
In the Wild Light

ALSO BY JEFF ZENTNER

The Serpent King

Goodbye Days

Rayne & Delilah's Midnite Matinee



In the Wild Light

JEFF ZENTNER



CROWN
NEW YORK

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For my mom and dad

For Nellie Zentner (1921–2019), who showed me that someone could love me so much she would cry every time I would leave



SUMMER

Chapter 1

The human eye can discern more shades of green than of any other color. My friend Delaney told me that. She said it's an adaptation from when ancient humans lived in forests. Our eyes evolved that way as a survival mechanism to spot predators hiding in the vegetation.

There are as many tinges of understanding as there are hues of green in a forest.

Some things are easy to understand. There's a natural logic, a clear cause and effect. Like how an engine works. When I was eleven, my papaw pulled the engine out of his Chevy pickup and took it apart, letting me help him rebuild it. He laid the pieces out—reeking of dark oil and scorched steel—on a torn and greasy sheet, like the bones of an unearthed dinosaur. As we worked, he explained the function of each piece and what it contributed to make the engine run. It made sense, how he said it.

He wasn't sick then. Later, when he was, I understood that when he used to say *Don't nobody live forever* when accepting another piece of his sister Betsy's chess pie, that wasn't just a phrase he used. That was when he still had an appetite.

Now his appetite has moved to his lungs, which are always starved for air. His breathing has the keening note of the wind blowing over something sharp. It's always there, which means

he has something sharp inside him. People can't live long with sharp things in them. I understand this.

Some things I understand without understanding them. Like how the Pigeon River moves and pulses like a living creature, never the same twice when I'm on it, which is as often as I can be. Or how sometimes you can stand in a quiet parking lot on a hot afternoon and perfectly envision what it would have looked like there before humankind existed. I do this often. It brings me comfort but I don't understand why.

Other things I don't understand at all.

How Delaney Doyle's mind works, for example. Trying to comprehend it is like trying to form a coherent thought in a dream. Every time you think you're there, it blurs.

You'll be talking with her and she'll abruptly disappear into herself. She'll go to that place where the world makes sense to her. Where she sees fractals in the growth of honeysuckle bushes and elegant patterns in the seemingly aimless drift of clouds and the meandering fall of snowflakes. Substance in the dark part of flames. Equations in the dust from moths' wings. The logic of winds. Signs and symbols. An invisible order to the world. Complex things make sense to her and simple things don't.

She's tried to explain how her mind functions, without success. How do you tell someone what salt tastes like? Sometimes you just know the things you know. It's not her fault we don't get it. People still treat her like she's to blame.

Some aren't okay with not understanding everything. But I'm not afraid of a world filled with mystery. It's why I can be best friends with Delaney Doyle.

Chapter 2

A carload of girls from my high school is trying to exit out the entrance of the Dairy Queen. I pause to let them. Then I pull in, my lawn mower rattling in the back of my pickup—the same truck whose engine my papaw and I rebuilt.

The early evening July sun blazes like bonfirelight on the hills behind the Dairy Queen. They're a soft green, as if painted in watercolor. Gleaming soapsud clouds tower behind them. Delaney told me once that the mountains of East Tennessee are among the oldest in the world, but time has beaten them down. Sounds about right.

Delaney stands outside, her shadow long and spindly against the side of the building. She's wearing her work uniform—a blue baseball cap, blue polo shirt, and black pants—and holds a cup with a spoon sticking out of it. With her other hand, she twists her auburn ponytail and presses her thumb on the end, tufted like the tip of a paintbrush. It's one of her many nervous tics.

The expression on her face is one she often has—her eyes appear ancient and able to see all things at once, unbound through time and space. It's what I imagine God's face looked like before summoning the world out of the ether.

If God were wearing a Dairy Queen baseball cap, I guess.

I'm in no hurry, so I wait, out of curiosity. It takes longer than you'd think for her to notice I'm there.

"It's fine. I had no plans for my Saturday night but waiting in the DQ parking lot," I say out my open window as she finally approaches. I try to play it straight-faced, but I never manage with her.

She gets in, giving me the cup to hold while she buckles up. "You're late."

"By like two minutes." I go to hand her back the cup.

She refuses it. "That's for you. Started melting because you were late. Your punishment."

