



CHAPTER SEVEN

TRUTHFULLY SPEAKING, ELISE was completely unable to get Schmidt out of her mind the day after she taught him the basics of rock music. She was working at the store for the day, and more than she cared to admit, she zoned out entirely and forgot about the songs playing from her laptop as she fell into familiar daydreams about Schmidt, and those strong arms he had carried her with yesterday. Her notebook was slowly filling up with hearts drawn around his name, like she was a teenager with a huge crush on the cutest boy of school, but perhaps she wasn't fool to think there was something between them. Obviously, it was her style to doubt herself, feel insecure and live in the belief that Schmidt would never feel as strongly of her as she did of him, but the previous night, something had happened. They almost, nearly, maybe even came close to a kiss — that happened, yeah.

That was why Elise spent a huge fraction of her time doodling hearts and dreaming about what could be, and more than was acceptable, a customer had to repeat their question numerous times just because Elise hadn't heard the first time. Still, everyone who stopped by the store seemed relatively happy when they got what they came for, and she smiled, which delighted Elise. Despite Comic Planet being rather small, and not very well known yet, she was getting some money and her customers seemed pleased.

But it was the brutal truth, that she wasn't getting enough money. The store had drained her of her wealth, and as much as she enjoyed the smiles and compliments she received, her hard work wasn't paying off as well as it should have. Frankly, all of Elise's money had gone into building the place into its current glory, and that led into her spending most of her time in that mentioned glory. If she wasn't in lo 4D, she was at the store, and that was literal, because she had to give up her apartment, and now, all she had was a poor mattress and a set of Marvel sheets to sleep with in the back of the store.

The small bell over the entrance rang as another customer entered, and as soon as Elise saw Jess and a woman she didn't recognize, she instantly shut the notebook with Schmidt's name all over it, and smiled kindly at her friend. Jess walked over to the counter, and greeted the woman with a warm smile stretching her painted lips, as the other girl Elise had never seen looked around the small, but cute place. To be honest, Elise was somewhat intimidated by her beauty, and the flawless features, and found herself staring until Jess spoke up and for the sake of her dignity, she tore her gaze from Jess' friend and looked over to her.

"Hey, Elise. This is Cece, she's my best friend and I thought you two should finally meet", Jess smiled, and when Cece put out her hand for Elise to shake, her courage went down the drain and her eyes widened. It was such a simple gesture, yet it brought so much misery and struggle to Elise she nearly got a migraine from it, but eventually she managed to take Cece's hand and pray that she didn't notice the layer of sweat covering her own. After shaking hands and introducing herself, Elise let go and glanced down to her feet awkwardly, drawing deep inhales and letting them out after holding them in for a moment. She was not comfortable with making friends.

"Nice to meet you, Elise. I've heard a lot about you", Cece spoke, and although she probably meant it in a positive, kind manner, Elise's face became devoid of color and she stared at the woman in fear. What kind of things had she heard? Did she hate Elise already? Would she burn down her store in the dark of the night? Was that smile to be trusted?

"Y—You too", Elise let out, with an evident struggle, but she tried to keep in mind that Cece was Jess' best friend, and therefore most likely a good person, just like Jess herself. Perhaps, they'd be able to get along and become good friends eventually, once the shyness in Elise would fade away and she'd feel more at ease in her presence. It wasn't Cece's fault, though, merely something Elise went through whenever she was meeting new people — constant, endless worrying and doubting. Directed mostly at herself.

"You know, I was wondering if we could have a girls' night next weekend? Maybe at your place, Elise?", Jess suggested then, just when Elise had thought the moment couldn't get any worse. To calm herself down, Elise did what she always did, quietly muttered the lyrics of the first song she could think of, and once she had went through the chorus of a Linkin Park song, she felt ready to respond. And unfortunately, her response had to be a shy shake of her head. Even if she wasn't very into parties or anything like that, she was a tad disappointed that she had to refuse, but the truth was, she had no place. Except for, of course, the store but for her, that was beyond embarrassing.

