



Bats & Breadsticks

a short story



LINDSAY PAIGELY

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Written and published by
Lindsay Paigely

To my writing group.

This short story would not have been possible without their support. In 2024, we began writing stories based on the prompt: “Your main character meets a supernatural being or creature.”

On October 31st, 2025, we published all three of these short stories.

Thank you, Time with Nicole and Landon K. Mar, for reviewing my story drafts and providing feedback to make it stronger. Credit also goes to Nicole for coming up with the restaurant name (Parmazam), as well as the final image of the story.

Bats & Breadsticks

I think I'm on a date with a vampire.

Not that I'd mind. I don't believe in the stigma perpetuated by horror films— the stereotype of a violent being with a weakness for blood and no self-control. From what I hear, the most challenging part of dating a real vampire is finding a restaurant that can accommodate their dietary needs.

Of course, the risk of being bitten by a vampire probably goes up when you agree to date one. But any first date involves risks.

For example: Oliver's vampirism isn't the problem. The problem is, if he's really a vampire, he completely lied about it on his dating profile.

"Brie!" Oliver exclaims, waving me over with a big smile. My mind pinball-machines between red and green flags as I approach our table for two. His excitement makes my stomach flip-flop in the best way, but his evident fangs cause me to trip. I catch myself on the back of my chair.

"Whoa! You okay?" he asks.

"Good! I'm good," I fib, returning the smile. "Just not used to heels, I guess."

"Well, you look amazing," Oliver says. "Um..." He blushes, scratching the back of his neck. "Is that okay for me to say? I know we just met."

"Of course," I say, feeling my own face flush. "Thank you."

I'm too shy to say it, but he looks amazing, too— even more so than his profile picture. Oliver's main photo is of himself and his golden retriever, taken selfie-style with a backdrop of autumnal pine trees. In the photo, he and Buddy smile for the camera, both sporting chunky scarves on a cloudy day. On our date tonight, Oliver is wearing a cream-colored cotton sweater that, despite only just meeting the guy, I'm tempted to snuggle into with my entire face. His copper-colored curls look a bit shorter, indicating a fresh haircut, but they're still long enough to be brushed away by his hand.

I sit, unzipping my parka and tossing my purse over my chair before I can stare any longer. "So," I say, folding my hands in my lap. "You've been here before?"

"No. First time," Oliver says as he takes his seat. "My sister recommended it. She thought you might like the ambiance— Said there's nothing else like it in town."

"It's... certainly something," I say, looking around. I spent more time preparing my hair, makeup, and outfit than scoping out the venue beforehand, and now I'm questioning more than just Oliver's online bio. A quick Internet search told me we'd be dining at an Italian restaurant. But if I looked at the reviews, I'm sure at least one of them would have mentioned the entire waitstaff being in costume: top hats, tuxedos, and overenthusiastic smiles. One waiter gives his cape a dramatic swish before running away, dodging a server with a tray of drinks. I start to wonder if we're both underdressed for what I guess is the Victorian era when I hear muttering behind me: "Just three more hours."

A waitress approaches our table with a deadpan expression and a steak knife. She twirls the knife aimlessly with one hand, reading from her tablet in the other. “Welcome to Parmazam,” she says between clicks of chewing gum. “My name is Trish. Tonight, I’ll be your server. Can I interest any of you in today’s specials? Our magicians... I mean, chefs...” She glances at the mustard yellow wall beside us, where I hear a clock ticking. “...have a few tricks up their sleeves.”

Ah. I get the theme, now.

Trish gives a heavy sigh, tossing her dark brown, asymmetrical hair away from her face and finally meeting our eyes. “So,” she says, “The Soup of the Day is tomato bisque.”

Magic tricks. Soup. My brain pieces together the perfect pun and before I can stop myself, I shout, “Tomato bisque? What *sauce-ory* is this?!”

For a spit-second, as Oliver’s jaw drops and he says nothing, I want to crawl under the table and live there. Make it my new mailing address. But as my face flushes for the second time, Oliver sets his water glass down with a belly laugh. I grin, relieved at my date’s positive response to what could have been a very dumb joke.

