

## Circles within Circles

### Chapter Four – Anticipation

January 2021

"Hold on, hold on, hold on, my dude. And then you said *what?*" Sandeep's pixelated and poorly-lit face was difficult to read, but his voice was full of incredulous mirth. "You asked this girl if she was a *virgin?* Right in front of the entire class?"

Ethan shifted self-consciously on his creaky bed and shrugged into the screen of his laptop. "I mean, no, not like that! Everyone else was busy talking to other folks, you know. Like, no one even heard, I'm sure..." "Okay, yes, but still! You like this girl that much?" Sandeep was clearly amused. "You want to get into her panties that badly? I didn't think you would be the kind of guy who cares about that whole virgin thing-" Ethan cut in before he could continue. "No, no, I don't, geez! I was just making conversation, okay? And I don't even like her that much..."

"*That* much," Sandeep laughed, his accent slipping magically away for a brief moment as he adroitly mimicked his friend. "Oh, sure, not *that* much. But yet you are asking her about her sex life? Come on, man!" At his friend's laughing tone, Ethan bridled in protest. "Hey, she asked me the same question, you know!"

"Wait, *what?*"

And so Ethan explained how it had all fallen out. In the end, Sandeep was clear on one thing. "Go on, man! Get to know this Anneke girl! She sounds fun, to be honest. And if she didn't get turned off by you asking that stupid question, and she asked you the same thing back, like, bro. I think she might be into you..."

*Into me.* Ethan mulled over his friend's words later that afternoon as he sat waiting for class to start – this time much farther away from Anneke, but glancing surreptitiously over at her now and again. Was she really into him? It wasn't like she was coming up and asking to sit together, or brushing up against him after class, or talking about hanging out on Friday night...

Hmm, Friday. Maybe he should- But no, she probably had plans. Ehh, then again, maybe he could say it was to study for this first assignment they'd already been given... Yeah, it was probably lame as heck. But still, you had to start somewhere, right?

And so it was that, once the professor had finally finished droning on and on about the wonders of

American Transcendentalist literature, Ethan was... well, not exactly prepared. But resolved. Resolved to stand up, stride casually over and adroitly ask those lovely grey eyes what they thought of the first assignment, and to follow it up with a comment about how it would be cool to study together sometime.

Why was it that doing something in reality always felt so stupid compared with what it felt like in his head?

He strode over – not elegantly, but rather more like a drunken giraffe in a mud-hole. He caught her eye – not with a cool, slightly smiling gaze, but with shifting gaze and burning ears and sweaty palms that suddenly seemed five times too large for his pockets. And then he started talking... and the words that came out sounded like the loudly incoherent mumbles of an idiot.

"Hey- um, yeah. I was, like- Um- that first assignment... it's something else, isn't it?" *Dammit!*

"Umm, sure? Yes, I guess so," came the response, and there she was: looking at him with that mild and slightly guarded expression that she so often wore. "Are you looking forward to it? I'm sure a short essay like that will probably be easy for you..." *Dammit again! Why hadn't he ever thought about the possibility that she might actually say something in return? Keep it together, keep it together...* "Um, I dunno," he managed, stepping clumsily aside to let three of their loudly chatting fellow students slip past. "I mean, sure? But so anyway, I was thinking- like, if you're not busy or whatever, and if you wanted- I mean, I'm not saying you have to, but- We could maybe..."

"Yes?"

"We should study together? I mean, like, work on it together sometime? Maybe Friday night?" He'd done it – at fucking last! So great was his elation that he almost forgot to listen to her response until she was halfway through.

"...other classes before then, so I'll have some other things to take care of that evening. But I guess... hmm. How about Saturday? Do you have anything going this Saturday?"

His accommodating words slipped out in an unthinking torrent. No, no, of course not! No, that was absolutely fine! Oh, she lived off campus? Oh, that was no problem. He'd get there. Oh, yeah, maybe her address was a good idea. Sure, he'd find it. Just text it to him. No worries. No worries.

Even that night, the unaccountable rush of energy hadn't entirely faded: the rush at the realization

that he'd actually talked to a girl, and made a study date, and actually agreed to go to her place! Off campus! Oh, he knew it was silly, that a college senior shouldn't be getting so worked up over something so ordinary as this. But it still felt like a big deal: a chance to get to know this hot new foreign student. A whole stretch of time together with those grey eyes, those long legs, that witty tongue that had so adroitly managed to flummox him in front of those other guys. Oh, what she must look like without all those pretty clothes of hers...

Perhaps it was for the best that his roommate was out late again, and thus wasn't around to hear his heavy breathing... and the squeak of the bedframe, and the quiet groaning beneath his blankets as with closed eyes he let his mind – and hand – wander into some decidedly inappropriate directions.

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Anneke could hardly help from smiling to herself as, with a clink and a twist of the key, she anchored her bicycle to the rack outside and began making her way up the stairs to her apartment. The guy had come to her after all. That Ethan fellow really did seem to have a thing for her, just as she'd suspected last week. And her tactic had worked: her tactic of giving him distance, of letting him go, of giving him the chance to miss her and seek her out on his own.

She grinned as the door clicked shut behind her and she made her way forward to deposit her backpack with a soft thud on the little sofa. Hmm. This was going to be most interesting indeed. It would be just her and this guy on Saturday: just her and the guy who claimed he'd been with a girl before, but whose endearing awkwardness make it abundantly clear that he was anything but a ladies' man. She needed to impress him and intrigue him, while not scaring him off. So her next move would have to be something subtle... yet clear as day to a clueless klutz like him...

A giggle escaped her as she pulled open her closet and reached back into the box she knew so well. Oh, yes. This would be perfect. Just leaving these out somewhere – maybe on the bathroom counter or somewhere – would do the trick. If he didn't get the hint from that... well, he was truly hopeless.

Yet as the heavy, leather-clad cuffs slipped tantalizingly through her fingers with the soft clink of metal on metal, Anneke sighed and held them for a moment, her grey eyes growing suddenly meditative. Thoughts and images and memories were swirling within, startled awake by the sound of those cuffs. And judging by the tightening of her fingers around them, the memories they'd awakened weren't entirely pleasurable.