



The Hypnotist's Love Story: A Novel

By Liane Moriarty

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A “sharp and funny romantic tale”(O, the Oprah Magazine) from the #1 New York Times bestselling author of *The Husband's Secret* and *Big Little Lies*.

Ellen O’Farrell is a professional hypnotherapist who works out of the eccentric beachfront home she inherited from her grandparents. It’s a nice life, except for her tumultuous relationship history. She’s stoic about it, but at this point, Ellen wouldn’t mind a lasting one. When she meets Patrick, she’s optimistic. He’s attractive, single, employed, and best of all, he seems to like her back. Then comes that dreaded moment: *He thinks they should have a talk*.

Braced for the worst, Ellen is pleasantly surprised. It turns out that Patrick’s ex-girlfriend is stalking him. Ellen thinks, *Actually, that’s kind of interesting*. She’s dating someone worth stalking. She’s intrigued by the woman’s motives. In fact, she’d even love to meet her.

Ellen doesn’t know it, but she already has.

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Editorial Review

Review

"*The Hypnotist's Love Story* is an intensely absorbing, excellently written tale that turns *Fatal Attraction* on its head—finally! Told with wit, charm, empathy, and plenty of suspense, you'll regret turning the pages so fast to find out how it ends. Loved it!"—Sarah Strohmeyer, bestselling author of *Kindred Spirits* and *The Cinderella Pact*

"Spellbinding! Reading Liane Moriarty is like spending the afternoon with a wise, witty, comforting friend. I could not put it down!"—Beth Harbison, author of *Always Something There to Remind Me*

"[A] smart romance...a fresh spin on grappling with misplaced passion."—*Good Housekeeping*

"A witty modern love story in the age of cohabitation, blended families, and second chances, this is a compassionate, absorbing tale. Moriarty has crafted an incredibly likable heroine in Ellen, the hypnotherapist who can solve her clients' problems but can't seem to keep her own life from spiraling into soap opera. Readers who enjoy Jennifer Close and Marian Keyes will adore Moriarty's wit and warmth."—*Booklist* (starred review)

"A warmly humorous, gently poignant, ultimately comforting tale of frustration and redemption...Moriarty writes with both a frisky wit and a generosity of spirit that's truly disarming...It will make you feel warm all over."—*USA Today*

"Simply exquisite, fascinating (and frequently hilarious)...as much of a page-turner as any thriller."—*Bookreporter*

"Mesmerizing."—*Family Circle*

"This superb novel...examines misunderstandings—not just with lovers, but with friends, families and, perhaps most often, ourselves."—*Parade*

About the Author

Liane Moriarty is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Truly Madly Guilty*, *Big Little Lies*, *The Husband's Secret*, *The Hypnotist's Love Story*, and *What Alice Forgot*. She lives in Sydney, Australia, with her husband and two children.

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Chapter 1

When people think of hypnosis, they think of swinging pendulums, "You're getting sleepy" and volunteers clucking like chickens on stage shows. So it's not surprising that many of my clients are quite nervous when they visit me for the first time! In fact there is nothing unnatural or frightening about hypnosis. Chances are, you've already had the experience of going into a "trance-like state" in your day-to-day life. Have you ever driven to a familiar destination and found that you have no memory of the drive? Guess what? You were in a

trance!

—From “An Introduction to Ellen O’Farrell,
Hypnotherapist” leaflet

I had never been hypnotized before. I didn’t really believe in it, to be honest. My plan was to lie there and pretend it was working, and try not to laugh.

“Most people are surprised by how much they enjoy it,” said the hypnotist. She was all softness and soap; no makeup or jewelry. Her skin had a polished, translucent look, as if she only ever bathed in mountain streams. She smelled like one of those overpriced crafty shops you find in country towns: sandalwood and lavender.

The room we were in was tiny, warm and strange. It was built on the side of the house like an enclosed balcony. The carpet was musty, with faded pink roses, but the windows were modern: floor-to-ceiling panels of glass like those in an atrium. The room was flooded with light. As I walked in, the light seemed to whoosh through my head, like a brisk breeze, and I could smell old books and the sea.

We stood together, the hypnotist and me, our faces close to the windows. When you stood that close, you couldn’t see the sand below, just the sea, a sheet of flattened, shiny tin that stretched out to the pale blue line of the horizon. “I feel like I’m at the helm of a boat,” I said to the hypnotist, who seemed excessively delighted by this comment and said that was exactly how she always felt, her eyes round and shiny, like a children’s entertainer.

We sat down opposite each other. My chair was a soft, green leather recliner. The hypnotist’s chair was a striped red-and-cream winged armchair. There was a low coffee table in between the chairs with a box of tissues—some people must cry, sobbing away about their past lives as starving peasants—a jug of ice water with two perfectly round slices of lemon floating on top, two tall water glasses, a small silver bowl of shiny wrapped chocolates, and a flat tray filled with tiny colored glass marbles.

I once had a big, old-fashioned marble that belonged to my father when he was a boy. I’d hold it in the palm of my hand for luck during exams and job interviews. I lost it a few years ago, along with all my luck.

As I looked around me, I saw that the light reflected off the ocean and onto the walls: prisms of dazzling, dancing light. It was a bit hypnotic actually. The hypnotist had her hands folded in her lap, her feet placed squarely on the ground. Flat ballet shoes, black tights, embroidered ethnic-looking skirt and cream wraparound cardigan. Hippie but elegant. New age but classic.

I thought, What a beautiful, calm life you must lead. Sitting in this extraordinary room each day, bathed in dancing light. No e-mails filling your computer screen. No irate phone calls filling your head. No meetings or spreadsheets.

I could sense her happiness. It radiated off her, sickly, like cheap perfume; not that she would ever wear cheap perfume.

I tasted sour jealousy in my mouth and helped myself to a chocolate to make it go away.

“Oh good, I’ll have one too,” said the hypnotist, unwrapping the chocolate with warm, girly camaraderie, like we were old friends. She is that sort of girl. She probably has a whole circle of giggly, supportive, lovely girlfriends, the sort that hug each other hello, and have Sex in the City DVD nights and long, shrieky telephone conversations about men.

She opened a notepad on her lap and spoke with her mouth adorably full of chocolate. She said, "Now, before we do anything, I'm going to ask you a few questions. Oh, dear, I shouldn't have chosen the caramel Chewy."

I hadn't expected so many questions.

For the most part I answered honestly. They were innocuous enough. A bit pathetic even. "What do you do for a living?" "What do you do to relax?" "What's your favorite food?"

Finally, the hypnotist sat back in her armchair, smiled and said, "And tell me, why are you here today?"

Of course, my answer to that one wasn't one hundred percent truthful.

He said, "There's something I need to tell you."

He had placed his knife and fork on the edge of his plate, and now he was sitting up straight, with his shoulders back, as though he was finally ready to face the music. He seemed fearful and slightly ashamed.

Ellen, who had been smiling, instantly felt a painful cramp knot her stomach. (A part of her mind registered this: the way her body responded first. The mind-body-spirit connection in action. So fascinating.)

Her happy, open smile stayed foolishly frozen on her face.

She was thirty-five years old. She knew what this meant. This nice man, this self-employed, suburban surveyor, this single dad who liked camping and cricket and country music, was about to say something that would put her off her barramundi in white wine sauce. He was about to say something that would ruin her day, and it had been such a lovely day, and the barramundi was really very good.

She put down her fork regretfully.

"What's that?" she said, her tone pleasantly quizzical, and every muscle in her body tightened as if she was preparing to be punched. She would cope. It wouldn't be the end of the world. It was only their fourth date. She hadn't invested that much of herself. She barely knew the man. For heaven's sake, he liked country music. That should have been a red flag from the beginning. Yes, she had been indulging in some hopeful daydreams in the bath tonight, but that was a common pitfall of dating. She was already moving on, working on her recovery. She would be over it by Wednesday. Thursday at the latest. Thank the Lord she hadn't slept with him.

