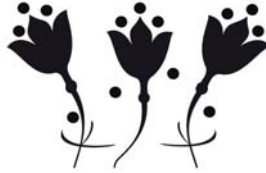


Feminine Products



Rita Plus

Feminine Products



by

Rita Plush

Everyone's got personal baggage, but Rusty Scanlon thinks she's carrying more than her fair share. Owner of a trendy boutique in the outskirts of New York City, Rusty has an eye for fashion and a gift for messing up her love life. She doesn't trust men. They've all abandoned her – the first being her carpenter father, who ran out on her and her mother when she was only six years old.

When she meets Walter Margolis, a guy who adores her, she thinks she has it all. Not so, she discovers when she tells him she's pregnant and he suggests a paternity test. Rusty doesn't know what to make of Walter's reaction until he reveals the details of the accident he thinks he caused as a teenager, and the guilt that has tormented him all his adult life.

When a smooth-talking con man puts two and two together, 'by the way' mentioning that he once knew Rusty's father, and also her mother – they apparently had a 'thing' some years back – she realizes he's after something. She decides it's time to find out the truth, and find her father. Until she does, she can't fully commit to the life she hopes to share with Walter.

Rusty's emotional rollercoaster ride is full of twists and turns that teach her and those around her about losing love and finding it, and what it means to be a family.

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by
Rita Plush

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~PRAISE FOR PLUSH'S WRITING~

Move over, Susan Isaacs. Rita Plush gives us a sassy female protagonist who spouts wisecracking girlspeak, gems of feminine gumption, and knows Gucci from Pucci.

–Debra Scott, journalist, editor, writing coach

Just like her writing for BoomerCafé.com, Rita draws you in and keeps you there. Especially if you're a boomer yourself!

–Greg Dobbs, co-founder, BoomerCafé.com

Great read about how to run a fashion boutique, consider marriage, get conned, and wonder about your long-gone father.

–Maggie Bishop, author of *Murder at Blue Falls*

Mystery and romance with a dash of spunk, Plush goes for the unexpected and raises the stakes higher. Never a dull moment.

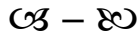
–Monique Antoinette Lewis, founder of AtTheInkwell.com

Now here's a writer with some fizz. Rita Plush, funny and dialogue-fluent, takes us beyond the 'feminine products' found in a bathroom medicine cabinet to the ultimate one, progeny – unplanned, no less. Ladies, you want the way we live now? It's all here, from emotionally stunted men and a missing ne'er-do-well father to a Woody in cowboy boots. And then there's your heroine, a D.I.Y. kinda gal making a go of it as a clothier. Like Plush herself, she's someone we need to hear more from.

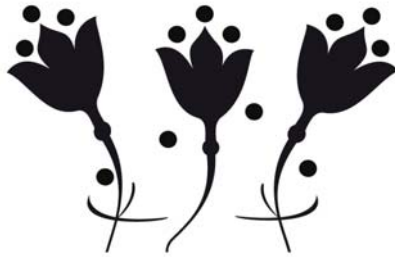
–The East Hampton Star

~AUTHOR ACKNOWLEDGEMENT~

This book is dedicated to the loving memory of my dear husband Herb, and to my children Alan, Rhonda, and Leslie, my daughter-in-law Betsy, and my sons-in-law Andrew and Larry. Enduring thanks go to my family and friends who continue to cheer me on, including Steven Weingarten and his vigilant eye, and Hannah Garson and Muriel Lilker, my writing pals since I first put pen to paper some twenty-plus years ago. Appreciation goes to Phil Wager of *The Iconoclast* for reading chapters in their early stages. Thanks to Maureen Brady for her good advice and early edits. *Namaste* to Judy Wein and Patia Cunningham for their yogic wisdom and knowledge that I spun with writerly abandon. Pat Morrison at Penumbra Publishing worked her magic and made the chapters flow. Hugs to you all.



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PART I

Rusty ~ Present



Chapter 1

She finds it on the shelf with the vaginal cleansers and tampons, anti-itch creams and panty liners, promising accuracy and easy use.

At home, hands trembling, she breaks open the carton, grasps the thumb grip and, leaning forward on the toilet, holds the wand under her stream. She gazes at the little windows and waits for the stripes to appear. She remains on the toilet, staring at the double band. “A baby,” she whispers to the silent tiled room. “I’m going to have a baby.” She peers down and leans over, getting her face as close as possible to her belly and gives the air a little kiss.

* * * * *

Rusty is thirty-nine, and she’s only been pregnant once before – at sixteen. Back then, the thought of going through with it filled her with fear and disgust, but now she wants the life inside her – and the man who put it there. A sort of man hard to describe. Traumatized by the deaths of his family members and the accident at the root of it, only some thirty-plus years after the fact, did he sit *shiva* for them. *Closure*, some would call it – though not Walter; he’d never use a cliché like that. Wouldn’t even think it.

