

Liane Moriarty is the author of three novels, *Three Wishes*, *The Last Anniversary* and *What Alice Forgot*, all of which were published successfully around the world and translated into seven languages. Writing as L.M. Moriarty, she is also the author of the *Space Brigade* series for children. Liane lives in Sydney with her husband, son and daughter.

You can find out more about Liane's books at her website www.lianemoriarty.com.

Also by Liane Moriarty

Three Wishes
The Last Anniversary
What Alice Forgot

Writing as L.M. Moriarty

The Petrifying Problem with Princess Petronella
The Shocking Trouble on the Planet of Shobble
The Wicked War on the Planet of Whimsy

*The
Hypnotist's Love Story*

LIANE
MORIARTY



MACMILLAN

Pan Macmillan Australia

First published 2011 in Macmillan by Pan Macmillan Australia Pty Limited
1 Market Street, Sydney

Copyright © Liane Moriarty 2011

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted
by any person or entity (including Google, Amazon or similar organisations),
in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including
photocopying, recording, scanning or by any information storage and
retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publisher.

National Library of Australia
Cataloguing-in-Publication data:

Moriarty, Liane
The hypnotist's love story / Liane Moriarty

ISBN: 9781742610603

A823.4

Typeset in 13/15.5 pt Bembo by Post Pre-press Group, Brisbane
Printed in Australia by McPherson's Printing Group

The characters in this book are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons,
living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Papers used by Pan Macmillan Australia Pty Ltd are natural, recyclable products
made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The manufacturing processes
conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

For George and Anna

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 hypnotised 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 make-up or jewellery. 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, 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 iced 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 coloured 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

The Hypnotist's Love Story

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 emails 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, as if 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 and 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 favourite 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 question wasn’t one hundred per cent truthful.



He said, ‘There’s something I need to tell you.’

He had placed his knife and fork on the edges of his plate, and now he was sitting up straight, with his shoulders back,

as if 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 apologised for her comment. ‘That may have been patronising,’ she’d said, and Ellen had pretended to faint in shock.)

The Hypnotist's Love Story

‘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 to 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 hair-dresser 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 straight away, 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 eaves-drop 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 felt as if she already knew him, as if 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 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

The Hypnotist's Love Story

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 towards 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 it 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 hypnotise 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 in a flash. Now 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 mid-sentence, for heaven's sake. (She had been telling him a story about a

patient who was obsessed with Jennifer Lopez. It was actually 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.

Or 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 *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 in front of her.

Was there time? Was it really necessary? Yes.

She sat up straight in her chair and placed her hands palm

The Hypnotist's Love Story

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 was floating a few centimetres 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 light bulb, 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 awe-struck 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'.

(She wished she'd never mentioned this practice to her good 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 cosy 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 south-westerly and light. For once, the world seemed extremely manageable.

After breakfast, she'd rugged up 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 today, he shook her hand vigorously and promised to send her a postcard from Paris. She'd also met two new clients, and 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 had been to countless doctors, physiotherapists and chiropractors, who were all baffled. The other was a woman who had promised her fiancé that

The Hypnotist's Love Story

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-Beth 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 gave her a simple relaxation session. She called it a 'soul massage'. Afterwards, Mary-Beth said her soul felt exactly the same, thank you; but that was Mary-Beth.

After Mary-Beth had plodded off, Ellen had cleaned the house, carefully leaving a few things lying about so it didn't look like she'd cleaned up but that she was naturally this tidy. She had considered taking down some of the Buddhist quotations that were 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 a 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

The Hypnotist's Love Story

be at home baking cakes, or whatever it was that parents of primary school-aged children did with their nights.

She looked up again and there he was, walking back towards 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 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 realised 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 . . . okay, 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 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 were 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, emails, 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 when I told my ex that I’d been to the

The Hypnotist's Love Story

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 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 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, savouring 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 through 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, dammit.

'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

The Hypnotist's Love Story

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. 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 behaviour 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 goodnight. 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. Sxx

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.’

The Hypnotist's Love Story

‘How long did you go out together for?’

‘Two years. Well, three years. She was my first relationship after my wife died.’

Ellen 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 dialled 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 okay? You took your antibiotics? What’s Grandma doing? Oh really? That’s good. Yeah. Okay. Well, maybe if you just tell me quickly.’ He stopped talking and listened. His eyes met Ellen’s and he winked. ‘Is that right? Okay, well – right. A volcano? Parachuting? Jeez.’

He kept listening, tapping his fingers on the tablecloth. Ellen watched his hand. It was a lovely hand. Big square-cut fingernails.

‘Okay, mate. Listen, you might have to tell me the rest tomorrow. I’m being really rude to my . . . friend. Okay. 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 unselfconsciously.

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 unheeded 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.