"Based on how close you were watching for me, you were obviously deeply concerned. Oreo Blizzard?"

"Your favorite."

"Nice." I take a bite and study her face for a moment. "How was work?"

"You smell like gasoline and cut grass. Did you know the scent of mown grass is a distress signal?"

"For real?"

"It's from green leaf volatiles. They help the plant form new cells to heal faster and stop infection. Scientists think it's a type of chemical language between plants. So you're covered in the liquid screams of grass you've massacred."

"I could've showered off all this grass blood before picking you up, but then I'd've been even more late."

"Didn't say I minded," she murmurs, not making eye contact. "Plant screams smell nice."

"You reek like french fries," I say, leaning toward her and taking an exaggerated whiff. "The smell of french fries? Potatoes shrieking for their babies."

"I'll slaughter some potatoes. I don't care."

"You just gonna pretend I didn't ask how work was?" I put my truck in gear and back out.

She twists the end of her ponytail. "The Phantom Shitter struck again."

"The Phantom Shitter?"

"Some dude who comes in once a week or so and absolutely wrecks the men's room. No one ever sees him come or go. We've even checked security tapes. It's a pooping ghost."

"Imagine dying and haunting the Earth and making it your mission to befoul the Sawyer Dairy Queen."

"*Befoul.* Where'd you get that word?"

"Dunno. Besides the Phantom Shitter, how was work?"

"Got in trouble."

"Why?"

"Did an interview with NPR on my break and it went long."

"Damn, Red, getting even more famous."

"You too," Delaney says with an impish smile.

"What?" I ask around a spoonful of Blizzard.

"I mentioned you."

"Hell you did." I look at her, aghast.

She smiles again.

I shake my head. " 'I couldn't have made this discovery without Cash Pruitt.' That what you said? 'No one else on planet Earth could have paddled me out to a secret cave along the Pigeon River so I could find some bacteria—' "

"Mold."

"Whatever."

"Big difference biologically."

"Fine. 'Mold that kills the nastiest bacteria.' "

"Don't forget driving me to Nashville to show my results to Dr. Srinavasan. Said that."

"Oh, right. No one else could've done that."

"No one else *did* do that. Anyway, yeah, that's about what I said."

I wipe my hand down my face. "Lord above."

"Stop being dramatic."

I raise my index finger. "What's the one thing you know about me?"

"I know you asked me once if peanuts are a type of wood. No, they aren't."

"That I like to *earn* what I get."

"Right. Cash Pruitt: famously a lover of earning."

"So you're out there telling people I did something without me earning it."

"If it makes you happy, I still took credit for running the experiments and figuring out the mold's antibiotic properties."

I lower the visor against the sinking sun. A ray catches a crack in the windshield and illuminates it, a tiny comet. I've always loved when the light finds the broken spots in the world and makes them beautiful.

I glance over at Delaney. She's turned inward, squinting her honey-colored eyes against the orange glare splashed across her pale skin, on the freckles that dot her nose and cheekbones like an atlas of stars. She brushes a stray piece of hair from her face.

"Seems like you could get a better job than DQ now that you're in the news and doing interviews on the radio," I say.

"It requires no mental energy, so I can think about other stuff and get paid for it."

"Your life. Wanna ride around some, then go watch *Longmire* with Pep?"

"Can't. Babysitting Braxton and Noah later," Delaney says.

"He'll be bummed."

"Tell him I'm sorry and next time I come I'll tell him about gympie gympie."

"The hell is that?"

She always looks happiest right before she's about to deliver some horrifying factoid about the natural world. She radiates pure joy now. "Australian shrub. Read about it last night. The leaves are covered in these little silica-tipped bristles—silica's the stuff they make glass out of—and then these bristles deliver a neurotoxin that causes horrible pain for days, months, and even years. So if you brush up against it, the whiskers dig into your skin and the pain'll be so intense it'll make you puke."

"Good *Lord*. That sounds like it came from outer space."

"As long as the hairs stay in your skin, the pain continues. It feels like being burned alive. They're hard to remove, too. Your whole lymphatic system swells up. Armpits. Throat. Groin. It's a nightmare."

"*Why* are you telling me about this?"

"You're constantly waging war against the plant world. Thought you might like to know they have a revenge weapon."

