

# LOVE'S LANDSCAPES



Don't Read in the Closet 2014

## AFTER THE RIDE

Siôn O'Tierney

**Table of Contents**

Love's Landscapes.....3  
After the Ride - Information .....5  
After the Ride.....6  
Author Bio ..... 19

# Love's Landscapes

*An M/M Romance series*

## AFTER THE RIDE

By Siôn O'Tierney

### Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

### What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

### Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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## Photo Description

A man stands alone in near-darkness. He is stripped to the waist and wrapped tightly in heavy ropes. The dim light illuminates the lines of a well-trained body. His arms are relaxed, but bespeak great strength. His head hangs down and he leans heavily against the ropes, as if he has just finished an attempt to tear himself free, or perhaps he's storing up energy for another try.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*They think they broke me. They think it's working. They think I am finished. I am not.*

*I will fight. I will be free. I will get back to him...*

*\*\*This is not a BDSM story. This man is not a sub. He has been captured. Why? For whom he is? For what he knows? For whom he loves? That is up to you to decide. Please, no shifter or vampire stories. Dystopian, Historical, Contemporary, or even Sci-Fi are okay. However the story comes to you. Please just help this man find his way out of the dark place he is and make his way to his HEA (or at least a HFN).*

*Thank you so much!*

*Sincerely,*

*Alison*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** rodeo, cowboys, kidnapping, friends to lovers, sweet/no sex, subtlety

**Word Count:** 6,392

## AFTER THE RIDE

By Siôn O'Tierney

I feel a hand on my shoulder. It's Paul and he's asking if I'm ready. I start the check. Hand—I reset my grip on the rein; the tape is helping, but the wrist hurts like a bitch. Boots—heel-deep in the stirrups. I stand up a little, put some weight on them to make sure they're all the way in. Thighs—locked tight around the swells of the saddle. Back—core tight but loose, in control. Head—I roll my neck as far as it will go. Mouth—guard set in my teeth, I bite down hard.

“Cowboy up!”

Paul's voice echoes in my head, but it doesn't last. Dad's training kicks in. I push my hat down tight on my head so I won't lose it.

“All right folks—”

I can hear the drone of the announcer. He sounds like every man who's ever stepped up to the mic. They're all the same: same face, same voice, same clichés and tired jokes. I guess there's a familiarity there. They make every rodeo remind you of your first. That's worth something.

“—coming to you now out of chute number three is a young man from Broken Arrow, Oklahoma, named Chidike McCord. That's a mouthful, but I'll let you in on a little secret: his friends call him 'Truck.' He's been burning up the circuit and people are saying he's got a good shot at Rookie of the Year in saddle bronc riding. I have seen this boy ride a few times, and let me tell you, he knows how to get the job done. Truck has done well for himself this weekend and was in third place coming into tonight's competition. If he scores well here, he could be walking away with one of these fine buckles and a pile of prize money. Tonight, he's riding Nitro, one of—”

I make eye contact with the man on the gate, to make sure he'll see the signal. Slow—like I always do it—I look up, staring at the night sky for one long moment. Then I give a quick nod and snap my head down. Chin to my chest; keep it tight. Vision narrow.

In the periphery, I see the movement; the gate's swinging open, and my free hand comes away from it, lifted into the air. The horse coils beneath me and

comes unwound with a powerful lunge. I almost lose my breath on the landing, but not my mark. I never miss my mark. My spurs are locked in the horse's shoulders until I feel him lunge again, turning into a spin. I lean into the turn and begin spurring: stroke and set, stroke and set, with the rhythm of the horse's movements. The crowd, the lights, the announcer, it all falls away and it's just me and Dad, out in the pasture. I'm on the barrel and he's pulling the ropes. I bounce and jar, but I've felt every twist and jink a hundred thousand times before and I know just what to do.

The horn blares and I'm back, the crowd is roaring. I grab the saddle with my free hand and kick loose from the stirrups. When I turn my head to look, a pick-up man is a few steps behind, but I'm coming off before he can get to me. Suddenly, the horse folds right under me and I'm flying back. Then my head is ringing. I'm flat on my back in the dirt. I can see the pick-up men guiding Nitro out through the gate and there's a man standing above me, giving me a hand up. Someone shouts nearby and I turn. A pretty young blonde in jean shorts stuffs my hat through the bars of the fence. There's blood on the brim. The girl's not bleeding; it must be mine.

