



CHAPTER ONE

IT WAS THIRTY minutes to the opening event of Comic Planet, and frankly, Elise Stevens was a nervous mess, almost unable to drink her tea without spilling it all over her Fall Out Boy tee. She was shaking, glasses sliding closer to the tip of her nose with each second whilst she used her laptop to check out the time more often than was necessary. She feared that no one would come in, that she'd have to sit there all alone throughout the night in the hopes that at least one person would get lost and accidentally enter her small store, but mostly, she prayed for a crowd of people to literally run in and party with her. She wasn't a big people person, a huge awkward nerd to be honest, but right now, she preferred the idea of more than less, regarding people.

Somehow, Elise managed to finish her tea in time, and then found herself sitting by the desk again, with a strawberry lollipop between her lips and a Captain America comic resting on her crossed thighs. She had already put on some music, and the lights could be turned on and changed into flickering neon ones with one flick of a switch, so she considered herself to be ready. There was alcohol and snacks, so maybe, just maybe, people would be entertained and find themselves having fun, if they'd arrive. With fifteen minutes to go to 7 pm, Elise was nearly falling apart, but she tried to remain cool and calm on the outside in order to impress whoever would walk through the door first.

Outside the comic book store, beyond Elise's awareness, stood the gang from apartment 4D, waiting for the party to start and the doors to open, some of them more than others. However, the dark of the night didn't seem ideal either, so even Schmidt who hated the plan the most, yearned to find himself indoors and drowning his annoyance in senseless amounts of alcohol. He was there already, might as well party the night away, right?

"This is preposterous! My creepy guy radar is dripping red", Schmidt scoffed, still stuck on the idea of the owner being some boring, sad man who would infect him with the lack of enthusiasm and motivation in life. The reality was far from his low expectations, and soon enough he'd come face to face with the complete opposite of who he was waiting to meet inside the store — not a sad nerd, but a stunning woman, about his age, one gaze away from stealing the man's heart in an instant.

The four of them engaged in a loud argument about whatever they could think of, until the door was opened and they heard music blasting from inside, welcoming them into the shop. Each and every one of them shut their mouths immediately, and Jess ran indoors, considering she was the most excited, followed by Winston who felt his inner child come out around comic books. Meanwhile, Nick and Schmidt attempted to play it cool and walked slowly behind their friends, giving space for people who entered the store with enthusiasm equal to Jess or Winston's. Surprisingly many people were eager to visit, and it downright shocked Schmidt who had expected him and his friends to be the only one to bless the owner with their presence.

"I don't know, man. This doesn't seem too bad", Nick pointed out once he and Schmidt had entered the store, and begun walking around to observe the surroundings. And frankly, it seemed that Nick Miller was growing fond of what he was seeing, and absolutely intrigued by the swords hanging on the walls, aching to touch and buy one. However, he managed to keep calm, and strode with Schmidt around the relatively small space, stopping to check out a few comic books once in a while, yet Schmidt wasn't warming up to the experience like his best friend.

"Are you sure? Because, I mean...", Schmidt proceeded to rant about the flaws of the store, even if he was coming up with most of them, since he failed to find any negative sides about the upbeat music, the perfect atmosphere or the bar on the other side of the shop. It seemed like a nice place, but sticking to his initial opinions, Schmidt managed to make up things he, according to his own words, despised about the absolutely adorable shop. Fair enough — the place wasn't made for everyone, some people just didn't like comic books, like Schmidt for example, who was the complete opposite of Jess, as the woman was running around with hands full of stuff she would most likely end up wasting her money on.

"And do not get me started on the owner, I bet—", Schmidt continued, only to be cut off when he and Nick heard an unfamiliar voice from behind of them, yet it was laced with kindness and happiness, and once they turned around they came face to face with a fairly young woman with the cutest smile in the whole world, and frankly, Schmidt was certain his heart stopped for a moment there.

"Hi, and welcome to Comic Planet! I'm Elise, I'm the owner", the woman smiled shyly, and offered her hand for Schmidt and Nick, but neither took it. They just stood there, staring, unsure how to react but once it had been quiet for far too long, Schmidt finally managed to speak — though all that came out was the only thing he could think of.

