



THE GOOD
VAMPIRE'S
GUIDE TO
BLOOD &
BOYFRIENDS

Jamie D'Amato



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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations,
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Please note that the novel overall includes non-graphic references to a past suicide attempt, non-graphic small animal death via vampire, and descriptions of panic attacks.



FUNERALS FOR SQUIRRELS

BRENNAN'S JOURNAL

For plausible deniability purposes, everything contained in this journal is hypothetical, theoretical, and/or fictional. Yep.

Questions

- Who turned me?
- Blood: Animal? Human? How much? How often? Regular food, too?
- Other vampires? Other supernatural???
- Nocturnal? Sleep?
- Garlic? Sunlight? Silver? Holy water?
- Sparkles?????
- IMMORTALITY???????

It took Brennan Brooks forty-eight hours, six coffees, and approximately eight thousand pages of reading to come to the conclusion that there were too many goddamn books about vampires, and none of them came with an instruction manual.

In the far corner on the “silent study” third floor of Folz Library, Brennan sat on the carpet in the folklore and mythology aisle at the center of a tornado of books, stacks rising up into towers. He wore a flannel over an

old band T-shirt and was currently testing whether vampires needed sleep or needed to shower by—you guessed it—neither sleeping nor showering. Signs pointed toward not needing sleep and desperately needing a shower, but more observation would be needed.

In Brennan's experience, there were no problems that books didn't have answers for. Unfortunately, being turned into a vampire during an accident you didn't fully remember did not have its own *For Dummies* manual.

But Brennan had no trouble sinking into a fog of research, lost in a book about vampirism in Serbia and Bulgaria, which was fascinating but ultimately useless. His throat burned with a persistent thirst, his head throbbed, and every sound and smell was like a tidal wave. The soft snoring of some poor soul already behind on work for the semester was like a chain saw, the rhythmic squeak of a library cart like a piercing alarm, footsteps coming to a stop—

A shadow darkened the text and Brennan squinted upward, blinking away the dissonance of being rudely ripped back to reality.

"If you don't mind my saying so" came a rich Southern lilt, light with amusement, "I think you're missing a few key texts in the genre."

Standing at the end of the aisle with a library cart, a guy arched a brow. Brennan processed what he must be seeing. The mess of books, not subtle in their titles of *The Vampyre*, *Vampires and Vampirism*, *Les Vampires*, *The Legend & Romance of the Vampire*, a dozen other things featuring the words "vampire," "blood," "monsters," and so on. Brennan half-heartedly covered the book he was reading with an arm and blinked up at the fluorescent lights.

"Um, what?" Brennan said.

"Vampires, yeah?"

The boy had curly brown hair, delicate features disrupted by bushy brows, and light skin a bit more tanned than Brennan's ghostly pale. He smiled, encouraging, and it was familiar. Brennan couldn't place it. They must have had a class together, or crossed paths on campus. He looked like if Timothée Chalamet had a less punchable face. Maybe that was it?

Brennan squinted at the guy. "You have recommendations?" His voice was scratchy, his mouth dry. He was thirsty again. He cleared his throat.

The boy kept smiling, but it was sly. "It looks like you're lacking in the trashy YA romance department. No *Twilight Saga*? Or have you already read it?"

Brennan deflated and avoided rolling his eyes, narrowly.

"No, I have not. I don't think that will help with this particular project. Thanks, though." He returned his attention to his pile of destruction.

He meant it as dismissal, but the boy left the cart at the end of the aisle and crossed toward Brennan and the stacks of books between them. He wore a ringer T-shirt with the logo for a coffee roastery, and the bitter, nutty smell of espresso lingered on him. He had one AirPods hanging from his ear, buzzing with some indie-sounding music Brennan could hear but didn't recognize. He smelled too good to be normal, which meant Brennan was *really* thirsty.

"Come on, where's *The Vampire Diaries*? *Vampire Academy*? *House of Night*?" he continued, and at Brennan's increasingly blank look, added, "Or at least—*Interview with the Vampire*?"

"Okay, I *have* read Anne Rice," Brennan defended himself. "But I don't think half-naked werewolf love triangles are going to help me right now."

"Fine, if you don't do it for the research, do it for the experience."

"I'll keep that in mind," Brennan said, and didn't bother hiding his amusement.

Brennan took in the brown curls, the freckles, and once again it niggled at the back of his brain that he'd seen the kid before—spoken to him, even. The memory was barely evading his grasp, like a dream slipping away as the morning alarm went off.

As soon as Brennan turned on the scrutiny, the boy straightened up and took a step back, pink spreading over his cheeks. "Gosh, here you are trying to work and I'm prattling on about *Twilight* and distracting you."

"No, it's okay," Brennan caught himself saying, then shut his mouth with an audible click.

Really, he shouldn't be encouraging this—distraction. He had work to do, questions to answer, and none of that would be helped by an (admittedly cute) boy talking to him about *Twilight*. No, no, nope.

While Brennan debated how to politely tell the boy to leave him alone

until he figured out whether he was at risk of snapping and murdering someone, the rhythmic sound of high-heeled footsteps approached.

