



## CHAPTER TWO

"**WAIT, WHAT DO** you mean the comic book shop girl is coming over for dinner?", disbelief was lacing Schmidt's tone as he looked up from the magazine he was reading by the table, almost spilling his coffee as the shock in him spread out, twisting his face into a terrified grimace. Nick and Winston glanced at each other, succumbing to laughter, whilst Jess threw out her hands and sighed out loud, displeased with the reaction he got from Schmidt, who seemed to be against all of her ideas lately.

"Yes, at 5 pm, Elise Stevens is coming here to have dinner with us. I thought it'd be nice to get to know her! Besides, she seems really great and I want to be her friend, okay!", Jess ranted, and Schmidt sighed heavily while covering his face with his palms, muttering profanities as Nick and Winston laughed at their friend. Jess rolled her eyes, and took a seat next to Nick to sip on her coffee, whilst it seemed Schmidt was entirely unable to do so ever again, utterly shaken by these not-so-shocking news Jess had come home with.

"Dude, don't pretend like you're not excited. I saw you last night, you were honestly blushing. You obviously like this girl!", Nick laughed, and Schmidt gave him a deadly stare, ready to spark a verbal fight as he closed the magazine and smacked his hand against the table in irritation.

"That's absurd! I am—I do not like her", Schmidt argued, but then with a slightly lower tone added, "but hypothetically, regarding suits, do you think she'd prefer fancy gray or classic black?", turning more serious now, and confirming that perhaps he did kind of like her. But he was Schmidt, and he was into girls all the time, and then he'd have sex and then never see them again. He could do that with Elise, right? Slowly but surely seduce her and then have meaningless fun behind closed doors, with no strings or any kind of emotions whatsoever attached? Right?

Winston shook his head, and leaned over the table to face Schmidt with a stern look on his face, his finger pointing at the man opposite him. "Schmidt, I'm gonna say this once. You are not wearing a suit", Winston insisted—after all, it was merely a casual dinner at their local, not one at some fancy, romantic restaurant. Jess and Nick nodded in agreement, looking at Schmidt with serious looks to make sure the man would control himself and not go over the top, like he easily did.

"Fine, fine. No suits."

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Elise was a nervous wreck, and completely unsure of what to expect, but she tried to be brave as the elevator she was standing in made a ping when it halted. Once the doors opened, the woman walked out and inhaled deeply. It was nearly 5 pm, and she was early, just like she wanted to in order to make a good impression on Jess and her roommates. With a smile forced onto her face, Elise spotted the door that read 4D on it, and as soon as she had approached it and mentally prepared herself for spending the following several hours with people she barely knew, her knuckles felt a light knock on the door.

She could hear loud arguing and yelling in a rather panicky manner from the other side of the door, but eventually, the noise settled and the door was opened, revealing a well-dressed Schmidt, with his hair combed back, hands straightening the tie before tucking it underneath his jacket. Elise's eyes widened at the sight, as it was certainly handsome, but she instantly felt wonderfully under-dressed for the occasion and feared that she would make a complete fool of herself—although she did bring a bottle of wine with her, but instead of a fancy dress she was just wearing a Spider-Man shirt and a pair of jeans, whilst Schmidt had clearly put effort into his appearance.

"Y—you're wearing a suit", Elise just blurted out, not sure what else to say, and since Schmidt was standing in front of her, she couldn't sneak in and avoid the topic either. So, she was forced to be swallowed by the awkwardness of the situation and pray she wasn't looking like a homeless person compared to the rest of them. Schmidt chuckled quietly, and nodded somewhat proudly, the grin on his face revealing how he was feeling and it was downright pleased with himself. And frankly, Elise didn't wonder, because he looked great, but she feared that she did not.

"I wasn't sure if you like fancy gray or classic black more so I made a bold move and went with charming brown", Schmidt explained with a smile, one that caught Elise off guard along with his words, causing her cheeks to turn red under the intent gaze. She glanced down at her feet and tried her best to not swoon right there and then, but she was absolutely unable to get Jess' words out of her mind—"I think Schmidt likes you", and damn it, what if he did? Elise had no clue how to work with that, because even though the man was certainly like a treasure to behold, Elise didn't know how to be with men, and the idea of someone being into her was frightening.

