

“Woof!” Beauregard barked.

Yeah, woof! Caitlin was too stunned to do anything but stare, heart pounding, as the dog and towel-clad Hot Guy, still clinging to Beau's collar, hurtled in her direction like

a runaway locomotive. *Bring on that train wreck, universe.*

It was obvious Hot Guy hadn't noticed her until that second, because his brown eyes grew huge as Beau reared up, his paws landing on her shoulders, tongue nailing her cheek as she slammed back against the doorjamb.

"Oh, shit," he said, only inches from her. So close she could smell his aftershave or soap or whatever mouth-watering scent clung to his body. Releasing the dog, he tightened the towel and took a couple of steps back. "I'm sorry, I..."

Caitlin strained to peek around Beau's huge head as the guy backed up another step, gave a smile, and said, "I didn't see you there."

Well, no way could she say the same, and she certainly wasn't sorry. Heck, the last few minutes warranted completely forgiving the universe for conspiring against her all morning.

Beau gave her face another slurp as she snapped the leash on his collar. "I'm your dog walker."

"Yeah, I figured that out. It's a good thing you're here. I've got a real problem."

Yeah, so did she, like a runaway libido. Whoa, the guy was fine.

No handshake, no intro. He simply blurted out, "You have to stay with Beauregard today. He can't be left alone."

You have to... Icy prickles danced up her spine as the order dredged up all manner of "no freaking way." She didn't even know this guy, but after Gary, it was hard to not paint everyone with the same brush. Even half-dressed hot guys. "I'm sorry. I have six other clients today." Resisting the urge to look back at him, she slid her fingers into the

loop at the end of the leash.

“No. You *have* to do this.”

Never, she'd sworn to herself when she left Gary, would she ever again let a man tell her what she could and could not do. The only thing she had to do was whatever she damn well wanted. And right then, she wanted to get out of that apartment. She also desperately wanted a cappuccino. “Come, Beau.”

“No.”

No? She narrowed her eyes. “So, you don't want me to take him out?”

“No.” Simple and to the point. This was a guy used to giving orders and she was a woman who would no longer take them.

She unsnapped Beau's leash. “Suit yourself,” she said, hanging the leash on a hook by the door. As she closed the door behind her, a pang of guilt flared. She knew she was being unreasonable, but she refused to give on this. What had being reasonable gotten her in life other than a world of hurt?

Boots *squicking*, she tromped to the elevator and mashed the button, replaying the conversation in her head. Unlike Gary, this guy hadn't acted all domineering and angry. He'd seemed...desperate and a little panicky. The pang of guilt turned into regret. He'd set her off unintentionally. Most people didn't carry this much baggage. Most people toted duffle bags of issues. She was wheeling a steamer trunk and this guy had unwittingly popped the lock to Pandora's box of bad vibes.

The elevator dinged and slid wide right as the door of his apartment opened and then slammed shut. Half-

dressed now in dark blue pants, he was struggling into a long-sleeved white dress shirt with funky striped do-dads on the shoulders like she'd seen on pilots walking through the airport when she flew back from Georgia. On one sleeve was a patch with a round logo with *AE* in the center. A navy blue tie dangled from his fingers. "Please, don't go."

Yeah, she'd heard that before. She crossed her arms over her ribs.

He draped the tie around his neck and deftly buttoned his shirt. "Hear me out."

And that, too.

Brow arched, she waited. From inside the apartment, Beau scratched the door. He was several minutes late for his walk now.

With precision, he began to knot his tie. "You and I got off to a bad start. I'm sorry."

Actually, the start had been pretty spectacular—especially the gold medal round of sofa hurdles in the Bath Towel Olympics. It's what had followed that threw her morning back into the toilet. She scraped her wet bangs from her face and shrugged, frustrated by her fascination with his ability to perfectly knot his tie without a mirror.

He smoothed the ends of the tie flat and she kicked herself internally for letting her libido remind her of how his tall, muscular body looked sporting only a bath towel. Wide shoulders tapering to narrow hips. *Damn*. She drew her gaze from his long fingers to his dark eyes that looked completely sincere.

"I need your help. It's really important. Beauregard swallowed something super valuable."

Aaaaaand, now it's about money. It's like the guy was

going through her *Piss-Me-Off-Playbook*. She put her hands on her hips, resisting the urge to roll her eyes, remembering her last huge fight with Gary.

“It has sharp edges and I’m worried it’ll hurt him.”

