

# Chapter 1

*Wednesday, 9 June 2010*

## **The Widow**

I CAN HEAR THE SOUND of her crunching up the path. Heavy footed in high heels. She's almost at the door, hesitating and smoothing her hair out of her face. Nice outfit. Jacket with big buttons, decent dress underneath and glasses perched on her head. Not a Jehovah's Witness or the Labour party. Must be a reporter, but not the usual. She's my second one today – fourth this week, and it's only Wednesday. I bet she says, 'I'm sorry to bother you at such a difficult time.' They all say that and put on that stupid face. Like they care.

I'm going to wait to see if she rings twice. The man this morning didn't. Some are obviously bored to death with trying. They leave as soon as they take their finger off the bell, marching back down the path as fast as they can, into their cars and away. They can tell their bosses they knocked on the door but she wasn't there. Pathetic.

She rings twice. Then knocks loudly in that rap-rap-rappity-rap way. Like a policeman. She sees me looking through the gap at the side of my net curtains and smiles this big smile. A Hollywood smile, my mum used to say. Then she knocks again.

When I open the door, she hands me the bottle of milk from the doorstep and says, 'You don't want to leave that out, it'll go off. Shall I come in? Have you got the kettle on?'

I can't breathe, let alone speak. She smiles again, head on one side. 'I'm Kate,' she says. 'Kate Waters, a reporter from the *Daily Post*.'

'I'm—' I start, suddenly realizing she hasn't asked.

'I know who you are, Mrs Taylor,' she says. Unspoken are the words: *You are the story*. 'Let's not stand out here,' she says. And as she talks, somehow, she's come in.

I feel too stunned by the turn of events to speak and she takes my silence as permission to go into the kitchen with the bottle of milk and make me a cup of tea. I follow her in – it's not a big kitchen and we're a bit of a squeeze as she bustles about, filling the kettle and opening all my cupboards, looking for cups and sugar. I just stand there, letting it all happen.

She's chatting about the units. 'What a lovely fresh-looking kitchen – I wish mine looked like this. Did you put it in?'

It feels like I'm talking to a friend. It isn't how I thought it would be, talking to a reporter. I thought it would be like being questioned by the police. Thought it would be an ordeal, an interrogation. That's what my husband, Glen, said. But it isn't, somehow.

I say, 'Yes, we chose white doors and red handles because it looked so clean.' I'm standing in my house discussing kitchen units with a reporter. Glen would've had a fit.

She says, 'Through here, is it?' and I open the door to the living room.

I'm not sure if I want her here or not – not sure how I feel. It doesn't feel right to protest now – she's just sitting and chatting with a cup of tea in her hand. It's funny, I'm quite enjoying the attention. I get a bit lonely inside this house now that Glen is gone.

And she seems to be in charge of things. It's quite nice really, to have someone in charge of me again. I was beginning to panic that I'd have to cope with everything on my own, but Kate Waters is saying she'll sort everything out.

All I have to do is tell her all about my life, she says.

My life? She doesn't really want to know about me. She hasn't walked up my path to hear about Jean Taylor. She wants to know the truth about him. About Glen. My husband.

You see, my husband died three weeks ago. Knocked down by a bus just outside Sainsbury's. He was there one minute, giving me grief about what sort of cereal I should've bought, and the next, dead on the road. Head injuries, they said. Dead, anyway. I just stood there and looked at him, lying there. People were running round finding blankets and there was a bit of blood on the pavement. Not much blood though. He would've been glad. He didn't like any sort of mess.

Everyone was very kind and trying to stop me seeing his body, but I couldn't tell them I was glad he'd gone. No more of his nonsense.

## Chapter 2

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### **The Widow**

THE POLICE CAME TO THE hospital, of course. Even DI Bob Sparkes turned up at A&E to talk about Glen.

I said nothing to him or any of the others. Told them there was nothing to say, I was too upset to talk. Cried a bit.

DI Bob Sparkes has been a part of my life for so long – over three years it is now – but I think perhaps he will disappear with you, Glen.

