



An addictive, psychological suspense  
with a twist you won't see coming

LOVE ME,  
LOVE ME  
NOT

KATHERINE  
DEBONA

Katherine Debona

**Love Me, Love Me Not: An  
addictive psychological suspense  
with a twist you won't see coming**

«HarperCollins»

## **Debona K.**

Love Me, Love Me Not: An addictive psychological suspense with a twist you won't see coming / K. Debona — «HarperCollins»,

Today isn't the first time I've thought about killing my best friend, but it is the first time I've done something about it. Since they were teenagers, Jane and Elle had been inseparable. Until the day that Elle stole the love of Jane's life. Now everything has changed. Jane wants him back, and with a little help from her horticultural obsession, she may just have found the perfect solution... A psychological suspense novel that you will not be able to put down. Perfect for fans of Louise Jensen and Clare Boyd. What readers are saying: 'A gripping and addictive read!' 'READ THIS BOOK!' 'Such an intriguing read and definite book club referral.' 'A great twist!'

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*Love Me, Love Me Not*  
**KATHERINE DEBONA**



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*For Dylan and Scarlett – who made me understand how many different types of love one person can hold in their heart.*

'There are all types of love in this world  
but never the same love twice.'

–F. Scott Fitzgerald

**NOW**

## CHAPTER ONE

### **Stargazer Lily: Ambition, encouragement when facing a difficult challenge**

*Surrey, England, present day*

Today isn't the first time I've thought about killing my best friend, but it is the first time I've done something about it.

I didn't mean to; at least, it must have been a subliminal thought because I never intended to pick up the wrong bottle from the back of the fridge. Honest mistake, given I was preoccupied with the sight of her at the edge of the lawn, arm outstretched as she leant over to pick one of my Passiflora before holding it up to her dainty little nose.

It was all I could do not to smack my hand against the windowpane and shout at her to leave it alone, to get her hands off that which didn't belong to her.

Instead I offered up a shaky wave as she caught me watching, a guilty smile tugging at the corners of her mouth.

She's sitting on the other side of the garden table now, bare legs tucked up underneath her skirt, palms wrapped around the mug of chamomile tea I made to help with her nerves. I sit down opposite, stirring a teaspoon of honey into my single caffeinated drink of the day.

'Are you allowed honey?' She sips her tea and fixes me with a doe-eyed stare. The innocence doesn't penetrate the way it would with someone who didn't know her as intimately as I do.

'You're getting confused with babies,' I say, handing over a plate of scones, my mother's homemade strawberry jam oozing from their middles. Her hand hesitates, as if deciding which one to choose, but I know it's more about the ever-tightening waistband; a waistband that used to hang on hipbones but now strains against the result of comfort eating. 'Besides, it's as organic as it's ever going to get. The hive's in next door's garden.'

'Of course.' Her eyes close as she bites down on the crumbling patisserie, the sweet fruit intermingling with thick, Cornish cream.

I know her weaknesses. I know everything about Elle.

A sigh, a stroke of hair as she wipes a crumb from her lips and gazes across the lawn.

'What's the matter?' I ask, not needing to follow her line of sight to see the picture of my garden. At this time of year it is particularly resplendent; the wisteria has bloomed, the alliums are starting to show and there is a constant chatter of visiting birds and wildlife who come to feast on nature's wares.

I should be fumigating the greenhouse and planting out my tomatoes instead of placating a drama queen.

'I'm sorry for barging in on you like this,' she says, but I know the words are empty. Elle has never needed to apologise for anything in her life; there has never been a moment when she has had to understand how it feels to be contrite, to ache with regret over a decision made.

She always left that to me.

'Don't be silly,' I say, sliding the plateful of temptation a little closer. 'I'm glad you came.'

She pulls another scone in two, red leaking into white and spoiling the perfect, clean lines. I feel my jaw clench and have to look away.

'So how are you feeling?' she says, an unexpected moment of concern, the only one offered since she arrived on my doorstep, cheeks wet with distress, and at the very moment I had finished wiping down the work surfaces.

'A little tired, but otherwise fine. What about you?'

Tears brim from between dark lashes and tumble down her face, faint blush marks only adding to her beauty.