"Goodness gracious, Angels are real."

Elise was confused by this, causing her to lift an eyebrow as she awkwardly pulled her hand back and looked at Schmidt carefully. Glancing at Nick then, Elise sought for answers, but when neither of them offered any, she waved her hand in front of their faces in order to snap them out of whatever they had fallen into. Pushing her hands into the pockets of her jeans, Elise smiled sheepishly once Schmidt jolted awake from a very evident daydream, and the man broke into a nervous laughter, nudging Nick with his elbow and starting to shake slightly in front of the owner, who was the actual opposite of what he had expected.

"I mean, uh, do you believe in angels? Because I... I...", Schmidt tried, clearing his throat, "I think you might be one", a familiar grin finding its way to his lips once he found the spark of confidence within him, from underneath the heavy nervousness and butterflies filling his stomach. His eyes locked with Elise's, and they stared at each other for a moment, whilst Elise shrugged with equal shyness. Though, Schmidt was slowly recovering from his momentary weakness, and the old habits of flirting with women he found attractive filled his head, making it impossible for him to do anything else but that. Which, again, made the situation rather awkward for Nick who just stood beside his friend and prayed for the moment to end as soon as possible.

"I don't think I am, sorry. Uh, you like comic books?", Elise quickly changed the subject, crossing her arms and looking around nervously, obviously shaken by the shameless flirting. She wasn't used to guys hitting on her — during the twenty-seven years of her life, she had only had one boyfriend, who had dumped her when he considered her obsession with comics, superheroes and fictional characters in general to get out of hand. Which, in her opinion, was rude yet it shattered her self-esteem entirely, and caused the red blush on her cheeks as she avoided eye contact with Schmidt.

"No", Schmidt blurted out, still grinning, until he understood what he had said, and quickly corrected himself. "I lovethem", he added quickly, only for Nick to shake his head and smile at Elise, whose eyes were wide, hands shaking and the expression on her face signifying fear, which he didn't wonder. Schmidt was a handful, for sure.

"Schmidt hates them. He didn't even want to come. He was so sure the owner would be some creepy, sad guy", Nick explained, and Elise let out a quiet laugh while her gaze dropped to the floor, over to her feet, and her fingers fiddled with the hem of her shirt nervously. Schmidt scoffed loudly, swatting Nick's arm, which pulled a groan from the latter as he grabbed the spot Schmidt smacked, so utterly done with his best friend's behavior already.

"Thank you, Nicholas. Now go away", Schmidt spat sarcastically through gritted teeth, giving his friend a highly irritated, cold stare which managed to drive Nick away, leading Schmidt into laughing lightly as he turned to face Elise again. The woman was frightened by the sudden intimacy of the situation, how they somehow ended up standing somewhat close to each other underneath the dim lights with rock music softly playing on the background, and how Schmidt was looking at him with a wide grin pulling up his surprisingly tempting lips in a way that both scared and excited Elise. She hadn't talked to men in ages, so it was a rather strange situation that she wasn't potentially able to handle.

Elise shivered, but somewhere deep within her she found the courage to keep the conversation going, and she forced a slight smile whilst shyly hiding her hands behind her back. "So, Schmidt, if you're not into comic books, what are you doing here?", she asked as their eyes locked, sending her heart through her chest and into the sky. She had no clue how he had such an effect on her, but he was attractive for sure, and for someone who hadn't interacted with men in an embarrassingly long time, perhaps Elise's reaction was merely natural.

"My roommates dragged me here. At some point, they literally did. But now that I know the owner is such a charming, stunning woman I might just stop by again", Schmidt explained, with the grin still widening his lips and boosting his confidence, whilst he casually leaned against one of the comic book racks, only for the damn thing to almost collapse underneath the pressure. Panicking, Schmidt threw his hands out to catch the rack, and somehow managed to grab it before a single comic could fall out, but it still wrecked his cool, casual vibe and made it quite embarrassing for him. But instead of laughing and walking away, Elise rushed over to him.

"Oh, gosh, are you okay?", Elise asked in worry and placed a hand on Schmidt's shoulder, a contact that surprised even herself, and in an instant she pulled her hand away while their eyes widened, completely unprepared for physical contact, although it was all Schmidt could think about, but he failed to play it cool like he intended to. He was usually so good with women, but now, his confidence just came crashing down and he felt awkward and weak in Elise's presence, like that overweight kid he used to be, with no clue how to actually talk to women.

