

Widow On The World

Chapter 1

I'd dreamed of my husband many times since his death - the difference was, this time I *knew* it was a dream. This time I knew there had been no mistake, knew that when I opened my eyes Rob wouldn't be sleeping by my side and that he wasn't ever coming back.

In those other dreams he was young again and vibrant. He had called to me, 'Denny, Denny.' It was his own sweet name for me, and I'd truly believed that if I reached out I could touch him and bring him back into my life again.

In this dream, he was the older, greyer, and more familiar forty-something version of the man I had loved for most of my life. He was still smiling as he walked steadily towards me, but in this dream I was fully aware that if I reached out there would be nothing there - and so I didn't even try.

In this dream, Rob stopped suddenly, just as I'd known he would. I could see that his tall frame was already fading, disappearing in front of my eyes. Almost passive in my acceptance, I watched an outline that was as familiar to me as my own steadily diminish.

Turning from me slowly, Rob took one last, long look back. I tried and failed to detect the teeniest hint of regret in the straight gaze, but was forced to accept the time for regrets was over - for both of us.

The grief that usually took hold as the dream faded was absent, the pain of parting no longer raw and new, but tempered by an acceptance that had been a long time coming. I think I knew in my heart that Rob had come to say a last goodbye, and that he wouldn't be back.

One last tender smile, a hand raised in final farewell, and Rob was gone. I was left in no doubt, no doubt at all, that his purpose in coming had been to free me, to leave me in no doubt that he expected me to get on with a life that wouldn't include him.

Usually, after dreaming of Rob, my eyes would open with great reluctance to greet the dawning of yet another day I didn't want to face. Often I'd tried, without success, to go back and retrieve the remnants of the dream, but this time it was different. This time as I opened my eyes to the familiar room we had shared, ready to face a new day - a new life even - I had the beginning of a smile on my face and a heart open to the promise of new hopes and dreams. Whatever future was out there for me, I finally realised I was ready to face it.

'Denise. Denise, answer me. Are you there?'

The sudden shrill screech brought a dash of freezing water to my senses. It drowned my fledgling emotions, forcing the last remaining sweet tendrils of dream into oblivion - and some of my brand new optimism with it. I sat up, eyes wide, heart thumping.

This time someone was calling my name for real; the tone strident, urgent, and definitely female, was punctuated by the hefty and regular thud of my own brass door-knocker.

'Mum?'

It couldn't be. I turned my head to glance at the clock and gaped. My mother was *here*, at seven-thirty in the morning? Shaking my tousled head, I closed my eyes again, desperately hoping this was all part of the dream.

A hail of gravel clattering against the window brought me fully awake and

tumbling out of bed. Stumbling and tripping over a thick tangle of a duvet that was half on the bed, half on the floor, I threw back a curtain and pushed the window wide.

'Well, there you are. I began to think I'd never rouse you. You always could sleep for England.'

I shuddered, closed my eyes, and then opened them again, but the vision remained solidly intact. Planted in the middle of the garden path, silhouetted against the blue of a Ceanothus shrub in full bloom, stood my mother. A taxi with the engine running waited at the gate.

I blinked again, concentrated as hard as I could, and felt my heart sink right down into the soft pile of the bedroom carpet. If the size of those suitcases was anything to go by, she was accompanied by just about all of her worldly goods.

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'What do you *mean*, you've left home?'

Around me my own homely kitchen, with its array of solid pine units, offered absolute, everyday normality. In stark contrast I had this obviously deranged woman facing me across the table. It scared me a bit - no, actually quite a lot - because I had no doubt my mother had taken leave of her senses. Everything I'd ever read about Alzheimer's, nervous breakdowns, brainstorms, and anything of a similar nature, flitted in and out of my head. It crossed my mind that she might be totally unhinged and therefore dangerous, though perhaps that was a bit imaginative, even for me.