She couldn't control what was about to happen, only her response to it.

For a moment she saw her mother, eyes lifted to heaven. Ellen, tell me, my darling, do you truly believe this facile self-help nonsense you spout?

She did, in fact. With all her heart. (Her mother later apologized for her comment. "That may have been patronizing," she'd said, and Ellen had pretended to faint in shock.)

"Actually, can you excuse me for a minute?" He stood up and his napkin slid to the floor. He picked it up, his face flushed, and carefully laid it on the table next to his plate.

She looked up at him.

"I'll just..." He gestured at the back of the restaurant.

“All right,” she said soothingly.

“Over there to your left, sir.” A waiter discreetly pointed in the direction of the toilets.

She watched him go.

Patrick Scott.

She didn’t really like the name Patrick anyway. It was a namby-pamby sort of a name. You could imagine your hairdresser being called Patrick. Also, his male friends apparently called him “Scottie,” which was ... well, perfectly acceptable really in that Aussie blokey way.

If he ended it, it would definitely hurt. Just a little sting, but a sharp one. There was nothing extraordinarily wonderful about Patrick Scott. He had an ordinary pleasant face (long, thin, slightly receding hairline), an ordinary body (average height, quite broad shoulders, but naturally broad, not look-at-me-I-work-out broad), an ordinary job, an ordinary life. It was just extraordinary how comfortable she’d felt with him, almost straightaway, within minutes of meeting up with him for the very first time in that embarrassingly empty café. She’d suggested the café and had been horrified to find it virtually deserted, so that their nervous first-date voices seemed too loud, and three bored teenage waitresses stood about the room with nothing better to do than eavesdrop on their stilted conversation. They’d been waiting for their cappuccinos, and he was playing with a packet of sugar, turning it around in circles and tapping it on the table, when their eyes met, and they sort of grinned at each other in mutual recognition of the awfulness of the whole situation, and all of a sudden Ellen felt all the tension in her body drift away, as if she’d been given a powerful painkiller. She had the strangest feeling that she already knew this man; she’d known him for years. If she believed in past lives (and she didn’t not believe in them; in her work she’d seen it all, her mind was wide open to all sorts of bizarre possibilities), then she would have said they must have known each other before.

That sort of instant warmth had happened to her many times before with women; oh, she was the star of female friendship—but never with a man.

So yes, she barely knew this nice surveyor called Patrick Scott, but it would hurt if he broke up with her. Probably more than a little sting.

She thought about the hundreds, maybe thousands of stories of rejection she’d heard from her clients over the years. “I cooked a three-course dinner party for thirteen of his relatives, and while I’m doing the washing up, he announces he doesn’t love me anymore.” “We had a fantastic holiday in Fiji, and on the way home we’re drinking champagne and she tells me that she’s moving out! Champagne—as if it’s a celebration!”

Oh, the naked pain that still furrowed their faces, even when they were describing something that happened years ago. Rejection by a lover or even only a potential lover was so tough on the Inner Child. Fears of abandonment, memories of past hurts, feelings of inferiority and self-loathing, all rose to the surface in an unstoppable torrent of feeling.

She was trying to observe her situation, objectively, like a client’s case history, in the hope that she could stay detached from it. It wasn’t working.

Of course, all this panic might be for nothing. Patrick might not be about to dump her at all. There had been no signs, and she was good at reading people. That’s what she did for a living, after all. He had said she looked “gorgeous” when she opened the door for him tonight, with such a pleased expression on his face, as if he’d just been handed a gift, and he wasn’t the smooth, charming type who automatically gave the sort of compliments women liked to hear. There had been a lot of eye contact over dinner, some of which could

have qualified as “lingering.” Throughout the meal she had noted that he was leaning forward toward her (although perhaps he was a bit deaf; it was surprising how many men were just a little deaf—she knew this both from dating and from her work).

She had felt that their body language and breathing rhythms were in sync, and that wasn’t because she’d been patterning him, at least not deliberately, the way she would with a client.

There had been no awkward pauses or uncomfortable moments. He had been interested, in a respectful way, about hypnotherapy. He didn’t say, “Show me! Make me cluck like a chicken!” He didn’t sneer, or worse, take a gently condescending tone and say he wasn’t really into “alternative medicine.” He didn’t say, “So do you need any training for that?” or “Is there any money in that?” He didn’t seem afraid. Some men she’d dated seemed genuinely frightened that she might hypnotize them without their knowledge. He just seemed curious.

Also, a few minutes ago, he’d shown her photos of his son! His adorable blond, skinny little eight-year-old son, on a skateboard, playing the trombone in a school band, fishing with his dad. Surely, he wouldn’t have shown her those photos if he’d already decided it wasn’t going to work.

Unless the decision had just hit him with a flash. Now that she thought about it, it had been oddly abrupt, the way he put down his knife and fork to make his announcement, his eyes looking over her shoulder, as if he’d just seen a glimpse of a different future in the distance. She’d been midsentence, for heaven’s sake. (She had been telling him a story about a patient who was obsessed with Jennifer Lopez. The patient was actually obsessed with John Travolta, but she always changed the details for confidentiality reasons. And the story sounded funnier if it was Jennifer Lopez.)

He’d looked so sad. Even if he wasn’t about to dump her, he was definitely about to say something unacceptable or unpleasant.

Perhaps he’d lied about being a widower. He was actually still married and living with his wife, even though they slept in separate rooms.

He wasn’t a surveyor at all; he was a mobster. Now the FBI would come after her and insist she wear a wire. Her body would never be found. (She’d watched the entire series of *The Sopranos* on DVD last summer.)

Or perhaps he had a terminal disease. That would be terrible, but at least not personally hurtful.

Whatever it was, she was pretty sure that sunshiny feeling she’d been experiencing all day was about to vanish.

She took a large mouthful of her wine, and looked up to see if he was on his way back from the toilets. No. Goodness. He was taking a while. Had he just splashed water on his face and was now standing at the bathroom mirror staring into his own eyes, his hands gripping the sink, breathing heavily?

He was on the run from the law.

Her own breathing was starting to get a bit ragged.

Too much imagination for her own good. Mrs. Pascoe’s comment on her Year Seven report card.

She looked around her. The other diners were all involved in their own conversations, cutlery softly chinking against plates, the occasional not-too-raucous burst of laughter. Nobody was looking at the woman with the empty chair across from her.

Was there time? Was it really necessary? Yes.

She sat up straight in her chair and placed her hands palm down on her thighs. She closed her eyes and breathed in through her nostrils, out through her mouth. With each breath she imagined her body being filled with a powerful gold light. The light gave her energy and strength. The light filled her feet, her legs, her stomach, her arms and, finally, whoosh, it whirled around her head, so that all she could see was a golden glow, as if she was looking directly into a sunset, and for a moment she felt as if she were floating just a few centimeters above her chair.

I will be fine. Whatever he says will not touch the essence of me. I will cope. On the count of three. One ... two ...

She opened her eyes, refreshed and reinvigorated. She looked around. Nobody was staring at her. Of course, she knew that she hadn't really levitated above her chair while glowing like a lightbulb, but sometimes the feelings were so astoundingly real she couldn't believe they hadn't physically manifested in some way.

Self-hypnosis was such a wonderful tool. She could always tell when a student or client actually got it. They were awestruck by what their minds could achieve. The first time that levitating sensation happened to her it was like she'd discovered she could fly. She could wipe out the drug problem if she could just teach teenagers self-hypnosis.

Patrick still wasn't back. She looked at the meal in front of her. No point letting it go to waste. A waiter gliding by stopped and refilled her wineglass. Good wine, good fish. Pity she didn't have a book.

She thought about her day.

