

12
HONEY
MOON

A Novel

K.L. BRADY

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A Novel

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In Loving Memory of
Francine V. Brady
I miss you every day.

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Thank you to God for giving me this gift and the beautiful inspiration for this book. Since Mommy passed away, I wondered if I could ever be funny again and, through Your grace and mercy, I've finally arrived at a place in my life where I can laugh and smile.

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Honeymoon

[huhn-ee-moon]

1. A vacation or trip taken by a newly married couple.
2. The month or so following a marriage.
3. Any period of blissful harmony.
4. Any new relationship characterized by an initial period of harmony and goodwill.

♡ ONE

Judge Dread

A Friday in April that year...

Crushing fear and chronic romantic failures taught me in a single hour what my mother tried unsuccessfully to teach me in twenty-nine years: If I wanted to be truly happy, I needed to think like a woman—a smart one. And if I emerged from this courtroom with my freedom, that’s exactly what I planned to do. As my glance traveled across to the prosecution’s side and zeroed in on the bogus victim, four numbers seared into my brain: 90—15—3—6. Thinking like a man and following the 90-day rule was about 15 minutes and 3 strikes from landing me in jail for 6 months.

“Your Honor, I’d like to cite *Pena versus the Commonwealth*—” I started before he gave me the hand.

“There is no burden to prove intent in a simple assault case, Ms. Vincent. Nice try.”

Strike one. On to Plan B.

“S-S-Sorry, uh, sir...your honor,” I stammered. “I swear to you...I did not unjustly harm Mr. Wiggins.”

I tried desperately to squeeze some truth from this bold-faced lie. Standing in the Circuit Court room wearing an overpriced save-me-from-jail suit, I couldn’t help but wonder why I deigned to represent myself at my own misdemeanor hearing. I’d grudgingly choked down two

semesters of law school at my mother's command before dropping out and understood just enough legal terminology to be dangerous to myself and others. In a timely flash, the disapproving grimace of my attorney mother, a Georgetown-educated priss, whizzed through my mind like a bolt of lightning. She had an extreme aversion to any actions that might sully our good family name. Watching me plead in my case in that court would've sent her straight into anaphylaxis shock. And if the shock didn't kill her, she'd surely have slaughtered me.

Nope, I'd take my chances with jail. Statistics showed pro se litigants (fools who represented themselves) engendered more sympathy from judges than those with representation. And I figured if I mucked things up badly enough, the judge would declare a mistrial and I could hire a lawyer to clean up my mess the next time around.

"This is all a big misunderstanding, one I'll be happy to clear up if you give me the opportunity." In my mostly dignified and obedient years, I'd never lost my couth before, at least not in law-breaking proportions. Yet, there I stood, ten minutes from doing time in the big house, my face chili pepper hot and equally reddened from the stress. I flicked my hair back and smoothed my skirt to dry the sweat from my drenched palms.

Judge Baxter peered down at me from the bench, like a justice god from his throne, the harsh fluorescent lights shining a halo around him. Just my luck. I remembered him from my father's firm's Christmas gala and a pang jolted my stomach. My rump roast was toast.

He peered over the top of his rimless spectacles before returning his attention to my file. "Hmm. Okay, let's see what we have here...a bruised leg, acute lacerations to the face and arms..."

"Uhh, Your Honor. For clarification purposes, I did specify *'unjustly'*. And those lacerations are only little cuts," I said before mumbling, "*not the cold-blooded shanking he deserved*" through clenched teeth.

The judge leaned his rotund, robed body against his chair back and swiped his palm across his forehead, noticeably exasperated with what Mother might term ‘my shenanigans’.

“Thank you, Ms. Vincent. However, it may behoove you to respect the fact that after serving twenty years on the bench, I’m well aware of the definition of laceration and other such legal mumbo-jumbo. Now, may I finish?” he snapped.

Okay, Mr. Judge Unprofessional.