That got her attention. Despite her love of number crunching, animals had always been her true obsession—ever since she cooked up plans for a pet care shop with her best friends Jane and Fiona, back in grade school. Jane had made that childhood dream happen a year ago when she opened *Animal Attraction* and brought the three of them together again. Jane ran the place. Fiona provided vet services, and there were two groomers, one receptionist, and three dog walkers—well, she was only doing this until she passed her CPA exam. Then she’d do the books for the shop. She’d be doing them now, if it weren’t for some silly clause in Jane’s investor agreement that required a licensed CPA.

Her gaze flitted to where Beau scratched the door again. “What did he swallow?”

“An engagement ring. I left my dresser drawer open and he got hold of the box, and all I can find are the shreds of the box. No ring. I’m sure he ate it.”

“That’s why the couch high jump was in process when I opened the door.”

“Yeah.” He glanced at his giant watch—the kind with all the little dials that had always struck Caitlin as overkill. “I thought he had it in his mouth, but it was only a shred of velvet from the top.”

She drew her eyes from his shiny watch to his glossy brown hair. Thick, rich hair like dark chocolate, which she could use two pounds of right about now. Instead, she settled for pulling the *Mountain Dew* out of her pocket.

Caffeine would help her looming headache. “So, you want me to what?” She knew the answer, but wanted him to have to say it.

He suddenly found his bare feet fascinating. At least he had the good graces to look embarrassed. “Wait for it to pass.” He glanced at his watch again.

“That could take a long time. Maybe even days.” She popped the top of the Mountain Dew, and of course, in accordance with the rest of her morning, it fizzed out the top and some drops splattered onto the shiny marble floor in front of the elevator. The loss column was almost totally full. “Maybe I should call our vet. Beauregard probably needs an X-ray.”

The guy seemed fixated on her lips as she slurped from the top to keep more from spilling out. He shook his head as if to clear it. “He’s terrified of vets. Loses it completely. I really don’t want to put him through that unless it looks like he’s having trouble. I’ll be back sometime before dark.”

She fought the urge to wipe her sticky hand on her coat. Before dark? She thought he’d ask her to stay a couple of hours, not the whole freaking day. She shot a glance down the hallway both directions before blurting out, “You expect me to drop all my other clients and hang out until he poops an engagement ring?”

He guided her back to his apartment door and ushered her inside, no doubt to get her out of the way before a neighbor came out to see what was going on. Beau helped out by licking the sticky soda off her hand while she held the can out of reach with the other.

The guy gave an exasperated huff. “I’m asking you to stay until the ring...appears or I get back. I’ll be home as

soon as I can, and you can leave.” And then he said the only thing that could have turned off her anger like a wall switch. “I love this dog.” He ran his hand over Beau’s huge head. “He’s my best friend.”

Well, crap. She dug in her pocket and pulled out her phone, trying to dial with her free hand. “Lemme see if someone is available to cover this.” Before he responded, she rang her boss and longtime friend, Jane Dixon.

Jane picked up on the first ring. “What’s up, Caity?”

“Um, we kind of have a situation.” She shot a look at the guy who was sitting on the sofa putting on socks. “Is there a way we can get someone here to stay with Beauregard for the day? I have two other appointments in this building and one a block over before lunch, then four more in the afternoon, two of them with multiple dogs. It would be easier for me to pick up someone else’s appointments than for them to take over all of mine since I have so many today.”

“Tell me what happened.” Jane’s voice was more intense than Caitlin had expected for something like this.

“Beauregard swallowed a piece of jewelry, and the owner wants me to retrieve it when it passes.”

“Yuck,” Jane replied.

“Yeah.” She glanced over her shoulder to see the guy tying on a shoe. “We just need coverage for the dog while the owner’s at work. Someone to handle it so I can make my other appointments. I’ll take Beauregard to the park, and then someone just needs to sit with him until this resolves.” Which, since it just happened, could be a long time.

“Listen, there’s nothing more important than this client, and you’re the first walker his dog has ever liked. I need you to stay. I’ll find someone to take your other appointments,

even if I have to do it myself.”

Well, that was surprisingly dramatic. “Are you kidding me? Someone just needs to sit here while I make my appointments. No biggy. Pretty sure Beau just sleeps all day anyway.”

“This man is my most important client. The dog doesn’t trust people, but he trusts you...and so do I.” Jane said.

Caitlin found herself mesmerized as she watched the guy slip a belt through the loops on his pants and buckle it with sure fingers before picking up his phone from the coffee table in front of him. What was wrong with her? Her body was reacting as if he were taking his clothes off, not putting them on, which brought up images of him reversing the process. Slowly. For her. *Dang*.

Jane’s voice brought her back to their conversation. “Are you listening to me, Caitlin?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Taylor Blankenship works for Anderson Enterprises... as in the Anderson brothers who funded Animal Attraction. They’re why we’re in business right now. He’s best friends with Will Anderson. They served in Afghanistan together. You have to keep him happy.”