Around us early morning sunshine filled the room with bright rays, and the sound of birdsong filtered through the open window. Cups and saucers, pretty floral-patterned china ones, were set out on the pinewood table that had been carefully chosen in happier times, by Rob and me, to complement the kitchen that had been fitted at great expense and was our pride and joy. The fragrance of freshly ground coffee was all around us, and everything seemed just as it should be. That all *wasn't* as it should be was becoming increasingly clear. I couldn't believe the world, as I knew it, was about to fall apart round my ears for the second time in twelve short months. Could life really be that unfair?

Lifting the untidy tumble of fair hair out of my eyes, I narrowed them and scrutinised my mother, looking for some clue. What on God's earth could have brought her here at the crack of dawn armed with a bombshell and a full set of matching luggage? I couldn't believe the way she'd dropped the demise of her marriage into the conversation - as casually as you pleased.

Watching as she calmly helped herself to a biscuit, even taking the time to pick the selection over to find a favourite, I wondered how I was supposed to handle this? Was it a joke? My parents had been married forever, with a marriage that was rock solid - or it certainly had been when I visited the pair of them less than a month ago.

I took a deep breath, 'You and Dad had an argument, right? Everyone has arguments. Rob and I had arguments. It's not such a big deal.'

My mother met my look with a straight one of her own, not responding immediately. I refused to give in or glance away, but studied her carefully. Close-up scrutiny confirmed that she looked much the same as she usually did. Odd, under these exceptional circumstances, surely?

Quite attractive for her age - well, pretty damn good for sixty-five years of age, actually - my mother, or Mrs Elaine Isobel Jefferson to give her full title, actually looked a sight better than I did. In my defence I have to say early morning never was my best time of day. Add to that the fact that my hair was badly in need of a good brush, not to mention the thorough wash that would also have benefited the towelling

dressing-gown I wore, and there really was no competition.

My mother, in sharp contrast, appeared totally unruffled, her features remarkably unlined. She was also meticulously made-up for someone in the middle of a relationship crisis. Not even a hair of her carefully sculpted and stiffly lacquered head was out of place.

It struck me as hardly normal, that, finding time to fit a quick shampoo and set - and possibly even a chestnut rinse to disguise the creeping grey - in between cancelling out forty-odd years of marriage and packing a complete wardrobe of clothes. Good grief, she'd even taken the time to match her earrings and accessories to her navy knee-length skirt and jacket.

This whole crisis had to be about something and nothing, I just knew it. My mother was being breathtakingly off-hand about what appeared on the surface to be a spontaneous decision to change her whole life. You'd think she'd popped out on one of her all-too-frequent shopping trips, instead of turning her back on a marriage she had decided - apparently overnight *and* without a great deal of careful thought - was past its best.

She gave me another, even straighter look. She was good at those, had perfected her very own brand of glaring over the last so many years. I'd seen lesser men than my father, and better women than me, wilt under the blaze of that dark piecing gaze. She'd been known to reduce me to a quivering wreck with very little noticeable effort, and my growing older never seemed to lessen the effect her displeasure had on me.

I took a firm grip on my cup, and my courage, and matched her stare for stare. After all, she was in *my* house. Yes, she was actually, I realised grimly. I should keep reminding myself of that, because she had the unfortunate habit of making me feel like a child in primary school whenever it suited her to gain the upper hand.

'Your father and I do not have arguments. You heard me correctly the first time, Denise. I've left him.' With that she defiantly took a cigarette from the packet in front of her and lit up.

I felt my lips thin into a disapproving line. She knew full well how much I hated smoking in the house, hated it with a vengeance and always had. She'd probably lit the damn thing just to goad me, but I refrained from comment this time without too much difficulty. It seemed more important to get to the real reason behind her arriving on my doorstep with her extensive baggage in tow.

This clearly wasn't intended to be an overnight stay and I thought I should have something to say about that. Her plans were clearly destined to impact on any I might have, and on a fragile peace of mind that had been a long time coming and exceptionally hard to come by.

'Why?'

There, that was better, no comment, just a direct question, and a perfectly civil one, I'd have thought, under the circumstances. This was *my* house, I reminded myself again and a bit more firmly this time.