A girl with a pencil skirt, heels, massive dangling earrings, and blue hair came to a stop and leaned around the edges of the bookshelves.

“Cole, we have a homesick freshman situation in 202B and I’m really not equipped for these things like you are,” she said.

The boy—Cole, though the name didn’t answer the tugging question of familiarity—straightened, whirled around with the energy of *Brennan who?*, and gave the girl his full attention.

“Don’t worry about it, I’ll get it. Will you put on the kettle? I’ll be down in a minute.”

The girl nodded with relief and strode back the way she came.

And that was when Brennan realized why Cole was so fucking familiar.

“You’re the Hot Library Blanket Guy!” Brennan said. Then he wanted to sink into the ground and let the earth reclaim him.

Cole winced and then put on a tight, polite smile. “I think technically the adjective used in the Sturbridge U memes group is ‘cute,’ but . . . yep. That’s, uh, that’s me.”

Brennan was mortified, but heat didn’t flood to his cheeks like normal. Did he even blush anymore? His pen was still in his hand, the notebook in his lap. He jotted his question down.

Cole’s eyes—brown, Brennan noted—flitted between Brennan and the notebook. His lips pinched inward. He smoothed his shirt, and the smell of roasted espresso wafted toward Brennan.

“Sorry,” Brennan said. “I’m easily distracted. I just—” He paused, unsure. “We talked once. I knew I recognized you somehow. It was a while ago, I don’t know if you even—”

“I remember,” Cole said. He gathered the books he’d set aside and propped them on his hip. “Of course I do. But, look, let me let you get back to your thing. Blanket duty calls.”

And as quickly as he’d pulled Brennan out of Serbian mythology, Cole left him to it.

He stayed in his corner in the stacks for a while longer, trying to delve back into Bulgarian folklore, but found his attention drifting while he read the same sentence over and over again.

Because Cole said he *remembered*, in a tone like, *obviously*, like he

stayed up at night talking to his friends about what a loser this guy was from this one random library encounter. He'd never be able to return to the library again. He'd end up wasting away in front of his computer in his room and would die as he lived, alone and ashamed.

Brennan closed the book, cutting off *that* stream of thought.

Dr. Morris would call this catastrophizing. Cole probably didn't think about that night half as hard as Brennan was right then.

It had been such a small thing, really.

It was last semester, not long before everything happened in March and Brennan had forfeited the semester in favor of therapy. He had been sitting at the library, as he tended to do, and he was depressed, as he tended to be. He buried himself in homework—a giant essay for his History of Capitalism class. Not exactly a *calming* topic. He'd been working himself up to a frenzy, typing fueled by rage and what he could now call his deep-seated emotional regulation issues. He could recognize *now* after months of therapy that he was refusing to process his emotions, but at the time he'd thought he was just *that* invigorated by the atrocities of late-stage capitalism.

So when someone had leaned a hip against the desk he'd been working on and said, "I don't know about you, but typing that angry usually means you need a break, a snack, a nap, or some combination of the three," Brennan had barely pulled away from his essay before he broke like a dam.

Cole wasn't Cole yet, just the Cute Library Blanket Guy—a campus celebrity from the university's Facebook meme group who helped random students through various crises with blankets, stuffed animals, stress toys, and warm beverages. He was a library aide, but he'd turned into something of a campus urban legend.

He'd taken Brennan's little breakdown in stride, took him to a storage room that had been done up as best as a library storage closet could be: besides the boxes of paper and office supplies that circled the small space, there was a shag rug on the floor, a few of the cozier, egg-shaped chairs stolen from the downstairs study lounge, and a crate serving as a table that held an electric kettle.

"What, you just have this back here?" Brennan had asked.

Cute Library Blanket Guy opened a tin from one of the shelves and said, "Tea or hot chocolate?"

The tin was full of assorted tea bags and drink mixes, and the guy was looking through them thoughtfully.

“Coffee?” Brennan said.

“Man after my own heart,” Cole had said, and Brennan remembered vividly the secret smile he’d given him then. Really, if not from the Southern drawl, Brennan couldn’t believe he hadn’t recognized him based off that smile.

But once he’d offered Brennan a blanket and a mug of shitty instant coffee, Brennan had just—unleashed it all. Word-vomited about college not being what he’d expected and having no friends and *also*, what the fuck are we supposed to do about the wage gap when Congress has been dragging their feet about fifteen dollars for the last decade, and does it even *matter* when we’re all specks in the universe who are going to die either way?

He’d been so embarrassed at the outburst he’d said most of this into his hands, shielding his face from the world. He didn’t want to be perceived, and Cole respectfully asked questions where appropriate and agreed when he could and just. Listened. His mug said MY WEEKEND IS BOOKED with an illustration of stacks of books, and his hands looped around it delicately.

Cole had listened, and nodded, and sipped his coffee while Brennan talked and drank his own and refused to make eye contact. After his rant, he caught his breath and realized that Cole hadn’t had to say anything and he already felt better.

“Wow, I need to go back to therapy,” Brennan had said in conclusion.

