

**Same  
Time.  
Same  
Leash. New  
Routine**

Chapter One

T.J. Arengill

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# Chapter 1

The coffee had gone cold. Again.

Andrea stared at the mug with a sigh, then stood and shoved it into the microwave for the third time that morning. She hit the “reheat” button with the same urgency someone might use to save a dying plant. Coffee had to be hot.

While the machine hummed, she glanced at the calendar. One year. One year since she’d made the biggest decision of her life. Hard to believe twelve months had passed, and she still wasn’t anywhere near where she expected to be. Everything had turned out harder than expected—which by now shouldn’t have surprised her. She tended to be overconfident—not because she couldn’t do things, but because she always forgot to factor in the unexpected things life threw at her.

Still, she didn’t regret quitting her job.

The beep of the microwave pulled her out of her thoughts. She should have sat down and kept writing, but the melancholy hanging over her drew her toward the couch instead. She curled up, coffee in hand, and stared at the calendar again.

One year.

She remembered exactly how she had felt that day. Fired up. Determined. Done with the hamster wheel that had been

draining the life out of her. Her managers had never understood her. No matter how much she tried to show them that her way of working would help the company, they refused to listen. They had their straight line from A to B, and she was expected to follow it, even though she consistently delivered the best results. Every time she stepped off that rigid path, she paid for it.

The money had been good—very good. And she'd saved and invested smartly. She trusted she could stay afloat for a while before needing another job.

Her manager had given her that crooked smile, the kind that said, "Sure, that's what you think," when she told him she was quitting. So she'd straightened her shoulders and told him, clear and calm, "This is my two-week notice."

Her voice must have sounded more serious than she expected. The smirk disappeared.

"Are you serious? We're in the middle of the Hammond project."

"Yes, I'm aware. I prepared everything. They'll be fine."

"But there are always problems with the Hammond project."

"Yes," she'd said. "And they'll solve them. Just without me."

He got angry—really angry—but the more upset he became, the more certain she became. He didn't care about her. He cared about himself, his project and what would happen if it didn't go perfectly. That was no longer her problem.

She leaned forward, hands on the desk, and looked him straight in the eyes. "I am deadly serious. In two weeks, I'm gone."

He exploded. "No. Today is your last day. You want to leave us? Then leave right now. I don't want your dumb face here another two weeks."

*Dumb face?*

*Wonderful.*

If he meant her gone immediately, fine. She would take one more paycheck without working. No problem.

She took a steady breath and said, “Fine, Dwayne. I’ll pack my things.”

He was already dialing for security before she finished the sentence. And in that moment, everything she’d carried for the past three years—stress, frustration, dread—slid off her shoulders. She became weightless, almost floating. She’d never fully understood that phrase before, but now she did.

The security guard arrived to escort her while she gathered her belongings. Her coworkers rushed over, shocked, asking what was going on. She told them everything they needed was in the project folders.

Dylan grabbed her arm. “Girl, you can’t do this to me.”

She looked into his warm brown eyes. “I’m sorry, Dylan. I can’t stay any longer.”

“I get it.” He sighed. “Promise me we’ll stay in contact.”

“Of course we will. And if you need anything, questions or help, I’m still here.”

The security guard cleared his throat. It was time to go.

She checked the drawers one last time, making sure she didn’t leave any of her favorite pens behind, and they were *all* her favorites, then accepted Dylan’s hug and the quiet pats on her shoulder from others. She walked out without looking back.

In the weeks that followed, her coworkers had a few questions, but she’d expected that. She had planned to stay two more weeks, and she was still willing to help them out—just not Dwayne the twerp. His bright red face came to her, like smoke might puff from his ears. The Hammond project had gone okay. Not great. Not the way it would have gone with

her. So yes, Dwayne still got in trouble—and Dylan told her every detail.

She took another sip of her coffee and looked around her little apartment. Downsizing from a bigger place had been hard, squeezing everything into this small space, but it worked. It was cozy. It was hers.

The first time she walked into the apartment came back to her.

One look at the peeling paint, the ancient tiles, and the suspiciously humming fridge, and she had already crossed the place off her list. She was halfway through telling herself that a *fixer-upper* did not mean *character* when a small meow sounded behind her.

She turned, then froze.

A black cat sat in the very center of the room like a tiny, judgmental landlord, staring at her as if she'd trespassed into his property viewing.

"Oh my," she'd said. "You're not coming with the apartment, are you?"

