

Northern Lights



ASTA IDONEA

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By Asta Idonea

A dream romantic vacation to Iceland to see the Northern Lights turns into a nightmare when James's workaholic boyfriend, Richard, again insists on putting his work first. After a call from Richard's office, an argument ends with the couple splitting up for good. Not only has Richard left James, he's left him abandoned to explore the park alone, where James quickly gets lost. But just when things seem darkest, the Solstice works its magic, and James finds the guiding light he needs. Or it finds him.

“NO. NO, Bob, listen to me. Bob, listen to me. Yes. No. Yes. Bob. Bob. Calm down.”

I turn off the tap, shake my hands over the sink, and reach for towel as I listen to the one-sided conversation drifting through from the next room. I don't really know why I'm surprised. It's not as if this hasn't happened a hundred times before. Richard and I will make plans, and then that damn phone of his will vibrate, emitting the inane, grimace-inducing ringtone I've never been able to stand, and everything will unravel.

Richard and I met at a Christmas party five years ago, just before he started his job at Robert Preston & Associates. To date, that was the one and only Christmas we've managed to spend together. Every year since, something work-related has called him away. He does his best to make it home for dinner on my birthday, which falls during the holidays, but even that is touch-and-go. Some years I've ended up celebrating alone, surrounded by fast-cooling, half-eaten slices of pizza and a pile of empty beer cans.

For months I've been begging him for this overseas trip. We've been going through a tough patch, and I thought spending the holidays together—without interruptions, just the two of us—would go a long way toward healing the rift. I'd held out hope that the distances involved would grant us some measure of security, that the fact that we were out of the country would make Bob think twice before dialing. But it appears I was wrong. Honestly, you'd think Richard was Bob's boss and not the other way around, given the manner in which the man carries on.

“Yes, all right. Let me check flight times and I'll call you back, okay? Yes, I'll be there, I promise. Try not to panic. Yes, I'll call you straight back. As soon as I know, you'll know. Okay, Bob, hang tight.”

I lean over the sink, staring at my reflection in the mirror. It seems that Grinch-Bob has struck again, ruining the holidays for the fourth year running. I concentrate on my breathing, trying to stay calm for the conversation I know is coming.

In the bedroom, Richard sighs and sets the phone down. A moment later he's standing in the doorway, and I look up to meet his gaze in the mirror.

"Jimmy, I'm sorry, but Bob—"

"Yeah, yeah, I heard." I bite back the rant hovering on the tip of my tongue and brush past him into the bedroom. "When do we leave?"

"There's no need for you to cut short your vacation. The room's paid up for the week, and I'm going to be sleeping at the office for the next few days anyway, from the sound of things, so you may as well stay. Enjoy yourself, enjoy the holidays, and I'll see you at home next Monday."

"You want me to stay here on my own?"

"Reykjavik was your idea. You said it would be inspirational for your writing."

"Yes, but that wasn't why we came." I swallow, trying to clear the tightness in my throat. "This was supposed to be about us, Richard. You know things haven't been right between us for a while, and this trip... Did you forget tomorrow's my birthday?" I can hear myself descending into a whine, but I can't seem to stop the words from flowing. "You promised we'd see the Northern Lights together. It's Christmas for chrissake!"

"I know, I know. I'll make it up to you, Jimmy, I promise. I'll get you a new camera, a new laptop, whatever you want. It's just that Bob—"

"Bob, Bob, always Bob. Well, you know what? Fuck Bob! Or maybe you already have."

The slap takes me by surprise, and my neck gives a painful and audible crunch as my head snaps to the side. My cheek stings, but I fight the urge to rub it, just as I refuse to brush away the tears I can feel rolling down my face.

"My work is important, Jimmy. Can't you see that?"

"Oh, I can see it just fine," I reply, staring down at the red and white stripes of the carpet. "It's more important to you than I am, that's for sure."

The toes of Richard's loafers enter my field of vision as he steps toward me. I find myself wondering why his shoes always have to be so goddamn shiny. "At least I'm doing something worthwhile with my life. With you it's just one pointless project after another. You're a dreamer, Jimmy, and a scrounger—always have been, always will be. Don't forget *I'm* the one who keeps a roof over our heads, who puts food on the table."

“No, Mr. Big-Shot Lawyer, I hadn’t forgotten. You never let me forget it.”

“What the hell do you want from me, Jimmy?”

“Only for you to be here, to put me ahead of your work now and then. And if you can’t do that, well, maybe we should just call it quits.”

I look up to find Richard regarding me with one of his assessing looks—the look he usually reserves for witnesses during cross-examinations.

“You know what? You’re right. It’s clear we both want very different things, and I think it *is* time we moved on. This trip may have achieved its aim after all. It’s given us this chance to make a clean break.” He turns away and retrieves his suitcase. A moment later he has the bag open and is repacking the clothing he removed from its confines less than an hour ago. “Stay out the week, Jimmy, and see your Northern Lights. There’s plenty of money on your Cash Passport. When I get home, I’ll move your things into the guest room, and you can stay as long as you need once you get back. Peter owes me one. I’ll ask him to find you a nice outer-London apartment with affordable rates. I’ll even pay the first month’s rent for you while you find yourself a job.” He zips the case shut and pulls on his coat. His wallet and phone go into the pockets, and then he picks up the suitcase. “I’d better get to the airport and sort out the flight home. Have a good birthday, Jimmy. I’ll see you back in London.”

Richard opens the door.

He steps out into the hallway.

The door clicks shut behind him.

And then he’s gone.

A strange sound comes out of my mouth, somewhere between a word and a guttural sob, and I sink to the floor. I pull my knees in tight and wrap my arms around them, rocking forward and back.

What just happened? More importantly, how could I let it happen? I just stood there, an openmouthed idiot, as my boyfriend of five years left me. I should have stopped him. I should have apologized and told him I loved him. I should have begged him to stay and talk things over. Instead, I baited him. I dared him to go and then did nothing when he called my bluff.

With a whimper, I roll over onto my side, and the thick fibers of the carpet soak up my tears.

I MUST have fallen asleep, because the next time I open my eyes, it's dark outside. A glance at the digital alarm clock on the bedside table confirms it's after ten, and I drag myself into a sitting position and from there to my feet.