The man points to a nearby section of fence, and I jog toward it. I get halfway over and my friend Royal is there giving me a hand down. He walks me over to the EMT, who checks my head and finds the bleeding. He bandages me up, and then he wants to check for a concussion. I don't have to look at Royal. He knows.

"How many fingers?" the man asks, and I can't quite make it out. It's all a bit blurry, but Royal is pressing two fingers into my back.

"Two?" I ask. I wish that hadn't come out as a question. I feel so tired. I need rest, I need to check my score, I need to get my gear. Someone will have it off of Nitro by now. The crowd is so goddamn loud.

The EMT shines a light in my eyes, and finally, seeming satisfied, pats me on the shoulder, and turns to go back to his station.

"Great ride, Truck." It's Royal. He tells me he'll grab my gear and make sure Paul gets it.

"Score?" I ask, unable to string a longer sentence together.

"Eighty-seven."

Royal grins at me and I smile back. 87. That's enough for prize money, and depending on the others, it could be enough for the buckle. Paul will get that for me, too.

"I'm going to the truck," I tell Royal. "See you in Cheyenne?"

I don't catch the response, and then I lose him in the crowd. A fan congratulates me on the ride, and gives me a beer. I thank him and down it in a few swallows. It helps dull the ache in my head, dull the roar from the stands. I find the Dodge and drop the tailgate; climbing into the bed, I make a pillow out of a loose gear bag and cover my eyes with my hat. The sound of the rodeo seems to drift away from me as I fall asleep.

\*\*\*\*

Everyone called my father either "Dad" or "Mr. McCord", so it was easy for me to get used to calling him "Dad". I don't remember my birth parents. They died when I was very young. Some sickness or another. I was raised in an orphanage. They taught me English. That's where I met Dad. He was on a charity mission. Even back then, before he retired, he had time for that kind of thing.

I remember liking him. He was funny, and strange. He worked hard all day, and then when everyone else stopped for the night, he kept working. I followed him one day. He had a barrel that had once been filled with water, but had started to rust. I watched him curiously as he took a hammer and began to smash the sides in. He used the claw to bang holes into the top and bottom on one side. Then he took a heavy coil of rope and started cutting it into pieces.

When he was done with the rope, he put it in the barrel and I followed him to a grove of Afara trees near the river. He stopped in a small clearing about twenty feet across and he called to me. I thought I'd been sneaking well, but he must have known I was there all along because he didn't even look up.

"Chidike," he said. "Come help me with this."

I entered the clearing nervously, but I was very curious about what he was doing. He took the lengths of rope out of the barrel and handed me one of them.

"Do you know how to tie strong knots?" he asked.

I nodded. I knew many good knots.

He pointed to one of the trees. "Climb up there and tie one end of that rope above the second branch."

I was confused, but I did as he instructed. After repeating the process several times, we took the barrel to the middle of the clearing and he began to tie the ropes to it. In the end, the barrel was hanging between four trees, about



two feet off the ground. I looked at Mr. McCord, wondering why we'd done all this, and he grinned like a little boy.

He lifted me off the ground and sat me on the barrel. I perched there, bouncing, still not understanding. He took the last piece of rope and tied it around the middle of the barrel in front of me. Then he showed me how to hold on to the rope, and balance myself with my free hand and he told me to hold tight with my legs. Then he went to the ropes tied to the front of the barrel and he started to pull on them.

At first, he only pulled them together, so that the barrel bounced up and down, but then, he pulled one harder than the other and I was so surprised I let go. I went flying from the barrel and landed on the ground so hard that it knocked my breath out. I laid there on my back, smiling and laughing as soon as my breath came back. It was exhilarating; I loved it.

The light was almost gone by then, so Mr. McCord and I picked our way through the bush back to the main house. I didn't sleep at all that night. I just relived that moment when the barrel bounced me off, over and over. Flying through the air. Landing in the dirt. Staring up at the stars as they came out.

\*\*\*\*

It takes me some time to figure out where I am. It's dark. I'm cold. I can't see anything, but I can feel the ropes. I've been stripped to the waist, and I'm tied up. The bandage is still wrapped around my head; it's a little too tight. I'm wearing my jeans, my boots, and my chaps—they're unbuckled, I don't remember; I must have undone them before I passed out. I lean against the ropes, trying to pull, but I'm nowhere near strong enough to break them.

What the hell is happening to me?

I remember the ride. I remember the EMT. I remember the truck. And then I was here. There's nothing in between.

