



## **The Invitation by Jay Mountney**

### *Wolf's Lair*

Joe used the campsite facilities grumbling under his breath. He had hardly slept. The noise of trains and of dogs barking had kept him merely dozing all night. His companions swore they had heard nothing and all three looked well-rested and fresh. Luke was preparing what he called breakfast though it was, Joe thought, just coffee, Malcolm was shaving, whistling as he did so, and Oliver was re-reading the pamphlet they'd been given when they booked in the previous evening.

"Hurry up, you lot." Oliver sounded thoroughly impatient and Joe sighed as he dressed. His best friend, Paul, had come down with a dose of summer flu and as he'd already paid towards this holiday Joe had ended up camping in Poland with a trio of Paul's work friends, guys he didn't know well and frankly didn't want to know better. They were too much the outdoor type for him, he reflected. Plus, they seemed to know all about various sports he had barely heard of.

"What's the rush?" he asked now.

“The overnight camping permit gives us access to the site before the day trippers arrive,” said Malcolm. “We’ll have it almost to ourselves for an hour if we start now.” He gestured to the camp which was admittedly nearly empty. Joe wasn’t surprised. The facilities were barely even basic, and there had been no shops nearby so they made do with black coffee and tightened their belts after last night’s dinner of tinned beans on somewhat uneven toast. It could, he thought, have been worse. The previous site had had a shop but the woman in charge had sold them drinking yoghurt instead of milk despite knowing their knowledge of Polish was non-existent. Or perhaps because of that.

It would be interesting, he reflected, to see the famous Wolf’s Lair without the added bonus of crowds. He loved history and had made sure he read all about the place before coming there. Hitler had chosen a place with plenty of rocks and trees to disguise his eastern fortress. Joe swallowed his coffee – no sense risking dehydration even if it wasn’t a particularly hot summer – and followed his companions to the entrance gate.

The whole site was atmospheric and Joe wondered whether it would feel as eerie if there were crowds, as there would be later. The massive stone bunkers were overgrown with trees and there was a raven sitting watching them outside one. It wasn’t safe to go inside, of course, but it was possible to imagine being within these dour walls. He thought even the Fuehrer’s high command must have felt a certain amount of impending doom though maybe not. And doom was in the end reserved for Berlin, not Eastern Poland, after all.

As well as the raven there was a young man watching him. A very hot young man, though Joe wasn’t about to make assumptions. He had liked the look of Oliver but it turned out Paul’s friends were all totally straight, like Paul for that matter. Joe’s gaydar was unreliable, perhaps because he was comparatively inexperienced. He kept himself to himself most of the time and buried himself in his work which was an online IT job that gave little opportunity for human interaction. Paul was his housemate and had suggested this holiday as a way of tearing Joe away from the screen for a couple of weeks. It was a pity it had turned out the way it had – not exactly dire but less joyous than he had secretly hoped.

The young man clearly didn’t share Joe’s inhibitions. He strolled across and started chatting.

“You are enjoying the tour?” His accent was strong; middle European but Joe couldn’t quite identify it. The man must have heard him speaking English to Oliver and the other two before they went ahead while Joe read one of the information panels.

“I am, yes,” he said. “I’ve always liked history and this is fascinating.”

They chatted about the ruins for a while, falling into easy conversation as if they’d known each other for years rather than ten minutes. They introduced themselves and the young man’s name was Carl, or Karl. Joe didn’t ask for the spelling. His blond hair and blue eyes were appealing, and whilst he was fit and toned he wasn’t as muscular as Joe’s camping group, so Joe enjoyed looking at him as they spoke.

“I know the place wouldn’t have been as overgrown back in the day,” he said, “but even so, it’s deep in the woods. It must have felt overwhelming at times.”

“It was overwhelming to those who did not wish to be here,” said Carl. “There were many who were conscripted and there was some slave labour for the buildings.”