“Oh, lord,” Trish groans. She looks around wildly. “Please excuse me,” she adds before making a swift escape towards the kitchen.

“Shoot, I think I pissed off our waiter,” I say.

But this only makes Oliver laugh longer, clutching the tabletop for support. As he does, I seize the opportunity to inspect Oliver’s fangs. *Yep, definitely fangs*, I deduce, thankful for Parmazam’s bright chandeliers. Oliver’s canines are twice the size of the rest of his teeth and look sharper than Trish’s steak knife.

Fangs. Definitely a vampire, I think.

“Ah, that was good,” Oliver says, reaching for a breadstick.

Garlic bread. Definitely not a vampire, I think. I take a sip of ice water, trying to calm down. *Relax, Brie. He didn’t lie on his profile. For all you know, the sharp teeth could be some genetic thing. Don’t jump to conclusions.*

“Oh, *damn.*” I look up; Oliver drops his breadstick as though it’s on fire. He snatches a cloth napkin and wipes his hands.

“Everything okay?” I ask.

Oliver chuckles, giving himself a bop on the forehead. “I should have realized. We’re at an *Italian* restaurant.”

I take another sip of water and wait for the point.

“I’m allergic to garlic,” Oliver says, shrugging.

I laugh— a little too loudly.

“I’ll be right back. Just need to wash my hands.” Oliver stands. “Um, if Trish gives our table a second chance, can you order me a Peach Bellini? Oh— without salt. Thanks, Brie!” He gives me a little wave before departing for the restroom.

Once Oliver is out of sight, I scamper. Darting from table to table in three-inch heels that pinch mercilessly, I search for my best friend: Maggie.

You know the bit in kid's shows and comedies where the nervous character is at an important meeting or something, and they don't know what to say, so they ask their best friend to hide somewhere in the room and feed them lines through a walkie-talkie earpiece thing?

Well, after pleading with her, Maggie considered the hiding-in-the-restaurant part— in case I needed to run to her for advice here and there. Or in case I needed help escaping, if the guy ends up a creep or an asshole... or, in this case, a paranormal creature.

Before resorting to checking under tablecloths in a cartoonish manner, I finally find Maggie: dressed down in a crop top, wide-leg jeans, and sneakers, settled at a small table near the window, sipping red wine and reading—

“*Crêpes & Canines?!?*” I hiss. “You’re reading *Crêpes & Canines: A Steamy Slow-Burn Different Worlds Werewolf Romantasy?* On a night like *tonight?*” I cross my arms, flinging myself into the opposite chair.

Maggie raises a brow before snapping the hardback shut. “Wow. You remembered all the keywords.”

“Of course I did,” I huff. “I’m twenty-eighth on the waiting list.”

“Tell you what,” Maggie says, sliding the book into her messenger bag. “Before I return it, I’ll lend it to you... *if you can give your real-life date a fair chance.*” Maggie crosses her arms. The table’s candle creates a glow on her brown skin, including the hand she uses to slide her glasses down her nose: her “serious librarian” look. Through her dark fringe, her russet eyes stare into my own. “That means dinner and dessert. And not running out unless he’s a prick.”

“Maggie—”

“No, no,” Maggie says, shaking a finger. “Those are the terms you agreed to, my friend. You meet this guy for dinner and get to know him *before* you decide if you’d rather have a second date with him or continue exclusively dating fictional men.”

“Ouch.” I imitate a stake through my heart.

“Look, Brie, if I have to sit through one more paranormal rom-com with you and hear you say, “*I wish a mad scientist would piece MY broken heart back together in his secret lab,*” without actually looking for a hot dude in an overcoat, I’m— I’m...” Maggie’s eyes narrow. “I’m confiscating your library card.”

I gasp. “You wouldn’t.”

“Never underestimate an assistant librarian,” Maggie warns, swirling her wineglass.

