

## Chapter 1 *Old friends*

It was lunchtime. I'd been in the *Jolly Sailor* pub in west London for about half an hour, when I saw a man sitting by himself in a corner of the room. Although I didn't know his name I was sure I knew him from somewhere. He had grey hair and he was looking out of the window at the River Thames.

I don't usually go to the pub at lunchtime, but it was the birthday of one of the other journalists at work. There were four of us. I asked them if they knew the man sitting in the corner. They looked over, but no-one knew him. I don't know why, but I just kept looking at him, trying to remember.

Finally, when we were all about to go back to work, the man turned round and looked straight at me. He knew me, I could see, because he smiled at me. Who was he? Then I realised it was someone I had been at university with five years ago. I couldn't remember his name immediately. He looked so old. He started to get up from his chair and I walked over to him. As I got closer I remembered his name.

'Carl,' I said, 'good to see you. What are you doing here?' I held out my hand.

'John, what a surprise! It's been such a long time.' He shook my hand and then put both hands on my arms. 'It's good to see you. You know, you're the first person I've seen

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from university for a long time. Those were good times, weren't they?'

It was clear that Carl was pleased to see me, but at first he wasn't sure what to say to me. He looked so different from the young, happy student I used to know. We were the same age but he looked a lot older than me. His hair was going grey and his face had a worried look. He was also much thinner than I remembered him.

Carl pointed at the seat he had just left. 'Let's sit down,' he said. 'I'll get you a drink.' I had to go back to work, but Carl was an old friend, a good friend – we'd had a lot of fun together at university. I couldn't say no.

'Yes,' I said, 'OK.' I told my friends from work that I would come back to the office soon. They left and I waited while Carl bought two drinks. It was hard to believe this was the same man I had been to university with. He looked so white and thin. Had something happened to him? Maybe he's just been in hospital, I thought.

Because I'm a journalist I always ask questions, but when Carl came back with the drinks, I didn't say anything about the way he looked.

'So, Carl,' I said, 'I've just been trying to remember the last time we met. I think it was at your wedding. That was quite a day, wasn't it?' Carl just nodded his head and smiled in a sad way. I didn't know what else to say, so I kept talking.

'Isn't it terrible that we haven't seen each other since then?' I said. 'How's Linda? Have you got any kids yet?' Carl stopped smiling and looked at me strangely. I knew I'd said the wrong thing, but I had to ask about his wife Linda. Linda went to the same university as us and she was

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beautiful. We were all good friends and we'd had a lot of fun together at university. Linda was fun to be with.

Carl had always been a serious person. He'd worked very hard and did well in his exams. When I used to try and make him go out for the evening he often said that he had too much work to do. I thought that Linda would soon get tired of him. Sometimes Linda and I went out together to have fun and left Carl with his books.

She must have liked the fact that he was serious because a year after they had finished at university Carl and Linda got married. It was a great wedding and they both looked so happy. They were obviously very much in love.

Had something happened to their marriage? Something must have happened to them since then, but I was afraid to ask.

Carl now looked at me in a serious way. I could see he wasn't happy. He was wearing a suit, but he wasn't wearing a tie and I wanted to ask him if he was working at the moment. But I didn't ask him and, as we drank our beer, I told him about what I'd been doing for the last four or five years. I told him how I'd found it difficult to get a job when I first left university.

'You know, Carl, I was never able to study like you did, and when I had to go and get a job I found it really hard. For a couple of years I worked on small newspapers all over the place. I spent two years in Devon. Beautiful but very quiet . . .'

I thought that Carl might want to know how I moved to a big national newspaper, how hard I now worked, but I could see he wasn't very interested. He kept looking out of the window at the river.

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‘. . . So finally, about six months ago, I decided it was time to come to London. There was nothing to keep me in Devon. No family, you know? I haven’t been able to find a girl who wants to marry me yet. Perhaps I never will!’ I said. For the first time since I had started telling him about myself Carl seemed to be listening.

‘Don’t work too hard if you do get married . . .’ Carl said. ‘I worked too hard and it finished my marriage.’

‘Oh dear,’ I replied. ‘What happened, Carl? You don’t look very happy. Where’s Linda?’

‘Happy? You’re right, John. No, I’m not happy and I’m not sure I ever will be again . . .’ He stopped talking and looked out of the window again. He finished his beer and then said, ‘But you don’t want to hear my story . . .’

But I *did* want to hear his story. After all, I was a journalist. I wrote stories as a job. I was always interested in stories. And I was especially interested in Carl’s story. He was my friend. So was Linda. Of course I wanted to know.

‘Tell me what happened with you and Linda,’ I said. He looked at me for a minute to see if I was serious and then said, ‘You know, when Linda agreed to marry me I thought I had everything. It was wonderful. I got a good job in London as soon as we left university. It was hard work – I was working most weekends – and for a couple of years we didn’t take a holiday. But it was good money and we soon had enough to buy a flat. Linda had her friends and she seemed to like her job as well. We liked doing the same things, I thought, and I hoped that I’d soon have more time for us to spend together . . .’ He stopped talking for a few seconds.

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‘It was Linda’s idea to buy the house by the sea. It was going to be a place we could go to together at weekends. She loved the place. I understand why now,’ he said, and then laughed in a sad way.

‘Linda said London was dirty and noisy and the flat was boring. You know Linda, John. If she didn’t like something she always said it was boring.’

He stopped for a moment and then in a voice full of anger he said: ‘I wish I’d never seen that house. Never mind, John. You don’t want to hear all this.’

I felt uncomfortable. This was not the Carl I used to know. I looked at my watch. It was nearly two o’clock. I had to go back to work, but I also wanted to know what had happened to my old friend, what had changed him so much.

‘I’m sorry, Carl, I’d really like to hear your story, but I have to get back to work. Look, why don’t we meet somewhere another night?’

We decided to meet in a pub we both knew the next evening. It was close to where I lived and was a much quieter place than the *Jolly Sailor*. I thought it would be easier for Carl to tell his story.

I was a bit late leaving work the next day and when I got to the pub Carl was already there. He was sitting with his back to the door in a quiet corner. I walked over to him and he stood up quickly. He looked worried.

‘I’m pleased you’re here,’ he said. ‘I thought perhaps you weren’t coming.’

‘Of course I came,’ I said. ‘Sit down and I’ll get the beers.’ When I returned with two beers, Carl said:

‘Thanks for coming. I’ve been thinking, and I really feel