

Jess Lambert 2
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The Accident, Christmas Eve Last Year

Chapter 1 - ALICE

My family was murdered at the witching hour.

I know they were murdered, otherwise why wouldn't they have come back?

Families don't just disappear. They don't just walk away from the people they love.

That night there was nothing to make me think something bad was about to happen. No dark whispers riding the winter wind. No chill skating over my neck. No creepy premonition that everything was going to change.

We were happy. That's what I remembered most afterward.

It was Christmas Eve, my favorite night of the year. We always stayed the night at my aunt Mel and uncle Jack's on Christmas Eve. My grandma was there, too. She'd just arrived from Florida for the week.

We always stayed at Mel and Jack's because they had the biggest house. They decked it out with lights and tinsel and a huge tree with designer baubles, not the homemade ones we had on our tree. They always did a fancy, catered dinner and endless desserts, and then, on Christmas morning, we'd all get up wearing our matching pajamas and open our stockings and our presents together.

My parents could never afford any of the stuff Mel and Jack did. I'm not saying we were poor, just our presents were, like, pajamas and stuff, not electric ride-on cars or Apple watches or Gucci socks.

That Christmas Eve, after dinner, somebody turned on some old dance tunes and the adults, who by that time were hilariously drunk, had started dancing. Mel had hired a Santa to show up for Finn and I was wandering around snapping pictures.

I had a bit of a sore throat, so my parents decided to take us home instead of staying that night. Dad said I needed a good night's sleep. I remember walking to the car, Mom's good arm, not the one in the sling, wrapped around me. Dad was laughing at something my little sister Ella had said. He had a great laugh, his whole face kinda crinkling, his eyes squinting, his body shaking with joy.

Like I said, we were happy. So happy it hurts to think about now.

I stopped to catch a snowflake on my tongue. Did you know in Scotland they had 421 words for snow? A large snowflake was called a *skelt*, a fine driving snow, a *snaw-pusher*. This snow was a *flukra*, snow falling in large blobs.

"Come on, Alice!" Ella shouted. "Get in, it's freezing!"

We piled into my mom's minivan, Dad driving, Mom next to him. Ella and I were in the backseat; me behind Mom, Ella behind Dad. She was chatting about something I no longer remember, even though now, in the darkest hours of night, I try my hardest to remember what it was. Makeup, maybe, or boys. They'd already started noticing her, even at ten, with her big, blue eyes and her bubbly personality. *Ten going on sixteen*, Mom always said.

I buckled up, the taste of the snow, cold and metallic, like winter and something harder, like stone, lingering in my mouth. The clock on the dashboard said 11.47 p.m. I noticed because it was so far past my bedtime.

"Pete, do you really think..." Mom began.

“It’s fine.” Dad’s eyes cut to the rearview window, a street light glinting off his glasses. “You girls buckled?”

“Yes,” we chorused.

Ella was lying. Her coat was draped over her like a blanket, but I could see her seat belt. Empty. Unfastened. I glared at her, hoping she’d feel the weight of my gaze. But she didn’t lift her head from under the warm nest of her hood. I shook my head but didn’t say anything. I wasn’t a tattler.

Later, I would regret that. I would torment myself with how different things could’ve been if I’d only spoken up.

Something fluttered in my peripheral vision. Maybe a bat? Or a bird braving the cold. I didn’t think about it too much. I felt safe and secure surrounded by my family.

Snow battered the windshield, the roads already covered. The wipers beat on max, rhythmically shoving at the white flakes. The headlights barely cut through the wall of white swirling around us.

I was just starting to fall asleep when the car slowed. A couple of construction barriers with a *Road Closed* sign were blocking the road.

“That’s weird,” Mom said. “I wonder what’s happened.”

“Maybe they’re fixing some of those potholes,” Dad said. “I’ll turn around.”

“But the only other way is…”

“I know.”

“Maybe we should…” Mom’s voice was pinched with worry.

“This road’s closed, honey.”

“Pete, I really don’t think—”

“It’s fine.” Dad cut her off, a little impatient, a little annoyed. He’d been getting annoyed with her a lot more lately. He’d been getting annoyed with all of us lately. Not anything big, just little things I only noticed *after*.

That’s how life breaks down when something bad happens. Those dark, sudden moments that happen without warning. This was my life before. This is my life now. The two are nothing alike.

Dad spun the minivan around and turned into Killer’s Grove.

