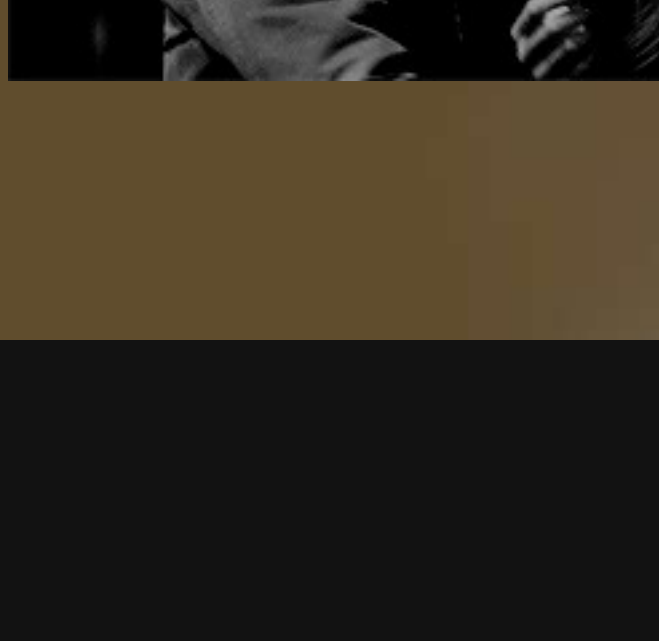




CHAPTER TWENTY

THE FIRST WEEK with Schmidt had gone just flawlessly — he and Elise were truly happy with each other, and everyone could tell. There was something absolutely special between the two, and Winston had grown a habit of calling it *movie love* the kind of undying devotion and a *ection* it was rarely seen outside movies. Elise had moved out of Jess' room and mostly resided in Schmidt's room now, and she didn't need the mattress either, as the two shared the bed, which in their roommates' opinions was at the same time adorable, and gross. Nick was certain that Schmidt was going to ruin small, innocent Elise but nonetheless, their friends showed only support and were happy for them.

However, once the first week had passed, Schmidt encountered the first bump on their blissful road. It wasn't a fight, it wasn't anything serious between them but it was the fact that Elise's birthday was coming up in only a few days, and he had no idea what to get for her. They weren't just friends anymore, they were dating and as her boyfriend, Schmidt had the task of getting her the best present, greater than she could expect or imagine and something to blow her mind. And that put pressure on him, because he needed to get something amazing but he could barely come up with anything average.

"Winston, you must help me. I don't know what to get for Elise on her birthday, but it needs to be something epic. She's my girlfriend now, and I need to make sure she knows I love her unconditionally", Schmidt whined as he lowered his head between his arms and rested against the bar counter. The two men had come to keep company to Nick during his shift, and Schmidt didn't mind because now, he could ask for help but it seemed neither of his friends were willing to assist him.

"I'm pretty sure she knows that already, Schmidt", Nick pointed out from across the counter he was wiping, and in return Schmidt shot him a glare, which Winston couldn't help but imitate.

"Perhaps, perhaps she doesn't. Elise is very insecure and fragile. Like a glass angel! It is my duty to protect her and make her feel loved when she can't do it herself and therefore, my gift needs to be something that says unconditional love". Schmidt explained with a stern look, demanding only the best for his beloved Elise, requiring something amazing instead of some lame gift or something equally bad. He wanted his gift to bring Elise to tears of joy, and he wanted to hug her and tell her it was no big deal even if it was a huge present, and he wasn't going to settle for any less.

"That is true. Elise is very sensitive. I suggest you buy her jewellery", Winston shrugged in the belief that it was a good idea, and perhaps it was, but not good enough for Schmidt. Soaring, the man smacked Winston in the back of the head and shook his head, rather frustrated with his friends.

"Idiot. I suppose I will just have to rely on my instincts and do what feels right", Schmidt sighed, but frankly, neither Nick or Winston doubted his ability to make it the best possible birthday for Elise. Schmidt had a tendency to be a bit of a perfectionist, and that alone confirmed that he wasn't going to settle for less than perfect when it came to Elise, especially when he considered the woman herself to be perfect.

And as always, Schmidt was going to succeed.

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Elise was quite aware of what day it was, but she had elected to ignore the fact that she was turning older again in order to not draw any attention to herself. She had briefly mentioned her birthday to Schmidt a few days ago, but she had assured that she didn't need cake or anything, because ever since childhood, her birthdays had been a profound disappointment. Each year, her mother had promised to give her a proper party, but somehow things always went south and therefore, to save herself from the tears, Elise preferred not celebrating. She wasn't trying to hide her birthday from anyone, not even herself, but she had learned that it was easier to just not get her hopes up — something that Jess agreed with.

The two women had a tendency to spend the day alone to avoid tears and disappointments, but Jess was also a sucker for nice surprises and proper birthday parties and therefore, Elise should have seen the mischief in her smile as the two were walking towards their apartment. Jess had taken her out for milkshakes at the nearby café, insisting on showing at least some special kindness to her due to her birthday, but in reality, it wasn't just that. Their absence gave Cece and the guys the time they needed to turn the apartment from its usual, basic appearance into a party for Elise.