He tilted his head and answered with another meow that sounded suspiciously like "maybe."

That was unfairly cute.

She crouched and scratched behind his ear. His fur was impossibly soft, one clipped ear marking him as fixed. Maybe a former stray. But he looked far too clean now. Too confident. Too much like he already owned the place to still be one.

He wound around her legs, tail high like a flag of approval, and before she talked herself out of it, she'd scooped him up. He relaxed into her arms immediately, tucking his head against her shoulder like he'd been waiting for her.

A voice echoed from the hallway. "Snowflake? Snow! Where are you?"

Andrea blinked at the cat. *Snowflake*. Naming a black cat Snowflake was, honestly, perfect.

A man appeared in the doorway, slightly out of breath. “Ah! There you are!” Then, turning to her, he added, “I’m so sorry. And thank you for grabbing him.”

“Well,” she’d said, “I think he grabbed me.”

He’d smiled, lopsided and relieved. “I’m Sam. From across the hall. And—are you moving in? Please say yes.”

She hadn’t even had time to answer before he rushed on, talking with his hands. “We just moved in last week, and I could really use a neighbor who loves cats. And Snowflake clearly approves of you.”

“You think so?”

“He’s in your arms,” Sam said, pointing like he’d just cracked a case. “He’s friendly with everyone, but I’m usually the only one who can pick him up. And even then he complains. He acts like he’d marry you.”

Snowflake purred, loud and decisive, like he agreed.

Andrea laughed, liking Sam instantly, his easy warmth, and slightly chaotic sincerity. Something about him felt familiar, like meeting someone whose brain worked on the same frequency as hers.

And that had been it. The moment she decided she’d sign the lease.

She’d come to see an apartment and left having found Snowflake, Sam, and a place that fit.

The agreement got signed the next day.

She checked the time. Not much left before she had to head out. She hurried to the kitchen and turned on her tiny espresso machine and milk frother—the two most important appliances in her apartment. Some days coffee felt non-negotiable. That wasn’t technically true, but it certainly felt like it.

One year.

Her gaze went to her computer. Her book was coming along. She'd planned to be finished by now—editing, prepping for beta readers—but something was still missing. It came down to her villain. He was good, just maybe a little too easy too predictable. Nikki had assured her the book was good, but “good” wasn't good enough. Not for a first book. Not for *her*. Still, Nikki had known her long enough to call her out if it truly didn't work. She'd never been the kind to soften the truth.

Perfectionism had been an asset in her old job. Now... not so much.

Financially, she was still fine, especially with her side gig, dog walking. A little extra income that helped more than she expected. But she needed to finish this book.

She glanced out the window. It seemed cold today. But she could be wrong, a gray sky in October didn't automatically mean cold weather in Charlotte. Well, and what does her mother always say? There's no wrong weather, just wrong clothes. She'd check the weather app after this fresh cup.

She wrapped her hands around the mug, breathing in the scent she loved so much, and took a slow sip. Warmth spread through her chest.

Yes, she had made the right decision. She wasn't where she wanted to be yet. But she would get there.

Everything would work out.



She quickly finished her coffee when her phone buzzed with the first calendar reminder of the day. 10:00 a.m., Goldman trio pickup.

“Right,” she mumbled, setting the empty cup in the sink. Pulling her hair into a ponytail, she hopped into her sneakers and slung her bag over one shoulder. A quick mental check: compostable poop bags, peanut butter treats, keys, phone. Good.

The day’s route was solid. Goldman Trio first. Shadow, the black lab, next. Then the Grayson Duo on Maple, Mrs. Hayes’s pug Hazel after that, Orbit the Border Collie on Willow Lane, and finally Bear.

She had exactly six houses to hit today. The route was planned with just enough buffer in between, because with dogs, anything could happen.

Some people assumed she was disorganized. Those people had never tried to juggle a full week of pet schedules, overlapping time slots, last minute cancellations and even more last minute requests. Add medication charts and her own meticulous health tracking, including yes, even poop texture. No wonder it was a small miracle anything ran on time.

Andrea was chaos, yes. But her chaos came with color coded tabs.

She opened the door to head out but stopped immediately. Directly across from her stood Sam, completely tangled up with a girl who still had her arms wrapped around his neck. She gave him one last big kiss before slowly pulling back. In the sweetest Southern accent, she told him she would call him later.

Then she turned, noticed Andrea standing in her doorway, and hesitated for a brief millisecond before hurrying toward the stairwell. Sam was left behind with a broad, satisfied grin.