I point back over my shoulder at the lawn mower in my truck bed. "I mow lawns and trim shrubs. They grow the hell back. That's like saying barbers are waging war on heads."

"There's an apocryphal story about someone wiping their ass with gympie gympie leaves and . . . it didn't end well. Get it? End."

"Please tell me *apocryphal* means 'completely and entirely false.' "

She cackles. "The gympie gympie's gonna find you," she says in a singsong voice.

"Won't."

"It's gonna crawl up your ass. Give you gympie butt."

"I'll sleep with my lawn mower in my bed. If it tries, I'll fire that up and mow the shit out of it. Be like, 'Who's in pain now, gympie gympie? Warn your friends.' "

"I wanna be the one to tell Pep about it. Don't spoil it," Delaney says.

"You think his life will improve knowing about this plant?"

"He loves my facts."

"Don't know why. You got time for me to stop for gas?"

"I don't have to be to Noah and Braxton's for a while."

I pull into the RiteQuik, park, and start filling up my truck. Cicadas thrum like a thought that won't leave your mind. The turpentine scent of sun-warm pine tar and distant grill smoke hangs thick in the air, mixing with the smell of gas and oil leaking on hot engines. In front of the store, two girls in neon bikini tops and Daisy Dukes sit in the back of a Jeep with the top removed, talking and laughing raucously, primping and taking selfies. The radio blares Florida Georgia Line.

The night has started to breathe its first cool breaths. They feel like river water on my face. The summer days here end like a kid who's been running as fast as he can, then comes inside and falls asleep in front of a fan.

I go inside to pay. When I come out, the pulsing bass from a car stereo rattles my lungs and diaphragm. A purple Dodge

Challenger with ornate rims is parked behind me. It's an unwelcome sight. Jason Cloud. I loathe his kind—a dealer of weed, meth, heroin, fentanyl, Oxys, Lortabs, Valium, gabapentin, and whatever else people will buy to wake themselves up or put themselves to sleep. He's not the one who sold my mama the shit that killed her. But it was someone like him. Someone who will end lives for a purple Dodge Challenger with rims.

Cloud stands at the passenger window of my truck, talking with Delaney, pausing every couple of seconds to send a plume of vape smoke skyward. He's wearing an oversized white T-shirt, a thick gold chain, huge black shorts that go past his knees, and Nike sandals with socks pulled up almost to his knees. His bleached-blond hair is in cornrows, and his mouth glitters with a gold grille.

He only has a few years on me, but looks far older. His eyes are the shade of weapon gray that someone would pick out for themselves if God didn't have rattlesnake yellow in stock. No compassion or intelligence in them. Only cunning—and sizing you up for cracks. Underneath each eye is a crude teardrop tattoo the color of wash-faded denim. I've heard those mean you've killed someone.

I walk faster, anger scuttling up my throat from my chest.

"What don't you know, girl?" Cloud says to Delaney as I enter earshot of their conversation. "Ain't nothing *to* know."

Delaney stares forward, then turns and catches my eye. She looks afraid and relieved. *Help me,* her eyes say.

Cloud sees me approach and gives me a curt backward nod. "'Sup, mane."

I return the terse nod. "Everything good?"

Cloud pulls a drag off his dragon vape pen. The cords of his neck ripple underneath a tattoo of the face of Jared Leto's Joker character from *Suicide Squad*. He releases a gout of white, cherry-scented vapor in my direction. "We real good. Just having a private conversation."

"We gotta go," Delaney says, her voice taut.

"Won't take but a minute," Cloud drawls. His mouth smirks. His eyes don't follow.

"We're already late," I say in a low voice.

Cloud sidles toward me and spits. I can smell him as he nears—expensive cologne, weed, cherry vape smoke, and something stale and sour. "We're talking now."

I try to slip past him to get in my truck. He steps to cut me off, and I almost run smack into him. "Scuse me," I mutter. "I gotta—"

"You her daddy?" His tone is equal parts mocking and menace.

"No."

"Hmm? Boyfriend? Y'all smashin'?" He gives me a death's-head grin with his grille and humps the air a couple of times.

"Man, I don't want no trouble."

"Naw?" Cloud gets in my face, staring me down. "What's your name, mane?" He's near enough I can feel the sweat evaporating from his skin.

