# Catherine: Surprised

I scanned one last time over my work, trying to remember the highlights I had to mention during the lecture. I knew it was better to have a full auditorium to talk to, mostly because too many people meant not having to focus one's gaze on one person in general while speaking, and yet I couldn't stop the nervousness creeping up my spine.

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I tried to steady myself by breathing in and out in evenly, trying to remember something happy to calm my nerves.

Bård's smile, and his eyes. The way he would trace my movements as I wrote, and the way he would reach out to point something out. The way he would skate his fingertip over the paper as he teased about the mistake. The way his frame fit against mine when he'd hug me, and how his arms wrapped around my waist. How he'd rest his chin on my shoulder, before he would land a kiss on its crook tentatively. The way he smirked when he proved me wrong, and the way we could spend all day in silence and it would still be the best time of the week. And, everything Bård in general.

"Katie," mum's voice broke me from my reverie, and I shook the thoughts away to consider how I had missed her approach.

Flickering a glance towards the entrance of the auditorium, I inquired, "Is it time?"

"You should be getting inside," she responded. "Come on, Katie. And, good luck once again."

"Thanks mum," I murmured, and gave my mum a hug, before entering the room.

The members of the committee ware already settled, and I stepped in front of the room. Setting up the laptop, I connected it to the projector and turned around to check its functionality. Using the fact I was turned with my back towards the room and no one could actually see me, I closed my eyes briefly, took a deep breath and then turned around to face the audience as I began laying out my work.

After laying out everything I had planned, I paused, and considering how to conclude I decided, "To paraphrase what a friend once told me, 'Architecture reflects a building like character reflects a person.' Just as we all look out to figure out the makings of a person, the same way I tried to pick up what it is that deciphered my case study." Pausing for a moment I provided, "Thank you so much for your attention. Are there any questions?"

When the Q&A aspect of the lecture ended, I breathed out a sigh of relief. Biting on my lower lip, I stepped off the podium once the rest of the room began piling out. Smiling, my mum along with Fred, got up from their seats to greet me. Fred wrapped his arms around me, hugging tightly, and he stated, "You did it, Kate."

Casting a glance towards the committee, I smiled at Fred, and provided, "I sure hope so." Gulping, I turned to face mum in order to ask her, "How did I do?"

"You did great dear," she assured, resting her hand over my shoulder, clearly waiting for Fred to step away so she could pull me into a hug as well. Before she could do so, my professor's voice greeted from behind me, "Catherine."

Turning around I met the man's gaze and retorted, "Professor."

"Congratulations, Doctor Fox," he felicitated, a polite smile on his face as he extended his hand for me to shake.

"Thank you, professor," I beamed at him, shaking the offered hand.

Scratching his beard, he informed it, "I believe you will have to wait for official results, but I just had a word with our colleagues, and they were satisfied with your work enough to confirm it."

"Thank you so much for the information," I replied, nodding curtly.

"I will leave you to celebrate," he provided, "We will see each other by the end of the week, I am sure."

"Yes, professor," I responded, "Have a good day."

"Thank you, Catherine." With that, he walked away.

I turned around to face my family in order to proclaim success, but all I intended to say vanished at the sight which greeted me. Happiness and pain, at the same time, blossomed in my chest and I felt my lips attempting to move, but nothing seemed to come out. Behind my mum, a few steps away, stood no one but Bård himself.

His gaze held mine, as he hesitantly approached us, and when he stopped I noticed my mother and brother had already turned around to look at him too. I glanced at him and then at Fred, only to find him already looking at me, smiling encouragingly.

"Hei," Bård provided, voice hoarse. "I can see congratulations are in order."

His smile was tight, as though he was restricting himself, and his whole countenance was rigid – looking less like his relaxed, carefree self.

Finally finding my voice, I cut my analyzing short before responding, "Thank you, Bård."

Unknowing what to say, I remained silent.

My heart skipped a beat as his lips twitched at the name, the small smile still not reaching its potential. He looked good as usual. But, he also looked tired – his eyes were bloodshot, and everything about him spoke of how little he had managed to sleep the night before.

But, it didn't stop his devilish self to look so alluring with his mused hair – a strand curled behind his ear, as well as his half-crooked tie strangely adding to his charm.

