

It Felt Like A Kiss

'A fantastically addictive,
beautifully written read'

Paige Toon

SARRA MANNING

About the Book

Ellie Cohen is living her dream. A great job at an exclusive Mayfair art gallery, loyal mates, loving family, and really, really good hair. Well, there's the famous rock-star father who refuses to acknowledge her and a succession of 'challenging' boyfriends, but nobody's perfect.

But when a vengeful ex sells Ellie out to the press, she suddenly finds herself fighting to keep her job, her reputation and her sanity. Then David Gold - handsome, charming but ruthlessly ambitious - is sent in to manage the media crisis . . . and Ellie.

David thinks she's a gold-digger and Ellie thinks he's a shark in a Savile Row suit, so it's just as well that falling in love is the last thing on their minds . . .

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Sarra Manning

Dedicated to the memory of Gordon Shaw who was always
the most exemplary of fathers.

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It's very difficult to keep the line between the past and the present. You know what I mean? It's awfully difficult.

Edith 'Little Edie' Bouvier Beale

Camden, London, 1986

He was the most beautiful man Ari Underground had ever seen.

‘I could eat him for breakfast,’ she said to her friend Tabitha as they stood at the bar of the Black Horse. ‘He looks like a cross between James Dean and Serge Gainsbourg.’

‘He’s married,’ Tabitha said flatly. ‘Even if he wasn’t, he’s bad news.’

He might be married but he was also brooding and dark, and Ari wanted to lick the sneer right off his pretty face.

And if he was married then he had no right to be staring back at her.

Afterwards, when she’d come off stage in the tiny room above the bar, still high on the applause, the buzz, the sheer thrill of playing songs that hot-wired people’s hearts, and was packing her amp and her guitar into the back of the van that Chester had borrowed from his dad, she suddenly felt a pair of eyes painting pictures on the back of her neck.

Ari turned round and he was there, *right there*. Didn’t say a word, just took a step nearer, and another one, until she was pressed between the van and his hard body. This close she could see how long his eyelashes were, and the sneer disappeared because they were close enough that she could purse her lips and blow it away. It was a lot like kissing without actually kissing.

They weren’t touching either, though his body hustled her against the side of the van. When Ari panted a little because he was so intense, so silent, and she’d never been so turned on, it was as if he caught her every breath.

A door banged behind them, then she heard Chester say plaintively, 'I've got to have the van back by midnight or my dad'll kill me,' and the spell was broken.

In the time it took to blink, Billy Kay wasn't there any more.

Chapter One

Camden, London, The Present

It had rained hard that lunchtime. There was still a damp, peaty smell rising up from the undergrowth in Regent's Park, but the sharp scent of wet grass was fading as Ellie Cohen walked home from work. There was a luminescence to the early evening; soft and light, no crispness in the air. Ellie slipped off her jacket and hoped that the good weather would last until the end of the week when she was off to Glastonbury. Spending three rainy days battling the elements and trudging through squelching fields of mud with the risk of getting trench foot would not be fun.

Ellie would spend most of the week anxiously clicking refresh on the Met Office website, but now it was Monday evening, which was household chores night. Then, as a reward for their hard work, Ellie and her flatmates would watch trashy TV and eat like queens, courtesy of Theo, owner of the Greek restaurant downstairs, who needed to get rid of any food left from the weekend. The thought was enough to have Ellie quickening her pace as she left the park by Gloucester Gate and hurried towards Delancey Street.

Five minutes later she was outside her flat but before she could pull out her keys, the door opened to reveal Tess and Lola. For two women who had hummus, lamb kebabs, stuffed vine leaves and back-to-back episodes of *The Only Way Is Essex* in their immediate future, they didn't look very happy.

‘Why are you both looking so grim?’ Ellie asked, as they made no effort to step aside and let her in. ‘Is it the thought of the pre-cleaner tidy-up? Come on, you know the thought of it is worse than the actual doing of it.’

‘We need to talk,’ Lola said soberly, and Tess nodded, not looking Ellie in the eye. Instantly Ellie was suspicious.

‘Why? What have you done? Have you broken something? Have you broken something of mine?’ Each thought was worse than the last. ‘Did you borrow something without asking and break it? Please don’t say it was my new hairdryer!’