I look out of the window, taking in the five-star, no-expenses-spared view of the city. The lights from the buildings are reflected in Tjörnin Pond, creating a kaleidoscope of color. The artist in me acknowledges its beauty, and a muted voice in the back of my mind prompts me to reach for my camera. But the heartbroken, disconsolate part of my soul is the stronger right now, so I draw the curtains and turn away.

I kick off my shoes and lie upon the bed. Folding my hands behind my head, I stare up at the ceiling, tracing the shadowed form of the lampshade, trying to decide what to do. I could ignore Richard's parting words and catch the next available flight home. Maybe if he and I talked, we could find a way to patch things up between us. But no, that's nothing but a pipe dream. This split has been a long time coming. I think we both knew it, but neither of us wanted to be the one to speak up first. Even if we *could* make amends after this argument, it would be no more than wrapping a bandage around an already fatal wound—a prolongation of an inevitable end.

"It's over."

I say the words out loud and give myself a moment to digest and accept them. My chest is still tight and my heart feels as if it's been stabbed with a hundred tiny blades, but I also experience a sense of relief that things have finally come to a head. I think again about packing my suitcase and leaving. Richard's accusation of scrounging cut deeper than I care to admit, and I relish the idea of tossing his gift of this room and the Cash Passport back at him, letting him know I neither want nor need his money.

But then I reconsider.

It's Christmas, I'm in Reykjavik, and tomorrow's my birthday. Why shouldn't I make the most of it? Without Richard's funding, I doubt I'll have this opportunity again in a long time, if ever. And everything's already paid for anyway; it would be a shame to waste it in a fit of petulance.

I'll stay, I decide in that moment. I'll do my best to enjoy my time here, and when I go back, I'll clear out of the apartment while Richard is at work one day and never take another penny from him.

Despite my newfound calm and the acknowledgment that what has happened is for the best in the long term, I can't bring myself to follow our original plans for the day. My birthday was supposed to start with a tour around the city, followed by some museums, a lavish dinner, and then an evening trip out to see the lights. If I'm going to do this, I need to make sure everything is completely different to eliminate any lingering thoughts that Richard should be at my side. I still have a full week ahead of me; the Northern Lights can wait a few days.

I scan my memory for some of the other sights I'd read about in the guidebook, and the day trip to the famous geysers pops into my mind. The idea seems a promising one: a full day out of the city, where I won't be reminded of Richard's absence, where everything will be planned out for me so I won't have to find ways to occupy myself. Yes, it's perfect.

I reach over and fiddle with the buttons on the clock, setting the alarm for six thirty. That should give me plenty of time to get up, have breakfast, and then make my way to the information center to see if I can book a last-minute place on the tour.

WHEN I reach the tourist office the next day, I'm in luck: there are still spaces on the trip, and the coach will depart in ten minutes' time. I buy my ticket, order a coffee, and gulp it down in five swallows, burning my tongue in the process, when I see the coach approaching ahead of schedule. The door opens, the driver inspects my ticket, and I'm waved aboard.

The vehicle is about two-thirds full, mostly couples and family groups, and the only remaining seats are either right at the front or at the back. Unable to overcome my schoolboy fear of the front row, I head to the back and settle in an aisle seat, dropping my bag onto the empty seat beside me. An elderly couple boards a minute or two later, taking seats at the front, and then we're off.

I concentrate on the scenery as we leave the city, snapping a few shots through the slightly smeary window with my DSLR. The images

aren't going to win me any prizes, but I hope to get some better pictures when we make our stops.

Our first port of call is the Strokkur geyser, and it's certainly an impressive sight. For a few short minutes, I almost feel happy as I snap away, trying to capture the motion of the water as it shoots skyward. However, that feeling doesn't last.

I suppose it was inevitable since I'm the only single person on the tour, aside from the driver and tour guide, both of whom are busy smoking foul-smelling cigarettes over by the coach, but I feel a tap on my shoulder and turn to find myself faced with a young couple sporting shy, hopeful smiles.

"Would you take a photo of us? With the geyser?"

The girl's accent sounds German, and she's already holding out the camera, all but pressing it into my hands, so I have little choice but to take it from her. I frame the shot and wait. When the water erupts behind them, I depress the shutter, and then I hand back the pink Nikon compact. They huddle together to assess my effort, then break into wide grins.

"*Danke*," the man says. "Thank you. Very good picture!"

They've barely taken a step back before another couple, having seen my charitable act, approach and make the same request. And then another, and another. By the time the guide calls us back to the coach, I've taken photos for just about everyone on the tour, and I'm starting to think this trip wasn't such a good idea after all.

It's not that I mind helping with the photos, but having to keep looking at these couples and families enjoying this experience together—in love, happy—is starting to make me melancholy. Today was supposed to be about me letting go of the past and looking to the future, but all I can do now is think about Richard. Wondering what he would have made of this place, imagining the photos *we* would've taken together, his arm around my waist, his fingers brushing my hip.

When we reach the next stop—Gullfoss—I keep apart from the others, hoping to avoid a repeat performance. But to no avail. Within minutes the first couple approaches me, and from there the scene plays out much as it did before. I manage to take a handful of my own shots of the waterfall; however, most of my time is taken up composing portraits for the others.

By the time the coach pulls in to the Thingvellir National Park, any pleasure I had initially garnered from this day has evaporated, and all I want to do is return to my hotel and crawl into bed. Happy bloody birthday to me! I think 2015 is shaping up to be a real contender for the title of “Worst Christmas and Birthday Ever.”

The guide is giving his spiel about how we will all go into the Visitor’s Centre to watch the multimedia presentation before proceeding to see some of the park’s most famous sites. Everyone trails obediently after him, myself included. But then a realization washes over me and I slow my pace.

If I go in and watch this presentation, when I come out I’m going to be stuck in the role of group photographer again, forced to live through another round of cheesy smiles and doe eyes, all reminding me of what I lack, of what I’ve lost. Or I could ditch the others and go off exploring on my own. I know what time the coach is leaving to return to the city, so as long as I’m back by then, what’s the harm?

I drop to the back of the group and wait until they’ve all entered the Visitor’s Centre. I hang around outside for a minute or so, giving them time to go in for the presentation, and then I tentatively open the door and step inside. A quick scan reveals I’ve successfully evaded my fellow tourists, so I hurry to the information desk.