"So, I think I might be able to get my own apartment soon. I like living with you guys, but it's made for three, so technically you shouldn't live there either. You've made it work, but I'm beyond extra, you know?", Elise sighed as she fiddled with the keys Jess offered for her to open the front door of their loft. Elise had made plenty of money lately, and a few other shifts earlier today, the cash just kept on filling her register and soon enough, she could actually move out. She wouldn't have to go far, nor leave their lives entirely but living together, especially when Coach had returned, was almost too complicated to handle.

Jess nodded enthusiastically, alerting Elise with the overly excited grin on her face but she just shook her head at the doubtful thoughts filling her head, and turned to the door which she then opened. As soon as she had stepped inside, the roommates jumped out with party horns and balloons, and a familiar Panic! At the Disco song started to play as the group of friends wished Elise a happy birthday, surprising the woman entirely. Eyes wide and mouth agape with shock, Elise was unable to move when her friends rushed over to her and pulled her into a tight group hug, closing her in the middle and showering her with love and a *ection*.

"Happy Birthday, Ellie! We made cake and everything", Winston grinned and patted Elise's shoulder as she was let go, and slowly, her expression brightened and she broke into a happy smile. Almost in tears, Elise pulled Winston into a new hug and thanked him, and the others as well, for the unbelievably sweet surprise. Elise hadn't imagined that they would go through so much effort just for her, but they had, and that was enough to make her emotional as she held onto Winston and thanked him at least a dozen times.

The cake, which Winston and Coach had worked on together, turned out to be absolutely delicious despite the initial, strong doubt Elise couldn't help but feel at the sight of their creation. But it was good, and disappeared quickly, leaving everyone groaning and unbuttoning their jeans to relieve the aching or devouring such a huge cake. Still, it was worth it, and when Cece said that out loud, everyone agreed.

With the heavenly taste of chocolate still lingering in her mouth, Elise sighed happily as she seated herself next to Schmidt on the couch. "Thank you", Elise broke the silence quietly, adding a soft chuckle in the end as she looked down at her hands and felt the familiarity theynsess overcome her. She was quite close with these people, especially when Schmidt was her boyfriend, but sometimes she still felt awkward and shy when it came to talking and being in the spotlight.

"No problema, cupcake. Now, I know we haven't known each other for very long yet, but you seem awesome. And obviously, I got you a present, so here you go, Els", Coach spoke from the seat opposite hers, and leaned across the coffee table to give Elise his present. Smiling thankfully at him, Elise took the gift from Coach and slowly started to unwrap the box, unsure what to expect, but it was good, and could have been worse after discovering a baseball shirt with the name of a team she had never heard of. Still, Elise smiled, because when she looked up and Coach smiled proudly, she couldn't stand the thought of disappointing him, so despite the gift being totally unrelated to Elise and her interests, she thanked him and promised to wear it some time soon.

Cece was the next one to give Elise her gift, and as soon as Elise revealed the first four seasons of a TV show she had recently discussed with Cece, the two women hugged each other happily. She could remember being intimidated by Cece, and fearing that they wouldn't get along but the opposite had happened, and only Cece's presence made Elise smile. Winston had bought Elise a Marvel shirt and the newest Fall Out Boy album, proudly explaining how he knew of her passion for superheroes, and how he could remember meeting her for the first time when she was wearing a Fall Out Boy tee. Elise appreciated the effort and thoughtful gifts, almost in tears as her friends continued to prove her wrong as soon as she had believed that it wouldn't get any better.

"Uh, I didn't know what to get for you so I teamed up with Jess and we worked on this together, so... Yeah. Happy birthday, Ellie", Nick spoke up then, and handed Elise the small box wrapped in cute paper, and the woman quietly thanked the two of them before looking down and tearing the paper apart. Schmidt followed aside with an interested look, which possibly meant he had no clue what Jess and Nick had done together and felt equal curiosity as Elise did.

As soon as Elise lifted the top of the box, she gasped and felt her heart swell with joy and love for the truly amazing friends she had. It was a framed picture of them all, even Coach, on the night of Prince's party and even though it was full of flaws — like Elise's tearful eyes or Nick's certainly amusing expression — it was perfect. It was beautiful, and soon enough, Elise looked a lot like she did in the photo — red eyes but a happy smile on her lips. She had never had friends that meant this much to her, or the other way around. She had always been the one to get too clingy and too attached, and she had always lost the friends she thought would support her until the end but now, there wasn't a single doubt in her mind. These people were sticking with her for good, through good times and bad times and that photo would never cease to remind her of that.

