

CHAPTER ONE

A Death

‘Bert – I’m home,’ Gladys Porter called up the stairs, when she had let herself into the hallway of her terraced house. ‘I’ll put the kettle on for a nice cup of tea.’

She was about to potter through to the kitchen when her face registered that there had been no reply.

‘Bert? I said I’d make a nice cup of tea.’

Still there was silence from above.

Gladys put down her shopping bag and ran stumbling up the stairs. Seconds later she was running down them, through the door, and out into Jubilee Terrace, where she fell into the arms of her neighbour Norma Kerridge.

‘It’s my Bert,’ she sobbed, her face a picture of

distress. 'Help me, Norma. I think he's...*dead.*'

The viewing public, of course, already knew that Bert was dead. Vernon Watts, the actor who for the past ten years had played Bert in *Jubilee Terrace*, had had a heart attack two months previously while crossing the road in Highgate, where he lived. He had been hit by a bus and had died shortly afterwards in hospital. Since then the character had been written out of the series, apparently confined to bed with a vague, undiagnosed illness. Now he was out for good.

The public had been grieved by the death of Vernon Watts. He had once been a comic round the Northern clubs and smaller music halls, and his public image was of a plump, genial man, 'a bit of a card'. St Stephen's Church in Highgate, where Watts had not worshipped, was ablaze with flowers from his fans, most of them addressed to Bert Porter. His widow received very little media attention, but his *Jubilee Terrace* widow had been lovingly photographed sobbing as she came out of the church. His real widow did not mind her neglect. She was glad not to have had to pay public tribute to her hated husband.

'He was like a second husband to me,' his television widow was quoted as saying to a *Daily Star* reporter.

In the studio canteen, after filming the scene of Bert's demise, Marjorie Harcourt-Smith, who

played Gladys, dabbed at her eyes with a little lace handkerchief.

‘I’ve been dreading doing that scene,’ she said, in her impeccably Mayfair normal voice. ‘And it was *awful*. Thank God it’s in the bag. It was really upsetting.’

Carol Chisholm, who played Norma Kerridge the neighbour, sipped at her tea and kept her eyebrows firmly unraised.

‘But you and Vernon never really...got on, did you?’ she said, trying to be tactful.

‘I hated Vernon Watts more than anyone in my whole life – barring my husband, God rest his soul. That’s beside the point. We had a professional partnership. The fact that we also had a personal guerilla war is neither here nor there.’

It was a distinction Carol Chisholm grasped very easily. She nodded her professional understanding.

‘Of course it’s different with us. Philip and I get on quite well. I don’t mean I’m in the least *attracted*, or him to me, or that we’d marry if my husband and his wife died or anything like that. But we do enjoy each other’s company. We have a lot of drinks together, as you know, and a lot of laughs. That means that filming the Kerridge family scenes is usually a pleasure.’

Marjorie tucked a cigarette into an immensely

elegant ivory holder. It was a demonstration against the fact that smoking was now forbidden in the canteen. The gesture was weakened by her failure to light up.

‘It’s Susan you can’t abide,’ she said shrewdly.

‘Now that’s not fair. We’re always perfectly polite to each other. She’s still young. There’s lots of time for her to grow out of her...’ Carol’s voice faded away as she gazed over to the other side of the canteen. ‘Look at her now. Snotty little bitch.’

The Porters and the Kerridges were next-door neighbours on *Jubilee Terrace*, and (barring occasional upsets) bosom friends. The Porters had had just the one son, a ne’er-do-well youth who had emigrated to Australia where he was said, as even Mr Micawber was said, to be doing well. The Kerridges had a son and a daughter. The son was in the merchant navy. The actor who wants out of a soap is usually either killed or sent to the colonies. If he wants out with the option of occasional return spots he is as often as not sent to sea with the Royal or merchant navy, and the next the public hears of him he is doing pantomime in Worthing. The fact that Britain hardly has a fleet of any kind these days has not impinged on the world of soaps.

Which left the Kerridges’ daughter. Dawn was her name, and ten years back she had been an

enchancing child – played by a dire little tot from stage school, now with the Royal Shakespeare Company and infinitely contemptuous of television soaps. Dawn had disappeared from the series for a time, spoken of but not seen, and she had reappeared two years before, a pretty, pouting sixteen, and played by Susan Fyldes.

The two women stared over to where Susan was deep in conversation with Dawn’s current boyfriend, a young black actor with a pronounced public school accent.

‘I wouldn’t mind,’ said Carol, in a boding-ill voice, ‘if she didn’t keep throwing it at you how bloody well-born she is.’