Still blushing, Elise looked up shyly, locking her eyes with Schmidt's. "You put on a suit... For me?", she asked quietly, her tone near a whimper in its weakness and vulnerability, but Schmidt had no time to evaluate her voice, when her words made sense to him and he understood what he had accidentally admitted.

"No, no, that's not what I—I didn't say—Oh my— Jess, Elise is here!", Schmidt yelled nervously, and disappeared from the doorway whilst Jess ran to the scene and welcomed Elise instantly. Still shaken by what had happened, Elise was a bit confused, but that didn't stop her from smiling at Jess, who more or less dragged the new girl into the apartment. Quietly, Elise gave Jess the bottle of wine and shrugged, insisting that she considered it only polite and the least she could do as a guest being invited over. She did that—tried her best to be kind and caring, and rarely she failed. She was a friendly, lovable person overall, and perhaps that was why Schmidt could not get his eyes off her from across the room.

Jess introduced Elise to the guys, Nick, Winston and Schmidt, whom she had already met a couple of times, and seemed to grow a liking to. Obviously, she didn't voice her thoughts, but admittedly her gaze lingered a tad longer on him than it did on any of the other men. Nonetheless, Winston and Nick both seemed fun and someone she'd gladly befriend, and therefore the smile on her face turned out to be indestructible and constant. She was happy, though, even if socializing was not her cup of tea and she felt a bit out of place, but these people gave off a nice vibe. It was impossible for Elise to regret coming over, because so far, she was being treated as if they had been friends for years.

Elise also noted, how no one but Schmidt was wearing rather formal attire, and she felt relieved due to being just as casually dressed as the others. Still, she couldn't help but think about what Schmidt had said, and what could be the true reason behind the suit.

"I am obsessed with your store, okay? You'll be seeing plenty of Winnie the Bitch around there", Winston praised as he shook hands with Elise, whose cheeks turned pink under the compliments he kept on showering her with, but somehow she managed to stutter out a thank you, as she did after all feel very flattered and happy to hear such things. Admittedly, there had been a fear that Comic Planet wouldn't be a huge success like she had dreamed for the longest time, and it had drained her of mostly all of her money, but she was proven somewhat wrong last night, with tons of people stopping by the place and showing her support whether it was just sweet, sweet praise or buying a few comics before heading out.

Once the introductions were out of the way, and Elise felt somewhat at ease, they all gathered around the table and Jess served the dinner—chicken pasta, like had been promised. With only a few bites in, Elise was blown away by the miraculous taste, as if she was actually in a restaurant, not apartment 4D, and her eyes widened at the perfect combination of flavors as she devoured another forkful. Turning over to Jess, Elise piled up the shreds of courage in her until it forced the words out of her mouth into the air for everyone to hear, earning all of the attention to herself.

"Jess, this is amazing. Did you make this?", Elise asked, smiling so brightly at the woman who parted her lips, glancing around, but before she could get a single word out, Schmidt spoke up and Elise's attention was drawn from Jess to him. Her smile faded slowly as she paid attention to what he had to say, only to then realize what an awkward situation she had created for herself. Or perhaps it wasn't awkward at all, but once hers and Schmidt's eyes locked, she felt herself falling from the temporary bravery to utmost weakness caused by the sole joy he looked at her with.

"Actually... I'm usually the one who does the cooking. I'm glad you like it, Elise", Schmidt grinned, and poked at his pasta with his fork, devoid of concentration as he got lost admiring Elise from the other side of the table, which earned a kick in the shin from Winston, who forced a fake smile to his lips. Elise turned red again, and looked down at her plate before stuffing her face with the pasta in order to find herself unable to speak and therefore, unable to embarrass herself, but it seemed someone didn't catch up with her intentions.

That someone being Nick. "So, Ellie— Can I call you Ellie? So, what kind of a girl are you, huh? How do you spend your days?", Nick came onto her, smiling warmly and convincing her of his good intentions, but with nothing but hatred towards attention and being in the spotlight, Elise could only open her mouth as her eyes widened and her mind went blank. There wasn't much to know about her, really, she was just a comic book shop owner with a fiery love for tea, fictional characters and rock music. Although, that was something too, but she failed to get it out there, completely frozen.

