

Extract from “For Better, For Worse”

Chapter 1

‘I still think about you.’ There was a pause in which Josie presumed she was supposed to say something. ‘A lot,’ Damien added when she didn’t.

Josie closed her eyes, marvelling at the red splotches inside the lids, and sighed at the telephone. ‘I think about you a lot too, Damien. But it mainly involves dreaming up ways of inflicting pain on you.’ Axe through the head, winning the lottery, and Ewan McGregor falling desperately in love with her were the ones which currently featured most. ‘Funnily enough, rather like you did to me.’

She twisted a strand of her boring brown hair through her fingers and considered, not for the first time, getting it dyed one of those vibrant, fashionable colours much vaunted in make-over programmes. Would she look good as a Fiery Chestnut? Possibly. But it might be better with a more radical haircut than a neat bob that was more conservative than William Hague. Did they do a Brunette Bombshell? Would it transform her life to switch to Brazen Ebony? Whichever way, the hair she’d currently got needed washing. Another chore to add to the growing list of things she had to do tonight, and none of them involved wasting time talking to Damien. She wriggled her toes and eased the dead weight of her cat from her foot before he made it completely numb. The Cat Formerly Known As Prince gave her a look that would have turned ten blackbirds to stone. Josie blew him a kiss as he strutted into the kitchen, outraged tail flicking the air.

‘I never meant to hurt you,’ Damien continued, intent, it seemed, on having his say.

‘Coming out with “I’m in love with someone else, goodbye” generally does.’

‘We should have talked things through.’

‘Damien, the first I knew about it was when you came down with a packed suitcase. I thought you were off to a computer conference in Margate or somewhere. I didn’t expect you to end our marriage at nine o’clock on a Monday morning.’ Particularly not after we’d made love the night before and reached simultaneous orgasm - both of which were very unusual for a Sunday. ‘You wouldn’t talk about anything. Not even who would get custody of the cat. You breezed out as if you were going to buy a loaf.’

‘I don’t know what came over me,’ her husband said. ‘One minute I was happy, the next I wasn’t.’ ‘“Thing” came over you,’ Josie said. ‘Thing and her double-D cleavage and Lycra leopardskin-effect thongs.’ (Yes, I have been to her house and peered over her garden wall. I know she has a rusting whirligig with two bits of wire missing and pegs that don’t match, showing a carelessness in the laundry department that you would never have tolerated from me!)

‘It wasn’t simply about Melanie.’

Melanie, Josie mimicked, pulling a face fit to sour milk down the phone.

‘Although, I admit, she was the catalyst.’

Catalyst? Home-wrecker!

‘I feel as if I have made an awful mistake,’ Damien said. ‘A really awful mistake.’

‘And how’s that supposed to make me feel? I’m just getting my life back together. I no longer need a ton of Kleenex just to watch EastEnders. I am no longer emaciated and blotchy and look like I have some deadly disease. Strangers no longer shy away from me in the street. Friends have stopped telling me that I really should see the doctor. I’m happy.’

‘Are you?’

‘Yes.’ It came across as a little too defiant to ring true.

‘I’m not.’

There was another uncomfortable pause.

‘How’s The Cat Formerly Known As Prince?’ he said more brightly.

‘He’s delirious. Eating his Kit-e-Kat like there’s no tomorrow. He’s coping very well with being a single-parent feline.’

‘Good.’ Damien didn’t sound as if he thought it was good.

‘What’s it like being a substitute daddy?’

Damien exhaled slowly. ‘Tougher than I thought.’

Josie smirked to herself.



'The kids put Lego in unspeakable places, I've just had to spend an inordinate amount of money getting Farley's Rusks extracted from my laptop, and they leave toast crumbs in the bed. Most nights, it feels like I'm sleeping in Prince's litter tray.'

I bet that curtails the wild sex sessions that were much vaunted in the early days!

'Does Thing know you phone me?'

She heard Damien bite his nails. Something he always did when he was contemplating lying. 'No.'

'So where is she now?'

'At Tesco's. Late-night shopping.'

Whoop-de-doo! And I thought my life was boring!

'Did you tell her the divorce papers have come through?'

More nail-nibbling. 'No.'

'You haven't sent them back yet?'

'No.'

