

Chapter 1

I drag myself on a walk around my neighborhood twice, the soup of North Carolina's early June humidity plastering my hair to the back of my neck. Still half asleep, I let my dogs set the pace and try not to nod off behind my enormous incognito actress-style aviators that cover half my face.

Most girls would try to squeeze in a morning cuddle with their hunky boyfriends as soon as the alarm goes off, but I launched out of bed this morning before mine could hit snooze. As a holdover from his college days, Neil's mom still calls ten minutes after his second snooze to wake him up. In the beginning, he'd ignore her second "How are you doing this morning, beta" call, but three months into our relationship, he's comfortable enough to carry on a speakerphone conversation with his mom while he shaves and gets ready.

In almost every other respect, we're fine. But if he just hit reject the way he used to, I wouldn't be out here at the asscrack

of the morning, wincing at the sheer audacity of the sun streaming directly into my eyeballs, despite my sunglasses.

To kill time, I pause at the bus stop and let the kids pet my French bulldog, Freddie—who pretends not to enjoy it—and my Yorkie–Jack Russell terrier mix, Harrie—who unabashedly does. I get to chatting with the Instagram-wellness-peddler-pretty-at-eight-a.m. moms who’ve seen my latest upcycled furniture drying out in my driveway.

“Rita!” a woman calls from across the street, beckoning me to join her and her friend.

It doesn’t take long before the frenemy neighbors vie for the same vintage Queen Anne dressing table, and their frenzied bids have already crossed double the asking price on Instagram.

I have to admit it’s a beautiful, if somewhat boring, piece.

I thrifted it from a local flea market last month at end of day. The price dropped because the crusty seller didn’t want to load it back up on their van. Even with its busted cabriole legs, peeling paint, and cracked mirror, it was a steal at under a Benjamin.

I would have loved to paint it a bright pop of color—hot pink, peacock green, or electric blue—but the clientele around here prefers their paintwork just like they prefer their neighbors—conservative. So refinishing to the original walnut color and painting the new legs and drawers in champagne it is.

My phone dings with a new email in between a particularly fierce volley between the always-glowing skincare ambassador and the went-vegan-for-the-likes yoga instructor who I know for a *fact* smuggles home Zaxby’s wings and fried chicken from Bo-jangles.

I don’t want to take my eyes away from the bidding war in front of me; in any case, emails are harbingers of evil, usually credit card statements or sales bots who have scraped my email from Dharma Designs Instagram’s contact info.

Skincare Lady's final bid takes it up to triple, well above markup, and I arrange to deliver it later this week. Shaking on the price isn't easy, especially when I know my (um, *her*) dressing table is only going to be used as a prop to display her overpriced gunk for sponsored posts (I mean, she has a mini fridge just for her skincare!), but I need the money.

And secretly, I *was* rooting for her to come out the winner.

So I grit my teeth and take her hand, both of us pretending we don't see last month's chipped black polish clinging desperately to my tips.

She has a flawless gel mani. Because, of course.

Yoga Girl smiles through her teeth and says "Oh well, maybe next time!" with neighborly gusto, but her eyes are slits. I'm glad she was outbid. She always responds to my "Hey" with "Namaste" and asks if I know her Indian friends.

My email dings again.

"You sure are popular," says Skincare Lady, who I really should call by her actual name, Paula Dooley.

Every year Paula's brood goes door to door with glossy brochures, drumming up sales for their school fundraisers. She makes it a point to always wave and chat because I buy her kids' seed packets every spring instead of getting them at the store for half the price. They're too cute to turn down when they knock on my door. And though my grandmother would grumble about wasting money, when I was growing up Mom always emphasized the virtue of being neighborly.

I'm so used to ignoring the junk mail I get that I'd already forgotten about the beeps. "It's probably just spam. Are you sure any evening this week is good to drop off the dresser?"

"Any time," she confirms. "Listen, Rita, it's sure hot out here. Do you want to come in for some coffee? I've got to clean up the kitchen because not a one of them kids knows how to put

their cereal bowls in the sink. My youngest still hasn't learned how to aim for the toilet, so you can just imagine how well he's doing with pouring his own cereal"—she laughs—"and there's something I'd love to talk to you about, if you've got a minute."