I give her hand a gentle squeeze, not trusting my tongue to control itself. There's a hole at the cuff of her cardigan and the cashmere has begun to bobble. A crack in the otherwise polished veneer and I wonder how much of this has been noticed by Patrick, or whether he needs another prod.

'Is he still travelling a lot?' No harm in throwing another log on that fire.

Elle sniffs, patting underneath her eyes with a manicured hand. Her skin still holds the sun from a Caribbean break little more than a month ago. A last-minute attempt to fill the caverns of her womb with her husband's seed.

'It's because of the promotion,' she replies, ever ready to defend his absence. 'He says all the brown-nosing is necessary to make sure he's a frontrunner. Once he makes partner he'll have more time.'

'For what?'

'For us, of course. For the baby.'

'Still, it's a shame he's not coming to the scan.'

'It doesn't matter.' A twitch of shoulder, fingers turning diamonds round and round the bone. 'He'll be at the next one.'

'Of course.' I swallow my sweetened cup of Lady Grey tea, breathing in its comforting scent to try and forget the perfumed lilies Elle thrust upon me earlier.

I'd presumed she meant them as an apology for coming here so early, and unannounced at that, but really, lilies? I could have told her they were a funeral flower, gifted at a time of mourning, but instead I freed them from their plastic prison, snipping off the pollinated stems and placing them in an aquamarine vase that now sits on the console table in the hallway. They will act as a reminder of her every time I pass by over the coming days, watching their petals tumble to the floor, crumpled and beginning to rot.

'I thought I was meeting you at the hospital after your yoga class,' I say. That would make this the third class in a row she's skipped. Too many prying eyes and unwanted questions about her attempts to conceive from women whose own children fill the gym's crèche while they try to shed the excess weight. Because, clearly, the imprinted memory of a life that grew inside of them is a burden their bodies need to be rid of.

'I didn't know what to do with myself,' Elle says. 'The house feels so empty when he's not there.'

Elle doesn't do alone. She isn't used to filling the silence that comes with living by yourself. It was a silence I used to look forward to at the end of the working week, but is one she runs from, always needing someone to provide her with the reassurance she craves.

So here she is, in my house, all self-complacent and full of faux concern for the one person who has always been there for her, no matter what.

We all have our weaknesses and Elle is mine. She has this uncanny ability to make people do her bidding, albeit unconsciously. One of those creatures who just demands attention, even if all she's doing is standing at a bus stop or queuing up to pay for milk in the supermarket. It's as if she has this aura about her that is impossible for other humans to resist. Especially men. Especially Patrick.

Then there's me, Jane, as if my parents named me knowing I would always be dull. Dark, bulbous eyes set a little too far apart, pallid skin and hair too wily to tame. Like Snow White, but without the beauty. I am the shadow to Elle's glory and have followed her for nearly half of my life, desperately hoping some of her shine would fall onto my skin and seep through my pores rather than rushing off like rainwater on plastic.

Except now I have something she does not. A baby. Her husband's baby no less. Patrick's baby. My baby, if the plan works.

I may only be the surrogate, but if Elle isn't around any longer then it's only logical that I take her place.

Murder. So absolute, so final. It's been a secret longing of mine, one I've wrapped around me in the night when I think of everything that could have been. But I never dared to make it anything more than an indulgent fantasy, accepting that my place in life would always be second to Elle.

Until I was able to give her what she wanted more than anything else in the world. The one thing she craved with every ounce of her being. The one thing she was unable to do for herself.

Every second of every day we make a choice. We have the ability to control so much more than we think. It is something I am adept at, noticing the opportunities, the moments when others are caught off-guard and I can choose which way to go.

Which is perhaps why my fingers sought out the second bottle on the left of the top shelf of the fridge instead of the third. It's the only reason I can think of that I didn't stop myself, despite registering the bitter scent that curled into my nose as I squeezed the dropper and released half a dozen globes into her tea. It was supposed to be an extra something to help her sleep.

Only belladonna might make it harder for her to wake up in the morning. Eventually. Because although this poison can kill, I have learnt, when administered in the right dosage, death isn't certain and, instead, all sorts of other, peculiar symptoms can occur. Symptoms that will not only make Elle suffer both physically and emotionally, but suggest to all those who adore her that she isn't so perfect after all.

Here's hoping.

'More tea?' I rise from my chair, resting a hand on the curve of my stomach, watching as her eye follows, envy always so tricky to conceal.

