My suitcase was packed and ready three days before my flight was due. I was anxious and eager to go back, to say the least. It didn't help that I kept being reminded of Bård, either thanks to mum's questions or his texts, though that last was marginally my fault. The last few days at the house were spent with a lot of fidgeting, mumbling and blushing, and I hated the feeling of a hormonal teenager the entire situation entailed.

It was when I decided to go book the flight, when Fred finally spoke to mum about going to Norway with me. Despite the obvious opposition from her side, he kept insisting it would be only for a few days before my semester begins and a er promising he'd behave, mother gave up trying to change Fred's mind. She kept regretting the decision though, mentioning I should ask Adela if it would be okay for me to bring my brother as well more than a few times. I think, mum secretly hoped Adela would say no and save her the loneliness, but just as I expected Adela was more delighted than I was to have him there. Being an only child, I assume Adela wasn't aware the menace a young, energetic younger brother could occasionally be.

So, instead of one ticket, we ended up with two, and Fred was tailing me all over the house asking what he should pack. Mum seemed beyond mildly a ected, so I kept reminding her it was only a couple of days, and Fred would be home sooner than she would anticipate. I tried convincing her that a few days for complete quietness and relaxation in the house might do her good, but it seemed every time I tried as much as bringing the whole a air up, her scowl would inform me how wrong my beliefs were. So, I decided to keep quiet.

As though overcompensating for my silence, Fred couldn't get Norway out of his mind from the morning to the very end of the day, and consequently every second word coming out of his mouth was either a question about the trip or expectation regarding his time in Norway. I knew – from my mother's lost expression – if the ticket were refundable, Fred would have wound up locked in his room days ago. Either way, the combination of my worried mother, my hyperactive little brother and my worried self, turned out to be not so horrid a er all.

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The first call I received when landing in Norway was from mum. It was basically only seconds a er I turned on my phone, that it rang. Like she had been restricting herself from calling, and finally gave up under the pressure, and I knew that was the case, despite the firm denial she normally gave. I couldn't ignore the call, so placing a hand on Fred's back to make sure he was next to me at all times, I answered with, "Hey."

"Why didn't you call?" she immediately asked.

Trying not to roll my eyes in my brother's presence, I replied, "We just landed, mum. I was about to call."

The second I stopped speaking, she asked another question, "How was the flight?"

"It was good," I reassured, as I could hear the worry in her voice. "Fred slept through most of it. I used the time to read."

"So, are you still at the airport?"

"Yes, mum. As soon as we get the luggage and check out, we are going to get a cab to Adela's," I mumbled, remembering the a air which happened the first time I hailed a cab form the airport. Thankfully, I now knew the city enough to go around without getting lost with a map in my hands. Mum still didn't know the story, mainly because I thought she wasn't going to find it as interesting as other people did, especially if I included the drunk presence of Bård in there.

My thoughts had completely dri ed away from the conversation, until I heard mum say, "Okay then. Call me when you get there." "Okay mum. Bye."

I dropped the phone back in my pocket a er disconnecting the call, and turned to Fred saying, "Let's get this over with and go to the house and sleep, shall we?"

I didn't need his response to know he was completely on board with that plan.

For the first time since I could remember, Adela bothered waiting for a reply before stepping inside the room. Even a er being given the go ahead, she slowly peeked inside, as she cracked the door open, and asked, "Can I?"

I nodded as a response, since neither I nor Fred seemed to have anything interesting to do. I was immersed in my doctorate dissertation for the better half of the last hour. He was focusing on some game, the name of which I didn't even bother to pick up. Adela then walked in, her normal demeanor accompanying her. She glanced at me, as though silently asking for approval, and before I could even think about what she might have planned, she was asking, "Are you free to go out to the shopping center for a movie of your choice and a lunch somewhere?"

If I were given a chance and was alone in the decision, I might have protested mostly since I still needed a few details sorted over on the page I was working on, but Fred was on his feet enthusiastically hugging Adela for the suggestion, so I couldn't find it in me to deny him a day out, especially since it was exactly what he had been hoping on when he had planned the trip.

So, I dropped the stack of papers on the bed and resigned myself with the decision made without any authorization from me whatsoever. I didn't mind though, since I could use some fresh air as well, and it would be unfair of me to pass on the chance, particularly since I would still have time to work when Fred wasn't there.