Harrie gives a warning bark.

I back away. If it was just coffee she was offering, I'd say yes just to while away a few more minutes, but there's no way I can afford to get suckered into buying whatever potions she has in her beauty fridge, even if they might make me look eighteen again.

"Oh, um, you know, Paula, I am all set for skincare." With my free hand, I pat my cheek. "Got my SPF moisturizer on right now."

"One of these days you and I are going to have a chat about what you put on your face. But no, I'm not trying to sell you my obviously superior skincare." She huffs, rolling her eyes. "We're looking to remodel and I want new *everything* for the house. I just love your style. You know, I couldn't believe it when I found out that you renovated the Full Belly Deli, our favorite little restaurant! I *told* my husband I recognized their new furniture! You and your Dharma Designs are turning into quite the local celebrity," she adds with a wink.

I hold back a snort. "Please. Half the women on this street are Internet famous. You're, like, all over Instagram. I swear I get recommended your products every day."

I'm not even exaggerating. Paula and her friends are all beauty, fashion, and lifestyle influencers, with follower counts high enough to be Instagram verified, whereas my furniture account, Dharma Designs, is struggling to break ten thousand.

"Anyway," I continue. "I just gave Full Belly Deli some pointers, helped them with the conceptualization, and did a quick

sketch. It didn't even take an hour, and they'd just bought all that furniture, so."

Her mouth drops open. "Honey, you did all that? No no no. You do *not* undervalue your time and knowledge by giving it away for free. You should *not* have to pay for your own exposure."

I give her a tight smile. It's easy for her to say. People like me all have to start somewhere, and sometimes that means being generous with clients to get our names out there.

Harrie, getting bored, strains against the leash. Freddie boxes him between my legs, nose to nose, with quite possibly the sternest expression a dog can wear.

"At least think about it? Cost is no object." Her laugh tinkles. "As my husband says, 'Happy wife, happy life!'"

For some reason, I can't shake the image of her at the duck pond in the park, ripping a hunk of bread into pieces and smiling benevolently as the geese scramble over themselves to get what's in her palm.

I stare. "You're serious? But I've never done a home remodel before."

She nods emphatically. "Yeah, but I've seen *yours*. We don't have to talk details right now, but if it's something you're interested in . . . ?" Her voice goes up at the end, making it a question.

It's tempting. Money always is, especially when you don't have a lot of it.

But the idea of being inside her house, making decisions about all of her things, in the same place her family lives . . . It's too much responsibility. A home has a soul of its own and it tends to the people who live there. And I wasn't exactly someone who had a lot of experience with happy homes.

The happiest home I've had is the one I made for myself.

Even if, right at this minute, it was the one I was avoiding going back to.

“I don’t— I mean, I do *product* design,” I stress. “I’m not an interior decorator. I wouldn’t even know how to put up wallpaper the right way.”

“Rita, I’m talking about a big project. It’s serious money on the table. Carte blanche.”

There’s literally no good way to phrase this. I’m put on the spot, so I strive extra hard for the right words. “And I appreciate it, don’t get me wrong, but . . .”

My friends tell me it’s irrational, but I like to be sure all my furniture goes to a good home. My mom, on the other hand, thinks I should sell to whoever can pay the highest. But when I put myself into every piece, it matters where they end up.

“Summer’s my busiest time, Paula. I hit up all the flea markets and I still have spring inventory at my parents’ place that needs doing.” I lay it on thick so she backs off, but not enough to burn a bridge with a neighbor with deep pockets. “You’re so generous to give me this opportunity. But you know what? You have excellent taste, so I’m super confident that however you design your house, it’ll be beautiful. And if you need some odds and ends to round out what you buy, then I’m more than happy to show you what I have.”

Paula’s face slumps, disappointed, but quickly morphs into a preening smile.

My mom would scold me for turning down carte blanche, which is exactly why she will never, ever hear about this. We say our goodbyes and my pups and I continue on our walk, Harrie pulling ahead of Freddie, eager to get home.

It’s only just half past eight, though, so I stop for a chat with sharp-eyed old Mrs. Jarvis next door. She’s always in her front garden ready to rope passersby into conversation about her handsome single grandsons (“Hint, hint, Rita,” she says with a conspiratorial

wink), *The Old Farmer's Almanac*, and the latest gory true crime docudramas she's fascinated by, in that exact order.

