

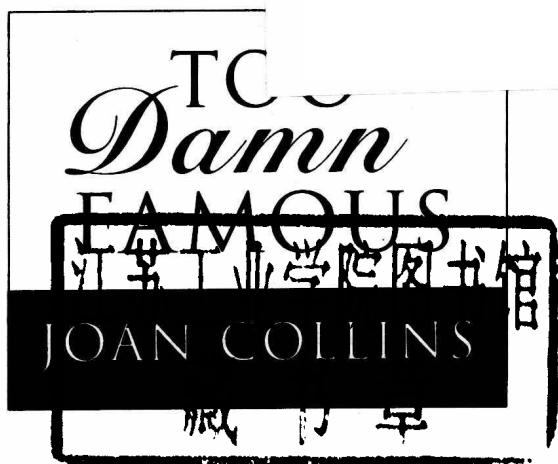
JOAN COLLINS



Too Damn Famous

A NOVEL

'Perfect holiday reading' DAILY MIRROR



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Joan Collins is first and foremost an actress on both stage and screen, but she is also the author of six other books including her autobiography, a bestselling book on health and beauty, and two previous novels.

By the same author

Fiction

Prime Time
Love and Desire and Hate

Non-Fiction

Past Imperfect
The Joan Collins Beauty Book
A Fight for Life
My Secrets

FOR ROBIN

With all my love

*I should like to thank Rosie Cheetham
for her belief in me, her caring, her encouragement, and
her dedication to this book.*

*And thanks also to Joan Maddern for always being there when
I needed her.*

LOS ANGELES 1988

CHAPTER ONE

'I don't need a husband, I need a wife,' Katherine Bennet declared, just loudly enough for the covey of reporters snapping at her heels to hear. She was hurrying through the winding corridors of Santa Monica Superior Court, with her expensive and expansive divorce lawyer Barry Lefcovitz in tow, who was parrying the journalists' intrusive questions in his usual humorous way.

Katherine's smile was cold and tight-lipped, in no way reaching her pale green eyes, but nevertheless it would look convincing enough splashed across every tabloid front page and television newscast.

She didn't want to appear too happy after an acrimonious divorce.

And splashed her face would certainly be, as it had been for the past three years, on every front page, magazine cover, and across every gossip column from New York to New Delhi. Katherine Bennet was that rarest and most ephemeral of creatures, a television superstar, so famous that everyone wanted to know everything about her – many even wanted to *be* her.

The swarm of news hounds seethed around their prey like flies on a carcass – the carcass she'd almost become in that courtroom: practically picked clean of all her hard-earned money and possessions by a pontificating male chauvinist of a

judge, whose main interest had been in posturing for the benefit of the television news cameras which he had allowed into his courtroom with such a show of reluctance.

Thank God for Barry, thought Katherine glancing towards him. The attorney's thick silvery hair and amused black eyes seemed to take on an added lustre as he fended off the paparazzi, who snapped her relentlessly while they inched their way down the steps to the courtroom entrance, and to the cool sanctuary of the waiting limousine. Katherine smiled to herself.

How Barry Lefcovitz *loved* publicity. Column inches were food and drink to him. He was never happier than when appearing on the panel of an Oprah Winfrey or Phil Donahue show discussing abused wives, equal rights for minorities, or pro choice for women. But if he hadn't agreed to take on Katherine's divorce for a modest fifty thousand dollars, naturally plus expenses, and plus all the coverage a publicity-hungry divorce lawyer could attract for defending one of the most famous women in America, Katherine could well have been in the hole for north of a quarter of a million. That, including what she had had to settle on Johnny, would have cleared out her savings, which, by mega-star standards, were still meagre. Although she'd been a star for three years, it hadn't been quite long enough to have yet reaped the financial rewards.

'What are your plans now, Katherine?' enquired the midget in the mac, the one to whom Katherine had directed her comment about needing a wife, not a husband.

'Back to work,' she answered as pleasantly as was humanly possible with twenty flashes exploding inches from her face. 'It's time to put all this behind me.'

The flashes were blinding her, so Kitty slipped on her dark glasses.

'Aah, no – Katherine – please, don't, honey. We wanna see those beautiful eyes.'

'You've seen these eyes for the past five days. Now they need a rest, gentlemen – and so do I, if you don't mind.' She struggled hard to give a show of good humour she didn't feel.

'Let the lady through, gentlemen, *please*.' Her bodyguard Burt had three or four burly back-ups in close attendance. Huge, beefy, men, they were all over six-feet-four and seemingly just as wide. Their task was to move the press out of the way without using force. However much Katherine was jostled, they weren't allowed to use hand-on-body contact, because of the possibility of being sued for criminal assault. Their job was to guard and protect their charges, without rough-housing which some paparazzi with a grudge often resorted to.