Walter has a way of expressing himself. Stiffly, some might say, as if he’s out of practice, or just learning the language. ‘*They are gone from me. I am of no use to them. It is time I give them to their graves.*’ And on the subject of children? The one time they talked about it... ‘*Do you like kids?*’ she’d asked over dessert at her place a month or so ago. She’d baked an apple crumble. ‘*There will be*

none, he'd said. That too was Walter. Succinct and to the point. And Rusty, unsure of where the relationship was going – she'd only known him three months then – let the matter slide. It slid ... right into her fallopian tube.

After days of worrying about the how, when, and where, she decides ... in his loft. She'll bring champagne. *Oh? And what are we celebrating?* She'll seem mysterious by not partaking, and he'll want to know why. She'll say *doctor's orders*. She'll give hints. *I have a condition ... I'm not supposed to drink ...* make him guess.

But before she gets the chance to buy bubbly or the opportunity to tease out the details, into her boutique walks the prime mover, trim and fit as a marathon runner, unannounced as usual. Short hair gray and side-parted, eyes glistening with energy, a man close to fifty, but looking older, as Europeans or folks with hard lives do, he climbs atop a counter-high stool fronting the showcase.

Caught up short, she chatters away about a movie they've seen, the Chanel exhibit she'd like to catch at the Met. Did he manage to track down a new carburetor for his vintage Mustang, while about the baby, not a word.

He studies her face. "What is it?"

"Nothing," she says, her voice going a bit higher. Absently, she refolds an already folded silk scarf on the counter.

He says, "We have already discussed Scorsese from the top to the bottom. And did we not pencil in Coco for next Thursday? And it is the pistons not the carburetor on my car that need replacement. There is something else on your mind today." He cocks an eyebrow.

And so she comes out with it. "I'm going to have a baby."

"A baby?" She might be incubating a brood of chicks the way he says it. "I do not know the first thing about a baby," he says.

"Nobody does, but they learn."

"It is not in me to raise a child."

"You don't want it." Hot tears pool in her eyes.

"I thought women took care of those things."

"You mean get rid of?" Her hands fly to her stomach, to the would-be ears of the tiny life within, for fear it might think itself unwanted.

"I did not mean it that way. The birth control pills; I thought you were taking them."

"I stopped. What was there to control? You disappeared. You were gone for months. You came back and we..." She's sobbing now.

He pulls a freshly laundered handkerchief from his back pocket and offers it to her. She swats it away, snatches up a silk scarf from the showcase, ruining it with mascara.

"Me, children?" he says, as if she proposed he become an astronaut. "Out of the question. I am not ready to be a father. Sometimes I think I am not ready to be myself. But," he says after a contemplative pause, "I will do the honorable

thing. I will take the blood test. If it is mine, I will marry you.”

“*If it’s yours?* How could you think it’s not yours! You think I had sex with someone else while you were gone?” Hurt, infuriated, she sweeps out her arm, clearing the counter of the bags, belts, and leather briefcases she’d set out to price. “*Well maybe I did!*” she roars. “Maybe I had orgies every night, right here on the showcase!”

“Rusty, please. Please don’t upset yourself.” He reaches out to quiet her.

She throws off his hand. “Don’t touch me. Get out.”

“I was wrong to say that. Let me explain, please.”

“*Get. Out!*” For emphasis, she grabs a handbag, hurls it at him. A look of surprise, but he’s quick, and she misses. Tries again with wallets, a Moroccan leather carryall with double handles and shoulder strap – anything, anything she can lay her hands on – until the door shuts behind him. Then she rubs her aching arm and wipes her eyes with the back of her hand, catching a glimpse of herself in the mirrored wall behind the showcase.

She’s got her father’s height – *der langer* – the long one, Grandma Frieda used to call him, meaning he was tall – his green copper-flecked eyes, though wide-set like her mother’s side, the strong Scanlon jaw, and auburn hair. An unusual face, a striking face. But what strikes her now are her puffy eyes and a harried, disheveled look.

Usually meticulous about her appearance, she swipes at her runny nose with her index finger, ties her hair into a loose knot above her neck, and surveys the damage.

Some stones are loose from the jeweled picture frame that went flying – a miracle the glass didn’t break – but they can be glued back. Scratches on the leather goods will buff out, or worse come to worst, she’ll mark them down. Nothing crucial. Crucial is the baby. Crucial is a baby without a father. *Her own father took a long walk when she was six years old.*

Scarves folded, belts rolled back, she restocks the shelves. Bending and reaching, briefcase here, Pucci bag there, she begins to put the store to rights. But in every fold and every roll there is the after-image of Walter, the questioning eyebrow, his shocked face, wrecking her world.

To distract herself, she tries to concentrate on her upcoming fall window display, but she can’t seem to come up with anything new.

She’s done the ocher. Done sienna. Done the bare branch thing with gloves and little purses sprouting out like leaves. Done bushel baskets, gloves and winter scarves piled among the apples. Done gym totes, spilling beaded evening bags instead of sweats and sneakers. She’s done it all, and it’s not like her to be caught up short.

Like her, is to be bombarded with ideas, to fall asleep with one image and wake up with another. Endlessly they’d fly at her, as if on wings, either the entire window concept in one fell swoop, or one piece at a time, but they keep coming, one idea leading to the next. Now all she can think about is Walter. Is he gone for

good this time?

