

Praise for Degrees of Love

“Through Susan, Slabach crafts a relatable, heart breakingly real story that will no doubt resonate with those at a similar station in life: women who love their families yet yearn for just a little more--to feel wanted rather than needed, to feel passion rather than complacency.”

—Kirkus Reviews (starred review)

“Susan’s personal decisions and consequences feel familiar and real in this smart and sensual novel.”

—Publishers Weekly

“This is an extraordinarily well-written book that will leave readers turning the pages as fast as they can to see how it will all turn out.”

—San Francisco Book Review, 5 Stars

“*Degrees of Love* will take readers on an emotional journey as we watch Susan explore the different roles in her life, working to discover what it is she truly wants most.”

—RT Review, Top Pick

“*Degrees of Love* is an astounding depiction of love, marriage, family and what life could be if different choices were made... The plot is distinctive and unpredictable. With an ending that will not disappoint.”

—Chick Lit Cafe

This is an author to watch out for and I will eagerly be waiting for her next novel. *Degrees of Love* will be added to my best of 2018 list!

—Library of Clean Reads

The ending made me sit back and think. I couldn’t just move on to the next book. This is a novel that had me talking to my girlfriends about it, going through the scenarios of the main character’s life, asking each other what we would do.

—Readers’ Favorite

*Ten Thousand
I Love You's*



A Novel

Lisa Slabach

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Ten Thousand I Love Yous

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Ten Thousand I Love Yous is a work of fiction and a creation of the author's imagination. Names, characters, places, and entities are fictitious or are used fictitiously. Any similarities to real people, living or dead, or actual incidences are wholly coincidental.

The weaker partner in a marriage is the one who loves the most.
—Eleonora Duse

Chapter 1

I SAT NEXT TO my husband in the Davis High School stadium bleachers with the sun beating on my face, and like almost everyone else, fanned my graduation program back and forth in a vain attempt to tease a Delta breeze out of the still air. Scanning the crowd, I noted all the sane people had dressed for heat. Jay had insisted on dressing for the occasion, so I followed suit and sweated in a dress that constricted my middle. He pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket, swiped at a bead of sweat gathering on his brow, and then pulled on his collar.

“Take your tie off,” I whispered.

“I’m fine.”

He and I squinted as we watched a sea of blue caps and gowns flow onto the field while the school band played *Pomp and Circumstance*. They all appeared so gleeful, smiling, giggling, and waving as they weaved their way to the waiting chairs. I wondered if they were happier about shedding the tediousness of high school, or about the journey ahead—college, leaving Davis, and testing their independence. I wondered what futures were in store for these children—yes, I still thought of them as children. Most would be heading to college. (The highly educated Davis community expected their children to go to college.) Many were headed to Ivy League schools and other prestigious institutions. Maybe, just maybe, there were a handful thinking about marriage and parenthood.

Jay and I had missed our high school graduation. We'd spent the night in the delivery room. At the time, missing the ceremony had seemed insignificant compared to the enormity of becoming parents. We hadn't understood why not marching was such a colossal disappointment to both my and Jay's parents; we had graduated after all. Now I got it. The ritual formally celebrated and marked the end of day-to-day parenthood. It was an accomplishment, an end, and a beginning rolled into one life-changing moment.

I spotted Haley's black hair shining in thick waves down her back and pointed. "There she is."

"Yep, that's our girl. Hard to miss that hair."

She had Jay's hair and olive skin and my blue eyes—the perfect blend of the two of us. Everyone had thought we were too young to get married, let alone be parents. *Their marriage will never last—and their daughter. What will happen to their poor daughter?* I glanced down and unashamedly beamed at all the asterisks following *Haley Braxton* in the program. Each tiny black dot denoted a huge win. As smart as she was beautiful, graduating with a 4.2 and attending U.C. Berkeley in the fall, she planned to be an attorney, like her daddy. That was what happened to us and our daughter. Our lives were a success and about as perfect as anyone could reasonably expect.

Jay smiled down at me. "You did a good job, Kimmy."

"So did you, Mr. Braxton."

His eyes glistened, and from nowhere, tears trickled down my cheeks. "Sorry, totally blindsided by the tears." I swiped at them and rummaged through my purse for the small tissue package I'd purchased earlier that day.

He shook his head with a chuckle. "Wrong usage."

"What?"

"Blindsided. You used the term wrong. You knew you'd cry."

"I didn't feel the tears coming."

"Why was Kleenex in your purse, then?"

"Fine. I thought I *might* cry." *Jeesh*. Mr. Litigator always had to be right.

The beginning of the speeches put an end to our bicker. The joy and excited energy of the graduates kept me from shedding another drop. After the ceremony, Jay took pictures of Haley and her friends until it was time for them to board the bus for their Senior Class party.

With the whooping and laughter fading behind us, we walked home in silence, each of us absorbed with our own thoughts. Haley had only been four years old when we'd moved to Davis for Jay to attend the University of California-Davis School of Law. We'd fallen in love with the sunny college town, with its endless bicycle paths and easy pace, and felt so lucky to be raising our daughter in a community that valued education and family. Now, she was technically an adult. When had that happened?

As we turned up our walkway I asked, "Feeling a little sad?"

"Not sad. Wistful."

Wistful described my mood exactly. We were moving to a different stage, but it would be exciting. We could do things like make love on the couch or on the kitchen table if we wanted. As much as I loved, and would miss Haley, I looked forward to nights alone with Jay.

Once in the house, I suggested we open a bottle of champagne. Jay's mood lightened and he popped the cork while I got down our crystal champagne bowls. Delicately etched with swirls and flowers, they were our go-to glasses for special occasions. My grandmother had given them to us as a wedding gift. My parents had boycotted our wedding, but Gran had defied them by supporting my choice. She and my grandfather had toasted with them on their wedding day, and she thought they would bring us good luck. So far, they had.

We met at the kitchen table. He poured and then lifted his glass. "Every ending is a beginning. Cheers." We tapped our glasses together and simultaneously sipped.

