

AS DUSK DESCENDS



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Ch 1-1. A Sort of Vampire Romance

The sun dipped below the horizon, casting an orange and pink glow across London's autumn sky. A cool breeze rustled the fallen leaves outside the modern café. As the last rays of sunlight vanished, Mildred Evans leaned against the counter, her apron dusted with coffee grounds, the smell of fresh pastries wafting through the air.

This spacious branch of a large franchise was comfortably nestled amidst the city's ceaseless commotion, its inviting atmosphere and welcoming lights serving as a refuge for those seeking respite with a latte or a quick bite. After years of drifting through various jobs, Mildred had found her haven at this place. Not everyone might consider becoming a café manager a dream, but to her, it represented a tangible, satisfying goal.

As she took a breath, the chiming of the entrance bell broke her brief rest. Her brown eyes noticed the door swing open, a familiar figure stepping in. In the span of her first month there, Mildred had come to recognise this peculiar figure by his unique order. He visited almost every day she was working, typically arriving around the same time.

Tall and pale, an air of mystery seemed to cling to him like a second skin. His dark hair was a dishevelled mess, but it somehow only added to his enigmatic charm. He was always impeccably

dressed in a formal suit, though it appeared crumpled and slept-in, as if he'd just rolled out of bed. Another incongruous detail was his watch – a bold, rugged piece more suited to outdoor adventures than a formal suit.

The man had an unusual routine. He would order the cheapest espresso on the menu, ask for “just an empty cup, no actual coffee,” and then retreat to the farthest corner of the café. There, for precisely one hour, he would flip through one of the many texts he carried with him.

Some were academic books or printed research papers, their text often in what seemed to be German or other unfamiliar scripts rather than English. He would glance over these, occasionally pausing to scribble in a notebook with his fountain pen. But his interests were not confined to the academic. He also perused various reads, ranging from classics to genre novels. He seemed to have an eclectic taste that didn't discriminate against any genre. Sometimes, like everyone else in this digital age, he was seen fiddling with his smartphone, casually browsing through the small glowing screen. But mostly, he was leafing through his books and papers, lost in his own little world.

Today, as the intriguing man approached the counter, Mildred decided to make a friendly gesture. Flashing him a warm smile, before he could place his order, she playfully said, “Just an empty cup, right?”

For a moment, the man looked taken aback, as if caught off guard by her friendly approach. But then, his lips formed a small smile that did not reach his eyes. He replied, “Yes, thank you.”

Mildred and the enigmatic man, whom she soon learned was named Philip, began exchanging small talk during his nightly visits. Philip revealed very little about himself, keeping most of his personal details shrouded in mystery. But he seemed to enjoy chatting with

Mildred, sharing knowledge and stories in their casual conversations.

One day, as he walked into the café, Mildred decided to ask about his peculiar ordering habit. “Why do you never drink anything?”

Philip simply shrugged, a slight smile playing on his lips. “I never drink... coffee,” he confessed, his tone bordering on mischief.

“But you’re in a coffee shop every day,” Mildred playfully pointed out.

Philip chuckled at that. “Well, that doesn’t mean I don’t appreciate a good café. I find this place to be the perfect spot for a short break, especially reading. The aroma of coffee, the soft lighting, and the gentle hum of voices...”

“Oh, I totally get it. A good atmosphere makes all the difference,” she chimed in. “Given your evening visits, this is probably the best place for you.”

“Exactly! It’s one of the few that stays open late. But, not only that — it’s always nice to see a friendly face.” His eyes twinkled with a light tease, his gaze fixed on Mildred. Then he asked her, “What would you recommend if I were to order something else?”

Caught off guard, Mildred pondered for a moment. “A flat white?” she suggested. “It’s my favourite.”

True to his word, Philip ordered a flat white. An hour later, he returned the untouched mug to Mildred. “This is for you,” he said, winking at her. The coffee was still warm, just as fresh as when it had been brewed.

Mildred was astonished. “What did you do? How is it still hot?”

“Shhh,” Philip pressed a finger to his lips. “If you say it out loud, the coffee might realise it’s supposed to cool down.” He was clearly teasing her, but his playful demeanour made the whole exchange feel like their own special secret.

From that day on, ordering a beverage for Mildred instead of an

empty espresso cup became their little tradition, adding another layer of intrigue to their growing friendship.

After weeks of shared stories and laughter, Mildred decided it was time to take a leap of faith. As Philip approached the counter one evening, she took a deep breath and asked, “Hey, Philip, are you free this Saturday? I was thinking we could go out, you know, on a proper date.”

Philip’s eyes widened in surprise, and Mildred saw the nervousness wash over him. Despite his unease, there was a glimmer of hope in his eyes, as if he had been waiting for someone to reach out to him and break through the barriers he had built around himself.

After a moment of contemplation, Philip looked into Mildred’s eyes and said, “Yes, I’d like that very much. Thank you, Mildred.”

With a preparedness that suggested she had been anticipating this moment, Mildred swiftly reached into her pocket and pulled out a napkin, on which she had already written her number. She slid it towards Philip, her cheeks flushing slightly. “This is my number. You know, for planning and... stuff.”

Philip looked down at the napkin, then took out his phone and typed something quickly. As Mildred’s phone buzzed in her pocket, she took it out and saw a message from an unknown number: ‘:)’

She and Philip exchanged warm smiles, their eyes locked in a shared moment of joy. Her heart swelled with happiness, feeling a rush of anticipation for their upcoming date. Thus began their whirlwind romance.

* * *

Mildred couldn’t contain her excitement as she prepared for her first date with Philip. After applying a final touch of makeup, she

took a step back from the mirror and studied her reflection.

A young woman, wearing her favourite swing dress below a soft cardigan, was looking at herself. Her strawberry blonde hair was pulled into a half ponytail, softly cascading midway between her shoulders and chest. Her big, round eyes, set in her oval face, blinked with confidence. Overall, she was quite pretty. She knew it. She was perfectly armed for the date.

Checking her appearance one last time, Mildred smiled. She eagerly anticipated the conversations and experiences that awaited them during their evening together. Undoubtedly, it would be an exciting and unique adventure.

Despite the recent spell of gloomy weather and the pessimistic forecast, the evening of their date was graced with perfect weather. Mildred remembered how Philip had assured her in a text message the day before, “Don’t worry about the weather, it’ll definitely be fine.” She had shrugged it off as hopeful thinking, but as she stepped out into the evening’s gentle breeze and under the clear skies, she wondered how he could have been so certain.

The setting sun cast a warm, rosy hue across London as she arrived at the agreed-upon meeting spot. Right on cue, just as the final rays of sunlight faded, Philip appeared.

She was taken aback by the sight of him. Gone were the crumpled suit and unkempt hair she had grown accustomed to seeing. Now, his hair was neatly combed, and he was dressed in effortlessly stylish, casual clothes — a casual blazer, chinos, and pristine trainers, like any young man on a date. He seemed almost nervous, shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

“Wow, finally you’re wearing something other than a suit!” Mildred exclaimed in surprise.

Philip showed an awkward smile and asked hesitatingly, “Don’t you like it?”

“No, no, I like it!” she reassured him. “It’s just that I’ve never seen you dressed like this before. It’s a lovely change.”