Right up until the moment that Patrick put down his knife and fork, it had been perfect. Exquisite, even.

She'd slept deeply and dreamlessly to the rhythm of the rain on the roof and woke late to sunshine on her face. The first thing she saw when she opened her eyes was the branch she'd hung from the ceiling as a reminder of the Buddhist sutra of mindfulness. She'd then inhaled and exhaled three gentle breaths while maintaining the "half smile."

(Although she wished she'd never mentioned this practice to her friend Julia, who had asked Ellen to demonstrate her half smile. When Ellen finally complied, after much cajoling, Julia had rocked with laughter for ten minutes straight.)

When she got out of bed, the windowpanes were icy against her fingertips, but the new gas heating system her grandparents had installed (thanks to Great-aunt Mary's lucky lotto ticket!) before they'd died had transformed the house into a cozy cocoon. She ate porridge with brown sugar for breakfast while she listened to the ABC news, which was upbeat and wry. The recent flu pandemic was probably not a pandemic after all. (Her mother, who was a GP, had said all along that this would be the case.) A missing toddler had turned up safe and sound. The latest gangland killing was probably just a family feud. The latest political scandal had fizzled. Traffic was moving well. Winds would be southwesterly and light. For once the world seemed extremely manageable.

After breakfast, she'd rugged up warmly to walk along the beach and come back exhilarated and windblown, licking salt from her lips.

She'd had four appointments that day. She had her last session with a man who had wanted help overcoming his flying phobia so he could take his wife to France for their ruby wedding anniversary. As he left, he shook

her hand vigorously and promised to send Ellen a postcard from Paris. She'd also met two new clients. She always enjoyed meeting new clients. One was a woman who had suffered from some sort of debilitating unexplained pain in her leg for the last four years and been to countless doctors, physiotherapists and chiropractors, who were all baffled. The other was a woman who had promised her fiancé that she would give up smoking by their wedding day. Both sessions had gone well.

Her final appointment was with a client who was probably not going to be one of her success stories. She was having trouble pinning down what Mary-Kate really wanted to achieve from hypnotherapy, but she refused to be referred to anyone else and insisted that she wanted to continue treatment. Ellen had decided not to try anything too complicated today and just given her a simple relaxation session. She called it a "soul massage." Afterward, Mary-Kate said her soul felt exactly the same, thank you, but that was Mary-Kate.

After Mary-Kate had plodded off, Ellen cleaned the house, carefully leaving a few things lying about so it didn't look like she had cleaned up but was just naturally tidy. She had considered taking down some of the Buddhist quotations she had displayed all around her house on pale purple Post-it notes. Her ex-boyfriend Jon used to make such fun of them—standing at her fridge, reading them out in a stupid voice. But hiding her true self wasn't the way to start a potential new relationship, was it?

She also remade the bed with her crispest, nicest sheets. It was probably time to sleep with him. Oh, yes, it was a bit clinical, but that's how it was when you were dating in your thirties. It wasn't hearts and flowers anymore. They weren't sixteen. They weren't religious. They had met on the Internet: a dating website. So it was all very clear and upfront. They were both looking for a long-term relationship. They had ticked corresponding boxes to indicate this.

There had been some kissing (quite lovely), and now it was time for sex. She'd been celibate for almost a year, and Ellen liked sex. It surprised some men, who seemed to develop an ethereal, sweetly innocent image of her in the beginning, which she didn't mind; she even played up to it a bit. It just wasn't quite accurate.

(She also liked horror movies, and coffee, and steak cooked medium-rare. A lot of people were convinced she was vegetarian, that, in fact, she should be an herbal-tea drinking vegetarian, even going so far as to prepare special meals for her at dinner parties and then insisting that they "clearly remembered" her saying she didn't eat meat.)

She had taken her time getting ready for tonight: a long steamy bath with a glass of wine and a Violent Femmes CD. The violent chords and strident voices were so startlingly different from the chiming, bubbling relaxation tapes she played all day that it was like having a bucket of cold water thrown over her head. The Violent Femmes reminded her of the eighties, and being a teenager, and feeling supercharged with hormones and hope. By the time Patrick had knocked on her front door she was in such a deliriously good mood, the thought had actually flitted across her mind, You must be heading for a fall.

She had dismissed that idea. And now ... There's something I need to tell you.

She laid down her fork. Where was that man? She could see one of the waiters giving her a circumspect look, obviously trying to work out if he should offer some form of assistance.

She looked at Patrick's half-eaten meal. He'd ordered the pork belly. A poor choice, she'd thought, but she hadn't known him long enough to tease him about it. Pork belly! It sounded disgusting, and now it looked like a big slab of cold, congealing fat.

If he was the sort of man who ordered that sort of artery-clogging meal all the time, perhaps he'd dropped dead of a heart attack in the toilets? Should she send in that concerned-looking waiter to find out? But what

if the pork belly had just disagreed with him? He'd be mortified. Well, she'd be mortified in similar circumstances. Maybe a man wouldn't care.

She was really too old for all this dating angst. She should be at home baking cakes, or whatever it was that parents of primary-school-age children did with their nights.

She looked up again and there he was, walking back toward her. He looked shaken, as if he'd just been in a minor car crash, but he also had a "The game is up" expression, as if he'd been caught robbing a bank and was walking out with his hands in the air.

He sat down opposite her and put the napkin back on his lap. He picked up his knife and fork, looked at the pork belly, sighed and placed them down again.

"You probably think I'm some sort of lunatic," he said.

"Well, I'm quite curious!" said Ellen in a jolly, middle-aged lady tone.

"I was hoping not to have to tell you about this until we'd ... but then I realized that I was going to have to tell you tonight."

"Just take your time." Now she was speaking in the calm, slightly singsong voice she used with clients. "I'm sure I'll be fine—whatever it is."

"It's nothing that bad!" said Patrick hastily. "It's more embarrassing than anything else. It's just that, OK, I'll just come out and say it."

He paused and grinned foolishly.

"I have a stalker."

For a moment Ellen couldn't quite understand what he meant. It was as if English had become her second language and she had to translate the words.

I have a stalker.

Finally she said, "Somebody is stalking you?"

"She's been stalking me for the past three years. My ex-girlfriend. Sometimes she disappears for a while, but then she comes back with a vengeance."

Glorious relief was washing through Ellen. Now that she wasn't being dumped it was suddenly clear to her how much she actually liked him, how much she was hoping this would work, how she had actually allowed the words "I could fall in love with him" to cross her mind as she was putting on her mascara. The reason she'd been so deliriously happy today had not been because of the weather or the porridge or the new heating or the news. It was because of him.

A stalking ex-girlfriend was fine!

It was interesting.

Although, then again, stalking ...

She saw notes written in letters cut out from magazines and newspapers. Messages written in blood on walls. Crazy fans sitting outside celebrities' houses. Violent ex-husbands shooting their wives.

But who stalked a surveyor? (Even if he did have an especially lovely jawline?)

"So when you say stalking, what does she actually do? Is she violent?"

"No." Patrick looked as if he was being forced to answer a series of highly personal medical questions.

"Never physically violent. Occasionally she yells. Gets a bit abusive. She makes phone calls in the middle of the night, sends me letters, e-mails, text messages, but mostly she's just there. Wherever I go, she's there."

"You mean she follows you?"

"Yes. Everywhere."

"So, goodness, this must be horrible for you!" There was that middle-aged lady again. "Have you been to the police?"

He winced, as if at an uncomfortable memory. "Yes. Once. I spoke to a female police officer. I don't know if she—look, she said all the right things, I just felt like an idiot, like a wuss. She suggested I keep a 'Stalking Incident Log' recording everything, and I've done that. She said I could take out a restraining order against her, so I was thinking about doing that, but then, when I told my ex that I'd been to the police, she said if I took it any further, she would tell them I'd been harassing her, that I'd hit her—well, you know, I'm the guy, who are they going to believe? Her, of course. So I backed right off. I just keep hoping she'll stop. And the years keep rolling by. I can't believe it's been going on so long."

