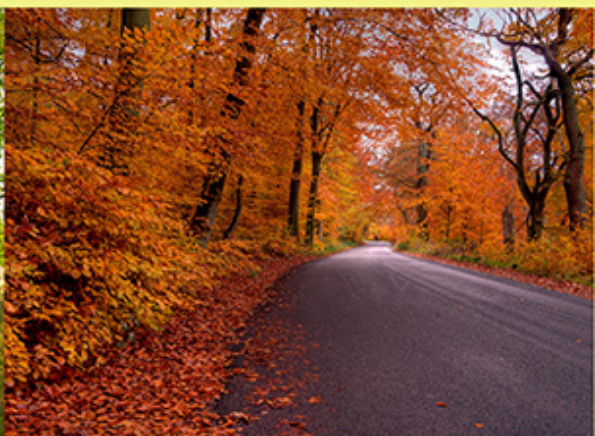
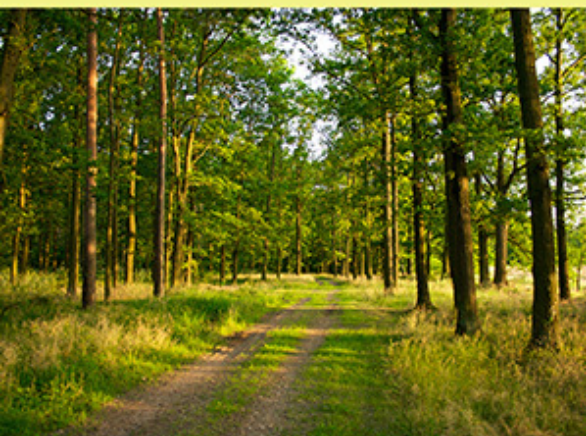


LOVE IS AN OPEN ROAD



Don't Read in the Closet 2015

THE HANGING OF HOPE

Chris C.

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

THE HANGING OF HOPE

By Chris C.

Introduction

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

What Is Love is an Open Road?

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 is an Open Road*.

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.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

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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THE HANGING OF HOPE

By Chris C.

Photo Description

A blond man stands behind a barbed-wire fence and looks at something in the distance. He looks to be in his forties and wears a dirt brown uniform, solemn-faced. Behind him are two blurred, grey buildings.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

He is standing at the barn doors, watching the quiet fields and the sheep on the hills. He rarely speaks apart from a curt “thanks” for the cold water I bring him when the sun is at its highest, and the fresh bread I share in the evenings, and the mugs of weak tea, eeked out of my dwindling supply of precious leaves. Not that he doesn’t understand English, but he is a proud man, despite his status of prisoner-of-war, and he knows what is coming: his repatriation to Russia.

I want to tell him he can stay here, that he will be safe, but I can’t, and he returns to his sweeping. The floor of my barn is cleaner than I can remember. And I have lived here all my life, as son and brother and then owner, too old to fight. A solitary life from choice.

I wonder about him. And he glances over at me and for a moment I see the look in his eyes. His understanding of who, and what I am.

In three days they will be coming for him.

HEA/HFN not obligatory, but I’d welcome a HEA—if possible. English setting, end of WWII. I would be satisfied without any sex, but if you add sex, make it low-key, not porny, and perhaps fade-to-black, rather than detailed. No twinkles or BDSM, please. I’d like to see how these two men share a brief moment of happiness.

Sincerely,

Emerson

Story Info

Genre: historical

Tags: post-WWII, Britain, over age 40, prisoner of war, non-explicit

Content Warnings: no HEA/HFN

Word Count: 4,631

THE HANGING OF HOPE

By Chris C.

The shadows flicker and ebb along the walls of the barn. From where I can see, his hands are shiny and dark red, still pressed against the leg of the younger man beside him who can't be more than seventeen.

“What's your name?” I ask, holding the lantern up higher.

He doesn't answer. He watches me carefully, warily, and says nothing.

“Your name,” I repeat, and he doesn't react. “First name, any name. Something I can call you.” Personable. I need to be personable. “I'm Daniel, for instance. I own this place. Twenty years now. Lived here for forty-two.”

“Ivan,” he says, at last. Flatly. No last name. His voice is steadier than I thought it'd be, level like some of the officers you'll see coming into town once in a while. Accent's all wrong in his English—it's thicker, though still clear. Not German, then. Russian.