Cole snorted a laugh and then covered his mouth with his hand in apology. “Maybe so,” he said, and Brennan still only looked at him in quick, mortified glances, but he could hear the smile in his voice. “Either way, if you ever need some space to relax that brain of yours, this space is usually free. If it’s ever locked, you can find me, I’m—” He’d coughed. “I’m around.”

And that was when Brennan’s anxiety had finally taken the reins, because this guy *worked here* and had better things to do than listen to Brennan whine about his first-world white-boy bullshit problems. He shot up from his seat and put the mug on the crate like it burned.

"Right, that's very generous, thank you," Brennan rushed out. "I'm here a lot, I'm sure I'll see you around. But I should go."

And so he went!

That was it, really. A one-sided encounter that Brennan sure as hell wouldn't be posting about on any Facebook groups.

So then, why did he feel like shit about it? Dread sunk in his stomach, a *Titanic* leaking anxiety.

Rooting himself back in the present, Brennan closed his laptop and started shoving his notes and computer away. The library now was as empty as it had been that night, but this time there was sound drifting up from downstairs—voices, laughter, keyboards clacking.

Brennan shouldered his backpack and headed out, across the second floor, around a student snoozing over an art project, down the stairs, and into the main area.

A quick scan showed it wasn't crowded, and he spotted Cole with a girl who was burrito-wrapped in her blanket and literally crying into Cole's shoulder.

"Like, does she hate me that much? Why else would she just fuck off the day after moving in?"

Brennan hesitated at the door, social norms telling him not to eavesdrop. His curiosity won out, as always.

"Well, did you tell your RA?" Cole asked.

"She said it was nothing," the girl said. "But it's been days now. What if something happened to her?"

Brennan froze. A girl, missing, the day after students returned to campus. Also known as the day Brennan was turned into a vampire during a car accident he didn't fully remember.

Taking a deep breath, he tried to clear his head from the fog that descended when he went too long without snacking on some poor squirrel. He was so thirsty his throat felt like a rash, which was getting fucking old, to be frank. He'd accomplished nothing yet except new levels of thirst and anxiety.

As if sensing Brennan's gaze, Cole looked up from across the way and spotted Brennan. His head tilted ever so slightly, and Brennan did what he did best: he ran.

BRENNAN'S JOURNAL

More thirst = senses go haywire? Everyone smells like a goddamn smoothie.

RANT

How many fucking woodland creatures do I have to kill to stop being so goddamn thirsty?

Nothing seems to help. It dulls the ache for a while but doesn't satiate it.

I have a hypothesis, but I'm going to consider some other options before I start having an existential crisis about something that might not even be the case.

Fuck.

Substitutes?

- Coffee—miraculously, helps temporarily

To test

- ~~Coconut water?~~
- ~~Iron supplements?~~

Sturbridge's campus was full of open spaces and greenery, lots of shady trees and curving pathways, and that was part of why Brennan had chosen it: it had a storybook charm that Brennan had fallen in love with. But over a year in and he'd still never felt part of the story—just a visitor, a side character. It was a beautiful backdrop he didn't belong in.

But he loved jogging through the lush forests that surrounded the campus, with their meandering paths and steep inclines. In early high school, when Brennan had his first experiences with existential dread-induced insomnia and couldn't sleep, with nothing else to do, he started jogging. It helped, mostly. He guessed some of the stuff they say about endorphins must have been true, because if he pounded the pavement hard enough, all the oppressive problems of the world scattered away from him. For at least a little while.

But this? This could barely be called running—he was *flying*.

Everything was faster and sharper, each step launched him farther, and each movement was steady and instinctive even as he moved at a

speed he knew he'd never run before. That possibly no *human* had ever run before.

How fast can I run? Another question for the journal. *How fast can a human run? The average person? An Olympic athlete?*

Once he was far enough away from campus to not encounter a stray jogger, he skidded to a stop. He processed a skittering sound up a tree, a blur of motion. Instinct took over, easy as breathing, and he dove at the squirrel and then bit down and—

Look—Brennan used to escort spiders in his apartment outside because he didn't want to kill them. He was a vegetarian. Two days ago, if someone had asked him, like, *You wouldn't attack a wild squirrel, right?* he would have been confident in the answer. But life was full of surprises.

It was sweet relief with a quick chaser of deep shame, next-level post-nut clarity where afterward he was left to clean up the mess he'd made. Except the mess in this case was a lifeless squirrel body.

Brennan did the same thing that he had done with the two squirrels and one rabbit he had drunk the blood of in the past two days: he knelt down and started digging. It felt like the least he could do.

He eased the squirrel's limp little body into its grave, sweeping loose dirt over it until it was buried. For good measure, he plucked a few wildflowers from the brush and put them on the patch of upturned soil.

"I'm sorry," Brennan said. He stood up, brushing dirt off his hands and knees.

Brennan pushed forward. He hadn't realized it, but his feet were leading him to the bridge he'd promised his mom and two therapists he wouldn't return to.

Begrudgingly, he would admit they had been right, considering it was where he'd been hit by a car and turned into a vampire, but explaining as much to Dr. Morris would probably get him back in the psych ward.