‘Oh yes, we’ve all been told her family limps back to the seventeenth century,’ agreed Marjorie. ‘Who cares? And it’s hard to see that as a qualification for working on *Jubilee Terrace*.’

‘But she’s a good little actress,’ said Carol, very obviously trying to be fair. ‘She’s got the accent off almost as well as you have, and she does the sweet ingénue to the life.’

‘But a shade vacuous, don’t you feel?’

‘Well, but that’s not a drawback. The Kerridges in general are hardly likely to produce a mastermind.’

‘There is a blankness behind the eyes – the ultimate give-away,’ pronounced Marjorie magisterially. ‘Look at early Elizabeth Taylor

films.’ She watched the young pair’s close, conversing heads. ‘She seems to be getting on better with James at the moment.’

‘Darling, she *detests* him. It’s just as with you and Vernon. They’re good professionals.’

‘He’s certainly wonderfully handsome,’ said Marjorie. ‘I could fancy him myself.’

‘Fancy, yes,’ agreed Carol. ‘But not *like*. Considering they are currently the nation’s sweethearts they are neither of them very high in the likeability stakes.’

‘I know Bill absolutely loathes James,’ said Marjorie. ‘He’s been like a bear with a sore head ever since James came into the series. Look at him now – just *gazing* at them.’

They looked towards another table, where Bill Garrett and his *Jubilee Terrace* wife Liza Croome were drinking halves of lager. Bill and Liza played Bob and Sally Worseley, licensees of the Duke of York’s. The character of Bob, established there since the series began, was an ex-boxer, now publican, whose barmaid wife was a perpetual source of anxiety and sexual jealousy. Rather unfortunately life mirrored fiction, for Bill was in fact an ex-boxer whose tarty wife at home, and her goings-on with all and sundry, had provided staple canteen gossip for the *Terrace* cast since time immemorial. The fact that she had an occasional role in the *Terrace* did not help

matters. Liza Croome, however, was the reverse of her role: her blowsiness was a matter of make-up and accent, and she was in reality a gentle and warm-hearted soul who had acted as shoulder-to-weep-on to Bill in his emotional troubles more often than she cared to remember.

‘Of course Bill’s dislike of James is *racial*,’ said Marjorie, with that air of omniscience that many found irritating. ‘We all dislike him, but Bill dislikes him because he is black.’

‘How do you make that out?’ demanded Carol. ‘I’ve never heard him use words like “wog” or “nigger”, not about James or anyone else – and he would if that was the way he thought. Bill is rather uncouth underneath.’

‘He’s rather uncouth on top. But it’s obvious. Bill was a boxer. All the best boxers are black. He must have been knocked to the canvas – is that the expression? – countless times by black boxers, because he was never very *good*. I’m sure he nurses a grudge.’

‘You’re going off into one of your fantasy worlds,’ said Carol. ‘Bill was never a boxer, except to get a bit of money while he put himself through drama school. We all did the same – waitressing, barmaiding, right down to going on the game. Bill doesn’t nurse grudges through half a lifetime, and certainly not about being knocked to the canvas.’ She leant forward. ‘But I think there is a quite different explanation.’

‘And what is that?’

‘I think he fancies Susan.’

‘But he’s old enough to be her father!’

‘Didn’t we just agree we fancied James?’

Liza Croome sat beside Bill Garrett in what once would have been companionable silence. They had often been thus – or else Bill had sat there, telling her in a low voice and hopeless tones about the latest exploits of his wife. They were exceptionally close, though there was not a spark of sexual attraction between them. Liza knew him through and through, liked being near him, and could predict his every reaction. Almost as if *I were* his wife, she often thought – the wife in a long-established marriage which had settled into a comfortable and comforting routine.

But in the last few weeks a new element had entered, something she did not quite know how to cope with.

‘*Bill,*’ she said, a clear note of warning in her voice.

Bill sat up and shook himself.

‘Sorry, I was miles away.’

‘What were you thinking about?’ she asked, her voice back into neutral.

He turned to her, squared his shoulders, and said, as if he had received a sudden, divine clarification: ‘I’ve decided to leave Bet.’

It was what Liza had been urging him to do for years. Bet was no good for him – no good for anyone. She was a whore with a heart of steel. Now it had come, and she felt the need to inject a note of caution.

‘I’m glad. But it won’t do any good, you know.’

‘What do you mean?’

Liza nodded towards the table where Susan and James sat, still close and absorbed.