I snatched my head back. How dare he? His sarcasm was neither attractive nor necessary. But his demeanor cooled and eyes narrowed with every frosted word that left his mouth, which rattled my confidence to no end. I’d been duly warned, so I replied, “Yes, sir. Please proceed,” before tightening my lips shut.

Strike two.

“I appreciate your authorization,” he said, adding more unnecessary snark. He again traced his finger down my rap sheet. “Now, where was I... a broken nose, sprained ankle, and bruised tailbone,” he said, pausing to lean forward in his seat, apparently eager to glimpse my expression. I bet he couldn’t wait to hear my argument.

I couldn’t wait to hear it, either.

Mostly because I didn’t have a clue about what I planned to say. How would I convey this story in a way that wouldn’t suggest that I kicked Mitch’s ass, when, in fact, kick his ass is precisely what I’d done?

How could I feign innocence when my only true regret centered on the unfortunate show of restraint that resulted in him leaving the scene in an ambulance—and not a coroner’s van? I wish I could plead temporary sanity because beating him down in the street like a purse-snatcher on payday served as a sign that I had finally come to my senses.

He continued. “Since your vast education equipped you with sufficient knowledge to provide me with the definition of laceration, I

wonder if you'd share with the court how you would define the cause of Mr. Wiggins' injuries...*if not simple assault?*?"

I chewed on the words like cud in a cow's mouth before spitting them out, believing my statement could be the difference between hitting the bars or sleeping behind bars after my hearing. "With all due respect, I believe the word you're looking for is *comeuppance*." My response sparked a wave of laughter among the spectators. "You must, I mean, please understand, sir. We dated for three months," I said, thrusting my three fingers in the air like a Hunger Games salute.

As I glanced at my digits, I realized the brief length of time might sound ridiculous to some, but wasting time with a lying dog always felt like too much time, whether three minutes, three months, or three years.

"I met him when he rolled past me in a wheelchair. Claimed he'd been diagnosed muscular dystrophy. He was handsome, seemed pretty smart, and I don't discriminate against wheelchair people, so I agreed to lunch. Truthfully, I was starving, and my Jimmies were squeezing my toes. Plus, I knew wherever he invited me to we'd be both sitting down.

"To my surprise, we hit it off. Shared the intimate details of our lives, including my recent receipt of a sizeable inheritance. After a few weeks had passed, he began asking me for money to obtain advanced physical therapy. Said he'd rise like Lazarus and walk again, except he wasn't dead...yet. As Ray Charles could see, this *so-called* victim didn't need physical therapy, and the only thing he needed to put in a wheelchair was his limp—"

"Ms. Vincent!" Judge Baxter interrupted.

"Wrist, your honor. Wrist," I said, flapping my hand to mimic his. "He always did this 'honey-child' thing with his wrist. Drove me nuts. Perhaps *mental therapy* would've been in order." The two-timing weasel was dressed in a pity suit, and he had a thick white bandage strapped across his nose like a badge of brutality.

Poser.

“Later, I discovered his deception in the worst way.”

“Mmm hmm.” Judge Baxter nodded. “Please continue.”

“So, on the day in question, I’m in Bethesda, driving down Wisconsin Avenue in my new Mercedes Benz. Fresh off the lot. I was barely a mile from the dealership when BAM! I’m rear-ended at a red light. At first, I’m in shock. So I check myself in the rearview mirror to make certain I’m okay. I see a man, from the chest down, slow jogging toward my car. Imagine my surprise when I rolled down the driver’s side window and Mr. Wiggins’ face was in my face, no wheelchair, and he’s trotting around like a prized stallion.”

The lying sucker sat face forward with a smug grin, looking like a black light bulb with his bald head sticking out of a neck brace. “He had no idea I’d be the one sitting in the driver’s seat. So when he bent down to hand me his insurance card, let’s just say I hope he was wearing a diaper.”

“I see,” Judge Baxter said amidst the courtroom chuckles. “What happened next?”