She takes another look around her store. *Her* store and the pleasure it gives her.

For years she bought and sold for others, stocked *their* shelves, dressed *their* windows. Working two jobs, sometimes three, she lopped off the sleeves on her winter dresses to make them do for spring, lengthened her skirts and cropped her pants, belted a sweater to get a *look*, so she could save-save-save enough money to finance her own business, and one day watch the installers hoist *Rusty's* above the store front. *A little to the right. Too much. To the left. Perfect!*

Not perfect today. Today, everything's off kilter and out of sync. She can't remain here – it's taking all she has to stay and straighten up. If she goes home, she'll brood. She decides to phone her friend Lily at the antique center down the block. Before Lily opened *Renaissance*, she'd worked in Walter's store. It was Lily who brought Walter out of his funk that had to do with that car accident years and years ago.

"Sure, come over," Lily says. Business is dead. She could use a little company.

Rusty picks up muffins and drinks from Yeast Meets Yeast, chats a minute with the flour-flecked baker, crosses the street, and walks a block. She finds Lily out back, tagging Victorian garden furniture. A kindred spirit, a woman who loves her work, Lily came late to her vocation – late and loving it. Mrs. Hausfrau one minute, *I am woman, hear me roar*, the next, she turned a decrepit vacant house into the centerpiece of downtown.

"Hey! What's up?" Lily says. "You okay? You sounded stressed on the phone." She gives Rusty a long look.

"I'm good. I'm fine," Rusty says in a tone she hopes is convincing, too worn out to go through the whole thing just yet. "*You* changed your hair," she says.

"Had it cut last week. Not too short? Not too young for me?" Lily turns her head, presenting a side view of her short, spiky do.

"Not a chance," Rusty says. Mid-fifties, she guesses, Lily left her empty nest with her husband still in it. "It's adorable. You look like a rocker."

"An *alte kocker* rocker," Lily says. "Went to a new guy. Said if I really wanted to look hot, I should do my roots dark. That's the big thing now: spend money to look like you need a bleach job. What about the earrings? I'm not used to big hoops."

"They set it off. They're perfect."

Of hair length and hoops, Rusty knows the difference between Class A and passé. Seasons before the runway models thrust their hips and slouch down the catwalks, her fashion antennae are all aquiver, intuiting the coming styles and fashion trends. Her business depends on it. But when her life depends on it, she doesn't know burnt ocher from burnt toast.

"Come, let's sit." Lily guides her toward a shady spot. A mild breeze moves

the air around them. “Maybe it’s finally cooling off,” she says of the late August afternoon.

Rusty removes her bolero shrug, neatly folds it, lays it across her lap, and settles in, her calm manner giving the lie to her inner tumult. “Here,” she offers, “I brought you a coffee.” She hands it over, then dips a straw into her milk container and sips.

“Milk?” Lily says. “Don’t tell me you have ulcers.” She blows on her hot coffee.

Rusty looks at her.

Lily looks back, squints her eyes as if to bring Rusty into clearer focus. “You’re not ... are you? Are you pregnant?”

All Rusty can manage is a nod.

“That’s wonderful,” Lily gushes and, after a few moments of silence on Rusty’s part, amends, “It’s not wonderful?”

Rusty shakes her head and uses bakery napkins to sop up the tears running down her face. Then for the second time that day, she places her hands on her stomach over the imagined ears within, shielding her unborn from what she’s about to make known. “Walter doesn’t want the baby.”

Her friend is stunned.

“I am not ready to be a father,’ were his exact words.”

“He’s probably not.”

“Thank you. I come to you for a little simpatico, and your heart breaks for *him*.”

“I’m sorry. You must feel terrible.”

“I feel like shit. He actually said, ‘If it’s mine, I will marry you.’ I threw him out of my store.” Gently she strokes her belly. “I want his child and *he* wants a blood test. Probably gone for good this time.” The first time he ran scared when she asked for an ‘exclusive’ relationship.

“He’s crazy about you. And you told me yourself, no man ever made you feel so valued. Don’t give up on him.”

“I want him to love me,” she says.

“He loves you. I know he does.”

“He told you that?” she says.

“Not in so many words...”

“What words then, and when?”

“In the spring, just before he closed his store and took off. We were talking, and he said he couldn’t get you out of his mind. He said he dreamed about you. He said, ‘I do not want to love her,’ as if he was fighting something beyond his control.”

“And you didn’t tell me? You kept that to yourself? You let me suffer, not knowing? I thought you were my friend!”

“I *am* your friend. But I didn’t want to get your hopes up. And I wanted it to come from him, for you to hear it firsthand. He was really struggling with it.”

She leans forward, reaching out to touch Rusty's arm.

Rusty bats her hand away. "*He* was struggling?" she says in a half-laugh, half-sob. "What about *my* struggle?" My *rejection* is closer to the mark, that cold-empty-cave feeling that someone poured her insides out. She takes it out on Lily. "Were you jealous he felt that way about me?"