The sight of it—the small, arched stone bridge over a narrow bubbling creek, the path leading to a dead end of thick brush—used to bring him comfort. It was his place, far enough from campus and deep enough into the woods that he could be alone, think, get away.

But then everything in March happened, and now it loomed, shadowy and foreboding.

The narrow wood path widened ahead, and the rushing stream grew louder. Following the widening path would take you to the highway, despite the road barely being wide enough for a car. There, if you knew where to look, hidden by a cluster of maple trees, was where the bridge was nestled.

Brennan retraced his steps from that night. He'd been walking to the bridge then, too.

He slowed to a stop.

Because now, as he emerged into the clearing, he saw a car parked just before the little stone bridge, and a dark head of hair bobbing around the very area that Brennan remembered so vividly. The car, too—a blue pickup truck, rusted and beaten half to death. Recognition sparked and Brennan knew this was the car that had hit him.

Instinctively, Brennan dropped to shield himself from view. Very few hikers or bicyclists made it out there. That was part of the old appeal, when Brennan had wanted to be alone. In the year since he'd found this place, he'd never run into another person.

Until now. And she was hovering over the spot where Brennan was *pretty fucking sure* he had died two nights ago.

The person had a small, feminine frame with long brown hair, and she was bent down like she was looking for something on the ground.

Brennan was strategizing how to inch around to watch without her seeing him when he felt a vibration in his pocket.

"BACKSTREET'S BACK, ALRIGHT!"

Brennan jumped, and the girl flinched, as Brennan's phone buzzed to life. He dove for cover too slowly, as her head whipped toward the sound and she stared right at him. She had a round face and pale skin, and Brennan committed it to memory as the Backstreet Boys ruined his only lead on whatever was happening to him.

In a heartbeat, the girl threw herself into her car. The engine started, and Brennan rose from his weak hiding spot to peek at the car roaring away.

Brennan bit back a curse as the car disappeared down the road and whipped his head around to make sure he was alone now, for real. The vibration and noise from his pocket died down.

A few yards away, there was a murky smear of a stain that Brennan *knew* was blood. He knew because he could *smell* it. He knew because it was *his* blood from the other night. It was right at the spot of impact, right where he'd been standing.

There were skid marks from tires. Brennan could almost hear their squeal, the rumbling engine.

"BACKSTREET'S BACK, ALRIGHT!"

Brennan scrambled for his phone. The only person who ever called him was his mom, who worked a Very Important Job that kept her Very Busy, and who would call campus security if Brennan dodged more than one of her calls after everything in March.

His mom's picture in the caller ID made his stomach clench in an anxiety-guilt hybrid. Instead of processing that, he answered.

"Hey, I have class," Brennan said, which was not a lie. He should have been in class ten minutes ago, had he not been fleeing the library.

"Oh, don't worry, I only have a few minutes, too. I have a meeting with a big Harvard guy about me speaking for the environmental conference and of course *today's* the day the coffee place runs out of the *good* recycled paper cups and is using *plastic*."

"Wow, talk about Murphy's Law," Brennan deadpanned.

"It's really that kind of day," his mom agreed, his sarcasm so far over her head it was intercepting a flight to Boston Logan. She added, almost as an afterthought, "How are you? How do I make it video again? I want to see your face."

Ah, yes. That was Brennan's mom. Meredith Brooks, big-shot academic-slash-activist, running around yelling about the rising oceans and industrial carbon emissions, trying to save the planet. That part was awesome. Always busy, always between meetings or classes, environmental scientist first, mom second. That part was less awesome.

Brennan grimaced and checked in his phone's reflection to make sure there was no trace of blood on his face. Which was not something he'd ever thought he'd have to do before FaceTiming his mom.

It took a solid minute for his mom to get her own camera on, and then it was their two rectangle images set over each other, with his mom's perfectly maintained blond hair pulled into a neat ponytail. She

was all tan and strong, natural energy. It was no wonder she did well in the environmental space. She was so put-together.

And then there was Brennan. With his patchy-bleached hair, pale and gaunt with shadows under his eyes, he *looked* like a depressed, zombified shell of a human, which was scary-accurate considering his possibly-not-alive status.

"Oh good," she said, paused, took in Brennan. Then, "You need a haircut."

He *did* need a haircut. But would it even grow out anymore? Another question for his journal. Not quite as high a priority as some others.

"Yeah," Brennan said. "Soon, yeah, I'm just getting used to the semester."

"Tell me about it," his mom said, and Brennan prepared for her to start monologuing. "Kirigan pushed off all the freshman courses to me, and was so condescending about it. But I do really enjoy the younger classes, helping them build that foundation. . . ."

Brennan tuned her out, focusing instead on the sound of wind rustling the trees. His mom had finally accepted a tenure-track professor position a few months after Brennan started college. Now she was enmeshed and thriving, though still a relative newbie. He was proud of her, obviously, but he couldn't help resenting her a little. He spent his entire life moving from place to place because she didn't want to settle down, and as soon as he moved out, she changed her mind.