"It must be..." Ellen was going to say "frightening," but that might offend him; it was her belief that the male ego was as delicate as an eggshell. She said instead, "Stressful." She couldn't quite keep the undercurrent of joy out of her voice.

"In the beginning I really let it get to me," he said. "But now I've sort of accepted it. It's just how my life has worked out, but it's hard on new relationships. Some women get freaked out by the whole thing. Some of them say they're fine with it at first, but then they can't handle it."

"I can handle it," said Ellen, quickly, as if she was at a job interview and she was proving she was up to the challenge. Hearing about ex-girlfriends' weaknesses always brought out a competitive urge to prove she was better.

Flustered, she took a mouthful of her wine. She'd just put her cards on the table. She had basically just said: I want a relationship with you.

She pretended to be frowning down at her wineglass, as if she was about to make some disparaging comment on the quality of the wine, and when she finally looked up, Patrick was smiling at her. A big crinkle-eyed smile of pure pleasure. He reached out across the table and took her hand in his.

"I hope you can," he said. "Because I feel really good about this. I mean, about us. The possibility of us."

"The possibility of us," repeated Ellen, savoring the words and the feel of his hand. It was all such rubbish about getting clinical and jaded when you were in your thirties. The feel of his hand was shooting endorphins throughout her bloodstream. She knew all about the science of love, how her brain was currently surging with "love chemicals" (norepinephrine, serotonin and dopamine), but that didn't mean she wasn't as susceptible as anyone else.

So now all their cards were on the table.

“What made you tell me tonight?” asked Ellen. His thumb was tracing circles in her palm. Round and round the garden, like a teddy bear. “About your stalker?”

His thumb stopped.

“I saw her,” he said.

“You saw her!” Ellen’s eyes darted about the restaurant. “You mean, here?”

“She was sitting at a table under the window.” He gestured with his chin over Ellen’s shoulder. She went to turn around to look but Patrick said, “Don’t worry. She’s gone now.”

“What was she doing? Just ... watching us?”

Ellen was aware of her heart rate picking up. She wasn’t sure how she felt: frightened, possibly a little thrilled.

“She was texting on her mobile,” said Patrick wearily.

“Texting you?”

“Probably. I’ve got my phone switched off.”

“Do you want to see what she said?” Ellen wanted to see what she said.

“Not particularly,” said Patrick. “Not at all, actually.”

“When did she leave?” If only Ellen had known earlier, she could have seen her.

“When I stood up to go to the bathroom, she followed me. We had a little chat in the corridor. That’s why I took so long. She said she was just leaving, and she did, thank God.”

So she must have walked right past Ellen! Ellen searched her mind for a memory of a woman walking by but came up blank. It was probably when she was doing her self-hypnosis, damn it.

“What did she say?”

“She always puts on this pathetic act, as if we just happened to run into each other. You’d think she’d look like a crazy bag lady, with, you know, crazy hair, but she looks so normal, so together. It makes me doubt myself, as if I’m imagining the whole thing. She’s a successful career woman. Well respected. Can you believe it? I always wonder what her colleagues would think if they knew what she does in her spare time. Anyway ... shall we talk about something more pleasant? How was your fish?”

Are you kidding? There was no other subject Ellen wanted to talk about more. She wanted to know every detail. She wanted to understand what was going through this woman’s head. She normally understood a woman’s perspective in any given situation. She was a girl’s girl. She liked women; it was men who often mystified her. But stalking your ex-boyfriend for three years? Was she a psychopath? Had he treated her badly? Was she still in love with him? How did she justify her own behavior to herself?

“The fish was great,” said Ellen. She tried to suppress her greed for more information. It was a bit unseemly

when this was obviously such a distressing part of this man's life. She knew it was one of her flaws: a ravenous curiosity about other people's personal lives.

"Who is looking after your son tonight?" she asked, to help him change the subject.

"My mother," said Patrick. His face softened. "Jack adores his grandma."

Then he blinked, looked at his watch, and said, "Actually, I promised I'd call him to say good night. He wasn't feeling that well when I left. Would you mind?" He pulled his mobile phone from his pocket.

"Of course not."

"I don't normally call him when I'm out," he said, as he turned the phone on. "I mean, he's a pretty independent kid now. He does his own thing."

"It's fine."

"It's just that he's had this really bad cold and then it turned into a chest infection. He's on antibiotics."

"It's perfectly fine." She wanted to hear him talking to his little boy.

His phone was beeping, over and over.

Patrick grimaced. "Text messages."

"From your, ah, your stalker?" Ellen tried not to look too avidly at the beeping phone.

He studied the screen on his phone. "Yes. Mostly I just delete them without even bothering to read them."

"Right." She couldn't help herself. "Because they're nasty?"

"Sometimes. Mostly they're just pathetic." She watched his face as he read the messages, pressing buttons with his thumb. He smiled ironically, as if he was engaged in nasty banter with an enemy. He rolled his eyes. He chewed on the edge of his lip.

"Want to read them?" He held out the phone to her.

"Sure," said Ellen casually. She leaned forward and read as he scrolled through the messages for her.

Fancy seeing you here! I'm at a table under the window.

You look good in that shirt.

You ordered the pork belly? What were you thinking?

She's pretty. You two look good together. S xx

Ellen recoiled.

"Sorry," said Patrick. "I shouldn't have shown you that one. I promise you, you're not in any, you know, danger."

"No, no, it's fine." She nodded at the phone. "Keep going."

Nice running into you tonight. We should do coffee one day soon?

I love you. I hate you. I love you. I hate you. No, I definitely hate you.

Ellen sat back.

“What’s your professional opinion?” asked Patrick. “Certifiably crazy, right? Remember, this relationship ended three years ago.”

“How long did you go out for?”

“Two years. Well, three years. She was my first relationship after my wife died.”

She wanted to ask how it ended but instead she said, “Why don’t you just change your phone number?”

“I used to change it all the time, but it’s not worth it. I’m self-employed. I need people to be able to track me down. Hey, I’d better call my son. I’ll be quick.”

Ellen watched him as he dialed a number and held the phone to his ear.

“It’s me, mate. How are you going? ... What did I have? Oh, pork belly.”

He glanced down ruefully at his plate. “Yeah, it wasn’t that great. Anyway, how are you feeling? You’re OK? You took your antibiotics? What’s Grandma doing? Oh really? That’s good. Yeah. OK. Well, maybe if you just tell me quickly.”

He stopped talking and listened. His eyes met Ellen’s and he winked briefly.

“Is that right? OK, well—right. A volcano? Parachuting? Geez.”

He kept listening, tapping his fingers on the tablecloth.

Ellen watched his hand. It was a lovely hand. Big square-cut fingernails.

“OK, mate. Listen, you might have to tell me the rest tomorrow. I’m being really rude to my ... friend. OK. See you in the morning. Waffles, of course. Yep, definitely. Night, kid. Love you.”

He hung up the phone, switched it off and put it back in his pocket.

“Sorry,” he said. “He wanted to tell me every detail of this movie he’d seen. Gets that from me, I’m afraid.”

“Really,” said Ellen.

She was feeling a shot of intense pleasure at the back of her skull. She loved the way he talked to his son, so casual and funny and masculine and loving. She loved the fact that they were going to have waffles tomorrow morning. (She loved waffles!) She loved the way he said “Love you” so unself-consciously.

A waiter took away their plates, balancing them on his forearm. “Was the pork belly all right, sir?”

“It was fine.” Patrick smiled up at him. “Just wasn’t as hungry as I thought.”

“Can I tempt you with the dessert menu? Or coffees?”

Patrick raised his eyebrows at Ellen.

“No thank you,” she said.