"Cash," I say, avoiding his eyes.

Cloud snickers. It sounds like a call from a buzzard to come feast on a carcass. "Cash. Sheeeit." He lifts his heavy gold chain with both thumbs and lets it drop back down on his chest with a muted thud. "It's me should be named Cash. Look like the only cash you got is your name, bitch."

I look him dead in the eyes. I know the peril, but I do it anyway. "My name's my name. Ain't ashamed."

I'm not afraid to fight him. I grew up having to fight, and it wouldn't be the first time I've fought on Delaney's behalf. But it would probably be the last. I would take him if I knew it would be just him and me, skin on skin. That we'd each take our hits and shake hands afterward. But there'd be tactical knives pulled out of pockets or Glocks pulled out of waistbands. And if I survived that, I'd have to *always* watch my back in this town, until he finally got himself killed or sent to prison.

I lower my gaze in surrender.

Cloud takes a long drag on his vape pen and spews vapor in my face, long and slow. "Cash Money. Better get to your girl." Then he draws in close, until his lips tickle my ear. Intimate, but in the way of a wolf lapping blood from a deer's throat. "You lean on her to say no to me, you'll deadass regret it, mane. On God."

With one last glower, he swaggers away, drops into the driver's seat of his thumping, rattling car, and peels out of the parking lot in a haze of acrid, rubbery black smoke, the back end of his car fishtailing.

I'm shaking and nauseated by the time I'm back behind the wheel of my truck. I take a second to breathe down my sizzling adrenaline.

Delaney murmurs something. I don't hear her at first.

"Hey." Her voice finally reaches through my maelstrom of thoughts.

"What?"

"Thank you."

"Why's he hassling you?"

Delaney sighs and sags into her seat. "Something about *going into business* together. Real vague. Like if you thought cops were listening. He's been on me ever since everything hit the news."

A few seconds of tense silence tick past.

I shake my head. "What's he think? After you save humanity from antibiotic-resistant bacteria, you'll help him cook better meth and make fentanyl out of dish soap?"

"Said he'd make me rich. Piece of shit."

I chuckle bitterly. "Oh, I *bet*. Guess we got this to look forward to next year."

"Maybe not," Delaney murmurs, studying the side of her left thumb, then lifting it to her mouth.

I reach over and put my hand on hers and gently pull it toward me. The side of her thumb is bleeding and ragged. Delaney diagnosed herself a while back with a "body-focused repetitive behavior." She picks and chews at the skin around her thumbnails until it bleeds. It happens when she's stressed or anxious. She can't afford help for it, so my catching her is the best she's got.

"Red," I say quietly.

She quickly pulls her hand back and goes for her thumb.

I grab her hand again and lower it to her lap. "Delaney."

She sighs and sits on her hand. "Happy?"

"Hate seeing you hurt yourself."

"Can't help it."

"Do your breathing exercises." She researched coping mechanisms. My job's to remind her. "What's going on? Cloud?"

"Not just him."

"Well?"

"I said a second ago maybe we don't have to deal with him next year?"

"You're not gonna poison him, are you? Not that I'm opposed, necessarily."

"Just replace his weed stash with gympie gympie."

We both laugh.

"I wish," I say. "But for real."

"I got an offer to go to a boarding school up north."

My heart plummets. With all the press she's been getting, I knew this day would come.

I swallow, then nod for her to continue. "Oh wow." The unease in my voice is obvious to my own ears even as the words leave my lips.

"Middleford Academy. In New Canaan, Connecticut."

"Sounds fancy." My head swims.

"It's one of the top five prep schools in America. This lady from Alabama named Adriana Vu, who made hundreds of millions in biotech, went to Middleford. She donated a shitload of money to the school to fund this amazing lab and STEM program. She contacted me and said she'd talked to Middleford and she'd pay for me to go there."

We let ourselves forget the inevitability of things. I guess it makes us feel in control over our lives. And I'd let myself forget that no one with a mind like Delaney Doyle's stays in one place forever. Much less a place like Sawyer, Tennessee. The only thing worse than her leaving would be her staying.

She starts to put the side of her thumb to her mouth. Stops. Squeezes her eyes shut and sits on her hand again. "I told her I wouldn't accept unless she could make it happen for you too. Said we're a package deal. So she said okay, and so did Middleford."