"Jealous? I brought the two of you together! I thought you were perfect for each other. I still do. Yes, my marriage was falling apart, but I was happy for you. If it was wrong of me not to tell you, I apologize." As if the tips of her hairdo have drooped, she pushes her fingers into it and pulls up.

"I don't know if you did wrong. I don't know what I know anymore. I'm thirty-nine years old, and I keep doing the same wrong things with the same wrong men." She sets out the cranberry walnut muffin on the filigree iron table between them and, plastic knife in hand, halves, then quarters it. If only she could portion her life into such a manageable size.

"He could be scared," Lily says. "When men get scared, they run or get mean. Women call a friend or shop themselves out of it. Walter's come full circle in a short time. Look at what he's had to deal with."

"I'm looking so hard, I can't see straight. It was a trauma for him to give up his antique store and sell off his merchandise, like selling off parts of himself, he told me. I can relate to that. But with me, it's not curios and credenzas. Want a heart? Here, take my liver too. Give, give, give, thinking I'll get back," she bursts out angrily and flings her bolero off her lap. "Good to men who aren't good to me." She stomps around the yard, kicking a twig on the grass. Lily, watching silently from her chair, bends to fetch and fold the discarded bolero.

"Love me. Be with me. Stay," Rusty says, sitting again. "I need to believe that Walter won't leave me. That he'll be there to see his child grow up, like a real father. Because mine ran out on me, I think every man will."

"How can he possibly guarantee that?" Lily says and swats at a fly buzzing around her face. "Would you believe him if he did?"

Rusty thinks on this a minute. "Probably not," she says without enthusiasm.

"So, let it go. Don't push him. Let things play out."

"And I'm supposed to do – what? Sit around and wait till he sees the light?"

"Look," Lily says, pushing up her fingers though the spikes of her hair again. I'm not going to tell you what to do or how to feel, but it sounds like you're in the middle of a storm here, and you don't know the safe way out."

"How do you mean?"

"Let this all settle down. Stop focusing on *him*."

Close-packed gray-blue feathers, a small bird hovers just above the table. Rusty and Lily look on curiously as it dips its pointy beak into a bit of paper napkin and off it flies to build its nest.

"I'm listening," Rusty says.

“Concentrate on the baby. Take care of yourself.”

“Just like that!” Rusty snaps her maroon painted fingernails.

“You put a new pin on the map with your store. You’ve been in *New York Magazine’s* ‘Best Bets.’ Did that happen *just like that?* You won ‘Best Window’ from your alliance last year. Another *just like that?*”

“I worked my ass off on those things,” Rusty counters.

“So work your ass off on *this*. Eat smart. Think smart. Do whatever it takes to have a healthy baby. It doesn’t take two people to rock a cradle.”

“Are you saying raise my child alone?”

“To start, at least,” Lily says. “To take the pressure off the both of you.”

“You mean be an I-can-do-it-all girl,” Rusty says. “Run my business *and* take care of my child.”

More and more each day, women are doing it, but more and more each day, Rusty wants a father for her child.

Chapter 2

Saturday, Rusty tends to what little business there is and sells a few markdowns, a gift here and there. Sunday, she devotes to unpacking the fall merchandise, tagging and setting out her goods, repeating like a mantra, *take care of yourself, take care of the baby*, and listening to, but ignoring, Walter's barrage of missed calls. 'Rusty, please answer your phone.' 'Are you there?' 'Can you hear me?' *Take care of yourself. Take care of the baby.*

And she is taking care, resting as soon as she feels the least bit of fatigue, eating when she should, and sleeping. Well, not so much sleeping, but a few days later, she does solve her window design problem.

She'll play the new against the old, set off her trendy merchandise against antiques. *Juxtaposition*. She loves that word, sounds like a mix of things, and that's what it is, a side-by-side display of opposites, playing off, showing off one against the other. Lily gave her the idea, not in so many words, but sitting out back with her on Friday, Lily, so sleek and *today* in her big hoops and close-cropped do, amiably perched on the elaborate Victorian settee.

A quick call does the trick. "Absolutely," Lily says. "Come on over. The place is yours."

* * * * *

"It's called a *costumer* in the trade," Lily says of the hall stand with its half-moon mirror, brass hooks, and woven cane shelves. "Very popular in the nineteenth century. Besides hats, it was used to hold mufflers or a lightweight cloak. The shelves, here, for a handbag or gloves. These open sections and the metal pan on the bottom for umbrellas. All part of a *costume*."

"That could work for me," Rusty says. "For that line of arty umbrellas I took in." Botticelli cherubs, Picasso's fractured faces. She moves around the room, eyeing a fluted, straight-leg footstool. "This looks interesting."

"That's French," Lily says. "Louis XVI. I used to mix up the Louies, fifteenth century, sixteenth century? Then I taught myself that straight equals sixteen. Get it? The two S's. Louis XVI is the straight leg, Louis XV is curved." Rusty nods approvingly.

Peering down and pointing to what appears to be two wood boxes suspended under the seat of a backless chair, Rusty says, "But what are *they* for?"