Philip’s face lit up with a relieved smile, and he glanced down at his watch, “Well, I’m glad you approve. We should get going if we don’t want to be late for our reservation.”

As he looked down, Mildred’s gaze followed to the rugged watch she’d seen so often. Realising that it always displayed the times of sunset and sunrise, she recalled his visits to the café inching earlier with each passing day, always after sunset. Even the time they had arranged to meet for their date was just after sunset.

“Mildred?” Philip’s voice broke her train of thought.

She blinked and looked up at him, “Your watch, it always shows the times of sunset and sunrise, doesn’t it? Does it have anything to do with the time you come to the café?”

Philip hesitated for a moment before answering with a small smile, “You’re very observant. I’m impressed. I wonder when you’ll figure out why.”

Before she could delve further into the mystery, he took her by the hand and led her to a cosy restaurant nestled in a nearby alley. The delicious aroma of various dishes wafted towards them as they stepped inside, mingling with the soft hum of conversation and laughter. The enigma of Philip’s watch and his mysterious timing faded from Mildred’s mind, replaced by the excitement of the evening ahead.

They were ushered to a secluded, candlelit table near the back of the restaurant. As Mildred glanced around, she appreciated the tasteful decor and the relaxed ambience of the place. Philip, noticing her approval, said, “I’m glad you like it. I’d heard good things about this place and thought it would be nice for our first date.”

The menu was a gastronomic tour featuring an array of dishes from around the world. After perusing the menu, Mildred decided on

a hearty pasta dish, while Philip, seemingly more interested in making sure Mildred enjoyed her meal, opted for a simple salad. They decided on a bottle of red wine, a recommendation from their attentive waiter, to accompany their meal.

As they chatted, they sipped their wine and enjoyed their meal. Mildred couldn't help but notice that Philip seemed a bit nervous or overly focused on their conversation. He was chopping his salad into tiny pieces with a knife, more focused on that task even than eating. She had to stifle a giggle at the sight.

“Are you planning to feed that salad to a bird, Philip?”

Mildred watched as Philip, bemused, discovered that his salad was now in a practically inedible condition. She found this amusingly endearing.

“So, Philip,” Mildred ventured, deciding to shift the focus from his meal fiasco, “I’ve been wondering about your age, if you don’t mind me asking?”

Philip hesitated, “Well, Mildred, I might be a bit older than you think.”

“So, how old are you, exactly?” Mildred raised an eyebrow.

Instead of responding directly, Philip turned the question around. “What do you think? How old do I look to you?”

“Well, you seem to be around my age, maybe early 20s, but after talking to you for a while, I’d say you might be a bit older, like in your mid-20s,” Mildred replied, trying to gauge his reaction.

At her response, Philip’s smile grew a bit more awkward, almost strained. Mildred prodded further. “Over 30?”

Seeing his expression, she quickly shifted gears. “Wait, are you married?”

Philip looked genuinely taken aback. “What? I assure you, I’m not the type to take off my wedding ring and chat up other women.”

Mildred nodded, seemingly satisfied with his response. “Well, as

long as you're not hiding a wife somewhere, I think we're good. You look young anyway, so age doesn't really matter."

Philip let out a laugh, the tension in his smile easing away. Redirected by Mildred's lightheartedness, their conversation veered into more comfortable territories. Laughter rang out between them, blending seamlessly with the muted chatter around the restaurant. His salad was left untouched, forgotten amidst the engaging exchange of stories.

As they exited the restaurant, strolling through the moonlit streets, only then did Mildred realise that she had never learned his exact age. But she decided to let it slide. She felt somehow that she would eventually learn the secrets that lay beneath the surface of the enigmatic man who had captured her heart. For now, she was content to enjoy the magic of their first date and the promise of adventures that lay ahead.

Note

Philip and Mildred are named after characters in an old English novel "Of Human Bondage" (1915) by W. Somerset Maugham.

Philip's watch is based on the RANGEMAN from Casio's digital watch brand, G-SHOCK. This model actually has a function that displays the times of sunset and sunrise.

Ch 1-2. A Sort of Vampire Romance

The day after their first date, Philip strolled into the café as usual, the bell over the door announcing his arrival. Just like the day before, he was no longer adorned in a crumpled formal suit. His casual yet smart outfit matched his lean physique.

“So you finally decided to stop wearing those crumpled suits?” Mildred greeted him with a teasing grin.

Philip chuckled, running a hand through his neatly combed hair. “Well, I didn’t care much about my appearance before... but if there’s a particular someone I want to look good for, why not?”

A moment later, he continued, his cheeks tinged with a blush. “Can I try to look good for you?”

Mildred laughed out loud. “Why not?”

Seeing her response, his face brightened. “So,” he began, his voice filled with a hopeful lilt, “When are you free next? Could we... maybe have another date then?”

Her reply was instant. “I’m free on Fridays and Saturdays.” She added, giving him a wink, “Oh, and my shift ends at 11, for your information.”

Philip whispered with a smile, as he glanced at another customer coming in behind him. “Let’s continue our discussion via text.”

And so their dating continued. Once, twice, and then many more

times after. Thus blossomed a romance with Philip Jenkins.

* * *

About three months into their relationship, Mildred found herself comfortably settled at a small table in Philip's kitchen. He was skillfully preparing fried rice, stirring the sizzling mixture with an ease that came from practice. As she watched him, she absently swung around a necklace with her fingers. It was a gift from Philip — a pretty piece adorned with a rich red stone centrepiece and tiny stones that sparkled even in the muted light.

At some point, frequent invitations to Philip's flat had become the norm for them. He was an unexpectedly good cook, and he seemed to relish in the delight he saw on Mildred's face whenever he placed a dish in front of her. Spending time at his home was a welcome escape from the cramped flat she shared with her two flatmates.

Still twirling the necklace idly, she questioned, "Is this a real jewel? Isn't it expensive?"

"Yes, it's garnet. It's said to shine even at night. Seemed fitting, given our late meetings," Philip replied, his eyes were fixed on the pan, yet his words conveyed smug satisfaction.

"Because of your peculiar post-sunset schedule," she mumbled. For some reason, his availability was mostly limited to after sunset, and his daytime communication was often sporadic. His explanations for this pattern were vague and inconsistent, making them difficult to accept.

Her attention shifted to the tiny, colourless stones embedded next to the garnet. "And are these real diamonds?"

"The jewel I chose for you is garnet, Mildred. It doesn't matter if small decorations are diamonds or not," Philip grumbled, disappointed that his symbolic choice had gone unnoticed.

Mildred persisted, “So they’re real then?”

He sighed. “Yes, they are. But little bits are not expensive, so no need to worry.” He paused for a moment, a smirk playing on his lips as he added, “Or, maybe, does it disappoint you?”

“Hey, I was just curious about the price,” she retorted.

“Isn’t it a bit rude to ask about the price of a present?” Philip shrugged playfully. “To be honest, I don’t even remember.”

Indeed, his present giving was a recurring event. They were always high-quality, and some were even luxuriously expensive. In just a month and a half of dating, he had given her presents worth more than her monthly earnings. She had been taken aback, but as it became clear he expected nothing in return and was not hinting at marriage, she came to accept them graciously. Philip simply seemed to enjoy her happiness, and Mildred wasn’t one to turn down freebies.