Getting ready was much more e ective than I would have anticipated, since the headache which had been lying dormant in my head had eased. Suddenly, I was glad for Adela's suggestion. Fred's enthusiasm and smile, made the idea all that better.

Within half hour we were already storming through the main door of the shopping center. Fred and Adela were conspiring against me in the choice of movie, and as much as I hated their decision, I didn't argue mostly because the day wasn't about me as much as it was about Fred. I could even watch an already seen movie if it suited my brother, and I would be happy about it.

"You do realize spoiling him will make him want to stay more, right?" "Then he could stay more," she replied, smiling fondly at me, but

The first moment Fred was out of our earshot, I addressed Adela,

then I realized what she had just said, and I scanned around us to see if Fred might have heard. I was glad to realize he wasn't paying attention to anything we talked about, as he kept walking before us, so I whispered, "Please don't hear him say that. I would love for him to stay, but mum is –"

Before I could finish my sentence, Adela had a hand raised midair, and said, "I understand. My lips are sealed."

"Thanks," I mumbled, averting my gaze to locate Fred and feeling a shot of panic course through my body as I didn't manage to locate him. In the anxious state, my hand grasped Adela's wrist, as I gritted out, "Where did he go?"

"I don't know. I can't see him," she replied, sounding equally worried, tiptoeing as she scanned the crowd ahead as well.

We both picked up the pace, moving in between the groups of people everywhere, as I cursed myself for letting Fred out of my reach. Not even trying to obscure my frantic breathing, I cursed under my breath louder – drawing a few judging gazes my way, as I was trying and mostly failing to cover it up with a cough. Adela, however, didn't comment and silently followed by my side. I was on the verge of a panic attack when I spotted my brother's head from in between few people, and hurried in his direction before I could lose him again.

I almost let out a relieved breath when I immerged from the crowd and there was nothing separating me from Fred. That was until I noticed him standing there with none other but Bård, and suddenly I was panicking for a completely di erent reason.

"Har du tapt?" I distinctly heard Bård ask, as I approached closer without his noticing it, his focus dedicated solely to my brother. I didn't want to comment on how I always happened to meet up with him in the most unexpected places at the most unexpected time. Fred, logically, remained silent since he couldn't understand Bård and somehow they kept staring at each other in a way which would have been cute, if it weren't for the fact I had just lost my brother in a foreign land and the part where my heart was racing, first because I had lost Fred on the first attempt of going out and then because I was about to face Bård for the first time a er the almost kiss.

Adela and I approached silently, and a sideways glace at Adela had me realize how interesting she found the entire situation. I tried not to scowl at her. Bård was about to voice something else out, but I interrupted him, trying to ignore the flutter of my heart when his head snapped up to meet my gaze at the very first syllable. "As much as you try, I doubt his proficient-in-Norwegianolder sister had time to teach him any Norwegian during the holidays."

Bård beamed at me, as he up righted himself, and greeted us, "Hello, Kate." He then turned towards Adela, saying, "Adela, it is a pleasure to see you again."

"Likewise," she chimed, before adding, "You saved us from looking for this dashing guy everywhere."

My heart was pounding and I tried my best to prevent myself from blushing, something I was certain grew into a failure. Attempting to interrupt any type of conversation which was bound to ensue, I said, "Fred, this is Bård. Bård, this is my brother Fred."

My gestures were entirely wild as they shook hands, so I tried to obscure my fidgeting hands by shoving them in my pockets. That partially worked, until Adela decided to play a good Samaritan and fix something up, in her normal mischievous nature.

"Now that everyone is introduced, I have a question," she announced, leveling Bård with her asserting gaze, which I was certain he knew the horridness of, based only from the expression he was spotting. A smile curved at the ends of my lips as he tried to remain immobile, so hoping it go unnoticed I bit my lip and ducked my head to hide the grin I couldn't prevent.

"Are you busy now?" Adela wondered, and that had me snapping out of any pleasant thoughts I had. I was going to blurt something out to stop Bård from replying, but it was too late, since only seconds later he provided with a half-confused, half-intrigued, "No, I am not?"

"Would you by any chance be into watching a movie with us?" she enquired, not giving up, shi ing her gaze between me and Bård, who oddly enough didn't look at me at all from the beginning of the conversation. She didn't wait for a response before she added, "I am Fred's date for the day, but Kate's the third wheel. So, maybe you'd be okay with chaperoning her."

