

## Wilderness House Literary Review 4/4

*Mignon Ariel King*  
excerpt from a novella

### Chapter One: *It wouldn't be make-believe...*

Emmie looked up at the January sky which already held a crescent moon that tipped, clear and silver-white, barely at dusk. Spotting a single star, she squeezed her eyes together saying, "Okay, so I wouldn't mind a man for the next ice-cold night that comes along." She walked on for a minute then stopped, looking up again, and added, "A good man." She had learned the hard way that one had to be specific when making requests, especially with a wiseass great spirit like hers. A handsome silver-haired man smiled at her and she hoped the star hadn't thought she meant tonight. Hell, just because she was feeling gushy and sick of drinking alone didn't mean she felt like running home to shave her legs and loofah or anything. No need to get crazy.

Speaking of legs, Emmie could barely feel her thighs. She had decided like some kinda fool to walk home from work despite the icy glaze covering early-January Massachusetts. Watching the sun set on a glass city was a rare sight so lovely as to be worth the risk of breaking one's neck. From inside the stifling-beige office it had seemed worth the risk anyhow. Hardly anyone had called all day; half the staff had stayed home; womaning the front desk in addition to doing her own database work had made her feel even more like a corporate prisoner than usual. Kicking off Talbot's pumps to drag on knee-high rubber boots had been the highlight of her New England-born day. After surviving the trek from Longwood Ave to Brookline Village, sucking iced air into her lungs as if she'd been buried alive for days, Emmie wimped out and hopped the D-Line to Brighton to warm up a little before walking the rest of the way. She got off at Beaconsfield, hustling over to Whole Foods to look at five-dollar apples before lugging home a gallon of milk. That was plenty of exercise for a forty-something bookworm.

Without warning a nerdy blue sweater blocked her path. Its owner seemed to tower over her, no small feat when a girl's five-eight. She looked up, annoyed, into one hell of a face, its lips moving. Startled, she responded to the now-human form before her as gracefully as she could manage, "Hunh?"

"Scallions," he said. Scallions? Kinky. But as handsome as he was, what the hell.

"Scallions?" she quizzed.

"You've dropped your scallions," he repeated patiently, extending both a smile and a transparent produce bag with a cheerful red twisty-tie. She liked his use of "you've." Hey, no joke. Good grammar is hard to find. He was Asian, with shiny dark hair falling in his face just enough to be adorable, the sweater's sleeves dragged halfway down over fingerless-gloved hands. Great fingers. Not so tall as he had seemed at first, just wiry. He stood way closer than most Bostonians would consider decent, but was obviously totally harmless. His eyes were like bittersweet chocolates and his breath smelled like ginger. Oh, to be 30 again! Must be a California import, she thought, trying not to notice his winterized sandals.

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Cute—in a stupid kinda way. He probably composted banana peels too.

“Oh, so I have!” Emmie responded, feeling slightly idiotic, trying not to look at him. That was entirely too much enthusiasm in her voice for found onions she hadn’t known were lost. But he was just toooo good looking, so why blame herself? Besides, in two minutes he’d fade into the land of Why don’t I date younger men, again? She took the bag and veered away, tossing “Thanks” over her shoulder all casual as hell.

“You’re welcome,” he answered casually too, but he watched her walk away just a second too long. She was definitely going to stop shopping at convenience stores--no handsome cavaliers there! Emmie daydreamed her way over to buy ginger tea, then floated to the register. Outside, a voice came from behind her.

“Need a lift?” On his bicycle in the ice? she wondered, but turned around to discover him sitting in something with four wheels, sleek and black like his hair.

“No offense, but I don’t generally hop into jeeps with strange men, pretty manners or no. Thanks, though.” Why wasn’t this babe hitting on someone his own age? Maybe the pink and yellow duckies on her boots were sending the wrong message.

“You really don’t recognize me, do you, Boz? I thought you were just kidding at first.” “Who, me? Kid?” she stalled, dredging her brain for gorgeous Asian dudes she’d met in the last decade. She decided he was Korean, not Chinese, so not one of the boys from Girls’ Latin that she’d secretly drooled over more than twenty years ago. It seemed like a really, really long time since anyone had called her Boz, a nickname earned by the heavy Boston accent she’d made no effort to lose, but not that long. Asian. Boston was not exactly a multicultural mecca for people of her generation who were born there. Nearly everyone she’d gone to school with, befriended, worked with, been in writing groups with, was Black or White. She only knew men of other races in passing. Never one for guessing games or surprises, Emmie blurted out, “Well, are you going to give me a hint, or should I just freeze in this spot?”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” he said. She felt bad for snapping at him since he really did sound sorry, his tone now less confident, very familiar too. Emmie looked him full in the face for the first time since knowing she was supposed to know him--just as the crinkles around his sparkling eyes began to disappear. She brought them back. She definitely knew those eyes.

“Oh, my God! You. Are. One. Of the. Apostles!” she giggled.

“Mark,” he smiled. “You were a lot friendlier in Allston Square, Boz.”