‘It’s not about your new hairdryer. We haven’t broken any of your things,’ Tess added quickly as Ellie opened her mouth to fire off a new round of questions. ‘It’s about, well ... first of all you should know that we’re not judging you. We love you, but it’s a case of loving the sinner, not the sin, you know?’

Ellie didn’t know, and couldn’t imagine what heinous act she’d committed that might warrant an intervention. ‘You’re going to have to give me a clue because I don’t remember sinning lately. Anyway, I’m not a Catholic, don’t they have the monopoly on sinning?’ she asked brightly to lighten the mood. It didn’t work.

‘Yeah, and you have the monopoly on bad boyfriends,’ Lola said. ‘After what happened on Saturday night, enough is enough.’

‘Richey is bad news. He’s the zenith of bad news,’ Tess elaborated, as she finally stopped blocking Ellie’s way and pushed her into the living room, then marched her over to the IKEA sofa. ‘Sit!’

It was the tone of voice tweedy women of a certain age used to discipline unruly dogs. Ellie sat. ‘OK, maybe things got a little out of hand on the weekend but Richey is not bad news, he just had a bad Saturday night.’

‘Not as bad as our Saturday night was having to deal with his crap,’ Lola said in a tight voice. They were both

standing over her, hands on hips. It was Ellie who had brought the two of them together but they still hadn't quite made the transition from roomies to friends. In fact they argued a lot, so how ironic that they'd finally bonded over the shortcomings of Richey.

Richey, Ellie's latest boyfriend, was shaping up to be a fine boyfriend. A great boyfriend. He was very good-looking, almost model standard - not that Ellie was shallow - was gainfully employed as an assistant at a film production company in Soho, had a good sense of humour, didn't feel emasculated that Ellie earned more than he did, and generally Ellie was starting to feel that the two and a half months that she'd been seeing Richey were turning into something. Maybe even quite a serious something.

'... and really, Ellie, he's awful. He's not worthy of you. Not even close,' Tess insisted so shrilly that Ellie stopped mentally listing all of Richey's considerable plus points and frowned at her best friend.

Ellie loved Tess, and often referred to her as 'my sister from another mister'. She'd bought Tess her first bottle of Chanel No 5 for her twenty-first birthday and had once endured three hours in Topshop as Tess tried on jeans and cried every time she swivelled round and looked at her bum in the changing-room mirror. There'd also been tough love, like the time she'd nursed Tess through an affair with a married man, or when she'd finally persuaded Tess to get her brown hair highlighted and to soldier through growing out her over-plucked eyebrows, and *this* was how Tess chose to repay her?

'I've already said I'm sorry about Saturday night at least ten times and you know I'll get your dress dry-cleaned.'

Lola sat down next to Ellie and gently patted her knee. Lola never did anything gently so it was a measure of just how serious they both thought this was; this *fuss* about Richey.

‘Sweetie, it’s not about the dress. It’s about you failing to see what’s blatantly clear to all the people who care about you,’ Lola said softly. ‘We don’t want to see you in a relationship with a smack addict or a meth head, or whatever horrible shit Richey is into.’

Ellie couldn’t believe what she was hearing. So, there’d been half an hour during an admittedly wild Saturday night that she hadn’t been with Richey and in that time he’d apparently gone on a drug-fuelled bender? This didn’t equate with the Richey that she’d been seeing. He held doors open for her. He gave her back rubs when she’d had a bad day at the office. He was always sending her funny, sweet little texts ...

‘You’re blowing this whole thing way out of proportion. Yes, he smokes dope, but more people smoke dope than go to church on Sundays.’ Ellie had read that in the *Guardian*, so it had to be true. ‘And maybe he caned it a bit hard on Saturday night, but really, Lola, you don’t exactly live a blameless life yourself, and Richey’s been going through a rough time ...’

‘Yeah, like he was going through my drawers. Probably to find stuff he could sell to fund his habit,’ Tess revealed, and Ellie’s heart plummeted, as it did from time to time. Usually when she was seeing a guy and it was all going well, until all of a sudden it wasn’t. Then her plummeting heart was the precursor to many nights of not sleeping, and drinking too much wine, and wondering why, when everything else was turning out just as she’d planned, right on schedule, the relationship area of her life was piled high with emotional debris.