Prisoners of war from the camp are always some form of SS. I eye the grey patch on his uniform.

“And your friend there?”

He doesn't answer.

“Your friend doesn't want help?”

By now, his head has turned to the right. I watch as he lifts a hand and presses his fingers against the other man's neck.

“He's dead,” Ivan says, after a moment. His hand drops. His face is impassive.

There's no real way to answer a statement like that.

He doesn't move. Instead, he lowers his voice and speaks into his friend's ear.

Someone once told me Russian was like sandpaper scraped against a rough surface covered in a thin layer of varnish. It's nothing like that. Ivan murmurs low, dark vowels rich in tone and enunciated consonants.

I watch as he carefully moves his friend off his shoulder and then leans him against the barn wall. One hand is on an upper arm, the other still pressed against a thigh. He lingers, a moment I feel like I'm intruding on, before he pulls his hands back and turns to look at me.

Ivan stands up, slow, purposeful. His eyes are blue-grey, sharp and assessing. He's not much taller than I am, but he's intimidating.

"If you come with me—" I try not to take a step back "—I'll help you dig a grave for him."

For a moment, nothing happens.

Then Ivan nods.

He surveys Ian's old room without a word. First, he looks at the old wind-up toys and wooden carvings set in a row on a shelf above the bed. Then, out the window overlooking the farm.

"You'll be staying here," I say gruffly, holding up the lantern in offering when he finally turns back to me. The sun's set by now, so the light casts creeping shadows up over the old bed, the faded posters, and clipped newspaper articles on the wall above the upper part. "Tomorrow we'll go down and bury him, but on the condition that you won't try to run after."

The lantern in his hand clanks sharply onto the nightstand.

I jerk. My hand lifts, skimming my side, but there's no Webley there; I turned it in after the war ended.

Ivan watches me, silent, waiting, tense.

"The army base a ways from here," I say, and spot the twitch of his hand at his side, "you both came from there, right?"

Lips pressed into a thin line, eyes sharp. "Yes," he answers. His anger's in the clench of his jaw, but the deference—forced—is in his shoulders.

Yes: Curt enough, tinged with accent. The first word he's said since we've left the barn.

He looks out of place here, mud and dirt and blood on his uniform, a purpling bruise on his cheek, and the mud tracking in with his boots. A Nazi in the room of a child. Still dangerous. I wonder what Ian would've thought of him.

“The bath’s round the corner,” I tell him, when he doesn’t say anything else. “I’ll get you some clothes and something to dry off with. You bothered if I lock you in at night?”

Ivan hesitates; he shakes his head once.

I let him be.

He’s quiet, save for low murmurs that I can hear from my room after I’ve locked him in. They’re long and lengthy and involve a name.

Halfway, I realize that he’s praying.

The next morning, we push open the wooden doors further to let the smell out. It doesn’t help. Supported by heavy wooden beams and old remnants of hay bundles lingering on the floor, the barn reeks of piss and shit. The smell of decay is overwhelming, but Ivan doesn’t seem to notice as he takes the cloth I offer him to bundle up the body, hefting it over his shoulder.

By now, it’s already begun decomposing. Eyes have sunk back into his skull, unseeing and unknowing, mouth gaping open. Flies buzz around, hovering and trekking on the pale grey skin under the dried blood and mud. Unlike Ivan, there’s a black patch on his uniform.

Once upon a time, before I had ever laid eyes on him, this young man—this boy—had been alive.

Ivan’s face is unreadable, but his shoulders are stiff. His jaw is clenched, even as we dig a grave in the fields a ways from there in silence. The sun rises higher and higher until it blazes directly overhead. Only the occasional *clang* of shovels fills the air.

Sweat sticks my clothes to my skin. Pain curls around my lower back. I grunt, surprised, and halt my work.

Ivan, on the other hand, keeps going.

I end up leaning against the shovel, watching as he digs his blade into the ground, foot against the shoulder of the shovel, and gathers the dirt. Ivan’s sleeves are rolled up to his elbows, and his blond hair is damp against his forehead with sweat. His expression is drawn and heavy. The wrinkles on his face seem to set deeper around his mouth and the furrow of his brows.

“What was his name?” I ask.

Ivan starts, head jerking up. I repeat the question.

He scowls at me, the same tense look as the night before. He straightens and rolls his shoulders back as if to loosen them. I hear the crack.