I twist my fingers in my lap. “Maggie, I don’t know if I can do this.”

“You can, and you will,” Maggie says, voice softening. “And I’ll be here the whole time.”

I turn my attention toward the window, trying to steady my breathing. Through a starry night doused by Pacific Northwest rain, my reflection looks at its owner fearfully. Her strawberry blonde bob has been styled in meticulous waves, her mascara applied with careful precision. Her red dress, freshly steamed, lay in a pitiful heap just days ago in the closet, behind a pile of sneakers.

On the table, Maggie pats my hand. “Just relax,” she says. “You have the support of myself and every stranger in this restaurant.”

Behind me, I hear the familiar pop of bubble gum. “Welcome to Parmazam,” the deflated declaration begins.

I turn around; Trish looks up from her tablet. “Son of a...” She sighs. “Please tell me you aren’t a twin of the person I just talked to. There aren’t two of you, are there?”

I chuckle nervously. “Nope. Only child.”

“You don’t make jokes too, I hope?” Trish asks Maggie with raised brows.

The corners of Maggie’s mouth turn up. “I’ll try to resist,” she says.

“Good.” Trish’s sigh is one of relief this time. “This restaurant is ridiculous enough already. What can I get you?”

“I’ll get the mushroom tortellini, please,” Maggie says. Trish enters the order into the tablet and Maggie hands over the menu.

“I’m, um, still at the other table,” I say, pointing my thumb in said direction. Trish begins to turn away when I add, “Oh, before I forget— could my date get a Peach Bellini without salt? And I’ll order a Strawberry Daiquiri?” I smile sheepishly. “Thank you, Trish.”

Trish nods at me, completes her turn, shakes her head, and retreats.

“Geez, what happened at your table?” Maggie asks.

I groan. “Nothing... Pun went wrong.”

“Ah,” Maggie says. “Wrong audience. Poor Trish.”

Kick.

“*Hey!*” I reach for my shin. “*What the hell?*”

“But your date clearly enjoyed it!” Maggie says, picking up her wineglass. “I’m not too far away to see the way he laughed at whatever it was you said. Now go back there and get punny.” She takes a sip.

“Fine, Maggie, okay,” I say, standing.

“Hey,” Maggie says. “It’s just dinner. With a really cute guy. Try to have fun.” She seems to hesitate before finally saying, “He’s not your ex.”

I wince. “I know.”

As I make my way back to my table, I try my best to bring Maggie’s words with me. But by the time I get there, most of them fade. And my blood feels like ice water.

If Oliver is a vampire, that means he lied on his dating profile.

And if he lied about his true nature, then I’m on a date with someone who might be very much like my ex.

Oliver, seated at the table again, seems to relax his shoulders as his eyes meet mine. “Hey,” he says.

“Hey,” I return, sliding into my seat. “Well... good news— I found our waitress, and our drinks are on the way.”

“Awesome, thank you!” Oliver says. Without explanation, he takes two black gloves from his coat pocket and slips them on. “I’ve got good news for you, too.” Maybe it’s because we’re at this odd mashup of a restaurant, but I wonder if he’s about to show me a magic trick. But then, with gloved hands, he slides the basket of breadsticks toward me. “You’ve just won... an entire bowl of garlic bread! Plus refills.”

Oliver offers me another smile. It goes all the way up to his forest green eyes, where a double reflection of the table’s candlelight shines.

My heart skips. I don't care about the gloves, or why they were necessary.

"Thank you," I reply, accepting the full basket of bread.

Yes, he's sweet. And thoughtful.

And yes, I momentarily slide into a state where I float instead of spiral. Feel seen instead of skimmed.

But then, I wonder: If I'm right, and he's already lying to me, how long will this false beginning last? How long before his true colors show?

"Brie?" I'm brought back to the table. Oliver studies my face, his eyebrows pulled together. "Are you okay?"

I nod. *He's not your ex.*

"Yeah, sorry. Just spaced out for a second." In my lap, my fingers twist together again. "I'm... I'm pretty nervous, actually."

