

Circles within Circles

Chapter Five – Studying and Being Studied

January 2021

There was something so delightful about teasing the poor guy, wasn't there?

Anneke hid a little smile and glanced back down into her laptop screen. It was close on twenty minutes now since they'd last spoken, and at the other end of her little sofa, Ethan was getting impatient. He shifted now and then – crossed his legs – took a sip of his energy drink – fiddled with the plug on his laptop. But his ostensible reason for coming over had been to study, after all... and Anneke couldn't resist the urge to play it off innocently and let him do exactly that.

Yeah, maybe it was a bit cruel. But god, she was having way too much fun!

At last she took pity on the poor guy and cleared her throat. "Hey, um, Ethan?" Immediately he was at attention, clearly relieved that she'd finally broken the studious silence. "Oh! Um, yeah? What's up." "Maybe... I guess, maybe it would help if we talked through this assignment now?" she began, leaning forward easily in her seat. "I mean, we've read the reading now, but I was wondering if you could help me understand a bit more about it and what we're supposed to write..."

How cute it was to watch him flush and light up! "Um, sure? So, we're supposed to, like, read this thing – basically, just a whole bunch of quotes – and then... what did the professor say? Just pick two or three and write about them?" "Yeah, I think so?" Anneke hedged cautiously, scooting closer as if to let him glance over at her screen. "That's what it says here, anyway. But first off... what's a Puddn'head?"

Sure, she could have Googled it. But it was so much more fun to play the foreigner card, to listen to Ethan try to explain Mark Twain's homely nineteenth-century prose when even he obviously didn't know what some of the odd words meant.

"Okay, thanks," she sighed at last, with a languid stretch that just happened to show off her figure to good advantage. "Now then, which of these quotes are you going to pick? Do you have a favorite?" He wasn't sure, of course. Maybe the one about Congress was pretty funny... or the one about Satan and Chicago...

"I've got two already, I think," she responded, trying her very best to remain casual about it. "See, there's that one about the Queen's English, right? Which I think is worth writing about because it's

trying to say how flexible language is, how it is always changing and no one can control it..." He was nodding, clearly impressed by her thinking. "And then I was thinking about the one about the moon? Where was it again...? Ah, yes. 'Everyone is a moon, and has a dark side which he never shows to anybody.' Doesn't that sound deep and mysterious?"

His fingers were fidgeting unconsciously, his brow furrowed a bit as he glanced over at her, then quickly away as he took another sip of his drink. "Um... yeah? I guess. I mean, I dunno..." She chuckled at his noncommittal tone. "What, don't you agree, Ethan? Come on, I bet you have deep and dark secrets somewhere in your past!"

"What, and you don't?" Great – he'd risen to the bait, just as she'd expected. "Oh, of course I do!" she laughed amiably, cocking her head and regarding him in mild amusement. "Ever so many dirty secrets, you can't even imagine." The expression on his face was a muddle of confused skepticism and interest. "Oh, sure, sure," he assented, clearly unsure of whether she was actually being serious. "I guess I'd ask what they were – but that quote clearly says you won't tell anyone, right?"

"Oh, I don't know," Anneke sighed, settling back in her seat as if to dismiss the whole silly topic. "Maybe someday, to the right person. You never know..."

Perfect. She'd planted seed number one, and all she needed now was to give it a few hours. That energy drink he'd been nursing would run through him eventually, after all – and when he finally asked, she'd point the way into her little bathroom, where she of course had just happened to leave a certain little bit of ostensibly embarrassing evidence lying out...

Wow, what a day!

Ethan heaved a sigh and sank down onto the edge of his bed, still hardly believing what he'd just been through. He'd done it: found his way to Anneke's apartment, and sat there studying and writing with her all afternoon. Of course, he couldn't deny that he'd sort of hoped things might get a little... you know, steamy. But they'd only just met, and he couldn't expect to go from zero to a hundred just like that, could he?

Oh, but she'd been flirting with him, he was approximately 84.7% sure. That whole bit about the moon and people having secrets...? Like, there was no way she was just saying that to be friendly. And maybe it was wrong of him, but he couldn't help but think about what he'd just happened to

see in her bathroom before he left...

No, of course I wasn't snooping! he told himself fiercely, flopping back on his pillow with a thud. She'd clearly just left something of hers out. Something that he obviously wasn't supposed to see. Something not at all like pads, or tampons, or all that other girl stuff he vaguely knew about but never dared look at...

Those things he'd seen lying on her bathroom counter couldn't have been anything other than handcuffs, could they?

A dark side which she never shows to anybody, he mused, rolling over and grabbing his laptop from its case. Was this Anneke's way of... not just flirting with him, but telling him she was into some weird stuff? Maybe she'd left them out just so he could see and get the idea-?

Bro, cut it out, he scolded, staring crossly into the screen as it lit up before him. *Her life doesn't revolve around you. She probably just forgot about them. Heck, they might not even be hers! What on earth makes you think she's that busy thinking about you, anyway?*

But still, he couldn't quite help his fingers as they flitted over the keyboard... opened up a private browser window... hesitantly typed in "leather handcuffs"...

A half-hour of clicking later, and he was more confused and perplexed than ever. Here were sites reviewing them – selling them alongside whips and gags and all kinds of eyebrow-raising items – photos of scantily-clad women wearing them... It was clearly a sex thing, that much he knew for certain. And sure, he'd heard people joke about Fifty Shades of Grey already back in high school. But as for actually meeting someone who might seriously be into that sort of stuff? He'd never even thought about it... much less considered whether he'd like to go along with it.

Somehow the question of whether he and Anneke might start being boyfriend and girlfriend had become a thousand times more complicated. And somehow too, he highly doubted that the seemingly omniscient Google would have an answer if he asked it "how to ask a girl who likes handcuffs if she wants to be your girlfriend."

Maybe he could bluff his way through if it ever came up. Maybe he could just roll with it and figure it out as he went along. Maybe she wouldn't even notice. She'd be so hot and bothered as soon as he put those cuffs on her or whatever. Hmm... that was quite the visual image: Anneke holding out her hands, all cuffed and helpless...

Oh, who was he kidding? She'd been the one who saw through his bull-crap about sports only a few short weeks ago! She'd know immediately how inexperienced he was, no doubt about it. And when it came to sex, deep down he felt sure it wouldn't take long for her to worm out of him just how laughably and pathetically he'd lost his virginity three years ago...

He slammed the laptop shut with a thud. He'd have to sleep on it. Maybe tomorrow morning things would be clearer. And in the meantime, he'd better grab some food and settle down with his Xbox for a nice long gaming session.

After all, when real life made no sense he'd always found that the best thing to do was to blow up a bunch of virtual polygons.