The world had no idea how tough it really was. The toes of Katherine's shoes had been trampled on half a dozen times and twice a camera had narrowly missed smashing into her face as an over-zealous snapper had swung around for a better angle. She had ink stains on her silk jacket where one of the journalists had carelessly allowed his pen to brush against her sleeve, and all in all she felt a complete mess. This was Hollywood's latest, most dramatic divorce, so the press were desperate for a sensational quote from Katherine and if they couldn't get one, they would make it up. The fabrications she had read about herself in the newspapers over the past week had been mind-boggling.

'Katherine Bennet, 43, has appeared in court in a different designer outfit every day during the week of her divorce case' screamed one tabloid. *'With each over-the-top, high-priced outfit, she flaunted an equally flamboyant hair style, and she was wearing enough make-up to stock a medium sized drug store.'*

That was a complete distortion for a start. Katherine had always been well-dressed and groomed. Even as a child, her hair ribbon had to be tied at the right angle and her white socks pulled up just so. All she had actually worn in the

courtroom were three or four classically cut jackets in subtle shades of taupe, grey, or beige, a couple of simple skirts, and high heels. Katherine always wore heels, even with trousers. She liked making her five-feet-five inches into five-feet-eight, and if some would describe her as a throwback to the sixties, why should she care?

Katherine prided herself on being her own person. She didn't particularly mind what people thought of her, and she always spoke her mind. She wore what she wanted, what suited her, and she never, ever suffered fools in any way gladly. Sometimes Katherine's stubbornness and self-sufficiency made her seem cold or aloof, and to those who thought of her as their enemy, she could appear alarmingly like the venomous shrew she was currently playing so successfully on television.

'So, are you off all men for ever then, Kitty . . . ?' smirked the stringer for the New York tabloid which her mother devoured every day.

'Never say never, my friend,' smiled Katherine, Raybans masking the flatness in her eyes. 'Who knows, maybe I'll turn Sapphic!'

'What - wha' she say?' The reporter's eyes swivelled round to look at his cronies, who had completely misinterpreted Katherine's quip, and were scribbling 'You know I'll still stop traffic' on to their stenopads.

'For Christ's sake, Katherine,' said Barry *sotto voce*. 'Start tellin' these guys you're a goddam lesbo, and the shit'll *really* hit the fan.'

That gave Katherine the first real laugh she'd had for days.

'It's a *joke*, Barry - a feeble one I guess, but I'm not up to Robin Williams' standard today.'

It had been hell in that courtroom. For five days, seven hours a day, on a hard wooden seat in full view of the court and the two dozen assorted hacks behind her, she had sat as

motionless and expressionless as was possible with a breaking heart and a lump in her throat the size of a melon. At one point during her husband's testimony she had scribbled to Barry on her yellow legal pad the words 'He's lying! *Lies. Lies. Lies!!*' and that appeared as the third most important item on the six o'clock news all over America that night.

Now, with the covey still yapping questions and snapping their hateful cameras, the open door of the black limo seemed like a haven. She eased herself carefully into the rear seat, the way any woman in a shortish skirt learns to do. Bottom on seat first, legs firmly together, then swing them in swiftly before the pack could grab a leg shot.

But not swiftly enough today. One of the sleazier snappers had set the timer on his camera and placed it strategically on the pavement so that as Katherine swung her legs into the car, the camera flashed twice, getting a full view up her skirt.

'Son of a goddam bitch!' Burt heaved a kick at the offending camera, which clattered into the gutter.

'Fuck you, buddy,' screamed the red-faced paparazzo, scrabbling to retrieve it. 'I'll get you for grievous assault to personal property, you prick.'

Burt didn't answer. He signalled to his cohorts to slam the doors on Katherine's side, and jumping into the front seat beside the chauffeur, barked, 'Move it.'

'Oh God, let's get out of here.' Katherine leaned back on the upholstery, and, secure in the dark-tinted windows of the limousine, took off her glasses and gave a huge sigh.

'Well *done*, honey.' Barry patted her shoulder. 'We won!! You won! You're a free woman at last, Kitty. When I think of what that son-of-a-bitch was trying to grab from you, and what we finally settled on, you're one lucky lady.'

She nodded wearily. Yes she was free. Free of Johnny and

his drinking and his lying and his drugging – free of the ghastly courtroom fiasco and the gawping mobs. But really free? With her life? No way.