The bubbly tickled my nose, and I smiled at my husband. "Can you believe Haley has graduated? Her life really is just beginning."

"So's ours."

What an odd comment. We had been married for eighteen years. I understood we would be entering a new phase, but our life wasn't just beginning. "What do you mean?"

"With Haley going to college, the day-to-day responsibility is over. You and I will be free in a way." His voice was shaky. He took a sip and stared at his glass. "It's a chance to reboot ... try new things."

"What kind of 'things'?" Jay was very athletic. One time he had wanted to be dropped by a helicopter on top of a mountain to ski down. I'd talked

him out of it because it was so needlessly dangerous and hoped he had something else in mind.

“Adventurous things. Things we never got to do because we were parents when everyone else was young and having fun. Don’t you agree?”

As high schoolers, we’d contemplated taking a summer and traveling around Europe or possibly Australia, but now we were a little old for backpacking Europe or dancing at clubs until two in the morning. “Not really, I think that stage has come and gone.”

“Why? We’re still young.”

I laughed. He was close to being made a named partner at the law firm, and we had an eighteen-year-old daughter for crying out loud. “Fine, but no motorcycles.”

“Don’t laugh at me,” he growled. “I’m serious.”

“Okay, honey,” I said apologetically. “Let’s have some fun. We can join a bowling league,” I joked, expecting him to grin and confess what he thought we should try or where we should go. Instead, his leg bobbed a few times, and he refilled our glasses. He probably had something in the works and was waiting for the right moment to spring it on me, like when he’d secretly planned a Caribbean cruise for our fifteenth wedding anniversary.

I walked behind his chair and draped my arms on his shoulders. He smelled good. Haley was out of the house. “What would you like to try?” I whispered as I nuzzled his neck.

He jerked, knocking his champagne glass. Time slowed as I watched it roll off the table, drop to the floor, and shatter. I don’t know why I didn’t try to stop it.

“I’m so sorry. I’ll clean it up,” Jay said as he pushed out of his chair. “Why don’t you get ready for bed?”

“Okay,” I murmured, blinking back my tears. It was only a glass for goodness sake.

To distract myself while waiting for Jay, I flipped through *Modern Mom* magazine. Without fail, my spirits lifted seeing my name on a byline. Kimberly Braxton wasn’t a household name, but I was regularly published in women’s magazines.

About thirty minutes later he shuffled in. I asked, “Tired, honey?”

“Yeah.” Poor baby. He’d had a rough day. As a litigator, he’d battled in court before racing home to get ready for Haley’s graduation.

I watched him undress and admired the way his muscles flexed and moved as he stripped to his briefs and pulled on an old t-shirt. His six pack wasn’t as defined as it once had been, but he was still plenty fit. I loved this man and all I wanted at that moment was to feel close to him.

He crawled in bed, reached for his book, and settled in to read. I snuggled up next to him and rested my head against his bicep. He kept reading.

“Hey,” I said, “Let me in?”

He sighed, lifted his arm, and let me nestle into him. I knew he was exhausted, but I really wanted to make love with my husband, so while he read, I slipped my hand under his t-shirt and ran my fingertips in small swirls over his stomach.

Less than a minute later, he reached over and turned off the light. Lately he’d insisted on making love in the dark, but I missed gazing into his eyes and seeing his body move with mine. I wished he wasn’t so self-conscious about getting soft. I loved his body and always had. I was the one who’d packed on the pounds, but the extra weight added a cup size to my figure; Jay, being a breast man, couldn’t complain about that.

His lovemaking was particularly wham-bam-thank-you-mam fast and furious—the kind of sex we used to have when he’d been in law school and needed a quick stress release. It left us both sweaty. I got up to take a shower, and he was asleep before I got back to bed.

The sound of a key turning in a lock woke me sometime after two. Haley. I found her in the kitchen digging in the refrigerator.

“Hi, honey. Did you have a good time?”

Haley emerged with a bottle of water, and the smile on her face told me she’d had an exceptionally good time. “Yeah. Derek asked me out.”

“Told you the boy was smitten,” I teased.

“Mom, *please*,” she groaned.

“Alright, alright, but tell what happened.”

She took a swig of water and her smile returned. “He asked me to dance about ten minutes after we got there, and we ended up hanging out all night.”

Ah, young love. “So, did he kiss you?”

Her eyes went dreamy and she sighed. “Yeah, he kissed me. Please, don’t tell Dad. He’ll be merciless with Derek if he knows.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t.”

Jay expounded countless times on the unbridled horniness of teenage boys and was determined his daughter would not follow in my footsteps. I agreed, but it made him overly strict when it came to Haley’s natural desire to date. Some things she and I kept just between us.

“How’s Daddy? He seemed kind of bummed.”

“He’s fine. I suspect he’s planning something.”

Haley giggled. “I caught him packing a suitcase and stashing it in the garage. Think he’s going to surprise you with another trip?”

I smiled and raised my eyebrows. “Could be. We should go to bed. We’ll have to head out around seven to get you to the airport on time.”

The next morning, I woke Jay a few minutes before it was time to leave. Haley was going with a group of friends to Disneyland for a few days. We were hesitant to let her go without a chaperone, but she reminded us we were married at her age and her godmother, who also happened to be my best friend, lived less than twenty miles from the park.

Jay quickly pulled on an old t-shirt and pair of shorts, grabbed his camera, and asked to have a few minutes alone with Haley. I loaded her luggage and waited in my SUV while they talked, knowing whatever he said to her she would repeat as soon as we drove away.

He took Haley’s picture, and she yelled, “Come on, Mom. I want one with you.”

I got back out of the SUV and after a couple snaps, had Haley on her way. As we pulled out of the driveway, Jay watched us from the front porch, and Haley waved to him until we turned the corner.

“Dad’s planning something for sure,” she said.

“What’d he say?”

“First, he gave me his standard lecture about boys and drinking and then he slipped me this.” Haley grinned and held up five, one hundred-dollar bills.

“Nice.”