"They're steps. Watch." Turning the piece upside down so that the steps under the seat are now on top of it, Lily tips back the chair. She lifts the bottom step, pulls out a succession of other steps all attached, and then pulls them down

to the floor. "A folding library chair that converts to a ladder. Those Victorians loved quirky things. Spend and show off was their MO. Ostentation was an attribute. Shop till you drop? They invented it."

"Clever," Rusty says. "Maybe folks will, er, *flip* for the accessories I put on it? Okay if I take it?"

"Take all you want."

"I'll put a card in my window. *Antiques, Courtesy of Lily Gold's Renaissance*. Maybe you'll get some business out of it."

"Terrific," Lily says. "Now, let's get these over to your place." But when Rusty moves to lift the chair, like a guard arm at a railroad crossing, Lily's arm comes down in front of it. "Don't you touch a thing! No heavy lifting for Mama. Woody Clemente's upstairs. One of my tenants. He'll give us a hand. Ever meet him?"

"Not officially, but I think I've seen him around. Wears jeans and Western boots?"

"That's him. Wouldn't think to put a guy like that behind a Singer, but he can shirr and backstitch with the best of them."

"So you told me. Cornered the market on custom toss pillows and hostess p-jays."

Lily announces she'll go get him. A few minutes later, she's back.

"Like nothin' better than assistin' such a lovely lady," Woody says after Lily introduces them. "Rusty Scanlon," he repeats. "Right nice name."

A husky man with a short neat gray-tinged beard and coordinating ponytail, he lifts the costumer with ease. "Your *bow-tique* is down the block, Miss Lily said. I can walk it." And like a wrestler applying a body-lock, he wraps his arms around the artifact, tips back on his western heels, and carries it out onto the porch, Rusty a few steps ahead of him.

"Careful," she says, "you can't see around that thing. The steps are coming up. There're three. One more," she says when he's almost to the street.

At her shop, he asks, "Where y'all want this to go, Miss Rusty?"

Miss Rusty? Southern gent, is he? "If you'd just lift it into the window..."

While he's gone to fetch the footstool, she starts picking and choosing. A pair of russet knit gloves with matching leather cuffs, under the double handles of an embossed cordovan bag. A red tote with black patent corners and shoulder strap.

"Miss Rusty?" he says from behind her.

With a little yelp of fright, she turns. "Woody! I didn't hear you come in."

"No matter. When I'm a-stitchin', a big ol' bear could steal my Singer right out from under me, and I wouldn't know. That's how engrossed I get. My mama, bless her bourbon-lovin' heart ... 'Woodridge,' she used to say, 'You got the hands of a genius, and the brain of a mole.'"

"That's a terrible thing for a mother to say," Rusty can't help responding, having heard more than a few terrible things from her own mother.

"A good woman, my mama. Home-schooled me by and by. Taught me all I need know. But she has no valve."

"Valve?"

"Safety valve. She just lets it all it out, whatever's on her mind."

"My mother used to sew," Rusty says.

"Did she now?" He gives her a long look.

"Clothes for my dolls from broken umbrellas. Cut the fabric from between the ribs." A one-shouldered evening gown for Barbie, a dinner jacket for Ken.

"Then we have something in common, your mama and me."

"I guess," she says, a little surprised at his assumption, and then she's suddenly overcome with a craving for food so intense that if she doesn't eat immediately, she's afraid both she and baby will perish. Her stomach growls audibly. "Excuse me." Embarrassed, she rushes behind the counter and reaches for the sleeve of Saltines, rips through the cellophane, wordlessly offering some to him.

No thanks, he just ate.

She polishes off the packet. Shamelessly sighing with relief, she dusts the crumbs from her black jersey bosom. "Hunger just hits me sometimes."

"Your belly talks, you best listen. Be happy to get you some real food from across the street. The Thai place, the bakery?"

Did he say Thai? Did he say savory little dumplings stuffed with ground meats and finely shredded cabbage with tangy slivers of ginger? Did he say individual pear and strawberry tartlets peaked with crème fraiche? She's all but drooling – she hardly knows this man, how can she send him running for food? "No, it's okay. I can always have them deliver later if my stomach gets the better of me. I'm fine now, really."

"They're not doin' takeout today." His tone is harsh and why so insistent? *He's no gent, southern or otherwise.* "Delivery boy called in sick, know that for a fact. It's just across the street. So what'll it be? A sweet from the bakery, or some tasty Thai?" he asks, his voice going soft, cajoling.

Let him get it, already, you're going to pass out from hunger. She reaches under the counter for her bag, pulls out her wallet. "If you're sure you don't mind?"

"Allow me," he says.

"Oh, no," she says and means it. "I can't let you do that."

But he won't take no for an answer, and she relents, thinking she'll have to reciprocate in some way.

Busying herself with the window, she arranges the glove and bag combo on a step of the library chair, the tote on another. And, for evenings out, embroidered silk cases for cell phones. *Looking good,* she says to herself, looping a mohair muffler run with metallic thread onto one of the costumer's hooks. For no apparent reason, an idea for the walls hits her – that roll of tan linen fabric stored in back! She can feel the staple gun in hand when a pungent aroma drifts

through the door, followed by Woody toting a paper sack and a white cardboard box tied with string. She turns from her work, steps down out of the window. "That was so nice of you, really," she says to him, taking the food and setting it down on the showcase.