“Mikhail,” is the eventual response, short. He rubs the dirt off his nose before he returns to digging.

“I’m sorry,” I offer.

Ivan doesn’t answer me; the anger is still lined in the muscles of his shoulders while he covers the body and only lessens slightly once he finishes packing down the dirt. At that point, he breathes in deeply and then slowly out from his nose. He wipes his cheek with the back of his hand.

“Did you know each other long?” I ask. He has a smudge of dirt on his cheek now.

He glances at me, and then at the buried rubble.

“No.” Ivan’s voice is curt, tight. He casts another look down at the dirt. The hand on his shovel tightens. Out of anger, sadness, or fear, I can’t tell.

He doesn’t talk much after that.

By the time we drive back, the sun’s already moving past the highest point in the sky. Ivan doesn’t reply when I ask him what he wants to eat, but he helps peel the potatoes and sets the plates while I do everything else.

Lunch is steamed potatoes and cabbage, with a half blob of butter each, seasoned with gravy. We eat in silence. Ivan eats the potatoes first. He doesn’t say anything about the tea, but he doesn’t have to. Two pounds’ worth a week between two people is laughable at best, with how often we drink it here. When he arrived, my tea tin had enough for only the tiniest of spoonfuls.

It tastes more like water at this point, but I need to make it last.

Once I’m finished eating, Ivan takes everything to the sink without a word. I watch the stiff lines of his back as he washes them, and then get up.

The plates and utensils clack against each other as he passes them over to me to rinse.

“I’ll be going into town,” I tell him as we’re finishing up. “I’ll give them a call to pick you up.”

The mug Ivan sets down clinks loudly against the other one.

When I glance over, his jaw is clenched tight, and he stares straight ahead. He can't even look me in the eye.

Even here in the countryside, we hear horror stories about the Nazis. The massacre of the Jews and everyone else they considered imperfect. The concentration camps. Families being torn apart, the children and the old being gassed and burned, and their valuables stripped and used for the war. The slave labour, the human experimentations. How they beat them, starved them, tortured them for their own amusement. A reality that is chilling to think of.

Ivan seems so humane compared to that. Close enough to touch, he doesn't seem capable of killing another person for sick amusement. He doesn't seem like he would've sent people to their deaths, watched the nightmare happen and supported it.

I try to understand it. I try to imagine Mikhail in that role.

The only image I can maintain is that of Ian's. Young, curious, and too eager to please. In a place where he shouldn't have been at the wrong time. I try to imagine Ian turning a blind eye to the riots, to thin-stick skinny men and women and children huddled together, and the indiscriminate slaughter.

I can't do it. I can't fathom it.

All I can remember is how I found him. And how I couldn't even recognize him. At the beginning of the war, all I could think was that there was no justice.

But Ivan and Mikhail must have done all of this. They're Nazis, for God's sake.

"You need to tell Mikhail's family what happened to him," I tell him, and that's all I can manage to say.

He was too young. Mikhail didn't need to die. Neither did Ian.

Ivan, for his part, does not answer.

In town, I've barely finished the call when the phone box door opens.

"You should've kept your mouth shut. And saved your pennies."

I turn around to see James. His face is red, winded, and his expression is livid. Even now, he's still wearing his uniform—he must've come straight from the base.

“What?”

He shakes his head. “Not here,” he says, glancing behind me. There’s always a line of people to use the phone boxes, and right now is no exception. “Dan, come on.”

I hurry after him, but it isn’t until we get into the truck that he says, “You have to get them both out of here.”

“Both?” He doesn’t look at me, already starting the truck engine and driving out from where it’s been parked hazardously. “James, I only reported one—”

“One?” James demands impatiently. “No, no, there’s two, there’s supposed to be at least two. I snuck them both out myself. I made the kid promise to stick to him like glue.”

“Snuck?”

“Yeah, I let them escape. Close your mouth, Dan. I don’t need to look at you to see that.” James turns left on the road. He’s doing what he always does, talking while he drives in circles. “You shouldn’t have called. Now they’ll do an investigation. We’ll have to pick them up.”

I don’t understand. “They’re prisoners of war. They’re *Nazis*—”

“They’re Soviet prisoners of war who defected; that’s the difference.” James grits his teeth. “Dan, you don’t understand how bad it is where they came from. You don’t get it.”