“I’m getting confused,” Andrea said, still watching the girl tip tap down the stairs. “Who is that? Weren’t you with the blonde one?”

Sam's grin widened. "Blondie and I didn't work out. She had a problem with Snowflake."

Andrea tilted her head toward the stairs. "This one doesn't?"

He shrugged, his smile turning smug. "We'll see. We haven't had much time together yet."

Andrea laughed. Right on cue, Snowflake padded over, tail high, asking for his daily pets. She reached down and stroked the black cat's silky head, even though she was now running late.

"Come on, Snowflake," Sam said as he scooped him up. "You see she has to go. So where are you heading? Which one of your funny furry friends is first today?"

"The Goldmans," she said.

"Oh, good. Bring me home some stories. I love how silly those dogs are."

"Will do." She closed and locked her door, gave Snowflake a final warm pat and Sam a quick smile, then headed down the stairs after the pretty girl.



By the time she reached the Goldmans' house, sweat pearls were forming on her forehead. She had forgotten to check the weather app and it had turned out much warmer. She keyed in the code, let herself into the foyer, and was immediately greeted by three small tornadoes of fur.

"Morning, team," she said, bracing herself.

Waffles, Muffin, and Peanut hit her shins like three excited pom-poms of caffeinated fluff.

"Let's take the scenic route today, huh?" she said, snapping on leashes with practiced speed.

They burst out onto the sidewalk like a fuzzy firework. Andrea held the leashes in one hand and pulled out her phone with the other, noticing a message from the next client. She was checking it when the screen lit up with a call.

Mom.

She hesitated, then answered.

“Hey.”

“Hey, sweetheart.” Her mother’s voice was cheerful in that slightly too cheerful way that always meant something was coming. “Just checking in.”

“I’m mid-walk, but okay. Everything alright?”

“Just checking how the writing is going.”

Andrea exhaled slowly through her nose. “Same as yesterday. I wrote a sentence.”

“Only one?”

“It was a *really good* sentence.”

“Is it the final sentence of the book?”

“Technically, no.”

“Andrea.”

Andrea guided the trio away from a particularly suspicious patch of sidewalk. “Mom, I’m working. I’m walking dogs. I have six appointments today.”

“You said you were only doing this until the writing took off.”

“It hasn’t paid yet.” She paused. “But I’m okay.”

“Your savings won’t last forever.”

“I’m aware.”

“Do you need money?”

“No.”

The word came faster than she intended, and it hung awkwardly in the air for a beat too long.

“I just don’t want you to keep putting yourself last,” her mother said gently. “You’ve been pouring into other people’s pets for months. You deserve a shot at pouring into yourself.”

A pang hit her chest, which she promptly ignored.

“I’m fine. I just haven’t... found the right villain yet.”

“You haven’t found what?”

“For the book,” Andrea said quickly. “I can tell something’s missing, or something just isn’t right.”

“Maybe it’s not a villain. Maybe it’s a man.”

“Oh my god.”

“What? It could be romantic tension!”

“I’m not putting a man in my book just to fix a plot hole.”

“I was talking about your *life*.”

Andrea groaned and tightened her grip on the leashes. “Not this again.”

“It’s not *this again*. You’re still seeing that one client, right?”

Andrea blinked. “Which one?”

“The one with the code. Tall. Business-y. Great cheekbones. Smells like good decisions.”

“That is the weirdest description of a man I’ve ever heard.”  
Why did she tell her about the cheekbones?

“But accurate?”

“Yes,” she sighed. “I still walk his dog. No, he’s not home when I’m there. Yes, I have the code to his place, like I do for *every* client. And yes, he did a background check that rivaled national security clearance.”

“He also asked about insurance,” she added. “Liability, pet coverage, the whole list. I already had it, but he made me send proof. Twice.”

“Still. He’s the only one in the right age range, and not married.”

Andrea gave a sharp tug as one of the dogs lunged at a pigeon. “He’s serious about *not* talking to me. He barely spoke to me.”

“But he’s single?”

“No. And also not my type.” That wasn’t true. Unfortunately, he was exactly her type. Which was fine, because she never actually saw him.

“What *is* your type?”

“Someone who doesn’t wear button-downs and look like he’s stepping out of a magazine.”

“Well,” her mother said with a chuckle, “now I get why Sam isn’t your type either.”

“Mother...”

“Alright, alright. You are only friends... right?”