I would have complained about the choice of words which made me sound like a teenager if I didn't think Bård would take it the wrong way. I was fairly certain it was Adela's way of payback for not sharing the events from the undefined first date I had with Bård, and even though she was aware just how bad I had felt then, she seemed confident enough in herself now to use the immediate material in producing a suitable situation. Normally, I would have appreciated her trying, but I feared Bård's reply or the lack of it, since he remained riveted and silent for more than a few moments.

I was fairly convinced he was trying to think of a way to escape the situation, but then he turned towards me and asked, "Is it okay with you?"

Incapable to produce words, I simply nodded my confirmation, already planning a suitable revenge for Adela. She didn't even know what she had coming.

"Great," she cheerfully produced, grabbing my brother under the arm and dragging him towards the cinema, not sparing a single glance towards us.

Once le alone, I smiled at Bård, whispering, "Hey."

"Hey," he responded. "How have you been?"

Averting my gaze towards direction in which Fred and Adela disappeared, I began following and Bård joined by my side. Not sure what answer to provide exactly, I mumbled, "Busy. What about you?" "In between family, and your enigmatic texts," he began, and suddenly all the tension and awkwardness seemed to dissipate in the air, "I have been irritably unemployed."

"I am not going to hear the end of the Christmas tree, am I?" I squinted my eyes at him, allowing a smile to break on my face.

"No," he deadpanned. "It is blackmail<u>material."</u>

I hu ed out a breath, mumbling, "Yeah, right. Good luck with that." "Don't push me, or I will," he replied.

When we stopped before the cinema, Adela and Fred already had tickets, but only two. Quirking an eyebrow towards Adela, I asked, "What happened with you saying I had to watch this movie?"

Adela smirked, and I was feeling the inclination to wipe it o her face with the lowest blow I could think of, but then she was talking and as always her charm was getting the better of me. "I was forcing you when you had nobody to keep you company if you made a di erent pick. Now you have company, so I only know Fred and I are seeing this one."

I squinted my eyes at her, judgingly. She didn't blink an eye. "You are infuriating," I stated, allowing the irritation in my voice to show. I turned to Bård, asking, "What do you want to watch?"

"Anything is fine," he replied, his gaze strangely set on Fred. We ended up buying tickets for the same movie, and I completely

ignored the knowing glance Adela secretly directed to me. It was as

though she knew how flustered I felt and how much of a debate I had going on in my head. It was a battle between wanting the day to be over and actually wanting to prolong it. It was so strange not knowing what I wanted, and even though Fred had no problem with Bård being there, I felt confused and even the feeling was something I wasn't able to explain to myself.

At Fred's insistence and Bård's unbelievably convincing support, both of them ended up buying a bag of popcorn and cola, smiling like little children as we lined up to enter. Taking a moment when Adela was in deep conversation with Fred and wasn't paying attention to me, I leaned in towards Bård and whispered, "You are worse than a teenager."

His smirk grew wider. "I have my moments."

It was the last exchanged words before we were seated. Problem was, we were halfway through the movie and I was so focused on the mess in my head, I had no idea what was happening on the screen. I was really trying to focus, but Bård's steady breathing by my side and occasional chewing, combined with glares from Adela, definitely took all capability to remain ignorant.

I was giving up on trying to follow the story in the movie, given that I had missed more than enough of it anyway, so instead I decided to keep my attention to Fred's comments. As though Bård was aware of my disinterest in watching the movie, he leaned in and with eyes still trained on the screen, he asked, "Is he always this quiet?"

"Most of the time," I blurted out, before the sense overload could catch up with me and drive me into silence. It was just that Bård was a steady warmth on my right and the delicious perfume he was wearing, wasn't making anything easier. I could feel my heart rate spiking, which ensured me I was most likely blushing as well. Somehow, I felt relieved to be in a dark room at the moment and a smile danced on my lips as I mused to myself I was the only one aware of my heartbeat. I began relaxing at the thoughts, evening out my breathing and trying to clear my throat without giving any indications of doing so.

If Bård took notice of the fidgeting, he didn't mention it. He simply asked, "Do you think I could take him out somewhere tomorrow? You will be included in the package."

