Inspired by the movie Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1978). I aim to write character studies of four of the main characters in the movie, centering them around four personality traits that each character has. These are the traits that make them human, traits that will disappear once the pods take over.

Edited as of January 2017.
Driving home through the gloomy San Francisco streets, Jack’s head was filled with a relentless, resounding thud reminiscent of a headache, though pain did not accompany it. It was a word beating against his brain like the muffled backbeat of loud music at a club—not that he had ever been out to a club, but he had seen them on TV. Jack gritted his teeth as he drove, hoping the little stabs into his tongue would block the word from coming to light. But as soon as he slowed to make a turn, it came springing fully formed into his head. 

*Coward. You’re a coward, Bellicec.*

Jack released an angry sigh through his nose, unhappy with the word that had come to him countless times before. Though he should have been used to the idea by now, it still frustrated him because he had no way to refute it. *I truly AM a coward, aren’t I?* Not that he tried to be. Somehow he kept coming back to it, especially in social events like that godawful book party he had just been to. Every time he was faced with a promising audience he would either talk himself out of reading to them, convinced that they would hate his work no matter what, or he would let others present their ideas before him, until he had long since lost their attention. No wonder he hadn’t yet achieved the recognition he desired, because he backed down every time. What a paradox—wanting to be appreciated for what he did, but fearing any reaction. There were plenty of authors who’d love to use that idea as a repeating motif throughout their novels. But Jack wrote poetry only, and wasn’t sure if he was ready to translate his paradoxical emotions onto the page.

Of course, that paradox was what made David Kibner’s remark sting so much worse. “There’s a lady up top, red hair, blue dress, she’s interested in your work.” *Like hell there was some lady,* Jack thought sourly, and fought the urge to strike the steering wheel. What right did Kibner have to lie to him like that, just to get him out of the way? If he was supposed to be this great psychiatrist, couldn’t he tell that it was better not to get Jack’s hopes up? For one brief, splendid moment Jack had believed someone had actually read one of the poetry anthologies in which his work had been published, that he would have an opening into the conversation without having to awkwardly self-promote, that there were people out there who were still interested in the artistic structure of words and not garbage like the stuff Kibner churned out every few months. But after a few long minutes of surreptitious scanning, he realized that the lady didn’t exist and felt his shock and excitement crash and burn into the ground.

Yes, Jack was a coward for not confronting Kibner after that and demanding him to apologize for disappointing him. (Of course, Jack hadn’t really been given the chance. But even if he had, there was no guarantee he would be able to face Kibner and admit that he had been hurt emotionally. There was something so off-putting about the man, so patronizing, that made Jack want to minimize their interactions as much as possible. And there he was again, cowardly stepping down and submitting to Kibner because Kibner was always right, of course a man as renowned and *brilliant* as Kibner had to be right...)
He was a coward for not promoting himself more aggressively, for not standing up for himself like a real man should. And of course, he had been a coward in the past, when that cold steel gun barrel had been clenched between his teeth, when his shaking hand had fingered the trigger and he knew it would just take one shot, pop, and he’d be gone. He’d be free. Free from the work and stress that the university caused, free from the chilly looks and turned backs he received from nearly every student in his major… free to find out what exactly came after death. Any writer would give the world to see that.

He was never entirely sure what had stopped him. Maybe it was that he had glanced up at the mirror that very moment, and seen the sweat beaded on his face and the wild look in his eyes. Maybe he had realized then that he didn’t want to go so gentle into that good night. There was still enough spirit left in him to rage against it. Or maybe it was premonition- after all, Nancy had come into his life the day after he decided not to end it.

But just because Jack had made that decision didn’t mean he couldn’t occasionally criticize it. He’d ended up holding onto the gun. It now sat pretty inside a locked safe somewhere in the apartment, ready to be used against intruders. Now wasn’t that poetic, that the very weapon that had almost ended Jack’s life was now prepared to save him? But it wasn’t a topic Jack could write clearly on, though he had alluded to it before. And those poems might never see the light of day- or at least, the light of an adoring audience.

2. Perfectionist

“He dashes a book off every six months. It takes me six months just to write one line sometimes.”

“Why?”

“Because I pick each word individually, that’s why.”

“What’s so hard about that?”

What’s so hard about that?!! Slowly Jack’s mind emerged from its musings on his cowardice and began to replay the conversation he’d had with that imbecilic woman at the bookstore. What’s so hard about that… She was lucky he’d already been burnt out from half an hour of vacuous conversation beforehand, or he would have run her into the ground with angry, lashing words. Clearly that woman wasn’t a writer, or she’d never have made such a statement. Clueless people like her made Jack’s blood boil, the way they thought all writers were like Kibner- regurgitating the same ideas over and over onto the page, but rephrased in ways that made them sound clever. Hell, Kibner probably had half his books ghostwritten anyway. Not even he could understand the torture Jack put himself through, slaving over a blank page at his desk, reading his work aloud for hours and hours just to get the rhyme and meter right, much less the meaning. That was exactly what Kibner was lacking, meaning. His books had absolutely no substance… why a guy like him deserved to have some joke of a party put on in his honor boggled Jack’s mind.

Slowing to a stop at a red light, Jack glanced at the book lying beside him in the passenger’s seat- a free copy, or else he never would have taken it home. The sight filled him with an unspeakable amount of disgust. The truth was, it took Jack Bellicec six months just to write one line because he was a perfectionist of the highest order. If that woman had known the extent to which he suffered, choosing each word and stringing them together exactly right… Thank God he had met Nancy and dropped out of the university, or there would be nothing left of Jack- nothing but the frantic, half-assed scribblings across scraps of paper that littered his room, trying desperately to meet his professors’ deadlines. Breaking away from that scene had been worth it, just to get rid of the pressure to create something worthwhile in a short span of time. But now that Jack was free to write to his heart’s content in between helping Nancy, a new kind of pressure
arose- the pressure to create works that improved upon each other. If any poem had one word out of place, one rhyme that had to slant to fit in or one metaphor that wasn’t easily understood- if it resembled a previous poem of Jack’s in any way or if it wasn’t quite as good as the last, Jack would have to alter it or start anew. He wanted to reach his full potential every time, to pull out all the stops. If he didn’t sacrifice his entire soul when writing, he was no better than Kibner.

Nancy was an awfully patient audience, which was why Jack was so lucky to have her in his life. She listened attentively to every reading and offered her input on every revision. Most importantly, she was honest- not bluntly, pretentiously honest like Jack’s old peers at the university had been during critiques, but unafraid to let Jack know when the poem didn’t reach her. A piece of writing advice that Jack had often heard bandied about was that it was important to write just to please one person. For Jack, that one person was Nancy. She supported his work with all her being, even when it didn’t make money. She rejoiced at the rare times his work was published in a reputable anthology and consoled him when it was rejected, or appeared in a magazine with lines cut. ("It’s like cutting off a child’s hands!") She herself was well-read and well-studied, and happy to help with any task Jack asked of her.

Most certainly she didn’t give useless advice like, “Ignore them. You don’t have to prove yourself to anybody.” As the light turned green and the traffic accelerated, Jack frowned slightly, remembering Matthew’s words at the book party. Sure, it was easy for him to say… he worked for the government. He was well-respected in his field, because the world couldn’t see the way Jack’s writing improved and helped people just like sanitation inspection. (Or, it would help people if he could get it off the ground. Someday… someday…)

Matthew meant well, though… he had just been distracted. Reviewing the night’s events, Jack’s frown deepened further. Matthew, Matthew, Matthew…

3. Clingy

After the miserable disappointment with Kibner’s imaginary redhead, Jack had found nothing to do but track Matthew down. After all, he’d been the one to convince him to come to the book party in the first place.

“Look, Jack, I’m not available that night. I’m going to David Kibner’s book party.”

“David Kibner?” The scorn saturated his voice. “The great pop psychiatrist, that David Kibner?”

Even as Jack drove, he could see Matthew’s stern face before him, his forehead creased as he struggled not to re-tread their frequent argument. “Yes, that David Kibner. He is popular, he is a psychiatrist-“

“But he’s not great. Just admit it, Matthew.”

“And he’s going to be at the party.” Matthew finished, tense. “And I’ll be there too. Jack, I know you’re not fond of him, but it would be a great opportunity for you. There are going to be a lot of popular writers at that party. Forget- forget David- you don’t have to talk to him the whole night. There’s bound to be someone at the party who’s interested in hearing about your work.”

Interested in my work… The prospect was a ripe, forbidden apple hanging within reach, but Jack balked at the temptation. He folded his arms across his chest and gazed down at the floor, and Matthew sighed.

“You’d be doing me a great favor to join me at the party,” he said. “We don’t even have to stay very long. We can go out for dinner later if that’s what you want.”
Slowly Jack lifted his gaze to meet Matthew’s, and gave a subtle nod of agreement. "Well sure, if that's what you want." For his friend, he would attend.

Unfortunately, Matthew had ended up at the party nearly half an hour later than Jack, with a woman at his side- his coworker Elizabeth, about whom Jack had heard many stories. That and the following conversation, where Matthew didn’t seem interested in a word Jack was saying, pretty much ensured that the night was a disaster. And for all his trouble, all Jack got out of coming to the book party was a cruel lie from Kibner and then a shove into a brick wall while that great psychiatrist roared in his face. “Bellicec, for the last time, I want you to stop! Stand still, be quiet, and shut up!”

Before Jack could hardly form a coherent sentence- “Stop what?”- Matthew had lunged in and drawn him away from the conflict, leading him by the arm into a nearby store. “Jack- Jack…”

“Why in the store?” Jack protested, glancing backwards at Kibner’s intent conversation with Elizabeth before the glass door shut behind them. “He’s a nut!”

Matthew didn’t respond at first, letting go of Jack and stepping back to face him. “It’s okay, Jack. It has nothing to do with you.” To Jack he looked wearier than ever, faint lines of stress standing out on his forehead. His deep gaze drilled into Jack. Confused and more than a bit annoyed, Jack ran a hand through his glossy hair.

“Well, why’d he grab me like that, huh? Who gave him the right to shove me around?”

“It’s for Elizabeth.” It was obvious that Matthew was trying to speak evenly, but he couldn’t help but let his impatience sharpen his tone. “He was doing a demonstration for Elizabeth. He’s treating her.”

“What’s his treatment have to do with pushing me against a wall?”

“He’s treating her because she’s upset,” Matthew intoned, completely failing to answer Jack’s question. He scoffed. “She looks fine.”

“She is upset, Jack,” Matthew insisted, harshly stressing the third word. He lifted his hand and brushed his forehead in an agitated manner. Jack narrowed his eyes. “You look upset to me now.”