Caitlin turned her back to him, hoping he was as fascinated with whatever he was looking at on his phone as he appeared to be. “He won’t even be here,” she whispered. “It doesn’t matter who watches the dog.”

“It matters to me,” Jane said

She shot a glance at him over her shoulder. “C’mon, Jane.”

“You know that dog’s history. He’s been through two companies and half a dozen dog walkers before you.”

Caitlin spun at the sound of the door opening. “Thanks for staying,” Taylor said with a smile. And just like that, he left, closing the door behind him with a confident click.

Of all the...

“Caity?”

“That bossy jerk just left. Walked right out the door,” she grumbled into her phone.

“He flies the Anderson Enterprises helicopter. He probably had to leave for a scheduled flight or something.”

She understood that. Sticking to a schedule was the only real control she had that was constant, and he’d just screwed that up.

“I’ll get your other appointments covered. This could be good. You need to relax, Caity. I’m worried about you.”

“I’m fine.” Well, she would be.

“Are you really? You don’t seem fine. Since you’ve been back, you only work and study. It’s like you’re punishing yourself for making a mistake.”

No, she was just making up for the time lost because of the mistake. “I’m all good. Really.”

Her friend sighed. “Okay. Sit back, watch some TV. Call if you need anything. Bye.”

“Bye.” The only thing she needed was a total do-over of this morning. That, and a double espresso—no, a triple. And maybe a dry change of clothes...and a hairdryer.

Beau whined from the door, tugging at the leash on the hook.

“Yeah, you like a schedule, too.” She shoved her phone into her coat pocket and grabbed the leash. “Let’s go find a Starbucks.”

Chapter Two

The walk with Beauregard was completely uneventful, with nothing coming of it but a spectacular Caramel Macchiato from a coffee shop near the dog park.

Caitlin filled Beau's bowl from the kitchen sink, like she did after his walk every morning, but rather than his usual sloppy slurping, Beau sniffed the bowl, whined, and flopped down on his dog bed in the living room.

"Is your tummy hurting, big guy?" she asked, scratching behind his ear. He sighed and closed his eyes. Caitlin sighed, too. It was going to be a long, long day. The caffeine had helped lift her mood, but being wet and cold for who knew how long was going to be the pits.

She looked around the small, tidy apartment. She'd never really paid much attention to it before. She didn't pay attention to any of her clients' homes. They weren't her concern. The pets were. She'd always been able to compartmentalize like that, which is why she liked

accounting. She only had to consider relevant facts, not all the extras—like the dozens of photos in frames on the bookshelf at the far end of the room.

She pulled off her coat and hung it on the hook by the door, then slipped out of her boots and socks. The warm wood felt fantastic underfoot. She sighed as she wiggled her pruny bare toes, and for the first time since Taylor left, she was glad she wasn't stuck walking dogs all day. As soon as she passed her CPA exam, she'd never have to walk another person's dog again.

Fighting the urge to look over her shoulder like she was a toddler about to sneak candy, she padded to the bookshelf. This wasn't snooping, really. He had this stuff out on display, after all. One frame made of a dark, knotty wood held a picture of what appeared to be a younger Taylor and his family. An elderly man and woman, probably grandparents, flanked a happy-looking couple who were no doubt his parents and Taylor and a girl with braces wearing a big grin who looked to be around twelve or thirteen.

Of the dozen or so pictures, at least half of them included Taylor and the older woman, and the rest were of his family. They must be very close. Caitlin's chest tightened with longing. Her parents had divorced when she was a baby and she'd never had a close relationship with either. Even though they were only two hours apart, she'd only seen her mom once since moving back from Georgia.

Another picture was of Taylor in full dress uniform looking tall, muscled, and badass. Well, that explained his tendency to bark orders. As sexy as he was in his uniform, she preferred him in a bath towel. She closed her eyes and recalled the delicious expanse of tan skin and hard muscles,

and her fingers twitched.

A loud ding from a computer on the desk to the left of the bookcase jerked her from her daydream. Again, it wasn't snooping if something was in clear view, right? She squinted at the popup message on the screen several feet away.

can't wait to see you this weekend! i love you, xoxo

-b

Nothing like another woman's love letter closed with kisses and hugs to kill a perfectly good daydream. B must be the woman he planned to give the ring to. "Better give that ring back, Beau," she said. "Sounds like magic's happening this weekend."

Beau smacked his jowls several times and closed his eyes.

Even though she'd worn a coat, the water had partially soaked her clothes. When she looked down, she couldn't help but admire her new hot pink lace bra showing through the thin sweater. She frowned. Spring Break T-shirt contestant wasn't the look she was going for. Hopefully, the material would dry quickly. She pinched the fabric and pulled it away from her body.

