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Opening extract from
The Serpent King

Written by
Jeff Zentner

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JEFF ZENTNER

THE
SERPENT
A NOVEL
KING

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DILL

There were things Dillard Wayne Early Jr. dreaded more than the start of school at Forrestville High. Not many, but a few. Thinking about the future was one of them. Dill didn't enjoy doing that. He didn't much care for talking about religion with his mother. That never left him feeling happy or saved. He loathed the flash of recognition that usually passed across people's faces when they learned his name. That rarely resulted in a conversation he enjoyed.

And he *really* didn't enjoy visiting his father, Pastor Dillard Early Sr., at Riverbend Prison. His trip to Nashville that day wasn't to visit his father, but he still had a nagging sense of unformed dread and he didn't know why. It might have been because school was starting the next day, but this felt different somehow than in years past.

It would have been worse except for the excitement of seeing Lydia. The worst days spent with her were better than the best days spent without her.

Dill stopped strumming his guitar, leaned forward, and wrote in the dollar-store composition book open on the floor in front of him. The decrepit window air conditioner wheezed, losing the battle against the mugginess of his living room.

The thudding of a wasp at the window caught his attention over the laboring of the air conditioner. He rose from the ripped sofa and walked to the window, which he jimmied until it screeched open.

Dill swatted the wasp toward the crack. "You don't want to stay in here," he murmured. "This house is no place to die. Go on. Get."

It alighted on the sill, considered the house one more time, and flew free. Dill shut the window, almost having to hang from it to close it all the way.

His mother walked in wearing her motel maid's uniform. She looked tired. She always did, which made her seem much older than her thirty-five years. "What were you doing with the window open and the AC on? Electricity's not free."

Dill turned. "Wasp."

"Why you all dressed to leave? You going somewhere?"

"Nashville." *Please don't ask the question I know you're going to ask.*

"Visiting your father?" She sounded both hopeful and accusatory.

“No.” Dill looked away.

His mother stepped toward him and sought his eyes.

“Why not?”

Dill avoided her glare. “Because. That’s not why we’re going.”

“Who’s we?”

“Me. Lydia. Travis. Same as always.”

She put a hand on her hip. “Why you going, then?”

“School clothes.”

“Your clothes are fine.”

“No they’re not. They’re getting too small.” Dill lifted his skinny arms, his T-shirt exposing his lean stomach.

“With what money?” His mother’s brow—already more lined than most women’s her age—furrowed.

“Just my tips from helping people to their cars with their groceries.”

“Free trip to Nashville. You should visit your father.”

You better go visit your father or else, you mean. Dill set his jaw and looked at her. “I don’t want to. I hate it there.”

She folded her arms. “It’s not meant to be fun. That’s why it’s prison. Think he enjoys it?”

Probably more than I enjoy it. Dill shrugged and gazed back out the window. “Doubt it.”

“I don’t ask for much, Dillard. It would make me happy. And it would make him happy.”

Dill sighed and said nothing. *You ask for plenty without ever actually asking for it.*

“You owe him. You’re the only one with enough free time.”

She would hang it over his head. If he didn't visit, she would make it hurt worse for longer than if he gave in. The dread in Dill's stomach intensified. "Maybe. If we have time."

As his mother was about to try to drag a firmer commitment from him, a bestickered Toyota Prius zoomed up his road and screeched to a stop in front of his house with a honk. *Thank you, God.*

"I gotta go," Dill said. "Have a good day at work." He hugged his mother goodbye.

"Dillard—"

But he was out the door before she had the chance. He felt burdened as he stepped into the bright summer morning, shielding his eyes against the sun. The humidity mounted an assault even at nine-twenty in the morning—like a hot, wet towel wrapped around his face. He glanced at the peeling white Calvary Baptist Church up the street from his house. He squinted to read the sign out of habit. NO JESUS, NO PEACE. KNOW JESUS, KNOW PEACE.