The last word sounded like a plea. But that would be a lie. She loved Sam and he loved her, but there were no other feelings.

“Maybe you’re hiding behind your work because real intimacy feels risky.” Her mother kept talking.

Andrea stopped at a red light and raised an eyebrow at the sky.

“Mom, I’m fine,” she interrupted. “I’m not looking for a relationship right now. I can’t afford distractions. I need to focus. Sorry, I’ve gotta go. The Goldmans’ dogs are getting that glazed look again.”

“Okay dear. Tell Sam I said hi.”

“Will do. Love you.”

“Love you more.”

Andrea pocketed her phone and tightened her grip on the leashes. She hadn’t started walking dogs on a whim. There was a difference between a neighbor kid filling in and someone doing this professionally, and she’d made sure she was the latter. She’d learned what she needed to learn. She kept improving.

Even clients like Ethan—especially clients like Ethan—hadn't managed to poke a hole in that.

She returned the dogs, sweaty, winded, and asking herself for the seventeenth time that week why she didn't own a sports watch.

“Good job,” she panted as the trio spun in celebratory circles. “I survived another round.”

She handed off their leashes, double-checked their water bowls, made sure all three had a few extra scratches, and handed out some treats before moving on.

Straightening her ponytail, she trudged back down the steps and pulled out her phone. As she walked, she started thumbing out an update for the Goldmans. Of course she'd taken a ridiculous number of photos on the walk, because clients loved proof of happy tongues and wagging tails. Now she scrolled through them, choosing the right ones to send. Then she found a keeper. All three of them facing the camera, tongues out like they'd planned it. Exactly the kind of photo Mrs. Goldman loved.

She sent the report, slipped her phone away, and adjusted her pace.

Next was Shadow, the shy black lab mix who panicked if a leaf rustled the wrong way.

As usual she stepped inside quietly, like walking into a meditation retreat, her movements slow and deliberate after the chaos of the Goldmans.

Shadow peeked around the corner, then froze.

Andrea lowered herself to one knee. “Hi, sweetheart. It's just me.”

He inched forward, sniffed her hand, then cautiously pressed his head into her palm.

“There we go.”

She clipped his leash gently, moving in slow motion compared to the breakneck chaos she'd just come from.

As they stepped outside, Shadow relaxed as usual.

She glanced down at him. "You know what, buddy? You're my apology walk. After the tornado, the universe sends me you to slow my brain."

Shadow blinked and leaned against her, quiet as a whisper.

Andrea smiled.

"Come on, sunshine. Let's go."

The next few appointments passed in their usual rhythm. She greeted the dogs by name, left polite notes, took cute photos for clients who liked updates, and pushed aside the thought of how much of her life was lived inside other people's homes.

When she reached Ethan Carwell's building, the temperature had climbed to the point where her long pants felt like punishment.

She entered the lobby and gave a nod to the concierge, who returned it with the same neutral expression he gave her every time. She didn't mind. She wasn't there to impress anyone.

She used the keycard to access the private entrance on the twentieth floor. Up there were only three apartments, and access was limited to residents and a few trusted people, like herself. The elevator opened, and she stepped into the quiet hallway.

On the left side was the door that led to the roof pool, which she had opened only once, just to have a look. It was open to all residents, but you could only get from there to this hallway if you had the right keycard. On a hot day like today, she caught herself dreaming about going for a swim after work.

She shook the thought off and braced for the sound of claws on hardwood.

Then she let herself in with the code—6-1-9-2—probably his birthday, not that it mattered.

# Afterword

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on Amazon and Kindle Unlimited.

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# About the author

T.J. Arengill writes romantic comedies rooted in everyday life, where unexpected connections and quiet moments slowly turn into something more. Her books are part of the Romantic Paw Series, where routines, everyday moments, and the small details of daily life shape the story as much as the romance itself.

What began as a story written for her son slowly turned into something more. A few short stories followed, and before she quite realized it, she found herself building a life around storytelling. Somewhere between blank pages, rewrites, and the occasional thrift-store detour, she discovered something unexpected—she truly loves telling love stories.

She is the kind of person who never starts a chapter without coffee in hand and who collects ideas as others collect post-cards. A strategist by trade and a storyteller at heart, she builds worlds on paper while juggling the everyday chaos of life.

She lives in North Carolina with her husband, their son, and a cat named Snowflake who is convinced he's the real main character.

When she's not writing, she's usually out observing people, thinking about her next story, or collecting small moments that often find their way into her books.