It's because of her that I could even afford to live in this neighborhood for the past three years. After graduating college out west, the last thing I wanted was to reclaim my room in my parents' house, but good luck finding a one-bed or studio apartment in my price range in a good neighborhood.

Just when I'd been about to lose my mind at Aji treating me like a teenager again because I was *temporarily* living at home until I found a place, Doctor Dad had come to the rescue. He'd been the one to set Mrs. Jarvis's arm fracture after a fall, and found out she was looking to turn her Airbnb on the narrow strip of lot adjoining her own into a long-term rental property.

Every Christmas the Jarvis clan doesn't spend here, I get cards from all of her out-of-state kids, grateful that their mom has someone nearby just in case. Last year a holiday-guilted daughter even sent me a three-month wine subscription.

As we finish the update on her latest docuseries, Mrs. Jarvis none too subtly points out for the third time the creeping invasion of weeds in my front lawn. And since I can't be sure Neil's hung up on his mom yet, I squat by the mailbox to pluck a fistful of dandelions and some yellow flowers I think are weeds.

My rule of thumb? If I don't remember planting them, they're weeds. Harrie sticks close while Freddie sprawls on the drive under the shade of a flowering dogwood with his paws over his eyes, too elegant to go tromping around in dirt.

As I pick out chunks of clover in the middle of the lawn, Harrie wanders over to sniff the flower bed. I don't glance up since he usually knows better than to go digging in there. It's really a shame that a plant as pretty as clover is technically a weed, I muse as I rip another cluster out by the roots.

Freddie woofs, short and sharp, getting my attention. When he sees me watching, he turns his head to the right, drawing me to—

The half dug up flower bed.

My heart sinks.

Pink, white, and coral impatiens are strewn all around Harrie, petals sprinkled over his fur, broken stems everywhere. He couldn't look prouder if he tried.

"Harrie!" I scold, pulling him away. He wags his tail, straining at the leash so he can "help" me some more. Apparently he has the same difficulty distinguishing flowers from weeds as his mom. "Thank you, Freddie, you are the very best of boys."

I swear Harrie growls at him.

I chuck the dog poop baggy and the weeds before picking up the morning paper that I never read but subscribe to only to feel like a capital-A adult. Idling by the trash tote, I doom scroll Twitter until my energy bar dwindles from green to red like a real-life Sim.

My best friend, Rajvee, would tell me to quit dawdling. She's always trying to get me to tackle issues head-on, forgetting that I'm the girl who took running leaps to avoid the monster under her bed while she not only made "friends" with Gladys (because what else would you call it?), but also went on midnight snack runs downstairs with her as a convenient "She did it, not me!" patsy. But she's right; I'm not a kid anymore. Maybe it's finally time to be fearless.

I take a step toward the house. *Keep staring, don't blink.*

Harrie cocks his head expectantly.

I hesitate. God, I'm gutless.

Maybe I should check my email. I mean, there could be something really important.

"Just gotta do this one thing and then we'll go in," I tell the

boys. Freddie has no opinion and returns to his very busy life of sitting, but Harrie pins me with a knowing stare.

“Don’t look at me like that,” I mutter, already pulling out my phone. I tap the mail icon, expecting to see a pizza coupon or a panty sale alert. I’m about to mindlessly trash it, except—

Sender: *MyShaadi.com*

Subject: *A sneak peek JUST FOR YOU ☺*

Preview: *It’s been a while! We’ve missed you, Rital! Now’s your chance to meet new singles in your area . . .*

I groan. I had totally forgotten that Aji badgered me into signing up for the matrimonial website during my dating dry spell six months ago, pre-Neil. I’d copped an earful from her when I’d used it for dating instead of marriage.

I should have unsubscribed from this a long time ago.

“Goodbye and good riddance.” I press the screen with my thumb harder than I need to.

You are now unsubscribed.

I take a deep breath and turn the key in the lock. The next few seconds will tell me how successfully I’ve timed my arrival back home. But until I push the door open and find out for sure, I hang in a Schrödinger’s-cat limbo.

Time to be brave.