'Because we weren't going anywhere, dear,' she said with a condescending smile, and in the reasonable kind of tone she might use to a child of three.

'Going - ? You've only just come back from Gran Canaria.'

'Denise,' exasperation crept into the tolerant level of her voice and she flicked ash from her cigarette, very deliberately, into her saucer, 'I'm not talking holidays here, I'm talking relationships. I'm talking about marriage, mine in particular. We've hit a blank wall, your father and I.'

Lifting the cigarette to her lips she drew on it deeply, threw back her head, and

blew a perfectly formed smoke ring into the air.

Well, she had me there. I didn't know what to do or what to say. I must have looked for all the world like a landed fish as I struggled, mouth opening and closing, with nothing coming out.

'You *must* have seen this coming,' she suggested, when I'd clearly given up on the struggle to find a suitable response.

Again that oh so reasonable tone, the insinuation that this wasn't the bolt from the blue that it so obviously was. That's when I started to get angry.

'Actually, no,' I glared at her with something very akin to real dislike surfacing inside of me. It was quite a scary feeling. The nearest I had come to such an emotion regarding this woman, at least in recent years, was a mild exasperation. Disliking your own mother was unthinkable, wasn't it? Well, it was to someone like me who loathed any kind of bad feeling and normally avoided unpleasant confrontational situations - but when I thought about my lovely, mild-mannered Dad, and what this would do to him, I suddenly became very, very angry.

My mother looked so smug, sitting there, relaxed and quite obviously waiting for me to take her side. Her side in what, exactly, I had no idea. She'd as good as admitted there had been no argument.

'I have to say that - no - after forty-odd years of marriage, I *wasn't* expecting your relationship to break up overnight. I never heard anything so bloody ridiculous, if you must know. This isn't the script from some soap opera, it's real life.' I was off then, on my feet and in full flow, hardly recognising myself in the shrill tone. 'You can't just wipe out all those years of loving marriage on a *whim*. Are you quite mad?'

'How *dare* you speak to me like that? I've thought about this many times, if you must know.' My mother came back at me immediately. Up on her own feet, hands flat on the table, she leaned toward me and matched me glare for glare. For all of her bravado, though, I could see that she was shocked by the ferocity of a verbal attack from a normally mild-mannered daughter - and not a little rattled, if I wasn't mistaken.

Satisfied, I sat down. 'Well, it's not something you've seen fit to share with me - or with Dad, either, I'm willing to bet. Did you even tell him you were going, or have you just walked out?'

Having the grace to flush slightly, she sank back onto her own chair, and for once her gaze refused to meet mine. 'Harry's away for a few days with his golf pals. I thought it was for the best to do it this way. He would only try to talk me round.'

Of course he would. The poor sod loved her. What did she expect of him? That he would help her pack, cheerfully send her on her way? She must know she was in the wrong, that there was absolutely no way she could justify her actions but, having said that, I knew my mother well enough to know she'd have a damn good try.

Determined to make the most of any advantage gained, I took a deep breath and stood up again. It made me feel more in control, somehow, despite the fluffy slippers and grubby dressing-gown.

'And so will I,' I stated baldly, 'because someone's obviously got to talk some bloody sense into you. It's hard enough for me to start over at forty-six, with my own home and a career. What on earth will you do? Where will you go? How do you plan to live with no income?' I almost added that jobs for sixty-five-year-old women, with no formal qualifications or training, were few and far between, but found I couldn't be that blunt - even as angry as I was.

My mother completely missed the point I was trying to make - but whether that was on purpose or by accident, it was hard to tell.

'So that's it.' She rose to her own feet - and in high heels she reached an

impressive five feet nine inches without any effort - and looking down at me, she hissed, 'I never thought I'd see the day I wasn't welcome in my own daughter's house.' Hefting her giant handbag up onto her shoulder, she stalked to the door with the parting shot, 'Never let it be said that I'll stay where I'm not wanted.'

Rigid with fury, she marched into the hall, and even as I despised myself for doing it, I found myself running after her.

