

England 1995

‘Hey, Jan, look at this!’ Carol said. She had a letter in her hand and took it across to her husband at the breakfast table. ‘It’s from the Oxford Orchestra,’ she said. ‘They’re giving concerts in the Czech Republic this Christmas. They’re doing three concerts in Prague and they’re asking me to go because they need a harpist. Shall we go to Prague for Christmas? I can play with the orchestra, and you can come with us.’

‘When are the concerts?’ asked Jan. ‘I always have a lot of work in the weeks before Christmas. I must finish writing my new book then.’

Jan taught Czech at Oxford University and wrote books about languages. He was born in Czechoslovakia, but came to England with his father when he was very young. He met Carol when she was one of his students at university.

‘The first concert is on December 20th,’ Carol answered. ‘Are you free then?’

‘No, I’m sorry, Carol,’ Jan said, ‘but I can’t come before December 24th.’

‘Well, it doesn’t matter. You can come for the second concert. It’s on December 25th.’

‘But what about my father?’ said Jan. ‘We can’t go away and leave him at Christmas time. He loves a family Christmas with us – you know that.’



Jan's father came slowly into the room.

Josef Vlach was sixty-eight years old, and his eyes were bad. He couldn't see very well, so he lived with Carol and Jan.

'Josef can come with us,' Carol said. 'He often talks about Prague at Christmas. He says it's the most beautiful time of the year there because of all the snow on the old buildings.'

'I know,' said Jan. 'But he only talks about Prague. He never wants to go there. Every time we ask him to come with us, he says no. I don't know why, but I think it's because of my mother. When he thinks about Prague, he remembers her. You know, sometimes he cries when he looks at his photo of her – after all these years!'

Just then the door opened and Jan's father came slowly into the room.

'Good morning,' he said, and sat down at the table. 'Is there any coffee?'

'It's cold now,' said Carol. 'Shall I make you some more?'

'Thank you, my dear,' he answered. 'You're very good to me.'

Carol went out for some coffee. Jan looked at his father carefully. 'I must ask him now,' he thought, 'while Carol is out of the room.'

'You're very quiet, Jan,' said the old man. 'Is something wrong?'

'No, no,' said Jan quickly. 'Nothing's wrong. It's just ... I want to ask you a question, but I ... I ... it's difficult.'

Jan stopped. His father smiled.

'Difficult? Why is it difficult? Are you afraid of an old man?'

'Of course not,' said Jan. 'But I *am* afraid of your answer. You see, Carol wants to go very much. She loves playing her harp, but it's Christmas time and—'

'Stop!' said Josef. 'What are you talking about? Where does Carol want to go at Christmas?'

'To Prague,' said Jan. 'And I would like to go with her. We want you to come too.'

'Ah!' said the old man. 'To Prague. I understand now.'

The room was suddenly very quiet. Jan drank his cold coffee and waited.

The old man took something out of his pocket. It was a photograph of his dead wife, Jan's mother. He spoke very quietly – not to Jan, but to the photograph in his hand.

'Perhaps now ... before I die ... just once I can go back again ...'

Carol came back with some hot coffee. She looked at Josef, then at Jan.

'Shhh ... He's thinking about Prague,' Jan said quietly.

Carol put the coffee on the table and sat down. The hands on the clock slowly moved through two long minutes. Then the old man put the photograph back in his pocket.

'All right,' he said. 'Let's all go to Prague for Christmas. It's beautiful there when it snows. I remember it so well ... so very well.'



'Let's all go to Prague for Christmas.'

The accident

The first rehearsal began at nine o'clock and finished at two o'clock.

'What a long morning!' everyone said.

'I'm sorry,' said the conductor, 'but we have very little time. The first concert is tomorrow night and a lot of important people are coming, so we must play well. Now please go and eat. This afternoon is free, so you can go and look at this beautiful city. Tomorrow morning we begin again at nine o'clock. Please don't be late!'



'We must play well.'

Carol left the rehearsal room with Alan, one of the first violinists.

'What are you going to do this afternoon, Carol?' Alan asked.

