

Chapter 10

Bleeding Hearts

Tu est un vrais sans coeur. (You're heartless.) Gabriel

I glanced quickly in the rear-view mirror at the receding Montreal skyline. The windows of the brightly lit skyscrapers sparkled like sequins against a blue-black sky. As I crossed the Champlain Bridge, heading home, I felt like a cheating spouse leaving her lover. If I was in love with anything, it was this city. Yet I had to admire my lover from afar. My life was securely anchored in a sleepy suburb out of reach and out of sight of the life I had once pictured.

Just as I stole another glance backward, the sound of a horn brought me back to reality. I was drifting into the neighboring lane. The bridge was icy and if I wasn't careful I'd end up in the St. Lawrence River. The prospect of a watery end, for one scary second, didn't disturb me at all. But once again I let my mind drift and I cruised right past my exit. I dreaded the scene I knew was waiting for me at home.

In my mind, my life played out like some bad B movie that went straight from release to DVD. For years I tried to convince myself and everyone else that Gabriel and I lived the quintessential Hollywood ending. I loved telling the story of how we'd met. I loved hearing people say, "Wow, just like in the movies." I spoke with feigned enthusiasm of how fate had brought us together. Everyone just assumed we would live happily ever after. The reality was much, much different. We did not enjoy romantic dinners out, plays, concerts, or gallery openings together. These weren't his *thing*. So I pretended they didn't matter to me.

How was I to know that after two years of distance dating and 24 perfect weekends that included all of these things, that our relationship was merely an illusion? We were two people on their best behavior, trying to please one another. We'd even adopted some of each other's interests, but that was also short-lived. After a few years of marriage we reverted back to our prenuptial selves. Individually we were fascinating, on paper we were perfect, but together we were a misalliance. I barely knew him and he didn't understand me.

I'm not blameless in any of this. It's always easier for me to point the finger at someone else than admit I'd made the mistake. I remembered a quote from economics class that described our marriage perfectly. "Given the choice between changing one's mind and proving there's no need to do so, most people get busy on the proof." I guess it's the same thing for love. Three years became five, which quickly became seven, and now I had spent the last ten years trying to prove I had made the right choice.

Gabriel went from being my husband to being my project. Like most women my age, I saw him as a fixer upper, a work in progress. The reality was more like take it or leave it. The model was not upgradeable. He was neither a marketing campaign nor a piece of software.

I cranked up the defrost setting. My unconscious sighs had fogged up the windshield.

The evening I'd just spent in the city had been wonderful. It was the time of my company's national sales meeting and the entire team was in Montreal to work and play. Over dinner I had flitted from table to table, talking, flirting and joking with colleagues. It happened to be my birthday, so there had been surprise birthday cake and champagne. When my colleagues sang "Happy Birthday," I'd had to hold my tears in check. Gabriel and I really didn't celebrate birthdays all that much; in fact, most holidays came and went with little or no fanfare. If one of us wanted or needed anything we usually got it for ourselves.

I had worked very hard at Brands-R-Us and had been promoted to marketing and communications director in record time. The large corner office came with a hefty \$55 million advertising budget and a staff of three. I had also acquired a personal assistant, Annie Lachance, who was trained as a professional assistant and secretary. At 26 she was as telepathic as she was efficient. Her talent for anticipating my needs and reading my mind was amazing.

Annie kept my schedule, set up my meetings, helped with marketing research and kept me focused, especially on those days my mind was preoccupied with personal problems. No one but Annie knew I was balancing on the edge of a knife. Annie made sure it didn't show professionally and she tried to act as a buffer personally. She also didn't pull punches. She was more direct than diplomatic, and that was okay. I needed that.

Earlier that day Annie had thrust a garment bag into my arms. "Here. Wear this."

"What is it?"

"A cocktail dress. Monique sent it over from Ogilvy's. You'll need it for tonight."

I glanced down at my sensible Jones of New York suit. "But this will work just fine."

Ten years my junior, Annie was dressed in a white blouse, plaid mini-skirt, black tights and high-heeled suede boots. She looked like she belonged in a poster for a trendy Montreal boutique like Le Château or Mexx. She looked me over and said, "It's a bit, hmmm, what's the English word? Ah yes, 'dowdy.'"

"Dowdy?" My voice rose. "Do you think I look dowdy?"

"Dowdy and drab."

“What do you *really* think, Annie?” I asked.

After dinner the entire group had gone dancing at a local club. We’d done the Lambada, a sexy and provocative dance. I hadn’t danced a single step since my wedding ten years earlier, but tonight I hadn’t sat down once. I’d wanted to stay as long as I could but I knew Gabriel would be up waiting for me. He was never happy when I called to say I’d be leaving at midnight instead of ten o’clock as originally planned. Tonight the silence on the end of the line had said it all, but I didn’t care.

As I entered our house, I hoped he had fallen asleep. I slipped my heels off and tiptoed into the hallway, trying not to wake him. But there he was, waiting for me. His arms were crossed and he had a pained look on his face. It said, how dare I have a good time without him?

“Tu es un vrai sans coeur,” he bleated.

I was expecting a comment on my lateness, not a charge that I was heartless. Where did that come from? I wondered.

My first instinct was to soothe and apologize, and then I remembered that I hadn’t done anything wrong. I brushed past him as if nothing had happened.

“What? What did I do?”

His strategy changed and he became angry. “Why,” he asked, pointing his finger at my chest, “are you still on the pill when we’re not having sex anymore? Who are you sleeping with, Cat? Someone from the office?”

I stepped backward and covered my heart with my hand. Denial would be useless here. He wouldn't believe me anyway. I went for a scientific explanation instead. Sometimes it was just too easy and I took comfort in that fact.

"I'm perimenopausal and the doctor said I should be on the pill."

He didn't know how to respond to that, and I suppressed a smile. I was nowhere near menopause, peri or otherwise, but he couldn't refute the explanation.

Thwarted, he stomped out of the room. "You think you're so smart. That you have an answer to everything," he yelled over his shoulder.

I surveyed my surroundings and muttered to myself, "I must not be that smart. I'm still here."

As I brushed my teeth I fantasized about packing a bag and walking out the front door. If tonight's display of recrimination was any indication of what would happen, I decided it was best to do nothing. I didn't know how he'd handle my leaving and I had nowhere to go.

I didn't want the end of our marriage to be my fault, but somebody had to take the decision and it wouldn't be Gabriel, no matter how bad things got. Why would he give up the house, car, sailboat, motorcycle—in short, his lifestyle—because his wife was unhappy? That was my issue, not his. He was perfectly content.

I glanced around the house. Gabriel would never give this up, I thought. And that thought led to the next. What if I said I wanted to go home to Cleveland and start over? What if I said I wanted a fresh start? He'd never go for it, not in a million years. It was brilliant. Rather than argue, I would implement a change so drastic it was bound to force a wedge between us. I would resign from Brands-R-U's in the morning and return to

Cleveland with or without him. If he didn't choose to come, well, that was his decision, his fault. I would be free.