“Jack…” Once again Matthew’s eyes bore into him, seemingly fed up with the entire conversation. He moved towards the door, and Jack followed him. “Do me a favor, will you?”

“I’ll do any favor you want…”

They stepped outside, and Matthew looked seriously over at Jack. “Go home, and I’ll call you later.” The statement was not a request, but a command. “Go home and leave us alone for a bit.”

The words hit Jack like a slap in the face, like stepping outside from a nicely-warmed house into the bitter chill of winter. “Go home?” He blinked in dumb disbelief, waiting for Matthew to say something, but when all he got was a stare and an “Okay?” he was forced to accept. “Okay… okay.” He had to agree, because he didn’t want to annoy Matthew, but all the while his heart sunk in his chest. He felt like a helium balloon that was rapidly losing air, deflating.

“Thank you.” With that, Matthew turned away and trudged off in search of Elizabeth, placing all thoughts of Jack Bellicec behind him. Jack stared after him for a moment before walking away, concentrating on where he had parked his car. He couldn’t dwell on the rejection because it would hurt him, more so than Kibner’s little trick had already done.

However, now that Jack was alone in his car and turning down the home stretch towards
Bellicec Mud Baths, he was free to dwell on the incident all he liked, and his gut churned with the heat of injustice as his heart twisted unpleasantly. He hadn’t meant to annoy Matthew… he had just needed attention, needed someone to listen to him vent, needed some reasonable answers from the world. Apparently his troubles weren’t enough to hold his friend’s attention. Yeah, some friend… The very idea made Jack want to roll his eyes. Sure, the guy who’d come by to inspect the mud baths and stuck around to talk to Jack was his friend. No, there had never been an ounce of companionship in their interactions- he was clearly saving all of it for that woman Elizabeth, with whom he was besotted.

Somewhere in the rational part of Jack’s mind, he knew that on good days Matthew really did enjoy his company. But on the outside he stewed and simmered, holding onto the anger for as long as it took to drive that pathetic pain away. He couldn’t help being a clingy person. He couldn’t help wanting full attention from what few friends he had. And he definitely couldn’t help coming from a friendless background, which made him eager to hold onto anyone who showed him the slightest hint of interest. If Matthew knew about Jack’s past- or rather, if he had been thinking harder, because Jack was sure he had mentioned it before- he wouldn’t have brushed Jack off tonight, a move that hurt him more than it would others who were able to form normal, stable relationships.

4. Dream

By the time Jack returned to his place of business, his anger had boiled away, leaving a cold, empty feeling to settle in his bones. He felt as if the wind had gotten inside him, rattling around his ribcage trying to pierce his heart.

Stepping in through the front door, he was assaulted with the blare of classical music over the speakers and Nancy’s bright face beaming at him from behind the counter. “Jack! How was the book party?”

He kept his gaze away from her, afraid that if he caught sight of her warmth the floodgates would burst. His hands numbly drew out the book, the free signed copy that had somehow got palmed off on him, and he trembled in appalled rage.

“Is that Kibner’s book?” Nancy asked politely, and suddenly the emotions swelling within Jack were too great to keep inside. A hot flash of lightning crackled through him as he forcefully flung the book to the floor, his face contorting with bitter misery.

“Didn’t get to read your poetry?” Nancy’s voice took on a more sympathetic tone, and Jack couldn’t even shake his head in response. If he attempted to speak to her, he knew it would all come out- his frustration with Kibner, his disappointment with himself and the foolish partygoers, the way Matthew had hurt him by brushing him off and the solitary, lonesome drive home… He didn’t want any customers to walk in on him spilling his guts to Nancy. This wasn’t the place for it. So he stayed silent and motionless as another tremble went through him and his eyes filled with burning tears.

“I’m sorry, Jack.” Nancy spoke quietly, reading the expression on Jack’s face. He looked away from her as he approached the counter and picked up a fresh towel, a lump rising in his throat. He’d talk to Nancy later, once he had calmed down… right now what Jack Bellicec needed was a long, hot shower, alone with his thoughts. Slinging the towel over his shoulder, he left Nancy standing at the counter and entered the bathing area, where only two customers remained.

“Hey, can you help me out of here!?” The abrasive voice cut through the chimes of the classical music, and Jack stared in incredulity at its owner. Lying in the mud was one of their regular customers, an overweight man who stared up at Jack with nothing but self-interest in his
eyes. “Bellicec!” he barked. “I’m talking to you! Give me a hand.” Jack only stared back, wondering if the man could see that he was starting to cry or if he even cared, before stepping into the nearest shower and sliding the curtain behind him. To hell with the customers- that was more Nancy’s territory anyway.

The warm water caressed Jack as it poured down on him, bringing a sense of life to his hollow shell of a body. He closed his eyes and hung his head, focusing only on the sensation and the sound of the water pipes. It wasn’t long before he was breathing evenly, the painful point of pressure in his throat dissolving. Jack raised his head to wash away the last of the tears, before opening his eyes to gaze at the ceiling. The shower seemed to cleanse him of his dark mood, replacing his sour reminiscing with indulgent thoughts of Nancy.

Shakespeare had claimed that a rose by any other name would smell as sweet, and it was one of the few points Shakespeare made that Jack agreed with. Nancy... my sweet rose. The finest woman on this planet. She was the main reason Jack was glad he hadn’t pulled the trigger of the gun that fateful night, because he had met her the following day. He could have met her earlier, but he had been a fool too wrapped up in his work. Day after day he sat in the university library, poring over books and notebooks, while she sat at a table not too far from him, trying to catch his eye. He had never taken notice of her, so focused was he on his assignments, until he had hit rock bottom. After foiling his own plans of suicide, he had crawled dejected into the library the next morning, determined not to go to class- and there she was, sitting just two feet away with a tentative smile on her face. It was the first time he had truly seen her. She approached him and asked him for help finding a certain tome, “because you’re in here all the time so you must know,” and that was the start of the greatest love in his life. Nancy Kay, beautician, and Jack Bellicec, would-be writer, moved in together, got married, and opened a business without the intention of parting.

Despite his cowardice, perfectionism, and clinginess, Nancy still loved Jack. She didn’t mind his negative qualities because she knew he had positive ones as well. However, Jack himself wasn’t sure what those qualities were. Was there any aspect to his personality that didn’t completely turn people away? Excluding the romantic side, because that was for Nancy and readers of his work to appreciate.

Standing under the hot water, it dawned on him momentarily. “Kibner’s trying to fit people to change the world- I’m trying to change the world to fit people.” At the time it had seemed like a remarkable insight that failed to gain the proper impressed response from Matthew. Now Jack saw that it was all he had to his name. Kibner might enjoy puzzling people out, working on their problems for them because they weren’t well-equipped to deal with it themselves. He told people through his books that their perception of the world was valid and made them feel they could handle the harsher aspects of life. But it was those aspects of life that Jack aimed to correct. Through his writing, he wished to set the world on fire, reshaping it so that people wouldn’t have to alter their perceptions just to cope. If Jack’s writing took off, they wouldn’t need to cope. Thanks to Jack, the world would be a much better place to live in.

Yes, Jack Bellicec might have been a coward, afraid to stand up for himself or present his work to a crowd. Yes, he might have been a perfectionist, spending months and months on a poem when a few hours would suffice for the pros. And yes, he might have been far too clingy in his personal relationships. But the most important facet of Jack’s personality was that he had a dream, the same lofty one he had had since high school, and he had the drive and support to make that dream come true. Someday... someday the world would be changed according to Jack Bellicce’s perspective. Someday a writer like Kibner wouldn’t be hailed as the greatest of the modern age. Someday, true art would have its place in society, just like any other profession.
I chose to write about Jack Bellicec first because, in some inexplicable way, I relate to him (or sympathize with him at the very least). This made it easier for me to get inside his head. He's probably my favorite character in the 70's remake, though they all have their merits.
Matthew Bennell

Chapter Notes

Whew. So Jack's character study took me roughly 5 hours to write, whereas this took me a grand total of... 12 hours. (Admittedly, there were some Internet breaks involved.) It's a hell of a way to spend the day...
I also took a different approach to this one.

1. Strict

Matthew Bennell was a strict person by nature, which was the reason Julia gave for leaving him. As far as reasons went, it had sounded more like an excuse to Matthew. Anything would sound like an excuse when it came a week before the wedding. One moment she had been lying beside him in bed, his arm curled protectively over her belly and her soft head resting between his neck and shoulder... and when he opened his eyes again, he was cradling nothingness to his chest. His fingers were left stroking a paper note, not Julia’s dark hair. Sitting up in bed, he had read the whole thing by the light of his bedside lamp. It didn’t say much, but what it did say spoke volumes. Julia had given it a lot of thought and realized she was no longer interested in marrying a man like Matthew. His habitually strict, serious nature made her feel too confined, and tying the knot would be tying it around her neck. She closed out the note with a pretty sentiment designed to ease the shock- I’m sorry I had to cut it so close. I’ll always think fondly of you, Matthew. The memories we made together have been some of my favorites.

How sincere that sentiment was, Matthew had no idea.

Following the rude awakening, Matthew made phone calls. Friends, family, coworkers… He dialed any number he could get his hands on, in hopes of tracking Julia down. If they could just talk face to face, maybe she wouldn’t run off so quickly. But over and over, the apologetic voices on the other end claimed not to have seen her. At first Matthew became convinced that someone was lying to him, until he realized that Julia’s various acquaintances were all too sympathetic to lie. Julia’s family approved of him and he got along well with her friends… but now Julia had a problem with him?

As the tangle and thrum of ringing telephones surrounded him, blending into one voice, Matthew sat back and contemplated Julia’s possible whereabouts. It was entirely likely that she had fled San Francisco altogether. He had been the one to suggest moving, anyway, all because of a great job offer that seemed insignificant now when compared to Julia’s affection. But they had already been engaged then. Early into their engagement, but engaged nonetheless. And Julia had made up her mind to keep living with Matthew. She had told him herself when he first brought up the matter, stating that she’d be closer to her family and would likely find more promising job opportunities. She hadn’t mentioned feeling confined or strangled at the time… but now that Matthew considered it, he wondered if she had been less happy than she let on.

The fact stood that Julia apparently felt trapped by Matthew’s “strict, serious” nature. This was the point of her note over which he spent the most time puzzling. On what basis were her accusations? Hadn’t they had fun together? He vividly remembered laughing with Julia over dinner, teasing her with pet names as they prepared to go to their respective jobs in the morning. Before moving to the city, they had spent cozy evenings on the sofa, awash in lamplight, Matthew
with a book in his hands and Julia with her head on his shoulder. He’d always felt relaxed around her, and had thought she felt the same.