I cleared my throat, you know, to cough up the lie. Then I took a long Southern-belle dramatic breath. “So, now we’re face-to-face. And I’ll admit I’m a bit surprised because he’s been missing in action for a month, since the day after we’d slept together, to be precise. But I’m willing to listen to reason and discuss the repairs, so I decide it’s best to step outside to speak to him. Man-to-woman, eye-to-eye. Calmly, of course.

“But I, uhh, *first* stuck my fist out the window to, uhh, *check the temperature outside*. Imagine my surprise when my knuckles *accidentally* grazed his nose. He could’ve dodged me, but I think the muscular dystrophy slowed his hand-to-nose coordination.”

I scanned the room to see if the fish were biting this bait and, from my perspective, they hooked onto every word I spoke. That’s when I held up my hand to show my jewelry. “I wear a lot of rings, as you can

see. I suspect this one might be responsible for the teeny tiny lacerations around his whopping honker. It's Tiffany's—a platinum band with a cushion-cut tanzanite and a double row of diamonds. Two karats. His massive nose? This ring? It would've been harder to miss him.

“Anyway, I'm concerned about his well-being because he's bent over, yelling unnecessary expletives. So I open my car door to check on his physical state. In all of the excitement, I misjudged the distance between Mr. Wiggins' head and the car door, so it may have slammed into his skull, just a smidge. The next thing I knew, he crumpled to the ground and curled into the fetal position. By now, I'm overridden with guilt to the point that my suffering was nearly too much to bear.”

“Hmph. Sounds as if you weren't alone,” he said.

After I had cleared my throat, I examined Judge Baxter's face for signs he'd bought this steaming pile of cow pucky, bit my bottom lip, and continued on, treading carefully.

“So I bend down, in my new dress and heels, and *snatched* him, er, I mean, *grabbed*...well more like *lifted* him by the shirt collar to help him up. But he's a big guy, as you can see, and I'm a little unsteady in my four-inch heels. So I'm like ‘oh my God I'm gonna drop him’ because he's heavy and my knuckles are still sore. After I get him halfway off the ground, I lose my grip, and BAM! He slams flat onto the hard, cold asphalt, right next to shards of glass from a broken bottle, which also may have contributed to the *teeny tiny* lacerations. Maryland must improve its litter law enforcement. Someone could get killed. Anyway, by this time, he's barely responsive. So, I softly called his name—”

“Your Honor, she didn't softly say anything. She called me a lying bastard so loud my mother heard it,” Mitch hollered. “And she's in Cleveland.”

Of course, those were the only words of truth to escape from his *cracked, ashy, lying* lips. But it wasn't his turn and he'd interrupted my story.

What's worse? Judge Baxter appeared to give his interruption some credence. So I panicked.

"I object! Leading the witness!" I responded. Unfortunately, the only phrase I could've spoken that was more irrelevant was "Pick-up on aisle three!"

More like strike three.

"You are out of order, Ms. Vincent," Judge Baxter said in a near growl. He turned to my accuser. "No more outbursts, Mr. Wiggins. Your opportunity to tell your side of the story will come soon enough. Now, please finish your account, Ms. Vincent."

"Well, when he was non-responsive, I softly patted his face." Translation: Pimp-slapped him so hard I left a palm print. "And then I called 911."

A stone silence settled over the courtroom as we all watched Judge Baxter's facial expression for a reaction. When he didn't budge or speak, I delivered my rousing conclusion. "So I believe I've demonstrated there was no intent to assault anyone. This was all an innocent mistake, a series of unfortunate coincidences."

That's when Mitch coughed BS. Honestly, I tried to keep my mouth shut but what fell out of my lips next probably sealed my fate.

"And if you think about it, Your Honor, Mr. Wiggins claimed he suffered from an affliction that required a wheelchair. So, I believe God used me as *His vessel* to make an honest man out of the so-called victim. You see, he arrived in a Lexus but, thanks to me, he left on a gurney. I saved his soul."