My brain replays her words, like when you're watching

TV half-asleep and you're not sure you heard something right. *"What?"*

"I told her I wouldn't go unless you could come with me. Said it would be too hard to go alone to a new boarding school junior year, where everyone's got their friends already. So she came through. Full scholarship. Just like mine. Middleford said okay too. You can come with me."

I scrutinize her face for some hint of a joke. But neither the timing nor the nature of the joke is her normal sense of humor. "Come on."

"I wanted to pick a better time to tell you, but."

"Is this for real?"

Delaney looks away, out her window. Watching the people milling around in front of the store. "Yep."

"You're gonna go, right?"

"I don't want to go alone. That was true when I told her that."

"You saying that if I don't go, you won't?"

"I said I don't *want* to." Delaney toys with the end of her ponytail.

"That's what you meant when you said we might not have to worry about Cloud."

"Yeah."

I stare out the window for what feels like a long time. "You know my papaw's not good."

"Yeah," Delaney says quietly. "That would still be a thing if you stayed."

Silence falls between us like an axe sinking into wood.

"I didn't earn this," I murmur.

"Whatever," Delaney replies. "Without you I never could

have found that mold. You were as important as the microscope I looked through."

"Is this even a thing? People who deserve scholarships getting them for friends who don't?"

"Athletes do it. This hot-shit basketball player named DeMar DeRozan told USC he wouldn't accept a scholarship unless they gave one to his best friend. So they did. It's not like you don't deserve to be there. You've gotten good grades."

"At *Sawyer High*."

"Still."

"This was never *remotely* part of my plan."

"You had a plan?"

"I mean . . . no."

After our laughing subsides, I say, "Know what the farthest north I've ever been is? Bristol damn Virginia. Papaw took me to a NASCAR race when I was little."

Delaney giggles. "Johnson City for me."

A convoy of three black Dodge Sprinter vans pulls into the gas station. In the weeks since Delaney's discovery was announced, Sawyer's been crawling with rented vans full of men and women laden with caving gear. Can't exactly patent something that grows in a cave, Delaney explained, so they're all coming for their piece: The universities. The pharmaceutical companies. The Gates Foundation. Delaney told me the other day that she served a team of French biologists at DQ. They had no idea who she was.

"Don't tell me you're only going to do this if I do it. Don't be telling me that," I say.

Delaney eyes the people getting out of the vans. "They

should try boiled peanuts while they're here. Bet they don't have boiled peanuts wherever they're from."

"Red."

"Don't know what I'll do."

"Mr. Hotchkiss is a good science teacher, and he does his best, but you need more than a key to a high school lab where the teacher has to buy microscopes with his own money. You *need* to do this."

"So do you. There's a big world outside East Tennessee. You don't like it? You can always come back. Everything'll still be here. You know that."

"I'm happy here."

Sometimes Delaney looks at me like my skull is transparent and she can see the thoughts forming on my brain's surface. "There are ghosts here," she says quietly.

There are indeed.

I'm dazed, like I just woke up from one of those long Sunday afternoon naps, when it's a moment or two before you can remember where you are or even your own name. The light is waning. I glance at the time on my phone. "We better get you to Noah and Braxton's." I start my truck and jam it into gear. I pull out of the parking lot.

"You're pissed," Delaney murmurs. She starts to lift her thumb to her mouth, but we lock eyes and she grabs the end of her ponytail instead.

"Just don't know what to think."

"You still haven't thanked me," Delaney says after we drive for a while without talking.

I shake my head, defeated. "Thanks. I think." None of this has

quite sunk in yet. I know this because I'm feeling numb, rather than completely panicking at the thought of possibly losing her.

Delaney stares forward with an unreadable expression.

I've always thought she had a strangely elegant beauty. Of something being pulled in each direction toward perfect and broken. I once saw a bird that had been run down in the road. It lay there, pulverized. But the wind caught two of its feathers and lifted them free of the destroyed body, breathing life back into them. I watched those feathers dancing in the wind for a long time, such unexpected grace amid ruin.

Delaney reminds me of that. Couldn't say why.