People would tell Brennan that it took a special kind of person to get a master's and two PhDs while being a single mother. Brennan disagreed—it took *two* kinds of special people. The first, a self-absorbed, book-smart mother, and the second, an overly self-sufficient latchkey kid cursed to grow up with attachment issues.

"—I'm really just trying to take it a day at a time," she finished. Brennan hummed along to confirm he was listening, which he was not. "But anyway, you're keeping up with school? Getting ahead on your readings?"

"Of course," Brennan said. He'd started reading chapters as soon as his textbooks were available, but even that head start wouldn't buy him much time with everything else going on.

"And how are you doing?"

He hated this question from her. She always asked it with the demeanor of checking something off her to-do list.

"I'm doing well," Brennan hedged.

His mom scanned him from the screen, her face so close to the camera that he couldn't see anything around her. She had two doctorates but didn't know how to hold a phone so Brennan didn't have to look directly up her nostrils.

"That's so good to hear," she said, and her voice was thick, and no, if she started crying Brennan would hang up—

"I'm so glad you're doing well," she continued around a snuffle. "You know how I worry and how much last semester scared me." She started crying. The camera showed her chin from below, perfectly highlighting her trembling lower lip.

"Oh, Mom, I'm—I'm really doing well. This semester will be different, I know it," he said, instinctively going back to the mantra he'd been telling himself a few days ago. Now it felt like a bold-faced lie.

"I just want you to be happy and do well, okay? I can't go through something like that again."

That one hit Brennan right in the gut. Somewhere, the Dr. Morris in his head was saying something about narcissistic, emotionally immature parents, but Brennan couldn't hear her. He stood up, needing to move, pace, run.

"You don't have to worry about that," Brennan said. "I'm on top of things. Look, I should go—"

"Okay, me, too, but you know you have my credit card for anything you need, you don't have to ask."

He made it a few feet before something else caught his eye, something bright pink in the grass to the side of the road.

Brennan crouched and picked it up. A pink scrunchie. No tags, no labels, nothing distinguishable. But it was something. It might have even been the thing the girl was looking for. Why, though? What did she want? What did she *know*?

"Brennan? Did you hear me?"

Brennan shoved the scrunchie in his pocket. A problem for later. More questions for the journal.

"I don't need anything," Brennan insisted.

She was already paying his rent since he'd lost his tutoring gig last semester. He knew she had money now and they were in a realm of living comfortably, but clipping coupons and counting quarters to get groceries when your mom forgot to (and then went to an out-of-town conference without you) was a habit that died hard.

"You need to *eat*. Coffee doesn't count. Order some DoorDash on me. Any night of the week. You look like you're starving. I must look like a terrible mother."

She hung up, and Brennan stared at the CALL ENDED screen for a moment too long.

He went through a slideshow in his mind of reasons he loved, respected, and was proud of his mother. She was a hard worker, she instilled a value of knowledge in him, and sometimes when he was a kid she'd pull him out of school to take field trips to the zoo or the aquarium or the library because she always said life outside of the classroom was as important as life within one.

And with that appreciative disclaimer out of the way, he allowed himself to shift to the stormy cloud of negativity that he *really* felt. He let the anger drive his feet as he headed home.

That was one thing Brennan couldn't stand about surviving his attempted suicide in March: everyone wanted to relate it back to them. He had barely processed his own feelings about trying to off himself before he had to juggle everyone else's—the concern, the worry, the *How can I help?*s and the *But you're better now, right?*s. All he wanted to do since then was move on, but with each passing month, people kept wanting to hear that he was doing better, that he was *good*.

But to be honest? He'd been fucking better.

Except no one wanted to hear that. Hell, Brennan didn't want to hear it, either.

Brennan's throat returned to its natural state of severe burning, and that was when he sped past the angst and bullshit and focused on something else his mom had said.

Because Brennan knew what it felt like to drink water when you were hungry.

When he was twelve, he had his first existential crisis, and spent days

and nights mainlining Gatorade and familiarizing himself with every popular idea of life after death. He didn't realize he hadn't eaten for a week until he passed out in front of thirty unforgiving seventh graders while presenting a book report on *The Book Thief*.

Drinking the blood of animals felt a lot like that. Enough to soothe the ache for a moment, but not enough to stop it. And Brennan had a theory about what *would* satisfy the craving.

Worse, that voice of the girl crying in the library rang in his head. Someone had gone missing around the same time Brennan woke up and realized he was a vampire. Brennan *maybe* needed human blood to live, and he *maybe* had a block of lost memory between getting hit by a car and waking up in his apartment, a totally reasonable eight hours during which to commit murder.

In typical Brennan fashion, he briefly contemplated suicide. In a cool, totally low-key and logical fashion, thank you very much. But he guessed somehow, somewhere along the way, *some* of the therapy must have worked, because not being alive wasn't an appealing option. At least, it was less appealing than being—*undead*.

And really, just that feeling was novel. As someone who tried to kill himself six months ago, "optimistic" wasn't a word he freely associated with himself, but this semester he'd been almost hopeful.

The guilt and the angst were par for the course. But trying to do something about it? Having hope? Wanting to keep fighting? To keep *living*?

That was pretty new to Brennan. He'd only just gotten those things back.