"I'm gonna get a drink. See ya", Schmidt blurted out, and with that, he had strode on and walked over to the open bar he wasted no time with, instantly pouring himself a drink and downing it with one big gulp. Elise looked as he left, and frankly, she began doubting herself once the confusion settled and made room for insecurity, but she had barely time to build hatred towards herself, when another stranger waltzed over to her and drew her mind elsewhere. Well, not entirely.

Elise was joined by a woman with glasses hanging off her nose, resembling Elise's appearance, and her arms were full of stuff, from mugs to comic books she had hoarded with a crazy pace. As the owner of the shop, Elise was rather flattered and couldn't help but smile at the sight, happy that someone was enjoying their time in the store. The young woman blew her curls away from her face, and returned the smile Elise offered her as she visibly relaxed due to being in the presence of another woman. Frankly, Elise wasn't good at talking in general, or handling social situations at all — which was odd, since she would have to do that on a daily basis now — but she preferred talking to women over men. There was pressure, admittedly, but it was different.

"I think Schmidt might like you. He doesn't usually flirt so bluntly, he's more of a smooth, discreet guy, you know? And he definitely isn't so awkward, ever", the woman smiled and looked over to Schmidt, who was nervously standing in the corner, with a drink in hand and a doubtful look on his face. He seemed out of place, out of character for sure, and Elise smiled slightly at the recognition of the discomfort she was used to feeling. But once the woman's words registered in her head, Elise turned to face her and shook her head vigorously.

"Like me? Like? Me? P... nooo...", Elise panicked, worry filling her heart as she looked at the enthusiastic girl before her. "How do you know him, anyway?", she added carefully, her eyebrows knitting together as she considered all the possibilities. Was this his girlfriend? If so, how messed up was their relationship? Were they related? Was she a stalker? Was he a stalker? So many options to choose from, and each one caused Elise to grow a tad more worried until she broke a sweat under the lights filling the room with a lovely shade of purple. Yet, it was none of them.

"We're roommates. I'm Jess, and yes, I live with three men. Hodge me and my two other roommates. Please don't judge me. I'm not some hoe-bag, I swear", the woman elaborated, and struggled to offer a hand for Elise to shake, but somehow she succeeded anyway and they introduced themselves to each other. Once hands had been shook and the introductions were out of the way, Elise turned to look at Schmidt again, with a slight smile on her pink lips. He was a sight for sore eyes, certainly.

"I'm Elise. And don't worry, I won't judge you", Elise promised, although she was definitely surprised to hear that she shared an apartment with three guys, one of which was the eye candy Elise couldn't stop staring at. Even if he seemed awkward and uncomfortable, out of his comfort zone, and once in a while yelled at the younger customers, claiming he was sick of all these youths ruining his night. Yet, all Elise could do, was smile and wish that she'd have the courage to get to know him better. And it seemed Jess could see it shining in her eyes.

"Hey, Elise, you wouldn't want to join us for dinner tomorrow night?", Jess suggested, and the store owner immediately looked over to her with a surprised look on her face. They had barely met, and she was already inviting her over to dinner? It seemed like a risky situation, and usually, Elise hated plans on such short notice, but once she weighed the pros and cons and realized that it would give her an opportunity to get to know more people in L.A., befriend Jess, and get to know Schmidt over some food, the concern on her features faded and turned into a new, enthusiastic smile.

And with a simple word, Elise had agreed to go over to their lovely apartment 4D tomorrow evening, for some chicken and pasta and whilst it frightened her in the most gut-wrenching manner and frankly, made her physically sick, she was also excited and unable to stop smiling, convinced that she wanted to do it despite being scared. It was going to be great, she was sure of that, and she wasn't wrong.

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I'm not gonna lie guys, elise is lowkey based on me. fight me. (actually please don't because i don't do fights) also yes i should stop doing that with my characters but eh, oh well.

oh and it's our schmidty's birthday, happy birthday to max greenfield. also, i hope you guys are liking the book and elise so far :(

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