“But are you sure it’s okay to give me these pricey gifts so often?” Mildred probed, her tone hesitant. “I mean, I know we’ve already talked about it, but I still worry.”

He chuckled, “I earn enough for a young barista not to worry.”

“Well, quite,” Mildred agreed nonchalantly, her eyes drifting around Philip’s flat. A one-bedroom flat, located near the café where she worked. It couldn’t be said to be overly spacious, but it was never cramped — that’s the point. In London, a residence that did not compromise on basic living standards was a privilege.

Mildred, deciding to halt her string of queries, quietly slipped the necklace around her neck. Tugging lightly on the chain to adjust the pendant, she asked, “How do I look?”

Philip, who had just finished garnishing the fried rice on the plate, turned his head and his face instantly lit up. “You look beautiful, Mildred.” Then he announced cheerfully, “And dinner’s ready!” He carried a steaming plate of fried rice to the table.

As he placed it before her, Mildred noticed that he hadn't brought any food for himself. Again. In fact, it seemed she had rarely seen him eat unless she explicitly invited him to do so, or scooped him a serving. What was he playing at?

Noticing her gaze, Philip offered a reassuring smile. "Don't worry about me. I'm not particularly hungry."

"What do you usually eat, Philip?" Mildred asked. "You can't possibly survive on the few bites you take when we're together. Are you enjoying some secret dish that I can't see?"

Philip shrugged nonchalantly, pulling out the chair across from her to sit. "Ironically, I don't actually eat what I cook."

"But... didn't you say you love cooking?"

"Yes, I do," Philip admitted. "But have you ever tried to cook while you're starving? It's quite tedious. However, watching someone else enjoy the food I've prepared? That's a real pleasure. It's part of why I appreciate our relationship so much. I hadn't had that opportunity before."

His response left her in quiet contemplation for a moment before she recalled something peculiar. She asked, "Was that why your kitchen was so bare when I first came here? No cooking utensils, no fridge, not even a mug. I almost thought I'd walked into some romance novel hero's desolate apartment. You know, the kind of place that doesn't even seem lived-in." She giggled.

At her words, Philip seemed to flinch slightly, his grin becoming strained. "Ah, well, as I've mentioned before, my place was under renovation at that time."

While Mildred couldn't make sense of what kind of renovation would rid even the cups from a home, she decided to let it pass.

"Anyway," she continued, "if you don't eat what you cook, what do you actually eat?"

Philip rolled his eyes, giving her an unconvincing answer. "Protein

bars, mostly.”

“Protein bars, huh?” Mildred looked him up and down, her gaze landing on his forearm, lean but not muscular. She smirked, “Somehow, I’m not convinced.”

Philip immediately pouted at her response. “Hey, I’m a scholar. You can’t expect me to be all muscle. That’s asking too much.”

“Are you a scholar? I didn’t know.” She blinked.

Caught slightly off guard, Philip responded, “Well, if not, what do you think all this is about?” he gestured widely around his home.

Her mind followed his gesture. Sure, his bedroom-library was filled with strange, occult books, and the cabinets in his tidy living room housed equally bizarre collectibles. But what did that prove?

“Yes, it seems very scholarly,” Mildred commented sarcastically.

“Magic is a legitimate academic discipline,” he defended, blushing slightly. “And I even have a PhD in Magic. So, I can certainly call myself a scholar.”

“Seriously, Philip? A PhD in Magic?” Mildred chuckled, scooping rice onto her spoon. “I was barely convinced by your claim that you were a freelance sorcerer. But a Hogwarts graduate? A bit too much to believe.”

“It’s definitely not a joke!” Philip protested. “Of course there is no Hogwarts. We undergo formal education at universities.”

“You really expect me to believe that magic is an academic field?” Mildred immediately pulled out her phone and began searching. To her surprise, she found that several old universities indeed had departments dedicated to the study of magic. Sighing, she chuckled. “OK, you won.”

“I told you so,” Philip grumbled, looking slightly deflated. Noticing Philip’s sulky expression, Mildred decided it was time to switch gears.

“Alright, alright, I’ll quit the teasing,” she conceded, waving a

hand dismissively as she took another spoonful of rice. “You know, we both know looks aren’t everything. It was quite impressive you lifted that entire double bed — frame and mattress together. I never thought you were a weakling.”

At her words, Philip’s face instantly lit up in a triumphant grin. “Well, I do have my moments.”

“Want to see something else impressive? Watch this,” Caught up in confidence, Philip decided to take his chance. He quickly sprang to his feet and rushed over to the stove, grabbing the pan with the leftover fried rice.

Mildred watched, wide-eyed, as Philip sent the rice soaring into the air with a swift upward motion. Flames danced above the pan. It was a rather impressive spectacle. That was, until the rice swished perfectly into the sink, entirely missing the pan. His face instantly turned bright red.

“That was a great performance,” Mildred tried to find something to compliment, “of... throwing leftovers out.”

“Yes, of course that was my intent.” His limp voice made it hard to tell whether he was speaking sarcastically or really pretending he had intended it.

At that point, Mildred burst out laughing uncontrollably. Philip exclaimed, still blushing. “That wasn’t supposed to happen!”

As she watched Philip’s antics, she couldn’t help but consider the peculiar man before her.

Initially, he had seemed a somewhat brooding figure, until she initiated a conversation with him at the café. He also had been very cautious in the early stages of dating. But as they grew closer, Philip had revealed a side of him that was cheerful, playful, and even childish at times. He was easily elated, easily discouraged, and sometimes annoyingly stubborn. When conversations veered towards topics he seemed uncomfortable with, he’d attempt to change the

subject with almost comically poor skills.

He might have been a bit awkward for a man apparently over thirty, and he had his fair share of moments where he was insufferable as a boyfriend. Yet, in a way, it was this mix of charm and annoyance that kept her hooked.

As her laughter had died down with the passing thought, she decided to comfort him. “The fried rice was delicious, Philip. Even without the dramatic show.”

Philip calmed down a bit, the compliment easing his frustration. With a sheepish smile, he admitted, “You know, it probably would have tasted even better with some garlic. But, alas, I’m allergic.”

He chuckled, a playful twinkle in his eyes as he added, “And considering the... umm, series of events that usually follow our dinners, it’s probably best we skip the garlic for practical reasons, anyway.”

Mildred giggled at his euphemism. There was an unspoken understanding between them, a shared anticipation of the intimate moments that often followed their meals together.

Deciding to shift the focus away from the botched performance, Mildred quickly scooped up the last bit of fried rice and took a sip of water to cleanse her palate. Sliding closer to Philip, she placed a gentle kiss on his lips, a intimate gesture meant to comfort him. “Let’s forget about the fried rice,” she whispered against his lips.

Philip’s response was a soft hum of agreement, his attention now solely on her. As they kissed, Mildred was reminded once again of the unique charm that was Philip – his slightly elongated canine teeth, a detail only someone who had kissed him would know.

* * *

After their tender moment had ended, Philip saw Mildred home.

He bade her goodnight, and then he was gone, swallowed by the shadow of the city.

Once inside her room, Mildred fell onto her bed and gazed at the ceiling in contemplation. Philip's revelation about his PhD in Magic had left her curious.

Despite their three-month relationship, Philip was still very much a mystery to her. She didn't even know his exact age yet. She had been waiting for him to share that information, but it seemed he wasn't going to reveal it until pushed.