I understand that knot in your throat, the taste that refuses to go away. It burrows deep within you, gnawing away at everything else until it becomes like some yapping little dog that follows wherever you go.

I know what it is to want that which someone else has. I've known it from the very first second I encountered Eleanor Hart. Fifteen years ago, my first day at a new school, when the door of a 4x4 arced wide, gleaming metal reflecting sunlight onto my sallow skin. The silhouetted figure of a girl emerging from its leather interior accompanied by the animated barks of two chocolate-brown Labradors held captive in the boot. She wore a fitted Barbour jacket, over-the-knee socks wrapped around gazelle-like legs, and the hem of her skirt was several inches higher than was stipulated in the school handbook.

A flick of hair, followed by the scent of rosewater and something else, something I knew all too well by its absence in my own home. Money. It was unique and untouchable; barely noticeable yet a protective cloak to those that owned it. Even before she turned her head, even before I was presented with the sight of her exquisite face, I knew I was in love.

'Do you remember Miss Patterson?' I place a fresh mug of tea in Elle's outstretched hand.

'Frizzy hair and a permanent smell of fish?' Elle's nose wrinkles at the memory. 'She hated me almost as much as she loved you. Did everything she could to fail me that first year of GCSEs, do you remember?'

I remember. The way the corridors throbbed with incessant conversation, the squeak of new shoes and the musky scent of hormones. Designer backpacks jostling for position with oversized watches and sunglasses perched on hair slick with gel.

I felt the full weight of each glance, the passage of eyes up and down my skinny frame as they took stock of my financial status, and I was easy prey with my cheap glasses and second-hand blazer. Just one look placed me in the camp of nerd, my position firmly fixed on the bottom rung of the ladder before I'd even stepped across the threshold.

'Do you ever wonder what would have happened?' Elle looks over at me with more than just this question behind her eyes.

'If you hadn't sat next to me in maths?' Of course I do. It's what changed everything. I've always wondered if the two of us were paired up on purpose, the more able children sat beside those whose

parents had lined the headmaster's pockets in order to get their offspring past the first hurdle. For everyone has their price, even the leader of an esteemed private school in the middle of the Surrey countryside.

Or was it simply a twist of fate? I may have been a shrew sat next to a peacock, but to me it was the only thing I needed. Every great journey starts with the first step, and I was given an opportunity I knew not to squander.

'I loved the fact you were so different.' She's staring across the lawn now to where a squirrel is busy burying its winter wares.

'By different you mean poor.' I take a sip of my tea and resist the urge to throw something at the vermin. Hopefully it will get snared in the trap I have set so I can drown its rancid body in the river once Elle has gone.

'No make-up, hair scraped back and the most enormous, incredible eyes. I loved how you didn't care what anyone thought of you.'

'I was the freak, the outsider, Elle. The only reason anyone ever talked to me was because of you.'

Every school has a system, a hierarchy of sorts, and the trick was to choose your position within it with care. For once you're in, once your camp has been chosen, it is nigh on impossible to break ranks.

At my previous school I had gratefully accepted the camp of geek. Not only did it keep me away from the glue-sniffers, the vagabonds, the dregs that linger at the outskirts of social decency, but I also managed to set up a side business in what I liked to refer to as 'homework assistance'. Which basically meant that for the right price I was willing to do the work for you.

But I had arrived that fateful morning at an altogether different kind of establishment. Too much gloss, the air thick with boasts about where Tobias and Grace and Elijah had spent their summers. A constant battle of one-upmanship as teenagers compared the size of their parents' bank balance. The only reason I was there was because of a scholarship my mother took great pleasure in reminding me could be rescinded if I weren't able to live up to my potential.

I knew I had potential. Just not the kind she was hoping for.

'They were jealous of us,' Elle says as her lips begin to tremble. 'Of how close we were.'

I wonder which part of our history is making her react in this way.

'They thought I was in love with you.'

She nods her agreement. 'Until France.'

Until the summer we spent in a house overlooking the Côte d'Azur. The summer when Elle was getting over a breakup by wrapping her legs around a local boy called Jean-Pierre who rode a Lambretta and had skin as dark as a conker.