“Very nice. Then, he said he’d miss me and told me he wouldn’t be home when I got back. So, it sounds like you two are going somewhere.”

For most of the drive we speculated on where he might take me. Her money was on Hawaii, but given Jay's recent mood, I bet on Vegas.

After I set her bags on the curb, I squeezed her tight. I wanted to tell her to be safe, not to talk to strangers, and to call me, but checked my impulses. Instead, I said, "Have fun, kiddo."

"You, too." She laughed. "Oh hey, Dad asked me not to say anything about the suitcases or about not being home when I get back, so please don't say anything."

On the way home, I stopped for a latte. I wanted alone time to catch my breath and take in how my life was changing, how Haley was changing, and how I would have to loosen my mommy reins and let her become an adult. I missed my girl already and needed to get control of the aching feeling in my chest before going home to whatever Jay had planned. Recently, he'd been acting oddly, but it had only been a year since his mother had died, and now, we were coming to the end of a huge chapter of our lives. I could feel him gearing up for a change, antsy to flip the page and see where life would lead us next. If he wanted to be dropped by a helicopter on top of a mountain, I had to be prepared to do it with him—metaphorically speaking, of course.



Seeing our suitcases lined up in a neat row, my heart beat a little faster. I smiled in anticipation of what was coming and turned around as Jay walked into the living room.

My smile slipped as I registered the tense, straight line of his lips. His deep brown eyes, which were usually soulful and warm, glanced at me, cold and detached.

He gestured toward the couch. "You should sit down."

My stomach dropped and my mind raced with possibilities as I sunk onto the cushion. Had someone died? Had something happened to his father? What? What?

I stared up at him, terrified of his answer. "What's going on?"

He sat on the ottoman, facing me. "I haven't been happy for a long time."

“I know, but your mom died a year ago. I thought you were better and moving past it.”

“I am—I have. It’s not my mom. It’s us, our marriage. I’m not happy with us.”

Marriages have peaks and valleys. I’ve written about it, but we hadn’t been fighting. We hadn’t had a major fight in a long time. “I don’t understand.”

“I’m not in love with you anymore.”

What? What did he just say? Of course, he loved me. We were soul mates; he’d said so more times than I could remember. I must have misheard him, and I opened my mouth to object.

He held up his hand. “Kim, listen. Please, listen to me.” He kept going, and like some surreal nightmare, his words jumbled and blurred as they attacked my heart with stabs of pain. Something about not loving me ... had done his duty ... needed to be free ... our marriage suffocated him ... best thing for both of us ... would always, always care about me. He was sorry ... so sorry, but he didn’t love me as a husband anymore.

“But we made love last night,” I said still not believing him. If he needed more romance and passion, I could give it to him. Things would be different with Haley gone.

“We had sex. It had nothing to do with love.”

What he’d said wasn’t true. I knew in my heart it wasn’t true. Before I could voice my thoughts, he pulled an envelope out of his back pocket and thrust it toward me. “Here, it’s a roundtrip ticket to LAX. I thought it’d be a good idea if you spent a few days with Valerie.”

I shook my head, refusing to take it. I didn’t want my friend. *I wanted my husband.*

He set the ticket on the ottoman and stood. “I’ll call you in a few days.”

As I watched him turn his back to me, my mind flashed to my grandmother’s champagne glass smashing to the ground, not trying to save it. Next thing I knew, my body blocked the front door. “You’re not going anywhere! Whatever is going on, we’ll work it out.”

“Kim, move out of the way. I don’t want to hurt you, but I am leaving.”

“No, not until you tell me why! Did you meet someone else?” My face flamed and my pulse raced, waiting for his answer.

His jaw clenched and he shook his head. “No, dammit. Now *move*.”

“No, I love you!” I said, widening my stance while tears flooded down my face. “I’m not letting you leave without a fight, not until you tell me why.”

In one quick move, he hoisted me over his shoulder and dropped me on the couch. As he reached for the door, I scrambled back to my feet and launched at him, wrapping my arms around his legs. “You can’t tell me because you still love me. You love me,” I sobbed.

He toppled to the floor and yelled, “The only way I can stand making love to you is with the lights off! Doesn’t that tell you enough?”

I let go and crumpled, all strength gone. My husband, the man I’d loved for twenty years, the man I’d loved from the time I was sixteen, didn’t love me. I repulsed him, and he left me sobbing so hard I couldn’t think or breathe.

Hours later, I lay curled in the same spot, unable to move, feeling like I’d been hit by a Mack truck—marriage roadkill, kicked to the curb and abandoned with my heart so shattered I wasn’t sure if I was alive or dead. What a sad story it would make on the evening news that Kimberly Braxton literally died of a broken heart.

Blindsided. I now knew what it meant to be blindsided.

Chapter 2

One Year Later

*M*IRACLE OF MIRACLES, I continued to breathe despite my heart-break. I used to relish having a quiet house all to myself, but now that entire days passed without me speaking to anyone, solitude had become my unwelcome companion. Sometimes I talked to myself just to ensure my voice still worked. I hadn't realized how much I'd depended on Jay for socialization until he'd left, but the reality was Jay had been our social planner. I had loved hosting dinner parties and going to get togethers, but without Jay, I doubted an invitation from me would be welcome, and not many invites came my way.

Thus, to be around people without imposing on friends, I developed a habit of frequenting my local grocery store. I loved my Nugget Market. In addition to bargains and staples, the store carried items like duck fat, Meyer lemon infused oil, and exotic cheeses. As a bonus, the employees were exceptionally cheerful and friendly. It was a pleasant place, and the faces of the college students working at the store had become reassuringly familiar. So there I was, on the anniversary of Jay's flight, at a place of comfort, at the Nugget.

When I got out of the car, the sky was beginning to dim. The cars, the grocery carts, and the people coming and going were bathed in a pinkish-purple glow of pre-twilight. It made everything have a filtered, out of focus, not quite real, quality. The glass of wine I'd had, combined with my mood, made me

feel sensual, hyperaware of colors, the summer heat radiating from the asphalt, the sounds around me.