My heart skipped a beat when I took notice of his shaking hands. He was nervous, and a nervous Bård meant he wanted to talk. My heart skipped another beat, and I couldn't prevent a shy smile.

Then my mother cleared her throat. Snapping out of my assessment, I provided, "Mum," I motioned towards the man whose attention was directed to my mother, "this is Bård. And, Bård this is mum."

My mother outstretched her hand right away, and Bård shook it, as she said, "It's a pleasure to meet you, Bård."

"Pleasure is all mine, ma'am," he responded.

"Young man, that makes me feel older than I really am. Call me by my name, please."

"Very well," Bård confirmed softly.

"How about we head out now?" My mum inquired, glancing at Fred before her eyes landed on me.

I gave her the confirmation she inquired after, "Yeah, let's."

As though Fred could read my mind, he grasped mum's hand, tugging her towards the entrance, allowing Bård and I to remain behind alone. He fell into a pace by my side, the length of our arms brushing as we walked side by side out of the building.

I kept my gaze fitted on mum and Fred, forward, mostly aiming to avoid Bård's gaze altogether. I did enjoy the reassuring warmth of his presence on my right, and it took more willpower than I could have very predicted, to prevent myself from leaning against him and resting my head over his shoulder.

Seemed Bård was willing to break the silence first. "Is there a chance I could persuade you to go for a cup of coffee with me, and postpone the celebration with your family just a little while?"

"It's the least I can do," I provided, "since you came all the way from Norway." It was easy going back to our teasing manner without any intense attempts. Judging by the shy smile on Bård's lips when I glanced at him, he seemed to have nothing against my words. Unsure, I inquired, "Do you know how long are you staying in London?"

He shrugged, murmuring, "Not yet." He paused there, sucking in a breath and cracking his neck left and right, before providing, "I wasn't going to decide until talking to you."

"How about this?" I inquired, before relating my suggestion, "I will go and excuse us with mum, and we can grab a cup of coffee at the café around the corner and talk, and then we work from there."

The hasty nod accompanied by the beaming smile from Bård required no further verbal confirmation as to his agreement to the proposed, so without missing a beat I headed towards where mum and Fred were standing, and once approaching, "Mum, Bård asked me to talk and I proposed going for a cup of coffee. Is that okay?" I couldn't stop the justification, "I will be back home as soon as possible."

"It's okay, Katie," mum reassured, "You talk to him and take your time. Besides it is still early, so we will have plenty of time to cover everything planned. Just sort it out, yeah?"

"Okay, mum," I responded, a small smile shying on my lips.

"Oh, and Katie. Bring him over for dinner," mum mused, a smirk on her lips and a glint of mischief in her eyes.

Trying to avoid addressing the implication of her words, I provided, "I will see you guys at home."

I was about to make my way to Bård, when I felt Fred's fingers wrapping around my wrist, tugging gently. Looking at him, with a slight twist of my body angling to face him, I waited until my brother provided, "Good luck, Katie."

Letting out the unexpected chuckle those words woke up in me, I said, "Thanks, Fred."

The unsaid, "I will need it." remained weighing heavily in the air, and on my shoulders as well as I made my way back to Bård. He was standing almost exactly where I left him, but his gaze was following me, and I found it difficult not to blush under it.

I set on biting my lip and willing my cheeks to cool down. Once I was in Bård's earshot, I provided, "We are excused. Shall we?"

"Yeah," he murmured, falling in a pace by my side. He paused, before asking, "How are you?"

"I am good," I informed him, elaborating, "The preparations for today kept me busy. Yourself?"

A huff of breath preceded his words. "I am good as well, I think. Better now, in any case."

"Should I seek an explanation to those last words?"

To my absolute astonishment, Bård chuckled. "Better not."

I joined in.

We arrived at the café after a couple of silent minutes later, as I tried to understand Bård's being by my side, as well as his quiet demeanor. I failed both, and once we stepped in the café, I knew I wouldn't have to dwell on it for too long. Bård asked for this solely for the purpose of talking to me, which meant I'd soon have all the answers to the questions roaming my mind.