The court erupted in laughter, but I didn't. Neither did Judge Baxter. His scowl stretched the corners of his lips downward, almost to the hem of his robe. He pushed his glasses onto the bridge of his nose and dryly said, "This is the whole of your defense, I presume?"

I nodded, wondering how one should go about learning how to be someone's bitch. The need for a crash course felt imminent.

He grunted and gripped his gavel. “Court will be adjourned until Tuesday at 9 am to afford Ms. Vincent an opportunity to secure proper counsel. That is if she doesn’t want to be held in contempt and spend thirty days in the company of the county Sheriff’s department.” He gave me a sidelong glance. “Have I made myself sufficiently clear? Or shall I define the word *contempt* for you?”

“Uh, no, sir. Proper counsel. Tuesday at 9 am. Got it.”

“No, you don’t *have it*, but you better *get it* by Tuesday.” The bang of the gavel echoed like the hollow thump of a fallen guillotine, and my neck was ripe for slicing.

“Court is adjourned.”

• • •

My Grandma Pearl once told me there are two kinds of men: the ones who will make you count your blessings, and the ones who will make you want to start counting from zero to forget they ever existed.

Mitch Wiggins fell into the latter category. He made me determined to not only start again but to start better. The end of our disastrous liaison quite literally drove me from love’s hangover straight to Circuit Court and in a brand new S-Class with a dented rear fender. The real shame of this sham was that I had him pegged within days, maybe moments, of meeting him. The red flags went up and flapped like crazy, batted against the winds of Deceiving Bastard, but I convinced myself to ignore the warnings and continue with the charade. And finally, I figured out the real problem.

The Honeymoon.

See, at that time, I still viewed “the honeymoon period” in a relationship as a wonderful pit stop on the yellow brick road to everlasting happiness—and I was wrong. So wrong. The actual truth was concealed behind the blare of my biological clock, which was ticking like an Old & Barren bomb merely seconds from exploding over the remnants of my life. For starters, the man sold insurance, placing him one rung up from a

used car salesman. He was so slippery I'm shocked his greasy charm didn't make him slide his fake behind out of that wheelchair sooner. He oozed slick and even shaking hands with him was like running your fingers through a curl dripping with juice de Jheri.

Oh, but he was intelligent, seven kinds of fine, and he wore the right uniform—he was an Armani-suited god dipped in creamy caramel. However, if you flipped him inside-out, I'm positive he'd look like a naked mole rat.

There's nothing worse than a man with some outside fine and some inside ugly.

Didn't matter. He was outside perfect—and that's all that mattered to me at the time. Ninety-five days' worth of flowers, gifts, five-star restaurants, and hypnotically entrancing dates. He and I marked time, step by step, toward our forever. He never lost a beat. Behaved like a perfect gentleman, in every way, according to original manufacturer specifications. In exchange, he received all the financial support I felt comfortable enough to muster which, thankfully, was a mere drop in the bucket to what I could afford. After all, I am still my mother's daughter. Stupid in love? Sometimes. Stupid with money? Almost never. Adopting the habits of my tightwad mother turned out to be my saving grace.

On day 96, post-coitus, it quickly became clear that all he ever really wanted was to stash my cash and then smash-and-dash. All that love he claimed to be so deep in spurted out of him with his load. I delivered my cookies on a silver platter engraved with our initials—MW & MW—and that spineless son of a scum sucker disappeared from the earth like the dinosaur. Then he slammed into my bumper a month later in a Lexus I found out he'd bought with the money I'd given him for “therapy.”

That was the final straw. The 90-day rule got chucked out the window and the book that delivered the lie went right behind it. Women could wait nine days or nine-hundred years to sleep with a man, but a scum sucker was a scum sucker.

He'd been pushed out of his mother's spacious womb as a skirt-chasing, scum-sucking, Casanova wannabe and he'd eventually die and return to the earth in the same sorry manner in which he lived. Only then he'd be intermingled with the dirt to help grow food to feed others of his kind.

The scum-sucking circle of life.

