



Here's the original opening to *The Vampire's Mail Order Bride*. It was left out of the book because some of my savvy beta readers thought it might give readers the wrong impression about the hero, Hugh Ellingham. Now you can decide for yourself.



Hugh Ellingham always clarified his stance on marriage to every woman he dated. Gently, but most definitely *before* they started dating. Pretending that he was ever going to take another trip down the aisle would only arouse false hopes. He wanted companionship, not commitment.

Some women, however, still liked to believe they could dissuade him of that notion. They were wrong, of course.

The woman standing next to him, Piper Hodge, was one of those women.

Granted, she was everything a man could want. Intelligent, witty, beautiful, comfortable in any situation, even at one of these stuffy fundraisers his grandmother was famous for. Most men would have fallen so hopelessly in love with Piper, they'd have proposed months ago.

Hugh was not most men. Never would be. And not just because he was a vampire.

He leaned in, her expensive perfume teasing his nose, and whispered softly, "Piper, let's go for a walk."

She looked over the rim of her champagne glass, her eyes sparkling with the kind of dreaminess that spoke of engagement rings and big white dresses. Call it a hunch, but that didn't bode well for the discussion he was about to have with her. But better to do it now than before she was making guest lists and talking to caterers. She set her flute on the tray of a passing server. "I'd love to, darling."

Getting through the crowd took some doing. Nocturne Falls was a small town, but there was wealth and influence here that most other towns didn't have thanks to the particular bent of many of its citizens. Tonight's event was a mixed gathering, so the supernatural attendees were

just as numerable as the solely human partygoers, and all of them seemed to want a moment of his time. When he'd shaken the last hand and dispensed with the final bit of small talk, he finally whisked Piper out to the garden.

"It's a beautiful night," Piper commented as they strolled the flagstone path away from the house and into the heart of the garden. "The moon, the temperature, everything." Her fingers caressed a flower on the vine curling round a piece of statuary. "Your grandmother has such a way with plants. This whole garden is positively magical."

He nodded absently, his mind already piecing together the words he needed. They passed another couple heading back to the house as he and Piper approached the small pond that sat in the center of the property. The fountain in the middle churned like his gut. Ending a relationship with a woman was never easy. He didn't want to hurt her, but that seemed like the inevitable conclusion.

A penny glinted near the edge of the pond. His grandmother frowned on guests using her pond as a wishing well, but that didn't stop them. He put a knee on the ground to pick up the offending coin, buying himself one last moment to affirm the words in his head.

"Oh, Hugh," Piper exclaimed breathlessly. "I knew you'd change your mind."

He glanced up and knew instantly what she was thinking. Bloody hell.

She was aglow with excitement, her hands clutched to her heart. "Yes. *Yes.*"

He left the penny behind and stood. His bow tie felt very much like a noose. Or maybe that was wishful thinking. "Piper, this isn't what—"

"No, it's perfect." She laughed coyly as she cupped his face in her hands. "I was starting to think you'd never propose."

Bloody, *bloody* hell. He took hold of her hands and brought them down to her sides. "I'm not proposing."

Her mouth went slack. “Then why were you on one knee?”

“I was picking up a—look, these last five months have been wonderful, but—”

“But?” Anger replaced the blank look in her eyes. “Are you breaking up with me?”

“You deserve a man who can give you his whole heart, and that’s not me.” An old line, but one that had worked with Veronica. It was also the truth.

She ground her teeth together so hard her jaw clicked. “My parents are here. I told them...” She shook her head in disgust, eyes glistening with tears that seemed more angry than sorrowful. “My girlfriends said you were a commitment-phobe, but did I listen? No.”

She scowled at him, turning half away and taking a deep breath. “They said you weren’t the marrying kind.”

“I also told you that,” he said quietly. He *had* been the marrying kind once. And it had hurt him so badly, he couldn’t bring himself to do it again. “I’m just not the right man for you.”

She stabbed a finger at him again. “That’s for damn sure.” She tapped that finger against her chest. “I’m a catch, you know. Any man would be lucky to get a woman like me.”

He nodded. “I agree.” Not once had she said she loved him. He was okay with that. Made things a little easier. “That man is out there, somewhere, I promise.”

She grunted. “Your family’s discounted ad rates at the *Tombstone* are over.”

Piper’s family empire consisted of two things: the biggest car dealership in a fifty-mile radius and the local newspaper, the *Nocturne Falls Tombstone*. Not coincidentally, Piper was the only reporter for the *Tombstone* who drove a new Lexus every year. Hugh stuck his hands in his pockets. “I never expected them in the first place.”

She growled something unintelligible and stormed off. He waited a good ten minutes before going back inside.

His grandmother met him at the door. “You broke up with her.”

Which meant the lecture was next. “I did.”

She shook her head. “Why, this time?”

“The same as always.” Because the pain of losing his first wife had scarred his heart too badly to love again.

“Juliette would want you to find another wife, you know. She wouldn’t want you to be alone this long. In fact, if she were here, I bet she’d pick out a woman for you.”

“If she were here, I wouldn’t need another woman.” The words nearly caught in his throat.

She took his hand and stared at him, her eyes glazed with tears that reflected his own pain back at him. “I hate seeing you so unhappy.”

“I’m fine,” he lied.

She scowled. “You’re getting a reputation.”

“Then maybe I’ll stop dating altogether.” It wasn’t a bad idea, actually. He enjoyed the companionship, but the hole in his heart had yet to be filled, and despite his honesty about not wanting more, the relationships often became so unbalanced that ending them was the only fair thing to do.

“Hugh...” She sighed. “Please don’t give up on love.”

“Too late.” He almost managed a smile. “It’s given up on me.”



Want to read the rest of the book and meet the woman who helps Hugh find love again?

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