But that was all before Matthew’s working hours took over, before he started carrying his work attitude back to the apartment. It made sense to be strict as a health inspector, because of the crap that people always tried to pull over on him. He was constantly astounded by the lies that were fed to him with a straight face, just so some crummy little restaurant could scrape by with the barest sense of respectability. The more absorbed Matthew became with his work, the easier it became to see through them. He developed a sharp eye for people and their body language, and condensed his inspections down to a series of interlocking questions that almost always led to the business’s downfall. Employees at the various businesses hated him and sometimes sought retaliation, but he was never annoyed because the incidents only proved that he had the professional attitude they lacked.

But being strict did not pay off at the apartment, and eventually Matthew came to expose all the flaws that Julia had hinted at in her note. No more were there quiet evenings on the sofa- just a back massage from Julia that never really seemed to loosen the tension. In the mornings Matthew was already mentally preparing himself for work, with no time for cutey small talk before kissing Julia on the nose and rushing out. Sometimes he came home late, leaving Julia to do the cooking for him. And the later he stayed out, the more tired he grew upon returning home, which made the bedroom good only for sleeping.

Matthew thought he’d made up for it by waiting on Julia like a princess when he was off work. He thought that lazy Sunday afternoon trysts and frequent dinners out could mend the worn threads in their relationship. But he failed to see that Julia deserved more of his attention, and that she wanted a different attitude from him than the one he wore to work. So she walked away from a wedding with which she could not go through, leaving Matthew with a slip of paper, a lonely apartment, and- perhaps for the first real time in his life- a broken heart.

2. Pragmatic

Matthew Bennell was pragmatic by nature, which was what first attracted David Kibner to him. In the beginning, Kibner was the one who attracted Matthew, a shining beacon of light that pulled him out of his dark months following Julia’s disappearing act. He first heard of David Kibner while out walking at night, ready to savor his break from work the following day. He’d consumed several drinks at a bar a few blocks away, but it couldn’t have been too many, because they had let him leave without any trouble. Though he was rather unsteady on his feet. Matthew wandered aimlessly, staring at the glowing signs hanging over his head and trying to stargaze through the cloud coverage that had rolled in that afternoon.

Before Matthew knew it, he was standing in front of a bookstore, peering through the front window and squinting his eyes in the sign’s flickering light. The place didn’t appear to be open- its only interior illumination came from twin floor lamps standing on either side of the front counter- and Matthew was about to move on when his eyes focused on a book cover displayed in the storefront. The author’s name, DAVID KIBNER, leapt out at him, being larger than the title itself. Below that was an image of a man, presumably the author, and then a series of words in smaller type that Matthew, in the bad lighting and in his mild drunken state, couldn’t read for the life of him.

It was probably said drunken state that caused Matthew to enter the bookstore, just so he could read the title- although he would be forever glad he had chosen to do so. A bell tied to the door handle chimed as he walked in.

“Good evening, sir!” a voice called out, and Matthew slid his gaze over as the figure of an elderly man entered from the depths of the bookstore. He approached Matthew with a tentative
smile. “I’m afraid we’re minutes away from closing, but you’re welcome to poke around for a bit
while I finish locking up.”

“Thanks,” Matthew mumbled. Turning away from the man, he drifted over to the display at
the front and lifted David Kibner’s thick volume to his eyes.

“Is there anything you need help finding?” the man asked behind Matthew’s back, but
Matthew didn’t respond. He stared hard at the cover of the book, straining his eyes to read it in the
dim light, before remembering that there were two glowing lamps by the counter and walking
over to them. As Matthew placed the book on the counter, the title burst to life.

_Chocolate and Flowers: The Search for Meaning in a Relationship and the Value of Love
and Lust._

“That David Kibner, he’s said to be a genius of modern psychiatry,” the shop owner
explained as soon as he caught sight of the book. He came over to Matthew’s side and thumped its
cover with his finger. “We’ve got dozens of his books around here. I haven’t read them all, but it’s
supposed to be fascinating stuff.”

Staring down at the book and wondering if this was some kind of sign from the heavens,
Matthew collected himself before replying, “I’d like to buy this book.” He couldn’t say why,
because self-help books had never interested him. That was the kind of stuff his mother would lap
up, and in fact had urged him to take a look at following the engagement’s break. It wasn’t his
brand of nonfiction at all.

But the book was about creating lasting relationships, and as Matthew had just been in one
that didn’t last, he figured he should discover what advice the experts dished out to prevent that
from happening again. Besides, there was a look about this David Kibner that immediately struck
Matthew as someone to trust- someone he would like to speak to personally. He drew out his
credit card as the shop owner moved behind the counter, and soon the transaction was complete.

Rationalism was always at the forefront of Matthew’s mind. He never liked to accept a claim
unless he had facts with which to back it up. Therefore when he woke the next day with a
pounding in his head and his most recent purchase lying on the bedside table, he was skeptical
about the book’s promised results. How could any random person hold the key to successful
relationships?

But as Matthew began to read, the writing style hooked him, pulling him in. Each chapter
was organized logically, proceeding from point A to point B and wrapping up in stunning
conclusions. Now here was a person who knew what he was talking about, a writer able to blend
professionalism with a personable, friendly tone. It was the first book Matthew had read where he
agreed with every point made, where he felt that the author was speaking specifically to him. He
finished the book that week, and on the weekend wrote to the PO Box listed in the back.

_Dear Dr. Kibner,_

_I’ve spent the last few days reading your most recent book, Chocolate and Flowers, and quite
frankly, I find it remarkable. Several months ago a relationship I was in came to an abrupt end,
and your book helped me come to terms with my shortcomings. If you’re interested, I would like
to discuss its points with you sometime in person. I live in San Francisco, on the opposite end of
town from your office. Perhaps we could set up an appointment._

_Sincerely,_

_Matthew Bennell_
The coming week he received a response, a personal one from Kibner himself expressing interest in Matthew’s proposition. That weekend they met up for lunch, sitting across from each other and discussing both the book and Matthew’s failed engagement.

“You feel guilty,” Kibner suggested, one hand curved around the stem of his wine glass and his whole body angled Matthew’s way. “You feel that you shouldn’t have taken the promotion and moved to the city, or Julia would have stayed.” He waited for Matthew’s nod before continuing, lifting his glass in the air. “It’s not your fault, Matthew. Julia may have blamed you in her note, but the trouble was with her all along. She left you to pursue her desires because she felt she couldn’t live with someone she deemed incompatible. You took that job because you were interested, weren’t you? If your working schedule didn’t suit Julia’s desires, she shouldn’t have kept up the engagement. It’s not worth staying with someone who won’t support you.” Kibner lifted the glass to his lips and took a brief drink. “That’s in reference to Julia, not to you.”

“She was very supportive of me before we moved to the city,” Matthew murmured. He picked up his fork and eyed the plate of pasta before him, quietly analyzing its components to make sure it was safe to eat. “Then she claimed I was too strict. I was thinking that I must have changed- that my job changed me.”

“Of course you’ve changed, Matthew,” Kibner replied breezily. “Relationships change people. It’s what our partners can’t understand, that the person they were initially attracted to has different facets of the same personality. When entering a relationship, people tend to put up a front to present all positive traits to their partner. It’s when the relationship gets serious, as yours did upon engagement, that the wall comes down, and your partner sees you as you really are. Julia couldn’t reconcile that this strict, serious Matthew was the same Matthew she had fallen in love with.”

Slowly Matthew nodded, swallowing his food, and Kibner went on. “Take it from a professional, Matthew. Julia was not the woman you were meant to marry. If you’re interested in marriage, you have to find a person who will accept every part of you, even your most negative qualities. And you have to be honest with them. You can’t just win them over like knights win fair maidens. You can’t expect to charm them every day with-”

“Chocolate and flowers,” Matthew said, meeting Kibner’s eyes. A smile tugged at the edges of Kibner’s mouth.

“I see you’ve read my book well.”

From that day on, a lasting friendship began between Matthew and David Kibner, and Matthew’s confidence began to build. He greatly appreciated Kibner’s practicality, which appealed to him in a way that previous advice from others did not. Directly after Julia had left, many sympathetic souls had offered platitudes such as “Time heals all wounds!” and “It’s always darkest before the dawn!” But though they meant well, they hadn’t helped Matthew because they gave him no real way to improve the situation. With Kibner’s book in hand and voice on the other end of the phone, however, Matthew finally pulled his life together and moved on from heartbreak. The book made sense, and sense was what Matthew liked the most.

3. Determined

Matthew Bennell was determined by nature, which was his favorite quality about himself. Not that he was often taken with himself, but it certainly helped when a bright young woman walked into his life and captured his full attention. Elizabeth Driscoll was not assigned to work in Matthew’s department, but when her advisor fell ill on the very day her training began, he was asked to take over and show her the ropes. It soon became more than the ropes Matthew longed to show her- more like the inside of a coffee cup and his favorite haunts around the city. Elizabeth
was intrepid, eager to learn and apply her knowledge. She asked reasonable questions when confused or interested. But what caught Matthew’s attention more than anything was her smile. When he was finished with the tour and had shown her to her workplace, she held out a hand and gave him a smile that lit her entire face, from her smooth cheeks to her beautiful brown eyes. “Thank you, Mr. Bennell.”

“Call me Matthew.” He shook her slim hand, grasping its softness firmly. “You’re very welcome.”

After recovering from Julia, Matthew had had a very scant amount of women in his life, and neither of them had been full-fledged relationships. Once he met Elizabeth, however, he found himself willing to get back on the horse. Elizabeth wasn’t like either of his two hookups, a face to forget in a week’s time. No, this was a face he had to see every day at work, a face he wanted to see even more times than that. He wanted to wake up next to her in the morning, drive her to work every day, and sit across the table with her each night. It was the hardest Matthew had fallen since Julia, and while at first stunned by the depth of his attraction, he came to accept it as the days wore on and Elizabeth showed no sign of leaving the job.

And as Matthew accepted it, he became determined to win her over. This time, he decided he wouldn’t resort to putting up a front as he had done for Julia. He would instead present his whole self to Elizabeth and let her take it or leave it.

The seduction started slowly. Though Matthew was attracted, he preferred taking baby steps to ease back into the idea of a relationship. First he made sure to be around Elizabeth as often as he could at work, to help her whenever she asked for it and listen when she wanted to talk. Then he learned her schedule and made sure their lunch breaks coincided so he could ask if she wanted to join him. Sometimes she said no, but the more he asked, the more often she accepted.