The Cat Formerly Known As Prince started a hearty wail at the kitchen door. Josie put her hand over the mouthpiece. 'I'll be two minutes,' she whispered. 'You won't starve.'

The Cat Formerly Known As Prince gave her a look that said, If-I-could-use-a-tin-opener-I'd-be-out-of-here.

'Is it really what we want?' Damien was using his best cajoling voice. The one he used to reserve for getting her out of bed at the weekends to make him bacon sandwiches. 'Really and truly?'

'Even as we speak, mine are languishing with Live It Up, Live It Down and Live With It - or something like that - solicitors to the terminally impoverished. Just sign them, Damien.'

'I don't think we should rush into this.'

'You already did.'

'I don't deserve this, Josie. You can't throw five years of marriage down the drain.'

You did. I can.

'Can't I come round to see you?'

'I won't be here.'

'Where are you going?'

'That's nothing to do with you.'

'I'm still your husband.'

'Only due to a minor technicality.' Josie sat up and made shushing noises at the cat, who was whimpering, producing puddles of drool on the floor and looking like he was about to start foaming at the mouth. 'Look, I have to go.'

'Why?'

'I have my own life now, Damien.'

'Is there someone else?'

Josie examined the tart red nail varnish on her toes with the bravado of someone feigning disinterest. It needed redoing before tomorrow. Tart red and the lilac chiffon that was looming on the agenda were not Looking Good's idea of trendy. The Cat Formerly Known As Prince had hurled himself to the floor in desperation.

'Yes.'

'Is it serious?'

'We spend a lot of time together.'

'Oh.'

'Is he handsome?'

'Oh.'

'I have to go. I'm having dinner with him tonight.'

'Oh.' There was an unhappy little gap. 'Do you love him?'

'I don't want to be having this conversation, Damien.' It was making an already leaden heart feel heavier.

'Is he rich?'

'Damien, I think it would be better if you didn't keep ringing me.'

'I don't want you out of my life.'

The corners of her mouth turned down and she bit her lip, pushing down the emotions that threatened to sneak back up whenever she wasn't looking. 'I already am.'

She put down the receiver and hugged a cushion. Cushions were a luxury she was allowed now that she made all her own choices regarding domestic soft furnishings. Damien had deemed them banned substances along with hanging baskets, wicker laundry hampers and cardigans. They all smacked of being middle-aged, he insisted, and that was something he intended to avoid at all costs. Consequently, she had endured an uncanny sofa for too long, and now it was piled high with the beggars.

The phone rang again, shrill and persistent. The Cat Formerly Known As Prince was turning himself inside out on the lounge carpet, doing his starving-animal impersonation to Oscar-winning proportions. If only Kenneth Branagh had been here to see it, he would have feared for his livelihood. The phone continued to ring and Josie chewed the end of her cushion, settling into a frown of indecision. She'd had enough of Damien. He was comparable to eating an elephant these days, only manageable in bite-sized chunks. The Cat Formerly Known As Prince gave her a look that said, Oh-for-fornication's-sake-answer-it! Josie snatched up the receiver.

'Da-'

'Why did you take so long to answer the phone?'

Josie let go of her death grip on the hapless cushion and fell back on to the sofa. This was a conversation which could only be attempted while horizontal and preferably with a large gin at her fingertips. 'Hello, Mum.' 'You haven't been talking to that low-life scheming toad again?'

'My bank manager?'

'No, that miserable excuse of an ex-husband.'

'Mum-'

'You were engaged for a very long time.'

'We were married for five years.'

'You know what I'm talking about.' Her mother harrumphed down the phone. 'I know what you're like. Three little words from him and you'll be running back to him with your skirt round your waist and your knickers round your ankles. If you're wearing any.'

'Mum!'

'He was never good enough for you.'

'Mum! No one was. You hated all of my boyfriends.'

There was a hurt silence at the other end of the phone. 'I liked Clive.'

'Clive?'

'Clive was very nice. In an unassuming way.'

'I never went out with anyone called Clive!'

'Yes you did,' her mother tutted. 'He was lovely. Always wore a scarf.'

'I never, ever went out with anyone called Clive.'

'He drove an Austin Allegro. Orange. His father's.'

'You must be thinking about someone else.'

