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The Secrets She Keeps

Helen Cross

I fell in love with Hepsie Vine on a snowy December afternoon. The day I went for my interview at Miss Moore's London mansion, Chessington Vale. I admit that I'd hoped for fans outside the house; a sway of chubby milk-faced girls and boys rocked on screams. I expected bed sheets sloganed with raw adoration. I wanted stalkers. Flowers. Love-struck graffiti. I wanted screaming vulgarity. Slender cars. I longed for glittering lights, a gaudy lustre of energy, money, passion and, high above, stars — thrown into the night by an admirer like a handful of jewels to twinkle for ever over Miss Moore. I'd imagined taxis. Their engines running clockwork thunder as they ejected the fitter, more fashionable, those richer, slimmer, those London beauties silvered as lightning.

For the interior of Chessington Vale I envisaged a breath-taking grandness. A place Miss Moore had designed herself that glowed far off in the moonlight. A palace, floating in a park of loneliness and riches, sickeningly vulgar, based on the only homes she'd ever known: hotels. There would be those same blind hotel corridors, a row of endlessly closing doors, the familiar scuttle of faceless staff peeping awestruck upon the lives of those greater than themselves. Perhaps a fountain. Certainly a white stone staircase of Hollywood proportions. Bathrooms like igloos. A pretty, bored PA filing her claws in the front hall. A heady scent o new wood, fresh leather, perfumed linen. But most discernible of all would be a mumble that sobbed across the night air and spoke only to me. 'Oh I have all of this, John: money, men, beauty, fame, and still I am unhappy.'

And all the time the snow would keep falling, in tiny white bells. Sex didn't come into it; it was all romance.

* * *

So, I was nineteen then and wanted overwhelming gaudy misery in a majestic setting, but what I got, as you may already know if you read the magazines, was a huge red-brick box around which security was so tight hat the whole place resembled a private clinic. A tubby uniformed guard circled the perimeter regularly. Four new CCTV cameras swiveled nimbly on each corner of that enormous but deeply ordinary modern house. And my interview was not for starry midnight, but for an early Wednesday afternoon on 27 December 200-. On a day so mushroomy

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Published by Bloomsbury

and thick that the sky still hung above me like a sodden grey overcoat. Still, I expected a thrilling crassness, and to end my contract laughing about my time with Miss Moore.
'My heart quickened and my brow glistened at the thought of my first meeting with a glamour model, and a millionairess'
In those distant hours before my interview, before I'd ever met Hepsie Vine (six long months before I briefly set up home with the girl), I loitered for a long time outside the high gates entertaining all manner of amorous dreams — for those were the years when I longed to be a movie director, or perhaps a playwright, a poet maybe, or a painter, and when I thought that whatever I longed for I would have — and when getting fried alive in trashy TV was the furthest thing from my mind. My heart quickened and my brow glistened at the thought of my first meeting with a glamour model, and a millionairess. I'd spoken to Miss Misty Moore very briefly on the telephone before my appointment, but because she, or rather what I think of now as the resemblance of her, was regularly in the papers around that time I held the exciting image of Miss Moore long before I'd actually met her.

By the living-room window a perfectly dappled pony with leather reins and silver stirrups snorted and spun on its rockers. By the huge pink fireplace teddy bears warmed themselves by the flames. I can tell you nothing more about how I actually got into Chessington Vale mansion that damp December day, for I feel now that I entered with as much conscious will as if I'd been sucked down a tunnel. A Christmas tree, so splendid I imagined it pinched that morning from Trafalgar Square, hovered in a shower of red-green-yellow stars. It had indeed started to snow. Everywhere, as though we were the embarrassed visitors of corpses, were fragrant pink blooms.

'Oh,' the woman said when she saw me, and her sigh did seem to tinkle the tinsel-hung chandeliers and send a ripple of cream over the diamond-spun buttermilk walls. The woman coughed and waved her hand — until between two fingers, like a tiny white wand, popped a cigarette. 'Isn't this just too amazing?' she said. I nodded keenly. 'It's what I've always wanted,' she smiled. Then she twisted, so she lay across the sofa in a way hat suggested both illness and indolence. She was pale as one should be after childbirth. Her limbs were heavy with exhaustion. Like the entire room, she seemed sunk under the weight of riches.