Joe shuddered but didn’t say anything. He wasn’t sure what nationality Carl might be or what his political opinions were. Of course, modern Germans and Poles officially despised the Nazi movement but there were always those who disagreed with official policy. No sense spoiling a pleasant conversation with an unnecessary argument. They walked on, following the others but remaining some way behind.

“I saw you in the camp,” said Carl. “Did you sleep well?”

“No,” Joe said. He talked about the noise, the trains and dogs.

Carl nodded. "That can be a problem," he agreed. "The trains used to come at all hours with workers, with supplies, with weapons. The dogs – German Shepherds, all of them. Well trained, but noisy brutes."

"My friends didn't hear them," Joe told him. "They must have been exhausted after they'd been for a run. I stayed on the site reading but now I wish I'd done something to tire myself out."

Carl smiled, his face lightening the dimness of the wooded path. "Maybe you would have heard them anyway," he said. "You seem to be a sensitive man, and you said that you like history." He stopped suddenly, and Joe realised they had reached the end of the tour path.

"I hope to see you again," said Carl. "Are you going to other sites?"

"I think Malbork Castle is next on the itinerary," said Joe. "Or soon, anyway."

"I will go there too," said Carl, sounding as though he'd only just decided.

"Meanwhile, I must say goodbye for now." He held out his hand and Joe shook it. Carl lingered, holding his hand longer than necessary, and smiling again. Then he turned and walked back in the direction from which they'd just come.

Joe shrugged. Maybe Carl, too, had friends he needed to rejoin. He watched him, admiring the tight trousers outlining a very attractive figure. Oh well, it was hardly a gay pub or club, though maybe if they met again he could make some kind of move.

"Daydreaming?" Luke's voice shook him back to the path ahead.

"No," he said. "Just finished chatting to someone and saying goodbye."

Luke frowned. "But..." He paused. The implication was that there was nobody in sight but of course there wasn't. Carl had rounded a bend in the path and was hidden by the trees.

"We found your railway line." Malcolm's tone was teasing and Joe couldn't think why until he saw the track, almost buried in grass and with gaps every now and then where people must have taken rails and sleepers for other purposes.

"Dream trains," said Oliver, laughing. "Oh, and I asked at the gate. There are no dogs on the site, and the nearest farm is a couple of kilometres away."

Joe could have sworn the noises had been real. Carl had sympathised, or had he? Had he just been humouring the strange Englishman? He joined in the laughter, accepting the joke, and swept his dark hair out of his eyes, blinking in the sun after the darkness among the trees.

There was now a line at the gate, and he could see that any minute the place would be overrun with tourists including screaming giggling children and teenagers, probably playing hide and seek among the stones. He was glad they'd had it almost to themselves. But it was mid morning, time to pack up and move on to the next point of interest.

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### *Forest Interlude*

There was an interlude of a couple of days when they visited the 'primeval' forest and saw the European bison (and other native wildlife) at a reserve rather than try to spot them in the woods. They were wary of the insects that were apparently a Polish version of horseflies but which Joe privately called bison flies. They were huge and possibly aggressive. The campsite they chose, or rather, the only one available, had better facilities than the one at Wolf's Lair but was also partially occupied by a group of Dutch students who took turns singing each other awake at some unearthly hour of the morning. When they had departed on their bikes to do some kind of research among the trees Oliver found an ants' nest and tipped it into one of their tents. Some Polish campers, watching, applauded.

Joe was aware that he had let himself in for all this by agreeing to a camping holiday but had mistakenly thought of well-appointed sites on the outskirts of towns, evenings in pubs and peaceful sleep. Perhaps if Paul had been able to join them he might have jollied Joe out of what was turning into misery.

His thoughts kept returning to Carl. There had been something special about the man, not just his blond colouring, his sparkling eyes and his undeniably attractive figure, but something in his whole manner, a glimpse of a character that seemed more to Joe's taste than that of the hearty campers he found himself surrounded by. He hoped they would meet again but knew perfectly well that it was highly unlikely.