'Mum, Mum, wait,' I pleaded, 'I didn't mean it like that.'

Immediately I could have kicked myself. I should have waited, watched to see how she was going to manage to haul those huge suitcases back out through the door and down the path, this time without the assistance of a burly taxi driver. She must have had the same thought at the same time, because she spun round so fast the draught she caused almost knocked a china figurine from the hall table.

'How did you mean it, then?' she demanded, leaning towards me so that our faces were just inches apart. 'Throwing your mother out on the streets, that's charming that is. That's really nice. My own daughter...'

The anger that had so recently deserted me, flew back in a rush that almost took my breath away - almost, but not quite. 'Now, just one minute, just *one* little minute.' I refused to give a centimetre this time, determinedly standing my ground. 'Correct me if I'm wrong, but *you* are the one who's so recklessly made yourself homeless, *and* without rhyme or reason, as far as I can see. You're the one dragging me into this - this fiasco, forcing me to take your side, into the bargain, because,' I put up my hand authoritatively as she went to interrupt me, 'that's the way Dad will see it. He'll think I'm encouraging you in this mad idea.'

'He wo - '

'*Will*,' I finished for her, with great emphasis, suddenly realising with clarity just how hurt my father was going to be by all this - and not least by my apparent involvement in it.

I groaned inwardly, wishing with all my heart that this could turn out to be a horrible dream I'd wake up from eventually. I should have seen it coming, of course, or something like it. Without wishing to sound self-pitying, I could honestly say one step forward and two steps back had become the recognised pattern of my life these past months. You'd think I would have grown used to it.

'You'd better unpack,' I said wearily, forced into a corner that was entirely of my own making.

I'd had a choice, right from the start, and I knew it. To invite my mother into my home or simply bundle her back into the taxi had been entirely my decision. The latter had only been an option, though, in the first moment or two of opening the front door. Allowing my forceful parent over the threshold had been a serious error of judgement on my part, and one I had a feeling I would be paying for, over and over again.

Getting on with my life, it appeared, was going to have to wait for another day.

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Saturday wasn't the best day for shopping at Sainsbury's, especially the huge out-of-town outlet that attracted shoppers from far and wide with its vast choice and easy parking. I knew that, and I really don't know why I chose that particular day to do my main shop, apart from it giving me a valid reason to escape the cuckoo settling herself so comfortably into the nest of my home.

I wasn't sure, either, why I'd elected to shop there rather than at the smaller, more familiar, local branch of the Cheapsmart chain. Less choice there, of course, but

less hassle, too, and there was the staff discount to consider. I was, after all, employed as the store's Human Resources Manager, a rather grand title to explain my role in a personnel department I ran with the aid of one assistant. However, it was too late to regret the decision to shop elsewhere for once and, as I reminded myself, it *was* widely agreed that a change was as good as a rest.

If the idea was to take my mind off what was happening at home, I have to say it worked like a dream. I'd forgotten it was a bank holiday weekend, and everyone would be stocking up as if for a siege. It was one long battle from finding a parking space, to selecting a trolley that would move even vaguely in a forward direction, before being forced into making decisions I wasn't ready to make about such crucial things as healthy eating versus comfort eating.

I'd used to love to shop at the store with Rob, but had resolutely avoided that particular shop since his death. The minute I pushed the trolley through the automatic doors, memories bombarded me swiftly from all sides.

I didn't even have to try to recall the way he'd insisted on tasting grapes or cherries from the fresh produce on display, laughing at my horrified insistence that it was shoplifting, or the way he'd sneak little treats into the trolley like a naughty child.

We'd discussed almost every purchase, sometimes at length, and though it was nowhere near the festive season, one memorable Christmas suddenly came into my mind. It had, hilariously, taken all of an hour to decide which box of crackers to purchase. Presentation and content were given monumental importance, and a decision had only been reached when we had begged for the intervention and advice of a member of staff.

I tried to smile at the memory, but in my still vulnerable state the lights in the superstore seemed too bright, the aisles too crowded, the choices too vast or too few. I had to fight to retain my composure and to resist the overwhelming urge to abandon my trolley and make a dash for the door.