"Happy to lend a hand." He makes no move to leave. "I thought you were hungry?"

"Well, I was. I am. But I'm busy now." She hopes she doesn't sound ungrateful; he did go out of his way and treat her to lunch. Truth is, she'd like to eat, but she doesn't want him watching her. And why is he hanging around? "Is there something I can show you?"

"Now that you mention it, there is. Your fine things here remind me of my mama's birthday."

"Happy birthday to Mama," she says. "Do you have anything particular in mind?"

"Can't say I do."

She shows gloves, a neck scarf, a variety of small leather goods, a travel jewelry case with dove gray lining; she has it in cream, black or red. He favors the scarf, takes a corner between his fingers. "Right fine gauge," he says. "Could you..." He gestures with his hands for her to model it.

She swings the silk around her neck, ties it, shifts the soft loose knot to one shoulder, remembering she was wearing a silk scarf the first time Walter made love to her. How, after he undressed her, he made a sash of the scarf, drew it around their bare waists, and tethered them in a silken knot.

"That will do nicely," Woody says.

"Pardon?" Rusty says, embarrassed, thinking he has access to her private thoughts.

"The scarf will do," he says. "Somethin' on your mind?"

"No. Not at all. Shall I gift-wrap it for you?"

"Please," he says, abstractedly, as if he too has turned away from his own thoughts. "Gift wrap, yes. For Mama."

Bronzy-boxed and fuchsia-bowed, the purchase is handed over. He takes it, but not entirely. More, he clasps it between thumb and forefinger, so that she can't quite let go. Finally claiming his purchase, he says, "There is one other thing."

"What's that?"

"You said your name was Scanlon."

"Uh-huh."

"Any relation to a Jack?"

"Say that again?"

"Are you related to a Jack Paul Scanlon?"

Scarcely breathing, she says, "That's my father's name. You know him? You know my father? Where is he? Did he send you here?"

Woody flicks the bow on the gift box. Soft, satiny, it responds with a

bounce. “Did know a Scanlon, name of Jack Paul. Far as how I knew him, you might say it was business that brought us together. And business that broke us apart.” He flicks the bow back and forth with his index finger, in a teasing, provoking way. “Far as where he is, thought you might be able to help me on that score.”

Why? she wonders. Why is Woody looking for her father? Her father she hasn't seen or heard from in thirty-three years. This man she both resents and longs for. Of Woody, she's suspicious. All that friendliness and generosity, this guy has an agenda. Buying her food ... ha! Probably doesn't even have a mama. *Hold on. Take it down to a low boil. He knows more about Jack Paul than you do. Turn the beat around. Play with his head, instead of letting him play with yours.* “Wish I could help,” she says. But we haven't heard from him since I was six. And you?” Her heart is a ball-peen hammer in her chest. “How long since you heard?”

Still toying with the bow, he says, “Met him in the nineties. Just outside of Vegas.”

She was where in the nineties, doing what? Her mind races back, trying to align timelines and lives. In her twenties then, new to New York, she roomed with other models. Did per-diem work in Seventh Avenue showrooms, pirouetting for out-of-town buyers, propositions aplenty. She went to clubs and danced all night. She smoked and drank but didn't do drugs. She met a man she thought she loved, but he didn't love her back.

“My Mama took in boarders then,” Woody continues. “Folks passin' through, lookin' for work, stayed a week, a month or two, was all. Mostly short-timers. Your daddy – if he was your daddy – a while longer.”

Rusty tries to imagine the boarding house. Was there a porch? Did it look out onto the street or a back road? Was there a yard? Did her father ever sit out there and speak of her, the cute little things she did, things that kids typically do that parents are so fond of repeating to anyone who'll listen? *Tell me! Tell me now! Give him flesh! Make him breathe!* “My father was tall,” she says.

“This one was tall,” he says, as if remembering the others who weren't. “Tall and lanky. Strong in the jaw.”

Rusty runs her knuckles along her jaw line, and it's her father's face she's touching.

“Matter of fact,” Woody says. “His hair color was somethin' like yours, only more reddish.” She feels her father's hands in her hair, braiding it, twining the sections one into the other. “A nice way about him too. Helped my mama out with paintin' and cleanup and such. If it wasn't for that misunderstandin', we'd probably still be knowin' each other.”

“What misunderstanding?”

“Can't go into that now. Got to get over to Mama and wish her a happy birthday.”

“You're flying out to Vegas?” Rusty asks.

“Mama don’t live in Vegas no more. Since I come east, she come right along with me.”

A grown man with his mother trailing along? “You must be very close,” Rusty says.

“Best friend, I got. But it was sure nice chattin’ with *you*. Have to do it again, real soon. Know a real fine place too.” He reaches into the breast pocket of his jacket and slips out some sort of appointment book. “Thursday night suit you? Pick you up at closin’.”