But the thing was that you had to get back on the horse. Keep on trying. Give potential new boyfriends the benefit of the doubt because the alternative was to become one of those embittered women who sat with other embittered women in bars and said embittered things like, ‘All men are bastards. You can’t trust any of them. Better to be on your

own than to be with some waste of space who makes you miserable.'

Ellie didn't want to end up like that. Half her mother's friends were like that. She had to stay positive, though sometimes staying positive was really hard. 'I'm sorry, I really am. I don't know how many more times I can say it, but we were *all* pretty out of it on Saturday night. There were Jäger shots—'

'That doesn't excuse him trying to steal from us,' Tess said. She had every right to sound upset - Ellie was upset on her behalf - but there could be a perfectly rational explanation for Richey rifling through her sock drawer, although Ellie couldn't think what it might be.

'I'm sure Richey doesn't have a habit,' she said emphatically, though she was going to be having words with him later. Serious words. 'It's not as if I've only just met him. I've been seeing him for nearly three months now and anyway, how bad can he be? My mum introduced us!'

'We're getting sidetracked here.' Tess sat down so she could put an arm round Ellie's stiff shoulders. 'Sweetie, this is coming from a place of love. Not a place of judgement.' Ever since Tess had read *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, in the hope it would lead to a promotion from freelance dogsbody to permanent researcher on the TV morning show *On The Sofa*, where she worked, she always used calm, modulated tones when faced with a difficult situation or truculent housemate. 'Also, I have to point out that Richey is the very worst in a long line of crap men you've dated.'

'I don't date crap men!'

'Lame ducks, then,' Tess countered, like that made it even better. 'Oh, Ells, you must have noticed that you always end up copping off with men who are, well, challenging and diff—'

'What Tess is trying to say is that you go out with total losers who hang around the flat with all their neuroses and

hang-ups until you straighten them out and then ...' Lola took a deep breath, either for dramatic effect or because she needed oxygen ... 'and then instead of thanking you, they dump you!'

That was a very harsh way of summarising her previous relationships, and, Ellie thought, a complete twisting of the facts.

'I'm twenty-six, and yes, I've dated a few men and it hasn't worked out. Big deal.' Ellie folded her arms and glared at her flatmates mutinously. 'I'm really sorry that I haven't settled down with my one true love, but then again neither have you, and while we're on the subject of exes with severe emotional disorders, two words, Lola: Noah Skinner!'

Lola flushed at the mention of the dissolute fine artist who'd made her life sheer misery for eighteen months as he slept with other women, tried it on with all her friends and had repeatedly ponced money off her even though his family owned half of Shropshire. 'Everyone's allowed a couple of bad boyfriends, but you're stuck in a bad boyfriend loop. It needs to end now.'

Ellie wasn't going to give up without a fight. She even opened her mouth to remind Lola that the two of them had first spoken only after Noah had come on to Ellie in the hope she'd persuade her boss at the gallery to represent him, but Tess got there first. 'Mark, your very first boyfriend, had all those issues with low self-esteem. He couldn't even walk into a room without genuflecting. Then you encouraged him to talk through his issues with a responsible adult, and his parish priest persuaded him to accept Jesus Christ as his personal Lord and Saviour, and he entered a seminary instead of coming to Ibiza with us after A levels,' she said in a furious burst.

'Doesn't prove anything,' Ellie ground out, even as she remembered that awful week after A levels when she should have been excited about going to Ibiza and, well, the

rest of her life, and instead she'd stayed in her tiny bedroom, curtains drawn, listening to her mother's Smiths albums as she began to understand that heartache wasn't just a word used in sad songs; it was an actual tangible thing and it hurt like hell.

Tess continued to list Ellie's past boyfriends: including Alex, the cross-dressing performance artist she'd dated when she was studying at Central St Martins, who she'd caught wearing her underwear and who was now one of Australia's most celebrated drag queens, and Jimmy the alcoholic, until he'd spent a night drinking with Ellie's mother and her friends. He'd woken up two days later in a skip, minus his shoes, trousers and wallet. Then he'd decided to go straight edge and dumped Ellie for being a bad influence.