"Oh, *whew!* Glad I'm not the only one," Oliver says, chuckling. "When I asked you out the other night, I almost thought you were turning me down."

I cover my face with my hands. "Agh. Sorry about that."

A few nights ago, Oliver and I were texting on the dating app. It had only been a week since we started chatting, but our conversations had already taken my attention far away from the Singles Near You tab. Oliver was easy to talk to, and sweet, and funny. We learned we both liked board games and winning them. We both liked traveling abroad as much as adventuring locally. But I, unfortunately, learned how oblivious I was when the topic of weekend hobbies came up— Oliver asked what my plans were for Friday, and I answered honestly: Watching a movie at home with Maggie and her Persian cat, Phantom.

"It's been a while since I've been asked out on a date," I confess now. "I didn't realize what you were really saying at first."

"That's okay," Oliver says. "Hey, maybe we can have a movie night with Buddy and Phantom sometime!"

"I don't think so," I laugh. "Phantom hates everyone except Maggie. I've lived with them for five years now, and Phantom has only just started accepting pets from me. And only if I do it right." As Oliver laughs, I give myself a gentle nudge of bravery. "But maybe you and I can go to the movies sometime?"

Oliver's eyes twinkle. "Yeah, I'd really enjoy that," he says, smiling.

Trish eventually returns to our table with our drinks. When she does, Oliver hurriedly picks up his menu. "Do you know what you want?" he asks me.

"Not yet, sorry," I say, picking up my own menu.

"I'll come back later," Trish says, about to disappear again.

"No, wait," Oliver says, with urgency in his voice. "I could actually use your help with the food options. Is there anything on the menu without... um, salt?"

Trish and her perfectly-winged eyeliner blink slowly at Oliver before saying, "My friend, you are definitely in the wrong place."

"Right. Um..." As he thinks, Oliver taps his finger on the menu's edge. "Maybe I'll just get a Caesar's salad then. No cheese. No lettuce."

"So, just the leaves, then?"

“Just the leaves,” Oliver confirms. “But... hang on.” Trish groans as Oliver takes one last look at the menu. “Sorry. I’ll also order a steak— The rarest and reddest the chef can make. But without salt, if possible.”

Trish snorts. “Okay. I’ll see what I can do.”

“I’ll get the chicken fettuccine, please,” I say. Trish takes both of our menus, and I add, “Oh, with extra—”

“Please,” Trish says, with desperation in her voice. “Whatever you do, don’t ask for extra parmesan. Please,” she warns again with a wide-eyed expression. “If you care about my sanity at all.”

I frown. “No cheese?”

“No *extra* cheese,” Trish corrects.

“But why?” I ask.

“Her *name* is cheese,” Oliver argues.

“What happens if we add more?” I ask.

“Because then I’ll have to...” Trish groans, hiding her face behind our two menus. “It’s so stupid. Just don’t do it.” And she’s gone.

“She’s having a rough night, huh?” Oliver asks.

“I mean, dining at a magic-themed restaurant is one thing, but *working* at one?” I reply. “Probably gets old.”

“No, it’s the garlic for sure.”

I study Oliver’s face. “What?”

“I— Just a guess,” Wilbert says, clearing his throat. “I’d find it difficult to work here. Personally... With the garlic.”

I shoo away the little anxieties in my head and raise my glass. “Um, cheers?”

“Cheers!” Oliver exclaims, clinking my glass.

Risking brain-freeze, I take a huge swig of the icy slush.

“I wish I’d known you were allergic,” I say, setting down my glass. “I would’ve suggested another place.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it,” Oliver says, waving away the thought with his free hand. “It’s really okay. But I’m telling you: If this were like, five, six years ago, all these breadsticks would be demolished by now. Used to love ’em.”

My internal panic swells. “So... you’re saying your allergy developed later in life?”

“Yes! Exactly. My *allergy*.” Oliver makes air quotes around the last word.