Doctoral dissertations were public knowledge. Mildred could probably dig into his academic career and learn more about him. Lying comfortably on the bed, she picked up her phone and began to delve into the online academic databases. Search: Philip Jenkins.

To her disappointment, or perhaps to further pique her interest, she could find no recent dissertations under his name. The only publication she could find was one by a Philip Jenkins from decades ago.

Strictly speaking, it wasn't even a direct match. The first and last names were identical, but the author of this old dissertation had published under his middle name, not his first. Well, to be fair, Mildred didn't know Philip's middle name.

Despite the publication date, the discovery led her down a far-fetched idea: What if Philip was an ageless sorcerer, having achieved immortality through magical means? If he was in fact as old as her grandfather, his reluctance to reveal his age would make sense.

However, she quickly discarded this theory when she found a Wikipedia article stating the older Jenkins had passed away over thirty years ago.

The only plausible explanation seemed to be that Philip was exaggerating his academic achievements. Had he dropped out of a postgraduate course? At least, his fascination with magic and his

pride as a scholar didn't seem to be a lie. Maybe he embellished his status to impress her, or to convince himself. It seemed a very Philip thing to do.

Although, confronting him felt unnecessarily cruel. Mildred didn't want to inject discomfort into their relationship by pointing out his bravado. After all, she already knew he was a bit of a pretentious fool.

The harvest of information was smaller than anticipated, yet she was satisfied. She had learned a little secret about her elusive boyfriend. She decided it was time to sleep, to lay down the questions and revelations of the night and embrace the calm oblivion of rest.

As her eyelids grew heavy, a wild idea flickered through her mind. What if Philip was really the late Philip Jenkins – though he wasn't even known as 'Philip' Jenkins, strictly speaking? His peculiar post-sunset schedule, his lack of eating, his slightly elongated canines, and his allergy to garlic...

It was a ludicrous thought. Yet she couldn't help but imagine, if she were to point out his academic falsification, Philip would likely start claiming he was a vampire as a way to refute it. It was just so... Philip. A soft chuckle escaped at the absurdity of it all.

A smile lingered on her lips as Mildred finally succumbed to sleep, the wild imaginings of the night fading away into the tranquillity of dreams.

Note

Philip's surname, Jenkins, is named after the real name of Howl, a character in a British fantasy novel "Howl's Moving Castle" (1986) by Diana Wynne Jones! My love for pathetic male characters might have come from Howl.

Ch 1-3. A Sort of Vampire Romance

For a couple of months following, Mildred had been smoothly maintaining her relationship with Philip. It hadn't reached the point of being very serious yet, and he didn't seem to be regarding it that way either, but he was a decent boyfriend nonetheless. At least, that's what she had thought up until then.

On an evening date as normal as any other, Mildred found herself sitting in a steakhouse across from Philip. The sweet aroma of sizzling beef wafted from the kitchen, and the sounds of clinking cutlery and subdued conversations hummed through the dining area.

The waiter, an amiable man with a ready smile, arrived at their table with a tray. He set a succulent, medium-rare steak in front of Mildred, while in stark contrast, Philip was served a steak so rare it practically dripped blood.

"What a lovely piece of meat," Mildred admired, smiling. She hastily picked up her cutlery, causing the knife and fork to clash together. The knife slipped on the fork's resistance, cutting her finger. Blood flowed from her finger. "Ouch..."

Suddenly, Philip's countenance shifted as though overtaken by a strange fury. His eyes locked onto the droplets of blood on her finger. Before she could even react, he snatched her hand fiercely, sucking at the bleeding finger. His cheeks flushed, and his eyes half-closed in

ecstasy. She was frozen with confusion and embarrassment. An eerie silence surrounded them.

Then his canine tooth bit into her cut, deliberately trying to coax out more blood. She screamed as pain shot through her.

“Agh!”

The spell that bound them shattered. Instantly, Philip withdrew, his face filled with panic. He turned so pale he almost looked like a corpse.

“I meant... did you know... um, that saliva has a disinfecting effect?” he stammered, chuckling nervously. “Yeah, that’s it! A natural antiseptic, really. Just helping clean the wound. It’s science...”

His words trailed off, the excuses ringing hollow even to his own ears. Mildred merely stared at him, her expression a mix of confusion and shock.

“Also... I just remembered,” he blurted out, suddenly rising from the table. The chair scraped noisily against the floor, attracting glances from the surrounding tables. “Something urgent came up. Something I absolutely can’t put off. I’m so, so sorry, Mildred.”

With that, he threw some cash on the table and almost sprinted out of the steakhouse, nearly knocking over a waiter on his way out.

“What... what the hell was that?” Mildred, left alone, muttered to herself, looking down at her still-stinging finger.

Slowly chewing on her steak, Mildred was deep in thought. Her appetite hadn’t completely waned despite the bizarre incident. An old joke resurfaced in her mind: could he be a vampire?

Surely, there must be a more reasonable explanation. Perhaps he just had some sort of blood fetish? Nonetheless, her intuition stubbornly clung to that one, outlandish hypothesis. Thus, she decided that the absurd idea might be worth verifying.

The next day, once Philip had presumably calmed down and concocted a series of excuses, Mildred found herself on the receiving

end of his endless apologies. His excuses still didn't make sense, but Mildred didn't care. Instead, her interest lay in his reaction to her upcoming proposition.

“An amusement park?” Philip echoed.

“Yes, the entire day. From morning till night. Of course, only on the best weather day, according to the forecast.”

This was her test. Until he admitted something — anything, really — Mildred intended to press him into the sunlight.

However, contrary to her expectations, Philip readily agreed. The appointed day arrived and, just as forecasted, Saturday dawned with beautiful weather, and Philip showed up at the station without a hint of discomfort.

What had she expected? She was a bit disappointed, but realised that it was actually best for nothing to happen. Deciding to just enjoy the date, she hooked her arm into his.

At the amusement park, Mildred and Philip meandered through the grounds, taking in the lively atmosphere. Laughter and chatter filled the air as people bustled around, enjoying the rides and attractions. Philip seemed to be doing just fine under the bright sun, though he appeared slightly worn.

They paused at a stall selling headbands. Her eyes fell on a particular one with cute lioness ears. Mildred picked it up, placed it on her head, and turned to a mirror hanging on the side. “How do I look, Philip-”

As daylight surrendered to the evening, they retreated to a nearby lavish tourist hotel. The opulence of crystal chandeliers and a grand staircase marked their entrance.

Spotting an off licence adjacent to the lobby, a new idea sparked in Mildred's mind — one last test for Philip. The sunlight hadn't bothered him, but she recalled that even in lore, some vampires could walk in daylight. What she needed was a bolder test: How

would he react to a seemingly unconscious woman?

“Find our room, I’ll join you shortly,” she told him.

In the store, she purchased a bottle of red wine and a similarly coloured grape juice, and then retreated to the toilet in the lobby. Once inside, she carefully emptied most of the wine down the sink, refilling the bottle with the juice, making sure to preserve the wine’s convincing aroma and colour.

Mildred entered their room, the ‘wine’ bottle in hand, and declared with a bold smile, “I’m gonna get drunk.” She poured herself a generous glass of the fake wine and drained it with faux enthusiasm. Glass after glass, she continued her performance until she seemed too drunk to stand straight.