Women were powerless to stop this. Whether we swung our thonged booties from chandeliers or carried our celibate, sanctified behinds to church searching for the source of our hallelujah dressed in a grandma suit, a woman could do only one thing to find out if a man was truly Mr. Right. It took a year of my life to figure out the answer.

And it all started on the 96th day.

TWO♡

The Honeymoon Planner

I dove headfirst into an extended funk, which included a week-long rom-com-athon, a few hours after confronting Mitch in court. Mack, my adopted Jackapoo, sat perched at my desk, yapping away as he tapped his paws on the keys of my iMac. He loved to type (don't ask me why—something with the backlighting maybe). I got staggering drunk on the memories of the early phases of my relationships—and a half bottle of Chardonnay. I spent my time trolling Facebook and shopping Tiffany & Co. for engagement rings, looking back on those dizzying, emotional highs between day 1 and day 89 after you meet someone new, wondering why I couldn't put them on Groundhog Day repeat. I wanted to relive each first touch, first hug, first kiss, and first roll in the proverbial hay.

The Honeymoon Phase.

Those heavenly moments at the beginning of a relationship during which sublime happiness could not be contained, when you agreed to everything and fought about nothing. And the butterflies. Oh, the butterflies. How they flapped around in your stomach as you lie giddy with anticipation waiting for the phone or doorbell to ring. When the mere thought of you compelled him to acknowledge your presence on earth and in his life by dialing your number or stopping over.

And don't even start on the lovemaking.

It was so delicious and frequent you could produce enough serotonin and dopamine between the two of you to fuel a medium-sized Chinese village in the Shanghai Province. I convinced myself that this vision of perfection, excitement and passion was how we all should experience love, not just in the first 90 days, but always.

No sooner than I conceived this stroke of genius did someone jiggle the doorknob on the front door of my tenth-floor Woodley Park condo. It was my best friend, Pam. Perfect timing. *Pretty Woman* was almost over, and she'd no doubt stopped by to ensure there was still life on this planet since I hadn't taken any calls since my disastrous court appearance. In a stroke of perfect timing, my epiphany had congealed into a cohesive strategy just in time to gift Pam with my spewage.

As I stood up to greet her, I caught a glance of myself in the mirror over the mantel. Ugh. A *Real Housewife* from Hell with a pasty green face and orangutan hair. Bits of my shoulder-length kinky curled strands stuck straight up to the ceiling as if I'd suffered from some freak static-cling ailment, and streaks of dried tears ran through the puke-colored mint julep mask slathered across my face; I'd forgotten to wash it off. And while I had a body for glamor, my baggy sweats and oversized T-shirt stained with unrecognizable food particles suggested I was five minutes out of a homeless shelter. Pam strolled in and glared at me with all the horror of a child catching his parents doing the hoochie coochie.

"Jesus H. Christ. What in the Freddie Kruger is going on here?" Pam's nose wrinkled and lips curled. Despite the disaster that I was, she scanned to see my house was still immaculate (organized organization) and then noticed Mack busy at work. "It's sad when your dog spends more time writing than you do."

"He misses his buddy. Maybe he's typing a letter to her." My house cleaning technician and Mack's walker-in-chief, Lupa, wouldn't be back until Monday. She didn't like the term maid. Said it made her feel like the hired help. She spent most of her time taking care of Mack rather than

cleaning—and with me scouring my way through this depression, there just wasn't a whole lot to do.

Don't ask me why, but when I started explaining my frazzled state, the tears flowed like rain. And my meltdown had little or nothing to do with Mitch. He'd in no way, shape, or form earned any of my bodily fluids. No, once again, the problem was that I'd allowed some dumbass man and some stupid rule to shake my faith in my own judgment.

"I blame that 90-day rule and the idiot who thought it up, you know?" I sniffed and wiped my nose on the back of my disgusting hand. If my mother, a serious germaphobe, had seen that display, she would've doused me with a vat of hand sanitizer. "It's one of the biggest frauds committed against women in the 21st century. He set us up big time. He should be arrested for crimes against humanity."