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## *Gdansk*

So on to Gdansk. It was a beautiful small city with an interesting waterfront, once a busy port and now a visitor attraction. Unlike some of the places Joe had seen on this trip and others, Gdansk was clearly lived in and enjoyed by its inhabitants and was by no means a museum piece even though much of it had been rebuilt after the war. He was admiring some amber jewellery and regretfully deciding he couldn't find anything he could personally wear when he realised he had somehow managed to separate himself from the others. He headed for the shops and bars along the riverside, hoping to find them there. Instead he saw Carl, standing under the old wooden crane mechanism, looking pensive, and every bit as attractive as Joe remembered. He was alone again, but then so was Joe. It didn't mean anything. It was all too easy to lose companions in the crowded streets.

Carl's smile glowed when he saw Joe and soon they were talking as if the previous few days had not separated the Wolf's Lair visit and this one.

"I thought you were going to Malbork?" His accent was still not something Joe recognised but it was musical. Like most non-native speakers he always used the full versions of things like 'did not' and 'you will' and Joe found his voice interesting to listen to.

"We still mean to visit Malbork," he said now. "But we got sidetracked and ended up here." Then he told him about the forest and the bison flies and the students, eliciting sympathy and smiles at the same time. "I thought you were going straight to Malbork," he finished.

"Like you, we were tracked to the side," said Carl, still not saying anything about his companions. He had to know about Joe's because he had seen them at the Wolf's Lair campsite.

They wandered along the bank, talking about the buildings and the history, and it didn't really surprise Joe when he felt his hand held in a way that would let him escape if he wished. Instead, he tangled his fingers with Carl's and they walked on.

"There were many Germans here," said Carl. "They thought of themselves as local people since some of the families had been here for generations. But of course after the war they had to leave. During the occupation, like everyone in the Reich, the young ones had to work for the Nazis. There was no possible refusal." He looked sad and Joe wondered if he had relatives involved. Grandparents, maybe. He didn't want to pry so didn't ask and Carl didn't volunteer any further information.

They reached the outskirts of the built-up area and turned back. Joe was holding Carl's hand fiercely, the action setting up pins and needles. But he was enjoying the contact and what it might mean. Though what could it mean? He could hardly invite a comparative stranger back to his tent for the evening and he had no idea where Carl was staying. He

certainly hadn't been on the campsite at Wolf's Lair though Joe had a sudden fleeting thought about why, in that case, he had been in the site like them, before the tourists.

Suddenly Luke's voice broke into his thoughts.

"There you are at last. We thought we'd lost you and would have to admit to Paul that we left you stranded in Eastern Europe."

Joe grinned and turned to introduce Carl to the others but the young man had vanished into the crowd. Joe gulped.

"All on your own, too. Still, you like all this historical stuff so I expect you weren't bored." Oliver was speaking now.

Joe started to say that he hadn't been alone but stopped. Surely they had seen Carl. Apparently not, and the only thing that proved he had ever been there was the remaining cramp in Joe's hand.

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## *Malbork*

Malbork was a striking Teutonic castle, parts of it still intact or carefully restored. The main initial impression was in fact the number of Russian tour coaches, old buses disgorging well dressed passengers all talking excitedly and rushing to look round. Oliver smiled at Joe.

"We know you're going to want to linger over all the mediaeval stuff," he said.

"We're going to dash round if we can get past the Russians and then go for a drink or two."

They arranged where and when to meet. Joe took careful note of where their SUV was parked and headed off happily to explore at leisure. The castle was huge, and in its heyday must have been like a large village or even a small town. There was plenty to see and admire.

He felt a hand slip into his own and realised Carl had found him. They looked around the castle and Joe read various bits of information on his phone, sharing his delight with Carl. Then he found himself dragged into what might have been a cupboard or closet of some kind and decided he didn't mind at all. Carl kissed him, tentatively at first then fiercely when Joe offered no resistance. Soon they were rubbing against each other, desperate for release. When it came, or rather when they both came, Joe could hardly believe he'd behaved like a horny teenager, but at the same time he could also hardly believe his luck. Carl, he thought, was perfect. He let his shirt hang outside his pants to hide the state they were in, and saw Carl do the same. They didn't talk straight away but left the small recess and continued their explorations.