'Perhaps you should have married Clive. He didn't look like the sort who would have abandoned you for a whiff of knicker elastic.'

There was no Clive. No scarf. No Austin Allegro.

'Mind you, your father was the same. Sex, sex, sex. Morning, noon and night. It was all he ever thought of.'

Her father had never ventured further than his potting shed for thirty years and always seemed rather more preoccupied with his pelargoniums than carnal pleasures. He had, however, in his quiet way managed to curb her mother's worst excesses, which had run riot since he was no longer with them.

'I blame all those women who burnt their bras; he was never the same man after that.'

Josie counted to four - ten was asking just too much. 'I was cooking dinner.'

'What?'

'When you rang. I was cooking dinner. The microwave pinger's just gone off. I'd better go or it'll burn, or melt, or disintegrate.'

'You're not having chicken ping again, are you?'

'No, I've pushed the boat out and have gone for Italian ping.'

'I do worry about you, darling.'

'I know.' But then you worry about the western hemisphere and nine tenths of its occupants in general.

'Are you all set for tomorrow?'

Josie eyed the packed suitcase in the corner nervously. There was no way she would want her mother to know that she was having second thoughts about this. It was the first time she had travelled alone in her new nearly divorced state, and her stomach registered a mixture of fear and excitement. She would get to look after the tickets, passports and money all by herself, instead of it being Damien's job. And she wondered how she would manage her luggage by herself before deciding it would be easier to control an airport trolley with a mind of its own rather than a man with one.

'I think so.'

'Now you won't forget anything, will you?'

'I shall do my very best not to.'

'There's no need to be facetious. You know I had to tie your gloves to your school mac with elastic because you were always leaving them behind. If I had a pound for every pair of woollen mittens you'd lost, I'd be living next door to Barbra Streisand now.'

'Yes, Mum.'

The Cat Formerly Known As Prince was looking as though he regretted telling her to answer the phone. She gave him an I-told-you-so stare.

'I have to go. The cat wants his dinner.'

'You spoil that animal.'

'I have no one else to lavish my love on.'

'You've got me.'

'Apart from you.'

'I do hope you find someone soon. I'd make a lovely grandmother.'

'Mum! That is the least of my worries at the moment. There's no way I'm ready for a committed relationship.'

'Even some casual sex would be a start-'

'Mum!'

'I know all about condoms. Mrs Kirby at the chemist told me about them when I was waiting for my Preparation H. Never go out with a man who buys small ones.'

'I have to go, my dinner's about to spontaneously combust.'

'I wish I was coming with you.'

'It's too late for that now, Mum.'

'I should be there. I don't know why Martha had to arrange her wedding in such a rush.'

'Well, that's Martha for you. Maybe she thought he'd change his mind if she didn't dash up the aisle.'

'She has been on the shelf for a very long time,' her mother conceded. 'I don't think Martha needed to worry about getting dusty.'

'Maybe if she's waited all this time, she might get the right man first time round.' Touché, Mother!

'I'll tell you all about it when I get back.'

'Don't agree to carry anything for anyone else. Particularly if it looks like talcum powder. It might be Class A heroin and you could end up belly-dancing in a Turkish prison. I read about it all the time in Women's Realm. You young girls don't realise how vulnerable you are.'

'I'm not a young girl. I'm thirty-two years old. I'm a pillar of the community and have been sensible and level-headed since I was twelve. What did it always say on my school reports?'

'That you were very sensible and level-headed,' her mother conceded.

'I rest my case.'

'And don't talk to any strange men on the plane. If you're sitting next to someone who looks a bit funny, ask them to move you. They're obliged to. It's in the rules.'

'I have to go.' Conversation Termination Sequence commenced. Let countdown begin. Five. Josie edged the phone back towards its receiver. <

'Give my love to everyone.'

'I will.' Four. Lower.

'Phone me when you get there, then I won't worry.'

'I will.' Three. Lower still. Looking good.

'Promise.'

'Promise.' Two.

'I love you, Josephine Ellen.'

'I love you too, Mum.' One. Made it. Handset to base. Docking completed.

Conversation Terminations successfully accomplished, Josie looked at the clock. Not bad. Approaching a world record, in fact. Pushing herself off the sofa, she noticed the cat, who was reclining weakly by the kitchen door. 'Well, you may have started out as a fake starving animal, but I'm sure your stomach thinks your throat has been cut by now.'