After a brief chat with the park ranger on duty, whose English is probably better than mine, I leave the building armed with a map and make my way over to the start of one of the trails. According to the ranger’s instructions, this route will take me to the famous Law Rock and then on to the Öxarárfoss waterfall. Depending on how long I spend at those two sites, I may even have time to double back to the church before I need to rejoin my group.

I wander the well-maintained walkway, taking in the view. The ground away from the path is verdant—a mossy kind of grass—and rocky outcrops rise on either side of me. I can see a couple way off in the distance, but other than that, I’m blissfully alone. I attach a wide-angle lens to my camera and snap a few shots. Then I replace the lens cap and allow myself a moment to appreciate the tranquility, until a sudden blast of cold air makes me shiver and I pull the zipper on my jacket, closing it up to my chin, and hurry onward.

There are a few tourists gathered at the Law Rock, and I join them in capturing the scene for posterity. I take my photos as quickly as possible, eager to move on before someone gets it into their head to wave their camera at me, but I manage to get a few good shots. Then I continue along the trail, picking up my pace both to ensure I keep ahead of the crowd and as a way to combat the winter chill.

I find myself walking alongside a fast-flowing stream. The water gurgles as it surges over the rocky riverbed, and the sound is soothing. Then the stream turns and I am left with a steep rock face on my left and an open plain to my right. Everything is so green, and yet the scene is desolate enough to remind me of the descriptions of the moors in *Wuthering Heights*.

Farther down the path, I come across a family that has stopped to enjoy a late lunch at a random picnic bench. I hurry past, keeping my gaze fixed ahead and offering no greeting, and soon they are behind me.

When I reach a fork in the road, I pause to consult the map, checking I'm still on track, and then I bear left, ascending toward the top of the hill. A sharp left turn at the summit takes me onto a boardwalk, and at the end of it I'm gifted with a perfect view of the waterfall. There's one other solo walker there—an elderly man I take to be a local from his manner and appearance—and I exchange nods of greeting with him.

The waterfall is beautiful, the crashing waters strangely relaxing, and I close my eyes for a moment to savor the wave of calm that floods through me. The travails of earlier in the day wash away, and I would almost describe my mood as “happy.” I open my eyes, reach for my camera, and snap shot after shot, hoping at least one will capture my current emotion so one day I can look back and remember this moment.

My tourist obligation for the site well and truly fulfilled, I glance at my watch. More time has passed than I'd planned. No doubt my group is already heading this way, and I have no desire to cross paths with them, not when I've finally managed to salvage my day. What if I skirt around them? I pull open the map and study the trails. Yes, if I leave the path briefly and cut across country, I can pick up another route that will take me to the church and from there back to the Visitor's Centre. I still have a good sixty minutes before the coach leaves; that should give me plenty of time.

I refold my map and shove it into my back pocket, then pack my camera away so I can pick up the pace without it bouncing against my hip.

It doesn't take me long to retrace my steps, especially since I'm headed downhill this time. I cut across the plain and have no difficulty making it to the road that will lead me to the church. Everything is going like clockwork, and so, naturally, that's when disaster strikes.

I'm walking fast, eager to reach the church with time to spare so I can take a few final photos, when my foot slips on some loose stones at the edge of the roadside. I twist my ankle and my balance is thrown. Before I can right myself, I fall to the side, roll down the slope, and crash through some bushes. I feel a burst of pain as my forehead connects hard with the sharp corner of a rock, and then everything goes dark.

WHEN I open my eyes, I fear I've gone blind. Then I realize my eyesight isn't the problem—it's dark because it's nighttime. My forehead feels uncomfortable, and I brush my fingertips over my brow. The right temple is tender and there's something crusty and flaky plastered to my skin that I have the sinking suspicion might be blood. I try to push myself up, only to collapse again when I'm hit by a wave of dizziness. My stomach somersaults and I retch, the action making me acutely aware of the dry tightness in my throat.

Once the worst of the dizziness has passed, I try again, moving slower this time as I push and pull myself up off the ground, using the rock formation as a temporary crutch. My limbs are stiff and chilled to the bone, but the greater problem is my ankle. A few tentative steps reveal I can put some weight on it, but not much and not for long. *Fuck.*

I shift my weight a little, attempting to find a semicomfortable pose while I get my bearings, and it's then that I hear the unmistakable sound of broken glass from within my camera bag. My lenses. Shit. As if this wasn't already the most unpleasant forty-eight hours of my life.

It takes me a little while to get my memory back into gear and work out what's going on. I was on my way to the church when I slipped. That's a 100 percent correct fact. During the fall, I must've hit my head and knocked myself out. I can't be as certain of this snippet of information as the last, but it seems a reasonable assumption under the circumstances. The real point of contention is why I'm still here. When I didn't reboard the coach, why was I not found? Surely one of the other passengers noticed my absence, even if the guide failed to do so. Did they not look for

me? Why did I awake upon the cold hard ground instead of in a warm hospital bed?

A moment later I decide I have more important things to worry about, such as what time it is, how long it will be until I can find assistance, and how I'm going to keep warm in the meantime. Now that I'm thinking about it, I finally register the bitter cold. I'm wearing a top-of-the-line padded jacket—a gift from Richard—made of the latest hi-tech fabric, but the chill is seeping through all the same. I don't even want to dwell on how blue my legs must be with only a thin layer of denim between my skin and the Icelandic winter night. When I release a tremulous breath, I can see the vapor hanging in the air. One thing is clear: I can't stay out here.

Now that I've grown used to the darkness, my eyes have adjusted enough that I can make out the road a few meters to my right. I start to hobble toward it, pausing every second step until the pain in my ankle subsides. The slight incline leading to the road proves a challenge, but with a mixture of determination and violent cursing that would make my mother blush with shame, I make it.

Racking my memory, I'm sure I fell to the right, so I turn in that direction and press on the way I was initially headed—I hope. Assuming I'm correct in the path I've taken, the church should be close. Surely someone will arrive there to open up early in the morning. This is Iceland, not central London, so I even hold out hope that the building won't be locked and I'll be able to seek shelter within its walls.