By the side of the floating woman stood a person, male, but no more a man than that plastic groom speared into the icing on a wedding cake is a man. A slender well-dressed black guy in his twenties. Gems of light from the tree glittered his features and as I looked in his direction he blew smoke high into the air, creating a cloud of stylish misery.

'So,' the man said, leaning rakishly against the pink-bloomed marble fireplace, 'welcome to the divine abode of the intensely private Miss Misty Moore.'

'That's a joke,' the woman said. 'It's just something they said in a magazine yesterday.'

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And I knew that, to this girl, for increasingly as I stared at her she seemed more girl than woman, something said in a magazine yesterday was the absolute height of tedium.

'So I'm supposed to be having this media career,' the woman reclining on the sofa continued, and she sighed and stretched and I held out my hand, which she shook.

'Lovely to meet you. How are you feeling?'

'All right.'

'Oh good,' I smiled. 'You never know how it will be, imagine'

'What,' she said sadly, 'do you mean?'

'Having a baby,' I smiled.

The pair looked at me for a long time.

'Oh no,' the plastic man by her side said eventually. 'No, no. You're thinking of Miss Moore.'

This black man's syrupy voice, the practiced lazy fall of his eyelashes - perhaps it all affected me so completely because, despite my single year at university, I'd lived without intoxication, an indulged only child raised under anaesthetic in Tunbridge Wells by middle-class, middle-aged parents who, because of my father's snoring, slept in separate bedrooms.

'She's not Misty, darling. Not by a long way.'

'Oh no,' the girl said, with that snap of 'ha!' in her voice, 'I'm certainly not Misty Moore.' I looked again and she was smiling a look of sad mischief at the misunderstanding. 'Though once upon a time long ago I did have a picture of her on my bedroom wall.'

And from that small smile I knew that she alone had invented lips. 'Isn't it funny? I used to be a fan and now here I am sitting in her living room. But no, I'm definitely not her.'

Of course not. This girl spoke with a creamy burr. She was young as a pup. Before my interview I had exchanged a few nervous lines with Miss Moore on the telephone and the millionaires had the smarter, chillier clipped vowels of a radio presenter.

'Did he tell you you would be going to live in the country some of the time?' Miss Moore had said before she even asked my name.

I replied that I did know this. The day man had approached me in Old Street's famous Madame Baguette where I 'designed' expensive buttered sandwiches for portly bankers, he'd explained that the contract would be to work for the family not

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only in London but also in a small village in Yorkshire for six months. There I would look after two children, a boy and a baby.

'Good,' Miss Moore said flatly, and then she howled that strange long animal laugh, the one I have since decided allowed her to slip out of her real self, and into something more comfortable: he copy of herself. 'I bet you think it's my idea we have a male,' Miss Moore said eventually when she had stopped laughing. 'Well, actually, it's not.' And she laughed again.

'You make me sound like a tom-cat,' I said, flirting without ever intending to, for she had this way.

'Her hair was blue-black as the last blaze of midnight. It had such a sheer sheen, a deep, almost purple, gloss, that it reminds me still, to this day, of a freshly rubbed plum'
'Hello?' the girl called then. 'I'm Hephzibah.' Hephzibah spoke as though reminding herself of her name rather than imparting the information to anyone in the room.

'And she's just leaving,' the plastic man said, and made a high stretch, which revealed a belt of hard black flesh around his waist. He wore his hair close-cropped so his pretty head resembled a tight fist, and he followed me with that quick cold eye.

'Everyone calls me Hepsie. And, as I was saying, I'm supposed to be having this media career.' The girl before me sighed again — as though she had known the man and me for years and we had all discussed ever topic through endless violet nights and now there was nothing else in the world to say. Not only were her eyes and lips bigger than is average on a young woman, but they had that dark-purple hue as if just snipped out of twilight.

'What do you know about her?' the man asked. Twinkles of fairy sapphire danced over his face.

That her hair was blue-black as the last blaze of midnight. It had such a sheer sheen, a deep, almost purple, gloss, that it reminds me still, to this day, of a freshly rubbed plum. So fresh that if I'd, and oh I do so wish I had, dared lean towards her and stroke my trembling fingers through her curls I'd've come away with hands dripping with a permanent inky blue.

'Not her,' the man sighed, 'I mean Misty Moore. What do you know about her? I mean, apart from the fact that she has a new baby, huge titties, is very famous and is a millionaire.'