“Just the bill then, thanks, mate,” said Patrick.

Ellen looked at her watch. It was only ten o’clock. “I’ve got some nice chocolates at home,” she said. “If you want to have coffee at my place. If you’ve got time.”

“I’ve got time,” said Patrick, and his eyes met hers.

Of course, they never bothered with the coffee and chocolates. As they made love for the first time on the clean sheets, there was a sudden flurry of hard rain on the roof, and Ellen thought briefly of Patrick’s stalker, and wondered where she was right now, imagining her standing under a streetlight in the rain with no umbrella, raindrops sliding heedlessly down her pale, tortured (beautiful?) face, but then all the interesting sensations of a new lover filled every corner of her mind and she forgot all about her.

Chapter 2

At my age most of my friends are in long-term relationships, and in my line of work I don’t have the opportunity to meet many new potential partners. I guess this just seemed like a fun way to make some new friends. I’m a romantic, but I’m also a realist.

—From Internet dating site profile of
username: Ellen68

Ellen walked barefoot along the beach early the next morning, her trousers rolled up to her knees so she could let the waves break around her ankles, thinking about Patrick (she loved the name Patrick, nothing namby-pamby about it at all!) and everything that had happened the previous night.

His son. (So cute!)

His crazy ex-girlfriend. (Intriguing! Although also possibly somewhat frightening. She wasn’t sure.)

His body. Goodness, she had thought, as if she were a swooning heroine in a Regency romance, when he unbuttoned his unassuming striped business shirt. Just thinking about his chest gave her a shot of pure lust and she pressed two fingers to her tender lips, grazed from all that kissing.

He had left right at midnight. Like Cinderella. He said that although his mother was staying at his place to look after his son, and would have gone to bed in the spare room, he always felt as if he was somehow taking advantage of her if he stayed out too late.

“I hate doing this. Of course, if we—you know—I’ll be able to let her know I’m staying overnight,” he’d said as he buttoned his shirt back up over his caveman chest.

“It’s fine,” Ellen had said, her voice thick with sleep. She was happy he was going. She preferred to lie in bed and think about him, rather than have him actually there and worry about what her hair looked like in the morning.

“I’ll call you,” he’d said when he kissed her good-bye.

Her phone had beeped with a text message at six a.m.

When can I see you again, please? I think you've got me hypnotized!

Which was cheesy. But extremely lovely.

So it looked like it was happening. She was at the beginning of something new. Here we are again. She took a deep breath of salty air and it caught in her throat. For a moment she felt the weight of all those previous disappointments.

Please let this one work, she thought pathetically.

And then, with more spirit, Come on now, I deserve this!

Ellen had been in three long-term relationships: Andy, Edward and Jon. Sometimes she felt like she was always dragging the memories of these relationships along with her, like three old tin cans on a string.

Andy was a freakishly tall young banker. Their three-year relationship always seemed vaguely fraudulent to Ellen, like they were just pretending to be in love and doing a really excellent job of it. When Andy got an overseas posting, neither of them even mentioned the possibility of Ellen going with him. The whole affair left her with the same sense of grimy regret she felt after eating McDonald's.

Edward was a sweet, sensitive high school teacher. They fell deeply, profoundly in love and became one of those couples with a clear path ahead of them incorporating children and pets. And then, for complex reasons that were still not clear to her now, and to everyone's shock, the relationship suddenly imploded. It was quite exquisitely painful.

She met Jon on her thirtieth birthday. So OK, she thought, this is the one. The real grown-up relationship. He was a smart, articulate engineer. She adored him. It wasn't until after he'd pulverized her heart that she finally noticed he'd never actually adored her back.

She'd always thought of these failed relationships as, well, failures. But it occurred to her now that perhaps they were actually essential steps in a predestined journey leading to this very moment on this very beach. To a green-eyed surveyor called Patrick Scott.

She thought of Patrick's ex-girlfriend, his stalker. Saskia. An unusual name with its hard, spiky little syllables. Ellen rolled the name around in her mouth, like a strange new fruit. Saskia would not appreciate knowing that Ellen's heart was filling with tremulous hope right now.

Ellen kicked out at the water in front her, sending up a spray of icy droplets. Well, really, what sort of person was this girl? Had she no pride at all? Ellen cringed at the idea of her ex-partners knowing she ever spared them a thought.

When, in fact, the three of them were always lolling about in the back of her mind. Every time she got out of the car she automatically slid the driver's seat back for Andy's long legs, a habit left over from the years they'd shared a car. Every time she cut a tomato she thought of Jon, because he'd once told her cutting crossways made it juicier. Every Boxing Day she remembered it was Edward's birthday.

Of course, it was to be expected that she thought of them. For a while each had been the person who knew her best, who spoke to her every single day, who knew where she was at any particular time, who would have sat in the front row at her funeral should she have tragically died.

It sometimes seemed so peculiar and wrong to her that you could be that intimate with someone, to go to sleep with him and wake up with him, to do really quite extraordinarily personal things together on a regular

basis, and then, suddenly, you don't even know his telephone number, or where he's living or working, or what he did today or last week or last year.

Ellen watched a giant wave on the horizon curl and crash with a distant boom.

That's why breakups felt like your skin was being torn from your body. It was actually strange that more people weren't like Saskia, instead of being so well behaved and dignified about it.

"Good morning!" An elderly couple walked by from the opposite end of the beach at a brisk pace, elbows pumping. Ellen picked up her own pace so as not to be outdone by octogenarians.

When her grandparents were alive, they would walk along this beach every night just before the six o'clock news.

They spent sixty-three years together. Sixty-three years of waking up next to the same person, in the very same bedroom, in fact, where she and Patrick had made love last night. (Which, now that she thought about it, was terrible. She liked to think that the spirits of her grandparents still inhabited the house. She hoped her poor grandfather hadn't been trapped in the bedroom, standing behind the curtains, shielding his eyes.)

Ellen had always assumed she would marry young and have a relationship like theirs. She thought she was that sort of person. Traditional. Nice. As if nice girls always found nice boys. As if "niceness" was all that was necessary to maintain a relationship.

In all honesty (and the achievement of genuine self-awareness was her ongoing goal), it wasn't her niceness so much as the fact that she believed herself to be nothing like her own mother: her mother who had brought up Ellen alone, with barely a man in sight.

And yet, here she was, thirty-five and looking for men on the Internet. Each time she clicked on to the website she felt like she was doing something vaguely unseemly.

Unseemly for her. That was the crux of it. She didn't think there was anything unseemly about anyone else doing Internet dating. Oh, no, it was fine for the unwashed masses! But Ellen helped people with their personal lives for a living.

That was it. She thought she should be the sort of person who was great at relationships, and it seemed she actually wasn't. Really, she kept telling herself briskly, why shouldn't she have suffered and had her heart broken like anyone else? Why shouldn't she have found it hard to meet the right man, like so many other women? Why shouldn't she be worried about the ticking of her biological clock, even if it was a cliché? Why shouldn't she be a cliché?

She was ashamed of her shame. As penance she was extremely open about her single status. She told all and sundry that she was Internet dating. She went on each awkward new date with her head held high, her outlook positive and her heart and mind open to all possibilities.

But it was hard work at times.

She reached the rock pool where she always turned back and put her hands on her hips, breathing heavily. She'd been walking faster than she realized.

She looked back along the beach toward her grandparents' house, now her house, the glass room at the back winking in the morning sun, like a diamond stuck haphazardly to the side of the house. "Fabulous. He's made it even more of an eyesore," her mother had said when she saw the new room Ellen's grandfather had

added on, thanks once again to Great-aunt Mary's lotto win.