I'd heard an interview on the radio with a sociologist who did a study on the way women walk. Supposedly, he could tell by the way a woman walked if she was regularly having sex. God knows I wasn't, but dang, I'd love to get laid. I consciously swayed my hips—just in case anyone was watching.

I wondered if I'd see Joshua. He was one of the college kids who worked at the store. I had no memory of the first time I'd seen him but could vividly recall the day he popped out of the background and into the forefront of my Nugget experience.

When I'd pushed my cart to his line that day, I'd been distracted thinking about a dinner party I was hosting and had been perusing the food magazines by the checkout stand with the hope some scrumptious looking cover would inspire me to culinary greatness.

A checker from the adjacent line had grabbed my cart.

"I'll take you over here," the helpful clerk offered.

"No worries, I got her," Joshua said, reclaiming my cart.

I glanced up and big hazel eyes met mine, stunning me. I'd never locked eyes with anyone but Jay, and accidentally doing so with a stranger completely unnerved me.

He pulled my cart through and closed the line behind me. "I'm supposed to be going on break, but you've waited in line a long time. I hate turning you away."

"How nice of you."

"Yeah, I'm a sweetie," he joked, and smiled, showing perfectly straight teeth.

He was a sweetie, and ever since that day, I'd kept an eye out for him.

The crash of breaking glass snapped me out of my daydream, and I turned in the direction of the sound. Joshua, with his mop of dark hair, was crouched by a car, and his eyes were on me—or were they? I probably imagined his wide-eyed gaze. The scent of cranberry juice wafted toward me as I walked past, and he bent over to pick up the remains of the broken juice bottle. He had a nice butt. In my semi-wine-buzzed state, I fantasized running my hand over it.

Bad, bad thoughts. I forced Joshua out of my head, grabbed a cart, and wheeled into the store. *Strawberries were on sale, salad fixings, what else?* Joshua's butt flashed in my mind again. *Meat.* I automatically went to the family pack

section. Ribeyes were four dollars a pound cheaper if I bought the three pack. A familiar pang rippled through my chest.

Would that feeling ever stop? Jay wasn't coming back. I'd heard he was dating a twenty-something cocktail waitress from Sacramento. I pictured her with bleached hair and ginormous fake boobs that compensated for her miniscule I.Q.—not that I was bitter or anything.

Haley hadn't come home for the summer. She said there wasn't enough to do in Davis and stayed in Berkeley. I couldn't blame her. And I couldn't eat three steaks by myself ... maybe I could, but I could not afford it.

I selected a single, perfectly marbled ribeye. It was a splurge, but I hadn't sunk my teeth into a hunk of beef in a while, and if I made two meals out of it, my budget wouldn't be completely blown. It irked me having to be so cost conscious while Jay was probably wining and dining Miss Booby at one of our favorite restaurants this very evening.

With my cart finally filled with the things I needed and a few items I absolutely did not need—including a pint of Ben & Jerry's which I justified because Cherry Garcia was on sale—I rounded the corner to the checkout lanes and big hazel eyes locked on me. What could I do? His line was open. It would be rude to push past to another check stand. My chest tightened and inexplicably, my hands shook. Gripping the cart and willing my hands to still, I wheeled to him.

He grinned at me, grabbed the Ben & Jerry's, and scanned it. "I thought that was you in the parking lot earlier."

The way he'd said *you* felt intimate—as if I were someone special, or someone he knew. *He noticed me in the parking lot?* Stop. He was simply making polite conversation.

Despite my thick and uncooperative tongue, I managed to answer, "Yep, it was me."

He picked up my ribeye and examined it. "Nice cut. If you marinate it in beer for about an hour before you grill, it'll melt in your mouth like butter."

"I've never heard that before. I will, thanks."

"No problem." He grinned again and kept scanning. "So what did you do today?"

I binge-watched Outlander and struggled with how much I craved the weight of a man's body on top of me. "I wrote."

"Wrote?"

And I fantasized about hunky men in kilts. "Pretty much that's it. I just wrote." I expected him to ask me what I wrote about, but he just nodded and kept scanning. Say something. "So are you taking any classes this summer?"

"No, I graduated last December, but I'll probably go back to school this coming fall."

Thank God, I wasn't completely deprived. Still too young for me to lust after, but at least he wasn't a college kid. "Oh? Are you going to grad school?"

"Possibly. I was accepted to an M.A. in Education program."

"Have you always wanted to be a teacher?"

"Not really, but I majored in History. I figure I can either teach high school or keep working here. Not that working here is bad, but you know, I need to do something."

"You have a lot more options than you think. You're great with customers and you work hard. There are a lot of things you can do."

He stopped scanning. "You've noticed me?"

Dang. The wine and daily isolation weakened my filter. Embarrassed, I fessed up. "Yes, I've noticed you."

I peeped up at him. A huge, open smile spread across his face and his eyes shined. "Wow. That makes me feel good; someone like you noticed me."

His lack of artifice was endearing. People thought those things. They didn't voice them. He wasn't playing it cool. He was open and honest. He was sweet. I smiled back.

Wait a second. Someone like me? What did he mean? Someone beautiful and sexy? Probably not. Someone older and wiser—someone motherly.

The mom in me kicked into gear and vomit mouth ensued. As he bagged my groceries, I spewed a plethora of unsolicited advice: he should put together a resume, ask for references, utilize the campus career center, apply for internships, et cetera.

He set the last bag in my cart and smiled. "Thanks for the suggestions."

"Oh, well I'm sure you'll do great with whatever you pursue," I said, starting to go.

“Wait. I’ll walk you out.”

“Can you leave your station? I don’t want you to get in trouble.”

He shrugged and glanced behind him. “No one’s in line.”

We chatted as he walked me to my car and loaded the groceries into the back of my SUV. I could swear even though he grinned down at me, his eyes glazed over from my yammering. I talked too much, but it felt so good to talk to someone after being alone all day.

“Thanks for your help. I hope you have something fun planned for when you get off work,” I said, wrapping up.