“Um... okay, then,” I say, my voice reaching a falsetto. I take another gulp of Strawberry Daiquiri. “Why don’t we, um... Personality quizzes!” I say, setting my drink back down. “Have you ever taken a personality quiz?”

“Yeah! I love personality tests,” Oliver says. I’m about to ask which tests he’s taken when he leans forward and asks, “What’s your blood type?”

Thankfully, I think Oliver misses the look of sheer horror on my face as Trish approaches the table with our silverware.

Oliver eyes his fork warily. “Oh, sorry if this is weird to ask, but— Do you have any silverware that isn’t... silver?”

I stand from my seat so fast, the table wobbles.

Oliver and Trish look at me.

“Restroom,” is all I manage before escaping.

I run, darting guests and waitstaff and one server juggling saltshakers. I nearly cause Maggie to tip out of her chair when I halt in front of her. “Take me home,” I say.

“Why? What happened?” Maggie asks.

“He’s a vampire, Maggie, he’s a vampire.”

“Oh, come on,” Maggie says, picking up her fork. “That’s not a big deal.”

I settle in the seat across from her. “It so is.”

“*Really*, Brie?” Maggie says. “You’re going to stereotype poor Ollie based on a few horror movies and paranormal romance novels?” She takes a bite of pasta. “Mm, this is good.”

“No, that’s not the problem,” I say. “He completely lied about it on his profile.”

“On his profile, it said, *‘I’m not a vampire?’*”

“No,” I say, growing frustrated. “He covered it up. He didn’t fill out any of the optional sections on the app— Favorite food? Favorite beverage? Both blank. He could’ve said blood, and I would’ve been fine with it. I am *not* fine with him pretending to be someone else.”

Maggie takes two more bites of mushroom tortellini, blots her mouth with a napkin, and crosses her arms. “I’m amending our agreement,” she finally says, giving me the “serious librarian” look for the second time. “If you can’t make it through a date with an unproblematic guy, and I’m playing chaperone, you’re paying for my meal.” Maggie leans back in her chair, tosses her thick braid over her shoulder, and flicks the menu back open. “I was thinking of ordering this lobster for dessert.”

“But he *is* problematic,” I argue, taking my phone out of my dress pocket. “He lied on his profile. He didn’t mention everything he’s should’ve— I’ll show you.”

“Did you mention your fear of heights on your dating profile?” Maggie asks, still browsing the menu. “Your pollen allergy? Your aversion to the cold?”

“That’s irrelevant,” I mutter. But I slide my phone back into its pocket.

“Isn’t he a hiker?” Maggie says. “He’d probably find that relevant.”

I groan, resting my head in my hand. “Darn it, why do you have to be so logical?” I ask. “Why can’t you just skip the lobster and take me home? You see how much I’m struggling here.”

“Because this will be good for you,” Maggie says, smiling over the menu at me. “As shiny and flawless as fictional men are, I know you want to end up with a real one.” Maggie frowns at a server walking past, who stuffs a plush rabbit into his top hat before greeting a family at a nearby table. “Also, I know you’re nervous, but the atmosphere certainly isn’t helping. Might want to pick a different venue next time.”

“Noted,” I say, watching a waiter perform a Cup and Ball trick at another table. The middle-aged couple wear confused expressions as the waiter moves the clear wineglasses around. After he’s done, the couple frown; both point to the wineglass clearly displaying the ball inside.

“If he is a vampire,” Maggie says, “And that’s still an *if*: Maybe he waited to tell you, given all the misconceptions people have about vampires nowadays. Either way, he didn’t lie. You can’t share *everything* about yourself on your dating profile.”

On the table, I twist and retwist my fingers together. “Maybe you should order two lobsters, and I’ll just hang out with you.”

“Brie,” Maggie says. She untwists my hands and holds them in her own. “I know you’re scared, but please: Do *not* let your ex ruin this for you.” I look down at my lap, swallowing a lump in my throat. “Listen to me. Please,” Maggie continues. “You did a brave thing tonight. You’re finally out on a date. And you’re doing amazing.” I blink back hot tears. “Two years ago, you did another brave thing: You broke up with a guy who wasn’t good for you, because you knew you deserved more. You deserved so much better.”