She knew Philip’s habits well. He never drank alcohol — at least, not really. His sips were always pretences, so she felt confident that he wouldn’t catch onto her deception. Indeed, he didn’t even bother pouring wine into his glass this time.

Finally, Mildred collapsed onto the bed, feigning a lack of control. Through squinted eyes, she watched Philip.

“Ah, Mildred, you gave me such a hard time today,” Philip murmured softly, his voice permeated with a hint of amusement. He carefully adjusted her into a more comfortable position and draped the duvet over her. His fingers brushed through her hair in a soothing rhythm until her breathing steadied.

There was nothing particularly suspicious about his behaviour, no unexpected twists or turns. Everything was normal, just like it should be. Mildred decided to let herself relax into his touch. For a brief moment or what could have been hours, she teetered on the edge of sleep.

That is until a sudden sharp pain pierced her arm.

Mildred cracked her eyes open a mere sliver, careful not to alert Philip. He held a sharp pin that he had just pulled from her arm. As

he licked her blood from the pin, his eyes were closed, and an expression of sheer bliss painted his face. It was eerily reminiscent of their evening at the steakhouse.

A chill ran down her spine. Her mind whirled, and a forgotten flashback hit her. The headband stall. The mirror. It had happened just today.

When Mildred had put on the lioness headband and turned to the mirror, Philip had been right behind her. His reflection should have been there. But it wasn't.

Taken aback, she had spun around, and Philip had pulled her into an embrace. His chest muffled her gasp. In that moment, she had realised she couldn't hear his heartbeat. In retrospect, throughout all their close encounters, she couldn't recall hearing it even once.

As dreadful panic had gripped her, he had whispered, "It's nothing, just... forget it."

And she had. She had actually forgotten about it all, until he plunged the pin into her arm, jolting her back into reality.

Mildred's heart pounded in her chest. Desperately, she tried to keep her breathing steady and calm her beating heart, praying she wouldn't betray any sign of being awake. As the reality of the situation dawned on her, she knew there was no denying it any longer.

Philip, her boyfriend, was a vampire.

* * *

The next day, Mildred retreated to the familiar confines of the café, just like she did every day. She felt a bitter irony. Now that she knew she was dating a vampire, her life hadn't suddenly become a gothic novel. She still had to grind beans, froth milk, and serve customers.

During a short break, she bit into a sandwich, chewing mechanically while her gaze was glued to her phone. The bustling rhythm of the coffee machines and chatter of customers provided an oddly soothing backdrop.

She was reading the Wikipedia article about the late Philip Jenkins, or rather, Howard Jenkins, as the article was titled. He was a scholar of the same name with Philip she found when she decided to investigate his supposed PhD.

Could her Philip really be the same Jenkins who died about 30 years ago? Mildred wasn't sure. But the coincidence was uncanny. The only doctoral dissertation ever published under his name was that of the late Jenkins. And now it was clear her Philip was dead... It was worth investigating.

'Philip Howard Jenkins (May 26 1946 - 22 Dec 1988) was a British scholar and professor of magic who specialised in the study of the intersection between magic and reality...'

He seemed to have been quite an influential scholar. Although he died prematurely of a heart attack... Could that have turned him into a vampire? And wow, he'd even had a wife and a daughter.

Mildred recalled their first date when she asked him if he was married. His words echoed in her mind, 'I'm not the type to take off my wedding ring and chat up other women.' Perhaps, he hadn't lied technically. After all, death did them part, even though he was the one who died.

The one who died. Not long ago, to her point of view, he had been a bit mysterious and magical, but nonetheless undoubtedly a living man. He claimed to be a sorcerer himself. Why should she have doubted him? She remembered Philip's passionate explanation about the 'magic' to fool coffee. 'It's not difficult, in fact, you can do it too if you know how...' Indeed, he was actually a sorcerer. A dead sorcerer. A pang of sadness shot through her.

“You alright, Mildred?” A concerned voice cut through her contemplation. Lost in her thoughts, Mildred hadn’t realised that Emily, a fellow barista, came close to her.

“Nothing. Just a lot on my mind, I suppose,” Mildred replied, attempting to shake off her worries.

Emily didn’t look convinced, but she changed the subject nonetheless. “Hey, how are things going with Philip?”

Caught off guard, Mildred’s eyes wavered. The question was harmless, even friendly, but to her, it felt like stepping into a minefield.

“Actually, Emily,” she began, hesitating as she considered her words. “You’ve been working here longer than me, and Philip was a regular even then, right? Was there anything that... bothered you or felt strange about him?”

Emily seemed to ponder for a moment, her gaze distant as she chewed on her bottom lip. Then she began to speak, her voice hesitant yet somehow eager, as if she’d been waiting for the opportunity.

“Before you started working here, there was a guy named Bob who worked your shift. And Philip... well, he’d been memorable to us even then. You know, that order of the empty cup, and coming every day.”

“One night, as I was leaving work, I saw Philip — I didn’t know his name then, though — kissing Bob. I was surprised,” she added as if making excuses, “I mean, I’d had no idea about their connection.”

“The next day, Bob didn’t show up for work. Said he was sick. I wondered if it was because of what I saw... He continued to miss work after that. On the other hand, Philip kept showing up as usual.”

“A week later,” Emily continued, her voice dropping to a near whisper, “we heard Bob had... well, he’d passed away. I don’t know what happened, we weren’t that close. And Philip... he just kept coming here, like nothing had happened.”

A cold dread creeped up Mildred's spine. The pieces of the puzzle were coming together in a horrifying picture.

Emily gave a slight shrug, an awkward laugh escaping her lips. "It's a strange story, right? I didn't know if I should tell you, because it's... well, it's probably a bit of an invasion of privacy. But it's just... it was really odd. I haven't made things uncomfortable, have I? I mean... you know."

But the revelation about Philip's sexuality didn't matter for Mildred. The matter was, Bob's death wasn't a random, unfortunate event. He was a victim of Philip, the vampire. And if that was true... could she be next?

"Thanks for telling me," Mildred finally whispered, her voice barely audible. "Don't worry about that. It... It's a lot to process, but I needed to know."

As Emily gave a weak smile and went back to her duties, Mildred popped the last piece of the sandwich into her mouth. Her break was coming to an end.

Mildred now knew what she had to do. It was time to end everything.

Note

The scene where Philip pierces Mildred's arm with a pin and licks her blood is an homage to early vampire literature, published about 60 years before *Dracula*, called "La Morte amoureuse (in English: The Dead Woman in Love)" (1836), by Théophile Gautier. It was a really beautiful scene. I couldn't help but pay homage.

Interesting Fact: Did you know that the pronunciation of 'Bob' is the same as the Korean word for 'meal'? During the writing process, I initially named him Bob, planning to change it later to something like Victor. However, after hearing my beta reader say, 'Wow, Bob literally became Philip's [bob],' I realised that Bob was the most appropriate name.

Ch 1-4. A Sort of Vampire Romance

Mildred's heart raced with nervous anticipation as she stepped out of her flat. The evening air was balmy, and the scent of fresh spring blossoms wafted through the streets. She was set on a path, a purpose clear in her mind, as she made her way towards the park where she was to meet Philip.