“Yeah, I’m going to hang with this girl.”

My heart twinged with an inner sigh. Of course, he’d be hanging out with a girl. Why had I imagined his friendliness meant anything other than he was polite? As a grown woman, I should be fantasizing about having my hands on a man’s butt—Jamie Fraser’s would do nicely.



Monday morning, my editor called. I had met Wendy years ago at a San Francisco writers’ conference. She’d been launching a new online magazine for working mothers called *OTG*, which stood for “On The Go.” I had proposed a series of “How To In 15 Minutes or Less” articles. She loved it. I took the “15 Minute” challenge and came up with 15 Minute Meals, 15 Minute Halloween Costumes, 15 Minute Desserts That Impress, and even How to Wow Your Man in 15 Minutes or Less. (Jay had been quick to volunteer as my research partner.)

Irony of ironies, my reputation for marriage advice and entertaining family anecdotes had given me an entree to freelance for other women’s magazines. I continued to write the articles even though Jay and Haley no longer lived with me. Jay covered our mortgage but writing paid the rest of my bills.

I knew why she was calling and bit the bullet. “Sorry, sorry I know I usually have my piece to you by now. I’ve had writer’s block, but I promise to make the deadline.”

“That’s fine. I’m actually calling because we need to chat. Do you have a minute?”

Wendy requesting a “chat” was never good. A sinking sensation hit my chest. “Sure, I have a few minutes. What’s up?”

“I know you’ve had a rough year, with your divorce and all, and it pains me, but you’re not right for *OTG* anymore. When your contract expires, we won’t renew.”

“Has my writing been lacking?”

“Kim, you know I adore you, but part of your charm has always been the reality and human factor you bring to the readers. Lately, your articles sound false.”

Tears stung my eyes, and I fought against boohooing to Wendy. Over the last year, I had struggled to write about working mom and marital issues. What could I say? I lived alone with two cats. I didn’t even like the cats.

“Okay, well, if that’s all,” I squeaked.

“No, it’s not all. I want you to write for another site I’m launching.”

Thank goodness, I wasn’t being flat out dumped. “Who’s the target audience?”

“Divorced women.”

“Ah, something which rings true?” I couldn’t keep the sarcasm out of my voice.

“Before you say no, at least hear me out.”

It would be foolish not to. Wendy had given me my first break. “I’m sorry. I was taken off guard. I am interested. What did you have in mind?”

“A dating and sex column.”

“Are you serious?” If Wendy knew I had gone on a grand total of one date since Jay walked out, she wouldn’t be asking me to write anything.

“Of course I’m serious. You’re only, what, thirty-five?”

“Thirty-seven.”

“Fine. My point is you’re still young. You can’t tell me you’re not back on the market.”

I didn’t feel young, but more importantly, did I dare tell her about my one date? My “friend” set me up with a fifty-three-year-old divorced dentist who had a receding hairline which started mid-scalp. The nicest thing I could say about him was he had good teeth.

“Kimberly? You there?”

“Yes, I’m here. It’s a rather personal subject.”

“So were the articles you wrote about trying to conceive. They were very personal.”

“True.” If I didn’t take it, I’d have to hunt down other writing gigs, which meant sending submissions and dealing with a barrage of rejections before finding a taker or get a nine-to-five job. On the other hand, I wasn’t dating or having sex, and I wasn’t ready. Jay was still too much a part of me. I had yet to pass a single day without thinking about him. I might sound just as *false*. Besides, I wasn’t divorced yet. “Can you give me a few days to think about it?”

“Sure, but this will be a weekly column, and you’ll have to come up with an angle. I want something unique, like the 15 Minute series. I don’t want a standard dating blog.”

Wendy reinforced what I’d been told by practically everyone. I should get back in the market and accept Jay wasn’t coming back. For months, I’d pretended that he was on a business trip. I even bought a bottle of his favorite cologne. The whiff of ocean breeze combined with a hint of citrus mingled with Jay’s natural scent perfectly. I’d spray his side of the bed with it, hug his pillow, and tell myself he’d be home the next day.

A visit by Jay a few days after I’d been served with divorce papers ended the charade. He’d dropped by the house to pick up more of his clothes and sundries, saw the bottle, and pocketed it. That inconsequential, mindless act made me explode like a volcano spewing hot lava rage—rage like I’d never felt before. I’d been so infuriated about the way he’d left, refusing even to discuss counseling, and then to waltz in and start grabbing things ... ugh. It hadn’t mattered that he thought he’d left the damn bottle. It shot me over the roof. I’d demanded it back and chased him out of the house screaming, “Get out! Get out!” like a crazed lunatic. When he’d gotten to his car, I’d hurled the bottle at him. Instead of hitting him, Jay had caught it with one hand. He’d coolly sat it on the edge of the planter box, got in his car, and driven away.

It was a shaming moment that I wished I could purge from my memory. I’d acted abominably and looked my absolute worst to boot. I’d gained so much weight that I could barely zip my jeans and had to wear an oversized sweatshirt to mask my rolls. Even worse, my face had been bloated from

months of drinking too much. The good thing that came out of it was that I cut back on the wine, dug out my old Beach Body workout DVDs, and started moving.

Since then, I've lost thirty pounds, but Jay still hasn't seen me. My little freak-out prompted him to insist we communicate via our attorneys going forward. I'd attempted to halt the proceedings by making high financial demands. At the very least, I'd hoped to force a meeting, but Jay agreed to everything I'd requested: the house, alimony, half of his 401K, and his treasured Porsche Panamera, which he had bought used and insisted was a bargain. He'd be responsible for Haley's tuition and our consumer debt—lucky for him I was credit card adverse.

I'd been furious with him in spurts and had hated him in waves. Lately, I simply missed him. He had to have days when he missed me, too. How could he not?

One more day and our divorce would be final.

I sat by my phone the rest of the afternoon, seized by a crazy, irrational feeling he would change his mind. I was sure he would. He didn't. The next day I received the first of my consolation prizes: Jay's Porsche sitting in my driveway and an alimony payment padding my bank account. At least I was no longer broke.