Chapter 3

We met at a Narateen meeting a few years ago. It wasn't the first time I'd ever seen her. We both went to Sawyer Middle School. She was considered a weirdo and a loner. No friends. Everyone vaguely understood that she was uncommonly intelligent. She wasn't known for getting amazing grades, but when she showed up for class, she would perform so well on tests that—as she later told me—teachers accused her of cheating. She certainly wasn't famous for her social skills or really much else, except spending a lot of time surfing the internet in the school library and hanging around the science lab. Rumor was she had a photographic memory (true). In another time, she'd probably have been called a witch (hell, maybe now too).

There were dark whispers that her mama was a user, and a bad one. Delaney's generally haphazard state of dress and put-togetherness and spotty school attendance gave us no reason to doubt. She had that old-beyond-her-years way of someone who's had to parent a parent. I recognized it from looking in the mirror. It made me not much more popular than her. None of the school's best-liked kids had to survive like we did, and they all avoided the stain of associating with us.

The basement at the First Baptist Church in downtown Sawyer smelled like a mix of the faintly medicinal, woody tang of

Pine-Sol and the cool, mildewed scent of old concrete, which can't keep out the hardest rains. I was glad to see that there was only one other kid there, seated in the semicircle of metal folding chairs. It was Delaney. This was as anonymous as a Narateen meeting in Sawyer would get. Me and a girl who never talked to anyone at school. I sat a few spaces away. Our eyes met briefly and we wince-smiled awkwardly.

We talked for the first time over stale Food Lion cookies and watery orange punch served from milk jugs. I told her my grandparents brought me. She'd come on her own. She pummeled me with facts about the science of drug addiction, talking like her mind was running from something. We found out our mamas were working Narcotics Anonymous together. My mama would later lose the battle. Her mama hasn't lost yet, but things don't look promising.

The next meeting, we sat beside each other. That week at school, we sat together at lunch.

Ever since I first became aware that the world contains mysteries and incomprehensible wonders, I've tried to live as a witness to them. As we came to know each other, I began to see something in Delaney that I'd never seen in another person. I can't name that thing. Maybe it has no name, the way fire has no shape. It was something ferocious and consuming, like fire.

And I wanted to be close to it, the way people want to stand near a fire.

Chapter 4

We pull up to Delaney's half brothers' dad's house. Their scarred gray pit bull, Duke, strains at the swing-set chain binding him to a sickly oak tree in the overgrown lawn, giving us a terse series of hostile barks. A rusting washing machine and dryer mold on the sagging front porch. An algae-scabbed aboveground pool slouches in a corner of the yard. It looks as fun to swim in as an unflushed toilet.

We both start talking at once.

"You go," Delaney says.

"Thank you," I say. "My hesitation isn't ingratitude."

"Okay."

"I'm not saying no yet."

"You're not saying yes yet."

"It's a lot to think about."

"You're smart. Start thinking," Delaney says.

We sit for a second, listening to the drone of the insect menagerie surrounding the house in the tall weeds. Pale neon-yellow fireflies dance their luminous evening waltz. Delaney explained to me once how they make light. I've forgotten. Occasionally, my mind lets me hold on to a fragile bit of magic in spite of practical explanations.

"Thanks again for the Blizzard," I say.

Delaney opens her door. "Thanks for the ride. Bye, gympie ass."

"You can't just impose a new nickname on me. That's not a thing. I reject it."

"Watch me." She starts to step down.

"Hey, Red?"

"What?" Delaney stops getting out and sits back in her seat.

"I always knew."

"What?"

"You'd do something important."

She looks happy. "Yeah?"

"You deserve all this. Your life is going to change so much."

"Not the part about us being friends."

"I'm not worried about that. But." I didn't know where I was going with what I was saying. It just felt like a thing that needed to be said.

"I mean," she says, "it'll be easier to stay in touch if we're at the same school."

I reach over and yank the bill of her Dairy Queen hat down over her eyes. "Go babysit."

She pulls off her hat and smooths the wisps of her hair. Once more she makes to leave.

"Red?"

Again she pulls herself back into my truck.

I don't know why I'm having such a hard time letting her go tonight. "How'd you know that mold would be in that cave?"

"You've never asked that before."

"Been curious for a long time."

"How'd I know?" She looks at me and then into the chirping, humming half-light, then back at me. "Because for every way the world tries to kill us, it gives us a way to survive. You just gotta find it."