It was kind of a dumb name. Killer’s Grove. I guess years ago a serial killer claimed he’d been burying bodies there. All you had to do was mention Killer’s Grove and people would go, “Oh, you mean that haunted road where all the bodies are dumped?” And you’d say, “yeah,” even though only one body was ever found there, and that was in like, the 1970s or something. And they’d tell you one of the billions of ghost stories everybody knew.

Mostly, those stories were told in a breathless dude-you-won’t-believe-this sort of way, and they usually started with a bunch of goths staying in Killer’s Grove on Halloween while stoned off their faces. It was the sort of dead zone where stories of people going missing were common, where your phone couldn’t get a good signal, and if you stood just long enough you’d feel the cold scratch of something whispering over your skin.

Nobody ever had any specifics, really. Just that the couple miles of road that stretched through the forest near Black Lake was haunted and had always been haunted.

My dad didn't believe in those stories, but my mom did. Maybe it was the Irish in her. She's the one who warned us about the witching hour.

"Nothing good ever happens after midnight," she'd tell my sister and me. "That's when all the dark spirits come out of hiding. When the veil lifts between the dead and the living and the spirits travel between the worlds."

So, yeah, the name was dumb. But still, some things stick with people. The past isn't some sandcastle that can just be wiped away by the tide.

I stared out my window. The road ahead was long and narrow. Darkness had stitched the trees together, a curtain of black. Our headlights barely cut through the wall of white swirling like static from an old TV screen around us.

Ancient evergreens dusted with snow pushed up over the sides of the winding road, thick branches arcing like gnarled fingers. Beyond the road was the forest. Miles and miles of it; northern hardwood, white pine and red oak, with jagged chasms and plunging gorges and caves. In the summer we'd go camping, hike the cobwebbed paths, but now everything was frozen.

My parents were arguing in the front, still doing that thing they sometimes did where half their conversation was out loud, and the rest was telepathic. They'd always done it, as long as I could remember. It was totally annoying. I closed my eyes and let their voices merge with the windshield wipers as sleep pulled at me.

"Do you think—?" Dad began.

"No."

"Are you—?"

"Tomorrow. Honestly, tonight I—" Mom sighed.

“I know, I get it.”

“It’s just, it’s Christmas and I think...Pete, watch out!”

My eyelids fluttered at my mom’s scream.

There was a flare of something. Light? Shadow? I couldn’t tell.

It all happened so fast.

Dad slammed on the brakes and the minivan skidded, then swerved. My stomach leapt into my throat. Dad cursed, trying to correct. But the tires couldn’t get any grip on the snowy pavement, and we veered off the road, clipping a tree with a bone jarring *thwuck*. And then we were airborne, metal crunching as the car flipped.

I could hear someone screaming—was it me?—as we spun, inside a washing machine of white snow and black night. Pain ripped through my arm. The metal on the roof screeched as we landed upside down on the pavement. The minivan rocked and then, with a final sickening groan, tipped onto its side, flinging me against my window.

My head cracked against the glass. Blood filled my mouth, poured into my eyes. And then everything went black.

I don’t know how long I was out, but when I came to, the only sound was the windshield wipers still going. *Swish, swish, swish*. Blood, hot and sticky, dripped down my nose, the scent like melting rust. Pain gushed over me in a hot wave. My arm was twisted in an unnatural direction.

The car had landed on its side. My side. Snow dusted my cheeks.

“Mom?” I whimpered, my eyes still squeezed tightly shut.

But there was no answer. Only the gentle sound of snow falling and the hiss of the wind and the beat of the wipers.

“Dad? Ella?”

Still no answer.

I opened my eyes. I was lying on the side of the car surrounded by junk: my backpack, which had come open, a random book, a box of crackers, an old t-shirt, an empty Coke can. I tried to move my head, but pain made me stop. A whimper escaped my mouth. I slit my eyes open again, turning my neck slowly despite the pain and dread and panic filling me. I expected to see Ella next to me, to see my mom and dad in the front.

I was afraid they were all dead.

But what I saw was worse.

Horror gushed in. I started to tremble. My heart hammered. Hot tears filling my eyes, streaking down my face. I squeezed them shut; then open again. But everything was still exactly the same.

There was nobody there.

Besides me, the car was empty.

My family was gone.

In my peripheral vision, the clock ticked over. 12.01 p.m.

The witching hour had arrived.