'I'm going to get a quick sandwich, and then I'm going shopping,' Carol said. 'My husband Jan and his father are arriving on Sunday. Monday is Christmas Day, and I haven't got any presents for them. I must find something this afternoon – our only free afternoon.'



'I must find something this afternoon.'

'See you tomorrow, then,' said Alan. 'And good luck with the shopping!'

'Thanks,' Carol said. 'There are some wonderful shops in the Stare Mesto, the old town, so I'm going down there.'

Carol went into a lot of shops that afternoon. In the end she got a book for Jan and a picture for his father. When she left the old town, it was nearly dark. It was very cold, so she walked quickly through the streets back to her hotel. There were Christmas trees in all the shop windows, and the city looked beautiful. There was a lot of noise too – people, cars, taxis, buses. 'Everybody's doing their Christmas shopping,' Carol thought.



'Jan! Jan! It's me, Carol!'

Suddenly she saw a man across the street. It was Jan! Why was he in Prague so soon?

'Jan!' she shouted across the street. But Jan didn't hear her. He walked on. Carol shouted again, very loudly.

'Jan! Jan! It's me, Carol!'

A lot of people stopped this time. They all looked at her. The man stopped too. He turned and looked at Carol for a minute, but he didn't smile and he didn't speak. It was a very long minute for Carol. Her husband's eyes were cold, and Carol began to feel afraid.



There was a sudden noise and somebody shouted.

Then he moved and began to walk away from Carol down a little street. Carol did not understand it, but she knew one thing – she did not want to lose him.

‘Perhaps he didn’t see me very well. It’s so dark now ... He’s going ... Where is he going? Jan, come back ... Are you ill?’

She ran across the street.

There was a sudden noise and somebody shouted. Two seconds later Carol lay in the snow.

‘She ran right in front of me,’ the bus driver said later. ‘I couldn’t stop – there was no time.’

Carol’s face was white and her eyes were closed. Soon an ambulance came and took her body away.

Was she alive or dead?

* * *

At nine o’clock the next morning the conductor was ready to begin the rehearsal. He opened his music and the orchestra started to play. Suddenly his hands stopped moving and the music stopped at once.

‘Harpist!’ the conductor shouted angrily. ‘What’s the matter with you? Are you sleeping? You begin to play here.’

‘Excuse me, Mr Rinaldi,’ said someone at the back of the room. ‘The harpist is not here.’

Everyone turned and looked at the harp at the back of the orchestra. It was true. There was nobody in the harpist’s chair.

‘Well, where is she?’ asked the conductor. There was no answer. ‘We can’t wait for her,’ he said. ‘We must have this rehearsal without her. Where is Alan? He can speak some Czech.’

Alan stood up.

'Can you go to the hotel and look for her there?' the conductor asked. 'Then come back here at once – with or without her.'



'Can you go to the hotel and look for her there?'

Alan left. Half an hour later he was back.

'She's not at the hotel,' he said. 'I spoke to two or three people in the hotel, and they say that Carol wasn't there at breakfast this morning. And they think that she didn't sleep in her room last night.'

'I don't like this,' said the conductor. 'Carol is never late for rehearsals, and she knows that these concerts are important for us. I think we must tell the police.'

'Shall I do it now?' Alan asked.

'Yes,' said the conductor. 'Please go now.'

Read Chapters 2 and 3, then answer these questions.

Who

- 1 ... wanted to go to Prague to play in some concerts?
- 2 ... was writing a new book?
- 3 ... talked about Prague but never wanted to go there?
- 4 ... went shopping in Prague?
- 5 ... looked at Carol in the street, but didn't smile?
- 6 ... couldn't stop because there was no time?
- 7 ... was angry because Carol was not at the rehearsal?

**Before you read Chapter 4, can you guess what happens?
Tick one box for each sentence.**

- | | YES | NO |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1 Carol is dead. | ☐ | ☐ |
| 2 Carol is in hospital, but she can't remember anything. | ☐ | ☐ |
| 3 Carol is in hospital and she is going to be OK. | ☐ | ☐ |