"You could be a Teutonic knight yourself with your blond hair," Joe murmured to Carl.

"They were all Scandinavian," said Carl. "They came on their way to the Holy Land. Poland was the place where all the roads met." He frowned and looked inquiringly at Joe.

"You mean a crossroads and yes, Poland was that for much of Europe," said Joe.

"Anyway, you look quite Scandinavian." He half hoped for more information about Carl's nationality and family but didn't get anything.

"A very perfect Aryan," was all Carl said, sarcasm colouring his voice.

After a while Joe checked his phone again to see what time it was. To his dismay they had scarcely time to get to the car park. He knew the others would wait but didn't want to be a nuisance. He was sure they would have cut short their drinking time to be at the car to meet him.

"Warsaw next," he told Carl as they hurried out of the main ruins. He felt rather than saw Carl slip away as his friends came into sight. He rushed towards them, apologising for being late.

“No problem,” said Malcolm. “I just hope you enjoyed yourself all on your own.”

“But...” said Joe.

“We saw you walking round by yourself,” Malcolm continued. “Still, you were smiling so you must have been happy about it.”

Joe frowned. He hadn't been alone for even a moment, though perhaps Carl had been invisible behind a corner or a pile of stones. Or perhaps he'd just come across as someone else in the crowd and nobody had noticed that they were holding hands. He didn't argue. Paul knew he was gay but he wasn't sure these guys did. He wasn't exactly in the closet but he rarely shared his private life with anyone other than his immediate friends and family. He got into the car and mentally prepared for the next stage of their holiday.

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## *Warsaw*

Warsaw was an exciting city and Joe loved seeing in person some of the sites he was familiar with from his studies. He was almost unsurprised to see Carl at the top of the huge Russian-built Palace of Culture and Science known as the ‘Wedding Cake’. He supposed Carl and whoever he was travelling with must be following a similar itinerary to his own and thought he had also recognised a few other faces in the crowd. They talked about the city and Joe mentioned the famous or infamous ghetto which he'd visited earlier. Carl frowned.

“It was very terrible, what the Nazis did here, and so many Germans were unable to stop them,” he said.

“Poles too, and others,” Joe pointed out.

“Yes, but it was all started by Hitler and his cronies,” was all Carl said.

They spent perhaps half an hour chatting and admiring the view. Joe invited Carl to come back to the camp site which was near the city centre for dinner with him and his group but Carl refused, politely but vaguely saying he had other commitments. There was nowhere in the ‘Wedding Cake’ where they could be alone. The restrooms were the height of luxury but full of people coming and going. There were guards everywhere, checking bags and checking behaviour.

Eventually Carl said he had to leave and Joe rejoined Oliver and the others. They went to the old town, beautifully restored but more like a museum than Gdansk had been, then back to the campsite. They were woken early by a group of Dutch people with mobile homes, leaving at the crack of dawn and talking at the top of their voices.

“Probably the parents of those students,” said Malcolm and they all wished they had an ants' nest handy.

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## *Berlin*

They left Poland and headed for Berlin. On the way east they had ‘done’ the city centre with a night at a hostel and now they camped on the outskirts. The site had been some kind of crossing post when Berlin had been divided and the sense of history was everywhere. At least, it was for Joe. The others seemed more concerned with the bar and the facilities. Joe went to the nearby Wannsee House the next day, leaving his companions relaxing in sunshine. He was determined to see the place where the horrific Wannsee plan or agreement had been formulated but Oliver pointed out that they weren't history buffs like him. The house was

attractive and set in well tended grounds. The pleasant exterior made the grim photographs and documents inside even more chilling. Joe had stopped being surprised when he found Carl beside him. After a while they both felt they could take no more horror and went out into the gardens where they sat in some shade under a tree.