Ellen's grandfather's childless, unmarried younger sister, Mary, had won half a million dollars in lotto and then died just six weeks later, while she was still pondering what to do with her windfall. (A new TV, perhaps? One of those "flat screens"? But really, Deal or No Deal would still look exactly the same, wouldn't it? Just bigger.) All her money had gone to Ellen's grandparents, who had used it to put on the extra glass room, install gas heating and go on a ten-day cruise each year until they died. Great-aunt Mary's lotto win had also resulted in their decision to leave their house to Ellen when they died, while her mother and Amnesty International had inherited the capital. This suited everyone because Ellen's mother had no desire to live in her childhood home. "No amount of money could save it," she liked to say, with sad authority, as if she'd been asked to give her expert opinion.

It was a strange-looking house, built in the seventies and incorporating all the most fashionable design features that decade had to offer: exposed beams and bricks, a stainless-steel spiral staircase, mirrored arches, lime green shag carpet and a bright orange kitchen. But Ellen had always loved it. She thought it had groovy retro charm and she refused to change a thing about it, except for adding an off-street parking spot for her clients. While her career as a hypnotherapist had supported her "quite remarkably" well (as her mother was always telling people, equally disappointed and proud), she had still been renting an apartment and an office when her grandmother died. Inheriting the house and using her grandmother's sewing room to treat her clients meant that Ellen was now enjoying the most financially secure position of her life.

A white stone on the sand caught her eye and she bent down to pick it up. It had a pleasing shape and feel to it; it might come in useful for one of her clients.

As she straightened back up, she looked out at the ocean and felt a loosening sensation in her chest, as if she'd been released from a corset. You weren't meant to admit, even to yourself, how badly you wanted love. The man was meant to be the icing, not the cake. She was a bit embarrassed by the depth of her happiness. Thank goodness no one could see the champagne corks popping in her head.

When she got home she would answer Patrick's text and suggest they see a movie that night. Not very original, but still one of the loveliest things to do with a new boyfriend. She would try not to sound overly eager.

She walked closer to the water and dug her toes deep into the sand. She remembered the feel of Patrick's back beneath her fingers, his collarbone against her lips.

Sorry, Saskia. I think I'm keeping him.

So, he's slept with the hypnotist.

I can tell. I knew as soon as I saw his hand pressed to her lower back as they came out of the movie. It was low, you see, and confident, indicating ownership.

He thinks he's pretty good in bed. It was his wife's fault. She once told him that he was an "extraordinary lover." And then she died. So every word she ever said became like the Word of God. The Word of Colleen.

Colleen once told Patrick that the laundry powder should be fully dissolved in the washing machine before you put in the clothes, even though most people just chuck it in on top of the clothes. But Colleen said the clothes wash better if the powder is fully dissolved. And so it was. I still do it, for Christ's sake. Even though it's annoying, because you have to wait until the machine fills up with water and sometimes I walk away and forget about it, and then I suddenly realize I've done half a load without any clothes in the machine.

He was actually pretty good in bed. He probably still is. Probably still says the same things, makes all the same moves.

I think of him lying in bed with her, breathing in her sandalwood smells, running his hands over her smooth, toxin-free skin.

I would like to see. I would like to be there, sitting at the end of the bed, watching him bend his head toward her nipple. Her breasts are larger than mine. I guess that's nice for him.

I wonder if she hypnotizes him for free.

Her voice sounds like warm honey dripping off a spoon.

They saw that Russell Crowe movie last night. It was pretty good. He should have known what was going to happen, because the movie was based on the series we used to watch on a Monday night. I wondered if he remembered and I thought, I bet he doesn't, so I sent him a text reminding him.

Afterward, they went for dinner at that Thai restaurant on the corner where he told me he loved me for the first time.

I wonder if they sat at the same table.

I wonder if he remembered, just for a second. Surely I am worth a fleeting thought.

I couldn't get a table. They must have had a reservation—she must have done it, he would never bother. So I went to a café and I wrote him a letter, just trying to explain, to make him see, and I left it on the windscreen of his car.

I am looking forward to my next appointment with the hypnotist.

Chapter 3

“As man imagines himself to be, so shall he be, and he is that which he imagines.” So said Paracelsus in the fifteenth century. The idea of the power of the mind is not new, ladies and gentlemen. Good morning.

—Introduction to a speech given by Ellen O'Farrell to the Northern Beaches Rotary Club August Breakfast, sadly unheard by the majority of the audience due to a malfunctioning microphone

We should go,” yawned Ellen.

“We really should,” yawned Patrick.

Neither of them moved.

It was nearly eleven o'clock on a Thursday night and they were lying flat on their backs on a picnic rug on a grassy slope directly under the Harbour Bridge. Earlier, they'd been to the theater in Kirribilli and seen a silly play. They'd eaten dinner at a tiny, crowded noodle bar, and then they'd walked along the boardwalk by the harbor, watching the traffic zoom over the bridge while the lit-up ferries slid beneath. They'd agreed tonight would be an early night, and that Patrick wouldn't come back to her place, because a teenage neighbor was looking after Patrick's son, and she had a uni lecture early the next day, so he didn't want to

keep her up too late—but still, neither of them wanted the night to end.

They'd been dating now for three weeks and everything still had that shiny new-car smell. Even the yawny voices they were using right now still had that self-conscious sheen: Look, this is how I sound when I'm tired!

"Have you got a busy day tomorrow?" asked Patrick.

"Just an average day," said Ellen. "Five appointments. That's enough for me. I find if I do any more, I get really, well, exhausted."

She was aware of a feeling of defensiveness left over from her most recent relationship. Jon's contempt for her profession had always been subtle: a faint fragrance she couldn't quite identify, and therefore couldn't ever tackle head-on. He was an even more passionately committed atheist than her mother. (The God Delusion was his favorite book.) "Show me the empirical evidence" was one of his favorite phrases. Whenever Ellen talked about her work, Jon would put his head to one side and give her a patient, avuncular smile, as if she were a charming little girl burling on about fairy princesses. Then he'd make some humorous, teasing remark that didn't go quite as far as denying the existence of fairy princesses but was there for the entertainment of any nearby adults. "Ellen has a Bachelor of Hypnotherapy," he would tell people, which was his sarcastic way of pointing out that Ellen didn't have a degree, because of course, there was no such thing. (She'd enrolled to do psychology and then dropped out halfway through her second semester to study hypnotherapy. Her mother was still in mourning.)

It wasn't until after she and Jon had broken up that Ellen saw how she'd struggled to hold on to herself throughout their time together. It was like every time she spoke, she was simultaneously trying not to take herself too seriously—Hey, I can handle a little gentle ribbing!—while at the same time justifying her whole existence: Yes, it is OK to be me. Yes, I do believe in myself and what I'm saying. I am not a frivolous lightweight, except maybe I am.

"Is it draining because..." Patrick scratched the side of his jaw and frowned up at the stars. "Ah, why, that is, how exactly is it draining?"

He was respectfully baffled.

"I guess it's because I can't ever just coast," said Ellen. "I have to be totally focused on the client. I never use prepared scripts. I tailor every induction—"

"Induction?"

"That's whatever technique I use to induce hypnosis—like, imagining you're walking down a flight of stairs, or progressively relaxing your body. I tailor it to the client's interest or background—whether they're more visual or analytical, or whatever."

"Do you have some tricky clients?" Patrick rolled over on his side and rested his head in the palm of his hand. "Ones who are hard to hypnotize?"

"Nearly everyone can be hypnotized to some degree," said Ellen. "But some people have more of a talent for it, I guess, because they're imaginative and they've got the ability to really focus and visualize."

"Huh," said Patrick. "I wonder if I've got the talent for it."

"I'll give you a suggestibility test," said Ellen. She got up on her knees, mildly exhilarated; she would never

have done anything like this with Jon.

Patrick looked up at her. "Like a gullibility test?"

"No, no, it's just a little exercise to show the power of your imagination. Relax! It's nothing strange. You've probably done it before at a sales conference or something."