Eventually Matthew offered his phone number, and they enjoyed many pleasant conversations after hours. By this point, Matthew knew he was in deep. His friendship with Elizabeth was taking precedence over every other relationship in his life. For the most part, his other friends were supportive of his goal to win Elizabeth. He didn’t talk specifics to David, but David approved of his idea that to begin a new relationship, he had to present himself wholly. A newer acquaintance, Jack Bellicec, had different ideas. He pounced on Matthew after the latter had mentioned Elizabeth more times than he realized—“Who’s this Elizabeth, exactly?” Upon hearing her description, he inquired, “Are you sure it’s best to date a woman you’re working with?”

“You’re not one to judge, Jack,” Matthew answered dryly. “You’re married to one.”

It all came to a head when the office decided to hold a holiday party. Walking out to his car one evening, with Elizabeth at his elbow, Matthew asked if she’d be interested in skipping the party. “I never go to office parties. They’re just an excuse to force us to socialize. If you’re interested, you could come over to my place that night. I’ve got a seat with your name on it at my dinner table.”

Elizabeth smiled even as she shook her head. “Sorry, Matthew, but as I’ve never been to one of those parties, I’d like to decide for myself before renouncing them completely.”

“Well,” Matthew murmured, stepping past the sidewalk and turning to face Elizabeth. “Then it looks like I’ll be going this year.”

A faint flush of pink tinged Elizabeth’s cheeks, and her smile deepened, though she tried not to let it. “Oh…” For a moment, her mouth formed shapes, as if she had more to say, but at the last second she stepped back and turned away, waving as she took off to her car. “Have fun at Chez
Martin tonight! I heard they always receive the clean bill of health.”

“Tonight will be the first time they don’t!” Matthew called behind her back, and then turned back to his car, his spirits high.

The party did not work out as he had expected it. Elizabeth showed up as she had said she would, and Matthew was there to take her coat and lead her over to the party area. However, they soon lost track of each other amidst the flow of fellow employees, many approaching to make painfully awkward small talk and then stay at Matthew’s side, hoping the conversation would spark. Immediately Matthew was reminded of why he didn’t like these parties— not counting Elizabeth, he had very little in common with his coworkers, and would rather not hear them ramble about their personal lives as if he was interested. He needed to find Elizabeth… but the cluster of people wouldn’t let him escape. There Matthew was forced to stay, sipping wine and politely conversing while wishing he could tune every word out.

Finally Matthew spotted Elizabeth, hovering on the periphery of the throng. He muttered “Excuse me” to the person nearest to him and shoved off, moving through the group of people. Soon he was towering over her, grinning slightly, as she gazed unsurely into his eyes. “Enjoying your first office party?”

“Matthew, I don’t feel well,” Elizabeth answered, her voice unsteady and her face pale. Her large brown eyes reflected unhappiness. “Can- can you walk me out to the front?”

His good mood dissolving into concern, Matthew nodded. “I’ll get your coat.” He went to retrieve it and came back to find Elizabeth leaning against the wall, her arms wrapped around herself. Carefully Matthew handed the coat over. “What happened?”

“I don’t know,” she answered faintly, trying two times to fit her coat’s zipper together before finally getting it right. “I was drinking, and then… and then I felt sick…”

Warily Matthew’s eyes drifted over to the bottles of wine the partygoers had provided. Had something in it disagreed with Elizabeth? He himself felt fine, if a little buzzed. It was worth investigating once he came back up, but now his first priority was taking Elizabeth to the front.

“Come on,” he murmured, circling an arm around her shoulders and drawing her close. “Let’s get you out of here.” Employees called their goodbyes behind Matthew and Elizabeth’s backs as they walked out, but neither of them gave a word of response.

In the elevator, Elizabeth slumped tiredly against Matthew, who gently held her in place. He slowly moved his hand further up her back, until his fingers were tangled in her soft hair. Elizabeth didn’t say or do anything in response- her eyes were closed - but Matthew decided not to push his luck. She had let him touch her, and that was enough.

The elevator’s doors opened with a whoosh. Matthew helped Elizabeth forward, walking her out of the elevator. Glancing up at him, she gave him a small, relieved smile. “Thank you, Matthew. I have to make a phone call…”

“There should be a phone in the office over there,” Matthew said, delicately turning Elizabeth so she could see where he was pointing. She stared at the office for a second before her eyes wandered to Matthew, turning slightly so that they were standing face-to-face. Letting his hand drop, Matthew took ahold of Elizabeth’s arm. Now he was staring into her eyes, searching her picture-perfect face for any sign of rejection. When she only stared back, Matthew leaned in…

Only for Elizabeth to step back, ripping herself from Matthew’s clutches. A small gasp rose in her throat, her eyes widening. Surprised, Matthew took a step back as well, feeling blood rush to
his face as his heart gave an off-beat thud. He cleared his throat, but Elizabeth spoke before he got the chance.

“Matthew… Matthew.” She seemed to be struggling with finding the right words. “Matthew, I…” Suddenly that beautiful smile of hers filled her face, an embarrassed, self-conscious smile. “I have a boyfriend.” Laughing slightly, she gestured to the ceiling. “I’m sorry, I just—"

“No, I’m sorry,” Matthew interrupted, shame washing over him. “Elizabeth—"

“I have to call him to pick me up,” she said, speaking over him. “Sorry. I’ll just be a minute…” With that, Elizabeth turned and ducked into the nearby office, leaving Matthew to pass a hand along his face and wonder how in the world he could have screwed up so badly.

When Elizabeth emerged, Matthew gave her a once-over to make sure she was okay before heading for the door, not bothering to look back and make sure she was following him. Outside, the cool breeze of San Francisco in the wintertime wrapped itself around them. Elizabeth sat down on a bench and stared out into the street, while Matthew pushed his hands into his pockets and tried not to look at her.

“How long have you been together?” he asked quietly. “You and your boyfriend?”

“Five months,” Elizabeth replied promptly, matter-of-fact, without a hint of annoyance. “We moved in together last month. I would have invited him to come tonight, but he had to work late at the clinic.”

“The clinic?” Matthew said. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Elizabeth nod. “He’s a dentist.”

“Oh.” For a moment they stayed silent in place, two silhouettes imposed against the tall building behind them, before Matthew ventured to ask another question. “What’s his name?”

“Geoffrey.” Matthew tried to keep his gaze straight ahead, but he still noticed Elizabeth reaching up to brush her hair out of her face, the faint beginnings of a smile on her lips. “Look, Matthew… I really do like you, but Geoffrey and I are very happy together. I hope you’re fine with that.”

Matthew released a heavy sigh. “Yes, I… I’m fine with that.” As long as Elizabeth was happy, that was what mattered. He had tried his best and been let down, as he had in the past. Perhaps there would be another opportunity in the future, but he knew when to back away.

They stayed outside together in a long, semi-comfortable silence until a car pulled up at the curb, prompting Elizabeth to struggle to her feet. “That’s Geoffrey’s car…” She glided down the steps, Matthew following after her to make sure she didn’t trip. From the car, an handsome man emerged and strode towards Elizabeth with open arms. “Elizabeth! How was the party?”

“It was fine,” she replied as his arms enveloped her, giving him a squeeze before releasing him and gesturing to Matthew. “This is my friend Matthew. He walked me out because I wasn’t feeling well.”

“Oh.” The man extended his hand, which Matthew took and shook. “Geoffrey Howell. Thank you for watching over her.”

“Matthew Bennell.” His tone was measured as he scoped out every aspect of Geoffrey’s person. “You’re very welcome.”

Geoffrey gave him a polite nod and went to the passenger door, opening it and herding
Elizabeth inside. Matthew watched from the curb as the two settled into the car and drove off. Then he turned away and went off to fetch his car, suddenly having had enough of human interaction for one night.

He wondered how much wine Elizabeth had drunk, and how well she would remember the night’s events the next day. For his sake, he hoped she wouldn’t remember that he had tried to kiss her, to spare them both the embarrassment. With the break of dawn, he hoped to make a fresh start in their friendship, because he realized now that David’s advice to him was not the full truth. Throughout the entire time he’d known Elizabeth, Matthew had been so focused on being honest and presenting himself to her that he had completely failed to acknowledge her own traits. He had been so wrapped up in “winning” her that he hadn’t bothered to check if she was already seeing someone or not.

And so Matthew’s unshakeable determination was put to better use in developing their friendship, instead of seeing Elizabeth as the next love of his life. Through friendship, they grew closer than ever, to the point where Matthew would have been content if it never became anything more. All that held him back from admitting that romance would never bloom was that Elizabeth did remember Matthew had tried to kiss her at the holiday party, and her unswerving statement that if it wasn’t for the man she loved and was living with, things might have turned out differently between them.

4. Warm

Most of all, Matthew Bennell was warm by nature, which was what finally won Elizabeth over, just a little too late. If only her reciprocation of his feelings hadn’t come at such an inopportune time. Having just seen the body doubles of Jack Bellicec and Elizabeth herself, made an innumerable amount of calls that all led to nothing, hacked his own body double to bits, watched his friends Jack and Nancy sacrifice themselves to the pods and then been forced to hide out in the health department until the pods’ suspicions eased, it hardly seemed strange when he and Elizabeth shared a kiss- a brief, fleeting kiss, but a kiss nonetheless. Foreheads touching, stress draining from their systems, they had moved towards each other and closed the gap, and for one, two sweet seconds Matthew had the contact with Elizabeth of which he had always dreamed. Then they parted, and not a word was spoken, but Matthew knew that something between them had irrevocably changed. Elizabeth would never again leave his side.

Twenty minutes and five speed pills later, Matthew was confronted with the body doubles of Jack and, most horrifyingly, his best friend David Kibner. And it was then, after this cold and hard David injected a sedative into Matthew’s body without his consent or a care in the world, that Elizabeth decided to say it. “Matthew, I love you.”

He understood her desperation, her need to get the words out, but if only she hadn’t chosen this moment. If only that I love you could have come sooner, during one of their many phone conversations or lunches together. If only she had realized how she felt on the day that Geoffrey changed, and instead of staying at Matthew’s for dinner, had spent the night. Or maybe she could have said it in the car on the way to the book party, after following Geoffrey around all day and realizing he was no longer the same man… Hell, Matthew wouldn’t have even cared if she had taken him aside during the workday and told him right there and then. But she had chosen this exact moment to love him, and it was the one moment that Matthew couldn’t say it back. Determining the pods’ goal was far more important than Matthew’s emotions for the woman beside him.

In the end, Elizabeth turned to Matthew because she had no one else to rely on- no one who was as stable and warm as him. It was Matthew who had cheered her up with dinner just two nights ago, Matthew who held her in his arms until she stopped crying. Matthew had arranged a
meeting with David Kibner to try and ease Elizabeth’s mind, and he had been there to save her from being replicated. This was not a strict, serious man who pushed his lovers away - this was a very caring, warm man who had always wished the best for Elizabeth. If they’d had the chance earlier, their relationship might have gone as far as Matthew’s previous one. But now that the pods had arrived, they had to spend their time running instead of discussing their feelings. An extraterrestrial invasion was no time or place for romance.