"What are you talking about, crazy person?" She laid down her purse on the foyer table and plopped down on the couch next to me. Usually dressed for success in high-end suits, Pam appeared unusually ragged in her tattered jeans and a faded Gap tee as if she'd been through a ringer a time or two herself. She and her husband Joe weren't exactly the poster children for happily ever after.

"The 90-day rule is nothing but a power play. He's conned women into trying to seize the control in the relationship by withholding sex. But the reality is, we'll never get what we need using his method. As Mitch proved yet again, we'll get the exact opposite."

"Didn't I tell you to throw that stupid book away? You've been studying that thing like calculus. It seems to be all you can think about. Meanwhile, my mind is on something else. When I walked in the door, I was thinking about my grocery list. The fact of the matter is, my dear friend, you are addicted to the beginnings of things. You're a junkie for the initial high, and it's not just with love. Let's do the math."

She held up her fingers and began to count, thumb first.

“In the past five years you’ve fallen in and out of three relationships, started writing three books, experimented with one career, initiated two unfinished home renovation projects, conceived two charitable foundations and quit pursuing one college degree. Twelve beginnings that never amounted to anything. When the newness wore off and the going got tough, you high-tailed it out of your commitment like *The Flash on Red Bull*.”

I hung my head in shame, but the emotion was fleeting. She was right, of course. The beginnings were the best part, and all the hard parts that followed blew chunks. In my mind, the question wasn’t how to persevere when things got difficult, but rather, how to sustain the love of what I’m doing or who I’m with through the hard parts. So I continued jabbering and ignored all attempts to derail my train of thought. At this stage, I didn’t need her wisdom, just a warm body with ears.

“I understand what you’re saying, Pam, but you haven’t heard my entire argument. See, the nugget of truth he so conveniently omitted from his book of trickery is that the minute a woman withholds sex, that’s when the real game begins for men. We think they are playing for our hearts when they are really playing to win a *beck-and-call* girl, just like Vivian said.” I referred to Julia Roberts’ line in *Pretty Woman* as if the words had come from some Freudian journal and not a movie script.

Pam looked at me, sighed and shook her head. “You’ve been drinking?” she asked, scanning the room for bottles.

I’d learned to stash the evidence immediately after emptying them. A relative lightweight when it came to drinking, bottles lying around usually caused people to dismiss my epiphanies, even the viable ones.

I was not derailed by her attempt to change the subject. “Denying men sex is like firing the starting gun at a dog race. It signals men that the chase has officially begun. From the moment the shot is fired, they pursue us like greyhounds, not focused on love or marriage, but fixated on trying to get a mouth full of rabbit. Every gesture, every stride brings

them a step closer to locking their jaws on us and having their way. And we gobble up the Kool-Aid thinking their demonstration of patience indicates they want long-term relationships when all it proves is that they can wait 90 or more days for sex.”

I paused to glance at Pam; I'd gotten her attention. Something in what I said resonated with her, even though I wasn't quite sure how much longer it would make sense to me.

“Keep going,” she said. “I'm listening.”

“And, don't get it twisted—waiting 90 days to give up the cookies will never make a man up his ante to hold onto you. No, the minute he gets them, he'll move you into The Minimum Zone.”

“The Minimum Zone?” She was definitely interested now.

“Yes. That's when they determine bare minimum requirements necessary to keep you—and then they freeze the relationship right there. It's only during the first 89 days when they move heaven and earth to snare you. Give you hope for a forever they will never deliver. That's the entire point of the chase. Think about every broken heart you've experienced and you'll know I'm not lying.”

Pam tapped her finger against her lip. “Okay, I'll concede to part of your argument, but you're missing the big picture. Some men do marry. Some marriages do work. It's patently unfair to say all men fall prey to this mindset.”