For the entire week, she had feigned ignorance, playing the role of the unsuspecting girlfriend. She had chatted and smiled, never betraying the terror that coiled inside her like a spring. But the time came to confront him, the vampire.

Their meeting time was set, as always, for just after sunset. It was the beginning of May, so it was in the evening past 8 pm. Still, the park at the weekend was slightly busy. Families enjoyed the mild weather, couples strolled hand in hand, and children chased each other around the abundant blossoming trees.

"Hey, Mildred," Philip greeted her, his voice smooth and welcoming. His silhouette was tinged with hues of the receding sun.

"Hi Philip," Mildred responded with a tight smile. "Shall we take a walk?"

Mildred took the lead, guiding him towards the rose garden. She wasn't sure if the myth that vampires despise roses was true or not, but she hoped to use it to her advantage.

The rose garden was in full bloom, a cacophony of colours and scents. “The roses are blooming beautifully, don’t you think, Philip?” Mildred asked.

“Indeed,” Philip replied, but his voice somehow held a hint of unease.

They continued walking, and exchanged trivial small talk. It was peaceful, but Mildred knew better. Underneath her calm facade, a storm was brewing.

Eventually, Mildred reached the specific rosebush she had in mind. The ribbon she used as a handle, tied to the items she had concealed within the bush, was peeping out. She stopped walking, glancing around. Fortunately, there were still some people around.

“Philip, you’ve mentioned your PhD in Magic once, remember?” Mildred asked, her voice breezy as if discussing the weather. “I was curious about it, so I looked you up.”

Philip smiled awkwardly, rubbing the back of his neck. “Ah, that,” he began. “The reason you didn’t find my name in recent records is, well, because I never actually graduated. Life got in the way, you know...”

Mildred felt the irony seep into her. She gave a short, bitter laugh. “Oh, Philip, I know you,” she said sardonically. “If you were truly a dropout, you’d have invented some grand story by now. I can imagine you, trying to convince me that the dissertation published under your name decades ago, by an author long since dead, was actually yours. But instead, you admitted it, admitted the ‘lie’. That’s not like you. So, it must mean-”

She quickly grasped the ribbon at the edge of the rosebush in front of her, and drew out a crucifix and garlic bulbs she had hidden earlier. “The very claim you denied is the truth you’re trying to hide, isn’t it, Dr Jenkins?”

Turning pale, Philip staggered back. His eyes widened, but he

seemed to not dare meet her gaze or glance at the crucifix she held. His features twisted into a look of despair. He muttered bitterly, “I knew this was inevitable.” But he couldn’t help but protest, “But honestly? Are you really going to tell me that because I didn’t insist on some absolute nonsense, it’s proof? Do you really think I’m such an idiot?”

“Of course not,” Mildred retorted, her voice sharp as a blade. “However, if you, who can’t cast a reflection in the mirror and whose heart doesn’t beat, have been secretly sucking my blood at night, that does become evidence. And yes, you are an idiot, regardless.”

“That makes more sense. I shouldn’t have agreed to go to that amusement park.” Philip sighed, running a hand through his hair. “Mildred, I can explain. But before that, could you put...” he continued, gesturing to the crucifix and garlic in Mildred’s hands, a look of discomfort on his face, “them down first, please? They’re not conducive to conversation.”

“Why?” Mildred scoffed, her grip on the items tightening. “So you can erase my memory and manipulate me again, like you did at the headband stall?”

Philip visibly winced at her words. “Come on, you can’t call it manipulation to help you focus on more important things than trivial facts.” He raised his hands in a placating gesture. “If I’d truly tried to manipulate you, you wouldn’t have even considered confronting me like this.”

That remark only stoked the flames of Mildred’s anger, of course. She raised her voice, shouting back at Philip, “Yes, you must be really proud! Do you seriously think I would just do as you say after hearing that?”

“Alright, that wasn’t the best defence,” Philip admitted. “What I meant was, I really have no intention of wiping your memory. Look at how far things have gone. So... please, put them down.”

His final request held an uncanny weight. His grey eyes glimmered with an intensity that bore into Mildred's soul, his powerful will seeping into her like poison. Despite her fear and reluctance, she felt an overwhelming compulsion. She finally yielded, her fingers loosening their grip around the crucifix and garlic. They dropped to the ground with a dull thud, leaving her defenceless. Terror swept through her, despite having known from the start that she was at a disadvantage.

After neutralising the threat, Philip visibly more relaxed. "I'm so, so sorry for being so forceful," he apologised. "But I just... I simply can't tolerate those things."

He let out a heavy sigh, his shoulders drooping. "Okay, let's get this straight. Even though we both know the truth, it's important to be clear before we continue... I am a vampire."

"So, you are really that Howard Jenkins, the one who died decades ago?" Mildred asked with a quivering voice. "The scholar whose Wikipedia article comes up on the first page of Google search results?"

Philip's jaw tensed at the mention of the name, his eyes darkening. "Well, it's a bit more complicated to simply say yes, but if I correct the tense... yes, I was."

"Dr Howard Jenkins, who had a wife and a daughter," she said contemptuously.

"I had had," he corrected the tense again, his voice growing quieter. "Death separated her and me. I'm a completely free man."

Mildred rolled her eyes. "Of course, you'd say that. But let's not pretend you've been entirely honest with me."

At her words, a flush crept over Philip's pale features, and he began to whine, "But you said it doesn't matter because I look young..."

"I said your age doesn't matter, not your history," Mildred retorted

in annoyance. “Don’t twist my words.”

The absurdity of the situation hit her then. Here she was, arguing with her vampire boyfriend about his dishonesty. Shaking off her annoyance at Philip’s pitiful response, she returned to the grim reality of their conversation.

“Let’s get to the main point, Philip. Have you been harming and killing people?”

Ridiculously, Philip seemed less uncomfortable with this topic. He straightened his posture and met her gaze directly. “Yes, I usually do. I won’t deny that. But Mildred,” he added quickly, “I never hurt you.”

“How dare you suck my blood in that hotel and say you never hurt me? And what about the steakhouse thing?” Mildred shot back.

Philip flinched at her anger, but he tried to defend himself. “The incident at the steakhouse was out of control, and the pinprick at the hotel — it can’t be harmful. Look, you dragged me into the sun, and I couldn’t sleep or eat all day. I’m sorry, really. But you can’t blame me for licking a few drops of blood. Seriously, what harm have I caused?”

“Of course, I can’t blame you for what I remember,” she replied sarcastically. “Especially since you have a habit of messing with my memory.”

“I didn’t do anything!” desperation crept into his voice. “How can I prove the absence? Look at you, you’re perfectly healthy. I only did the bare minimum to avoid this situation... That’s all.”

“Surely all your victims would have been perfectly healthy,” said Mildred, her voice cracking, “until you killed them. Philip, tell me, do you plan to kill me like Bob?”

“You are different from them!” Philip exclaimed defensively, then a frown knitted his brows. “But... who the hell is Bob?”

“Are you going to come all the way here and pretend you don’t know?” she snapped. “Bob, the barista who worked at the café before

me. I heard from Emily. She saw you kissing him, and a week later he was dead. You can't claim it was a coincidence, can you?"

Philip's eyes narrowed as he seemed to sift through a mental catalogue. His expression cleared after a moment, but it was cold, dismissive. "Oh, him. I see," he finally said. "How can I remember the name of my victim from half a year ago?"