Convinced I reminded Joshua of his mother, I stayed away from Nugget until the following Saturday. I prayed I wouldn't bump into him, but I was running low on groceries and couldn't bring myself to shop anywhere else. I had just begun to relax when I turned a corner, and big hazel eyes locked on me. *My God, he has beautiful eyes.* Was I staring or was he staring? After a couple beats, I smiled and kept going, my palms sweaty, nervous as a teenager.

"Hey, I thought about what you said." I stopped and faced him. "I really want to thank you. I've been treading water because I really don't want to be a teacher. You've inspired me to get moving with something else."

I inspired him? Warmness tingled my stomach. "That's so sweet of you to say."

We stood grinning at each other for a moment. Then he put his hand on my arm, gave me a squeeze—no, more like a hug—and said in a low, intimate voice, “Thanks again.”

His confident—dare I say seductive—touch surprised me, and I left the store in a glowy haze, certain of the growing attraction between us. If he knew how old I was, that I was divorced, and had a daughter old enough for him to date, he would probably be horrified. As flattering as his notice was, Joshua was too young and that was that.

Nonetheless, it had been over a year since I’d felt desired by a man. The thrill of it boosted my battered ego, and Joshua filled my thoughts for hours after I got home.

He was undeniably attractive, but his warmth of spirit pulled on me more. I couldn’t help imagining how it would feel to wrap my legs around his slim frame, to run my hands down his back, and grip his butt, or to kiss him in the small space between his jaw and ear. I was so used to Jay’s muscled frame that I found the idea of the Joshua’s slimness exciting, if only in the contrast to Jay. Would he have any bedroom skills? Maybe.

The only way I can stand having sex with you is with the lights out for Christ’s sake.

The happiness that had blossomed in my heart withered.

I stripped naked and stared in the mirror. Six months of working out to *Shaun T Hip-Hop Abs* had transformed my body. Look at me, Shaun T! Say, hey! I had a figure again. The *Brazilian Butt Lift* worked. I might not ever be model thin, but my stomach was flat and muffin top gone, leaving a curvy toned shape. Take that, Jay Braxton!

How old did I look? Could I pass for twenty-seven? Twenty-eight? Not in this town where I knew people, people who knew Haley and Jay, but what about strangers? Why not sell the house, move to a big city, and start over? I could be twenty-eight and no one would know. I could have a one-night stand with a twenty-five-year old hottie, and no one would know. I could experience the youth I’d never had with Jay.

I scrutinized the image in the mirror. Mrs. Braxton stared back at me.

Chapter 3

*A*T LAST, AN invitation! For years, Jay and I had been part of a group of friends consisting of four couples. Despite job changes, kids, and two of the couples moving out of Davis, we stayed close. When we were younger, we'd meet at someone's house, make popcorn, drink cheap booze, and play games or just talk and talk all night. As everyone became more affluent, our gatherings escalated to weekends in Carmel, wine tasting in Napa, trips to Tahoe, and the like.

I had barely spoken to any of the wives since Jay left. I wasn't sure if it was me or them. I didn't want to burden any of them with my perennial tears; nor did I want to be pitied or grilled on the mortifying particulars of Jay's exodus, so I didn't reach out. On the other hand, none of the women had called me either. I liked to think they thought I had a contagious disease—*matrimonium morbis* or something—and they were afraid their husbands would catch it. After not hearing from any of them for a good nine months, I couldn't stop my trembly heart from concluding they only had been friends with me by extension of Jay.

In any event, I was pleasantly surprised when I got a call from Carol. The men were headed to Oakland for an A's game, which meant the gals were free. She suggested we take the opportunity to celebrate my singlehood. My new status wasn't something I particularly wanted to whoop about, and Jay and I undoubtedly would be missing out on a couple's outing the next day but planning something for Jay and me separately was cheering. I hoped it

meant our friendship could continue. Instead of couple events, it would be girls' nights.

So Friday night I drove Jay's beloved Porsche, my car now, across town to Carol's house, bolstered with the knowledge I had value as a friend without Jay. She greeted me at the door. One look at her khaki shorts, flip-flops and t-shirt, and I knew I'd over-dressed.

Her eyes scanned me over too. "Wow, Kimberly. You look great. Love the dress."

"Thank you, I just came from a dinner date," I fibbed, not wanting to admit I'd gussied up because I thought it would be more of a party, and there was a chance I might see Jay after the men returned from the game, which was also the reason I drove over in the Porsche.

I handed her the bowl in my hand.

"You shouldn't have but thank you. Your shrimp dip is divine." I smiled. She had always loved my cooking. "Paige and Liz are already here," she said, leading me to her kitchen.

I'd met them while Jay had attended law school. Carol and Paige had been in his class. Liz and I had been supportive spouses keeping our husbands pumped with caffeine, and paying bills, while they struggled through Torts and the California Bar.

"What can I get you? We have margaritas, vodka, wine—pick your poison."

"I'll start slow. How about a glass of wine?"

Carol's phone rang and she left me in her kitchen to get my own drink. Liz and Paige were already seated around a table on Carol's patio. I inwardly groaned. The temperature was ninety degrees despite the sun going down. Of course, she would want to show off her new pool and stone slab patio, which reminded me of half a dozen other backyards in the more exclusive Davis neighborhoods. Jay would agree it was attractive, but too generic for us.

But that was Carol. She went with the latest trends and her kitchen fell in line with modern grey cabinets and white quartz counters, a starkness and absolute absence of color that reminded me of an Apple store. As I reached for a wine glass, I could hear Paige's strident voice chatting away. In fairness, she didn't know I'd arrived. "Jay met her at some club. She was his cocktail waitress and apparently has big tits. So typical—I'm not surprised he walked out."

“Why?” Liz asked, “What do you mean?”

“Appearance is important to Jay, and Kimberly let herself go.”

“Poor Kimberly.”