"We know you worry a lot, and you're scared that you'll lose us or get hurt, but I promise, Elise, you won't. You're amazing, and we are lucky to have you in our lives, and whenever you need us, we'll be there for you. And if for some reason we can't come to you, all you have to do is take out this picture and remind yourself that you are loved, okay?", Jess explained, and rose from the couch to approach Elise and pull her into a tight hug. By now, tears were streaming down Elise's cheeks and as soon as she had wrapped her arms around Jess and buried her face into her shoulder, a sob broke free and she shut her eyes. Luckily, though, they were tears of pure joy and Elise was feeling sincerely blissful in the wonderful company she was lucky enough to find herself in.

"Thank you so much", Elise whispered, wiping her eyes as Jess let go and sat back again, just like Elise did. Schmidt took Elise's hand, intertwining their fingers and stopping her from trembling. Melting closer, Elise sighed and thanked her friends again for absolutely amazing gifts and the best birthday ever. She had barely gotten the tears to cease their flow, when she was reminded that the night wasn't over yet, and there was still one gift, and Schmidt was convinced it was going to be the best one. Yes, even better than the sweet photo that had caused Elise to weep.

"Come on, baby. Close your eyes", Schmidt instructed, and after standing up, Elise did as he had requested and so lay down her eyes. Gently holding her hand, Schmidt started to lead Elise towards their destination and after shooting their roommates a confident grin, the man opened the front door which surprised Elise, but she didn't argue. She trusted Schmidt with her life, and let him take her wherever he was planning on, certain that it was going to be just brilliant. That was how Schmidt did things — he aimed for the stars, and often he got just that. And for Elise, he would have fetched every single star in the sky, and the moon.

Schmidt led Elise across the hall, and with a key he had retrieved from the creepy landlord, he opened the door of the empty apartment and led Elise inside. "Okay", Schmidt took in a deep breath, "Now, tell me what you see and it'll be all yours", he smiled and removed his hand from Elise's eyes where it had wandered, and the woman looked around immediately. She had expected the state of confusion to wash away but the pieces in her mind didn't collide and she knitted her eyebrows together at the sight, not quite realizing Schmidt's present.

"It's just... an... empty apartment?", Elise spoke carefully, unsure what else to say but as soon as the words left her mouth and Schmidt nodded with a smug smile, she began to understand. Clasping her hand against her mouth, Elise gasped and her eyes widened at the realization that it was hers just like Schmidt had said. "You didn't!", Elise breathed out, and Schmidt shrugged casually, the mischievous smile still on his lips as Elise started to freak out.

"It's no big deal", Schmidt assured, but oh, it was the opposite. Schmidt had bought her an apartment, a home to live in, a place of her own, and that went beyond incredible and caused Elise to break into tears. Covering her face with her hands, Elise walked towards Schmidt and the man closed her in a warm, loving embrace as his jaw rested atop her head and his lips curved higher into a pleased smile. It had cost some money, yes, but after thinking about what Elise really needed he had understood that she needed an apartment for herself, and since there was one waiting for new residents right across the hall, he had done what he believed was the right thing. And it had gotten him the results he had expected — a crying Elise, who was convinced she had the best boyfriend in the world.

It was quiet for a while, excluding Elise's sniffles but then she broke the thick silence with even heavier words. "I love you", she admitted, and immediately, Schmidt pulled away from the hug but remained close enough to cup her cheek and stare down into her eyes. Both of them smiled blissfully as he leaned down and placed his lips on hers, igniting a deeply loving, a *ectionate* kiss in the middle of the empty apartment Elise was more than happy to call her own. But what truly made it her home, was the fact that Schmidt was there too, and she was happily on his arms.

"I love you too", Schmidt smiled, feeling butterflies in his stomach for saying it for the first time. Elise felt equal excitement, and they ended up laughing and smiling together whilst holding each other close, both convinced that they were living the dream. "You're always welcome in the loft, though. And obviously I'm going to be here a lot, you know. You'll get lonely otherwise", Schmidt explained then, grinning whilst his slender fingers caressed Elise's cheek. The woman snickered quietly, but in agreement, she nodded her head and smiled at the thought of spending her nights in her apartment, with her boyfriend.

Things were going really great for her, for sure.

"C'mon, one more thing", Schmidt nudged Elise eventually, and pulled her to the balcony of her apartment, causing her to shiver at the sudden cold air on her skin but against his body, she found warmth. It was already dark, and the sky was beautiful with all the stars across it, but the darkness was soon enough illuminated by fireworks launched from the ground and flew to the black night sky and exploded in several colors, illuminating the dark streets and lighting a fire in Elise's eyes as she stared at the hypnotizing patterns amidst the stars. Schmidt wiped away from the hug but remained close, and whilst she enjoyed the *action* and the fact that he had arranged freaking fireworks for her, the residents of 4D walked into the apartment, and to the balcony until the whole group was there, adoring the sight that was just for her Elise.

All of it, for Elise, who was quite certain she was the luckiest woman on the planet.

okay this one is also one of my favorite chapters, maybe even #1 ?

NOT MANY CHAPTERS TO GO MAN, FIVE + EPILOGUE LEFT !):

thank you so so much for 4k reads

Continue reading next part