Inhaling deeply, Elise wondered whether she should make a confession or not, but as soon as she understood that the key to a good friendship was honesty and sharing secrets, despite how uncomfortable they were sometimes, she opened her mouth. "Look, uh, we can't have a girls' night at my place, because, um...", Elise scratched the back of her neck and glanced around nervously, "I—I don't have an actual home to live in. All of my money is in this store, so I, uh, I kind of live here." She offered a nervous smile to Jess and Cece, both of them staring at her in shock, and in a blink of an eye, Elise was pulled into a tight hug by the two of them.

"Oh, honey", Cece sighed, and even if they had only met, Elise didn't feel uncomfortable. She felt loved, cared of and special, and smiled as Cece and Jess hugged her from across the counter. It was a difficult gesture to experience, but it brought the warmth Elise needed, and she plucked a smile on her face. Wiping away tears, Elise looked down and chuckled so lowly. She was a sensitive person, always crying, so she was used to the feeling of warm, salty tears rolling across her cheeks onto her lips where she tasted them. Still, it was somewhat embarrassing, but luckily there was no one in the store except for them, and neither of the women seemed to mind, as it was a completely reasonable, understandable reaction.

"I have an idea", Jess then spoke suddenly, and Elise looked up with a confused look. "You're moving in with us!", she grinned, and Elise's eyes widened with shock, unable to believe that Jess was being serious, but the truth was, the woman was too nice to let someone be homeless. And on top of that, she would never joke about something like this. She wasn't heartless. If anything, she was a good friend.

And apparently, now, Elise's new roommate as well.

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"Look, Elise is my friend, that's all."

Nick gave Schmidt a tired look, not believing a word that came out of his mouth. He knew Schmidt well enough to know when he liked someone, especially when he usually showed it off and barely hid his true feelings, but something about Elise caused him to act like a silly teenager in love. He was awkward, shy and in the past 24 hours, Nick had heard him giggle. It was quite obvious, that it wasn't just simple attraction to Elise, not just sexual, but full-on love and an action that ran so deep, it brought up features Schmidt hadn't explored in ages. He did have insecurity somewhere within him, the remains of his younger years and Elise brought all that to the surface. It wasn't necessarily bad, but it was certainly proof that Schmidt was indeed in love.

"A friend? C'mon, Schmidt, we both know that's not true. I just really don't see why you won't tell Elise about your feelings and take her on a date. You're good with women, so why not use your charm on her?"; Nick shrugged, and took a sip of his beer, causing Schmidt to roll his eyes from across the kitchen counter. Schmidt had tried to make some food to put his energy to good use, but as soon as Nick had come out of his room, all of that had failed and the beginning of an omelet had gone to waste. Now, the two of them were talking about Elise by the counter, and mostly arguing over Schmidt and the feelings he obviously had, yet pluckily denied.

"Are you insane? Elise is not the kind of woman you flirt and sleep with. Elise is that woman you try to impress and make happy and eventually marry. I don't want to charm her or lure her into bed with me, Nick. I want her to like me for me and I want to have a sincere, genuine relationship with her and make her smile every day", Schmidt ranted to Nick, who smirked at the confession that just forced its way out of Schmidt's mouth. At the realization of what he just said, Schmidt coughed, and shook his head, adding an awkward, "I mean, it had feelings for her. Which I don't", which Nick didn't believe for a split second. He was 100% convinced that Schmidt had true feelings for Elise, and he wasn't wrong.

"Okay, makes sense", Nick rolled his eyes. "So you're just going to pretend like you're just friends?", he questioned Schmidt's intentions and lifted an eyebrow, not supporting the idea at all. He had seen the way Schmidt looked at Elise, and the way Elise looked at Schmidt, and it was right there, yet he seemed to be the only one to see it and it wonderfully frustrated Nick.

Smacking his hand against the counter, Schmidt nodded and smiled. "Finally you get it. I will just...pretend like there is nothing going on. And that should be easy, as long as I don't see her all the time and keep a reasonable distance", Schmidt explained, and just as he finished, the front door of the store opened and Jess walked in, along with Cece and finally, Elise. The breathtakingly beautiful Elise, wearing a band tee, glasses hanging on her nose, a shy smile on her lips. And then there was the suitcase she was dragging.

"Hey guys! Guess what? Elise is moving in with us!"