I don't say any of this to Kate Waters. She sits in the other arm-chair in the living room, nursing her mug of tea and jiggling her foot.

'Jean,' she says – no more Mrs Taylor, I notice – 'this last week must have been terrible for you. And after all you've already been through.'

I say nothing, just stare at my lap. She has no idea what I've been through. No one has, really. I've never been able to tell anyone. Glen said that was best.

We wait in silence, then she tries a different tack. She stands up and picks up a photo of us from the mantelpiece – both of us laughing at something.

'You look so young,' she says. 'Was this before you got married?'

I nod.

'Did you know each other a long time before that? Did you meet at school?'

'No, not at school. We met at a bus stop,' I tell her. 'He was very good-looking and he made me laugh. I was seventeen, an apprentice at a hairdresser's in Greenwich, and he worked in a bank. He was a bit older and wore a suit and good shoes. He was different.'

I'm making it sound like some romantic novel and Kate Waters is lapping it up, scribbling in her notebook, peering at me over those little glasses and nodding as if she understands. She isn't fooling me.

Actually, Glen didn't seem the romantic sort at first. Our courtship was mainly in the dark – the cinema, the back seat of his Escort, the park – and there wasn't much time for talking. But I remember the first time he told me he loved me. I prickled all over, like I could feel every inch of my skin. I felt alive for the first time in my life. I told him I loved him, too. Desperately. That I couldn't eat or sleep for thinking about him.

My mum said it was a 'fascination' on my part when I mooned around the house. I wasn't sure what it meant, 'fascination', but I wanted to be with Glen all the time and back then he said he felt the same. I think Mum was a bit jealous. She relied on me.

'She relies on you too much, Jeanie,' Glen said. 'Not healthy to be going everywhere with your daughter.'

I tried to explain about Mum being frightened of going out on her own, but Glen said she was being selfish.

He was so protective, picking a seat for me in the pub away from the bar – 'Don't want it to be too noisy for you' – and ordering for me at restaurants so I tasted new things – 'You'll love this, Jeanie. Just try it.' So I did and sometimes the new things were lovely. And if they weren't, I didn't say anything in case I hurt his feelings. He would go quiet if I went against him. I hated that. Felt I'd disappointed him.

I'd never been out with someone like Glen, someone who knew what they wanted in life. The other boys were just that – boys.

Two years later, when Glen proposed, he didn't go down on one knee. He held me very close and said, 'You belong to me, Jeanie. We belong together . . . Let's get married.'

He'd won Mum over by then, anyway. He'd come with flowers – 'A little something for the other woman in my life,' he'd say to make her giggle and he'd talk to her about *Coronation Street* or the Royal Family and Mum loved it. She said I was a lucky girl. That he'd brought me out of myself. Would make something of me. She could see he'd take care of me. And he did.

'What was he like, then?' Kate Waters asks, leaning forward to encourage me. Then. She means before all the bad stuff.

'Oh, he was a lovely man. Very lovey-dovey, couldn't do enough for me,' I say. 'Always bringing me flowers and presents. Said I was the one. I was blown over by it all. I was only seventeen.'

She loves it. Writes it all down in a funny scrawl and looks up. I'm trying not to laugh. I feel the hysteria rising but it comes out like a sob and she reaches her hand over to touch my arm.

'Don't be upset,' she says. 'It's all over now.'

And it is. No more police, no more Glen. No more of his nonsense.

I can't quite remember when I started calling it that. It had begun long before I could name it. I was too busy making our marriage perfect, beginning with the wedding at Charlton House.

My mum and dad thought I was too young at nineteen but we persuaded them. Well, Glen did, really. He was so determined, so devoted to me, and in the end Dad said 'Yes' and we celebrated with a bottle of Lambrusco.

They paid a fortune for the wedding because I was their only one and I spent my whole time looking at pictures in bridal magazines with Mum and dreaming of my big day. My big day. How I clung to that and filled my life with it. Glen never interfered.

'That's your department,' he'd say and laugh.

He made it sound like he had a department, too. I thought it was probably his job; he was the main breadwinner, he said. 'I

know it sounds old-fashioned, Jeanie, but I want to look after you. You're still very young and we've got everything in front of us.'