Fate decided to play a cruel trick on Matthew that night, when he and Elizabeth attempted to run for the last time. After seeing the pod warehouse and sustaining a twisted ankle, Elizabeth had given up hope. She collapsed in the nearby field, weeping - “They’re growing them…” Nearly as distressed as she was, but concealing it so as not to agitate her further, Matthew dropped onto the ground and took Elizabeth into his arms, cradling her. “Elizabeth… I love you, I love you, I love you!” It was the first time he had dared to say the words to her out loud, but even as he spoke he knew that it didn’t matter. Elizabeth was already gone, her face stained with tears and her eyes bloodshot from lack of sleep. Carefully he wiped the tears off of her face and gave her a kiss, wishing he could do more for her, wishing that he could ease her suffering…

Leaving Elizabeth alone in the field was the greatest mistake of Matthew’s life. When he came back, he knew rationally what had happened, but his heart refused to believe it. “I love you,” he whispered desperately, aching for her to open her eyes, while she kept sleeping soundly in what would have been the picture of perfect peace. He held her close, listening to her breathe and trying to stall the inevitable, consoling her even though she couldn’t hear him. “The boat’s there, Elizabeth. It’s gonna take us away…” But his comforting words weren’t worth a damn, because she crumbled into dust in his arms - her last minutes spent in blissful sleep, the rest she deserved after all of the stress she had endured over the past three days. Horror-struck, Matthew sprung to his feet, tears spilling from his wide eyes - and no less than a foot away, the naked body of Elizabeth’s double sprang up too.

He knew then, gazing upon her radiant form, that she was an abomination. The Elizabeth he loved was dead and long gone. And it was up to him to stop this new Elizabeth - no, she was a pod, she had nothing to do with Elizabeth - before she sucked the last bit of warmth out of him entirely.
David Kibner

Chapter Notes

This chapter was a real struggle to write, as evidenced by how long it took me to post it. David Kibner is by far my least favorite character in the movie, and I didn't enjoy getting inside his mind. I hope whoever's out there enjoys reading it, though.

I would also like to note that I used "psychologist" to describe Kibner's profession in this chapter, whereas I called him a "psychiatrist" in the first one. If anyone can elaborate on the differentiation, feel free.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I. Unconventional

Until his college career began, David Kibner had never received above-average recognition for anything he did. Every interviewer shook their heads and laughed when he told them- "You're not serious?"- but he went ahead, insisting the fact. No, no, I wasn’t the most popular student in high school by a long shot. My time at the University of California Berkeley is what really kicked off my career…

In truth, David was fibbing ever so slightly, as he often did when it came to interviews (and especially when the interviewer was blonde). No, he hadn’t been the most popular student in school, but every now and then honors would trickle down to him. He consistently made the A-B honor roll every year, occasionally had his essays examined as the golden standard for his peers in English class, and even got accepted into the school’s specialty center for medical science. However, being generally well-liked also made him faceless to the rest of the student body. There was nothing one could say about David Kibner, other than the fact that he was a good student and a good person. He had friends, and spent time with them regularly, but when he eschewed them to stay in and study his lack of presence was not commented on. In turn, he did not miss them acutely or even miss them at all. It was more rewarding to get his work done in place of socializing, and hand in a grade A paper the next day.

Of course, the students at his high school now would be foolish not to take notice of David Kibner. It would be hard not to, because a plaque had been erected in his name just outside the school. He figured that if he got any more popular, the next step would be renaming the specialty center after him.

“How did your days at Berkeley influence you as a person?” the interviewer would ask, sometimes angling her head so that David got a better view of her chocolate-brown eyes. He folded his hands in his lap and leaned back in his comfortable chair.

It wasn’t about how his university days had influenced him, he would invariably tell all interviewers. It was about how he had left his mark at the university. They downplayed it more than his high school, because they often had famous graduates waltz out of there. But the truth was that David Kibner had entered the mundane, unassuming psychology department, and flipped it on its head by the time he left.

Well, at least the second part was true. Again, a mild exaggeration was required, as it made the whole story sound slicker (and the blonde shifted in her seat to lean closer, smiling politely.
with spotless teeth). Besides, David had already told his story more times than he could count; it was easier to repeat the same information when asked. He hadn’t originally been a psychology major, not in the least. At first medical science was the name of the game, following up on his high school’s program at which he had excelled. It was less about the science of people’s emotions and more about the anatomy of their brains that caused the emotion, not interpreting behavior so much as figuring out where the behavior came from in the first place. The studies were strenuous, but David’s heart was in the field, and in the beginning he was sure he would be able to rise to his challenging workload.

However, he had ended up switching- and having to explain this switch was another reason why David often neglected to tell his full story in interviews. The truth was, not even David’s sincere interest could keep his work from crushing him. When he discovered that a college major meant a study that would swallow a student whole, he realized that medical science wasn’t the field that he wanted to devour him, and applied for a new major towards the end of the fall semester. This was what ultimately set him on the right path- a major in psychology with a minor in English. When the blonde interviewer heard this tidbit, David could have sworn her ears perked up a little.

“Was it your minor in English that originally interested you in writing books, Dr. Kibner?”

Still on last-name basis, he thought unemotionally as he eyed her. One had to admire her professionalism, at least. Slowly an ever-knowing smile broke over his face, for the interviewer had at last gotten to the crux of his fame and interest. David didn’t think he would ever tire of answering this routine question.

Yes, he told her. Yes, it was minoring in English that got him interested in writing his own books. Of course, he probably would have written essays anyway as a psychologist, but his desire to write books as a means of communicating his ideas grew more appealing upon taking numerous English classes. And fortune smiled upon him. At first writing was a hobby he kept to himself, but as his grades skyrocketed and his professors clamored to read more of his work, David began offering them snatches of the book he was currently creating. They lapped it up as if they’d never heard ideas so original- which of course they hadn’t, not then. David Kibner had not yet become a household name.

“What do you attribute to your success?” the pretty blonde asked, her hands clasped in her lap but her whole body poised at the edge of her seat. David knew triumphantly that he had scored.

It’s simple, he replied, the way he always did. The reason why his Berkeley professors and later his faithful audience had loved his work so much was that it was unconventional. David didn’t try to think outside the box- he raided the box for scraps, shook it until every speck of dust had fallen out. He went straight to the bottom of the box and reported what he had found there with an unflinching, scrutinizing eye. Once his first book was published, several years after his college career drew to a close, it rocked the public. Critics declared David to be an expert psychologist. His business boomed and he was invited to speak at numerous events. The popularity only increased as he released more books, emboldened by the success of the first one. No one had ever read anything like it before, or so the hundreds of letters pouring into his office told him.

“I suppose,” David concluded, casting his enchanted smile at the blonde and enjoying the way her eyes lit up in return, “that I was always unconventional, even back in high school. One thinks that it’s very conventional to study and get good grades. But in our modern society, that’s simply not true.” As if by accident, his broad hand landed not on his knee, but on the blonde’s knee instead, and she cheerfully gazed into his eyes, enjoying herself but not wanting to spoil
David’s closing speech.

“Because I worked so hard,” David said, refusing to break eye contact for even a second, “I was different from every slacker in the building. But I also made something of myself, something that I’ll never give up.” He shrugged gently, his smile softening, and the blonde grinned back. Without looking away from him, she reached down and placed her hand over his, her thumb reflexively stroking his skin.

So much for professionalism.

2. Playboy

David slept with the blonde that night, because neither she nor he could give any reason why he shouldn’t. He took her back to his apartment and they downed several glasses of white wine between them. After drinking to David’s fame and fortune and to the blonde’s successful interview, a record was spun and a slow-dance began in the dim lamplight. It took time, but eventually the warmth they shared and the murmured, sweet words in each other’s ear transformed into gentle, languorous kisses along the lips, the cheeks, the neck… Even so, David waited for just the right moment to ask, “Do you want to see my book collection?” If she’d been looking properly, she would have noticed it in glass cases all around her, but instead the blonde only nodded and eagerly tugged on David’s hand. He let her lead him to his room with a subtle grin on his face. No one could accuse him of being less than gentlemanly.

In the morning, David arose to find that the blonde was a late sleeper. He slid out of bed and flung the curtains back, meeting the glaring San Francisco morning. Cars barreled past on the road beneath him, and David breathed a sigh before turning back to his bed and staring at his slumbering conquest. She looked so funny asleep, with her hair all tangled and her blush smudged on one supple hand… The sight of her brought back memories to intrude David’s brain, memories of the other times he had awoken to a similar sight.

Rhonda had also touched her cheek when she slept, although she had focused more on the eyes and lips when doing her makeup. Dahna preferred to lie flat with her face buried in the pillow, now and again emitting a snore. Quinn had sat up in bed as soon as David so much as twitched a muscle, insisting that this wasn’t right for her. And Beverly had surprised him by faking her sleep and waiting until he was in the bathroom to pounce on him. “Wasn’t last night an absolute blast?” The sound of her throaty giggles had carried over the ceramic tiles.

So many women David had had… He was surprised he could still remember their names. Even when gazing upon the blonde currently in his bed, he couldn’t remember how she had introduced herself. It all seemed so long ago, before the interview, before the drinks and dancing… Dispassionately David turned back towards the window and stared out at the skyline, quelling the urgent voice in the back of his head that declared it was wrong to sleep with a reporter. Of course it was socially immoral. There was no denying that. But how wrong could it have really been when both enjoyed the experience so much? Besides, if there was any pesky residual guilt left over, David knew of a church that would accept him at any hour. Religion wasn’t his strongest interest, but every now and then he enjoyed the serenity it brought him.

Besides the fascinating character studies with which his patients provided him, the greatest perk of this lifestyle was the access it gave David to so many beautiful women. His catapult into celebrity had placed him among the likes of fashion models, a few of whom had flirted with him unashamedly. However, celebrity’s greatest downside also had to do with the game of love. Though David covered his nightly flings well, any relationship that went beyond a mere quick burn became instantly reported on, especially if the woman was more famous than he was.

Haven’t I paid the price for that already? Even as David stared out the window, the light
tinge of blue sky transformed into the blue of her eyes, and the decidedly non-melodic roar of traffic became her lilting voice, crooning as she pinned him down. “Are you ready, baby?” At the merest suggestion, every memory came flooding back. Closing his eyes, David felt her honey-blond ringlets brush against his cheeks, and her soft lips landing on the tip of his nose. “I love being here with you. David, you’re a prince to me.”