As Schmidt started to internally scream and fall apart, Nick snorted and nudged him with his elbow, giving him a wink. "Good luck with your plan, man. I bet it's going to be great", Nick laughed, entirely aware that one day, eventually, he'd find the two of them doing something beyond just friends. And frankly, he couldn't wait for that to happen, and as much as Schmidt hated to admit it, neither could he.

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The night had fallen, and most of the residents of lo 4D were already soundly asleep. Except for Elise, who had taken over the couch and was reading *Divergent* with her earphones on, playing her superhero playlist from Spotify. Although the music had a tendency to calm her down, and she had already had her cup of tea, she struggled to fall asleep, and she wasn't exactly sure why. Perhaps it was the fact that she hated sleeping somewhere different than home, but for now, the apartment was her home and that was also something she hadn't dealt with. The pressure was too real, and it weighed on her shoulders until she was too exhausted to even sleep, leading into rereading her favorite book whilst curled up in the corner of the sofa, with her Marvel duvet covering her entire body.

The insomnia was also partly caused by the fact that she and Schmidt had nearly kissed yesterday, or at least he had leaned in to do that, yet they never did. And it left a lot of unsolved feelings within her, along with the desire for closure and answers, yet as much as she needed them, she feared of hearing any. Perhaps she'd be disappointed, and that would lead into sharing an apartment with someone she loved, but didn't love her back, which would make things greatly awkward. Besides she was lucky enough to have such great friends who took her in, so she would never forgive herself for ruining all that, and therefore she decided to not talk to Schmidt about her feelings, nor the beginning of a potential kiss.

The music she was listening to was quiet enough for her to hear when one of the doors in the store opened, and the sound earned her interest and attention quickly. Taking out one earphone, Elise turned around to see Schmidt in his kimono, slipping through the cracked doorway of his room to step into the kitchen and sigh heavily. It was quite dark in the apartment, excluding the light Elise had in order to read her book, so Schmidt turned on the light above the stove to see where he was going. Once the room was illuminated, he noticed Elise, and smiled slightly.

"Can't sleep either, huh?", Schmidt asked, and Elise chuckled lowly, but admitted to having a bit of trouble with falling into a peaceful slumber, even if it was already beyond late.

"Can I ask you something, Elise?", Schmidt spoke as he approached the couch, and the woman nodded whilst sitting up and making space for him. The two of them sat together then, and Elise put away the book and the earphones to give Schmidt her full attention. She wasn't sure how, but even in that kimono, he looked like a god on Earth, and in the small light his face was perfectly illuminated and Elise was certain his jawline would cut her if she touched it. Still, of all the thoughts filling her mind, the strongest one was the question of how much money Schmidt had put in the Douchebag Jar only because of that kimono.

"Why did you move in with us? I'm not saying I don't want you here, because it's... It's great. I just— Why?", Schmidt whispered carefully, not wanting to wake up to their friends, nor to upset Elise. She inhaled sharply, and looked down to her fingers which were fiddling with the edge of the duvet, as she began to gnaw on the inner side of her cheek nervously — a bad habit she had picked up when she was younger.

Elise sighed, and looked over to Schmidt, whose eyes were filled with genuine concern, entirely aimed for Elise. "I know it's sudden, but honestly? I have nowhere else to go. The store has taken all of my money, so I'm basically homeless. I've spent the past couple of nights in the back of the shop", Elise shrugged, and in an instant, Schmidt's heart shattered for the woman. With a sad look, he placed a hand on her knee to offer her consolation and warmth, which earned a sincere smile from her.

"Elise?", Schmidt whispered, and she lifted an eyebrow, whilst nodding at Schmidt as a sign of willingness to hear him out. After exhaling deeply, Schmidt inched closer and lifted Elise's duvet to sneak underneath it and find cover beside her.

"I'm going to hug you now, and you can't stop me", Schmidt continued, and with that, he opened his arms to wrap them around Elise and bring her closer. And there was something in that hug that brought unconditional peace and happiness, and made the both of the smile as they closed their eyes and rested on the couch, under the warm covers.

And just like that, they both fell asleep, and there was no longer any sign of insomnia to be found.

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I love writing this book so much ahhh my adorable beans ((:(:

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