"OK." Patrick got up on his knees, facing her, with a brave set to his shoulders. The smell of his aftershave was already familiar to her but still new enough to arouse. "Do I close my eyes?"

"No. Just hold your hands like this."

She interlaced her hands as if in prayer and then lifted her index fingers so they were aligned but not touching. Patrick did the same and looked her straight in the eyes. There was something very sexy about this.

"Now imagine a powerful magnetic force is pulling those two fingertips together. You're fighting it but you can't resist. Watch them. It's getting stronger. Even stronger. It's too strong—there."

Patrick's fingertips closed.

"See! Your subconscious believed the magnets were real."

Patrick looked at his fingertips still pressed together. "Well. Yes. I mean, I don't know. I guess it felt real, but that's just because I was going along with what you were saying."

Ellen smiled. "Exactly. All hypnosis is self-hypnosis. It's not magic."

"Do something else."

"All right. Close your eyes this time, and stretch your arms out in front of you."

He did so, and she paused for a moment, observing the planes and hollows of his face in the moonlight.

"Hello?" he said.

"Sorry. OK. Imagine that I'm tying a huge helium balloon to your right wrist. It's tugging it upward. Feel it tug. Now in your left hand I'm giving you a bucket. It's very heavy because it's filled with heavy wet sand from the beach."

Patrick's right arm floated straight up and his left hand dropped down. Either he was doing this to please her or he was, in fact, an excellent subject for hypnosis.

"Open your eyes," she said.

Patrick opened his eyes and looked at his arms.

"Huh," he said. He dropped his arms and put them around her waist. He lowered his head as if to kiss her and then he stopped and suddenly spun around to look behind him.

"What is it?" said Ellen, startled.

"I'm sorry," said Patrick. "I thought I heard something. I thought it was her."

There was already no question as to who “her” was. Ellen looked around at the shadowy areas under the bridge for a lurking woman. She noted that she was experiencing a slight buzz: a pleasant burst of adrenaline at the thought of Patrick’s stalker secretly observing them.

“You haven’t seen her tonight, have you?” asked Ellen. The other night they’d been to the movies and dinner and Patrick hadn’t even mentioned he’d noticed Saskia until they got back to the car and found a letter from her sitting on the windscreen.

Patrick glanced around, his eyes narrowed. Then he sat back down again.

“No, I haven’t seen her at all. I think she’s giving us the night off.” He put his arm around her. “I’m sorry. It makes me twitchy sometimes.”

“I can imagine,” said Ellen sympathetically. Was there something moving over by that pylon? No. Trick of the light, damn it.

“So your business is all about the power of the mind,” said Patrick.

“That’s right,” said Ellen. “The power of the subconscious mind.”

“I believe in it, don’t get me wrong,” began Patrick.

Here we go. Ellen’s stomach muscles clenched.

“But there’s a limit to it, isn’t there?”

“What do you mean?” said Ellen. He’s not Jon, she told herself. He’s just stating an opinion. Calm down.

“I just mean, it can’t cure everything. When Colleen—that was my wife—when she got sick, people kept telling her to think positively. As if she could just think the cancer away. After she died I saw a woman on TV saying: ‘I refused to let the cancer beat me. I had two young children, you see. I had to live.’ It infuriated me. As if it was Colleen’s fault that she died. As if she should have tried harder.”

Go carefully, thought Ellen. She opened her mouth to speak and then closed it again.

Patrick put his hand on her knee. “By the way, I don’t want you thinking you’ve got to walk on eggshells whenever anything comes up about my wife. I’m fine about it. I’m not going to go all weird on you, I promise.”

Hmm, thought Ellen. “My mother is a GP,” she said. “So—” So what? So I have some sort of medical credibility because of her? My mother doesn’t really believe in what I do either. “I have looked after clients with terminal illnesses for pain management or stress relief, but I would never, ever promise I could cure them.”

“I didn’t mean to imply that,” said Patrick. His hand tightened on her knee.

“I know you didn’t.” Ellen put her hand over his, and wondered if he was seeing his wife’s face right now.

She didn’t tell him that she did believe that the mind had miraculous untapped powers.

Show me the empirical evidence, said Jon in her head.

They didn't speak. The sound of a ferry horn floated across to them from the other side of the harbor. There were footsteps behind them. They both turned to watch a woman wearing a dark business suit and white sneakers walking down the path toward them.

"That's not—" said Ellen.

"No," said Patrick, his face clearing as the woman was illuminated by a streetlight.

They were silent. Ellen thought about how she'd closed off such a huge part of her identity during her years with Jon. If this relationship was going to work, she needed to throw open those doors! Let in the light! The air! The— OK, Ellen, enough with the house metaphor.

"I really love what I do," she said to Patrick. That defensive tone was still there. She made a conscious effort to let it go, to just be. "I'm quite good at it too."

Patrick gave her an amused sidelong look. "Are you the queen of hypnotherapists?"

"I am."

"What a coincidence. I am the king of surveyors."

"Really?"

Patrick sighed. "No, not really. I'm more like the yesterday man of surveyors."

"Why?"

"I'm not fond of all the new technology. I still prefer to do all my drafting by hand. So that makes me slower. Not as efficient. It's a competitive disadvantage, as my younger brother likes to remind me."

"Is he a surveyor too?"

"No, he's a graphic designer, but he's very techy. Are you techy?"

"Not really, but I do like to Google. I think I Google every single day. Google is my oracle."

"What did you Google today?"

Today she'd Googled "dating a widower: avoiding the pitfalls" and "stepchildren—disaster?" followed by "cures for broken capillaries around the nose."

"Oh, I can't think." She waved her hand vaguely. "Something trivial." She changed the subject back. "Why did you decide to become a surveyor?"

"Maps," said Patrick immediately. "I've always loved the idea of a map, of knowing exactly where I am in relation to everything else. I had an uncle who was a surveyor and when I was a kid he said to me, 'Patrick, you've got good where-ability, you'd make a good surveyor.' I asked him what a surveyor did and he explained it like this: He said a surveyor determines the location of things on the earth's surface in relation to every other thing above or below that surface. Those were his exact words. It stuck in my head. And for some reason that just clicked with me. I thought, Yep, that's what I'll do."

"I think I must have terrible where-ability," commented Ellen. "I don't have any sense of where I am in

relation to anything. Like, right now—I couldn't point in the direction of home."

Patrick pointed over her shoulder. "North. That way."

"If you say so."

"Have you got any paper?" said Patrick. "I'll draw you a map."

Ellen always made a point of having a beautiful hardbound notebook and pen in her bag so she could write down thoughts as they struck her, ideas for her work and so on. She carefully ripped out a page for him. She didn't want him reading any of her random scribbles; most of them were the very essence of uncool.

Patrick pulled a slim gold fountain pen from his pocket. "My grandfather's Parker pen. I'd run back into a burning house for it."

He rested the sheet of paper on top of her notebook, leaned it on his knee and drew an old-fashioned compass in the corner. Then he began to quickly sketch the inlets and curves of the harbor. He added a ferry and yachts, the Harbor Bridge and the Opera House. It was like watching an ancient treasure map appear before her eyes.

"Here's where we had dinner." He drew a little illustration of the restaurant. "Here's where we saw that terrible play. And now we head over to the northern beaches." He sketched a beach and a two-story house. "Here's your house." He wrote: Ellen's Hypnotic House. "And now we head back over to the leafy North Shore and here's my house." He wrote: Patrick and Jack's Messy Men's Hovel. He had beautiful handwriting; it evoked another more elegant era.

She hadn't been to his place yet. She wondered if it was a hovel.

"And this is where we met for the first time." He continued drawing.

"And I think that's about everything—oh, except for this."

He drew a tiny cross next to the harbor and wrote: We are here.

"That's the most beautiful map I've ever seen," said Ellen truthfully. She had never had any interest in maps before, but she already knew she would keep this forever.