Kelly had been the name, he remembered grimly, one corner of his mouth twitching downward in distaste. For once, she had been the one to pursue him, bribing the author with whom he was sitting to switch seats with her so that she could grill him on when the new book was coming out. It soon transpired over the course of the conversation that Kelly was an upcoming actress who had played small roles in several TV series, and was now set as a supporting character in a film that had reached post-production. If the film did well, she mentioned, she might earn a starring role in her next feature, though of course she didn’t want to count her chickens before they hatched.

David liked her. He liked her practical attitude, her dominant personality, and of course her hair color. So as the dinner wore on, his questions turned probing, more personal, until she accused him of psychoanalyzing her and they had a good laugh. Then David suggested they hightail it out of there as soon as dinner broke up, and she agreed to pay for the taxi.

To his surprise, David found that it wasn’t just a quick fling he wanted from Kelly. Sure, they went back to his hotel that night and sure, they made love. But therein lay the difference— they made love. It wasn’t easy gratification, it was the slow and thorough worship of a body, learning every inch of her and letting her patiently guide him. She made him feel more alive than ever. Though Kelly departed directly afterwards, pausing only for a one-minute cuddle and leaving a cloud of sweet perfume in her wake, David asked her— for the first time in his life— if she could stay longer. Her reaction was to smile, and pause the process of slipping her stockings back on to blow him a kiss. “Wouldn’t it be nice?” Then she slid on her black heels and walked out the door as if the whole thing had never happened.

Of course, they found each other after that night, and again she was the one who initiated it, taking up one of David’s books that she read so religiously and sending a letter to his PO Box that contained nothing but seven important digits. For a while, David enjoyed the mutual attraction, taking it slow and letting it blossom into greatness. Kelly stayed over at his apartment on weekends when she didn’t have to be in town. They had long, fascinating phone conversations, filling in the details of each other’s personal lives. They went out for occasional dinners, debating David’s brand of therapy and the nature of human behavior. Once David found out that Kelly was his intellectual equal, she grew even more appealing.

He went to the premiere when her first feature hit the theaters, and responded positively to it. He was supportive when she signed on for another movie, understanding the importance of her success. Kelly hadn’t gotten the starring role, but her performance won critical acclaim and offered her a whole new string of offers. Her schedule grew ever more incompatible with David’s, but he rarely complained. Personal space and time for reflection was important for those in a relationship to have.

It was during the filming of her third movie— this time as the lead— that the affair had begun its descent. David had no idea when precisely it had happened, but he could never forget that jolt of shock when he opened up a magazine in his waiting room and saw his own name and face, in a section that wasn’t reserved for book reviews. Nestled in among other celebrity sightings was a photo of David and Kelly having dinner, with appropriate identification in the caption.

David had read his name in print plenty of times before, but never before in this context. He was at once inexplicably repulsed. Any of his patients could pick up this magazine before coming
to their appointment. And that photo was enough to let them form an opinion on him that wasn’t
the one he had so carefully cultivated. This was an entirely new form of media, and David knew
from his experiences with the fractured human psyche that the less reputable a source was, the
more likely individuals were to believe it.

At a loss, he could only take the magazine back to his office and stow it within his desk,
ruminating on his next course of action. He didn’t want to break up with Kelly- he still enjoyed
her company. But maybe it was time to take things down a notch.

From then on, David stopped calling Kelly as frequently, forcing her to call him. He turned
down every suggestion she made regarding public dates, insisting that they only meet at his
apartment. At first she was full of worry, but that quickly transitioned into shrill frustration.
“What’s the matter, David? Am I not good enough for you?”

“You’re too good for me,” he murmured, glancing past her accusing eyes and towards the
nearby bedside lamp. He let the light burn into his retinas before his gaze flickered onto the open
window and lingered there, focusing on the cool, tender night.

Her arms wound around him, tightly hugging his chest. “You haven’t found anyone better?”
Her chin nestled against his shoulder, and he breathed a heavy sigh. “Seeing anyone while I’m
down in Hollywood, someone taller and stronger and blonder?”

“No,” he answered, after a moment’s pause, and finally gazed into the clear, endless ocean of
her eyes. “I’ve been busy with my work. There isn’t always enough time to call you.”

Kelly pursed her lips, and David could see that she wasn’t fooled- she was too smart to fall
for that. She knew there had to be another reason why he hadn’t called her properly in weeks. But
she only replied, “Well, when your work gives you a break, let me know,” and slithered her fine
fingers down his body, twisting them into his chest hair and leaving pink lipstick marks on his
shoulder blades.

He could have made nice with her and met her in the middle, or come out with the truth of
how their relationship was beginning to spook him. But instead of tackling the problem as he
always helped his patients, David Kibner resolved to settle it in his own private way- by avoiding
Kelly. Every day the magazine’s trashy photo burned before his eyes, and every day Kelly slipped
further and further away from him.

The moment that ended it all came late in a relationship that was already failing. For weeks
on end, whenever she could catch him on the telephone, Kelly had been pestering David to go out
to dinner with her in San Francisco. “I miss you so much, David. Why do I feel like you’re
ignoring me?” Like the brilliant psychologist he was, he convinced her that her perception of him
was entirely incorrect, and then grudgingly agreed to take her out to dinner. Surely no harm could
be done if they were seen together in San Francisco. It was David’s current hometown, and he
knew all its secrets. Hollywood was a different story, with its incredible, constant thirst for a
salacious story to shove into the limelight.

Dinner passed easily, and for a while it felt like old times, save the few folks who stared in
open recognition at Kelly. They talked and laughed like usual, gazing into each other’s adoring
eyes, and even finished each other’s meals. If the getaway had been executed perfectly, David
might have rethought his entire position on maintaining his relationship with Kelly.

However, exiting the restaurant turned into madness, for as soon as David and Kelly set foot
outside, flashbulbs went off in their faces. Photographers rounded on them, blocking their way
whenever they turned, valiantly preventing them from reaching the curb. In the confusion, Kelly’s
hand was separated from David’s. Suddenly untethered, he shoved his way past the clamoring
crowd, ignoring their eager cameras, and made a blind dash for the car. It was only when he had hit the street that the thought of saving Kelly crossed his mind, and for a second he slowed, watching the throng accost her. But then a few moved towards the car, and with a touch of the gas pedal David accelerated and drove quickly away from the restaurant, leaving Kelly to fend off the paparazzi alone.

When she reached his apartment an hour later, David could almost see steam coming out of her ears. He tried to kiss her as she entered the door, but she forcefully shoved him away. “What the hell was that back at the restaurant?” she exploded, backing him into the sofa. “What were you thinking, leaving me behind like that?”

Calmly—on the exterior, at least—David held up his hands. *I’m defenseless, don’t attack me.* Words flowed surprisingly easily to his tongue. “I would have opened the door, but I didn’t want any of the photographers jumping in—”

“You could have waited for me!” Openly disgusted, Kelly turned sharply on her heel and sashayed angrily to the sink. “My God, David, do you know anything about the press? Even those bloodsuckers have limits! They wouldn’t have gotten in the car!”

“How was I to know that?” David protested, more eager to impress his point upon Kelly than willing to argue. Steadily he strode towards the kitchen area, following Kelly. “Your fame has easily encompassed mine.”

Kelly inhaled deeply through her nose, balling up a hand towel beneath her fingers. “Every day I understand you less and less. We haven’t been out on a proper date for months and now you dump me at the curb after taking me out? David, what do you want from me—”

Her desperate plea to enter the confines of his mind was cut off when David grabbed her arm, spinning her around so that they faced each other. He stared intently at Kelly, mapping her face, charting every emotion that ran across it—hot anger, churning frustration, prickling impatience and even a bit of cold fear. For the life of her, she couldn’t understand why he was acting like this.

Gently, David reached up and used his large thumb to brush the loose curls of blonde hair away from her forehead and behind her ear. Kelly made not a peep as he did this, pressing her lips together firmly and swallowing hard. Her wide blue eyes searched his face, trying and failing to identify the emotions he wore. Unfortunately, David Kibner did not wear his heart on his sleeve.

David took Kelly’s face in his hands and held her in place, drilling his hard gaze into her. Then he spoke the words he needed to say. “I heard you’re involved with your co-star right now.”

Kelly’s eyes immediately darted downward, and David knew that whether it was true or not, he had effectively just ended the relationship. Neither of them had lost nor gained anything from it, except perhaps fresh insights on how to treat fellow celebrities and the power imbalance between them.

Since then, David had quietly sworn that he would never date another actress. *They lie about themselves onscreen, so why should it be different in person?* Even from the very beginning, Kelly had been out of David’s league. He shouldn’t have trusted anyone who was cleverer and more capable than he was, able to pierce the aura with which he surrounded himself. She had observed his emotions and reactions far too closely, and came to know him much too well. For a long time afterwards David had wished that humans hadn’t been born with emotions. It would put him out of a job, but it would also greatly simplify personal interactions.

A yawning sigh roused David from his thoughts, and he turned around to see the blonde in his bed arch her back and stretch as her eyes squeezed shut and her lips formed a perfect O-shape.
Watching her, a small smile tugged at the corner of David’s lips. Out of all the women he had bedded, only Sandy had woken up quite like that… though she had more resembled a graceful cat than this clumsy woman.

This woman… Desperately David racked his brain for a name, anything that rang a bell. For goodness sakes, she had interviewed him just the day before. Did these women really mean so little to him that he was only interested in scoring, not in their actual character? One more hookup like this, and he might need to seat himself on his office’s well-worn couch.

“David?” the blonde said, sitting straight up in bed and rubbing at her eyes. A dim memory from the night before told David that she would need to put in her contacts before she had a chance to function properly. “David, are you there…”

“I’m here.” He directed his words toward her, but did not move an inch from the window. Slowly the blonde turned her nearsighted gaze onto him, and her face filed with a tentative, fraught smile.

“Thanks for the great night. I- I really appreciated it.”

David nodded, unsure if she could see the motion but not particularly caring. “You can’t stay for breakfast,” he said, after a tense, momentary pause.

It was only when the blonde had gotten dressed, washed up, packed her handbag, and left the apartment that David remembered her name. Sheila. Warm satisfaction grew in his chest as he gazed down at the busy street. Sheila, yet another conquest, another name to remember and compare to those who would inevitably come after her.