We grabbed a seat at the back of the café, away from all praying ears. As he sank in the chair opposite me, Bård opened his mouth to talk, only to be prevented by the waitress approaching our table and asking, "What can I get you?"

"Earl Grey for me, please," I provided, before resting my eyes on Bård, waiting for his order.

Before he could speak, the waitress twirled his way and flirtatiously provided, "And, what can I get *you*?"

I tried to hide my surprise, and eyed Bård while attempting my best to not burst in laughter. He seemed ignorant of her more than obvious flirting, which I found even more entertaining and amusing. I pressed my lips tight.

As I tucked a strand of hair behind my ear, he declared his order, "A cup of cappuccino for me."

"Okay," the waitress replied, before, "Anything else I could get you?"

"That would be all." I wasn't really up for her prolonging what I had hoped for since my gaze landed on Bård. "Thank you," I addressed her swiftly, my eyes widening the second after she gave me a stink eye and stalked off proudly. I gasped and whirled around to gape after her.

"Wow," I breathed out when I faced Bård again. "That was *something*." I couldn't help but stress the word.

Bård's baffled expression had me shaking my head at him. He still seemed unable to catch on, and inquired, "What are you talking about?"

I only then realized he was so not because he was uncaring, but because he was entirely oblivious.

"About our waitress making a pass on you?" I half-asked, half-teased.

His gaze snapped to the front of the café, and I smirked when his eyes widened and he ducked his head with equal haste, a blush high on his cheeks.

"Is she looking this way?" I wondered.

Bård's blush deepened by a tenfold.

"Oh my God!" I gasped, trying to grip a hold of my squealing, "She *totally is*."

My laughter escaped me without any notice and my shoulders began shaking with it. When Bård looked at me, his expression was as could only be described as pained. Over what exactly I couldn't be sure.

And, I wasn't, until he provided, "I am sorry. I would never flirt back, okay?"

"You don't have to apologize for that," I assured. "And, I know you would not. Besides, come to think of it, I am not judging her taste in men."

Bård's blush returned, taking me by surprise. It was then, the waitress returned with our order, placing my tea in front of me and Bård's cappuccino before him, and asked once more, "Are you sure there isn't anything else I could get you?"

"We are good, rest assured," Bård stated, keeping his cool, and his gaze never shifted away from mine. He was downright adorable.

And, there was a certain café I was sure couldn't visit ever again.

Bård's next words captured my attention. "Kate, I've been beating around the bush. The talk was supposed to happen back at the university, but meeting your mum wasn't in the plan. I somehow missed the part your family would be there. And, neither was the fact you'd end the presentation with my words. Why did you?"

"Because it felt real, and I know you love architecture, so it was right." I shrugged, keeping Bård's gaze locked on mine, as I confessed, "And, I missed you."

Something in Bård's determined expression softened, and I felt all his diffidence crumble down.

"I came to apologize for my words that day at the mall," he stated next. "I am not going to lie and say I don't entertain hopes of us going back to how we were, at least one day, because I do. I still love you, and what I said was wrong. I was too blinded by my wishes, not seeing you had your own to tend to as well."

He gulfed in a breath, pulling the cup closer, before continuing, "I spoke with Adela and the conversation was more than illuminating. I'm sorry I was too immersed in everything else as to ask about your dissertation. It was selfish, and so was I, because it has been so long since I had been happy. I was happy with you and it didn't take any effort whatsoever on my part, so I tried to hold on to it desperately. I know I ruined it, and I know I might have lost my chance, but I had to apologize. I had to ask for forgiveness."

He finished with but a whispers as his eyes fell on the cup in front of him, and I was torn between feeling ecstatic at those words or sad over the pain in them. I settled on reaching out over the table, and curling my fingers around his palm, giving it a light squeeze. I waited for him to set his eyes on me, before saying, "I forgave you long before now, but if you need to hear it. You are forgiven. Also, I am sorry too. What I said wasn't nice either, and was also unfair to both of us. My words were rash, and my attitude uncalled for, no matter what you said."

Taking a deep breath to calm the frantic beating of my heart, I added, "And, considering I entertain the same thoughts, do you want to give us another chance? No secrets, no hesitation, no fights."