Ding.

Again, she squinted at the computer screen to read a message from someone named Deborah.

I've considered your apology. How about dinner next Thursday? Same restaurant. I'll meet you there at 7.

“Wait a minute,” she said to the screen. “What about B?” She turned to the snoring dog. “What about B and the magic weekend?”

Beau opened one eye and closed it again.

Maybe she’d misunderstood the message. Bossy, yes, but the guy didn’t seem like a jerk. A man who loved his dog like that couldn’t be a total jerk, right? Maybe the dinner date with the Deborah person was business. There were no kisses and hugs or “I love you’s.” Yeah. “Totally business,” she assured Beauregard.

Ding.

“Oh, come on,” she grumbled, turning her back to the computer, determined to not look. After staring at Beau, who appeared to be dreaming about chewing, she couldn’t resist anymore and whipped around to the screen. This one was from someone named Felicia.

Hey, honey. Left some undies at your place. Will come get them when I’m back in town. Love you lots.

Definitely not business. So much for men who loved pets not being jerks.

Caitlin flopped onto the couch and growled, which caused Beau to lift his head. Then, he chewed a few times like he had in his sleep.

“You okay?” she asked, dropping to her knees in front of him. Maybe he’d cracked a tooth or cut his gums on the ring, which would explain his not drinking and his odd chewing behavior. She put one hand over the top of his snout and the other under his chin and pried his mouth open. Nothing but

big dog tongue and teeth, so she leaned down to get a look at the back molars and something glittered.

“Oh, man.” She leaned closer. “Yes!” she shouted with a fist pump before reaching into Beau’s mouth to pull out the ring stored between the back of his jaw and cheek. “You’re a dog, not a hamster, Beau-Beau.”

Sitting back on her heels, she examined the ring.

“Whoa.” This wasn’t at all what she’d expected. Based on Taylor’s clean, simple apartment and military background, she’d imagined a straightforward, no frills, round solitaire set in yellow gold. She turned it in the light and shook her head. It wasn’t huge, but a sizable square diamond was set in a fancy filigree that looked to be made of platinum with smaller diamonds embedded in it. It was in the style she remembered from the scrapbook pictures of her grandmother she loved looking at when she was a kid. She’d have never imagined him an antique ring kind of guy.

With a shiver, she stood and straightened the cold, wet shirt sticking to her neck and chest and headed to the kitchen, grateful Beau hadn’t swallowed the ring for a multitude of reasons—one being she could go home and put on something dry.

A quick wash with hot water and dish soap made the ring sparkly, especially under the halogen light above the kitchen sink. Almost magical.

Ding.

She glanced over her shoulder across the breakfast bar to the computer screen in the living room and rolled her eyes. Probably another girlfriend needing to retrieve her panties. With a sigh, she dried the ring on a dish towel hanging from the oven handle. Again, the deep stone in the

center of the ring caught the light and winked at her. It was one of the most beautiful things she'd ever seen.

Holding it between her forefinger and thumb, she studied the way the light refracted and changed color as it passed through the stones. Gary hadn't given her an engagement ring. She'd loved her gold band he gave her on their wedding day, but she'd lamented not having a symbol of the value and promise of their engagement. Turned out, for Gary, promise and value were all but nonexistent, so it suited.

Unable to resist trying it on, she slid the ring on her finger and wiggled her hand to make it glimmer in the light. So pretty. Elegant, with the promise of forever.

"Poor B," she said through the tightness in her throat. Caitlin knew what it was like to marry a player.

The computer dinged again, but she didn't look. With a disgusted huff, she scanned the apartment for a prominent place to leave the ring where Beau couldn't snack on it again. Moving to a wooden bowl in the middle of the breakfast bar that divided the kitchen from the family room, she tugged on the ring to remove it, but it didn't budge.

Oh, no. She twisted it and tugged harder as a knock came on the door. Beau jumped up from his dog bed and ran to the door barking. *Crap.* No way was she going to answer this guy's door.

"Taylor, sugar, it's me," a woman's voice called.

Perfect. Now women were dropping by in person. This guy was something else. With a grunt, she pulled on the ring as hard as she could, but no luck.

Beau went practically berserk, scratching the door and whining like a puppy. Clearly, he knew the person on the

other side. After another knock, the door opened and the older woman she recognized from the family photos on the bookshelf stepped inside and froze, key in hand.

Her large brown eyes traveled from Beau to Caitlin, scanning her from her bare feet, to her clinging T-shirt, to her wet hair. Caitlin took a breath to introduce herself right as the woman's gaze locked on the ring and a huge grin spread across her face.

“Well, it's about damn time.”