Poor Kimberly. She let herself go, which inarguably justified her husband walking out on her so he could boink a cocktail waitress with big tits. I never thought the health of my marriage was dependent on the size of my waist.

The hell with the wine. I poured a margarita. Now, I was glad I'd worn my sexy red, spaghetti-strap dress. I looked forward to their jaws dropping.

“Hey, I see you decided to go for something a little stronger,” Carol observed as she walked back in the kitchen.

“What the heck. We're having a celebration, right?”

“Absolutely. Come on, let's go outside.”

Grabbing the pitcher of margaritas, I followed her. The shock on Paige's face was my revenge: surprise, disbelief, and yes, *envy*.

“Wow, Kimberly! You look fantastic. Turn around and let me see,” Liz said.

Leave it to Liz to make my day. I loved Liz. Vain of me, terribly vain, but music to my ears. I put the pitcher down and did a quick spin.

“You've lost weight,” Paige said surprised.

“Actually, I lost thirty pounds. So how is everyone?” I asked taking a seat.

Liz smiled sympathetically. “We're fine. The question is, *how are you?*”

“I'm great. I just nailed a new writing assignment.”

“Oh? What is it?” Carol asked.

“A divorcee dating column for a new online magazine.”

“Are you dating?” Why did even a simple question sound bitchy coming from Paige? At heart, she wasn't a bad person—there were times when I really liked her—but for some reason her question made me feel like I was being cross-examined.

I loathed lying, but I hated even more being judged as sad and pathetic while Jay was cavorting with a cocktail waitress. “Of course,” I said, faking a laugh. “Why wouldn't I be?”

Liz squealed and asked, ready for a vicarious thrill, “Anyone in particular?”

Hmmm . . . If I'm going to lie, I might as well invent someone drool worthy.

“There's this med student I've been out with a few times.”

Liz squealed a second time, “Ooh la la, a younger man. Love it! What’s he look like?”

“He has blond hair and blue eyes like sea glass. And his body ... let’s just say he can eat crackers in my bed anytime.”

“What’s his name?” Paige asked.

Dang! She didn’t believe me. Knowing Paige, she’d check if my hot med student was enrolled at UCD. Why did I feel the need to lie to my friends? I was being adolescent. “I’d rather not say. I might write about him. No names, of course.” I smiled and turned to Carol. “I love your pool! Which design company did you use?”

Hallelujah, the conversation jumped from my non-existent dating life to home improvements. Paige didn’t get a chance to object, and by the end of my second margarita, we were laughing and dishing just as we always had. Then, the Jay subject came up.

“Jay’s being an idiot,” Carol stated firmly.

“Can you believe he claimed we had only been in puppy love?”

“What denial!” I appreciated the contempt in Paige’s voice. “A man doesn’t stay married as long as you two were because of puppy love.”

Carol asked gingerly, “Yes, but didn’t you get married because you were pregnant?”

Her question hit like a punch. What had Jay told her husband? “No, it was why we married so young, but Jay had given me a promise ring months before. He loved me pregnant. He’d walk me to class with his arm around me, so proud to be a procreator.”

Liz tittered. “Sounds like Jay.”

“It wasn’t all show.” We’d talk for hours with his head on my breasts. I’d run my hand through his hair, and he would run his hand over my stomach. “He wanted us to be a family.”

“He did love you.” Liz sighed. “I used to envy the way he’d gaze at you. You seemed like the perfect couple.”

I thought we were too. How many times had he told me he loved me? Multiple times a day for years and a minimum of once a day for the last few years of our marriage meant at least ten thousand I love yous had passed his lips. Ten thousand I love yous counted for something.

Tears pooled at the edge of my eyes, and I blinked quickly, trying to push them back.

Carol handed me a tissue and put her arm around my shoulder, giving me a quick squeeze. “You’re entitled to a few tears.”

“Jay’s just going through a mid-life crisis.” Paige wasn’t so bad. “He bought a fifty-thousand-dollar Camaro. Can you believe?”

“I can’t believe he’s taking Amber wine tasting with us tomorrow,” Liz grumbled.

Whoa. Back up. “Jay’s taking *who* wine tasting with *whom*?”

Liz paled. “I’m sorry. I assumed you knew. Carol, you told her, right?”

Carol hissed at Liz, “Why would I tell her?”

“Are all of you going to Napa tomorrow with Jay and his cocktail waitress?” None of them answered. I stared at their guilty faces. There definitely would be a couples outing. *Wow, I mean, just wow.* “I see.” No one said anything. What more was there to say? Sobering instantly, survival mode kicked in. “Well, it’s getting late.” I faked a yawn. “I should go.”

“Kimberly, Jay’s our friend too,” Paige tried to explain.

“Sure, of course.” *Kimberly is out and the cocktail waitress is in. I get it.* I pushed away from the table, picked up my purse, and forced my lips to smile. “Thank you for the drinks, Carol. I hope you ladies have a lovely time tomorrow. The weather should be perfect.”

Their pinched and strained expressions told me they were all holding their breath, waiting for me to leave; waiting to heave a sigh of relief that I was gone, their duty done, and they’d be free to dissect everything I’d said, the tears I’d shed, and how I’d exited from their lives. I walked out with as much dignity as I could muster, only stopping to collect my bright orange Bauer bowl that sat empty, looking out of place in the colorless kitchen.

Dazed, I slid into the Porsche, started the engine, and headed home, guided by a blur of streetlights through the darkness. I had years of memories with those couples. I’d considered the women close friends—not that I spent a great deal of time with them, but whenever I did see them, it was easy and comfortable. Now I was divorced from the pack, but Jay wasn’t. How had that been decided? Flip of a coin or a group vote? A stop light loomed ahead. I very consciously took my foot off the gas and eased to a stop. Despite the shock, I

was remarkably calm. Maybe my heart had been shattered in so many pieces that there was nothing left to break.

Nugget Market came up on my left. Something inside of me snapped, and I flipped on the turn signal and pulled into the parking lot. Out of habit, I parked the longest distance possible from the entrance of the store. It was one of my calorie burning techniques.