Then there'd been Andy, the compulsive gambler, who'd once pawned Ellie's TV but, buoyed up by her belief in his gift for numbers, left her to study for a degree in Applied Mathematics at Edinburgh University.

Even her attempt at a friend-with-benefits arrangement during her final year at Central St Martins had ended in absolute unmitigated disaster when Ellie broke Oscar's penis during a particularly vigorous sex session. Or that's what she thought until the A&E registrar said that it was just a bad sprain.

'Don't forget Danny,' Lola said to Tess, as she finished regaling Ellie with this list of lost loves. Not that Ellie needed any reminding. She remembered all of them. Not just the way things had ended, but the way each relationship had begun, with a smile, a joke, or a surreptitious look across a bar. Ellie remembered the good bits: lazy Sunday mornings with tea and toast, and wild nights out in Soho and Hoxton, as well as the bad bits: the rows and accusations and inability to reach a compromise.

Now Ellie listened as Lola hit the highlights of Ellie's two-year relationship with lovely, geeky Danny, who she'd been

planning on moving in with despite his lax personal hygiene and failure to turn up on dates because he was engrossed in *Call of Duty: Black Ops*.

Then Ellie had bought him a birthday consultation with a personal shopper at Selfridges and he'd fallen heart first for his birthday present, Sophie - they'd just become the proud parents of twins.

Yes, Ellie's love life was perfect to serve up as bite-sized anecdotes on a girls' night out when everyone moaned about how rubbish men were, but just as she remembered the good and bad bits of each relationship, she also remembered how they'd ended and that the heartache had never got any easier. On the contrary, it had got worse and had become her special friend, threatening to drag her under, and it had taken all of Ellie's considerable self-control to pick herself up each time, set her shoulders back and try again.

At least Tess and Lola appeared to have reached the end of their intervention because they each took hold of one of Ellie's hands.

'You're a smart, lovely gorgeous girl,' Tess told her, holding up her phone to show Ellie a photo as proof. It had been taken on a girls' weekend in Brighton last summer. Ellie was posing on Palace Pier and, yes, she was quite pretty. Or rather she thought of herself as a bit of a blank canvas. She was five foot seven, and slim because she worked hard at it, with long, straight shiny brown hair, though her mother and grandmother both insisted her best features were her big brown eyes and her smile. But the raw material had been shaped with some subtle warm-toned highlights, not to mention the Brazilian blowdry every three months to transform her Jew-fro into sleek and shiny perfection. The brown eyes were made more remarkable by lash extensions and her eyebrow threader's skill with cotton, wax and dye, and the smile was a result of several years of painful orthodontics. She wasn't going to

be giving Alexa Chung any sleepless nights, but Ellie was perfectly satisfied with how she looked, apart from her 34As and the sign on her forehead that read, 'All your problems solved, stop and ask me how,' which apparently could only be seen by men with severe behavioural disorders.

'I don't have bad taste in men,' she said hotly, though admittedly the evidence was pretty damning. 'Everyone has some kind of issue they need to work on so it's completely unfair of you to act as if my exes were Care in the Community case studies. They might have been fixer-uppers but—'

'No, this is way beyond ironing out a few flaws on an otherwise decent boyfriend,' Lola argued. 'You're an emotional fluffer, Ellie.'

'What's a fluffer?' Tess asked.

'It's a girl on a porn shoot who gets the men all hard and primed for action, then after doing all the heavy lifting, as it were, she has to watch while all her good work is enjoyed by another woman.'

Tess looked appalled. 'Oh my God, that's exactly what you do, Ellie!'

'No, I don't.' Ellie yanked her hands out of their grasps so she could fold her arms, her head lowered so her chin was almost on her chest. 'Danny was the only one who went off with another woman.'

'And you stay friends with all of them,' Tess added accusingly, like that was a bad thing.

'What's wrong with that?' Ellie demanded. 'What's wrong with being the bigger person and keeping in touch with your exes? It's a sign of maturity.'