What if you know Jesus but have no peace? Does that mean the sign is wrong, or does that mean you don't know Jesus quite as well as you think? Dill hadn't been raised to consider either a particularly good outcome.

He opened the car door and got in. The frigid air conditioning made his pores shrink.

"Hey, Lydia."

She grabbed a worn copy of *The Secret History* off the

passenger seat before Dill sat on it, and tossed it in the backseat. "Sorry I'm late."

"You're not sorry."

"Of course I'm not. But I have to pretend. Social contractual obligations and whatnot."

You could set your clock by Lydia's being twenty minutes late. And it was no use trying to trick her by telling her to meet you at a time twenty minutes before you really wanted to meet. That only made her forty minutes late. She had a sixth sense.

Lydia leaned over and hugged Dill. "You're already sweaty and it's still morning. Boys are so gross."

The black frames of her glasses creaked against his cheekbone. Her tousled smoky-blue hair—the color of a faded November sky streaked with clouds—smelled like honey, fig, and vetiver. He breathed it in. It made his head swim in a pleasant way. She had dressed for Nashville in a vintage sleeveless red gingham blouse with black high-waisted denim shorts and vintage cowboy boots. He loved the way she dressed—every twist and turn, and there were many.

Dill buckled his seat belt the instant before her acceleration pressed him into his seat. "Sorry. I don't have access to AC that makes August feel like December." He sometimes went days without feeling air as cool as in Lydia's car except for when he opened the refrigerator.

She reached out and turned the air conditioning down a couple of clicks. "I think my car should fight global warming in every possible way."

Dill angled one of the vents toward his face. “You ever think about how weird it is that Earth is hurtling through the black vacuum of space, where it’s like a thousand below zero, and meanwhile we’re down here sweating?”

“I often think about how weird it is that Earth is hurtling through the black vacuum of space and meanwhile you’re down here being a total weirdo.”

“So, where are we going in Nashville? Opry Mills Mall or something?”

Lydia glared at him and looked back at the road. She extended her hand toward him, still looking forward. “Excuse me, I thought we’d been best friends since ninth grade, but apparently we’ve never even met. Lydia Blankenship. You are?”

Dill took advantage of the opportunity to take her hand. “Dillard Early. Maybe you’ve heard of my father by the same name.”

It had thoroughly scandalized Forrestville, Tennessee, when Pastor Early of the Church of Christ’s Disciples with Signs of Belief went to the state penitentiary—and not for the reasons anyone expected. Everyone assumed he’d get in trouble someday for the twenty-seven or so rattlesnakes and copperheads his congregants passed around each Sunday. No one knew with certainty what law they were breaking, but it seemed unlawful somehow. And the Tennessee Department of Wildlife did take custody of the snakes after his arrest. Or people thought perhaps he’d run afoul of the law by inducing his flock to drink diluted battery acid

and strychnine, another favored worship activity. But no, he went to Riverbend Prison for a different sort of poison: possession of more than one hundred images depicting a minor engaged in sexual activity.

Lydia tilted her head and squinted. “Dillard Early, huh? The name rings a bell. Anyway, yes, we’re driving an hour and a half to Nashville to go to Opry Mills Mall and buy you the same sweatshop garbage that Tyson Reed, Logan Walker, Hunter Henry, their intolerable girlfriends, and all of their horrible friends will also be wearing on the first day of senior year.”

“I ask a simple question—”

She raised a finger. “A stupid question.”

“A stupid question.”

“Thank you.”

Dill’s eyes fell on Lydia’s hands at the steering wheel. They were slender, with long, graceful fingers; vermilion-colored nails; and lots of rings. The rest of her wasn’t ungraceful but her fingers were affirmatively and aggressively graceful. He relished watching her drive. And type. And do everything she did with her hands.

“Did you call Travis to tell him you were running late?”

“Did I call *you* to tell you I was running late?” She took a turn fast, squealing her tires.

“No.”

“Think it’ll come as a surprise to him that I’m running late?”

“Nope.”