The sound of crunching footsteps approaching from my left is so unexpected, it takes a while for my brain to register the noise and relay the information to my conscious mind. I've barely processed what I'm hearing before a tall robed figure looms out of the darkness. I gasp and my heart pounds against my chest. For a split second, I do believe I'm standing in the presence of Death, that I've dropped dead of hypothermia somewhere back along the road and he's come to collect me. But then the figure speaks.

“Hver ert þú? Hvað ertu að gera hér?”

It's a man's voice, and from the sound of the words I recognize he's speaking Icelandic—so not Death, then—but I don't have a clue what he's asking me. “I-I... I mean....”

“Oh, you are English? Are you James Blythe?”

“What? Uh, yes. Yes, that’s me.”

“Thank the gods. We were worried.”

I hear a click, and a second later I’m blinded by the bright white beam of a torch. I raise my hand to shield my eyes, blinking rapidly. When my vision returns and I’m able to see my companion properly for the first time, I jump back, wincing and swearing as I land heavily on my injured ankle.

“You are hurt?” He frowns, and the movement emphasizes the strange markings painted on his forehead.

“My ankle. I twisted it when I fell.”

He nods. “My car is near. I have first-aid kit at my home. Come.”

Before I can even start to form a reply, he’s turned off his torchlight and his arm is around me, bearing my weight, allowing me to hop along on my good leg.

It turns out my rescuer was not exaggerating, as we do not travel far before I can discern the vague outline of a vehicle just off to the right up ahead. When we reach the car, the man opens the passenger door and helps me in before heading to the driver’s side. He pulls his door shut and twists to rummage on the backseat. As he shifts back around, he tosses a blanket into my lap.

“The car heater is broken, but my home is close. Keep warm.”

I arrange the blanket over me, tucking it around my shoulders, and I’m instantly grateful for the added layer. Meanwhile, my companion starts the car and we leave the park.

We drive in silence for a while, with him watching the road and occasionally beating the squeaky gearbox into submission, and me casting what I hope are surreptitious glances in his direction.

The guy’s outfit takes up most of my attention. I want to ask him about it... but then again, I’m not sure I do. It occurs to me that I’ve gotten into a car with this man without any idea who he is. God, for all I know, he could be a mass murderer, and rather than saving me, he’s leading me to a grisly end! Death on the cold ground in the park might prove to have been the sweeter option. For all I know, he’s going to torture me for hours, drawing it out, keeping me alive for as long as possible, the better to enjoy my screams and pl—

“We are here,” he declares suddenly, slowing the car to a halt and then killing the engine.

Killing the engine? Really? That's the phrase my mind finds the most suitable under the circumstances?

He comes around to the passenger side and helps me out, supporting me again as we hobble to the front door of a damn spooky-looking cabin, which, judging by the absence of any lights in the vicinity, appears to be in the middle of nowhere. I can see the headlines now: *British Tourist Found Chopped to Pieces in Icelandic Hunting Lodge!* And from the way the guy's holding me up as if I weigh nothing, I don't doubt his ability to sever me limb from limb. Hell, he probably won't even break a sweat.

He opens the door, and we move through the dark room until we reach a sofa. He helps me sit before turning away, and a moment later, the lamp beside me blazes to life, illuminating the cabin with a soft yellow-white light.

My expectation of lifeless bodies hanging from meat hooks along the wall is not met. In fact, the place is surprisingly welcoming and cozy. The sofa upon which I'm seated is facing an open fireplace. There's a small table beside me, and beyond that, a kitchen comprised of a sink, hot plate, toaster, kettle, and a few cupboards. A glance over my shoulder reveals a single bed tucked into the corner, with a shelf full of books above and a chest of drawers at the foot. There's a second door near the back of the cabin too, which I'm guessing is the bathroom. The sink in the kitchen suggests the place is plumbed and is not so rustic as to only possess an outhouse. Either way, any fears I had of homicidal maniacs wielding axes quickly evaporate, and I chide myself for my paranoid imagination. Perhaps I should quit work on my fantasy novel and try my hand at some Stephen King-style horror instead—I seem to have the mind for it.

The man squats in front of the fire and lights a match. When he steps away, the logs in the fireplace are already catching the flames, and I can feel the first burst of heat against my face.

"I fetch the first-aid kit."

He returns brandishing a small emergency pack and kneels in front of me. I grimace when he eases my boot off, clenching my fists against the pain. He waits a moment, watching my reaction, and then slowly rolls down my sock. The way he's pursing his lips is enough to tell me the prognosis isn't good.

"This needs ice, but it is cold night and I would rather you be warm. For now I wrap it. In the morning I drive you to the hospital in Reykjavik,

yes?” He opens the first-aid kit and produces a cloth bandage, which he wraps securely but loosely around my ankle.

The swelling *is* pretty bad—I look like the Stay Puft Marshmallow Man. The gentle brush of his calloused fingers against my skin is oddly comforting, though, and I sink back into the chair and close my eyes.

“Can you turn?”

“Sorry?” I open my eyes and look down at him. For the first time, I notice how blue his eyes are—pale in color, and yet star-bright.

“In the chair. Can you turn? I want your ankle here.” He taps the arm of the sofa, and I finally catch his drift. He slips an arm around my waist, and with his help, I wriggle around and lie back as he raises my leg, resting it over the sofa’s padded arm. “Do you have other injuries?”

“No, just the ankle. Thanks... uh, sorry, but I don’t know your name.”

“Forgive me.... I am Kári.”

Something occurs to me. “Back in the park, you already knew my name. How?”

“I am park ranger. You were reported missing. We looked for you where your tour guide said you walked, but we did not find you. When the sun set, we had to stop until morning.”

“I left the group. I went off on my own,” I confess, and he nods, passing no judgment on my actions. “I fell, and I must have hit my head because—”

“Your head?” He stiffens. “Why did you not tell me this?” His expression is stern, and I suddenly feel like a naughty schoolboy caught telling a lie.

“What? Oh, it’s fine now.”

“You have vomited?”

I hesitate. “Yes.”

“More than one time?”

“No, only once.”

“Hmm.” He sits back on his heels, resting his hands on his thighs. “Perhaps you have head injury. We go to the hospital now.” He starts to stand.