He always had big ideas and they sounded so exciting when he talked about them. He was going to be the manager of the branch, then leave to start his own business. Be his own boss and make lots of money. I could see him in a posh suit with a secretary and a big car. And me, I was going to be there for him. 'Never change, Jeanie. I love you just the way you are,' he'd say.

So we bought Number 12 and moved in after the wedding. We're still here all these years later.

The house had a front garden, but we gravelled over 'to save on cutting the grass,' Glen said. I quite liked the grass, but Glen liked things neat. It was hard at the beginning, when we first moved in together, because I was always a bit untidy. Mum was forever finding dirty plates and odd socks in the fluff under my bed at home. Glen would've died if he'd looked.

I can see him now, clenching his teeth and his eyes going all narrow, when he caught me brushing crumbs off the table on to the floor with my hand after we had tea one night, early on. I didn't even know I was doing it – must've done it a hundred times without thinking, but I never did it again. He was good for me in that way, taught me how to do things right so the house was nice. He liked it nice.

In the early days, Glen told me all about his job in the bank – the responsibilities he had, how the juniors relied on him, the jokes the staff played on each other, the boss he couldn't stand – 'Thinks he's better than everyone, Jeanie' – and the people he worked with. Joy and Liz in the back office; Scott, one of the counter staff, who had terrible skin and blushed about everything; May, the trainee who kept making mistakes. I loved listening to him, loved hearing about his world.

I suppose I did tell him about my work, but we seemed to drift back to the bank quite quickly.

'Hairdressing isn't the most exciting job,' he'd say, 'but you do it very well, Jeanie. I'm very proud of you.'

He was trying to make me feel better about myself, he told me. And he did. It felt so safe being loved by Glen.

Kate Waters is looking at me, doing that thing with her head again. She's good, I'll give her that. I've never spoken to a journalist before, apart from telling them to go away, never mind let one in the house. They've been coming to the door for years, on and off, and no one has got inside until today. Glen saw to that.

But he's not here now. And Kate Waters seems different. She's told me she feels 'a real connection' with me. Says she feels like we've known each other for ages. And I know what she means.

'His death must've come as a terrible shock,' she says, giving my arm another squeeze. I nod dumbly.

I can't tell her how I started lying awake, wishing Glen was dead. Well, not dead exactly. I didn't want him to be in any pain or suffer or anything, I just wanted him not to be there any more. I would fantasize about the moment when I'd get the call from a police officer.

'Mrs Taylor,' the deep voice would say, 'I'm so sorry, but I've got bad news.' The anticipation of the next bit almost used to make me giggle. 'Mrs Taylor, I'm afraid your husband has been killed in an accident.'

I then saw myself – really saw myself – sobbing and picking up the phone to ring his mum and tell her. 'Mary,' I'd say, 'I'm so sorry, I've got some bad news. It's Glen. He's dead.'

I can hear the shock in her gasp. I can feel her grief. I can feel the sympathy of friends at my loss, gathering my family around me. Then the secret thrill.

Me, the grieving widow. Don't make me laugh.

Of course, when it actually happened it didn't feel nearly as real. For a moment, his mum sounded almost as relieved as me that it was all over, then she put the phone down, weeping for her boy. And there were no friends to tell and just a handful of family to gather around me.

Kate Waters chirps up about needing the loo and making another cup of tea and I let her get on with it, giving her my mug and



showing her the downstairs cloakroom. When she's gone, I look around the room quickly, making sure there's nothing of Glen's out. No souvenirs for her to steal. Glen warned me. He told me all the stories about the press. I hear the toilet flush and she eventually reappears with a tray and starts up again about what a remarkable woman I must be, so loyal.

I keep looking at the wedding picture on the wall above the gas fire. We look so young we could've been dressing up in our parents' clothes. Kate Waters sees me looking and takes the photo off the wall.

She perches on the arm of my chair and we look at it together. September the sixth, 1989. The day we tied the knot. I don't know why but I start to cry – my first real tears since Glen died – and Kate Waters puts an arm round me.