"I... like... eyes", Elise blurted out, not sure what else to say, since it was the only thing she could think of whilst staring into Nick's eyes with a rather scared look on her face, and at that point, he probably put together two and two and figured that she wasn't much of a social person. But then again, neither was he, so he just nodded and offered a reassuring smile to make it less embarrassing for Elise, who sighed at the realization of her word choices.

"Elise likes rock music. Yeah, she loves rock bands, don't you?", Winston nudged Elise with his elbow, and the woman was surprised, but nodded at the spoken truth. She and Winston had exchanged only a few words in the previous night, but it seemed whatever she had spoken, he had listened closely. And, perhaps, he could figure her love for the genre from the shirt she had been wearing, but nonetheless, she was flattered by the amount of attention she received from Winston. She was used to being a wallflower, not of importance or worth so much attention, so earning some was definitely new, but she liked it. She liked being heard and noticed, even if attention mostly flustered her, but when she did speak, she wished for someone to listen. And apparently, Winston had done just that.

Schmidt knitted his eyebrows together when he saw Elise and Winston smiling at each other, and the need to interrupt the moment between the two grew too strong to fight. "Well, she also likes comic books!", Schmidt butted in, proving that he, as well, knew something of Elise, but it only earned confused looks from everyone. Jess cleared her throat, and leaned closer to Schmidt, who wore a frustrated expression and a heart full of what he could only interpret jealously, but would never admit or accept.

"Schmidt, she runs a comic book shop. We all knew that already", Jess whispered, though not too quietly and it made Schmidt scoot and roll his eyes before continuing.

"What about men? How would you describe your ideal boyfriend? Do you have a boyfriend?", Schmidt bombarded Elise with questions, and the other two men let out a loud, disappointed "Dudel!", whilst Elise inhaled sharply and looked down, fiddling with her fingers as she scooped up the last of her pasta and swallowing it thickly. Frankly, the topic of men wasn't ideal, but not answering would only seem weird, or so she thought, so eventually she shrugged and forced herself to answer despite being somewhat sad about her history with men—which, truthfully, didn't come with much variety.

"No, no boyfriend. There was this one guy that I used to date but he left me", Elise admitted, and blew her hair off her face quietly, before looking up and smiling faintly, as her eyes met Schmidt's in a way that sent sparks throughout her body. "And when it comes to ideal, I guess I just need loyalty and kindness. Sadly, most of the men I would gladly date are either celebrities or fictional characters", Elise chuckled, and Jess laughed with her, which felt good—it felt good to know she made people laugh. She was funny at times, but it wasn't one of her strongest traits, although she did crack a few good jokes here or there but it wasn't what she was known for. She was just shy, closed up, sensitive and insecure. Which caused a sad silence in the room, but Schmidt gave a deep look to Elise with a reassuring nod.

"Well, I bet that guy's an idiot", Schmidt stated, and the rest of them nodded in agreement, causing Elise to smile wider than in a long time. Frankly, with these people, she felt genuinely happy and comfortable, excluding the occasional awkwardness and shyness, but it felt nice to be around people for once. She was used to spending her days alone, which she usually enjoyed, but being surrounded by all these lovely people reminded her how great it was to have friends, people to trust and lean on. And perhaps the gang from apartment 4D could be that for her.

"Okay, now, we're going to teach you a fun game, Ellie. How do you feel about heavy drinking?", Nick grinned, eating the mood entirely, but considering the dinner had been eaten, maybe it was time to move on to different matters. They all stood up from the table, and as Nick threw an arm over Elise's shoulders and began explaining the rules of a drinking game he and Winston called True American, Jess and Schmidt stayed behind to clean up the table, and Elise could have sworn she heard Schmidt ask Jess something unexpected, but certain to ignite a smile on her face.

"Hey, Jess, can you give me a few tips on how to be loyal and kind?"

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**yes, i am so excited for this book!! i already have like ten chapters written whoooooops. hope you like this as much as i do ((: ++ thank you so much for all the support!))**

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