3. Voyeur

Because David was busy tidying up after Sheila’s departure, he ended up about five minutes late to the office. To David, this wouldn’t normally be a big deal, because he was of the opinion that lateness only became a problem when the minutes were double digits. However, his sight upon entering the waiting room almost made him reconsider this position. Usually at this point in the morning there were only about five patients waiting for him outside. No matter how popular David Kibner was, or how pressing their problems were, very few were willing to orient their working schedules to fit in a morning appointment. (Several things could be read into that, David often observed. The perceived shameful of going to see a psychologist and the importance society placed on work being primary.) Yet David walked in to find that the expected amount of patients had doubled, clocking in at ten. And they were unusually persistent today. As David crossed the room and pretended not to notice the stares falling on him, one man got to his feet and intercepted David’s path, wedging himself between David and the office door. “Dr. Kibner,” he said breathlessly, wearily. “I need to speak with you before anyone else- there’s been a screw-up with the schedule, my appointment was supposed to come-”

“Excuse me,” David interrupted, his mouth laughing but his eyes giving a firm no. “I need to get to my office. Please wait your turn like everybody else…”

“No, you don’t understand,” the man insisted, valiantly refusing to budge even as David reached around him and pried open the door to his office. “I was scheduled to see you earlier. It’s urgent, doc!”

Urgent. David glanced back at the man as he switched on the lights, trying to remember if he had ever stopped by before. The very fact that he didn’t remember the man suggested that this was one of his first appointments, but the way the man spoke suggested familiarity. His thick eyebrows drooping low, David removed his coat and questioned the man. “What’s your name?”
“Oh…” An awkward, half-mocking smile appeared on the man’s face. “Oh, I’m sorry, let me explain. It’s my wife who usually comes here- but she couldn’t make the appointment, so I went in her place. And that’s-” He harshly tapped the doorframe. “What I’m trying to tell you!”

That was no answer, David thought, but his interest piqued at the mention of the man’s wife. He strode over to the man, pausing to hang his coat up on a hook by the door. “What’s your wife’s name?”

“Patrice Robins,” the man replied, his face aglow with intensity. Never once did his wide eyes move from David’s face, though David tried to shake his gaze by pointedly glancing away. “Please, Dr. Kibner, I need your help. I- I tried to get her to come see you herself, but she refused to.”

“She refused?” Slowly David’s eyebrows rose. He snuck to the door and cast a wide glance across the waiting area, taking the temperature of the room before deciding his regular patients could wait a minute. But only a minute, otherwise someone would get upset. And David generally prided himself on keeping his patients happy.

Mr. Robins gave a shaky, relieved smile as David shut the door, pleased that someone was finally going to hear him out. David, however, was lost in thought as he beckoned Mr. Robins to the couch. Yes, Patrice Robins… As he dwelled on the name, her image grew firm grew in his mind. She had seen him many times to help cope with her tendency for nervous breakdowns, a symptom of anxiety disorder. She wasn’t a patient David was especially fond of, but that didn’t mean he disliked her. On the contrary, he often spoke with her about reducing the stressors in her life, and listened to her problems with the most sympathetic ear she could ask for. Well… the most sympathetic ear beyond that of her own husband. However many problems Patrice had, none of them had to do with “dear Daniel, who helps me even when he doesn’t understand me.” Eyeing Daniel now, David felt glad that Patrice had never mentioned him, because already he was a character David was starting to find unpleasant. All those bleeding-heart, angry young men who would grow righteously offended at the drop of the hat… From the few moments Daniel had spoken, David had him pegged for one of those types, and he wished he could get rid of him discreetly. However, for the sake of Patrice, he knew he would have to listen.

“Sit down,” David insisted, pulling up a chair before the couch as Daniel gingerly lowered himself into the seat. “Start from the beginning, please. Now what’s going on with your wife?”

“Uh- to tell you the truth, doc, I really don’t know,” Daniel said, refusing to meet David’s eyes as he shifted for a better position. “I don’t understand it and I can’t explain it, and that’s why I’ve come to you. You’re bound to know her mind better than I do.”

“You say she refused to come see me,” David said, folding his hands together and placing them in his lap. “Do you know if her current problems are caused by her anxiety disorder?”

“I’m not sure,” Daniel replied unhappily, running his hand through his thick hair. “All I know is, I woke up this morning and she wasn’t the same. I don’t mean she was freaking out or anything- that I’ve seen before.” He sighed. “She was just… just completely different. She was unusually serene- yeah, serene’s a good word for it. She was serene, and she reacted to me when I spoke but she didn’t seem to understand. She heard me, but she didn’t listen. Do you know what I mean?”

“I’m sure I do,” David replied emotionlessly, and Daniel went on, his breathing growing faster as he got more excited, more frantic. “At first I thought it was all in my mind. You know, maybe she’s always been like this- maybe I’m the one who’s gone weird. Or maybe her sessions with you have really straightened her out. But what cinched it for me, the final straw, was when I
asked her if she wanted me to drive her to her appointment at your office this morning, and she said:-“ He swallowed and then relayed the words in a serious, driving intonation. “She said, ‘No thank you. I’m not going to that appointment.’ I mean- Doc, you of all people have to realize how odd that is! She’s never missed an appointment, let alone flat out telling me she’s not going. I tried my hardest to make her go- I kept insisting, and she kept saying-.”

“Hold on, Daniel,” David cut in, leaning forward and boring into Daniel with hard brown eyes. “You tried to make your wife visit me?”

Surprised, Daniel stopped playing with his hair and glanced up. “Well, why shouldn’t I? Something was wrong and she needed your help.”

“David, did it ever occur to you that what she needed was your help?” David questioned.

“Believe me, your wife isn’t foolish. She hasn’t lost her mind. The most likely reason why she decided not to come to her appointment is that she felt you weren’t giving her the attention she needed. She believed that in refusing your offer, she would get your attention. She wants to spend more time with you. She feels that you were asking to dump her off at her appointment and forget about her for the rest of the day, instead of caring for her like a husband should.”

For a moment surprise was all that reigned on Daniel’s face, but as David’s words sunk in, he turned into a model of dark anger. His fists clenched. “How dare you say that? Look- all the time we’ve been married I’ve tried my damnedest to be a loving, supportive husband. She loves me and confides in me- she’d never try to play mind games like that. If she thought I wasn’t paying enough attention to her, she would tell me right out, not…” His voice trailed off, and David seized the moment to deliver another piece of sage, authoritative wisdom.

“Maybe your best wasn’t good enough, Daniel. You say you tried to be loving and supportive, but were you actually loving and supportive? Perhaps Patrice felt that her emotional disorder separated you from her, that you two were growing apart because you didn’t understand what she was going through. Perhaps she became serene to make you believe she was cured, to win you back.”

“Oh, listen to yourself,” Daniel protested, his last word a groan. “You’re talking like you don’t even know Patrice.”

“I’m only doing my job,” David responded, his temper as even as ever. “You came here looking for an explanation, and I provided you with one.”

“Yes, but-“ In a surge of motion, Daniel rose from his seat on the couch, striking it hard. “It’s a quack explanation if you ask me. I don’t believe it. You’re not actually listening to my problems, you’re trying to work in whatever dogma you’re currently into and make it apply to me.”

David had managed to remain seated throughout this entire conversation, but as the last accusation fell from Daniel’s mouth he couldn’t take it anymore. Soon he was hauling Daniel across the room, feeling his innards burn and stir at the thought that this ridiculousness had wasted half his morning. “Take care, Mr. Robins,” were his parting words before shutting the door to Daniel’s pleas. “And next time you want to see me, please don’t piggyback on your wife’s appointment.” It was clear he wouldn’t be paid for that particular visit.

After the morning’s rocky start, David’s spirits lifted when his next patient entered his office, an elderly woman who was a regular. As she spoke to David about what was on her mind, he leaned in close and held her hand, giving her comfort and strength through a gesture of support. What David had discovered a long time ago, and in fact had touched upon as an undertone in some of his early books, was that people would respond better and open up to him if he showed them intimate contact, such as holding hands or a gentle embrace. It made them immediately trust
David, believing that he was there to help them no matter what. On David’s end, he liked listening to people’s personal stories. The further they went in depth, the better. It was easy for him to construct mental images based on what they told him, and it was his deepest pleasure to do so. In general, David’s greatest job satisfaction came from being a voyeur. Listening to his patients speak was almost as thrilling as peeking in windows and picking up on another phone line without letting anyone know. (Not that David would ever do anything like that, of course.)

There was nothing David appreciated more when on the job than seeing for himself the results of his patients’ treatment. Several success stories were brought to him over the course of the day, a few from those who had first sought him out last week. A strange, persistent case of paranoia had been collectively brought to his attention, with last week’s patients claiming that someone they knew well had been replaced by an imposter. Now the patients returned with words of praise, thanking David for clearing up their mental confusion. One presented David with a bouquet of hand-picked flowers in gratitude. With every appointment, David’s smile expanded. To have cured someone in such a short amount of time was remarkable—truly a testament to his abilities.

However, the paranoid reports didn’t cease. After several meetings with his regular patients, an unfamiliar woman was directed into David’s office, her hands balled up nervously and her dark bangs nearly obscuring her eyes. As soon as David caught sight of her, he rose from his seat and crossed the room, never once looking away. “Hello,” he said carefully, and the woman glanced up to greet him properly. “Hi,” she replied meekly, holding out her hand, and David reached out to warmly shake it. He couldn’t recall asking his secretary to schedule an appointment for anyone new, but now that this woman had walked in he wanted nothing more than to decipher her purpose for visiting.

“I’m Dr. Kibner,” he said, releasing her hand. “What’s your name?”

“Joan Beaton,” she replied, reaching up to tuck one of her particularly blinding strands of hair behind her ear. Up close, David observed that her locks streaked with darker highlights. He couldn’t tell if they were a darker shade of brunette, or completely black. She was definitely not his type, but her eyes were rather pretty.

“I- I’m here to see you about something important,” Joan stated, her hands falling limply and uselessly to her sides. “I’m sorry if- if I’m surprising you. This happened yesterday, and I made the appointment last night. I didn’t know where else to turn…”

“Oh, it’s all right,” David said, his mouth curving into a smile. You don’t have to worry about me. For a moment, he wondered how Joan had managed to surpass his waitlist, but that was a question for another time. Perhaps she came from a prominent family, or someone she knew was a patient of his. Calmly he placed a hand on Joan’s shoulder, drawing her close and pointing with his other hand to the couch. “Why don’t you take a seat, Joan, and we’ll talk about it over there.” Joan nodded, and David released her, waiting for Joan to stretch uncertainly across the couch before sitting down and initiating the conversation. “Tell me about your life, Joan. Tell me what’s so important.”