'It's a sign of you not being able to cut the cord. If I'm into some guy and he treats me like shit and dumps me, then no, I'm not going to banter with him on Facebook or invite him to my birthday parties. Look, we just want you to find a nice, normal man instead of these lame ducks you

always manage to bring home,' Lola said, patting Ellie's knee again, even though Lola, who looked like a 1940s pin-up girl with her dark auburn hair styled in a slinky Veronica Lake do, tight wiggle dresses and tattoos, would never, ever entertain the idea of finding a nice, normal man.

Ellie slowly shook her head. 'Sometimes lame ducks appear nice and normal. It's not until you're at least seven dates in that they reveal themselves and by then, well, it just seems rude to make your excuses and leave.'

'She can't dump people,' Tess explained to Lola over Ellie's head. 'Never could. When we started secondary school, we were all assigned people to sit next to until we made friends and Ellie got this horrible girl called Laura Mulkenny, who had BO, the most pustular acne I've ever seen ...'

'Which wasn't her fault. She had a hormonal imbalance.'

'... she copied Ellie's homework and left grease stains over it because she was one of those girls that ate her packed lunch in registration, and teased Ellie for being flat-chested. Ellie was far too chicken to come and sit next to me, even after we bonded about how much we loved Westlife.'

'I felt sorry for her. No one else wanted to sit next to her.'

Lola smiled knowingly. 'How long did you sit next to her for?'

'It's neither here nor there.'

'Five years,' Tess replied. 'Then Laura failed most of her GCSEs despite copying Ellie's homework, and wasn't allowed to stay on for A levels.'

'Well, you're going to have to dump Richey,' Lola said. 'He's more than just a lame duck. I know his type from way back, and his type is big, fat trouble. And once you've sent him packing, unless you find a decent bloke who isn't a complete freak of nature then you're forbidden from bringing any men back to the flat.'

‘I’m sorry, Ellie, but that’s how it has to be,’ Tess added. ‘I know it sounds harsh but it’s for your own good. You have to get rid of Richey.’

‘I don’t have to do anything on the basis of your flimsy circumstantial evidence,’ Ellie argued. ‘It might all be a simple misunderstanding, and if it is then I’ll have broken up with Richey for no reason. He might be the One.’ They both snorted. ‘But he might be! I’m not going to throw that away on a load of hearsay.’

‘It’s not hearsay. It’s your two best friends who witnessed your current boyfriend off his tits on class-As and we’re not doing this to be cruel, Ellster, we’re doing this for your own good.’ Tess had the sanctimonious note to her voice that brooked no denial.

‘I’ll talk to him,’ Ellie conceded. ‘But it’s Glastonbury this weekend and he’s booked time off work. I can’t get all heavy and issue ultimatums then head off to Somerset with him like nothing’s happened.’ The injustice of their demands made Ellie clasp her hands to her heart. ‘You can’t expect me to do that!’

‘Don’t care when you do it, just that you do it.’ Lola stopped with the knee-patting. ‘He’s not stepping foot in this flat ever again. End of. Now, can we get the pre-cleaner tidy-up over and done with?’

There was no budging them. Tess and Lola refused to discuss the matter further because Tess was too busy snapping at Lola, who spent the entire pre-cleaner clean moaning about the pointlessness of having a cleaner if you spent the evening before she came tidying up. ‘It’s so middle class,’ she complained.

‘You *are* middle class,’ Tess told her. ‘I don’t care if one of your grandfathers was a coal miner, your parents live in Reading and your dad’s a GP. We wouldn’t have to do a pre-cleaner tidy-up if you didn’t have a dirty crockery mountain in your bedroom and you never rinse the sink after you’ve brushed your teeth.’

It seemed as if the row would descend into hair-pulling until Tess played her trump card and threatened to get rid of the cleaner altogether and Lola was forced to admit that paying ten pounds for her share of the cleaner was money well spent.

They had the same argument at the same time every Monday evening and it ended only when Theo brought up a bag bulging with takeaway containers, as he did this evening, so the three of them could pick their way through a selection of stuffed vine leaves, lamb souvlaki and assorted dips while they caught up on trashy TV. Every time they skipped through an ad break, Lola would shake her head and sigh. 'Jesus, I can't believe I'm living with two people who used to like Westlife.'