Bård's proposal was honestly sweet and my heart skipped a beat when he looked at me expectantly, his gaze silently pleading in the most adorable way. I hated being the one to break a party, but despite that I heard myself saying, "He is going back home tomorrow."

When someone from the row behind made a shushing noise at us, Bård giggled as his arm flew to cover his lips and in the moment I snickered, completely aware of the gaze boring holes in the back of my skull.

Once he had his laughter under control, clearly attempting to keep it down, he asked, "When is the flight?"

"At four in the a ernoon," I replied.

"What do you say I pick you up in the morning a er breakfast and we go bowling?" he wondered, fixing his gaze on me.

In the darkness of the room, where the only sound was coming from the movie, I felt myself getting lost in the wish to lean a bit closer and close the gap between us. My eyes were fixed on his, as my mind kept analyzing the most nonsensical detail at the moment, and trying to determine the exact color which was hiding in his eyes. He made a slight shi in his seat and I felt myself being drawn to him.

I was on the verge of doing just what my instincts instructed me to do and lean in to kiss him, when he whispered, "You can get his things, and I drive you to the airport a erwards."

I snapped out of my thoughts and as my hand flew up to scratch the back of my neck. I worried in my lower lip between my teeth, and said, "Let me talk to Fred about it." I paused a moment, but Bård gave an understanding nod.

"I can text you tonight?" I half-explained, half-asked.

He didn't insist on it, only nodding his consent, before returning the attention back on the screen. I, on the other hand, had an even more di icult time focusing. It was as though I was suddenly painfully aware of every little movement Bård was making. Every little rustling from him would send my heart in another level of hyperactivity. It was abnormal of me to actually hope things would be awkward between us, but secretly I must have, since the fact everything seemed to be okay, made me feel disappointed in a way. It is not like I was hoping to lose Bård's friendship. It had been the most valuable thing I had grown to cherish since my father's death and the fact Bård was taking my mind o problems was something which was drawing me closer to him. The friend I wanted to keep.

But given we've already overstepped those boundaries made me realize how much I feared gaining something more. It was good to know I could rely on him to hear me out when needed and it was good to know there was someone who would help me stand up when I feel like drowning. And, it was all because that person wouldn't be there for me when 'us' didn't work out. That was the dread which clearly prevented me from making that final step forward. It was what made me push Bård away that night, and as much as I hated it, my logic had a good theory against my heart's wishes.

"Katie," my brother's voice cut my thoughts short. "Credits are rolling," he explained, looking at me expectantly. Then I realized I was still seated and very much fixated on one spot.

"Right," I mumbled, jumping up on my feet. "Sorry."

Fred wasn't buying the attempt at nonchalance. "You okay?" he asked.

"I am good," I reassured with a smile, and though he didn't seem convinced, he let the subject drop, as I inelegantly managed to exit the row and head for the exit. Once we escaped the general crowd, we ended up agreeing on going to lunch at a place of Adela's choosing. My brother was enchanted with the idea, so I was incapable to protest. Bård followed without any protests, so it was safe to assume he was as willing to comply with the demands as I was. My excuse was my brother's enthusiasm, whilst Bård had none. I was beginning to ponder over it, when Adela cleared her throat next to me.

Her gaze was fixed on mine, and when I glanced at her, she immediately enquired, "What's wrong with Bård and you?"

"Nothing," I spoke up, too quickly and too panicky for it to escape Adela.

Arching an eyebrow, she rolled her eyes, before saying, "We are discussing this when we can find a time alone. Got it?" An accusing finger was pointed in my direction and I knew she wasn't going to let it slide this time around. Lucky me, I had time to consider what to share, and the story wasn't mine alone to be able to share it all without regret.

Lunch went quite uneventful considering the company, but an animating conversation did happen to cover most of it. I know I was grateful to Bård for making Fred smile on more than one occasion, and it was not the shy, reserved type only. He laughed, out loud, a few times and hearing my little brother laugh so openly and so honestly a er what seemed years, I felt my heart blossoming.

And, if I glanced at Bård fondly more than a few times over, well no

one noticed it as to comment.

Fred jumped on the bed the second he walked through the door of my room and I shook my head at him. He seemed entirely exhausted and blissful, as he relaxed over the covers, not bothering to take o his jacket. He opened his eyes for a moment, looked at me with a grin stretching his lips, and mumbled, "I could fall asleep like this."