Taking a deep breath, Joan began to speak, lingering on each word as if she felt she would regret it later. “I take care of my mother when I’m not working at the office. She- she’s very ill, and she needs my assistance. Yesterday, though… and I know it sounds weird, because she’s never left the house since I came to live with her... I came home and she wasn’t there. And right as I was panicking, I heard the car pull up in the driveway. I hardly ever drive, I just take the bus to work. But my mother had used my car to go out to places unknown, all by herself. She hasn’t felt well enough to leave the house in ages.”

“Did she tell you where she had been?” David asked, inching closer to Joan. She shook her
head, her desperate eyes meeting David like she was clutching to a lifeline.

“I asked her, and she just didn’t respond to me. She said she had her own life outside of the house and didn’t appreciate me sticking my nose in it. When I asked her, ‘What life?’ she closed the door on me. And- and I went to give her the pills she takes every night after dinner, but… but I’m not sure she actually took them.”

“What gave you that impression?” David murmured. “Did you find the pills in the trash later on?”

Shaking her head, Joan’s voice began to waver, and her eyes filled with stray tears. “No, no… I don’t have any proof. I didn’t find any pills. But I have this feeling…” A muffled sob broke in her voice, and her shoulders shook. “I know it sounds silly, but it’s just not like her. I don’t think that woman is my mother.”

“Not your mother?” David adopted a gentle, chiding tone as he took Joan’s small hand in his. “She looked like your mother, didn’t she?”

“Yes!” Joan declared, her voice breaking. “She looked exactly like my mother, and that’s what’s scary! She looked right, but she didn’t act right. My mother’s never been so- so cold to me…” Hastily she reached with her free hand to wipe away the tears rolling down her cheeks, and David took the moment to make a move. He placed both hands on Joan’s shoulders, causing her to sit up straight and meet his eye.

“Your mother couldn’t have become a different person,” David said, stating the obvious. “This is just her way of trying to tell you that she doesn’t need you around now that she’s feeling better. Mothers always have a hard time letting go of their children, but it’s time now for you as the child to let go of your mother. You don’t deserve to be pushed aside, or made to be so upset. Confront your mother and tell her you want to move out. She might pretend to fight it, but she’ll be relieved.”

“But- but I don’t want to move out,” Joan protested tearfully. “I just want to know why my mother…” She lapsed into silence, during which David moved one hand upwards to touch her damp cheek.

“Your mother has her own reasons,” he said kindly, trying not to offend Joan. “Everyone must maintain a decent level of privacy, and your mother is no different. She’s pushing you out of the nest, and you’ve got to acknowledge that. Don’t worry- your move doesn’t have to be permanent. At the very least, telling your mother you’re going to move out may be the outlet she’s looking for. She wants to encourage you but she doesn’t know how. Before anything else, you should open a conversation with her to help her intimate her thoughts.”

Joan stared blankly back into David’s eyes, and then she broke away from him to fumble in her pocket for a tissue. “Do you- do you think she’ll admit anything if I talk to her?” she said, dabbing at her eyes. David nodded.

“Will you talk to her tonight? For my sake if no one else’s? Start a conversation about moving out. She’ll open up in no time.”

Joan seemed to deliberate on this before finally giving a nod. Shakily she looked out at David to give him a tentative smile.

“Thank you, Dr. Kibner. I really appreciate your advice.”

“You’re welcome,” he said, smoothly producing a card from the interior of his jacket.
“Here’s my number. Feel free to call me anytime if you want to talk more about your mother, and your life.”

Smiling more broadly now, Joan accepted the card, and soon she left the office in a purely refreshed state of mind. David was immensely pleased. Solving others’ problems and listening to their stories was nearly as intimate as sex, and the pleasure it provided was nearly as great. He looked forward to the rest of the appointments scheduled for the day before his work was done and it was time to attend a book party in his honor. Just one of the little perks that came with being a celebrity, he mused. And what delightful perks they were.

4. Private

Later that night, the thought of Joan Beaton and others like her clouded David’s mind as he drove back to his apartment. How strange it was that so many people were coming to him with the same story. First it had been the new patients last week, then Joan, and now several people at the bookstore- including the hysterical woman whom he had ended up comforting and treating publicly. David shook his head as he recalled her, wondering what the coincidence was. Even Elizabeth, his friend Matthew’s girl- after seeing the way Matthew had behaved around her tonight, and being one of Matthew’s prime confidants, there was no way David could think of Elizabeth as anything else- had fallen prey to the rising epidemic, despite Matthew describing her as very levelheaded. For his friend’s sake, David wished Elizabeth well in interpreting his advice, considering that perhaps she would take his words as a sign that it was time to break up with her boyfriend. As for the matter of the other people, there was nothing he could do but hope that they managed to solve their problems, with or without his help.

Returning to his apartment, David gave a soft sigh when he opened the door to silence. It had been a pleasure to attend the book party, but now that all was said and done David was pleased to be free from socializing for the rest of the night. Even before the security breach with Kelly, he had never felt entirely comfortable sharing specific details of his life. It was one thing to divulge information when interviewed- it was another to make small talk with party guests. The furthest David ever went in that regard was during his dates with lovely women, and his meetings with Matthew, who truly was one of his closest friends. But even then he liked to keep his distance, questioning Matthew without giving much in return. For David Kibner, his private life was very private, and he intended to keep it as such for as long as possible.

Maybe that’s why I’m unable to maintain real relationships anymore, was the errant thought that crossed his mind, but he shoved it away. No use in trying to self-analyze. Sitting down on the couch, he gazed over at the bouquet of small pink flowers he had taken home from his office, sitting in water at his kitchen table, before his eyes strayed to the myriad books in cases surrounding him. Right before his drooping eyelids gave up entirely and he surrendered unto sleep on the couch, David picked out the section where he had filed all his own books, and smiled in satisfaction. Then the world went black to him forever, and it was an imposter who awoke to answer a ringing phone.

Chapter End Notes

The final chapter is bound to take a while to get done, so be patient, everyone,
Chapter Notes

At first I tried to write a chapter just like the first three, but I gave up on Elizabeth. So this is less a character study and more of me getting inside her head for a few scenes. Sorry- I really tried to write it differently, but I found it hard to work with her character.
Thanks to anyone who read/is reading this!

After all the nightmarish events of the day, after seeing the people she knew and cared for slowly be replicated and replaced, one by one, and after being cornered and injected and expected to assimilate without a care in the world, Elizabeth had no other words for the pods but three very strong ones.

“I hate you.”

She spoke with seething ferocity, but David Kibner- or the pod that had replaced David Kibner- seemed coolly indifferent. “We don’t hate you,” he said, stepping back to watch the sedative he had given Elizabeth take its toll. “There’s no need for hate now- or love.”

Love.

The word pounded through Elizabeth’s head. Love. Love. L-O-V-E. She stole a glance at Matthew by her side, and suddenly the pieces fell into place.

The pods had no emotion, but people like her and Matthew still did. Perhaps with the intensity of their feelings, they could fight back.

But how was she to find love? How could she hold onto something as strong as that and wield it against the pods, when she wasn’t sure she could even summon it up anymore? Who was there to love in this cold, unfeeling world?

She’d loved Geoffrey, of course. She’d loved his enthusiasm, his energy, the way he appreciated the little things in life. She’d loved it when they went out to the shore on weekends sometimes, and how he carried her out of the waves and planted kisses all over her cheeks and neck. But that was before he had turned. The Geoffrey that Elizabeth faced now knew nothing about enthusiasm, energy, kisses. He was more a machine than a man, responding mechanically to the outside world without a hint of opinion. Though Elizabeth had always been an expert at reading people, she now saw nothing in his vacant eyes.

Jack Bellicec she could have grown to love. They had hardly exchanged two words between each other before this whole mess happened, and even less afterwards. But Elizabeth felt, despite their minimal interaction, that she and Jack would have gotten along swimmingly under other circumstances. She knew he was a writer, a trade which had always appealed to her, and she knew from their interactions at Matthew’s home that he cared very deeply for his wife Nancy. She also knew that he was stubborn, hard-headed, obstinate- exactly the type of person she would have loved to sit down and debate. But now Jack stared at her with a menacing glint in his eye, and Elizabeth knew she could not bring herself to feel any positive emotion towards him, try as she might.
As for David Kibner… There was no way Elizabeth would have ever loved him, pods or no pods. He’d eased her soul when she was worried about Geoffrey, but he’d also had a deceptive look about him, something that couldn’t be erased by Matthew’s words of praise. If he hadn’t been so genial towards her, Elizabeth would have denounced him as a pod from the start. A famous man like Kibner already had one foot in the grave- letting his true self die in favor of cultivating a persona to wear at all times.

Though Nancy had been kind, she was currently missing, and had probably been turned into a soulless pod herself. Even if Elizabeth had been able to reach her family, she knew in her heart that she wouldn’t get to them in time. So that left only one option…

Matthew Bennell.

As soon as his name came to mind, Elizabeth wanted to hit herself on the head for not having realized it before. She’d known for almost as long as they had been friends that Matthew harbored a deep attraction to her. And yet, because of Geoffrey, nothing ever came of this. Elizabeth had put it out of mind and drawn boundaries to protect him from getting too close. Conversations about their love lives were always brief and never included the possibility of letting the relationship develop. Somehow Elizabeth hadn’t even considered it.

Now she realized what a fool she’d been. One adrenaline-laced kiss, and now Matthew was all she could think about. Why hadn’t she just let go of Geoffrey as soon as she noticed something was wrong? Even better, why had she let Geoffrey charm her in the first place? Why couldn’t she have held out hope just a little bit longer, long enough for her to realize that Matthew’s feelings were returned?

All that time, and now none of it could be made up. They were on the run, and likely would be ‘til the day they died. Regret surged through Elizabeth. If only they could have known each other better-

But regret was useless. There was only one emotion that would save them now. Swallowing hard, Elizabeth addressed her words to the man besides her- “Matthew, I love you!”

The only response she got was a subtle widening of the eyes. But it satisfied her. He knew how she felt, and that was enough. It had to be enough.

Even through the rest of the night, as they ran and fled from pods in all directions, those words stayed in Elizabeth’s heart. She carried her love for Matthew everywhere they went, though she never again voiced it. He knew, and she knew, which made everything all right. Maybe they would get away, and tell it to each other all night and into the morning. There was, after all, no more sleeping to be done. Elizabeth trusted in Matthew to secure her safety.

As she lay exhausted and beaten in the silent field that night, she found herself full of nothing but a strong sense of inner peace. With open arms, she accepted her fate, knowing that there was nothing more she could do, and refusing to feel ashamed. Love had turned out to be an inefficient weapon, but at least its formidable power had gotten her this far. As each sense faded out, the last Elizabeth felt was Matthew holding her against his chest. She sighed her last breath. There was nothing more she wanted than to be cradled in his strong arms for all of eternity.

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