“You see what happened,” said Carl. “And many young people were caught up in it, forced to join the Hitler Youth to avoid suspicion, especially if they had any Jewish ancestors.”

They talked sombrely about the holocaust and the mentality that had led to it, then Joe said he’d better get back to the camp.

“We’re leaving tomorrow,” he said. “Driving straight through to the coast and the ferry. So I may not see you again.”

“Unless I visit England?” Carl sounded uncertain but hopeful.

“If you do, and you visit me, I shall be delighted,” Joe told him.

“Are there campsites and hotels near your home?”

Joe laughed. “I have no idea, never having had a need for them, but in any case, you could stay with me. Paul and I have a spare bedroom.” He didn’t point out that Carl could sleep with him; it somehow seemed too forward, even after their embraces at Malbork.

“Paul?”

“I told you about him. My housemate who arranged this trip then couldn’t come.”

“He is your boyfriend?”

“No, no, just a friend.”

“And he would not mind if I stayed in your house?”

“He wouldn’t, but it wouldn’t be up to him. It’s my house and he’s a tenant, really, someone I took in to help with the bills. Plus, he’s moving soon because his firm want him to work at a different branch.”

“You must give me your address.”

Joe gave him one of his business cards that had his address and his mobile number.; it really sounded as if Carl might come and he felt excited by the prospect.

Again, he suggested Carl should come back to the campsite, at least for a drink, but again Carl rejected the idea. He also refused to go for a quick drink near the Wannsee House and Joe didn’t want to push too hard. He had no intention of being too intense and then Carl deciding not to come to England. He would have liked another session of a sexual nature but it was good sitting in the gardens holding hands. And there was England, now, to look forward to.

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## *Manchester*

All too soon they were on the ferry then disembarking in Hull. Then there was the motorway journey to Manchester and Joe was dropped off at his house in Didsbury. The goodbyes were friendly enough but he didn’t think they’d stay in touch if Paul moved, as he probably would.

Paul greeted him with the news that he’d be moving out within the week since his new role would see him in an office in Liverpool and the commute would be stupid. Was already stupid.

“Especially with the state of the train service nowadays,” he said gloomily. “One of my new co-workers has offered to put me up till I find something more permanent. I’m sorry to leave you in the lurch but I think you expected it?”

“Yes, and although it’s been good having a housemate I can manage without,” said Joe. “And thanks for arranging the holiday. I’m just sorry you couldn’t be with us. We’ve seen some incredible places.”

“And you look really happy.”

“I met someone...” Joe grinned but didn’t continue.

“That’s great. Someone you can see here?”

“Well, he’s planning to visit.” He didn’t say any more but a couple of days later Paul said he’d been in both the Manchester and Liverpool offices and had seen the guys Joe had been to Poland with.

“They said you were a bit of a loner,” he told Joe. “And they didn’t see you with anyone so presumably you didn’t introduce tall, dark and handsome.”

“Blond,” Joe corrected, “but no, I didn’t. You know, the three were fine to travel with and I’m glad I went, but we didn’t really gel, and I did quite a bit of exploring on my own.”

Paul smiled. “Historical sites and such,” he said. “While they either went for a run or a drink.”

“Something like that,” said Joe, but he went on to tell the stories of the ants’ nest and the Dutch campervans. Paul nodded. He’d already heard some of the highlights from the others.

“It’s my last day here.” He hardly needed to remind Joe. “We ought to go out for a drink or something but I’m really tired. Those intercity trains would be fine if they actually ran on time.”

“There’s plenty of beer in the fridge,” Joe told him. So they settled down to an evening of beer, crisps and television, then Paul went upstairs early saying he needed to do some last-minute packing.

The house felt empty without him the following evening but in some ways Joe was happy to be on his own. He worked odd hours, running his own IT business. Sometimes he stayed up way beyond midnight then slept well into the morning. It was good not to have to consider someone else and he was doing well enough that the money wasn’t a problem. It would be good, too, to have the house to himself if Carl arrived. Or when he arrived, he corrected his less than optimistic thought. He got stuck into work, sometimes feeling he had never been away. Then he’d remember Carl and his smile would be at cross purposes with the serious stuff on his computer screens.