Then Tess would bop Lola with a cushion and Ellie would smile faintly, while on the inside she was in turmoil; not sure whether she should be angry with her friends or angry with her boyfriend. She was already steeling herself for the talk she needed to have with Richey. Past experience had proved that these kinds of talks always ended with her boyfriends having some kind of epiphany, then heading off into the sunset without her.

Chapter Two

The next morning Ellie was pulled out of sleep and fitful dreams of being followed around by a family of fluffy ducklings, who had a nasty habit of falling off kerbstones into the path of oncoming traffic, by the chirp of her phone.

She opened one eye. It was only six fifteen, three-quarters of an hour before her alarm. The number of the Mayfair gallery where she worked was flashing on the screen. Her boss had no respect for an eight- or even a nine- or ten-hour working day. If he was paying your wages and a hefty sales commission on top, then he owned your arse.

'Hello? Is there a problem?' Ellie hoped she sounded vaguely alert.

'You have to come in right now. I'm in a world of trouble.' It was Piers, her boss's hapless assistant, so, no, she didn't have to come to the gallery right now.

'Give me one reason why you felt it necessary to wake me up at such an ungodly hour,' she demanded, because, contrary to popular opinion, there were lots and lots of people who Ellie could say 'no' to, and Piers was at the top of the list. 'It had better be a really, really good reason.'

'Oh, please, Ellie. I've been here all night trying to fix it and I've just made it worse.' Piers sounded shrill and hysterical. 'There's a virus on my computer and somehow it's spread to all the other computers.'

That got Ellie's attention. She sat up. 'What kind of virus?'

She heard Piers swallow hard. 'Penises,' he whispered. 'There are pop-up penises on all the computers.'

‘Have you been looking at porn? Again? You were warned about this.’ She was already throwing back her duvet. ‘I’ll be there in an hour.’

Piers moaned. ‘It’s an emergency! Just this once can you not walk to work? I’ll order you a car.’

Ellie always walked into work. She walked through heatwaves, torrential rainfall and even the occasional blizzard, and although pop-up penises on the gallery server were serious, they didn’t warrant extraordinary measures. Besides, since their boss had got married he’d become boringly fixated about his own work/life balance – not that of his employees – and his wife got very pouty if he left for the office before eight thirty, so there was plenty of time.

‘I don’t need a car. But I’m going to need copious amounts of coffee when I get to work,’ Ellie said, phone clamped between ear and shoulder as she rifled through her summer work dresses, which ranged from taupe to white to pale blue to show off her tan, and also because anything brighter (or, God forbid, with a print) tended to clash with the art. ‘Also, I’m planning to smack you repeatedly with *Davenport’s Art Reference & Price Guide*.’

Fifteen minutes later she was stepping out onto Delancey Street, showered, dressed and wearing really big sunglasses because it was an emergency and there wasn’t time for a light I’ll-apply-my-proper-make-up-later make-up.

Regent’s Park was deserted apart from a few dog walkers and dedicated runners, but there was no time to appreciate the almost preternatural stillness of the early morning, as if the trees rustled in the breeze and the water rippled on the boating lake only when there were people around to appreciate these selfless acts.

There wasn’t even enough time to pop into Le Pain Quotidien on Marylebone High Street. Ellie crossed Oxford Street, which was just starting to come to life, and headed for the rarefied thoroughfares of Mayfair and instantly, the bustle was muted. The hedge fund managers had been at

their desks for at least an hour but it was too soon for the imperious-looking girls who worked in the luxury stores to start work and it was far, far, *far* too early for the ladies who still lunched to be heading for Miu Miu or Moschino or Marc Jacobs for a quick retail hit before their roast chicken, saffron, almond & parmesan salad (without the parmesan) and a bottle of sparkling water at Cecconi's.

Ellie didn't even dare dawdle for a little window-shopping as she walked past the hip boutiques on Dover Street and arrived at Thirlestone Mews, a pretty cobbled street just round the corner from Berkeley Square, at thirty-one minutes past seven. Piers hurried towards her. He was tall, thin and effete-looking, which made people automatically want to look after him, which was fortunate as his greatest talent was for getting himself into serious trouble.