“Wow! So sorry. 1995? -6? How the heck are ya? Where’s the other apostle? Do you still paint?” She was honestly happy as hell to see him. Two young artists had lived across the hall, a painter and a musician, both with day jobs, but evenings were spent skateboarding, drinking beer on the roof of the Comm Ave apartment complex, or talking to her. Well, Mark had talked a lot. Luke had mostly brooded a lot about absolutely nothing. Musicians were crazy bastards! Damn, had Mark always been so beautiful? Inside, yes, but he had been so young, in his first summer after

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college. Way too young and vulnerable to be looked at. He must be mid-30s now? He pulled on his signature goofy hat with a bouncy tassel. It reminded her of the Olympic skier Ingemar Stenmark. Mark used to wear that hat well into spring although he didn't seem to own an entire jacket. He was wearing a red down vest now, with one of the heavy cabled sweat-ers his grandmother made him, no doubt. Very familiar, indeed, but he was so obviously a grown man now, blithely blocking traffic to talk to a woman.

"Now you sound like you!" Mark laughed at her flurry of questions. "Safe to get in now?" he asked, hopping out and taking her bag without waiting for an answer. Emmie ran around to the other side and climbed in, clapping snow off her boots, even while saying that she only lived across the street and around the corner. He hugged her tight, rolled his eyes and sighed, "Yes, teacher," when she told him to buckle up, and they slowly pulled out of the lot, enjoying each other's smiling faces, laughing as if they were Bonnie and Clyde until the driver behind them honked hard.

Mark waved him around, rolled down the window to say, "Sorry, man." The other driver instantly relaxed, said, "'Sokay, brotherman," and Mark rolled up the window.

"Do you think it's corny as hell when middle-aged White guys say things like 'brotherman,' or is that just my peeps?" Emmie asked. "And, hey, I'm not teaching anymore. How 'bout you? Working at the warehouse? Married? Still painting?"

"You always could have five conversations at once," Mark laughed. "But, yep, it is seriously corny, especially with the shiny ski rack but dirty car. What fifty-five-year-old Black dude would be caught dead in that filthy-assed car?" Man, he could make her laugh. He noticed everything about all kinds of people, their personal or cultural idiosyncrasies. The definitive artist-observer. And they could talk about anything, even race, without all the squeamishness and throat-clearing crap, like she had mentioned something negative, yucky. In the post-PC world of "We're all the same" b.s., he was refreshing.

His question-answers continued. "No wife. No kids. You? Well, so, why aren't you teaching, Bubbles? I quit that lousy job after grad school and started my own graphic arts company. It morphed into web design, et cetera. I teach techno-aesthetics at MIT too."

"Get out!" She liked it that he called her Bubbles. Only he had nicknamed her that.

"But it's my car," he quipped, and she laughed hard before answering as they drove up Commonwealth Avenue and into the figure-eight side streets of Brighton.

"Take this right. I couldn't deal with any more crazy or racist asshole roommates or temping. And teaching Freshman English part-time don't pay the bills, brotherman. So I got a day job in a drab office at Harvard Medical, in development assistance. It's eighty-percent a great job, lots of solo research and database management, editing proposals, et cetera. Twenty-percent of the time I actually have to dress up and talk to hu-

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mans. That's no fun, but it beats homework and stupid comments about my "unprofessional" hair. Most days I could wear jeans if I wanted. Then I come home to peace, quiet, solitude, and all the food that I've bought, untouched. If I forget to buy beer I'm screwed, but otherwise, I am soooo not missing roomies."

"Nirvana," Mark said.

"Yessiree!" They were parked now outside of Emmie's apartment building.

Mark said, "That's what happened with me. I loved Luke like a brother, but after we moved, man, he was driving me batty! That damned pouting, the girls wanting to slash their wrists all the time, the mess. I hated my job and it paid nothing. I had no energy left to paint a wall, much less anything creative. So I started out as a freelance, then when I'd saved enough from both jobs, I opened my own doors. It's tiny, physically, but I love it."

"Cool. Where'd you guys move to anyhow?"

"Oh, you wouldn't believe it! We had this gutted apartment in an old warehouse near South Station before they renovated it. It was one gigantic room, with old sheets and screens, doors, anything we could haul out of the trash, separating the 'rooms.' I could hear Luke banging half of Massachusetts. The shower was a hose running from the sink to a free-standing tub. I'd be standing in the middle of the room stark naked, soapy, and flavor of the night would just walk past and say 'Morning' or something like it was no big deal, and water would be all over the place." His square hands, now free of the steering wheel, animated the retelling.

"How could you live there?" Emmie asked, laughing so hard she was wiping her eyes on a mitten. "Sounds like Bugs Bunny."

"I felt like Bugs Bunny too, but it was only \$400 a month, total."

"Too damned funny!" Emmie proclaimed. "Please tell me those are not the half-million

dollar condo lofts that are near South Station today."

"You've got it!" Mark started laughing hard too, watching Emmie blow on her neon pink angora mittens. "I crashed at my grad school roommate's new house for a while. Have a one-bedroom near my office in Somerville now."

"Say, I'm starving," she said. "You coming in?"

"Don't mind if I do. What number? I have to park."

"38. Try down that end. No sticker."

Mark brought her grocery bag to the stoop then bounded down the steps and into his jeep. Emmie took off, tearing up three flights, whipping through her crazy-tidy apartment to turn on the heat, scoop clothes from the designated "slob chair," and shove black turtleneck and chinos into a drawer. She pulled on red stretch pants and slouchy socks with a huge Patriots hoodie. She had ordered Thai food and a veggie pizza, conjured up Aerosmith, and opened two bottles of Sam Adams by the time the buzzer announced Mark's return.