“Maggie.” My voice shakes. “What if this guy’s lying, too?”

“If he’s a vampire, then—”

“No.” I let go of Maggie’s hand and rub a tear from my eye. “What if he’s not who I think he is? What if I think he’s a good guy, a sweet guy? What if I think he actually cares about me when he doesn’t?” I wipe both eyes. “Then, a year after I’ve fallen for him, he’s stopped calling me beautiful? And I’m practically dragging him to all the dates I’ve planned out? And I’m trying not to make him angry. And his mom says he needs me, and I’m good for him, and—” I shake my head. “What if...?”

Maggie positions the menu on the table to hide my face from the rest of the restaurant. Then, she moves her chair next to mine and gives me a paper napkin. “You’re okay,” she reminds me. I dab below my eyes, avoiding mascara. “If it helps, I really don’t think this guy is like your ex. But you won’t know that for sure unless you stop listening to the *what ifs* and start getting to know him.”

I nod, taking deep breaths as I pat my face.

“You keep asking yourself, “What if he’s like my ex?” But Brie, what if he’s not?” Maggie asks. “What if he’s exactly the kind of guy you’re looking for?”

I sniffle. “Well... that’d be wonderful. Because I like him.”

“I like him, too,” Maggie says, smiling.

She waits for me to steady my breathing, check my face in my phone screen, and reapply lip balm. When I stand, Maggie claps. “That’s my girl,” she says. “Now go let that mad scientist piece your heart back together. Team Cheese and Olives!”

When I return to my table, Oliver is waving me over with a wooden fork. “Hey!” he calls. “Just in time. Our food got here not too long ago.” He gestures toward our plates.

“Looks delicious,” I say, taking my seat.

For a moment, I allow myself to remember the last memory I have with my ex. I’m jolted back to a seaside bistro booth, swallowing lumps in my throat as I work on a salmon burger in tiny bites. I blink back tears, hoping passing patrons and servers don’t notice. And, across the table, I try not to look directly at the man who used to make time for me. Today, we only have an hour’s worth of lunch together before he dives back into his latest passion project. Other than “hey,” he hasn’t said a word to me. He’s on his phone, beaming as his fingers fly across the screen. I don’t want to know who he’s texting.

Instead, I fight the urge to break down. Force myself to be the laid-back, chill, easy girlfriend he wants. He's tired, he's unwinding. If I complain, I'll ruin the lunch. I make a bad joke in a bad attempt to get his attention: "Can I *sea* the menu?" I ask, smiling weakly. He glares at the interruption.

Later that day, over a phone call he doesn't have time for, I break up with him.

After hanging up, before grief and heartache settle into my skin, I feel light. Free. And strong.

Tonight, with Oliver, I decide to be strong again.

So when he smiles, fangs flashing, and situates his wooden fork over his flavorless salad, I decide to ask: "Do you have any other allergies?"

Oliver's fork freezes, hovering over his plate. For a moment, I regret my question; maybe I should have asked about his hobbies, or his dreams, or his dog. But then he smiles again— an odd response, I guess— and says, "Yes."

A pause between us.

"Oh," I say. "Good to know. What are they?"

"This one's a little, um, uncommon," says Oliver. "The sun."

"The *sun*?" I ask. "As in, broad daylight?"

"Yeah, it's unfortunate," Oliver replies. In his gloved hand, he picks up a steak knife and begins to dig into what looks like an extremely juicy steak. "Sensitive skin. It happened when I got my, um, my garlic allergy." He takes a bite, gives an appreciative, "Yum!" Then, he elaborates: "I can't stay in the sun for long. Like, hardly at all."

"What'll happen?"

"Oh, you know." Oliver smiles, shrugs, and takes another bite of steak.

That's the end of the explanation.