"Paul!" I shout for my friend, even though it seems foolish. All I can hear are the sounds of the highway. My eyes are adjusting to the darkness. Cars, semis, the road. I'm in a horse trailer, but why? How? No one can hear me, not on the highway like this. A horse whinnies, the sound high and reedy, and turns his head to look at me—concerned to see me, I imagine. He's only a few feet away.

Despite the breeze through the opened airflow vents, the stink is awful. I have to doubt this thing has ever been cleaned. The horse is set up at an angle to

me, I guess there's probably another beyond him, and on a curve, when headlights from oncoming traffic slant into the trailer, I can see I was right. I crane my neck to peer at the wall behind me. The trailer is a bumper pull, not a gooseneck. Is someone playing a joke on me? It doesn't seem like Paul's kind of joke, but...

My phone! I remember, I dug it out of my bag right before I laid down in the bed of the truck. Did I put it in my pocket? My legs are in shadow, and the pockets of my jeans are obscured by my chaps anyway. I wriggle my leg around, trying to tell if my phone's in there. Nothing.

I'm sore, both from hanging tied here in these ropes and from my ride. I need sleep. Real sleep.

If it isn't Paul, who could it be? And why? Dad has money, but there's easier targets. If I know Dad, he'd get one of his hunting rifles down off the wall of his trophy room (since Mom never let him keep them anywhere else in the house), and go vigilante on a kidnapper. I don't think anyone who knows anything about him would make a mistake like that.

None of my friends on the circuit would take such poor care of their animals. The state of this trailer is a disgrace. I absentmindedly struggle to free my right hand while I keep puzzling over the question of who might do this and why. A car in the passing lane matches pace with the trailer for a while, illuminating the closer horse. I can't tell the sex but I get a good look at the facial markings. I can memorize facial markings pretty well, it helps me remember the horses I've ridden. Hair is black... or a very dark brown. Irregular blaze that doesn't quite connect to a broad snip.

I close my eyes and think, running through all the horses I remember. I've seen this horse, I know it. But I can't quite seem to place it. Definitely not the horse of a friend. I know those all by name. None of them have these markings. An image flashes in my mind and my eyes snap open. I strain in the dark, but I just can't tell.

Then the whole trailer is lit up for a brief moment by the light of a truck stop as we blow past. There it is. High white stocking on the front left leg. I know the horse. I know the owner. Ethan Rush. That goddamn shit-eating asshole.

\*\*\*\*

I met Paul Dunn at my first junior rodeo. He was a senior, seventeen I think. Dad, being friends with Paul's family, pointed him out to me.

Dad wanted to watch from the stands, he was always big on independence, on being your own man. I liked that. I can see how some people would be scared by it, but for me it was thrilling. I felt strong and confident. It was Dad's influence, no question.

I must have been wandering, looking a little lost, because I was back behind the chutes and Paul caught my sleeve. Maybe someone pointed me out to him, too... I dunno.

He grinned at me. "You can dump your stuff here."

I shook my head irritably, but dropped my bag in the dirt by the fence, and laid my saddle on top of it.

"You mind?" Paul asked, but he didn't wait for an answer. Instead, he crouched down and began an inspection of my saddle, poking, pulling on straps. He stood with a nod and a grunt. "First time?" Another question he didn't want or need an answer to. "I'll help you on your horse if you like." With that he turned back to his own bag, focused, readying himself.

I could see into his bag. In addition to his saddle, he also had a rigging for riding bareback. I knew there were a lot of guys who did more than one event, but two rough stock events seemed like asking for an injury.

I dug in my bag for my iPod, stuck in headphones, and started to get into the headspace. Dad always encouraged me to do it on my own—he tried to get me to meditate and shit with him, but I couldn't manage it. I needed music. Hang drum worked best. There was something about the rhythm, the timing, the melodic patterns. It made me feel like my whole mind, my whole life, was narrowed, focused into a razor-sharp point, driving forward into what came next.

I got my chaps strapped on tight, rosined them up. I sat down in my saddle there in the dirt, made sure the stirrups were just the right length.

The horse I'd drawn wasn't anything special, but Paul had ridden him before. He told me everything he remembered as he helped me strap my saddle on the horse and get down into the chute. The second I was seated, the horse got a little pissed and laid hard against the gate. My leg was trapped. It went numb in a few seconds. They tried to get him to settle, but he wouldn't. When I nodded, they swung open the gate, but the horse didn't move. A judge shouted to me that the mark out rule would be waived, so I dropped my feet from his neck.