'I thought you'd never get here,' he cried, grabbing Ellie's hand and tugging her towards number seventeen, which was identical to all the other stucco-covered houses in the mews, its door wide open.

'You must never leave the gallery unattended,' Ellie gasped as she was yanked through the door. 'Someone could already have had a painting off the wall.'

'Don't even joke about things like that,' Piers snapped, as they both turned and looked across the reception area into the main gallery to make sure there were still fourteen paintings by an obscure yet collectable British Pop artist. There were.

'See? Things could be worse,' Ellie said brightly, though she didn't feel bright and Piers didn't seem to have delivered on the coffee front. 'Now shall we sort out this penis infestation?'

It was just as well that Ellie hadn't had breakfast because the sight of so many angry red, tumescent cocks multiplying every time she pressed a key on any of the gallery's computers made her feel bilious.

Piers twitched behind her. 'Oh my days! I never want to see an erect penis again.'

'If you hadn't been trawling the internet for erect penises in the first place this would never have happened,' Ellie told him sternly, though she knew they'd laugh about this, probably in a few short hours. Right now, it was Penis Apocalypse. 'I don't know what you've done. I can't fix it. We have to call IT.'

'You can't! They'll log it and he'll know. He'll fire me for absolute certain this time.'

Ellie doubted that. Anyway, it wasn't as if Piers needed to work when he had a private income and trust funds. This wasn't even as bad as the time he'd put his foot through a painting when he'd been mucking about in the packing room, though that time he'd got his long-suffering mother to buy the painting. So Ellie ignored Piers and dialled their IT service's emergency number.

She was put straight through to Danny, her ex, who happened to be on-call. Ellie always prided herself on remaining on good terms with her exes, but now having to speak to Danny after last night's conversation with Tess and Lola made her feel raw and exposed. Maybe staying on speakers with all the men who'd done her wrong, hurt her heart and made her cry was just another example of her total pushoverdom.

'Ellie? How are you?' At least Danny sounded pleased to hear from her, which was nice, even if there was the sound of a baby squalling in the background.

'I'm good, except we have a porn virus on the computer system,' Ellie said, deciding it was best to get straight down to business, because Piers was now huffing on his asthma inhaler.

Danny chatted away as he took control of their servers by remote access and painstakingly removed each and every penis from the system. He and Sophie had just got back from their first weekend away without the twins, who'd

been left with her parents, and were teething and refusing to sleep through the night.

‘Anyway, enough about me,’ Danny said when the last penis had magically melted away and he was doing something with their firewall to make it penis-repellent in future. ‘What’s your news?’

Now that the crisis had been averted, Piers, inevitably, was nowhere to be found.

‘Oh, nothing much. Work is busy and I’m going to Glastonbury this weekend. You know how my mum feels about Glastonbury.’

‘It’s like her Christmas, birthday and all other major holidays rolled into one,’ Danny said, and he chuckled and then suggested that they should get together for lunch or, even better, she should come round for dinner and some twin-cuddling time because Sophie was saying only the other day that they hadn’t seen her in ages.

Ellie finished the call in much better spirits. She’d also come to a new conclusion about her past relationships. Yes, she’d been involved with men who’d been challenging, and yes, they’d become a lot less challenging thanks to her support and guidance, but that was what she brought to a relationship. The fact that they stayed in touch proved that she was a person worth having in their lives. How could that be bad?

She was only twenty-six. Of course she was going to rack up a few failed relationships. It didn’t mean she was addicted to lame ducks. What it meant was that every time her heart got broken, it healed and was stronger than it had been before. Like her grandfather said, ‘Broken hearts make the best vessels.’

Ellie wasn’t ready to write off Richey because of half an hour on Saturday night. Richey liked a good time, and there wasn’t anything wrong with that, but he also liked talking quietly for hours over pizza and beer about everything from French New Wave cinema to climate change to how they

could both see themselves buying a dilapidated house near Deauville and doing it up on long weekends, as the restaurant staff pointedly kept wiping their table down because it was well past closing time. Ellie and Richey had a connection and Ellie wasn't sure how deep it went but she owed it to herself - to them - to get Richey's side of the story before she walked away.