‘The only thing that will do any good there is to keep out of Susan’s way as much as possible – go out to the pub when she comes to the canteen, keep away from her dressing room, keep away from her on set. Just don’t go near her.’

‘Come off it. You don’t think I have hopes—’

‘You have dreams, which is no better. You let them invade real life, and that’s dangerous. You’ve just got to close down on the whole thing – like any other fire.’

Bill Garrett looked away from her.

‘She’s of age to come into the pub in a fortnight’s time,’ he muttered.

‘What do you mean? Susan’s twenty. She’s been going to pubs for years.’

‘Not Susan, Dawn Kerridge. She’ll be of age to come into the Duke of York’s. There’ll be a lot more scenes involving the two of us.’

That was true, and unwelcome. Liza Croome

wished that Susan would find a steady boyfriend, though she rather thought that at the moment she too much relished her position as sexual tease to the male cast of *Jubilee Terrace* and to the males of the nation at large.

‘We’ll insist on a close-up of the two of us there,’ said James. ‘When you say “I’ve never done it seriously before. Only at school for fun.”’

‘That’s right. And they can hold it for “I thought I was serious, but it was never like this.” Christ, what an awful line!’

‘Ghastly. But pure soap. It would be a pity to change it. Then they can back off a bit for the next lines, and then come closer as our two faces come together for the kiss, and you go down on to the bed.’

‘Cut. Cut before I get there. Reggie will insist on that. Leaving the mugs in doubt whether we do or we don’t.’

‘And in fact we *don’t*, because that’s going to come up in about six weeks’ time. Will we, won’t we? God, what a sickening pair. Pantomime would be a greater challenge.’ James stood up. ‘Right. That’s all settled. I don’t think Reggie will disagree about the close-ups. See you on set.’

He nodded brusquely and walked away. As she watched his back, Susan thought: I just love that

oily black skin. I could go for him, if he wasn't such a shit.

And, walking away, James Selcott – Will Brown in the soap – thought the equivalent. He generally referred to her to outsiders as a prick-tease with pretensions. Their judgements, in both cases, were eminently fair.

'Lady Wharton' sat in a corner of the main set, learning her lines. Winnie Hey, who played her, found remembering anything increasingly difficult as she got older. Winnie loved sitting on the *Terrace* set, felt that it was as good as sitting in the garden. The houses were small, though room by room each had been enlarged over the years. The scriptwriters wished they had made them larger than the traditional two-up two-down. Then extra characters could be moved in and out more convincingly. As it was one house could contain six or seven characters without it being explained where they all slept. The scriptwriters relied on viewers not noticing, but a regular trickle of mail testified to the fact that the devoted viewer did. A two bedroom house containing three generations of a family, with boyfriends or girlfriends in and out, was obviously full to bursting.

'Lady Wharton' had been a brainwave of Reggie Friedman, the director, about five years before. Not one of the other soaps, he insisted,

had a member of the aristocracy in it. Why should they be discriminated against? It could prove a trump card: *Jubilee Terrace* would be the only British soap with snob appeal. He carried the day: the people responsible for soaps love ‘onlys’ and ‘firsts’. Cyril Wharton had moved into a flat in the *Terrace* as the advance guard. He was a stage designer, and it was made clear that he was excessively mothered, and escaping from apron strings. His sexual leanings were sketched in, but they almost never met with success with the sturdy working-class boys of the *Terrace*. He decorated the spacious ground floor flat as if it were a set for *Lady Windermere’s Fan*. Not long after that his mother had moved in, and not long after that Cyril had fled to the more welcoming environment of San Francisco.

But Lady Wharton had remained in *Jubilee Terrace*. It was never quite explained why, but it was delicately hinted that she was genteelly hard-up. Her elder son, the present baronet, was something of a brute in merchant banking. Anyway, there she was, the *Terrace’s* cut-price Lady Bracknell – cut price only because the posse of scriptwriters never thought up lines for her anything like as good as Wilde’s. Winnie was overjoyed she had been kept in. Stable employment was something to be valued at her age. She had been hard-up all her life – and not

gently so. At times she had been cold, she had been hungry. Now she had recognition on buses and tubes, and above all butter on her bread. It was something a young actor might throw away, but not an old one. It was worth clinging to. Winnie, frowning, concentrated on her lines.

‘The haddock you sold me yesterday was so dubious even the cat thought twice,’ she intoned.

‘Hello, Winnie.’

It was Reggie Friedman, breezing by. He was always breezing by, or throwing information at you in rapid staccato and not waiting for your reaction. Reggie had been the principal director of *Jubilee Terrace* for seven years, and still seemed to revel in it. This time, for once, he darted over.