Hey, slow down a minute. Won’t Mama mind? But she wants to know more about her father ... and he knows it. Yet how smart is it for her to be alone in a car with him? He could take her any place.

“Maybe I can meet you there.” She writes up the sales ticket, giving him a hefty discount as payback for lunch. She doesn’t want to owe this man a thing.

Turning his sharp brown eyes to her, he says with a little smirk, “A friends-and-family discount. Thank you kindly, Miss Rusty.” He pays in cash, with a thick fold of bills from a wide silver money clip, centered with a turquoise stone shaped like an eye. “I’m not one to argue with a lady. If it’s meetin’ you want, it’s meetin’ you get. Let’s say the Green Ox, on Forty-Seventh and Collins, in the old post office.”

She’s never been, but she knows the building. It’s the one with the artists’ studios and workshops. The restaurant on the top floor used to be the employees’ cafeteria.

“I think you’ll find it to your likin’,” he says.

Chapter 3

When Walter's calls keep coming, finally she picks up. How is she, he asks.

"How *should* I be?" she thunders, and in response to why she hasn't answered her cellular phone – *cellular phone*, the world calls it a 'cell' but Walter's got to be different – "I'm answering now!" she says. "What do you want? And make it fast, I'm busy." She is and she's not, putting the finishing touches on her window, she's got a few minutes to spare, the same way she does and does not want to speak to him. "Talk," she commands.

Not like this, he wants to see her.

"You know what I look like." She turns to the mirrored wall behind the showcase. Feature for feature, it's all her – the high plane of cheekbone, the broad span of jaw. Semitic? No. Gaelic? No. There's Tartar in there somewhere – horsemen, sabers high, raping Eastern Europe, generations before Grandma Frieda.

The makeup too has her imprimatur. A greenish gray accents the eyes, burnished copper flashes off the cheeks, rich clay at the lips. And with her tender breasts under her clingy black top and her waist wrapped in purple leather, it's Rusty, every inch.

"Do right by me?" she snorts. "How do you plan to do that?"

"Marry me."

Her heart skids to a halt. She has prayed and imagined those words; *a la* Disney she has made them sing and dance. Put on skates and all laced up, they triple-axeled on the ice. But not today. Today she wants more than a man to say, 'Marry me.'

"Am I missing something here?" she asks Walter. "Did you not say last week that you weren't ready to be a father? What are you? Some quick-change artist, and I'm supposed to hold my breath, waiting for you to decide who you want to be, and when you want to be it?" She slams her cell phone down on the showcase and a moment later picks it back up. "I trusted you," she says, her throat pinched and ragged. "I confided in you. I told you things I never told anyone." She hears no response. "Walter? Walter?" The call has gone dead.

She moves to her window. *Drape that shawl! Prop that bag!* The tangible, knowable world of product and goods, the touchable, feelable world of merchandise. *That*, she knows. Knows the feeling of arranging and placing, the comfort it provides. Knew it as a child, stocking shelves with Hellmann's Mayonnaise in her grandparents' grocery – pyramids of Libby's Cling Peaches stacked on the floor, morphed into the perfect accessory, positioned just so, in her display window.

To get a better perspective on her handiwork, to see the display as a

potential customer might, she swings open the door and walks out into the street, when a vintage Ford Mustang pulls to the curb.

“Do not send me away,” Walter says.

She turns on her heel, marches back into her store, grabs the box of umbrellas resting on the counter, chucks them up under her arm, and storms to the window. He rushes to her. “Where are you going with that? It is too heavy. You must not carry. Let me do it.” He tugs at the box. She yanks it back. Umbrellas topple to the floor. She glares at him. “Happy now?”

“Do not bend,” he commands. “I will pick them up. What is that smell?” He lifts his chin and sniffs the air. He makes a sour face.

She sniffs. “My lunch? I just had Thai.” Those delicious, crispy, spring rolls; she thinks she’s hungry again.

“It is not Thai. It is something here in the window.” He leans in, takes another whiff. “Ugh,” he says. She breathes in deeply, the mingled scent of wool yarns and silk threads, of leathers and dyes and it rivals any perfume – keep your Chanel and your Shalimar. If she could bottle it, she would – the aroma of a new season.

“It’s the merchandise that just came in,” she explains. “A day or two, it will evaporate. Is that why you came here, to tell me my store stinks?”

“That is not why. But lately I have become sensitive to certain odors, and my stomach is not right. It begins in the morning and sometimes lasts all day, I cannot keep anything down.” He places the retrieved umbrellas on the counter.

“Are you trying to tell me you have morning sickness?”

“I do not know what to call it, but...” Hand to mouth; the color drains from his face.

“Are you going to be sick?” All over her new suede bags?

“It will pass. I am here to resolve our problem,” he says with a deep sigh.

“Oh, so now I’m a problem?”

The hard lines of his face soften. “I ... I did not mean it that way. And you should sit. You can develop varicose veins from standing on your feet.”

“Would you rather I stand on my head? I’m not an invalid. I’m just pregnant.”

“We have created a life. That is not *just* pregnant.”

