

# Heart of the matter

[Family](#), [Marriage](#)



- Tessa, a happily married mom who recently gave up her professorship to stay at home with her two small children in a suburb of Boston. She's harried but content with her choice, perhaps because her husband, Nick, is the spousal ideal: a hunky pediatric plastic surgeon who loves kids. On the other side is Valerie, a single mother who's made her own way, putting herself through Harvard Law School while raising a baby alone. She's had her share of heartache and decided to avoid any more pain by spurning relationships entirely. All would be well but for a fluke. At a slumber party, Valerie's young son suffers life-altering burns, and Nick is the attending physician who treats him at the hospital. This emotionally charged encounter leads to a romantic entanglement that catches Nick and Valerie off guard. With that adulterous path outlined, Giffin could easily take sides. But she doesn't. Instead, she alternates between Tessa's and Valerie's points of view, dissecting the feelings and insecurities that can dismantle even the most intelligent people. Valerie, jolted from her emotional anesthesia, fights her growing attachment to Nick while agonizing over the consequences and rationalizing her desires. Tessa's confidence erodes as her husband subtly retreats from her. She vacillates between doubting Nick, condemning herself for doubting and wondering whether her mother was right that men lose respect for women who choose family over career. Amid all the angst, Giffin displays her trademark ability to capture the complexities of human emotions while telling a rip-roaring tale. She maintains a will-they/won't-they tension and supplies enough clucking friends and relatives to keep it spicy. And she succeeds -- almost -- in creating a plausible explanation for why smart, responsible adults stray. If only Nick were a more plausible object of these

women's affections. While a nice butt and a compassionate bedside manner are a plus, they're not enough to show why he's worth all the fuss. Nor does Giffin ever really explain Nick's own marital malaise. He's a sketch on a napkin next to Valerie and Tessa's full-color canvases. Without a compelling character at the center of the emotional carnage, Giffin succeeds only in exposing infidelity for what it is -- cowardice.