'I'm afraid not a lot,' I confessed. 'We spoke on the phone briefly, but I can't say that I've caught her on TV recently.'

'Ah, then you've not been staying up late enough,' the man replied with a smile that was hard to read.

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'Don't be unkind Brian,' Hepsie said, punching the man playfully on the arm. 'I used to think she was a goddess. In fact she's probably what made me want to run away to London in the first place.'

I felt a searing flush of embarrassment as the pair eyed me coolly through the incessant flashing of tree lights. Neither one of the couple who watched me that winter afternoon had mastered Misty Moore's gift of gazing on strangers as though they were the most precious treasure in the room. I continued to stare at Hepsie, and I saw that in her hair she wore a sprig of holly.

Amidst those thick black curls three holly leaves appeared, glinting like emeralds in a pile of sun-shot coal. Three dark leaves, two berries and a thick khaki nub of stalk. The scarlet fruit was dark and trembling as a just-oozed dot of blood. This silly adornment, perhaps a nod to Christmas, or that season's popular girl-as-fey-child fashion, would have seemed spicily coquettish on any other girl (would there later be a ridiculous routine whereby she pricked her finger on a thorn and fell into a snooze for a thousand years?) but on Hepsie Vine it just enhanced the feral whiff of a creature who has slunk through the undergrowth to be with you. She had the wilderness in her eyes, and though she was devastatingly fit I was certain the only heat that had ever warmed her skin was the sun, and the only wet that had ever licked her skin was the rain. She was both dirty and fresh. That's as accurate as I have ever been able to be about her. And it's enough for any man.

And perhaps this was the reason why, despite her modest dress, a white baggy T-shirt over jeans, and freshly scrubbed appearance, I sensed immediately trouble between Hepsie Vine and Misty Moore. Or, to put it more bluntly, I felt sure that Hepsie was being fired. Why? She engaged in none of the nanny's usual flirtery and flattery, that essential and tiresome jollity required to cajole one's employers into believing you are a kind and harmless person. Misty Moore had, I assumed on that December day 200-, got rid of blistering Hepsie, and, just by arranging for that man to walk into an exclusive sandwich bar in central London and ask a total stranger if he wanted a job, replaced her with a more pliant model: me.
'She was edgy, over-emotional, prone to wild mood swings. The thought was growing in my mind that my beautiful predecessor had been kicked out of the employ of Misty Moore because of some addiction'
'So,' I said, unable to bear the flashing silence a moment longer, 'is Misty here?'

'She's upstairs,' the man replied coolly. 'With her baby.'

'So, yeah, this bloody media career. Apparently it's just TV presenting or something.' The girl sighed, and despite her fatigue I felt sure she had determined to keep me a while longer from the legendary Misty Moore. 'And then there's the modeling too'

'That's marvelous,' I smiled. 'Sounds like a dream come true.'

'Is it?' she replied, looking at me suddenly as though it was the first time she had ever seen me. Hepsie wiped one fat tear from her cheek. 'You think it'll all be worth it?'

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Then she gave me a curious look, as though the only news she could think to tell me was bad news, and so instead she sighed and stretched and I saw a naked girl walking through a deep yawn, in her high hand a brand of fire, the light of which cast an orange glow down over the slender, almost boyish body. No, not boyish, not in December. That was later. Hepsie, in 200-, was not thin. Perhaps for this reason Hepsie at eighteen seemed older than her employer. For at thirty-eight, Miss Misty Moore, singer, actress, model, millionaires, was distinguished, despite her renowned ballooning breasts, as being as tall, hard and slender as a nail.

And yet, I hardly need to say this, there was something about Hepsie, being eighteen, that Miss Moore, being thirty-eight, could never touch. And on that day I went for my appointment at Chessington vale, it smelt like teen fury.

'Ooops, I need to go get sugar,' the man said, and the sound of his high voice startled the thin muslin curtains so the billowed like a bride in flight. 'Or are you sweet enough?' and laughing he stood and exited the room stage right.

'Don't worry,' Hepsie said when we were alone. 'It'll just be you and Misty in Wychwood. I mean Brian needs the discos and the drugs too badly to go to the country for six months. Though she has asked him to help you with the baby if necessary.

I asked Hephzibah then who the strange man was.