I’ve seen the propaganda posters for the war. Britain and Russia, pressing forward togetherness, a combined effort against Hitler’s Nazis. USSR, the utopian socialist state. I don’t understand what I don’t get.

“Then tell me.”

“Tell you? Fine. They’d rather die than go back.” His fingers drum on the steering wheel. “Dan, people like you all just look at the USSR and think it’s great. That it’s fair. Christ, I thought so too.” He clenches his hands tightly. “But the people, the orders—”

It occurs to me that this is the reason he’s driving along the dirt roads. “Are you allowed to talk about this with me?”

His voice is hard. “Just get them out, Dan. Get the boy at least. If you’d seen—” James breathes, and I remember. Arthur, his son, is seventeen, Mikhail’s age. “They have prison camps for their own people. They kill them,

work them until they die—God. We’re ordered to shoot so many escapees, Dan. Do you know what we do to get them to trust us? Lie to them. The refugees too.”

“What are you saying?”

“What I’m saying,” James says, “is that we have orders to make sure every Soviet citizen, military or not, goes back to their homeland to face their punishment for treason.” He tears his eyes away from the road long enough to stare me in the eye. “Dan, it’s a death sentence.”

Ivan is standing at the barn doors, broom in hand, watching the fields as the sheep graze. His gaze lingers on the area where we buried Mikhail, and in the direction of the war camp, where the barbed wire fences mark their territory.

I shouldn’t have made the call.

Why didn’t he stop me?

When he sees me approaching, he nods. His grip tightens on the handle, knuckles white, but his face is neutral. His pride is the only thing he has left.

You can stay, I want to tell him. You don’t have to go back. You will be safe here.

I can’t.

The moment passes. Ivan returns to sweeping, but not before I catch the look in his eyes. He knows what is coming: his repatriation to Russia.

In three days, they will come for him.

It’s easy to pretend it doesn’t, but the date of his departure hangs over our heads like a guillotine. We don’t speak about it, but Ivan’s prayers get longer in the nights, and I find myself waking up at the slightest of noises, half-convinced that they’re here.

Ivan wipes his forehead with the back of his hand. It’s an odd sight; the same soldier who brought back the smell of blood and death to Ian’s room is now wearing thick gloves and kneeling in the dirt to carefully uproot weeds and plant bulbs, inspecting leaves and checking on the cabbage heads and potatoes. He’s particularly careful around the younger plants with more delicate roots, loosening the soil.

It's easy to pretend that life is normal.

The farm's not big. It's just two barns, some chicken coops, a garden at the back of the house, a decent-sized pasture for the sheep to graze, and some fields for hay. I gave up growing any crops except my own.

The chickens are fed and watered, the hogs get the slosh and gloop in their troughs, the sheep are in the fields grazing, and the tractor is in the shed, ready to go. The eggs are gathered and put into cartons that I'll drive over to the grocer when I grab my rations for the week.

He's efficient, I'll give him that, but I know he's not sleeping anymore.

"Ivan," I say.

He pauses, glancing up over his shoulder at me, dirt streaks on his knees and on the gloves and on his face.

I hesitate, and pass him a cold glass of water.

"Thanks," he says. It's the first thing he's said to me since yesterday. It's curt, terse, but it's a thanks, nevertheless, never mind the stiffness behind it. His Adam's apple bobs as he finishes the glass, a bead of sweat trailing down his temple. He wipes it away with the heel of his palm, before he puts the gloves back on and returns to work.

I watch his shoulders for a moment, wanting to say something, anything. Part of the reason is that I'm not used to people; I haven't lived in the same house as anyone for the longest time. I haven't needed to be accommodating.

The other part is the guilt.

"Would you run?" I ask. "If you could. Again. You can."

I want to help him. I need to.

Ivan stops his work and turns his head. He stares at me for a long time and then looks past me in the field, where Mikhail is buried in an unmarked grave. He shakes his head, a wordless answer.

This is something I don't understand, something I don't think I ever will.

Eventually, I return back to the kitchen and put the glass in the sink.

I don't lock the door, but Ivan doesn't leave Ian's room. He just keeps praying.

I ask him about it in the morning, what he prays for.

Instead of replying, Ivan stirs the oatmeal and spoons it into his mouth. He's not hunched up over his food, but his chair is angled slightly. He sits back and looks over at his left as though he's used to seeing someone there.