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## *Arrival*

Carl arrived unheralded one rainy evening at the end of September. Joe was working and heard the doorbell but had no idea who it might be ringing it. He wasn’t expecting visitors of any kind.

When he opened the door and found Carl there, he was elated and shocked at the same time. His friend, boyfriend, lover – he wasn’t sure yet of the right term – looked tired, his blond hair wet and plastered to his brow, and his jacket damp and uncomfortable-looking.

“You came.” Joe felt incapable of rational speech and simply uttered his thought aloud.

“You said...” Carl sounded oddly shy. Perhaps he’d thought it was the kind of thing people said at the end of holiday romances but didn’t truly mean.



“Of course I did.” Joe held the door wide open. “Come right in. You’re soaking and you’re just getting wetter standing there.”

“You are sure?” Again, the slight hesitation and the sense that Carl was uncertain of his welcome. Joe didn’t answer, just grabbed him and pulled him into the hall. He closed the door and took Carl’s face in his hands, kissing him very firmly before turning to the task of removing the wet jacket.

“You need dry clothes,” he informed Carl unnecessarily. “Where’s your luggage?”

“I do not have any.” It was a simple statement but Joe was startled. Why on earth had Carl turned up like this without warning and with only the clothes he stood up in. And presumably at least a passport and money. He didn’t ask questions but led his guest to the living room, switching on the fire even though he hadn’t needed it earlier. It would help with the drying.

“Where is your friend?” Carl presumably meant Paul and Joe explained that his housemate had already left.

“I was about to make dinner,” he ended. “Pasta OK for you?”

“I do not eat.” Carl didn’t sound concerned and Joe assumed he’d eaten on the plane, ferry or train, whatever had brought him and that his stilted English was responsible for the way he had said it.

“Fine,” he said, “but I’m hungry so I hope you don’t mind if I cook and eat.”

“Of course I do not mind.” Carl smiled. The smile was as gorgeous as ever, Joe thought, as he quickly scrambled some eggs and stuck bread in the toaster. No time to cook the pasta dish he’d vaguely intended if he wanted to spend precious minutes with Carl who had given no indication of how long he might stay. His luggage might well be still at the airport, or even at a hotel, though Joe was determined he would stay here, with him.

He opened a bottle of wine but Carl refused the offered glass. “I do not drink,” he said, and then rejected the further offer of water or coffee.

He watched Joe eat, clearly not hungry himself, and then they settled in front of the television, watching the news in companionable silence. Afterwards, Joe cleared his dinner things away and stuck his plate and cutlery in the dishwasher. It wasn’t full so he could wait before running it.

Carl was looking less sodden and Joe was glad he’d put the fire on. He brought the wet jacket from the hall and hung it over a chairback where it steamed gently.

“Did you have a good journey?” He had finally settled on a question that would not suggest any over-eagerness or for that matter any wish to make Carl leave.

“It was a journey.” Carl shrugged but offered no details.

“But you made it, and I’m really pleased to see you. You will stay here, won’t you?”

“I will stay here since you have invited me,” Carl said. He was looking more relaxed now, and certainly less damp.

Joe made sure he’d closed down his computer then had another glass of wine. Carl refused anything to drink again but seemed quite comfortable. They chatted for a while, just banal comments about the weather, which was vile, climate change in general, and the state of Britain. Joe realised he wasn’t absolutely sure where Carl was from. Germany, he thought, but didn’t quite like to ask. He should have known by now.

It was late enough, he decided, to go to bed. He was excited by the idea and hoped Carl intended to sleep with him rather than in the spare room. One of the spare rooms – there were two now that Paul had left.

“Shall we go upstairs?” He waited for the answer that would tell him whether or not he was still wanted, though surely that was why Carl was here in his house.