I guess that was all the horse needed because he started to buck then, and hard. It was like the barrel, but not. It was all I could do to hold on to the rein. The way he moved under me was so much more complex than the patterns of the barrel. I knew them so well, but this was a whole different beast, so to speak. My brain must have shut down, because I grabbed the saddle with my free hand. Instant disqualification. I stayed on 'til the buzzer sounded, though. That was something.

I didn't want to get off, but then the pick-up rider was beside me and I kicked out of the stirrups, slid across the back of the man's horse, and tumbled in the dirt. Looking up at the sky, I couldn't see the stars through the blazing lights of the arena, but I could see them in my mind. I jumped to my feet.

Paul was grinning at me when I got back behind the chutes with my saddle. He slapped me hard on the shoulder, and I grinned back at him like an idiot.

\*\*\*\*\*

I don't know why, but my thoughts keep circling back around to Paul. It's been hours. Drifting in and out of consciousness. We may have stopped for a while. I can't really remember. My head is swimming. Such a headache. Time doesn't seem like it's moving forward. It feels like it's jumping every which way, like a wild horse under me, trying to throw me. Like I'm living my life out of order.

I was right. I heard them talking when we finally pulled off the highway. I knew it had to be Ethan and his asshole brother, Troy. Team ropers and, as if being team ropers weren't bad enough, the Rush brothers were... *notorious* is probably the most accurate word, and maybe the kindest as well. They won a few times, but mostly, they couldn't get their act together. One show after the next they'd come out chasing their steer and almost every time they seemed to find a way to screw it up. I never saw such a pair of out-of-sync individuals. And now isn't any different. They're outside the trailer, yelling at each other. I can only pick out a few words. I hear Paul's name, and something about a phone.

Why were they talking about Paul? Did they have my phone? I'm sure they could have wrangled his phone number a dozen ways, but I'm also sure he didn't give it to them. Whatever this is... Paul has no part in it. He couldn't... right? I shake off the question, but it bothers me all the same. If Paul is in on whatever stupid plan these guys have cooked up on their kerosene camping stove, he's not the man I thought I knew. Not the man I—

The side door of the trailer bursts open, and the morning light that floods in blinds me. Ethan is there in the doorway, looking at me. The asshole is wearing a bandana, like he's a train robber or something. Like I can't see his bald spot when he takes his hat off, or the tattoos on his fingers, or a thousand other ways I could ID him to the cops. I think, at first, maybe he'll let me loose, maybe he'll let me use the restroom, but without a word he turns to the horses—giving them water and grain. I'm so thirsty right now that I'd stick my head in the bucket and drink right alongside them.

Strangely, I need to piss almost as badly as I am thirsty. I don't know how that works. Maybe it doesn't really make sense, but just now I figure if I have that much goddamn water in my bladder, and I'm thirsty, then my body should really get on using it.

When Ethan comes back for the water bucket, he forgets at first to pull the bandana up. He realizes it real fast though, and throws a look my way after he fixes it. I pretend to be unconscious. It's not far from the truth.

\*\*\*\*\*

After I finished high school, there was no question what I was going to do. Dad never pushed me into anything. He encouraged me, sure, but only to pursue things I had already demonstrated an interest in. I never had a lot of interest in college, but I decided that while I was on the road, I could take a course or two online from the local community college every semester. It was always in the back of my mind—the question.

There's a lot of guys who'd stare at you blankly if you asked them, a lot of idiots who are so full of themselves, they believe there's no injury they can't come back from. But the other camp is bigger than you might expect. I know I was surprised. There's a lot of idiots in rodeo, but there's dreamers and philosophers as well.

Paul and I stayed in touch after that first year. He texted me every now and then from the road, and I couldn't get enough. I couldn't wait for the road to be my life. It gets old for some people, I guess, living out of hotel rooms and cars, crisscrossing the country, travelling from one town to the next, one rodeo to the next. For me, it couldn't come soon enough. Paul and I decided we'd drive together. He'd lost his main driving partner to a broken leg a few months back. You can enter in more rodeos if you have a partner to drive while you sleep and vice versa; there just aren't enough hours in the day otherwise.

I think it was rough on him, being alone for those months. He started texting me almost every day around that time. I could almost hear the sadness even through his words on the screen. Or maybe I just imagined it, because our first few months on the road were the happiest I'd ever seen him.