“You want the big picture? I'll give you the big picture. Sex isn't power. The game, the pursuit – that's where the real power is. Men only marry when the smart women allow them the delusion of believing they've conquered us—when they believe they've won. We, as women, get too wrapped up in our emotions to understand that once the hound is in motion, he's not going to stop chasing until he bites us in the butt. If we go into relationships thinking like men, we will control nothing. Our needs will never be met. No, we must think smarter than men. We must think like women—with our brains. The goal is not to *control the sex*...it's

to *control the game*. We must stop acting like rabbits waiting for the chase to begin.”

Pam paused in silence for a moment then blinked three times.

“No, listen...we’ve been trained to believe that first 90 days, the honeymoon, is the first stop on the way to happiness, but *it’s not*. The honeymoon *is* the happiness. That’s where we should be fighting to stay. Because nothing but disappointment, let-down, and emotional hell will follow.”

“This meltdown is because of Mitch, isn’t it? If so, you need to get over it. He isn’t worth the time it takes to stomp a roach. If you quit spinning your wheels on this, you’ll forget he existed inside of a week.”

“No, this isn’t about Mitch. It’s about every lying jackass with questionable motives that has ever charmed and deceived a woman for the sole purpose of securing a *beck-and-call* girl. I’m done being a rabbit. From this day forward, I’m gonna *control the game*.”

The lion roared in my belly. It was a new day.

I stopped ranting long enough to turn my attention back to the TV. *Pretty Woman* was almost over. Richard Gere stooped down to one knee, hoisted up the flowers, and asked for Julia Roberts’ hand...in what?

As I analyzed the scene, he sure as hell wasn’t asking for her hand in marriage. No, he just wanted her to be committed to him, ensuring ready access to on-demand sex. Used to be my favorite scene from any romantic comedy ever. I’d mouth the words “She saves him right back” as I clutched my belly and held still in expectation.

Uh, uh. Not anymore. Those tummy-clutching days were over.

“See this part?” I asked Pam, pointing to the TV screen. “This is where Vivian makes her mistake. She should’ve kicked him in the throat, taken the money, and run. Her chance to make a clean getaway was in her grasp and she blew it. She will never be more powerful in that relationship than at the moment she told him to take his cash and shove it. Now look at her. She gives all that power away for a five-dollar

bouquet of flowers and the promise of what? A gold band? As if a ring means squat. If he's polite, he may stick it in his pocket while he's shtupping some twenty-year-old waitress a year from now. If I were her, I would've taken the wallet, kicked *Ricky* over the edge, and given him the middle-finger salute."

Oops!

I'd blurted out the name before I could change it from *Ricky* to *Mitch*. And I knew Pam wouldn't miss a beat.

Her eyes bulged and she pointed at me with the "gotcha" finger. "Ah ha! You said *Ricky*. You're right, this isn't about *Mitch* at all." Pam grabbed the remote control and turned off the TV. "Everything you do goes back to Ricky, doesn't it?"

Suddenly, I felt ill. Nauseous. Thinking of him always brought on an episode. Made my head spin as if I'd just stepped off the Tea Cups ride at Disney. You know a man is wrong for you if the mere thought of him makes you think you're dying. I gripped my stomach and groaned. If I'd been exhibiting more symptoms, I'd be convinced I was about to bite the big one. Pam didn't believe death was knocking on my door, but I heard it. "I researched the Web Doctor the other day...and I think I have Leukemia."

She scanned the array of over-the-counter medications blanketing my teak coffee table (I'd been thinking about Ricky a lot) and picked up the bottle with the colorful tablets. Then she held it to my face. "Really? Gas pills? Since when did TUMS cure Leukemia?"

I sniffled repeatedly and released my gut long enough to grab a tissue and dab my tears. I'm far from a drama queen, so I didn't understand what she was insinuating. "Well, it's either cancer or gas. I'm still monitoring my symptoms."

"That does it," Pam yelled, exasperated. "No more laptop. I'm taking the MacBook home with me until I drag you kicking and screaming out of this funk. Or at least until you quit with the self-diagnosis." She started