I just laugh. I can't help it— my whole body seizes with giggles, and I hug my belly in a horrible attempt to stop them. My fork clatters into the other silverware. As I laugh, I overhear the table next to ours request extra cheese. I'm still laughing when the waiter brandishes a plastic wand from his sleeve, cries, "*Parmazam!*" and points at the pasta dish before taking a parmesan dispenser from his other sleeve.

I laugh harder. Oliver joins in, watching the magic act.

Finally, when the laughter settles down and we're both wiping tears from our eyes, I just say it: "Oliver. You're a vampire, aren't you?"

Oliver stops laughing. I expect a shocked look on his face. An attempt to cover up or brush away my revelation. But instead, Oliver sets his utensils down, slips off his gloves, and holds his hands in his face. "I'm so sorry," he says. "The way I tried to tell you... Aw, man. I should've just told you at the beginning of the date." Oliver looks up hopefully. "Can I explain?"

I nod, folding my hands in my lap.

"My sister set up my dating profile for me," Oliver says. "I don't get out much to begin with, at least not anymore. Even a little sunlight is difficult now."

My heart twinges.

“So, I asked my sister for help,” Oliver continues. “And— Look, I think she did a fantastic job. But she didn’t exactly know how to fill out certain sections that would give away my... you know.”

I nod again.

“Then, we got caught up with the issue of the photo, and she forgot to tell me about the parts she’d left blank,” Oliver said. “She eventually remembered and told me, but it wasn’t until after I’d asked you out. She said to try to bring it up casually during the date, but...” Oliver sits up, scratching the back of his neck. “I couldn’t figure out how to be casual about it. So, I thought, maybe I’d drop some hints and make it a fun game.”

I wince. “Sorry.”

“No, *I’m* sorry,” Oliver says. “I screwed everything up. When I didn’t see you for a while, I went to look for you, and I saw you crying, and—” Oliver sighs, shaking his head.

“It’s okay, Oliver. Really,” I say. I take a breath, relax my hands in my lap, and say, “I broke up with a long-term boyfriend a few years ago, and I think— No, I know... I need more time to heal. Not from the breakup, but from the relationship itself.”

I look up, meeting Oliver’s candlelit eyes. He responds with a sad and knowing look. “I understand. Whatever you went through, I’m sorry, Brie.”

“Thanks,” I say. “Um, pretty early into the date, I suspected you were a vampire. And I thought you were lying about it. That’s why...” I shake my head. “Anyway. I could’ve just asked. It seems so silly now.” I chuckle.

“Well...” Oliver hesitates, then gestures toward our plates. “We both have quite a lot of food to finish.”

“And I have quite a lot of breadsticks to work on.”

I say it with a smile, which Oliver returns.

“Alright, then, Brie,” Oliver asks, picking up his wooden fork. “As of now, I’m officially an open book. Ask me anything.”

Over the next hour and a half, Oliver and I talk about everything I’d hoped to discuss with him over dinner. His job as a web developer; my job as a travel agent. His dream to climb Mount Fuji; my dream to write a book about my family’s history. More about Buddy, more about Phantom. Our families. Our friends. Maggie.

And several miscellaneous questions:

Is Brie short for anything, or am I literally named after cheese? (I am, in fact, named after cheese— Brie is my mom’s favorite.)

How on earth did Oliver’s sister figure out how to take a picture of a vampire? (They don’t show up in photographs.)

“Oh, she didn’t take a picture. She made one,” Oliver explains proudly, taking his phone out of his coat. “She’s a professional artist.” He scrolls through the images until he reaches the forest selfie. When he zooms in and shows me, I realize I’m looking at a realist painting of Oliver, superimposed on the hiking photo of Buddy and the trees.

“No way— she’s so talented!” I exclaim.

As I zoom in and out of the painting, Trish approaches our table with the card-reader. I look up and do a double-take; I can’t explain why, but Trish looks... happy? The side of her mouth is upturned, and she doesn’t even roll her eyes when she says, “Now, don’t play a disappearing act. Please come back and see us again soon.”

“Thanks, Trish,” I say, paying my portion of the bill.