“No,” I say, catching hold of his sleeve. “The morning is fine, really. The head doesn’t hurt.”

I’m just beginning to feel warm again, and the last thing I want to do is go back out into the cold night. Besides, with my initial fears quelled,

I'm starting to feel oddly secure with Kári. I would much rather stay here with him in this cozy cabin than lie in a hospital bed surrounded by sterile white walls and a bunch of strangers in lab coats.

“Very well, but you must stay awake. I stay up with you. Wait a moment.”

Kári rises and walks behind the sofa, heading toward the bed. He picks up something black and rectangular—a satellite phone, I discover when he punches in a series of numbers. The conversation is short, but I catch my own name amidst the flurry of unfamiliar words.

“I called my boss,” he says when he turns back to me. “Now they know they do not need to look for you in the morning.”

Remaining by the bed, Kári pulls off his woolen hat, revealing shoulder-length blond hair. The strands fall, swaying back and forth as they return to their natural position. I notice a few sticking up, protesting their time incarcerated, and I feel a sudden and unexpected urge to run my fingers through them and tame them back into submission. The thought makes me swallow deeply, and I give a soft cough in an attempt to clear my throat.

Then he tugs the white tunic-style top over his head, followed by his jacket and then his pullover. It's only when he starts to lift the hem of his long-sleeved T-shirt that I realize he's intending to fully undress... and I'm sitting here staring at him like a total pervert. I go from feeling pleasantly toasty to uncomfortably warm. I know I should look away, certain my stare is fast turning into an all-out leer, but I find myself mesmerized by the enticing flash of rippling abs. I don't tend to go for muscled types, usually sticking with those who possess a lean, lithe frame like my own, but in this case....

It's a long time coming, but at last my sense of decency kicks in and I turn my gaze back toward the fire. What the hell am I doing? The guy came along and rescued me, a veritable knight in shining armor, and all I can do is ogle him in an entirely inappropriate manner. In any case, I have a boyfriend; I shouldn't be looking at other men.

The remembrance is a slap in the face, one that knocks all the wind out of me. I don't have a boyfriend anymore, do I? That's the reason I got into this mess in the first place. Part of me is ready to cave in with renewed sorrow and regrets; however, another part of me lets out an

internal whoop of joy. Richard cut me loose. That means I can look at Kári as much as I—

No! Absolutely not! He’s probably straight as an arrow. If he thinks I’m in any way eyeing him up, he may be deeply offended... or, knowing my luck, even angry.

There’s movement in my peripheral vision, and I look up to see Kári walking toward me, dressed—Thank the Lord!—in jeans and a sweater. He settles on the floor beside the sofa, and the firelight reflects off something hanging around his neck.

“What are you wearing?” I tap my own chest and then gesture at him.

He glances down and wraps his hand around the pendant. For a moment he appears to hesitate, but then he pulls it over his head and hands it to me.

Attached to the black cord is a pewter carving. It has a bit of weight to it, and I turn it in my hand a few times, looking at it from different angles. “A hammer?”

“Mjölnir.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“Mjölnir. It is Thor’s hammer.”

“Thor? As in the God of Thunder?”

He nods, and I hand the pendant back to him. He slips it over his head and tucks it inside his sweater this time, out of sight.

“So, you’re a big Marvel fan, huh?” I ask. “I always liked Spiderman more myself.”

He turns away and pokes at the fire with an iron, shifting some of the logs, making the flames hiss and spark. “No, I am pagan. The old gods are my gods.”

“Oh.”

There’s an awkward pause, and I get the distinct impression he’s expecting some kind of backlash. Well, he picked up the wrong injured tourist for that. I’ve faced more than my fair share of opposition to my sexual orientation over the years, and I’m the last person to have a problem with the beliefs or lifestyles of others. I do, however, have a moment of epiphany regarding his appearance.

“That’s cool,” I say, not failing to note the brief flicker of surprise that crosses his face. “Is that why you have all the... stuff?” I helpfully wave my index finger around in front of my forehead, and he reaches up,

rubbing the markings encrusted on his brow. Some of the crumbling, dried paste flakes away and drifts toward the floor.

“Sorry. I forgot.”

I shrug. “It’s not a problem, though you gave me a fright when I first saw you in the torchlight, all white robes and blood.”

“Not blood. It is herbal mixture. Plants.”

I wave away his explanation. “Yeah, I could see that once we got here and you turned the light on—it’s more green than red. What were you doing? Can you tell me, or was it a secret ceremony thing?”

He laughs and the tension dissipates. “No secret.” He points to his forehead. “These are runes. Sacred symbols. You understand?”

I nod when he meets my gaze.

“Tonight is Mother Night. Uh... Winter Solstice. I was making *blóð*. I would have stayed awake all night... sorry, I do not remember the word...?”

“Like a vigil?”

“Vigil, yes.” He nods. “To see the return of the sun. But we had to look for you early in the morning, so after the ritual, I left.”

He ends with a shy smile, and like a bolt of Thor’s lightning, I suddenly realize just how damn lucky I’ve been.

“So there wouldn’t normally be anyone patrolling the park at night?”

“No. The park is closed at night. I go only for *blóð*.”

“And if you’d not been called in to help with the search, you wouldn’t have been heading back to your car and found me on the road?”

Kári nods his confirmation.

“Any other night, I’d still be stuck there. Shit! Out in the cold, all night... I could have died.”

“Yes, you are lucky man, James Blythe. The gods smile on you, I think.”

“Damn straight!”

We sit for a moment, staring into the fire, neither of us speaking, but it’s a companionable silence. Red-orange flames lick the logs in the fireplace—they almost seem to be dancing. The smoke swirls upward, disappearing into the flue, and I find myself thinking of fate and gods. I wrack my brains to see what I know about the Norse gods, but I’m heartily ashamed to discover the only things that come to mind are Tom Hiddleston’s long, leather-clad legs and Chris Hemsworth’s pecs.

Actually, thinking about it, Kári rather reminds me of Marvel's Thor, with his long blond hair, although I reckon Kári's the better-looking of the two—Chris Hemsworth is a little too muscled for my personal preference, whereas Kári has the balance just right. And his hair is so shiny and sleek. I wonder if those locks would feel as silky as they look if I were to run my fingers—

“Why did you do it?”