Anyway, nobody was perfect. Not Tess, who was always jumping to conclusions, and especially not Lola, so they could get off her case.

'So ... is everything all right? Is my nightmare over?'

Ellie swivelled round to see Piers standing behind her, asthma inhaler poised. She gestured at the computer. 'Do you see any penises? Danny is going to log the job as a non-specific virus and system reboot, so you're off the hook.'

Piers still looked as if he was about to burst into tears. 'Are you really sure that there isn't some great big todger that you've overlooked that's going to pop up and it will start all over again and never end until I'm fired and I'll have to explain to Mummy why I've been fired and then she'll tell my grandfather and he'll—'

'Piers, shut up,' Ellie said very gently, as she levered herself out of the chair. 'Just stop talking.'

She took hold of his elbows and gave him a tiny shake. Up close he had the sour smell of someone who'd stayed up all night awash in his own fear, and his elfin face was puffy and sallow. He was still gibbering about his grandfather and the very real possibility that he might get cut off from his trust fund if he couldn't stay gainfully employed and prove he was a worthwhile member of society.

'You need to go home ...'

'I can't! It's almost nine and I promised that I'd have all the customs declarations finished and on his desk this morning.' Piers looked at her pleadingly. 'I don't suppose you could—'

‘If I were you I’d go home, have a shower and a shave and change your shirt,’ Ellie said quickly before Piers could completely take advantage of her good nature. ‘You’ll feel much better, and don’t worry about the customs declarations. The courier company aren’t coming to pick up that shipment until the end of the week. It’s only Tuesday. You can do them when you get back.’

Piers surreptitiously sniffed an armpit, then agreed to Ellie’s plan of action. After setting the alarm, she walked out with him as far as the nearest Leon for a triple skimmed latte and granola with strawberry compote.

By the time she got back to the gallery, Muffin and Inge were waiting for her. Neither of them was trusted to have her own keys, because they were just two more posh girls in a long line of posh girls that Ellie had seen come and go in the five years that she’d worked at the gallery. As far as she could remember Muffin and Inge were Posh Girl Ten and Posh Girl Eleven respectively, though after a while all the posh girls seemed to merge into one posh girl composite of shiny hair, expensive clothes and strident voice, who lived in Chelsea and was morbidly fascinated by the fact that Ellie lived in North London, had gone to a state school and didn’t know anybody called Bunny.

Still, most of the posh girls were perfectly nice and friendly, and both Muffin and especially Inge looked pleased to see Ellie as she rocked unsteadily over the cobbles because she hadn’t had time to swap her toning trainers for the Bloch ballet flats she had stashed in the bottom drawer of her desk.

‘Oh my, your natural look is looking very natural today,’ Muffin said by way of a greeting. Inge muttered something that might have been agreement or dissent but it was hard to tell with Inge because she never said much of anything, but sat behind the reception desk dreamily staring into space for most of the day. ‘It’s odd, you really do have *quite* a good complexion.’

It was a bit of a headspin for Muffin, who'd been raised in the country on food grown on the home farm and lots of untainted fresh air, that Ellie, born and bred in Camden, wasn't riddled with rickets and tuberculosis.

'It's not a natural look, I just haven't had time to put any make-up on,' Ellie said and as she unlocked the door and they began to go through the morning ritual of turning off the alarm, switching on the water cooler and sorting through the post, she gave them a brief account of Piers's latest mishap.

'He's such a silly boy,' Muffin said, even though Piers, unlike Muffin, had never mistaken a very famous conceptual artist for the window cleaner. 'I'd go and put your face on if I were you. Don't worry, we can hold the fort.'

Ellie doubted that very much because Inge had already abandoned the onerous task of opening the post to assume her usual position behind the reception desk so she could gaze into the middle distance while Muffin was glued to her iPhone, fingers skating over the screen.

'Let me know if we have any walk-ins,' Ellie said, just as she did every morning, because every walk-in was a potential client and every potential client meant potential commission and she refused to mount even one stair until she got a verbal commitment from both girls. Then, and only then, was she able to head upstairs for the sanctuary of her office.