A few minutes later, I peeked at the checkout stands. He was there, checking opposite the pet food aisle. I quickly threw some things in my cart and purposely wheeled to the cat food section last. I tossed in a few cans of Friskies even though a month's supply sat in my garage.

When I emerged from the aisle—what a coincidence—he was right in front of me, and he only had one customer in his lane. An incoming cart appeared on my left. I cut her off, cringing at my rudeness, but if I let her go first, I'd be expected to go to another line.

Please be happy to see me. He turned his head toward me. His eyes widened and then his face broke into a huge hey-it's-you smile.

"Hey, you're shopping late."

"I guess I am."

He gave me an appreciative once over. The unmistakable admiration in his eyes warmed me. "Like the dress. Were you at a party?"

If he only knew what kind of party. "Yeah, a friend of mine had a little margarita party."

"Sounds like fun."

"It was."

"Guess what I did this week?"

"You got a haircut?"

He colored, obviously pleased I had noticed. "That too." He ran his hand through his hair. "Too short?"

I liked the way his hair used to flop in front of his eyes, and he'd shake it back, but the shorter cut made him appear more mature, more hot than cute. "No, your hair looks great."

"Thanks. I was shooting for a more professional image."

"It works. So, tell me what you did."

"Oh, I applied for two management training programs."

“Joshua, that’s wonderful!”

“You know my name?” He seemed so astonished and pleased.

I couldn’t help laughing. “It’s on your name tag.”

His cheeks instantly flushed. “Right. Of course.”

“By the way, I’m Kimberly.”

“Nice to meet you, Kimberly.” Something about the way he said *Kimberly* made my heart jump. We both laughed, and he finished bagging my groceries.

I boldly asked, “Are you going to walk me out?”

He grinned, glanced at his nonexistent line, and turned off the light. “Lead the way.”

The store was about to close, so the parking lot was dark and almost empty. Joshua usually walked briskly, but tonight he took his time strolling me to my car. It had been a scorching day and heat from the asphalt swept up my legs, making my skin sticky. I desperately hoped my deodorant was holding up.

“What management training programs did you apply for?”

“Macy’s and a Bay Area grocery chain.”

“I didn’t realize Macy’s had a program.”

“I didn’t either until I checked out at the campus career center. You know, talking to you changed my perspective. I realized there are a lot of things I can do.”

He was so young. I needed to stop viewing him sexually.

I opened my trunk, and we both grabbed a bag of groceries. Our arms rubbed when we simultaneously bent into the trunk. I glanced over and his face turned toward mine. Just like a movie running in slow motion, time suspended as our eyes met.

“You smell good,” he whispered.

“I’m wearing Chanel.”

We were frozen, leaning in the trunk, close enough I could hear him breathing. His face somehow got closer. Then I did it. I kissed him. He kissed me back. His lips were warm, and heat flashed through my body as our tongues entangled for a few glorious seconds.

What am I doing! I jerked back. His head sprang up, hitting the trunk hood.

“Oh my God.” I asked, “Are you okay?”

I wasn’t sure if he was more stunned by knocking his head or the kiss. He rubbed the back of his head. “I’m uh, I’m fine. Kimberly—”

“I have to go.”

I raced into the driver’s seat and started the engine. He wheeled the cart out of my way, and I backed out. Through the rearview mirror, I could see him watching me as I drove away.

I had officially lost my mind. I’d kissed a checkout boy in the parking lot. Was I crazy?

Worst of all, Jay really, truly wasn’t coming back. He was taking his girlfriend wine tasting with our friends—my God, our friends. He’d publicly—humiliatingly—replaced me. For weeks, I’d told myself he wasn’t coming back, but deep down I hadn’t believed it. Reality slammed through my chest, and the remnants of my heart shattered into even smaller pieces.

Somehow, I managed to drive home through my waterworks. I grabbed my purse and stumbled into the house. What now? What the hell was left for me now? I couldn’t shop at Nugget anymore. My friends turned out to be Jay’s friends. I was the hanger-on who could easily be replaced. Collapsing into a chair, the tears fell harder. Maybe it would make it easier on everyone if I didn’t exist ... if I went *poof* and was gone.

Oh hell, I’d never kill myself. Haley would miss me. Who would feed the cats?

I had to talk to someone. I called the one person who was always there for me. She’d been with me when I was seventeen and took a pregnancy test. She stood by my side when Jay and I had exchanged vows. She’d been there when Haley was born, and when Jay and I had had our nastiest fights. I needed my friend. Although late, she’d be up.

“I’m in a club. Can’t hear a thing,” she said. “Call you right back.”

Of course, Valerie was in a club. She wasn’t married, lived in L.A., and was a celebrity stylist. She didn’t take drugs or drink excessively, but she considered it part of her business to keep up with the club scene. A few minutes later, she called back.

“What’s going on? Why are you calling this late?”

“Jay’s taking his girlfriend on a couples’ outing with our friends.”

“Asshole. Jay has a girlfriend?”

“Apparently, and he bought a fifty-thousand-dollar Camaro.”

“You have got to be shitting me! What an idiot.”

“It gets worse. Tonight I kissed a Nugget checkout boy in the store parking lot.”

She laughed, so I did too. “How old is he?”

“I’m guessing twenty-three.”

“Then he’s legal. Don’t beat yourself up.”

“Val, he isn’t coming back. I loved him so much, and I’ve been waiting for him to get things out of his system. Now, I know he won’t and I ... I ... I feel so alone and lost ... oh, Val ...” I couldn’t talk and swiped at the snot running out of my nose. I took a deep breath. “I’m sorry. Shit. I think I’m going crazy.”

“You are not crazy, and you’ll get through this. Now, I want you to put on your pajamas, pour a glass of wine, and watch the funniest, most ridiculous movie you have, okay?”

“Okay.”

“I’m taking the first flight I can book to Sacramento tomorrow. Just stay away from those checker boys until I get there.”

I chuckled. “Okay.” I could make it through the night by myself.