



ECLIPSE

JENNIFER LISS



Chapter 1

RATTLESNAKE RIDGE

I've never told this story before. Why not? Well, there are two reasons, really. First, I was afraid no one would believe me. One of the worst experiences in life is not being believed. So I've kept this secret for ten years.

Shame is the other reason I've remained silent. I feel guilty about what my family did that weekend in June.

It's time to finally tell my truth. Why now? I'll get to that later.

My name is Nate Thompson. On that weekend a decade ago, I was 11. Tanner, my brother, was 12. Our mom passed away when we were babies. My dad had never remarried. The three of us—Tanner, my dad, and me—were very close. Losing my mom had made us closer.

We had another family member who made up our tight unit. His name was Comet, our three-year-old mutt. He had white paws and shaggy black fur that would often get tangled with burrs and other plant life. Tanner joked that Comet's coat was like Velcro. When he hiked with us, Comet always wore a soft, goofy grin. We did a lot of hiking in those days.

People would ask, “Did you know your dog is smiling?”

Yes, we knew. Comet loved to be with us, and he loved spending time in the woods. We never needed to put him on a leash. He stayed near us, no matter what. No squirrel or cat could distract Comet.

We lived in a small town near a vast national forest. My dad was a general contractor. He took a lot of pride in our two-bedroom home. Fixing it up was his hobby. But we joked that our real home was the forest.

On that fateful weekend, school had just let out for the summer. It felt like nature was celebrating with us. Flowers blanketed the meadows. Creeks were swollen with late-spring rain.

My dad had planned a weekend camping on Rattlesnake Ridge. It was an area deep in the forest. We had never been there before.

Camping was a typical activity for us in early summer. But that particular weekend was special. A total solar eclipse would occur. The moon was going to pass between the sun and the earth, casting a shadow on our small town. This was something a person might see only once in their life. Tanner and I were so excited.

Nothing would keep us away from Rattlesnake

Ridge. There, we could fully experience the power of the eclipse. The three of us had talked about it for weeks.

But we had no idea what was going to happen in the forest that day. If we had, my family never would have gone. Instead, we would have stayed home, with our doors and windows locked.



Chapter 2

THE HIKE

My dad parked the car in a small gravel lot off Elm Road. We strapped on our packs and headed to the trailhead. My dad's pack was the biggest. He carried the tent, food, and camping stove. Tanner and I carried our sleeping bags, water, and clothes.

Comet walked beside me. He was smiling. Perhaps he sensed a big weekend adventure in the woods.

“You boys have your projectors, right?” my dad asked.

Tanner and I had made pinhole projectors with thick paper and tacks. Our plan was to use them to watch the eclipse safely. Staring directly at the sun was dangerous. It could cause eye damage or even blindness.

“Let’s do this!” my dad said. He started up the trail that led away from the parking lot. We followed him into the woods.

There was a system of trails that we intended to follow up to Rattlesnake Ridge. Our route was carefully planned. The folded map was in my dad’s back pocket. Tanner and I had studied it in the car.

My brother and I loved maps. I can still remember running my finger along the dotted lines while Tanner read the names of the trails aloud. First, we planned to go on Switchback East. Then we would take Moon Trail to Johnny’s Loop.

On the trail, Tanner entertained us with jokes. “Nate, why don’t mummies go camping?”

I shrugged.

“They’re afraid to relax and unwind!”

Tanner snorted, and I groaned. His jokes were so corny, but he enjoyed them. He borrowed the same joke books from the library over and over.

As we hiked along the switchbacks, Comet kept close to our sides. He only paused to pee on a plant or sniff a rock. Then he went still and growled.

Comet was like a security system. His growl made us pay attention. At home, it might just mean the mail carrier was walking up the driveway. In the woods, Comet’s growl could indicate something else.

We looked around but didn’t notice anything unusual.

“What is it, Comet?” my dad asked.

Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. The bushes weren’t shaking. We didn’t see any deer off in a meadow. Comet had amazing hearing. He probably sensed an animal that was a mile away.

We dismissed Comet’s warning and continued. But after a few minutes, he growled again.

Tanner pointed to a nearby tree. “There’s a woodpecker up there. Could that be what’s bothering him?”

“Birds don’t usually trigger him,” my dad said.

I knelt down and scratched Comet behind the ears. That always calmed him down. “What is it, boy?”

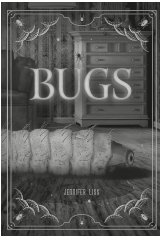
Then my dog did something strange. He raised his head and pointed his nose upward at the sky. His whole body tensed. I looked up too. The sky was a soft cornflower blue. There was not a cloud in sight.

My dad said we should keep going, so we did. Yet every few minutes, Comet let out a short, low growl. This put us all on edge. Soon, Tanner stopped telling jokes. I found myself constantly looking over my shoulder.

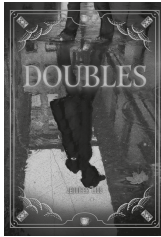
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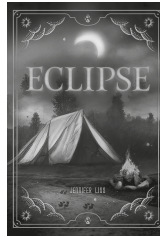
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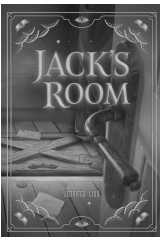
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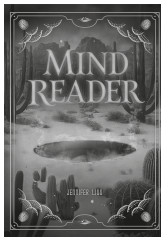
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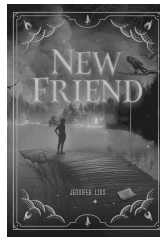
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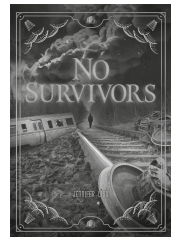
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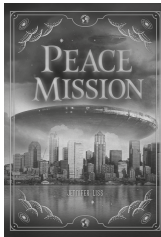
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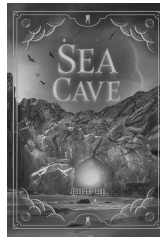
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Nate is excited to go camping with his dad and brother. They plan to see a solar eclipse from high up in the mountains. Then something very strange happens. What does it mean for Nate and his family? Will they ever be the same?



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