The summer she found someone willing to rid me of my virginity, my innocence camouflaged by red wine and teenage lust. A diminishing experience that took place in an iron-framed bed with white cotton sheets, the complaint of springs drifting down to where Elle sat smoking in the garden below. A night she embellished when we returned to school, thereby putting to rest the rumours about my sexuality, but never quite erasing the sting that came with being poor.

Years were spent acquiring Elle's friendship, her trust. Each and every time I stepped aside, edging her ever closer to the light, it was done for my benefit as much as hers.

Until she took something that belonged to me, something I now want back.

'You've always been there, no matter what.'

The 'what' being my first love. My one and only. The man I thought I was going to marry, spend the rest of my life with. But she knew even this wouldn't be enough to break the love I had for her. She knew that I, along with everyone else, would always, always put her first.

It's a privilege reserved for the impossibly beautiful, the ones who are so used to adoration, to the heads that turn whenever they enter a room. I wouldn't even call it an assumption, because if

something has always been there, if you have forever been placed on a higher rung of the ladder, does it not simply become part of you?

'It's what best friends are for,' I say, and she looks at me with such a pathetic look of gratitude on her face I have to stop myself from picking up the vase of flowers and hurling it at her irritatingly perfect features.

'But now I'm not so sure,' she says. 'Perhaps it's too much. Perhaps we've asked too much of you, especially when...' She hesitates, uncertainty no doubt a novel experience for her.

'What is it?'

Sitting forward on my chair, I bite back the temptation to push her answer. Could this be it? Have I done enough to make her question that which she holds most true?

'I think Patrick's having an affair.' She avoids my eyes, the bottom half of her face obscured by the grinning picture of a Cheshire cat on her mug as she continues to drink. I picture the warm liquid travelling down her throat and into her stomach. Little by little the poison administered will unfurl into her bloodstream. But as with everything else already set in motion, such an outcome will take time.

I allow myself a moment to inhale the words she has finally spoken, to let them settle inside of me in the shape of a smile. Patience is a virtue, my mother always said, and I have it in droves.

So it begins.

**THEN**

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **Narcissus: Rebirth and renewal, but also self-obsession**

*Oxford, nine years ago*

I saw him first.

Sat in the corner of the library with thick-rimmed glasses reminiscent of a certain schoolboy wizard. The sleeves of his jumper pushed up and the bones of his wrist tensed as pen scratched paper.

But he didn't see me. Not then. Nor as I followed him down the cobbled alleyway that led to the pub. Not as he sipped his pint and swapped ideas, hopes and dreams with his chosen friends. He didn't notice the way I lingered at the bar, my arm a breath from his own as he passed over a crumpled note to the student serving pints.

He didn't see me at the back of the lecture hall, watching the curl of hair at his neck, the twitch of leg as he listened. He didn't realise that I overheard his comment about Professor MacGillis's tutor group. About his joy and fear at having been chosen. A group I knew I was good enough for. A group that would change everything, if only I could find the golden key that would allow me to enter.

'So all I need to do is keep the water topped up and it will flower, even in December?' Professor MacGillis peered at the Narcissus's sculptural tangle of creamy tendrils, moving too slowly for the eye to see. A small gesture of my appreciation, a thank you of sorts for allowing me to join a study group usually reserved for grad students. He made an exception in my case, based both on a recommendation from my own college professor and the fact I had scored the highest results in the university for my first- and second-year exams. Having me as one of his students made him look good; he knew I was worth more to him than the other way round.

'Plants are like numbers, they follow the rules as long as you know what they are.' I turned the vase full circle, just to check all was okay. Because I always looked. I always noticed if a root had grown ... If a root had grown, a leaf unfurled, a petal's hue lightened by the sun.

'And you don't mind me keeping it?'

'Not at all. I can always grow more.'

'It would seem your talents aren't just limited to numbers, young lady.' A pat on the hand that lasted a moment longer than was acceptable. A lowering of lids that failed to hide his intention.

There was a letter opener on his desk and I allowed myself to imagine what it would be like if I were to thrust it between his carpal bones, snapping the tendons between his lusty fingers. To register the surprise on his face as it transformed to pain. For him to understand I was not someone he could manipulate into a cliché. I didn't need his help, nor his desire.