She told me he had a style column in a Sunday newspaper and he was Miss Moore's friend. She bit her lip in excitement as she poke.

'Sorry, I mean he's her style adviser,' she said. 'Incredible, eh? He has clothes, sorry, I mean haute couture, draped like starved corpses all over his flat, sorry, his apartment,' she said. 'That's his real job.'

'Wow. I've never met anyone quite like that before,' I smiled. 'It'll be fascinating.'

'Yes.' Hepsie nodded rapidly, and we beamed at one another in eager anticipation until there was a far-off sound, which gradually got louder and was unavoidably obvious as fierce arguing. 'Have you been to the North before?' Hepsie asked quickly, surely to cover the argument growing overhead.

'Not very far. In fact I'm sure when I get past a certain point on the M1 I'll get vertigo.'

'Not vertigo,' she said, 'but something odd might happen to you up there.'

'She's only teasing,' Brian interjected, bursting back into the room brandishing a squat silver sugar bowl. 'Take no notice of her.'

But a certain look had passed between the strange pair which twisted my next sentence to a stutter. 'How long have you been in London?'

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'Oh, millions of years, trillions,' the girl sighed. 'Longer than Big Ben, Nelson's Column and St Paul's Cathedral all put together.'

'You're obviously quite an attraction.'

'It's bloody tiring. But I'm sure in the end it's all going to be worth it.'

'And you must miss your family.'

'Well, my dad and granddad shot themselves last year.'

'Hepsie!' Brian said curtly. 'Please. He fine gentleman doesn't want to hear of such troubles.'

'Which is partly the reason I'm here, John,' she said softly. 'Partly to get away from the misery of my home, and partly because I thought I really could be famous.'

It seemed like we all gazed at one another then for a long time. Suspended, shocked, unnaturally still, three tiny faceless figures in a glass-domed snow-globe, waiting to be upturned, flung and stunned.

'Don't look so scared,' she smiled. 'The suicides were a while ago now.'

'I'm not scared,' I croaked.

'It's only because you're from the city and you're not used to it. In the countryside killings, slaughterings, butchery — all kinds of deaths — happen all the time up there.'

'Well, I'm sure young John'll have plenty to do,' Brian said cheerily, eyeing Hepsie with a frown, 'without thinking of death.'

'That is, of course, if I agree to take the job,' I said. The sky was snow-white now, and dampened in patches with smoky blotches of grey.

'Oh you'll agree,' Hepsie muttered. 'I knew you'd agree. You've no idea how much I want this to work.'

'Honey, it will work,' Brian said harshly, 'if you shut up and calm down.'

'She'll have her own show within the month, I'm sure,' I replied. There was an intimacy flaring between my interrogators that uneased me.

'Because really,' Hepsie said, another edge of sudden tearfulness in her creamy voice, 'it's nothing to do with Misty. Not now. At the end of the day it's all down to me. That's what everyone says about success, isn't it?' And she glanced up at the silver tinsel hung over her head in thick clouds. She was edgy, over-emotional, prone to wild mood swings. The thought was growing in my mind that my beautiful

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predecessor had been kicked out of the employ of Misty Moore because of some addiction. '"It's all possible, but it is down to you now." That's what everyone says.'

'Being so beautiful must help,' I said, before I had time to stop the words.

Brian flinched in imitation of astonishment and somewhere in the house there was a sudden burst of temper like a far-off explosion.

'Yes, apparently the world's my lobster,' she said, turning on her side and arranging her limbs so the left leg was outstretched and the right leg bent at the knee and rested above it. This was the first indication I had of an important lesson I was to learn in 200-: some women spoke most eloquently in gestures rather than words.

Here was a loud crash from upstairs and Brian excused himself from the room. When he was gone, simply to fill my lovestruck silence, I made the mistake of asking the lolling beauty if Brian lived at Chessington Vale with Miss Moore.

'No, I told you,' she cried, 'he lives alone in a flat, an apartment. In a warehouse.'

'In London?'

'Ha!' she exclaimed. 'yes, exactly.'

Then, 'Have you ever done things you regret?' she said quietly.

But, by the time I had absorbed the question, she'd waved a hand over her face and said, 'Oh never mind, forget it.' She moved towards me silently whispering, imploring me to understand some terrible thing that had happened to her. 'It doesn't matter now. As long as I can make a go of it here in London it's all been worth it. You've no idea how long I've dreamt this.'