The air was filled with the sounds of children laughing or grizzling, mothers calling, husbands grumbling, and the tinny voice over the public address system above it all, continually advising shoppers of special offers available or ordering more staff to the busy tills.

Taking a determined grip of my fragile senses, I hovered round a seemingly unlimited choice of fresh fruit and vegetables. There was little comparison with Cheapsmart's far more limited selection, but I resisted the urge to go for something outlandish and probably inedible and became determined to make a sensible selection.

Initially undecided, but suddenly mindful of my mother making herself far too comfortable in my home, I took immense satisfaction in picking out a fat green cabbage, when I knew perfectly well she preferred cauliflower.

I also gained spiteful pleasure in choosing big shiny red apples that would offer a real challenge to even a partial denture. Realising I was being childish didn't diminish my enjoyment one little bit. I supposed I should even thank her for giving me something to smile about.

'Denise.'

I jumped at the sound of my name, initially failing to recognise the vaguely familiar voice.

'I thought it was you. Don't usually see you here, especially on a Saturday morning. How are you?'

A vivacious dark-haired woman blocked my way. Her wide mouth was smiling, her eyes enquiring.

'Oh, Janice,' I laughed foolishly. Fancy forgetting my own sister-in-law, Rob's

only sister, who had been a part of my life for as long as he had. 'You've grown your hair, I didn't recognise you for a moment.'

'Looks like I'm not the only one,' she indicated my own shoulder-length locks. 'Yours is the longest I've ever seen it. It suits you,' she added, grudgingly I thought, but perhaps I was being too sensitive.

I felt a sudden need to explain that the long hair was unintentional. Grown because of a reluctance on my part to go to the trouble of visiting a salon and being forced into making life-changing decisions I wasn't ready to make regarding styles and length. I fought the urge successfully, but touched my head a little self-consciously, and was suddenly very glad I had finally got round to washing my hair that morning. I supposed I had my mother to thank for that, at least.

'So, how have you been?' Janice showed no sign of moving, but looked me up and down carefully, as if checking it was only my hair that had changed.

I shrugged, 'Oh, you know.'

'Oh, I do,' she leaned over and touched my hand. 'I miss him, too, you know.'

I gripped the trolley harder, forced myself to acknowledge, 'I'm sure you do,' certain that she did miss Rob, in her own way, though they'd never been what I would call really close. It was something Rob had regretted but accepted, saying it was the 'way his family was'.

'I'm sorry I haven't been over recently, but I'm sure you're coping well. It's been over a year, after all, hasn't it? Time to move on and all that.' The sympathy was still there, but there was also a firm edge to her voice. 'I'm sure you don't need to be told that life goes on. Mine has. I can't tell you how busy I am these days, but I will pop in when I get a minute. If you ever feel lonely, you know you only have to ring.'

'That's nice of you, but I have my mother staying at the moment.' I never thought I'd be pleased to say such a thing, but at that moment I almost felt grateful that she was there.

'That's nice.' No mistaking the relief in her voice, and I wondered briefly how she would have dealt with a request from me for some of her time and her company.

Janice hadn't quite finished, still showing no sign of moving on, despite the impatient hands reaching round us for the produce we were blocking.

'Any news?' she asked finally, looking at me more closely than I liked.

I stared at her, 'What sort of news?' I was as puzzled as I must have sounded. I did nothing except go to work, come home, eat a solitary meal, watch TV and go to bed. In fact, on reflection, I supposed I should be thanking my mother for bringing some variety into my mundane life.

'Oh, you know,' Janice said brightly, head cocked on one side, 'just anything? How's your job? And Bobbi, how's she?'

'The job is fine, as it always has been, and so is Bobbi.' I smiled at the thought of my eighteen-year-old daughter. 'She's taken to university life and the nursing programme like a duck to water. I'm really proud of the way she's been coping.'

I couldn't work out where all this sudden interest was coming from. After all, Janice could have picked up the phone any time during the past twelve months if she was that interested in my life.