University was a new world, much the same as before but filled with subtle intricacies that allowed me to simply be. I was no longer the geek, the nerd, the girl with all the answers. Instead my ability was praised, revered and I was not alone in my brilliance. But in two years I hadn't made any real friends. Hadn't found anyone to fill the hole I thought could only ever be filled by Elle.

'Professor...' I began. But then the door to his study opened and the room shifted, air pushed aside as my real reason for being there entered and I scuttled back to my seat. The breath in my lungs started to spasm but I didn't dare let it go, to turn, to move until I was sure it was him.

A space opposite, a seat not yet taken. Tucked into the corner, half-hidden by a bookcase, I waited as he greeted his classmates in turn, their peaty scent coiling over that of dusty books, stale beer and the Christmas chill that lingered in clothes.

I glanced at my notebook, the lines of my sketch making their way over questions already answered. Then my hand froze above the page as he kept moving around the room, stopping only at the seat next to mine.

'Is that a cornflower?' He unwound a bright-red scarf, each circle of his neck covering me with tiny particles of tobacco laced with eucalyptus. I pictured him rolling a cigarette, tongue running along the paper's edge to keep it in place.

'You shouldn't smoke if you have a cold.'

The words escaped before I was ready and I cursed myself for not thinking first. But he surprised me, then as always. He understood me in an instant and, instead of finding me repellent, was accepting and kind.

'True, but we all have our vices.' His teeth were crooked and, when he smiled, a dimple sat in each cheek.

I knew all about vices, only mine weren't the sort you admitted to. Would he like me still if he knew every part of me? I longed for it, for someone to recognise the depths that murmured underneath, willing themselves free. For someone not to care because in a way they understood them too.

The snow in his hair was melting. Droplets of water like miniature globes reflecting back an upside-down version of the world. I wanted to touch them, to taste whatever part of him still clung to the liquid.

'I'm Patrick.'

'I'm Jane.'

'Pleased to meet you, Jane,' he said, holding out his hand and waiting for me to slip my fingers into his palm.

That was when I became undone. A shifting inside of me at the nearness of him, something that before was missing but now made perfect sense. It came with a hunger, a painful longing that was a world away from the pull I had towards Elle. It was altogether more basal, which made it true.

'A group of us usually head to The Turf after MacGillis has finished talking about himself. You're more than welcome to join us.'

I couldn't reply. All my senses were compounded into the pressure of his skin against my own. All my capabilities, the words I had accumulated over the years, disappeared, because when I looked at him I saw a future never before imagined. A future I had believed wasn't for someone like me.

He had a mole on the edge of his jaw and I wondered what it would be like to kiss it. His hands, stained with ink, and nails, bitten down to the cuticles, were ones I longed to have trace over every inch of my skin. I watched the way he scratched at the tip of his nose with his pen when he was trying to figure out a problem. I wanted to know each and every one of his mannerisms, tuck them away to be remembered in years to come.

That night, I walked home looking ahead of me instead of down at the cobbled streets. I allowed myself to contemplate what it would be like to have a friend here. A real friend who understood and accepted me with all my flaws and imperfections.

What surprised me more than anything was that when I pictured his face it made me smile. When I slipped beneath the starchy sheets of my bed that night, looking out to watch clouds skate past the moon, I remember hoping that tomorrow, and all the tomorrows after that, wouldn't let me down.

We started out as friends, as oft the story goes. Sharing a love of equations, of mathematical probabilities and how far each concept could be stretched and explored. But being a mathematician, a rationaliser, didn't stop me from appreciating beauty. It made me look at a flower and see its inherent structure, allowed me to imagine it on a cellular level. It meant I saw how it was designed to make itself attractive to insects, how nature has a way of getting what it needs. Add to that the lessons I had learnt from Elle and it meant I understood the world in a way others could not.

So I gave him the time he needed to realise I was different. Because life is nothing more than a series of interconnected moments. Just the passage of time that we anoint with purpose and meaning, only distinguished by what we do with our intentions.

It was the night of the summer ball. The end of the beginning, or perhaps the other way around. I was dressed in midnight satin, my hair caught up in filigree hair slides, lips stained the same colour as a robin's breast. Patrick and I were sitting at the edge of the river under a heaving silver sky, as music from the main quad spun over the walls along with the drunken mating calls of our peers.

'It seems strange to think our time here is nearly over.'