Mildred's breath caught in her throat as she absorbed the chilling indifference in his voice. She suddenly realised the man in front of her was a cold, arrogant predator. She couldn't help but ask, "How many people have you killed so you don't remember them all?"

"Three to four per month," he answered with a flicker of malice in his gaze. "If that's the statistic you want."

"So, will that statistic include me soon? There's no difference between Bob and me, is there? Are you going to kiss me casually, and then bite my neck?" Mildred asked through gritted teeth, her body trembling.

Philip's face softened. His eyes, which had moments ago seemed so cold, took on a shade of sadness. "Listen, Mildred," he began, his voice gentle. "As for kissing Bob, it was just... an appetiser before the main course, like always. It's completely different with you. What's the point of dating a victim for six months? Giving all sorts of presents, and inventing nonsensical lies?"

Mildred couldn't contain her disgust at Philip's casual mention, treating Bob like he was a literal meal. "Then what's your point? Am I a longer 'full course' to you?" her voice dripped with distrust.

"The point? You're asking me what my point is?" A pained look crossed his face. "Same point as yours!" he cried out. "Do you remember? It was you! You were the one who first talked to me, approached me, and asked me out. What did you want, huh? Why do people date others?"

His voice cracked. His shoulders were shaking as he buried his

face in his hand. Mildred could hardly believe this absurdity.

“Crying? Seriously, are you crying?”

“I just wanted a normal relationship. Chats, hugs, and kisses...” he mumbled through his hand. “Not that kind of ‘kiss’. Just... just a normal kiss.”

Philip looked up, his eyes red and puffy. “This isn’t some ‘only you are special’ crap. But, damn, everyone needs someone special. Even if they’re monsters... Maybe especially if they’re monsters,” he sniffled.

“It’s not very romantic to tell a woman ‘I just wanted someone even if they’re not you,’” Mildred coldly pointed out.

“You won’t believe it even if I said you’re special or something anyway,” he retorted, still sniffing. “And I didn’t say that. That’s not what I think. What I’m trying to say is that I need you, particularly you, not just anyone.”

Mildred felt her blood boil with frustration. As the pair of them — a couple, for crying out loud — stood there, yelling and sniping at each other, Philip was beginning to draw attention with his whimpering. Families had stopped walking, children gawking, and a couple whispering behind their hands. It was ridiculous. She stood in a public park, locked in an argument with a weeping, murderous monster terrified of being dumped. Should she be grateful for the presence of witnesses? But all she really wanted was to make him stop crying. It was just too embarrassing.

“If you can’t bear the emptiness of life, maybe you should stop murdering first, Philip,” she suggested.

“You don’t understand! If I had a choice, I’d have ended this cursed existence the first chance I got!” Philip whined. “I just... I wanted something normal with you. We’ve had good times, haven’t we?”

“Stop being a drama queen,” Mildred snapped. “We’re not having some deep philosophical debate about the nature of evil. The point is, you are pitiful. Seriously, ‘I need you’? After you’ve been treating

me like an emergency glucose candy when your blood sugar's low?"

"But hear me out," Philip replied desperately. "In the end, everyone dies. Isn't it better to enjoy life while we can?"

The incredibly foolish statement from his attempt to defend himself echoed through the rose garden. Silence fell for a moment.

"Is that what you're telling me? That you might kill me if we keep this up?" her voice was frosty.

"No, no, no," he stammered, realising the gravity of his mistake. "That's not what I meant!"

But the damage was done. It was the final straw for Mildred. Finally, she declared, "We're over, Philip. Please get out of my life."

For a moment, Philip seemed like a statue, unmoving. She half-expected him to lash out, to use his supernatural powers to compel her to stay. Instead, he just deflated like a popped balloon. "Alright," his voice was barely above a whisper.

His weeping had ceased, and he let out a sound that was somewhere between a sigh and a sob. "I knew it. I knew it would end one day... Damn it, I got dumped!" he grumbled.

After a moment of awkward silence, Philip seemed to collect himself, albeit rather pathetically. He looked up at Mildred with a hopeful expression, his voice timid and unusually earnest. "Hey, this might sound super desperate, but could we, like, stay friends? Or acquaintances or something? Someone who says 'hello' in the street?"

The very first thought that came to her mind was to tell him to take a hike. She knew she could, and he would probably just shuffle off.

But another thought crossed her mind. The man in front of her was a vampire who admitted to killing 3 to 4 humans a month. That was Philip's doing alone. How many more were out there? It struck her that having him as an ally, even a reluctant one, might not be the

worst idea.

“Fine,” Mildred finally spoke. “But you need to promise not to harm me, my family, or any of my friends.”

Philip seemed to weigh his options before reluctantly nodding. “I promise,” he muttered, a sombre expression on his pale face.

Under a dusky sky, in the middle of a rose garden, a human and a vampire who were once a couple shook hands in promise. Though their romance was over, a new, uneasy alliance had been forged.

Note

Philip is a blatant reinterpretation of Dracula. A powerful vampire who was virtuous, respected, and a sorcerer while alive, and also quite childish after death. That’s right, the line “I never drink... coffee” in Chapter 1-1 is a variation on the famous line “I never drink... wine” from the movie ‘Dracula’ (1931). Even the unexpectedly good cooking that he displayed in Chapter 1-2 was borrowed from Dracula.

Ch 2. The Unique Client

Rita Blake, a stylist in London, sat in her chic office. Her reputation, a beacon in the world of fashion and colour, drew clients from far and wide, with her name well-known beyond her stylish nook of the city.

Yesterday, an unexpected opening appeared in her tightly packed schedule when a high-profile client had to cancel their appointment for the following day at the last minute. Although she received a cancellation fee, losing a full day's booking was far from ideal. Fortunately, the spot was quickly filled by a new client who booked a full-day styling package.

This new client, Philip Jenkins, offered only his name and gender. Some clients preferred everything to be done in face-to-face consultations, complicating the preparation process. But Rita, always adaptable, agreed to the booking, bracing herself for potential complications.

The door to her office swung open, and a young man walked in. Rita's trained eyes had already begun taking in his appearance. He was tall and lean, with dark hair and grey eyes. His suit was very formal, but the leisure watch on his wrist clashed with the rest of his outfit.

"Hello, Mr Jenkins, I presume?" Rita greeted, extending her hand.

“Call me Philip, please.” He nodded, returning her gesture with a handshake. “Thanks for accepting the booking on such short notice.”

“You lucked out with the timing, Philip,” she responded, smiling at her new client. “Now, shall we begin?”

“Actually,” he replied, releasing her hand, “there’s something we must discuss first. I have a somewhat unique problem.”

Curiosity piqued, Rita raised an eyebrow. “Unique? I love a challenge. What might that be?”

Without a word, he stepped up to the mirror, standing tall and straight before it. Rita watched him, and then blinked in disbelief. The man was not reflected in the mirror. She looked at him, then at the mirror, then back at him, but nothing changed. Her heart was racing.

“A... problem with the mirror reflection,” she said, trying not to let the terror seep into her voice. “That could certainly pose some challenges for... styling.”

“How very polite of you not to make any assumptions, Rita,” he chuckled. “Yet, I expected you to make an assumption. Well, I am a vampire.”