Troubled. That would rather accurately describe my attitude to women at the time. Six months previously I'd been abandoned by Clare, my first serious girlfriend. We'd only been together six months, but I was a weepy sensitive guy than and I loved her; some people die from eating a single peanut.

Hepsie's eyes were still dark, but for a tiny pine-green crescent moon, which was a single light cast over from the tree. 'Never mind,' she said deflating, instantly disappointed in me. 'I don't expect you to understand.'

'I want to try,' I begged.

'Oh, it's not complicated. It's just that no matter how much I want it - and God knows I do really want it — there's always gonna be this problem. Think of the difference between: He lives alone in an apartment in London and She lives with her family in a caravan in Yorkshire.'

I smiled and said no more, though the outburst hung in the room, mad and dangerous as though we had just unleashed a swarm of bees.

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'I don't imagine Mouse will be much trouble,' Brian said, reappearing with a grin.

'Poor thing,' Hepsie said quietly. 'The medication has right affected his appetite. It's one of the side effects. And the homesickness doesn't help.'

'He might eat more if he comes off the drugs,' Brian added. 'The drugs?' I said, and I was sure then that the pair glanced at one another and tightened their lips to suppress a giggle. 'Is there something I should know?'

'So Mouse, the boy, is... ?' I asked and the pair looked at me blankly. 'Why's he called Mouse?' the pair shrugged. 'Is his name Mickey?' I asked. They looked at me without smiling. I asked more bluntly who the boy was and Brian told me he was seven years old and was the child of Misty's former lover. His father had recently split up with Misty and moved out and his mother was still in America.

Later I would feel desperately anxious about caring for the abandoned pill-popping boy, for I had no childcare experience at all, but in the daze-dizzied moment I just tried to mask my panic with a smile and said, 'They both left him?'

'Oh,' gasped Hepsie quietly, and my perfect little beauty rose up suddenly, like she'd been carried off on the wind, blown to the door and, like a breath of smoke, had vanished.

Suddenly the room belonged to the furniture in that gaudy millionaire's house in London. Without Hepsie the absurd overblown pine wept down a puddle of needles. A tasteless moulded fireplace groaned under the weight of pink buds. I tried not to think of the lonely boy alone with me and instead, for the first time, I noticed everything, from the marble dolphins supporting each corner of the smoked-glass coffee table to the life-size colony of terracotta penguins waddling around the chrome cinema-size television. It's all too gluttonous to describe now, and anyway as you will begin to see I am uninterested in the descriptions of riches. Truly, all that sticks in my mind of any meaning are the spoons Brian served with tea, perfect and sad as snowdrops.

When at last Hepsie blew back into the room I tried to continue the conversation about the children by saying, 'And I'll also be responsible for the baby, right?'

'You mean stuff like bathing, changing, dressing, feeding her?' Brian said.

I nodded.

Then Brian and Hepsie glanced over the white garden, their young foreheads corrugated with frowns. I looked out too, and suddenly, yes, there now in the garden, before the window, was a perfect, mid-sized, carrot-nosed snowman, a line of black-coal lips curled up in a smile. Cerise cashmere scarf knotted around its thick white neck.

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'Well,' Hepsie said slowly, 'she certainly, definitely, absolutely won't be breastfeeding, will she?'

Brian shook his head slowly. 'No. Alas, not. For all the obvious reasons.'

'Well, it will be an amazing adventure,' I said quickly. 'Who cares who feeds the baby.' I was embarrassed at having, so thoughtlessly, already engaged in what seemed like lurid tabloid speculation. 'How old is it, the baby?'

'Two weeks,' Brian replied.

'Two weeks!' I exclaimed. 'But I had no idea. You're joking, right?'

'Hmm,' Hepsie said softly, sucking on the tip of her little finger, her pretty face twisted sharply away from me. 'Two weeks exactly.'

'But is it right for a baby that young to be cared for by — me? What about the baby's father?'

'Look,' Brian said with a sigh, 'you just put the food in one end and wipe it out the other, OK?'

Who were these people?

After some time, when still neither of my companions showed any sign of urgency, I said, 'OK, do you know what time my interview is?' 'Interview!' Brian exclaimed.