Brennan shuffled back toward the bridge and sat down on it with his back to the rocks like he used to do. He squeezed his eyes shut. Did eight counts of a breathing exercise he'd learned from the therapists at the in-patient facility he went to after his attempt. Opened his eyes.

He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out the journal he now stowed there at all times.

If Brennan dared to want to exist on this planet, he'd have to drink human blood. Which meant morally gray situations and committing minor felonies, things Brennan generally tried to avoid.

He couldn't drag anyone else into this shit the way he used to drag

people into his moods or make his mother worry. This was his problem, and he'd figure it out on his own. And he'd do it *well*: if he had to be a vampire, he'd be the best damn vampire this side of the prime meridian.

Because yeah, of course he had a plan.

It might even work.



THE BLOOD PACT

BRENNAN'S JOURNAL

MICHAELSON HEALTH SCIENCES BUILDING

Open Hours

- Building proctors at both entrances 7 a.m.-9 p.m. M-F
- Building proctor only front entrance 10 a.m.-5 p.m. weekends
- Locked doors after hours
- Janitors 12-1 a.m. every night every weeknight
- Deep cleaners 10 p.m.-?? Saturday nights

Key/Passcodes?

- 9/10 6:59 a.m.-proctor uses key to get in, code to disable security. What is code???
- 9/11 7:02 a.m.-99 something can't tell
- 9/12 7:00 a.m.-okay actually 09 something?
- 9/13 6:58 a.m.-091298 *hacker voice* we're in!

MORALITY & ETHICS

Under consequentialism, stealing blood will prevent me from potentially harming/killing others. ~~So that would be okay.~~ Except no, wait, because stealing the blood will prevent people who need it from getting it. Or prevent life-saving research. So it's bad.

Utilitarianism: only benefits me and the people I am able to resist killing with my teeth, which I would say isn't in itself commendable.

Under altruism, the answer may actually be suicide, since cutting me from the equation means no death, no stealing, and no depriving science or doctors of blood. So. Uh. Not the most fun conclusion.

Absolutism would say I would already be fucked for stealing, let alone stealing something that could save lives. Kant would kill me with a wooden stake and no hesitation: under Kant, killing vampires is probably a Universal Good action. How comforting, to be on the Kantian Bingo Card.

Hedonism would say it's okay because it brings me pleasure/relief. That doesn't make me feel much better about the situation. Hedonism isn't the peak of morality.

Moral relativism: okay, this one might work! Moral value is relative to context and culture. In this case, uh, I guess the culture of vampirism means that drinking human blood is. Less bad? I'm not convinced, but it's better than nothing.

Aristotle's golden mean would say there's a middle path to virtue. So, uh, maybe if I steal blood this once but am super good elsewhere it can balance out my karma or whatever? That's... not so bad. Maybe I can do that.

Brennan had had one required biology class in Michaelson Hall his first year at Sturbridge University. The building was modern, all floor-to-ceiling windows and curved walls, everything sleek and new and smelling like a hospital. It was the building they showed on all the brochures, yet the majority of Brennan's classes ended up relegated to the less modern, more run-down humanities buildings around the edges of campus. The ones that hadn't been updated in a while and always smelled like mildew and eggs. Ugh.

If he hadn't known much about Michaelson before, now he knew too much. Because if Brennan knew how to do anything? It was motherfucking *homework*.

He knew how many entrances there were, how many windows opened, and at what time the proctors stationed at the main entrance changed shifts.

He had a crude map of the few security cameras, easy enough to avoid by using a back entrance attached to a stairwell that would take

him where he needed to be without being caught on camera. Wasn't there something about vampires not being on film? Or photos? Or was it just mirrors?

Whatever, it was too late now; Brennan's watch read 6:55 and he was loitering under a tree, Michaelson on the other end of the landscaped greenery of the quad. The lawn, often populated with Frisbee players and picnickers and studiers, was empty save for a scampering squirrel.

Brennan shivered in the crisp air—muscle memory, maybe? Could he still *really* get cold?—and pulled his windbreaker tighter around him.

The thirst was brutal. His body felt feverish—not in temperature, but weak and dizzy. And there was the constant driving *urge* that felt like he was barely holding himself back, like he was one inconvenience away from breaking.

A figure appeared in the distance, walking on the paved pathway toward Michaelson, and Brennan jolted. That was the proctor—and he'd almost missed him.

His senses, still blaring and confusing, jumbled together into a cloudy haze that Brennan blamed on thirst. That was his hypothesis for now, at least, because the worse he burned to drink, the harder sounds became to distinguish from one another, a wall of noise closing in from all directions.

He launched forward, taking a long path around the quad to approach the back entrance he needed. At that time of day, it would be unlocked, unmonitored, and unoccupied for a small window of time.

Then all he had to do was follow the smell of blood.

Brennan moved with purpose, like a bloodhound with his nose to the ground. His body moved like it had learned ballet without telling him, perfectly balanced with each delicate, impossibly light step. He needed to write *that* down. Maybe this schtick had some perks, after all.

He came to a classroom door and glanced around again before entering and closing the door behind him. It wasn't even locked.