The answer was obvious from the start.

“Who is Ian?”

“My nephew,” I say. I know it then, that he's looked through the school workbook and seen variations of I-A-N on every page, spotted the small stack of crudely penciled letters written in different hands. I-A-N on the walls in pencil throughout the house. The same scrawl writing D-A-N on the sides of the chairs. M-U-M, D-A-D for the other ones.

There are traces of a boy living on this farm what feels like a lifetime ago, from the second-hand books to the school bag and to the clothes tucked away in the drawers and boxes. The chicken coop still has the words D-O N-O-T S-T-E-E-L painted on the side.

“How old?”

“Ten. His parents had evacuated him from the city.”

I don't know how to continue. I haven't spoken about him in years.

Ivan folds his arms slowly and leans back in his chair. He breathes out from his nose before he lifts one hand long enough to rub at his mouth with it.

He looks at me. And then, more emotional than I've ever heard him, he says, “I'm sorry.”

Something between us breaks after that, and I learn more that his silence isn't just his anger. It's who he is, what he believes in; actions are louder than words for him. He spends time in my house, looking at the photos on the walls, trying to find traces of Ian in between the cracks. Was he a father, before?

I ask.

“A daughter,” he answers. “Eight. Years ago.”

One more thing has changed. He watches me now just as much as I do him.

Time is up in less than eight hours. I can't sleep, and Ivan hasn't said a word since we've finished dinner. He's sitting on one of the armchairs, idly going through the pages of a children's book while I smoke my pipe. The radio mumbles on in the background.

"You can still run," I say. His head lifts up. "I could help you."

He shakes his head. "Daniel," he says. He doesn't say my name often. "Do you pray?"

"I—no."

Ivan looks down at his hands. At first, I expect him to be offended. Or at least, reply with a short word or two. Or accuse me of selfishness, something.

Instead, he says, "I'll show you."

Long after we finish praying, his hands still linger on mine.

James is the one driving the truck, but he gets out to shake my hand.

"Come over for dinner sometime soon," he says flatly. He's not really looking at me, but I know he's angry and disappointed. "Ellen misses you. And you get some sleep—you look like you've stayed up."

I pull him aside, my voice lowered. "James, you have to help him."

His grip tightens. "I did." His smile is forced when he lets go to direct Ivan into the back of the truck. "But *you* didn't."

I know Ivan heard that.

He isn't looking at me, but his head is held high. His shoulders are stiff again, his eyes are hard, and his lips are drawn into a thin line. His hands clench and unclench from where they've bound his wrists together.

I want to say something to him. I just don't know what.

"I'm sorry," I say, as he passes by me.

He doesn't reply.

Helpless, I watch as James nods to the other soldiers, and they close the truck doors behind him.

"All right," he says gruffly. "Let's go."

I didn't think it'd end like this.

I stare, transfixed, at the rows and rows of bodies, and then at the rest of the camp. The soldiers won't look me in the eye. James is nowhere to be seen.

That's Ivan's body hanging from the tree.

I don't know if they forced him to do it, or Ivan did it himself despite all of his pride to see it through, but it doesn't matter now.

This morning, Ivan was alive. He had a hand on my shoulder, reaching up for that tea tin I always put on the top shelf that I can never reach on my own without a chair.

Last night, he told me in short, sparse words that he'd wanted to be a hero as a child, fighting for the right side, but in adulthood, you learn there really isn't a right side. Just a side.

One side. Another side. Any side.

His entire life, Ivan had never found one he stayed with forever.

If he could have said more, explained himself to me, I don't think he would have. He preferred the quiet that I learned to accept. He worked on the farm in the day and prayed at night.

He was Ivan.

Ivan is dead.

It's more obvious now. The house is bigger. Things take longer to do. The door to the bedroom across mine is shut closed.

It's July. The sun is shining; the weather is heating up.

I live on a farm on my own, take care of a few animals, and tend to a small vegetable garden in the back. It was nice once, because I liked the peace of solitude.

It was nicer, once upon a time. But that was with Ivan, before Ivan. That was a long time ago.

The End

Author Bio

Chris is a slow-ass writer, perpetually concerned with the idea of making a good impression, and hates reading stories with sad endings. Writing them, however, is another story.

Contact & Media Info

[Goodreads](#)