

## *In the Dark of the Night*

### *Excerpt*

I looked down at Annie, who had been emptying the contents from her small pocketbook—her wallet, her keys, even a pack of tissues. She kept pulling things out as if they were coming from a closet, not her purse.

She continued to empty even more things out. She took out a stapler, a pack of Band-Aids, deodorant, a portable charger, and some granola bars. She tore open the granola bar and started to munch on it.

“Who are you? Mary Poppins?” I said. “How much stuff you got in that bag of yours?”

She looked up at me and smiled. She continued to empty her bag. She removed some change, and a few pens, a movie stub, a flash drive. . . .

“What’s next? A lamp?” I asked.

She looked up at me, then batted her eyes. “I could. Do you need one?” she asked sarcastically.

I chuckled at her response, and, for a moment, the stress I had been feeling started to melt away.

“Maybe later,” I responded.

Tony Conte

I looked at her and saw how tired and stressed she looked with all the contents of her pocketbook scattered on the elevator floor.

“Hey, you seem bored,” I told her.

“What?” she said in an aggravated way, almost hostile at my comment. “I’m not bored. Only boring people are bored.”

“That’s not true. Who told you that?”

“Once you hear it a couple times, it kind of becomes the truth,” she said.

“People have called *you* boring?” I asked her, genuinely perplexed.

“Yeah. It’s probably the main reason why I don’t date anymore. It’s all the same. I go out with a guy, the date seems to be going great, then out of nowhere they start to realize I’m not as exotic and mysterious as they thought I was, and they get bored of me. They leave, move on. I’m used to it by now. It’s like a broken record that I can’t stop replaying.”

“That’s kinda fucked up,” I told her. “I mean; I would never do that to you.”

I looked at her, trying to appear charming.

“I doubt that,” she mocked.

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“It’s true. I would give you my undivided attention, anytime, anywhere.” I paused. “Well—maybe if I had a fighting chance, I could show you.”

She furrowed her brow. “What you mean?”

“Your fiancé. You’re about to get married, right? I mean, clearly, you’ve found someone who doesn’t find you boring.”

She looked up at me and said in a nonchalant voice, “Oh yeah. He’s so great.”

I couldn’t help but smirk. “‘He’s so great?’ That’s it? That’s all I get? *That’s* what I have to compete with?”

“Look, you don’t have to compete with anyone. I just made the fiancé thing up. I’m still single. The last thing I wanted to do was to be hit on by a stranger on the train. So I just told a little white lie to get out of it.”

*What the hell?* I thought.

I couldn’t decide whether to be angry at her for lying or happy to hear she was single.

“Well, I’m kind of hurt,” I told her. “So, you didn’t want me to flirt with you?”

She opened the pack of tissues on the floor and held one out to me. I refused it. She shrugged her shoulders.

Tony Conte

“It’s not that,” she said. “I just didn’t want to make the same mistake again, trusting another guy and letting him into my life. Think of it this way, I was saving you the headache of dating a boring version of Marry Poppins.”

I let out a laugh and sat down next to her. I gently moved her hair past her ear to expose her naked shoulder. “You’re the most fascinating person I’ve met all year,” I teased.

“That’s a load of bullshit,” she snapped.

“Hey, stop that. I mean it. You’re really quite incredible.”

“Incredible? You barely even know me.”

She made a good point. I didn’t really know her that well. I just know how I felt about her. I knew I felt like she was someone special. I didn’t know how I knew it. I just knew.

“Well, that’s true,” I said. “So tell me something about yourself.”

“Oh, God, not this. I’m not going through this with you. We can just keep it down to small talk.”

“No,” I announced. “I hate small talk. I do. It’s just the worst. I like long, strikingly complex conversations.

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Conversations that matter. Conversations that make you think—that make you want to speak.”

She smiled at me. “Wow, that’s deep.”

“I mean it. I wanna know everything about you, Annie,” I asserted.

She finished her granola bar and stuffed the empty wrapper back inside her pocketbook. She bit her bottom lip, then spoke.

“What do you want to know?” she said.

I wasn’t sure what to ask her. I could have asked her anything at all. I watched her carefully, studying her. Finally, I asked, “Are you happy?”