“The steak was so good, thank you,” Oliver says, pointing to the meat leftover. “Can I get a box for the rest?”

“Yeah, of course.” Trish hands the card-reader to Oliver before walking away.

As Oliver pays his portion, I gather my courage and say, “Can I meet her sometime?”

Oliver looks up and frowns. “Trish?” he asks, pointing back and forth between himself and the retreating waitress. “I think you’ve met, before.”

“No,” I laugh. “Your sister. You’d mentioned she teaches Paint and Sip on Thursdays. Maybe... we could go together sometime?”

Oliver only looks at me for a moment or two, his expression unreadable.

My stomach twists. I hold my breath, waiting for the gut-punch of rejection.

“Brie,” Oliver says. He crosses his arms, leaning forward on the table. “I would absolutely love to go on a second date with you.” I release my breath as Oliver continues. “But I also don’t want to rush you, if you aren’t ready.”

“Oh,” I say, nodding. “Okay. Thank you for saying that.”

“I appreciate how careful you are, so give it as much thought as you’d like, and then let me know,” Oliver says. “Or, you know, *ghost* me. I’m paranormal, so I can handle it.” He grins, flashing his fangs.

I laugh. “I won’t ghost you. I’ll let you know.”

“You know, Cheese,” a voice mutters beside me. I turn to see Trish holding the card-reader. How long has she been standing there?

Also... *Cheese?*

“As long as you’re ready,” Trish continues, “It’s okay to take risks while you’re still healing from something.” She rolls up her sleeve and extends her forearm, and that’s when I gasp. There, on the back of her arm, is a pink mark in the shape of a crescent moon. “We all have scars.”

She rolls her sleeve back down, gives Oliver his requested box, and actually gives us a smile. “It’s been real, Oliver. Cheese. Take care.” Before I can react, she leaves.

Oliver bursts out laughing.

“What the hell? *Cheese?*” I exclaim, laughing along.

When Oliver can breathe, he says, “Your name is cheese! Remember?”

“Oh, right!”

We stand, putting on our coats. I loop my purse around my shoulder, and Oliver picks up his box. “I had a lot of fun.”

“I did, too,” I say.

“Great conversations,” Oliver says, “And great puns, too.”

“Thanks,” I say, smiling, “I had a *gouda* time.”

Oliver laughs. “Another great one.”

I blush.

Oliver extends his hand, hesitates, closes his fist, and offers me a fist bump. I accept it.

“Take care, Brie,” he says.

I watch him leave before making my way to Maggie’s table for the last time. Her table is clear, and her coat is on, but she’s seated, smiling at her phone.

“Switched to an eBook?” I ask.

Maggie’s still smiling when she says, “Even better. Got a phone number.” She shows me the newly added contact: *Trish Hoshino*, with a photo of the waitress holding a steak knife. “Soon, you and I both can say we’ve been on a date with a vampire.”

“Oh, congrats!” I say.

“Thanks,” Maggie says, slipping her phone into her coat pocket. “So,” she says, standing, “You made it through dinner. Congrats to you, too.”

“Yeah,” I say, finally relaxing my shoulders. I look up at my best friend with heart full of gratitude before giving her a hug. “Thanks, Maggie,” I say. “For everything. It’s the way you’ve always treated me that showed me how I want to be treated in a relationship.”

Maggie hugs me back. “It’s what friends do,” she says. “And you deserve all the love.”

At the same time, we spot a server approaching us with a handful of cards, fanned out in a flourish. “Pick a card?” he asks.

“Let’s get the hell out of here,” Maggie says at the same time I tell the server, “No, thanks! I’m *gouda!*”

We run, stumbling out the front door and laughing, our arms around our necks. Cold rain washes our faces, and we pull up our coat hoods. Maggie pulls out her phone, looking up directions for the walk home. In the sky, amongst the streetlights, stars, and raindrops, I catch a flash of movement. And though he doesn’t see, I give my hand a little wave at the bat flying overhead, claws clutching a takeout box.

The End