I dropped my jacket down my shoulders and threw it over the desk chair. "You need to get out of those clothes and then you can go to sleep if you want."

"Nah, I am staying up," he mumbled. "It is too early to sleep."

I smiled when he sat upright, taking o the jacket and dropping it over the pillow. Turning my back towards him, I opened the computer and turned it on to check if there was any sort of notification relating university. Coordinating my breathing and supporting my weight on my palms, I considered it a good time as any to ask Fred about Bård's suggestions. I feared his reaction, so I used the advantage my position gave me in hiding my expressions, and asked, "Fred, you can say no, but Bård wanted to take us to a bowling alley tomorrow

morning before driving us to the airport for the flight. I am supposed to text him a reply tonight."

Expecting a reproach from Fred had me closing my eyes, my eyebrows furrowing on their own accord, as I worried my lower lip between my teeth. As the silence from the other room prolonged in time, I resigned with the fact my brother was moments ago before shouting at me.

Then I heard him speak, the words whispered so quietly, thus making it almost impossible to hear, "You mean he wants to take you."

The reproach and fury which I prepared myself for never came. In fact, Fred's words were filled with something close to amusement.

"The invitation had you at the top of the list," I murmured, as I turned around to look at Fred.

And, just as his voice announced, Fred was smiling at me. "Do you really like him?"

I contemplated around the response to that question, debating whether I should tell Fred, but he seemed so expectant. I could never lie to my brother, no matter what, so I pushed myself o the desk and moved towards the bed. I sat down next to him and I locked my gaze with that of my brother, saying, "I might really like him."

"I don't mind, you know," he said next, surprising me. As much as I wanted to believe my bother would never cause any issues of the sort, I did expect him to put up a discussion at least. Before I could get a grip of my track of thoughts, Fred was continuing, "He likes you too, in case you didn't know."

Unsure what to reply to that, I asked, "He does?"

"He keeps casting you glances when you are not looking at him," Fred stated, matter-of-factly.

I barked out a laugh, before growing serious again and asking, "Where did you learn that?"

Rolling his eyes, Fred defended himself, "I am not a child anymore."

I smiled at him, realizing that he was probably right, but since he was growing right in front of my eyes I never actually took notice of it. And, in the craziness of a distraction university provided me with, I entirely forgot about him, and was just then fully unaware of how much I missed him.

Fred got me out of my thoughts once again. "I like Bård. He is funny and he really seems to care about you. And, I'd love to go bowling tomorrow."

Hu ing out a breath, I closed my eyes and tried to control my blush. The words were out before I could rephrase them, "I had you at bowling, didn't I?"

"Pretty much," Fred sardonically provided, before laying out the reason of the conversation, "I just wanted to get the truth. Mum will love to hear this."

"You are a traitor," I murmured under my breath, sending him a glare, but he appeared una ected.

Scrambling to get up I handed Fred the laptop once I had the check finished, leaving him to his devices. I picked up my purse from the floor where I had dropped it upon arrival and took out my phone. It required all the self-control I could gather to stop myself from going through the messaged Bård and I exchanged over the last month. I knew if I ventured there, I would end up grinning at the screen like the last few times I caught myself unaware of it, and it was certainly something I wanted to avoid while in the room with my brother. So, I let my fingers hover over the screen for a few moments, before typing out, Fred is looking forward to going out tomorrow. I hope you didn't change your mind, but even if you did – there is no way out now. Goodnight, Bård.

I remained glaring at the screen for a few moments a er I pressed send. When I was halfway to putting the phone down, it buzzed with a new message. Knowing who sent it, I couldn't resist and opened the message. The contents brought an involuntary smile on my face. A gentleman doesn't back out of a promise. Goodnight, Kate. See you

tomorrow Sighing, I dropped my phone on the table, since I knew if I texted

back we would end up texting for a while and Fred would definitely comment on that. I headed out towards the wardrobe and picked out a pair of sweatpants and a hoodie at a random, and grabbing a towel I headed towards the bathroom for a shower.

Before I stepped out of the room, I said, "Fred, I am going to shower. And, then we are getting chips and watching a movie, okay?" "Yeah," he replied, looking up to meet my gaze with a smile.

I le the room, feeling the day catching up with me and I was glad I had time to use for a relaxing bath. I entered under the spray, closing my eyes and allowing the water to wash away any hesitance and fear, for however brief.