

Emma Cole
Matter of the Heart, excerpt

My Nigel never could separate his work from his life.

I would often turn over in the middle of the night, expecting to feel him in bed beside me. Instead, through cracked eyelids, I would see a trail of open doors, and glaring light from the dining room. Sometimes, I would brave the cold floors of our drafty apartment to look over his shoulder. Place a kiss on the top of his head as he stared intently at the work before him. Pages upon pages of notes, calculations, algorithms worked out in longhand because he claimed it to be more reliable, which I could never parse.

“It’s the middle of the night, Nigel. Can’t it wait?” I’d tell him, in a soft voice, trying to lure him back to bed.

“Just another minute, sweetheart,” he’d reply. Most nights I didn’t bother getting up.

We moved a few years after, into a house just as drafty, but closer to his new job. Friends and family helped move boxes – his books and my clothes. Our small red car filled to the brim with old things we couldn’t say goodbye to.

“I’ll be so close to the lab, darling. So convenient. I can be there in five minutes if I have to,” Nigel said, twirling me around in our new empty living room. I didn’t see this as good news. But I bit my tongue and kissed him quickly.

This new job, as he’d explained many times over, was more complex than anything he’d done previously. Than *anyone* had done.

“Computers that are as smart as people, my love, can you imagine it?” For his sake, I tried to. “Not just that – computers that are as...as...as living as people. Human computers, computers that could be human. And we get to be a part of it!”

“But would they look the same?” I so rarely posed a question; his smile froze with his brows furrowed.

“What’s that, dear?”

“Could they make the computers, the robots, look the same as a person? Surely you’d be able to tell.”

“All cosmetic, love. That’s not the difficult part,” he chuckled. My Nigel had a broader scope – a deeper understanding for how the technology was chugging along. Yet in my mind, the wires and bolts of a computer would always be foreign.

My Nigel always worked late. Even on the days he swore he wouldn’t. Then it would be, “We’re so close, sweetheart. So close, I can’t leave now. You understand,” whispered to me through the phone.

I was okay with it until I wasn’t. A bit of a fight broke out; we were driving, on the way home from dinner with my parents. All the while he’d kept complaining, checking his watch.

“I have *important* things to do,” he was saying, starting to raise his voice as we headed down the highway. I was preparing a retort when I was interrupted. Our little red car flipped upside down on the freeway – a truck swerving into our lane.