\*\*\*\*

I started to get woozy, I don't know, a few hours ago? We haven't gone anywhere—I don't think—and I haven't heard anything from the brothers Rush for a while, but I haven't heard anything else either. I think we must be somewhere isolated. I can't hear the highway. I can't hear anything except, sometimes, birdsong. Whatever their game is, I guess they're getting a little smarter at least.

The ropes are the only thing keeping me on my feet now. Every time I start to drift off to sleep, I fall. There's just enough slack in the ropes that the weight of my body nearly wrenches my shoulders out of their sockets when I'm brought up short. I don't sleep, but I think I may have passed out from the pain. It's hard to say. The way I move between thoughts sometimes could be anything, it could just be drifting, or it could be sleep or unconsciousness. There seems to be very little difference.

I decide it's time. Ethan and Troy are probably sleeping. If I can escape, it has to happen now, before I'm too far gone. Before I'm too weak to try. Those assholes think they've broken me. They think I'm done, but I'm not.

I kick my leg up and over the left rope, thinking to get some leverage, or maybe to see if by some miracle I have my multi-tool in my boot. There it is. I guess I rode with it in there. I shake my boot for a while, wriggling, trying to get the tool to drop down into my waiting hand.

When it falls, I feel it brush past my fingertips, then it's on the floor of the trailer and I'm pretzeled up here for nothing. It takes me a while to get my leg back down. My spurs are still strapped on and the rowel gets stuck in the rope. With a painful twist the leather strap pops off and the spur comes free and I'm standing on two feet again.

Now I'm pretty much fucked. I catch the heel of my left boot with the toe of the right and pull the boot free. They're tight, so it takes some doing. I stomp down, trying to catch the sock, but I get my big toe instead. It takes a lot not to curse aloud. I try again. More gingerly this time.

When the sock is off, I pick up the multi-tool with my toes, but no matter how I try, I can't get it close enough for either hand grab it. Then I drop it

again, and it goes spinning down the gentle incline of the trailer. The far horse snorts and kicks out at it as it slides past. My hope drains away. I hang my head. Resting. Trying to make a new plan. Wishing that Paul were here.

We've spent a lot of time together this last year. "Buddies" on the trail.

He's a good friend.

A good man.

I rely on him.

Maybe too much...

\*\*\*\*

Ethan's back. At least, I think it's Ethan. I can't get a good look at him. I'm so tired I can barely open my eyes. Every time I do, it takes an eternity to focus my vision. Whoever it is, he's got a water bottle, giving me some.

That's not water; it tastes like moonshine. Some of it slides down my throat, burning the whole way down. The rest I spit in the man's face. I have no hope left that I can escape, but that doesn't mean I have to be cowed.

I detect a blur, but even if my head were clear, I can't move far enough to do anything about it. The blow lands right in my solar plexus. I struggle to breathe. Every failed effort to suck in air makes the pain worse. Then I puke; there was nothing in my stomach but bile and that bit of moonshine, but it's enough. Ethan turns and flees the trailer. I can hear him outside the door, retching. I smile. A small victory is better than none.

\*\*\*\*

I hear a voice in the darkness and turn my head, trying to find the source. It's familiar. It's a voice I know. Not Ethan or Troy. Not Dad, but it makes me feel warm all the same. I blink, lick my lips; they're badly chapped. It's hot in the trailer. And so goddamn dry. I'm so thirsty. But at least I don't have to piss anymore...

Oh.

My vision clears, and I can see the outline of the speaker. The first thing that comes into focus is the hat. It's a felt cowboy hat, beat all to hell. Black, with a braided gold band. It feels every bit as familiar as the voice, but I can't place it.

I see a flash of silver in the dim light and jerk away. It's the blade of a knife.

The voice continues—it's soothing—as the knife severs the rope holding my right arm, my body goes slack and I'd fall to the floor if not for the arm that slips around me. The voice's owner is strong; he holds me aloft and trades hands with the knife behind my back so that he can cut the other arm free.

As soon as both arms are freed, he eases me down to the hard floor of the trailer. Then I'm weightless, floating above the ground. He's lifted me—carrying me—and finally I'm out of that goddamn trailer. Free of it.

It's Paul, I realize finally. I still haven't understood a word he's said, especially now. That sound—sirens?—is getting so close, it's starting to drown him out. My eyes finally focus on his face and I reach for him. My arm is like a limp rope, but I manage to lift it to his cheek. My fingers fasten on his ear, and with all my strength, I pull him down close to me and kiss him. Every part of my body is numb, but the pressure of his lips on my own—I feel the chapped skin crack under the force of the kiss. I'm not strong enough just now to manage that on my own. I taste blood and I know, he must be kissing me back.