Carl smiled his lovely smile and rose from the couch. “Please,” he said, and Joe led the way up to his bedroom.

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## *Bedroom Interlude*

The sex was even better than he remembered or imagined. A session of fumbling frottage in a ruined castle had hardly prepared him for the pleasures he found in bed with Carl. He let his lover take the lead; sometimes he liked to be in charge but for now he was happy to be dominated. Carl was enthusiastic and experienced at the same time, a heady combination. Joe had lube and condoms in his bedside table. He'd hoped and had planned. And now it was all true. Carl raised an eyebrow at the condoms.

"I have not been with others," he said. "At least, not recently."

"Still, they're a good idea," Joe murmured and then, because he thought he should be honest, "And I have not been with anyone either, but I would hate to pass on anything from past encounters." It was obvious that Carl, too, had had past encounters. They said no more about the issue and Carl used a condom when he entered Joe, who thought he might lose consciousness in his overwhelming and dizzying joy.

Afterwards, they snuggled together, whispering their delight and stroking whatever skin or hair they could reach without moving too much. Joe fell asleep content in Carl's arms and slept deeply.

He woke early, which was not really surprising considering that they had reached the bedroom much earlier than his usual bedtime. He needed the bathroom and tried not to wake Carl but when he returned to the bedroom Carl was smiling at him and stretching.

"Did you sleep well?" he asked.

"I definitely did," said Joe. He could feel himself blushing at the memory of what had caused his good night. "Did you?"

"I have rested very well, thank you." It was odd phrasing but Joe put it down to Carl's occasionally less than stellar English. He wished he spoke Carl's language and then realised he wasn't even sure whether it was Polish or German or even something else. There were a lot of things he didn't know about his lover but he hoped there would be plenty of time to learn.

He dressed and went downstairs, making breakfast and coffee. Most Europeans preferred coffee, didn't they? And for food he just provided his usual cereal, fruit and milk.

Carl didn't avail himself of any of that. He frowned and said, "I told you I do not eat or drink."

Joe felt worried. Anorexia or some such disorder? Allergies? A dislike of unfamiliar food? He thought Carl could easily have drunk water in the bathroom so dehydration probably wasn't an issue, but if he couldn't provide acceptable food they might have problems. Carl, however, was cheerful and relaxed.

"Are you working today?" he asked, as he watched Joe clear the table and put things in their respective places including the dishwasher.

"I should," said Joe. "But I can afford to take a couple of days off. It sort of depends how long you can stay. If this is just a fleeting visit I'll take the time to be with you but if you can stay longer I'll need to work. I do work at home, though, so it isn't too onerous."

"I can stay as long as you wish me to stay," said Carl, and Joe's heart took flight with happiness even while he wondered how that was possible.

"Don't you need to work?" He frowned as he asked. He had no idea what Carl did.

"I can work anywhere," came the reply and Joe had to be satisfied. Journalism, maybe, or writing. Or some kind of art. At any rate, something like his own IT business that

didn't require a specific place. He decided not to query things. Carl would be staying and that was wonderful enough in itself. No need to press for answers straight away.

He didn't query his own unwillingness to ask questions. He was just incredibly happy and wanted above all to stay that way.

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## *Realisation*

The sex continued to be beyond fabulous, and Carl continued to refuse all food and drink but didn't seem any the worse for wear as a result. Joe did some work and handed Carl the TV remote and the Firestick. He noticed Carl's favourite programmes seemed to be connected with the second world war and saw him nodding occasionally.

"It was just like that," he heard him say once when a documentary about forced labour was showing. "They took anyone who might have a Jewish ancestor. They needed all the slaves they could get."

Joe wondered how much Carl had learned in school about the war, the camps, the holocaust, and so on. He thought Germany might not go into great detail though Poland was more likely to do so. Both countries were, of course, firmly opposed to any Nazi tendencies nowadays but he also knew there were right wing extremists everywhere and only hoped the opposition would stay firm. He realised he still didn't know Carl's background but every time he intended to ask he got distracted, sometimes by work, sometimes by sex and sometimes just by general conversation. His mind seemed to slide away from any inquiry as if the questions might be crude or intrusive.