"As long as we can bicker," he provided.

Beaming at him, I squeezed his hand once more. "We can bicker. And, we can throw pillows at each other, as long as we are honest. How about that?"

"I think that sounds good." His entire face lit up, and his hand tightened around mine.

My heart skipped a few beats.

"Not that I am not having a great time here, but I have a very intense feeling there is spit in my drink and my murder is being elaborately planned," I elaborated, before twisting my head towards the exit. "So if you don't mind, can we head out?"

Bård nodded enthusiastically. "Of course we can."

Unable to prevent my teasing nature, "Perhaps you should cover the bill."

Bård's sip of the drink ended with a cough. "I will leave that to you, thank you."

With a smirk, I eyed him, before making sure to take care of the bill. Bård seemed tense throughout the whole ordeal, and only when we stepped outside the café did he relax, the astir line of his shoulders easing with a swift roll. Allowing a strand of my hair to curl down from behind my ear, I hid my smile behind it, and waited for Bård to talk.

"So, where to next?" Bård inquired.

Cocking an eyebrow upon glancing at him, I provided, "How about, now that I have you on my territory, I surprise you?"

"Am I going to like this surprise?" he inquired, hesitant.

Shrugging, I retorted, "I don't see a reason why you wouldn't. After kidnapping me to the cabin, I can be allowed some revenge. Or can't I?"

"Indeed you can, but I dislike surprises." If Bård's smile was anything to go by, he didn't seem too perturbed over the prospect of being surprised. He was only aiming to tease.

Managing a crooked smile, I informed him, "And, yet, here we are."

We hailed a cab almost immediately, Bård latched onto my side and our fingers intertwined. It seemed so effortless stepping back to our easiness, it seemed a second nature to be by him. We spent the drive exchanging events from the time we spent apart due to our foolish fight. We laughed and teased, and most importantly we held each other tight, embracing the comfort, our feeling and shared trust.

I saw realization dawn on Bård's face when the cab stopped at the entrance of the cemetery, and after I paid the driver and we stepped out of the car, I gripped Bård's hand in mine and said, "There is someone I'd like for you to meet."

His smile was shy, soft and I didn't hesitate to pull him down the path to my father's grave. He followed in pace. His hand, which was reassuringly tangled in mine, gave a light squeeze before leaving the touch so he could curl his arm around my waist. I leaned into him, and we walked in silence until we reached our destination.

Without stepping away from Bård, I murmured, "Hi, dad." On its own accord, my hand snapped to rest over my father's tombstone, while I continued, "This is Bård."

I don't exactly know what I expected to happen, but Bård's next words were something I didn't imagine in my wildest dreams.

"Hello, sir," Bård began, slowly, as though he was testing the waters hesitantly. Trying out to see my reaction, but it seemed my hand easily resting in his was reassurance enough, since he proceeded, "I didn't expect I'd get to be here today, but your girl is full of surprises," and at that moment, he stepped behind me, surprising me. His hands wrapped around my waist, and he rested his chin over my shoulder, whispering against my ear a promise, "And, I intend treating her right as long as she will have me."

I chuckled in spite of the tear rolling down my cheek. My arms rested over Bård's and he leaned against me even more. My head lulled back against his shoulder, and I allowed a shaky sigh to escape me. The tear fell from my chin, so I reached up to wipe its trail. Before I could, however, Bård's fingers skated over my cheek wiping the salty trail away.

We stayed there a while, embracing each other in quiet reverence for my father, allowing the breeze to entertain a dance around our bodies. It was peaceful, and was a moment, which somehow in spite of how prolonged it grew, I wouldn't mind it continuing even more.

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When the car pulled up in the driveway, Bård and I stepped out once we paid the cabbie. Taking his hand, I walked towards the house as I pulled him along, and simply murmured, "This is home."

He smiled at me. "I like it."

Mum opened the door before we even reached it, leading me to conclude she must have seen us through the window. She smiled once she took notice of our entangled fingers, and as we stepped inside, pulled Bård in an embrace and proclaimed, "Welcome to the family, Bård."

I tried my best not to blush. My failure was utter and complete, yet I didn't mind in the slightest.

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