As a married woman, and the television bad girl whom America loved to loathe, she had some degree of immunity from the semi-slandorous gossip that always circulated around unmarried female celebrities. Now that she'd finally cut the cord which had bound her to Johnny, would she be allowed to live a normal life again?

The limousine dropped Barry off at his Beverly Hills office, then Katherine closed her eyes as Sam drove up the winding Benedict Canyon to her house. This was a vast white concrete edifice, like a big ugly chunk of cement that Johnny had persuaded her to buy two years ago, when she'd first hit the jackpot on *The Skeffingtons*. Built in the 1930s by some long forgotten movie mogul, it had been christened Hitler's Bunker by one of Katherine's wittier friends.

She had told the gardeners to cover the bleakness of the exterior with trailing English ivy, but the plant didn't want to attach itself to those stark white walls, and now only a few greenish brown patches testified to their efforts. Sam pressed the clicker and the gates creaked open. They were rusty, in spite of having been given a new coat of paint only last year. Katherine sighed again. The upkeep of this mansion was never-ending, what with the pool man, the pond man, the tree man, the indoor plant girl, the outdoor gardeners, plus the cook, the butler, the housekeeper, her secretary, the twice-weekly laundress, and the thrice-weekly trainer – not to mention the chauffeur, Warwick Kingsley her adorable but expensive publicist, and Brett Goodman her business manager whom she was convinced was ripping her off. It was a miracle she managed to hang on to a dime. Last but by no means least, was Brenda Corlew, her dependable friend and secretary, and housemother to her son, Tommy.

How could she cope without Brenda? Come to think of it how would Tommy cope without Brenda? The self-styled tough old dame with a marshmallow heart had become a second mother to him. Since most of Katherine's days were spent at the studio, often until well past midnight, Brenda spent several hours a day at work with Katherine but always insisted on being home when Tommy returned from school. She herself knew the trials and tribulations of being a television star, for she had been one herself in a sit-com back in the fifties as second banana to the much-loved Kookie Cazanova. They were close only to Lucille Ball and Vivien Vance in the ratings then. Almost as funny, almost as popular, but not as durable, and when Kookie finally retired to a mansion in Kentucky, she did so not only on the basis of her own considerable residuals, but on those of the whole cast, whom she had bought out for a paltry five thousand dollars each.

Katherine and Brenda had met at an off-Broadway audition a dozen years ago. Kitty was surprised to see an actress so famous at a 'cattle call', but as Brenda said:

'Three Emmies, one People's Choice, and a couple of Tony nominations; for ten years I've bin fightin' like everyone else for a job. Show-biz – huh! Don't it suck? – But don't we love it?'

Brenda's career was never going anywhere now, so when Katherine got the part of Georgia Skeffington, she asked her to come to Hollywood to help out. Kitty sometimes thought it was the best move she had ever made. Brenda became a constant source of support to her, and a comfort to Tommy, who was always less insecure and angry when she was around. Brenda's tart tongue and salty language hid a wisdom and warmth which they had both come to value immensely.

The car stopped outside the main entrance and Sam jumped out and opened the doors.

'I won't need you tonight any more, Sam, thank you.' Katherine was so tired that even getting out of the car seemed too much of an effort. Even though she had hardly eaten for days, her body felt heavy and leaden.

'Fine, Ms Bennet. Have a good evening now. I'm sure glad everything went well for you today.'

'Thanks Sam. We were lucky.'

Pedro opened the shiny black front door from which Katherine noticed the paint was beginning to peel. When they had moved in two years ago it had been lacquered so thickly it looked as though it would last forever. So much for LA weather.

'Tommy?' she walked across the wide chequered marble foyer into the whiteness of her living room.

'Tommy are you home, honey?'

'Tommy's gone to the Lakers game with Brenda, Miss Bennet.' Not the least of Brenda's attributes was that she loved basketball.

Faithful Maria, the housekeeper, appeared, wiping work-worn hands on her apron.

'They said they'd grab a bite after the game – so don't bother to wait up for them.'

Katherine nodded; she looked around the room. The ice-cream whiteness of the thick pile carpet, the silk damask walls, and the velvet upholstered sofas and chairs almost hurt her eyes. It was not at all comfortable; it was a sterile show palace, created to be a setting for Katherine in her designer clothes; a backdrop for those endless photographic layouts of her in the glossies.

The setting sun reflected off her new gold and diamond watch. It was just six o'clock.

'What time would you like dinner, *señora*?' Maria asked.

'Oh I'm not really hungry tonight – just fix me a boiled egg and some toast around seven, please.'