'What on earth do you mean?' Hepsie asked with a higher laugh than I'd heard before.

"I should have said earlier,' I smiled. I'd no idea why the reason for my visit had not already been mentioned, by me or them. 'But I was to have an interview at 2 p.m. about working for Miss Moore as a nanny. And now I know about the age of the baby, I need to make it clear that —' 'But this is it,' Hepsie exclaimed with another little giggle. 'You're having your interview now!'

'I don't even know if the baby's a boy or a girl,' I said, when I had drunk on Hepsie Vine so long I was intoxicated and emotional and overtired. 'Is it really only two weeks old?'

'She's called Jewels,' Hepsie said. 'You'll meet her soon enough.' And she sighed. "You are tall and strong and handsome. And of course that's one of the reasons I liked you, from the first minute I saw you"
I thought how an outsider might watch the windows growing rosy, imagine the slow blush of evening secrets spreading throughout the huge humming house. My rich lonely bankers at Madame Baguette would long to be deep in the warm heart of a family home at Christmas time. Then Brian flew me outside, past the snowman and into a purpling courtyard where he showed me a low yellow sports car with a black roof.

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'It's the top of the range,' he smiled. 'One of the most expensive models on the road today.'

'God yes I can tell. It's astonishingly beautiful'

'And bran new. 0-70 in seven seconds. I bought it for you. For when you're in the country,' he cooed, and we stroked our hands over the smooth cool bullet of gold.

'I just hope I'll be able to live up to the previous nanny. Hepsie seems very committed,' I said, still rubbing at the sports car.

'Oh yes,' Brian nodded. 'She's been totally committed.'

And when we fluttered back indoors Hepsie, tear-stained, exclaimed, 'You've no idea what it's like for everything to rest on how you look! I mean, yes I do want to get to the top, more than anything, but I guess I'm afraid too. Everything doesn't rest on beauty for you, John'

'Oh Hepsie!' Brian said harshly. 'Shut it, babe!'

'I mean, yes, you are tall and strong and handsome. And of course that's one of the reasons I liked you, from the first minute I saw you, in fact, in all honesty, it was probably the main reason I picked you, I can't deny that. You kind of look like a darker, more handsome Prince William. Has anyone ever told you that before?'

Something had changed. Our snow-globe had been turned and Brian, Hepsie and I tumbled helplessly hither and thither, shaken to mindlessness through the white whirl.

'That's just the way he blushes all the time,' Brian smiled dizzily, brushing the snow from his shirt and stumbling to regain his calm, 'and the way he flirts up at you through his fringe.'

'I know. And of course handsome's always good, but… it's not good if the only thing you have to sell is your body or your beauty. That's why I have to make sure I get into presenting, then acting, as well as the modeling. Because, you see, the thing about beauty is, it wears out. I mean, my mother and grandmother were beautiful once, and look what situation they're in now…'

Brian coughed and poured another cup of tea. 'Hepsie toots, calm down for Christ's sake,' he muttered.

'But you are beautiful now,' exclaimed. Tears were coursing down her pretty face and I felt a rush of terrible helplessness. I wanted so badly to hold her and kiss her then, and if Brian had not been gazing upon me like I wore the taint of a madman, I may have done just that. 'You are. You're beautiful now.'

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'I guess that's why I have to not let anything get in the way,' she said, and blew her nose on a tissue. Then she smiled, first at Brian and then at me, with a sly lifting of the chin. For a moment it was hard to tell if the conversation had been one huge yell for attention.

I rested back in my chair and exhaled slowly.

'Oh do that again!' she cried. I must have looked at her with extreme puzzlement because she clarified immediately. 'Do that thing where you stroke your hand slowly over your chin while frowning. It's so sweet!'

'I remember seeing you do that through the window of your café,' Brian smiled.

'It's one of the first things I loved about him. Look Brian!' 'Wow.'

'I imagine it was when some poor City secretary asked for a particularly tricky filling, you looked so perplexed, but totally concerned with getting it right for her! You looked so gentle and kind and shy. It's what got you the job above everyone else we watched.'

And though ten years on I cringe at myself now, that snowy afternoon in December 200- I did actually as young Hephzibah Vine asked. I sat there in a millionaire's leather armchair, measled with fairy lights, frowning and stroking my chin. Until the fit little honey I'd known for just a few hours was smiled back into sweetness.

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