Kári's question breaks my reverie, and I give a guilty start. “Huh? What? Sorry?”

“Why did you leave your group?”

I groan. “Everyone was in couples, and they were all so happy and in love. I just needed to get away.”

Kári gives a sad smile. “Ah, you had problem with your girlfriend. A fight, yes? I understand. You want to call her? Winter Solstice is good time for new beginnings. She will be worried about you.”

I wonder for a moment if I should go along with Kári's assumption, turn Richard into Rachel. But if I do, I know I'll feel like a dick later. The guy was honest with me about his beliefs, even though he expected me to react badly. The least I can do is return the trust.

“Um, kinda, only Richard was my boyfriend. It's over between us now anyway. He left last night. For good.”

Kári flinches. He does his best to hide the movement, but I see it all the same. Oh well, I guess that answers the question as to whether or not he's straight. On the plus side, perhaps knowing the guy is never going to be interested will help me put an end to this fascination.

“He was to come with you today?”

Kári carries on the conversation as if nothing is amiss, so I follow suit. “No, we were supposed to spend the day together for my birthday. We'd planned to take the trip to see the Northern Lights this evening. The park was a last-minute decision after he walked out on me.” The memory of his exit from the room flickers into my mind, and my chest tightens.

“It is your birthday? Til hamingju með afmælið. Happy Birthday.”

I shake my head and give a sharp, sardonic laugh. “Thanks. And what an amazing one it's been. The best birthday ever!”

I turn back to Kári to find he's watching me, a thoughtful expression on his face. The way he's looking at me, I suddenly wonder if I was mistaken about seeing him flinch. He doesn't seem disgusted or even

perturbed. Rather, there's something in his gaze.... I can't put a name to it, but whatever it is, it sends a jolt of undiluted desire right to my groin. I'm grateful for the layers of clothing and blankets that hide my burgeoning erection from view.

"I come back," Kári announces, jumping to his feet. There's a burst of cold air when he opens the door, and the fire flickers angrily at the disturbance. The flames have barely settled when the door opens again and Kári, apparently ever true to his word, reenters and crosses the room in two giant steps, grinning from ear to ear. "Close your eyes."

I do as instructed. However, I open them wide again a few seconds later when Kári slips his hands under my legs and behind my back and hauls me into his arms. A sense of unbalance and a fear of falling has me clutching at his sweater, but Kári just laughs.

"I do not drop you, I promise. I have birthday surprise. Close your eyes."

In three strides we are outside the cabin—I can tell that much from the freezing wind buffeting my face—but Kári keeps moving. Given his steady, even breathing, carrying me doesn't seem to be much of an exertion, and I marvel again at his strength. The one time Richard picked me up to carry me into his apartment, he was puffing within seconds and set me down as quickly as he could, practically dropping me. But then his muscles were nowhere near as developed as Kári's, muscles currently pressing against my lower spine and the backs of my thighs, doing things to another part of my body upon which I'm trying damn hard not to dwell. So much for ending the improper fantasies....

We come to an abrupt halt, and Kári adjusts his grip on me.

"Can I look now?"

"Wait." He turns a little to the right. "Okay, open your eyes."

Holy...!

The night is awash with color. Streaks of green interspersed with flashes of red snake their way across the star-clad sky. The light shimmers and sways, dancing like the flames in the fireplace, and it is without a doubt the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. I nearly ask Kári to bring me my camera, but then I remember the rattle of broken glass and decide not to bother. I'll come back and see this again one day. I can photograph it then. Besides, a photo—no matter how good—could never hope to capture the sense of wonder I feel as I stare upward.

“You like it?” Kári’s voice is low, little more than a whisper.

“It’s amazing.” I tear my gaze away from the sky to look at him. “And to think you can see this all the time. Do you ever get bored of it?”

“Never. It is different every time. But we go back now. You must stay warm.”

I almost beg him for a few more minutes, but I *am* starting to feel the chill, and the last thing I want is for him to decide I need to go straight to hospital after all.

We return to the cabin, and Kári moves to set me back down on the sofa. In doing so, he leans over me, his face close to mine. I feel his warm breath against my cheek, and it blows away all rational thought and common sense from my mind. Before he can straighten, I fling my arm around his neck, pull him closer, and press my mouth to his.

His lips are cracked and rough, no doubt from the amount of time he spends outside, but the slight abrasion as they rub against my softer skin is making me dizzy with lust. Either that or the concussion is finally catching up with me. I imagine how it would feel to have those lips brushing over my nipple, grazing my inner thigh, or—God help me!—wrapped around my cock. And as for his hair, it’s every bit as silky as I thought it would be when I sink my fingers into the soft strands.

It’s only when Kári slides his tongue along my lower lip that I realize he’s not pushing me away. He’s not disgusted and fighting to get free—not that it would be much of a fight for him—but is actively kissing me back.

I part my lips, more in surprise at the turn events have taken than in acquiescence to his wordless request, and a moment later his tongue is in my mouth, lapping, exploring. I’m not sure when it happened, but his arm is behind my back again, and he raises my torso, drawing me tight against his chest, deepening the kiss. And then I’m seeing stars. No, not stars—the Northern Lights. The green and red flashes burst like New Year’s Eve fireworks on the backs of my closed eyelids.

When Kári releases me and pulls away, I can’t repress the whimper that escapes my lips. However, the way I’m gasping suggests it *was* time to stop and come up for air. He sits back on his heels, breathing heavily too. His face is flushed, the crimson in his cheeks only adding to the brightness of his eyes, and his hair is tousled where I raked my fingers through it.

“Um...” I offer, biting at my lower lip as I try to decide what to say.

Should I apologize for jumping him, even though he seemed *far* from upset about the move, judging by his reaction? Do I compliment him on his technique? Because, hell, that was, hands-down, the most amazing kiss of my life. Or would it be better to play it cool, act like it was nothing special?

“Um?” Kári prompts, and then he smiles.

We both start laughing at the same time, and any awkwardness is immediately swept away.

I try again when our laughter fades. “So. That was... nice.”

“Only nice?” Kári shifts closer and leans on the edge of the cushion, looking up at me, a playful glint in his eye.