It was the confirmation Rita dreaded to hear. While she stood frozen in place, he sat down on the sofa in the middle of the office.

The vampire client continued, “I was a middle-aged professor who died about three decades ago. Now, I have to dress up like a normal young man. And as you can imagine, I’m somewhat out of touch with the current trends. That’s my actual problem.”

A silence fell between them, punctuated only by the distant hum of London’s city life. Rita stared at him for a moment, her mind reeling to keep up with this new information. She was terrified, of course. But she was a professional, and he was her client. It was simply a matter of adapting to a rather unique situation.

“I see,” she finally said, though it was clear from her expression

that she did not, in fact, 'see' at all. She continued after a moment, managing a shaky smile, "Then, let's make you look young and very much alive, Philip."

Rita moved towards her small kitchenette, intending to prepare tea as per her usual client routine. She absent-mindedly asked, "Milk or sugar?"

The vampire just stared at her in silence, causing Rita to freeze with terror. His eyes seemed to sparkle with some inscrutable amusement.

"No, thank you," Philip finally said, chuckling softly. Only then could she breathe.

With trembling hands, Rita poured herself a cup and took a seat opposite him. She began, taking a sip of her tea. "So, Philip, you mentioned you want to dress like a young man. Could you tell me more about the occasion?"

Philip started, leaning back against the sofa. "Well, there's this café I frequent. I've been chatting with a barista there, a charming young woman. And she asked me out on a date. She doesn't know, of course. And I have no intention of revealing myself."

Rita couldn't hold back her sympathy for the woman who unknowingly ended up dating a vampire, but she managed to give only one response. "I see."

"So far, I've been going to the café in my 'pyjamas,'" Philip continued, gesturing to his suit. "It was my routine to wake up, spend about an hour there, and head to my office."

"Why are you referring to your suit as 'pyjamas'?" Rita raised an eyebrow, her professional curiosity piqued despite the situation.

Philip shrugged, "Seems to be what people in coffins wear."

His tone was so nonchalant that it took a moment for Rita to process his words. She cautiously admitted, "I suppose you can't go on a date in a crumpled suit."

“Exactly,” he responded with enthusiasm. “The point is, I don’t want to appear like a boring old man.”

The absurdity of it all hit her. There she was, discussing fashion trends with a vampire who didn’t want to appear outdated on a date. The situation was ridiculous, and she had half a mind to kick Philip out of her office. But instead, she took a deep breath, and started doing what she did best.

“Alright, let’s discuss colours and styles. We need to identify what suits you, keeping in mind modern fashion trends.”

The consultation went on for a while, with Rita asking Philip about his preferences and analysing his best colours. They spoke about what was trending, and what styles would best suit his physique. Philip was overall receptive, and occasionally offered his thoughts and preferences. During the process, Rita could momentarily forget that she was dealing with a vampire.

As the consultation concluded, both Rita and Philip were pleased with the groundwork they’d laid. Now all they had to do was go shopping for outfits that fit the established guidelines. ...go shopping?

“The next step is a shopping trip, right? I’m excited,” said Philip.

“Oh, yes, the shopping trip,” Rita replied. Fear began to gnaw at the back of her mind. She was about to go shopping with a vampire who didn’t even have a reflection. She tried to change his mind, “I guess... perhaps we could do a virtual shopping session.”

Philip glanced at her, a grin spreading across his face. “My date is in two days. As for the shopping, it’s part of the package, isn’t it? If I wanted virtual shopping, I would’ve chosen that. I need an exact fit, and delivery would take too long.”

“But-” she tried to protest.

The vampire grinned broadly, showing his slightly elongated, sharp canines. “I believe in your expertise, Rita.”

There was no way out. Rita reluctantly agreed to go shopping with him.

To her surprise, the shopping trip turned out to be less chaotic than she had anticipated. No one seemed to care about Philip's lack of reflection. The clerks treated him like any other customer, and Rita was left with a deepening sense of unease. There was no doubt. Philip was somehow manipulating their perceptions. This realisation heightened her fear, but also brought a sense of relief. They could shop without causing a commotion.

Nevertheless, the experience was surreal. Rita had to take photographs of Philip in each outfit so he could see his own reflection. She was, essentially, shopping with a man who relied on her phone's camera to see himself.

"How do these jeans look?" he'd ask, emerging from the dressing room in a pair of dark wash denim that emphasised his lean physique.

She raised her phone, snapped a photograph, and showed it to him. "I think the colour suits you, but the overall fit seems a bit tight," she replied.

Store after store, they went on with this unusual shopping routine. Rita picked out clothes, Philip tried them on, she took photographs, and together, they made decisions. As her phone's gallery filled up with spirit photographs, their shopping bags multiplied in number.

It was just past six in the evening, and the sky was being dyed dusky hues when Rita realised that she had spent a full eight hours with the vampire. The strain of the day's events had left her worn, yet she managed to maintain a composed exterior.

As they stood in the street, surrounded by shopping bags filled with his new wardrobe, Rita noticed that Philip looked remarkably fresh for someone who'd been out under the sun all day — especially for a vampire.

The thought caused a shiver to run down her spine. She had been so focused on her work that she had forgotten about her fear. But now, as the shops began to close and the crowds thinned out, the fear was back. ‘Was this it?’ she wondered. ‘Was he going to bid her a polite goodbye and then...?’

Philip looked around the almost deserted street, a satisfied smile on his face. He began, “Rita, I must say, this has been quite an extraordinary day. I’ve thoroughly enjoyed it.”

“Really?” Rita managed to choke out. Her heart was pounding now. This was it, wasn’t it? She feared what could follow the polite goodbye. ‘You’ve done well so far. But you know too much...’

Philip seemed not to notice her fear. Instead, he let out a long sigh, his grey eyes reflecting the dwindling light. “Actually, it’s quite unnerving for one of my kind to venture out during the day. Even manipulating the perception of others is unusually exhausting,” he admitted.

“But,” he continued, a hint of a smirk playing on his lips, “I had to buy new clothes. And I thought, why not get professional help if I can’t avoid going out during the day? Now, I can confidently say that I made the right choice.”

He paused, his eyes flicking towards the bags of clothes, and then back to her. “In fact, I was so pleased with your service today that I’d like to request your services again. You know, if my date with the lovely barista goes well.”

“No.” Rita’s answer was almost instantaneous, driven by instinct rather than rational thought. She blinked, surprised by her own response. But she didn’t retract her answer. It felt safer than the dangerous prospect of agreeing to see the vampire again.

Philip chuckled. “I understand,” he said, his voice maintaining its buoyant quality, “But, honestly, your opinion doesn’t matter.”

Before she could respond, he threw her a final, mischievous wink.

“See you later!” And then, in the blink of an eye, he transformed into a flock of rooks, disappearing into the dusky sky.

Stunned, Rita watched him disappear. A cold sense of relief flooded through her. The day was over, her ordeal was finished. But as she glanced at the scattering of feathers on the pavement, she couldn't shake off the ominous feeling that her dealings with the vampire were far from over.

Note

The hordes of rooks that blanket the city's skies are truly, frighteningly impressive. Once you see it, you will never forget it. That's why Philip's signature animal became the rook. Not a crow or a raven, but a rook. Do you think it's not a very symbolic bird? But I believe that the rook is the bird of the Prince of Darkness.

As Dusk Descends

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