‘I’ve had a marvellous idea, Winnie. To fill the gap left by Bert Porter’s death. I thought of the Kerridge boy, but Phil has got a long-term contract with the Glasgow Citizens, and he’s not interested till next year at the earliest. But I’ve come up with something much better. We’ll have Cyril back.’

Winnie’s voice suddenly failed her. By the time she did get out ‘Oh no, not Cyril’ Reggie was in full flood of enthusiasm.

‘Yes. Isn’t it a great idea? Back from San Francisco. Big mystery. Why has he come home? And you know why? He’s got tuberculosis. Come home to die. Isn’t that a fabulous plot-line? None

of the other soaps has woken up to the resurgence of tuberculosis. We've all had tactful looks at senile dementia. And of course there isn't a soap that hasn't done AIDS. But all the time TB has been staging a comeback.'

'Is tuberculosis rife in San Francisco?' Winnie asked faintly. But Reggie was edging away.

'Who cares? We'll have got in first. It's a plot-line to die for, and a real trail-blazer.'

To his departing back Winnie Hey wailed: 'Not Cyril. Please Reggie. Not Hamish Fawley.'

But by then Reggie had disappeared through the swing doors. It was some time before Winnie thought of a crumb of comfort: if this was to be the story-line that brought him back, it was likely that his reappearance would be terminal.

Bill Garrett had phoned his wife from the car, so when he arrived home she already had her coat on and they did no more than pass in the doorway.

'Angela's out, Debbie and Rosie are in their rooms. You can fucking babysit – I've had them all day.'

'They're not babies, and they've been at school most of the day. Where are you going?'

'What do you care? Anyway, you're not my fucking probation officer.'

And she breezed out.

Bill went to the kitchen and made himself a

cup of tea. Upstairs he heard his two younger daughters shouting between bedrooms. They always gave him a bit of time when he got home – to stop being Bob Worseley and to start being Bill again was how they put it – and he appreciated their consideration. They were lovely girls, all three of them, the centre of his life. It was as if nothing of their mother had gone into their making. They were kind, concerned, intelligent – none of those words you could apply to Bet.

Sipping his tea, Bill considered his resolution to divorce his wife. Certainly she had given him more than enough reason, and she gave him almost daily evidence that she only stayed with him for materialistic reasons – food, drink, heating, lighting, pocket money and a degree of local cachet as the wife of a television personality.

There was, in fact, nothing left of the marriage, not for her and certainly not for him. He had no doubt she would prefer him to have custody of the children. Why had he not cut the knot years ago? He could only assume it was the pull of habit, a fear of having full responsibility for the girls. But that wasn't something he feared – more something he desired. He would protect them from the contamination of contact with their mother. He concluded it was his habitual lethargy that held him back, just as it had held him back

from quitting *Jubilee Terrace* and entering the unknown, terrifying world of being a jobbing actor, one with no clear idea of where the next job, and the next money, was going to come from. He had been guilty of lethargy – lethargy and cowardice. Well, no longer.

‘Daddy,’ said Rosie, as she and Debbie and the returned Angela – nine, twelve and blooming fifteen – sat on or around him on the sofa half an hour later. ‘Did Mummy tell you?’

‘I shouldn’t think so,’ said Bill. ‘We didn’t have time for many words.’

‘She’s going back into *Jubilee Terrace*. Three weeks’ work.’

‘They might have told me. When’s this?’

‘Early next month.’

‘So soon. Why didn’t they let her know earlier?’

‘I don’t know. She seemed pleased.’

I bet she seemed pleased, said Bill to himself. Bet loved her occasional sorties into the Terrace. They were a heaven-sent opportunity to humiliate him. Who would it be this time? Reggie? James? No, not the latter. He couldn’t see the suave young man courting sneers by going with a brassy woman of forty-two. Maybe the returned Hamish, who was in real life as hetero as the character he played was homo.

One thing was for certain: she would be out

to humiliate him, but now he would be just as determined to humiliate her. He remembered, back in the days when *EastEnders* was watchable, Dirty Den serving divorce papers on Angie as her much-trumpeted Christmas present. Pity Christmas was so far in the future. Hallowe'en would hardly have the same effect. Even Easter would have been something. Still, he could make it as public as possible.

Then he sighed.

He wasn't that sort of man. Not loud, not public, not demonstrative. He'd do things privately, softly, considerately. He wondered in his mind whether Bet had ever done anything considerately in her life. Never, he thought. Never.