“Well...” I pretend to mull it over. “Very nice?”

“Only very nice?” he asks, sitting up and bending over me, his lips just millimeters from my own.

“Perfect.” The word leaves my lips on a sigh as I surge up to claim another kiss.

This one is slower than the last, less hungry and more sensual. I feel a shift in his weight, and a moment later he’s rubbing his hand over the bulge in my groin. I groan and arch into the touch, wanting more, aching for skin on skin, wondering how quickly I can get him inside me. But even as I anticipate the delicious stretch as he fills me, alarm bells start ringing in my brain, and I reluctantly break the kiss and reach down to ease his hand away.

“Something is wrong?” His frown dislodges more of the herbal paste from his forehead, and I stretch out my fingers to brush the loose flakes away.

“Not wrong—God knows I want to—it’s just...”

“Your injury?” he asks, and it’s impossible to miss the hopeful note in his voice.

“No, screw the leg. Believe me, I wouldn’t hesitate if it was just that.” I pause and wet my lips, hunting in my mind for the right words, the best way to describe what I’m feeling. “I like you, Kári, and clearly someone else does too.” I gesture down my body, and Kari laughs. I manage a half smile myself before continuing. “But I only split with Richard yesterday, and I want to be certain this isn’t just some rebound thing, you know? As hot as you are, I want more than a quick fuck I’ll

regret in the morning. It wouldn't be good for me, and it wouldn't be fair to you."

Does he know? I wonder. Kári's English has been excellent so far, but is it good enough to understand such terms? Can he follow what I'm trying to say?

"Ah, you think we get to know each other better first, yes?"

I breathe a sigh of relief. "Yes. I'm sorry."

"No, that is good. Better. How long do you stay in Reykjavik?"

"Six more days."

This time his frown is accompanied by a slight pout, the sight of which is almost enough to make me cast all my good intentions aside and *beg* him to put those lips around my needy cock.

"You cannot stay longer?"

I'm about to answer in the negative when I reconsider. What's to stop me staying longer? It's not like I have a job to go back to, or any other commitments to force me home. The only issue will be accommodation. No way can I afford to stay at my current hotel past the end of this week. Part of me wonders if I'm losing my mind. I met Kári... what? An hour ago, two hours at most? And yet I'm contemplating the weeks we have ahead of us—the months, even. It's all happening so fast. Too fast? Maybe, but then again, everything about this, from my tumble to the fact that Kári was in the park only because of the Solstice, feels... fated. And even if it ends up coming to nothing, at least I can say I gave it a chance.

"I can stay longer," I say, and I'm unable to repress a smile of my own in response to his broad grin. "But I'll need to find somewhere cheap to stay. Richard, my ex, he paid for the hotel for the week and left me some money, but—" I break off, shame robbing me of my voice.

"But?"

I shake my head and pick at a loose thread on my jacket sleeve. "I have no money of my own. I don't have a job. Not a paid one, anyway. That's the main reason Richard left me."

"That is okay. You can stay here."

I look up sharply. "But you hardly know me."

"You stay with me, and soon I know you and you know me."

I am desperate to say yes, but the memory of Richard's words during our last argument holds me back. God knows I didn't set out with the

intention of scrounging off him, but that's the way it turned out. I don't want to make the same mistake with Kári.

"I don't want to put you out of pocket." He looks at me blankly, so I try again. "I don't want to take your money."

Kári shrugs. "You stay as my guest now. Later, you find work. What can you do?"

"Well, I studied journalism, but I quickly discovered it wasn't the life for me. The wages were terrible, and as for the hours.... I do like writing, only that doesn't exactly pay the bills, not so far. I like photography too, though I think the fall wrecked my camera."

"This is easy. The park needs new leaflets for English tourists. You can write and take the photos. Use my camera. I call my boss and it is done, yes? If you decide you still like me, if you want to stay longer, we find something else for you after."

"And immigration? I can't remember the details, but I know there's a limit on how long I can stay without a visa, or paperwork, or something. Hell, I'm not even sure if I'm allowed to work here."

Kári waves away this concern as he did the last. "We fix. No problem." He laughs. "You worry too much, James. You must relax."

I don't know whether it's Kári's accent or just the fact he calls me James—rather than Jimmy, as everyone else does—but there's something about hearing my name on his lips that makes my pulse race. I can't wait to hear how it will sound in other situations, when he whispers it into my ear, or yells it as he comes inside me. I know it's mad after so short an acquaintance, but being with him feels "right" in a way it never did with Richard, and I'm filled with a greater sense of hope than I've had in a long time. The world that yesterday I thought had abandoned me and left me to rot is suddenly full of tantalizing possibilities once more.

A glint catches my eye, and I look across the room to see bright patches of sunlight slipping in from behind the curtain. "It's morning? Already?"

"Yes, Mother Night is over and the sun returns." Kári stands and stretches. "I will make breakfast. Then we go to the hospital." I start to protest that I feel fine, but he silences me with a look that brooks no argument. "We make sure. Then we go to your hotel and get your things. If you do not change your mind...?" He pauses and looks down at me expectantly.

“No, I’ve not changed my mind.”

“Good! Today I must work, but Christmas we visit my sister. You will like her. She is very funny.”

“Christmas? But I thought you were pagan?”

“I am pagan. My sister is Christian.” He shrugs. “It makes no difference. We still enjoy good meal together, give gifts.”

I nod. He’s right at that: it doesn’t make any difference. In fact, I find myself fascinated by the idea of learning more about his religion, and the first traces of a storyline for a novel begin to form in my mind. It seems I was right—Reykjavik *is* going to be a source inspiration for my writing, just not in the way I’d originally expected.

Forty minutes later, we’ve eaten a hearty breakfast and Kári has helped me into the compact bathroom—fully plumbed, not an outhouse in sight—to freshen up. My ankle is still swollen, but it’s less sore than when I first awoke in the park, and I can manage to hobble around with only minimal assistance. Kári insists we get it checked out by a qualified doctor, but he doubts they’ll need to admit me, and I’m hoping his assessment is correct.

“Are you ready?”