One evening it was a phone call that distracted him. Paul had left a box of books and had said he would pick them up eventually. They weren't bothering Joe but Paul evidently had business in Manchester and said he could drop round and collect his belongings. They chatted about work and Joe said happily that Paul could meet Carl. He saw Carl frown but thought nothing of it. Paul said he'd be there in about twenty minutes and rang off.

"You'll like him," Joe told Carl. "He's a good bloke and he was a good housemate." Then, as the doorbell rang, "That'll be him now."

Paul came into the hall and said he couldn't stay long as he had a taxi waiting. Joe had the box ready for him but said, "At least say hello to Carl, then you can picture him when I go on about him." He gestured to where Carl was sitting in the lounge.

"I'm glad for you, mate, I really am," Paul said, "but I have to go." He looked directly into the lounge but said nothing to Carl. Then he picked up his box, thanked Joe, and left. "See you," he said as he headed down the path to the waiting car.

Joe understood that a waiting taxi was not something anyone wanted to delay, but he was disappointed. He'd wanted to show off his lover, his boyfriend, whatever Carl wanted to call himself. On a sudden impulse he phoned Paul who was presumably on his way to the station.

"You might have said 'hi,' you know." He hoped his tone was joking and not critical.

"But there was nobody there," said Paul. "Maybe he nipped upstairs before I came. I'll call again one of these days."

"But..." Joe began, then stopped. He was standing in the doorway to the lounge and so far as he knew Carl hadn't moved.

Slowly, so slowly it was like sliding down a sand dune, gathering speed as he went, his mind put a lot of things together.

Carl had met nobody, not even Paul just now. Carl didn't eat or drink. Carl could stay as long as he liked. Carl seemed to have a change of clean clothing although he'd arrived without luggage. The final whoosh of realisation was like a deluge of cold rain.

He looked at Carl. "You aren't real," was all he could say.

"I'm perfectly real," said Carl. "You can't say our exploits in bed aren't real. You can feel me inside you, can't you?" He grinned.

"Yes, but..." Joe wasn't sure what else to say. Accuse his wonderful lover of being a mere hallucination? That didn't seem a sensible thing to do.

"I tried to tell you." Joe heard Carl through a kind of fog that muffled the words slightly but didn't affect their meaning. So he didn't need to make any accusation. Carl was confessing to some kind of unreality. Joe gulped.

"Do you want me to leave?" Carl sounded upset, worried, for himself and maybe for Joe.

"Of course I don't," he managed to say.

"Because I can only stay if I am welcome," said Carl, gently.

Was he welcome? Well of course he was. They were happy together, weren't they? And if so, did it matter what other people saw or thought? It wasn't as if he had curious colleagues and his parents had emigrated to the South of France so were unlikely to turn up on the doorstep.

"You're very welcome," he said, then his mind skittered to other things he'd ignored. "You were there, weren't you?" he asked.

"In one of the labour camps, yes. After the Wolf's Lair, which is where they realised I was related to someone they knew had Jewish blood. The camp was where..." Carl stopped and Joe's mind flooded with knowledge.

"But what happens now?" He knew he sounded needy but he felt confused and somehow unmoored.

"If you want me here then nothing happens; nothing other than what has already been happening. The invitation was all I needed."

"But you won't age. What happens later? When I'm old and you aren't?" The words came out in a rush.

Carl laughed. "I am a great deal older than you to begin with," he said. "Yes, you will change but I will still love you. I fell in lust when I saw you at that campsite and then in love as I got to know you. There is nothing for you to worry about. Besides, we can think about how to make sure we stay together for ever eventually."

Joe stared.

A ghost lover? Could he? Should he?

But as Carl took him in his arms he knew he would, and that it would be good, certainly for now, and maybe for ever. He returned the kisses fervently then led the way up to bed.