A faint shadow crossed Patrick's face. It came and went so fast she couldn't tell if it was sadness or anger, or maybe embarrassment, or if she'd imagined it.

Then he smiled at her. "No charge this time, darlin'."

Her heart was melting all over the place.

I've got this box.

Sometimes I think if I just threw away the box, I might be able to stop. Once, I got as far as carrying it out to the rubbish bin. I opened the lid of the bin and smelled rotting food and heard the buzz of flies, and I thought, This isn't rubbish, this is my life.

I lost them tonight. They were going somewhere near Milsons Point or Kirribilli. I was hungry, so I didn't bother driving around looking for his car. I came home and ate sardines on toast while I watched Cold Case

with the box on the floor next to me.

Every commercial break I dipped my hand into the box and pulled something out at random. Then I would examine it as if it was a clue or a solution, as if I was one of the detectives on Cold Case trying to unravel the secrets of the past.

A birthday card, the cardboard still stiff and shiny. Not faded at all. It could have been given to me yesterday:

Dear Saskia,

Happy Birthday from your boys.

We love you,

Patrick and Jack xx

A photo of me and Jack with one of our Play-Doh cities. We spent hours making those cities. I'd spread out cardboard across the dining room table and we'd put in roads and roundabouts and traffic lights. Shops and houses. We'd spend days working on the one city: Jacksville, Jackland, JackTown. I loved building those cities as much as he did. It was like being a town planner without the politics or paperwork.

A boarding pass for Queenstown, New Zealand. Patrick and I went snowboarding for a week. His mum looked after Jack. I remember Patrick stopping to kiss me when we walked back inside for a hot chocolate. Warm lips; cold snowflakes falling around us as soft as caresses.

A map that Patrick drew for me when he was giving me directions to a developer's office near the airport.

I remember I said to him, "That's the most beautiful map I've ever seen."

Chapter 4

In this Act, "stalking" includes the following of a person about or the watching or frequenting of the vicinity of, or an approach to, a person's place of residence, business or work or any place that a person frequents for the purposes of any social or leisure activity.

—Section 8 of the Crimes

(Domestic and Personal Violence) Act

So she follows you? Everywhere? How is that even possible?"

"Well, not everywhere. The last time we were at the movies."

"Maybe she just happened to be there."

"Maybe, but she tried to get into the same restaurant, and then she left a letter on his car windscreen, which he didn't read. Apparently she waits around the corner from Patrick's house and follows his car. He said if he's going somewhere different, he'll often lose her, but if it's a regular place, like the movies at Cremorne, it's easy for her to work out."

"Good Lord."

“I know.”

“This must be awful for you. It’s ruining that wonderful time at the start of your relationship. You should be gazing moonily into each other’s eyes, not keeping a lookout for his crazy ex.”

“I don’t mind. Actually, I find it sort of interesting.”

“You freak.”

Ellen laughed at Julia’s decisive tone and stretched luxuriously. It was a Saturday morning and they’d just been swimming at their local pool. Now they were lying on white towels in the billowing heat of the sauna. Ellen’s legs and shoulders ached from the swim. Julia always made her swim harder and faster than she would if she was on her own. She could feel beads of sweat sliding all over her body: down her back, into her cleavage. She let her hands rest lightly on her thighs, and felt sleek and slippery and sensual. There was no problem practicing mindfulness when you were at the start of a relationship. It happened automatically. All that sex. All those chemicals zipping through your body.

And all that appreciation. That was what was so wonderful about falling in love. Patrick appeared to highly approve of every new thing he learned about her body, her past, her personality. It made Ellen not just sexier but funnier, smarter, nicer, kinder, all round lovelier. She was invincible! Her life seemed to flow and ripple in exquisite harmony, as if she’d achieved enlightenment. Her clients were sweet and grateful, her friends adorable, her mother not at all frustrating. (“So when am I going to meet him?” she said on the phone, her tone warm and pleased, sounding just like a normal mother presumably would.) Whatever grocery items Ellen wanted were always right on the shelf in front of her; traffic lights turned green as she approached; her car keys, sunglasses and purse sat obediently and conveniently on the hall table. This morning she’d had just one hour to go to the bank, the motor registry and the dry cleaners and she’d done it with time to spare, and every person she’d dealt with, even at the motor registry, had been charming. She’d had quite an emotional conversation with the bank teller about the weather. (The teller was from the UK, and thought that Australian winters were “divine,” and Ellen had felt tearily proud, as if she, in her invincible state, was solely responsible for the Australian climate.)

If only she could bottle this feeling and make it last forever. It couldn’t last forever, her rational mind knew that, but her heart, her foolish heart, was chirping, “Oh, yes, it can! Why not? This is who you are now! This is your life from now on!”

“I would never humiliate myself like that,” said Julia.

What? Oh. The stalking thing.

“Well, I guess she just can’t let go,” said Ellen. Right now, she was filled with gentle compassion for all of humanity.

Julia snorted. She was lying on the bench opposite Ellen, a towel wrapped like a turban about her head. She had a long, lean, athletic body and crazy blond curly hair and she hovered right on the edge of being extremely beautiful. Whenever Ellen walked along a street with her, she saw men’s eyes involuntarily flicking back to Julia for a second appraising look. Unfortunately, Julia’s beauty seemed to attract a certain type of man, the sort who appreciated quality and was prepared to pay extra for it. The problem was these men constantly upgraded their computers, their cars and their women. That was their nature. They were dedicated consumers, excellent for the economy. After nearly five years of marriage, Julia’s husband, William, had decided it was high time he upgraded to the latest brand of woman: a twenty-three-year-old brunette.

(Ellen always liked to think that the sort of man she herself attracted was automatically superior to those who chose Julia because they didn't let the billboards determine what was beautiful. They weren't superficial; they were individuals. Sadly, she couldn't really back this theory up when her relationship history was just as disastrous as Julia's.)

(Really, when she dug deep, she saw that her whole theory was just her way of making herself feel better because the majority of men didn't feel the need to give her that second flick of the eyes.)

(Although William had been a dreadful prat.)

(To be honest, she had been quite fond of him in the beginning.)

"Where's the woman's self-respect?" snapped Julia. "Just move on, for God's sake. She's making all of us look bad."

There was a real edge to her voice, as if she was personally offended.

"You mean she's making women look bad?" said Ellen. "It's normally men who do the stalking. It's good. She's showing women can stalk just as effectively as men."

Julia made a pfff sound. She sat up, leaned down with one long arm and picked up the ladle lying next to a bucket of water. She threw it on the hot rocks. There was a boiling hiss and the sauna filled with more steam.

"Julia," gasped Ellen. "I'm suffocating."

"Toughen up," said Julia. She lay back down and asked, "What's this girl's name?"

"Saskia," said Ellen, breathing shallow breaths of the hot, heavy air. She felt shy saying it out loud, as if it was a celebrity's name.

"Have you actually seen her yet? Or have you seen photos?"

"No. He never tells me he's seen her until after she's left. I'm desperate to see what she looks like."

"Maybe she's a figment of his imagination, and he's the crazy one."

"I don't think so."

Patrick wasn't crazy. He was lovely.

"So I assume he ended the relationship."

"He just said that it ran its course."

"So he broke her heart," said Julia sternly.

"Well, I don't—"

"Still, it's no excuse. It happens to all of us. Patrick should take a restraining order against her. Has he done that?"

Julia believed there were solutions to everything.

“He says he’s been to the police,” began Ellen, but then she stopped and didn’t bother to go into further detail. She wasn’t entirely convinced that Patrick had told her the whole story about why he hadn’t gone ahead with the restraining order.

“Anyway, the silly woman just needs to pull herself together,” said Julia, as if it was up to Ellen to pass on this instruction.

“Yes.”

Users Review

From reader reviews:

William Tietjen:

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