'In what way?' I looked over at him, at the thin line of red on his chin. No doubt the result of a shaving accident, his hands somewhat out of practice after weeks when time was reserved for poring over textbooks. Weeks fuelled by strong coffee and a somewhat narcissistic desire to be the best, the scholar, the one everyone else aspired to beat.

'I make sense here,' he said, gently bumping against my shoulder as I leant in to his touch. 'So do you.'

He was talking about my move to London. About pursuing a career at a prestigious investment bank. A career he thought I was worth more than and, to a certain extent, I had to agree.

'I want a different kind of life.'

He shifted his weight beside me. 'Meaning money.'

He didn't understand why I would choose money over intellectual prestige. Why I had no desire to build upon my existing knowledge of plants. To apply for a second degree in botany, stay here and use my brain for something altogether more worthwhile than making rich people richer.

Curling my bare toes into the grass, I watched as an ant climbed aboard my little toe. 'You say that like it's a dirty word.'

'That's because it is. You know as well as I do that money causes nothing but fear and loathing.'

Patrick came from money. Old money, handed down over generations, which meant he could afford not to care about it, or at least pretend not to. But I understood in a way he never could how intrinsic money is because of what happens when it is absent. What happens when your mother has to choose between putting food on the table or paying the electricity bill.

'Money makes things easier.'

I could feel him watching me, could picture the slant of his brow as he decided what to say next, but I didn't trust myself to look. Didn't trust myself to do something that would ruin what I could sense was about to transpire.

'Don't you want to do something more with your life than filling a pot with gold? Don't you want to be remembered for something: an idea, a concept future generations will read about and learn from?'

That was when I turned my face, looked up at him from under lashes laden with mascara and arched my back in the exact same way I had seen Elle do over and over again. He needed someone who would let him shine and not try to take away from his brilliance. He needed someone who was just as capable, who understood his ambitions, but had no desire to challenge him. We would make an incredible team because I would let him take centre stage. I'd had years of practice, of letting someone else bask in all the glory, but now it was time to claim my reward.

'I never really thought about my future before I met you.'

He blinked. Once, then twice more. Lips parted and became heavy with intent before he sprang to his feet and threw his empty glass into the river where it promptly collided with the side of a punt. None of its inhabitants seemed to take any notice; too busy were they in grappling with one another and I remember hoping that at least one of them would topple into the water and drown.

'Look at them,' he said, flinging his arm in the punt's direction. 'So unaware of the privilege they're experiencing just by being here. Such a waste.'

I loved him because he saw how unfair the world could be. That there were too many people who succeeded simply because of what they were born into. That it wasn't just the ignorant who sucked the life from this planet, but the ones who assumed they were better than everyone else because they were rich.

I loved him because he too had a darker side. One I didn't want him to lock away, because when I was around him the voices inside my own head seemed to still and I was slowly becoming open to the possibility of allowing myself to be happy.

For as long as I could remember I had wanted to do harm, both to myself and others. My stomach was littered with tiny silver scars that were testament to all the nights when I would sit in the shadows and ask the voices to leave me alone. To all the nights when my only release had been to feel the cut of skin, the slow slither of blood as my very essence seeped into the floorboards on which I lay. Because without it I knew my hands couldn't be trusted not to carry out the twisted imaginings of my mind. Without that release, the voices would not stop.

*'Walk with the wise and become wise. For a companion of fools suffers harm.'* Standing at the edge of the river, Patrick watched the punt make its precarious journey towards the horizon as I sat and stared at his silhouetted profile.

'Is that a poem?' I asked.

'Proverb,' he said as he came back to me. 'Seems my Sunday mornings weren't a total waste of time.'

'What is it you're trying to tell me, Patrick?'

'You're the only woman I've ever met who really gets me.' He placed his hands either side of my neck, the weight of him against my frantic pulse. 'You understand that people like us have a duty to give back to the world. To do something with the gifts we've been given rather than squandering away our time.'

'Did you know that the probability of our relationship succeeding is about the same as being struck by lightning?' I could feel my entire body shaking, certain that if he were to let me go my spine would betray me and I would slip into the river, be taken into its depths and drift out to sea.

'There's always an exception to every rule.'

His mouth came down to mine, smothering my nerves, and I decided to give him everything because I thought it was what I wanted.

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

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