road to true north
published by Firehorse Enterprises Ltd

ISBN: 978-1916307094
Copyright © Sarah Holding 2025

UK paperback edition printed and bound in Great Britain by TJ Books
Worldwide edition print-on-demand by IngramSpark.

CIP Data: A catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

Sarah Holding asserts her moral right to be identified
as the author of this book.

Cover image produced by the author.
Map illustration produced in ArcGIS by Ray Holding.
Typeset in Arno Pro.

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

All rights reserved.
No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means,
electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise,
without the express prior permission of the author.

road to true north

SARAH HOLDING

FIREHORSE

SARAH HOLDING is also the author of the following titles:

SeaBEAN, the trilogy

'An interesting way of introducing young people to environmental issues'

CHAMELEON

'Does it have to cost the Earth to find out who we really are?'

blackloop

'Stranger Things' meets 'The Breakfast Club'

How to Write a Poem

and some other poems

SCAN FOR MORE INFO:

acknowledgements

This novel was inspired by a road trip I took with my family around Iceland in the summer of 2015, and the first draft was written during a month-long writers' residency I attended at Arteles Creative Centre in Finland in November 2022.

Editorial advice and brainstorming partners are both a welcome and necessary part of the writing process, and I would particularly like to thank Kristi Dick, Lucy Dawes Durneen and Claire Corbett for their invaluable input.

No book can find its way into the world without being road-tested by expert readers, and in this case I am truly grateful to our dear friends Halldóra Hreggviðsdóttir and Matthildur Elmarsdóttir for their help in adjusting various Icelandic terms as well as cultural, meteorological and topographical aspects of the story.

Finally, thanks go to my family, who having undertaken a similar (albeit less eventful) road trip were uniquely able to give feedback and help shape the narrative. As always, my husband Eric helped me tease out the parts of the story that needed more time and space. Thank you darling; the novel is all the better for it.

I am dedicating this novel to fathers and sons everywhere, and in particular to our two dads, Bob and Chris, both of whom passed away while I was working on *Road to True North*.

Iceland


Þingvellir
reykjavík
geldingadalir
route 1
north american plate
eurasian plate


siglufjörður
húsavík
route 87
akureyri
mývatn
nature baths
route F88
seyðisfjörður
egilsstaðir
víti
askja
dreki
djúpivogur
höfn
jökulsárlón
vík

1

Of all the places in the world, why had his father brought him to this desolate place? Olly stared glumly out of the window at the lumpen grey lava fields below, snow trapped in deep crevices, puffs of steam exhaling here and there. For a few seconds before they made abrupt contact with dark tarmac, Olly felt like the plane was a stone skimming over slowly undulating waves. In the long braking roar that followed, Olly took a deep breath and sighed. Then he felt the landing gear touch down on the runway and the captain's gravelly voice announced, 'Welcome to Iceland.'

Olly thought about all the places his father had been sent over the years to photograph aberrations in the earth's crust: the Rift Valley in Tanzania, Iguazu Falls in South America, twisted rock formations off the coast of Papua New Guinea. When he was little, Olly had been in awe of these tours of duty to exotic places, always eager to hear his father's crazy stories when he returned home to their flat in Kilburn. But now that he was finally accompanying his father on a work trip, it already seemed dull and disappointing. Not that he'd had much choice in the matter; it was a blatant act of parental coercion: *You're coming with me and that's final*. He had no idea how he was going to survive the next two weeks.

Sean leaned across the empty seat between them and nudged his son's elbow.

'Right Mr Midas, get your skates on. And let's not forget anything.'

Sean watched as his son, moving at a glacial pace, unbuckled himself and rooted around in the seat pocket to retrieve his headphones and a packet of gum. Locks of greasy black hair obscured most of his face

except his set jawline, where Olly sported a crop of acne and a sparse adolescent beard. With great reluctance Olly dragged on his parka and Sean inwardly rolled his eyes when he caught sight of the red target sprayed on the back of the coat and was reminded of all the hoo-ha it had caused.

Feeling tetchy and already in need of a stiff drink, Sean stood up, stretched, zipped up his thick thermal coat, and opened the overhead locker. Olly's scruffy backpack, studded with button badges from all the gigs he'd been to, promptly tumbled down and landed on the empty seat between them.

'Lucky that wasn't my camera bag!' Sean muttered through gritted teeth. His son just shrugged and hoisted the backpack over his shoulder.

As if responding to the turbulence on the approach to Keflavik airport, Olly's stomach did a belated lurch, which he realised was actually hunger. He'd refused his mother's offer to make him scrambled eggs before they left the flat, protesting that it was 'far too early' to eat, and had made do later with a bag of crisps at the airport. Contrary to expectations, instead of heading straight for the bar once they were through security, his dad seemed to be restricting himself to a coffee and nicotine combo, which had the effect of enhancing Sean's frenetic work persona. Olly found this very out of character. At home, his dad was best known for falling asleep dead drunk on the sofa mid-way through a movie or pushing the trolley in a leisurely daze round Tesco in search of the aisle selling toothpaste or painkillers.

'Bollocks!' Olly muttered, as a sudden jolt of anxiety replaced his

hunger pangs.

'What now?'

'Nothing.'

'Olly, what is it?'

He couldn't read his son's expression through the screen of hair, but from the way Olly was twisting his mouth and clicking out his finger joints, Sean knew something was up. He put a hand on Olly's shoulder and forced his torso round to face him, raising his eyebrows in a way that demanded a response.

'My meds. I left them on the kitchen table.'

'Shit. We'll get Mum to post them. They'll be here in a couple of days and…'

'But Dad…'

'What?' Sean barked, aware his voice had a steely edge that only happened when he was stone cold sober.

Other passengers were trying to edge past them, their polar outerwear chafing as they shepherded their carry-on cases towards the exit.

'Mum said… never mind, I'll tell you later.'