“Listen, you,” she says, parasol pointed like a sword, giving him no ground. “You’re talking about *my* body this baby’s inside of, *my* womb.” With each *my*, the air between them gets a little poke. “*My* hormones on a rampage. *My* nausea. *My* leg cramps. *My* sore breasts.” She advances till he’s backed up against a jutting shelf that clips him on the shoulder. He flinches, rubs, sidesteps her next strike. “So don’t go telling me what pregnant is and isn’t.”

“I did not come here looking for a dueling partner,” he says, a pained look on his face. “There are things I must say to you, and your store is not the place. Come.” He starts to reach out to her, then thinking better of it, draws back. “Take a ride to the beach with me,” he says amiably. “It will be empty now, and

peaceful. You like the beach this time of day. I have fold-up chairs in the car, and I packed some snacks in case you get hungry,” he says in his detail-oriented way.

She can see them at the beach. The stillness latching onto the air, the sleepy sun, low and heavy in the sky. Their noses filled with the smell of the wide rolling sea, side by side in their chairs, digging their bare toes into the wet sand. *Move your chair, Rusty. Here it comes!* Scrambling to rescue their belongings from the tide, him smiling at her, though she has said nothing funny.

But for all that, can she trust him to mean what he says, to do next week, next month, what he attests to now? And so she gives no ground. “I don’t have time for the beach,” she says in a quick, sharp tone. “I have to finish my window. People walk by, they want to see merchandise. If the window is empty, they think the store is too.” Purposefully, she turns and repositions the costumer. Walter taps the antiquity. “From my store,” he says, his finger lingering there, as if drawn back to the strange dust that had settled over his store then – more mausoleum than going business, Walter’s antique shop featured the contents of his childhood home – he never sold a thing. Monk-like, he was living down in the basement, his bed a narrow cot. The lines in his forehead deepen, he makes as if to speak, but doesn’t.

“It’s on loan from Lily,” Rusty says. Her voice is subdued. She senses she might be intruding on his thoughts. “She didn’t mention it was yours.”

“It is no longer mine,” he insists. “I was not in my right mind, holding onto tables and chairs, as if they had the power to resurrect my family.” He clenches and unclenches his fists as if he still might be called upon to fight that power. “We are starting our own family. We owe our child a stable home. I want us to be married. I want our child to have a name.”

“*Owe*, as in debt and obligation?” she says. What kind of beginning is that for a marriage? The baby will have a name. Scanlon.”

“Rusty ... I am trying,” he says. “And you are not ... you are not giving me one single inch. A child should start out life with both a mother and a father.”

“I did. But that arrangement didn’t last long.”

“You think I will leave you as your father did. Well, I have my worries too.” Sweating, he wipes his upper lip with the back of his hand. “I fear that our child will die young and tragically as my brother did, and I will be to blame,” he says, and then falls into a lull of silence.

“In the car accident...” she says carefully, trying to pull his words toward her.

He doesn’t confirm or deny, but says, “I do not sleep nights, imagining that disaster will follow disaster as it did in my parents’ home, yet I want our child. I want to raise it with you. Unless you do not want me. Then that is something else.”

Her eyes grow hot and wet. “I do want you.”

He inclines his head toward her, takes her hands in his. “Then let us go now to City Hall.”

She lifts her head to gaze up at him. "What about the blood test?"

"Forget the blood test. I believe you. If you say it is mine, of course it is mine," and his tone and his look, and his hand in hers, so warm and accepting, she's tempted to say, *Okay, let's go. You've come around. We can work things out.*

And yet she challenges him, risks sending him away again with her want and need to be assured he will not leave her. "Now?" she demands. "What's the hurry? Give me a little time. That way I can plan. Buy a dress. Invite some friends. It is a celebration, isn't it? Or are you afraid you'll change your mind? Now or never, is that the way it is with you? A *Beat the Clock* wedding or none at all?"

"I am not beating a clock. Before you, I was nothing, useless as a puppet without its strings. You spun me back to life, Rusty. My palms tingle when I see you." His voice has grown soft, his eyes moist. She can hear him breathing. He's watching her closely. She waits out the silence. "You must believe this," he says.

His words fling open the chambers of her heart, and she waits for the words – the magic words, the *I love you* they use in poems and Broadway musicals – for the assurance she craves. But there's no point in wanting or waiting – Walter says what Walter wants when Walter wants to say it.

Grab a husband because she has to? She's her mother all over again – a mistake Rusty swore she'd never make. She'll be Tough Girl, I-Can-Do-It-All Girl. It's the style today, like animal print leggings – single women do it all the time. "I'm not going to marry you," she says.

"But I am ready. What is the problem?"

"You don't love me."

"I did not say that."

"You *did not* have to," she snaps, mocking his rigid manner of speech, and turns back to her window. "I have work to do," she says to the library chair and the paisley shawl trailing down its steps. "Please leave," she says. Hearing no movement from his quarter, she adds, "Now!" She yanks furiously at the shawl, tearing apart the display that was so right moments ago and now is so wrong.

Is she wrong? she wonders as soon as he's gone. Wrong not to give 'one inch?'