The scent flooded him instantly, grabbing Brennan right by the neck with the overwhelming instinct to bite.

That still-foreign feeling of his fangs dropping down filled his mouth.

Brennan nearly teleported to the giant freezer across the room, ignoring the tables and desks and whiteboards with elaborate diagrams, because Brennan knew, he'd seen enough movies and had enough context clues to be certain that was it—

He flung the freezer open to trays of blood in vials and plastic packs.

Really, if they don't want their blood samples stolen, they should keep them more secure, Brennan thought, and he was about to bite into the plastic then and there when he heard voices and footsteps. His senses must have been really dulled for him not to notice until then, but he launched into action, loading as many packs of blood into his backpack as he could reasonably steal.

And, fuck, he'd really meant to pilfer a little, few enough not to draw attention but enough to tide him over. But he had no idea how long a pack would last him, and he tended to be thirstier than he'd hypothesized, so screw it.

He tucked the packs in as carefully as he could in his haste and zipped the bag closed. He shut the fridge doors, returned to their undisturbed state.

The footsteps were in the hallway now, and he'd only have a moment to put distance between himself and the newcomer. Which meant no more *thinking*: act, dumbass.

He threw himself across the room to open the door. Footsteps shuffled outside.

Brennan turned in a whirling circle to take in the room. Even if he wasn't caught in the act, there was a decent amount of blood missing—he couldn't be seen at *all*.

He sized up the door, then turned with greater dread to the window. He leapt to it, pushed it open, poked his head through.

The coast was clear—no witnesses.

And it was just the second floor. People survived that all the time, right?

He backed away, adjusted his backpack.

And then he launched himself out of the window.

He rolled when he landed, swift and practiced. Like jumping out of windows was an everyday occurrence. He kind of wished someone had seen—it was probably badass.

But more pressing was the *smell* wafting from Brennan's backpack, and the burning thirst that pulled at him. Brennan gave in to the smell, the instinct, and let his body take over.

He grabbed one of the pint bags and bit down right into the plastic, and then the blood was sliding down his throat and the feeling was absolutely unreal. Like, the satisfaction of scratching an itch, eating your first bite of vegan cheesecake, and having a screaming orgasm, all tied into one. Like all of his nerves were lit up in satisfaction, relief.

He drained the pack in seconds, like one of the frat boys shotgunning beer at the parties some freshman-year friends had convinced him to attend—except those boys had ended up choking and gagging into the sink, whereas Brennan lifted his head and his world came into full Technicolor for the first time.

The prickling feeling, like shards of metal piercing his skin, smoothed over, his senses calming into something vivid and *real*. Where the noises around him had been a cacophony in his head, they faded into the background, and he felt at peace in his own brain for the first time since getting hit by that car. The tight itchiness of his skin was soothed, like aloe on a sunburn, and everything around him came into focus in stunning clarity. He'd put his own life into 8K resolution, and it felt—

Powerful.

The world was in stunning clarity, sharper, and that was when Brennan realized too late that he was not alone.

The murky smell of weed.

A rapidly increasing heartbeat.

Brennan lifted his head from the emptied blood bag and saw Cole—the cute library blanket guy—leaning against the wall, a lighter in one hand and a joint between his lips, just before his jaw fell open and the joint fell from his mouth.

It might have been comedic if Brennan wasn't amid about fourteen different crises.

Brennan's fangs were still bared, bulging against his lips. He willed them away but they remained stubbornly visible.

"Um," Brennan said, going completely still, as if that might activate some secret vampire invisibility power. No such luck. *Fuck*. "Hi."

He realized there was blood on his lips and moved to wipe his mouth with the back of his hand. Cole flinched back at the movement. Reflexively, Brennan threw both his hands up in surrender.

"I'm not gonna hurt you! I— Hold on."

He concentrated on making his fangs go away. *No more blood here! The situation has passed! Go to sleep!* It felt akin to talking down an inappropriate boner, a thought that added insult to injury.

Brennan summoned the memory of the garlic scampi his roommate, Tony, cooked last week, how the acrid smell had permeated through the walls and ruined Brennan's research cocoon, and at *last*, the fangs receded.

The first good thing Tony's cooking had done for him, thanks very much.

"This looks bad, probably, right? I'm gonna say this probably looks bad. . . ." Brennan trailed off as Cole slowly, deliberately rubbed his eyes with closed fists and blinked hard. "Would you believe that I'm a talented acrobat and this is an unbranded Capri-Sun?"

"I—You—" Cole stammered, then settled on, "Fangs?"

Well. So much for secrecy. Brennan was never a good liar.

"Okay, so," Brennan said, palms out like he was talking to a skittish animal, "I'm maybe a vampire."

The words hung in the air for all of a minute before Cole started laughing, light and confused, until it morphed slowly into a horrified *what the fuck* that pulled Brennan from the tidal wave of panic in his brain.

"What the fuck!" he said, laughter edging toward something unhinged. "Is this a joke?"

Brennan's life? Yes. Absolutely, on a cosmic level.

He said, drawing out each word, "I don't think so."