\*\*\*\*\*

Does the truth change when you're asked the same questions over and over again? No? Even if you're asked by five different people? But what if they ask the questions in a different order? In a different room? With a different tone of voice, a different demeanor? They stopped for about an hour, while a nurse helped me get cleaned up a bit and into a gown, but the Feds seem prickly and impatient. Like they're irritated with me. But through the whole ordeal Paul's been here, holding my hand.

They took him away for a few minutes; he told me he'd be right back.

The lights of the hospital are blinding. I ask if they can turn them down, but my nurse, a soft-spoken giant of a man, explains that there are other patients, and the doctors need to be able to see, in order to examine them.

Paul comes back. He seems less angry than when he left. I guess they worked some things out. I don't really have the energy to care about any of this.

By the time the Feds are done with me and I leave the hospital—pleasantly stuffed from hearty helpings of IV fluids and Jell-O—I'm so tired that I really don't want to leave the comfort of the wheelchair. At the door though, Paul starts to buck it, gently, under me, and I admit defeat. He helps me stand, and I lean on him all the way to the Dodge. I've never been so grateful for an elevator in a parking garage. He's so warm. After he helps me up into the passenger seat, I can't believe how much I miss his strong presence by my side.



Paul tells me his story. After his ride, he picked up my buckle—I got first, but just barely. Then he found my stuff: vest, shirt, and hat in the bed of the truck. He figured I'd gone for a piss, so he sat down to wait. After a while, he called my phone, and someone else answered, trying to distort their voice. They asked for a ransom, and at first he thought someone had just stolen my phone. He said he almost hung up on them, but they sent a picture. I must have still been unconscious. It scared him—a lot.

He told them he'd pay, and they planned an exchange in Cheyenne. He thought that was weird, but since he was already heading there, he agreed. Then he called the police. They promised to look for me, but Paul's not the kind to just wait around. He tracked my cell with the app we use to find each other whenever we get separated in a town we don't know well.

He found the Rush brothers' trailer at an old campground and went straight for me. The brothers had been sleeping. They were alerted by the sirens, but they didn't make it far into the woods before being caught.

Someone had told him that Troy confessed, he rolled over on his brother, said it was all Ethan's idea and he was just along to make sure Ethan didn't hurt me. Paul had heard why they did it, and if I weren't so tired, I would die laughing. Goddamn entry fees. That's all they were after. But the stupid fuckers took me across the border with them into Wyoming, and now they'll have to deal with the FBI and federal charges.

The one good—and I use the word very generously—thing about this whole situation is that the Rush boys were headed to Frontier Days, just like Paul and me. I guess they must have known that's where we were headed after last week in Utah or they would have had a pile of trouble trying to arrange an exchange.

We're a day late for our reservations, but Paul found us another hotel. One room open. The honeymoon suite. We laugh; it's not awkward. We'll share the bed, but I can't imagine we'll do anything but sleep right now.

Once we're up in the room, Paul helps me out of my jeans and into a new pair of boxers. It's hard to believe how comfortable I am being naked in front of him. I can see the lust in his eyes, and I realize it's always been there, I just didn't recognize it for what it was.

He's gentle though; he restrains himself. His hands are strong, guiding me into bed, tucking the covers around me; then he's warm against my back. I melt into his embrace, slipping through his arms into a deep sleep.

I guess I slept about two days, all told.

Paul wakes me to let me know he's taking a shower before heading to the arena. He wonders if I want to join him. I climb into the shower and, as the water washes all the grime from my body, I begin to feel strong, rejuvenated. Paul grabs me from behind; I can feel his enthusiasm. I turn and kiss him, then I push him away so that I can finish getting clean. I'm still wobbly, but I think I might just manage a ride tonight.

Hell.

I've got the money for the entry fee...

**The End**

## Author Bio

*Siôn O'Tierney is a philosopher and a gamer, but above all else, he is a consumer of stories. This is why the best decision he ever made was marrying his high-school sweetheart a week after graduation. For the stories, and the sweet, sweet author monies. These days, Siôn lives in Kansas City with his wife and writing partner, Raine O'Tierney. His free time, when he has it, is spent editing and walking the dog (maybe that's not free time after all).*

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