'I hope you're getting out more now,' she said suddenly, adding as if she were an authority, 'it's what Rob would have wanted. He wouldn't expect you to turn into a hermit on his account. Well,' she changed the subject quickly, 'I must be getting on. Lots to do, you know. Here,' she snatched a bunch of flowers from her trolley and placed them in mine, 'have these, Denise. They'll cheer you up. We must make more effort to keep in touch,' and with that she sailed off across the store, the crowds in the

aisles apparently clearing a pathway before her.

Only when I reached the check out some time later, did I finally realise what she'd been fishing for with her 'Any news?' and only then did I realise *I* was paying for the flowers she'd so kindly given me.

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'Well, she's quite right,' my mother approved when I recounted the conversation with some indignation. 'You should be getting out more. No one would think any less of you for having a social life, or if you met someone else. Rob would...'

'How come everyone is suddenly an authority on what Rob would or wouldn't have wanted? *I* was the one married to him for twenty-odd years.'

'*Was, dear, was,*' she kindly accentuated. 'That's the whole point. Everything's changed now, and you're a single woman. You have needs - even I realise that. You're still a young woman.'

'Bloody hell.' I slammed my hands down hard on the table and crockery rattled against cutlery as I leapt to my feet. 'What is this? Is everyone dying for me to get a man in my life? I didn't *choose* to be single - not like you have apparently chosen to be single again. Rob's heart attack made that decision for me. Being here without him is not what I *wanted*.'

'Of course not, dear,' she soothed, looking surprised, 'but it's been over a year...'

'You sound like Janice. So it's been a year. Is that supposed to make me feel better? Well, it's been the longest, loneliest year of my life, if you must know. I want my life back the way it was, I want my future with Rob back. I want *him* back.'

My chair crashed to the tiled floor behind me as I backed away from the table, leaving my favourite lasagne untouched on the plate. Bursting into noisy sobs, I ran upstairs to the sanctuary of the bedroom I had shared with Rob every night of our marriage.

It was such a relief to cry, to stop trying to be brave for the first time in weeks. It still hurt so much to know that I would never see Rob again, and it felt as if that would never change, never become easier to bear. I'd been a fool to think, even briefly, that it would.

He'd been my whole life for so many years, and for all of the ups and downs of a long marriage. Like most people who lose a partner, I had never even imagined a time when he wouldn't be there, and then had suddenly found myself living with the unimaginable day after day.

It was too easy to say he was in a better place. Perhaps he was, but where did that leave me? Was it being totally selfish to want him back? I couldn't cope without him - I'd been a fool to think for a moment that I could. I didn't *want* to cope without him.

'Denise?' A tap, tap on the door and the sound of my mother's voice brought my head up. The 'I'm-trying-to-be-understanding' tone she'd adopted really jarred. 'Denise, can I come in?'

She wouldn't have turned up on the doorstep like that if Rob had still been around. He'd have had no compunction at all about turning her right around and straight back the way she had come. I knew it, and I had no doubt that she knew it, too. At that moment I really didn't feel as if I could ever forgive her for taking advantage of the situation I had found myself in, or for arriving just in time to ruin my first feeble attempt at coming to terms with it.

'Go away,' I said, quietly, 'just go away.'

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I must have slept, because it was getting dark when I opened my eyes. The phone was ringing in the hall, and that must have been what had woken me. I lay quietly listening, making no attempt to get up to answer it.

Eventually, I heard my mother pick up the receiver and say my number. There was a murmured conversation, and I sincerely hoped the caller was my father. Perhaps he could talk some sense into her, because I doubted my own ability to do so.

I waited until the one-sided conversation had ceased and the receiver was replaced before going to stand silently at the top of the stairs. My mother was still in the hall, a bemused look on her face as she stared at the phone as if she'd never seen it before.

'Who was it?' I asked quietly, and watched her jump at the sound of my voice, before staring up at me.

'It was Bobbi. She's on her way home and says she has something to tell you.'