"You don't *think* so?" Cole's voice went progressively higher, but he was frozen to the spot on the stoop leading into Michaelson. "Either you *are* a vampire and you *did* just jump out of a window and drink a pint of donated blood, or you *didn't*."

Fuck. Shit. He went through a litany of curse words in his head but carefully said none aloud. His mother would be proud.

"I know it sounds—ridiculous, okay, but it's a developing hypothesis.

This is still new to me. That was actually my first time drinking human blood. A week ago, I didn't even eat meat!" Brennan's brain and mouth were moving too fast, and he knew he was rambling, but he needed to fill the silence. "My mom made me watch a documentary about factory farming when I was in high school and we went vegetarian together."

Okay, no. This was irrelevant and Cole was looking at him like he was insane. *Read the room, Brooks.* Brennan cut himself off and stopped pacing, foot tapping restlessly in place instead. He faced Cole and silently pleaded for him to say something, *anything*. Cole was stock-still, mouth twisted in a strange wobbly frown.

"So, the library. With the vampire books?"

"Research," Brennan confirmed.

Cole plucked up the joint he'd dropped and lit it with the urgency of someone who didn't know what else to do. He shook his head a few times, apparently at the entire situation. Brennan couldn't blame him. *He* still didn't know how to process this.

Cole took a long drag. "You're telling me vampires are real," he said, gesturing with the hand not holding the joint.

"In some form? Yeah, I'm coming to that conclusion. It's not like *Dracula* or *Twilight*, the rules are all weird and—I mean, most importantly: I don't sparkle."

"Disappointing." Cole sniffed.

Brennan huffed a laugh before he remembered to resume panicking. What would Cole do? Who would he tell? Brennan barely understood what was going on himself, and now this random blanket-toting, joint-smoking Southern gentleman would run to call the nearest priest as soon as he was sure Brennan wasn't about to maul him.

Cole finally moved to take in the empty street. God, he was probably making sure there were witnesses so he didn't get murdered. The streetlights flickered off as the first rays of sunlight rose above the line of maple trees and brownstone apartments. It was barely September, but an early-morning chill was settling over the college town.

"I hate to even ask . . ." Cole started.

"Go ahead," said Brennan. "I doubt I have the answer either way."

"Should I be scared?"

Brennan choked down the acrid smell of smoke, curled and uncurled

his fingers. He looked helplessly back to Cole, who sucked on his joint and stared Brennan down through narrowed eyes like that alone would give him answers.

I hope not, Brennan almost said, and then, *I don't think so*, but neither of those seemed good enough.

"I'm figuring it out," he said instead.

Cole laughed. "Well," he said, almost to himself, "if you're stealing donated blood, then at least I know you're not, like, attacking humans in the streets in secret."

"That's the goal, yeah."

"That's not so bad," Cole decided, tilting his head and taking another long, deep hit.

"Cole!" A voice called down from the open window Brennan had jumped from. "I can smell you smoking down there, are you gonna come help me or what?"

Brennan's eyes cut to Cole, ice crackling down his spine.

"Did I not mention?" Cole whispered. "I'm helping my friend with some stuff for the school's blood drive."

Of course he was.

"What, are you making friends down there?" A head of dark, curly hair peeked out the window from above.

Brennan flinched away, hoping to conceal his face. Even if there wasn't blood on his face, and his backpack wasn't visible from her viewpoint, she had a good view of his bleached hair and could probably pick him out of a lineup, if it came to that. God, he hoped it wouldn't come to that.

Cole turned over his shoulder but kept his eyes on Brennan as he called up, "Always, Marisela. I'll be right up!"

With Marisela disappearing into the building, Brennan swallowed hard as Cole considered him. This kid, in the wrong place at the wrong time, could make or break Brennan's life as a vampire before it had even really started.

"Here's the deal," Cole said, conspiratorial, leaning forward with a secret in his eyes. All Brennan could do was follow, drawn like a magnet. "I won't tell anyone, as long as no one's getting hurt."

"But?" Brennan prompted.

"But," Cole said, "in exchange . . ."

Brennan braced himself. This was real blackmail material. He could want anything.

Cole grinned, wicked, and said, "You read *Twilight*, and give me live updates."

Brennan blinked. "You're kidding."

Cole shrugged, seeming awfully pleased with himself. Brennan wasn't sure whether to be relieved or deeply, deeply concerned.

"Yeah, uh, how high are you?" Brennan asked.

"I believe it's 'Hi, how are you?'" Cole said, giggling, which was an answer to Brennan's question in itself. "So, whaddya say? Deal?"

Cole didn't go so far as to reach out a hand to shake—maybe that was too much trust, even when stoned—but it felt like an important offering. A lifeline.

Brennan took it gladly.

Sometime after stealing blood from a blood drive, making a back-alley deal with a campus cryptid, and walking home, Brennan's phone vibrated in his pocket.

He didn't open it until he got home to his place, passed Tony playing *Apex Legends* on his Xbox, and dropped his backpack at the foot of his bed. He flopped dramatically onto his bed face-first, and after a long moment, finally checked his phone.

His stomach dropped right out from under him.

1 unread text

[Unknown Number]

We know about you.