His pitiful meow said it did.

The phone rang again and the cat swooned. 'I knew it was too good to be true.' It rang again. 'I didn't have the run-down of all the neighbours' ailments or the latest update on the window-cleaner's love life.' It continued to ring and the cat continued to plead silently. 'I have to answer. She knows I'm here,' Josie said. It rang and rang and rang. 'I'll be one minute!'

Josie picked up the phone. 'Mum.'

'What sort of car does he drive?'

'Damien!'

'Is it a company car? Or is it something sporty?'

'Damien, leave me alone!'

'You've been on the phone a long time. Was it him?'

'It was my mother. Not that I have to answer to you.'

'Is he more important to you than I am?'

'Damien, flossing my teeth is more important to me than you are.' v'Oh.' She heard her ex-husband sigh heavily. 'Josie, I-'

'I'm going now, Damien. Goodbye.'

'Josie-'

Josie slammed down the receiver. The cat looked relieved. 'You and I,' she informed him, 'are going to get slaughtered.'

Josie lit the candles on the table. They were the red ones she had bought for last Valentine's Day, but they had never been used because Damien had phoned to say he was working late on a difficult project. Getting that tiny leopardskin thong off Thing's big fat bottom must have been hell. He eventually rolled up at two o'clock in the morning, pissed and reeking of perfume. (The team had been forced to go for a sociable drink in a hotel afterwards, he apologised through his hangover the next morning.) And she had eaten her lovingly prepared dinner alone.

Tonight, she put her reduced-fat, reduced-taste frozen lasagne for one on the table. The microwave had singed the corners to an appetising shade of black, rendering them as edible as paving slabs, while the middle was still white, wet and lukewarm. The lettuce was limp and two days past its sell-by date, but she wanted to clear out the fridge before she went away and had a pathological hatred of wasting food.

'Here you are, munch-machine,' she said fondly, and placed a tin of Supreme Meaty Chunks on a Royal Doulton plate on the table. It sported a bride and groom in the middle surrounded by ornate gold hearts and more flowers than you could shake a stick at. 'Time for din-dins.'

The Cat Formerly Known As Prince rubbed lovingly round her ankles, covering her black trousers with fur.

'Cupboard love,' Josie chided, sticking her fork into her lasagne with as much enthusiasm as she could muster for something that looked as tasty as wet wallpaper. It was a good sign that her appetite was coming back and she was getting tired of convenience food. Her next step in getting on with her life was to start cooking real, edible food again. Maybe even her vanished breasts might make a timely reappearance at some point.

She hated it when Damien phoned. It churned everything up that was just starting to settle down, like a riptide tugging away under the surface of a seemingly calm sea. He always managed to make her feel defensive, even though he was the one who had chosen to walk out of their marriage and it was none of his business whether she was seeing someone else or not. She could be shagging the entire England football team - and thoroughly enjoying it - and it would be nothing whatsoever to do with Damien Flynn. She took a slug of her red wine and it tasted dry and bitter. Even getting through one measly glass was going to be a struggle. There was very little fun to be had in drinking alone.

The Cat Formerly Known As Prince jumped up on to the chair and put his paws on the table.

Josie sighed wistfully. The only man in her life gave an appreciative purr to show he knew which side his bread, or his Kit-e-Kat, was buttered on and buried his head in his plate, eating, as always, as if it was his last meal.

Josie flicked the CD player on. George Michael crooned out. She could listen to all manner of soppy love songs dry-eyed now, which was surely another good sign. 'Careless Whisper'. 'Guilty feet have got no rhythm . . .' She and Damien had always danced well together, guilty feet or not. Grief, she was exhausted. Talking to both her virtual ex-husband and her mother had used up her emergency reserves of energy. Still, she could sleep through the flight tomorrow instead of watching the cheesy films that were always out of date enough so that you'd only just seen them anyway. Pulling the chair out and arranging her napkin with an unnecessary flourish, she sat down. The cat glanced up from his meal.

'So?' she said. 'You are important to me. Did I lie to him?'

The Cat Formerly Known As Prince gave her a look that said he thought she probably had.