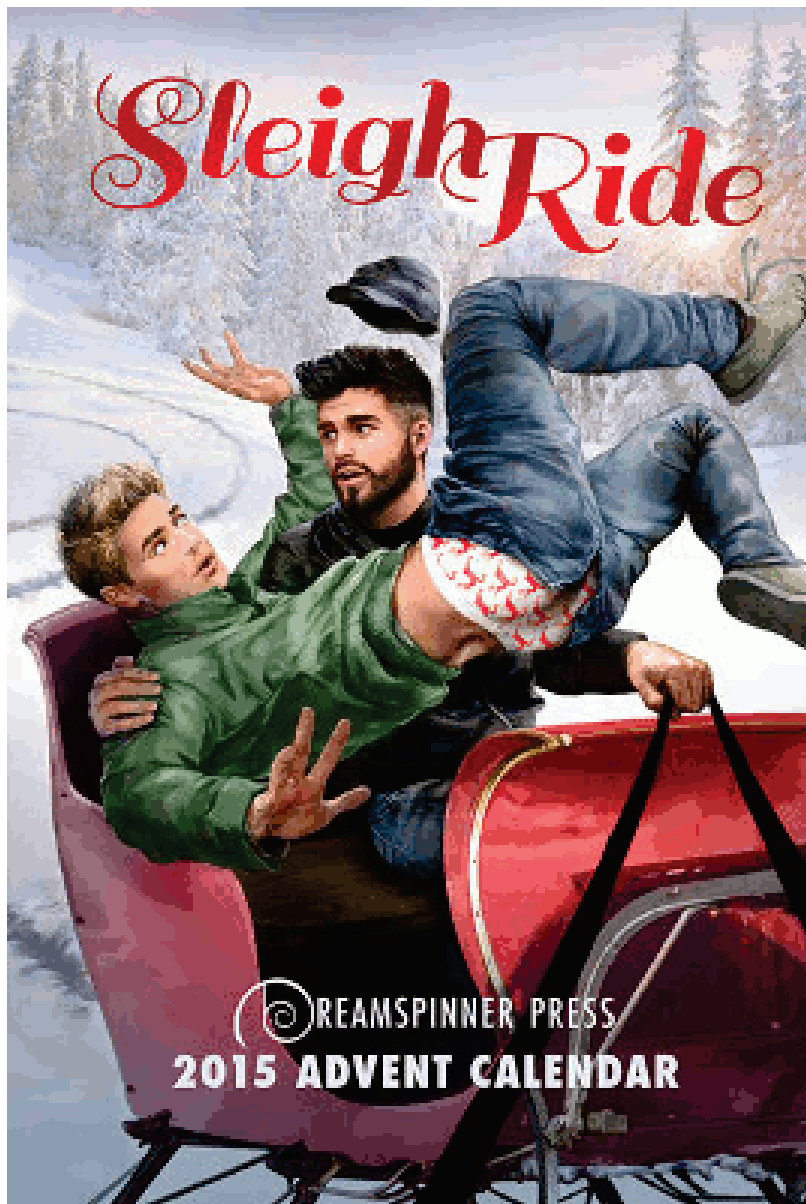
Kári emerges from the bathroom, and I can’t help but feast my gaze on him. He’s washed off the remainder of the gunk from his forehead, and his complexion is still rosy from the scrubbing, highlighting his beautiful blue eyes.

He catches me staring—I was hardly being subtle, after all—moves closer, and settles beside me on the sofa. He cups my cheek, leans in, and presses a gentle kiss to my lips.

I grip his arm, feeling the firm muscle even through the multiple layers he’s wearing, and inch forward to slot myself against him. As clichéd as it sounds, I can’t help but think we were made for each other, we fit together so perfectly.

“You know what?” I say when we break apart. “I think this is going to be the best Christmas ever.”

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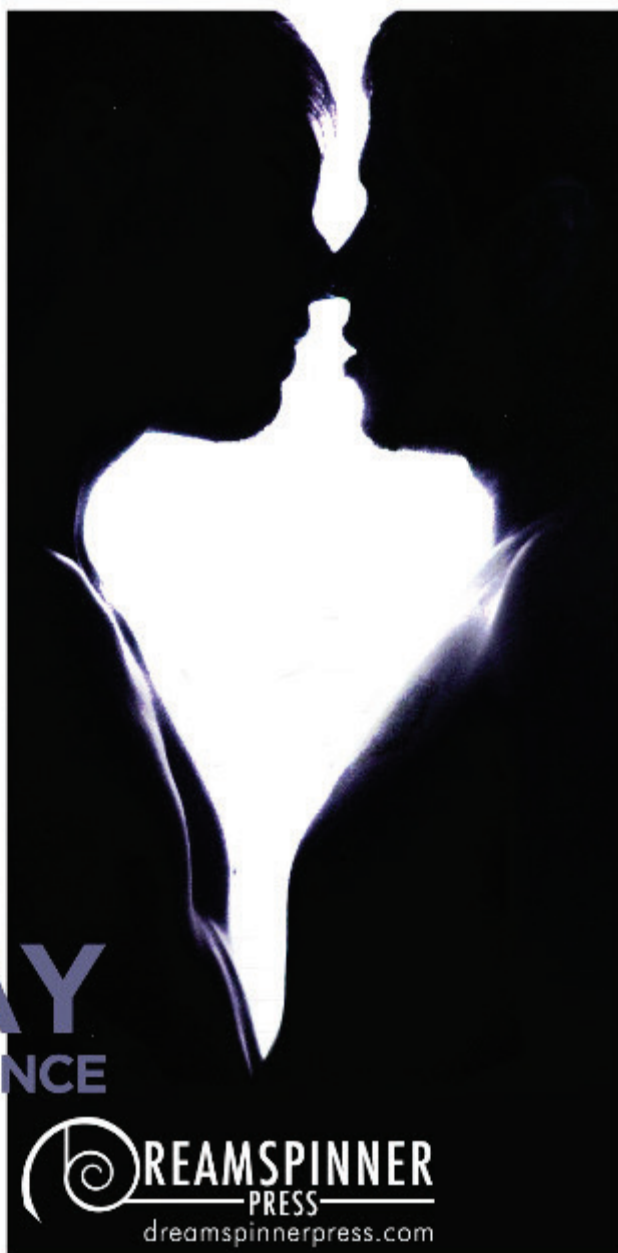
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