

# Driver

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Vic had enough. Enough of the car, enough of the smoke coming from his partner's cigarette, enough of the forest that stretched endlessly. His eyelids drooped. The steering wheel, held tight in his hands, kept him focused on the present. On the job he had to do.

Headlights appeared in the windshield. Another car was speeding down the tree-lined road, blinding Vic. The quiet shuffle of clothes against the leather seat caught his attention. He glanced over to see his partner, a huge man named Lucas, slump in his seat. Lucas narrowed his eyes against the light and lowered his head. Vic turned his eyes back onto the road and heard the other car race past them, its engine roaring against the quiet in the cab.

They were alone again.

Beside him, Lucas sat back up and yawned loudly. Annoyance and exhaustion gnawed at Vic and he spoke up. "Want a turn? I could use some rest."

"Not my job."

Lucas tugged at his seatbelt. He rested his head against the window and shut his eyes. That was the end of the conversation. Vic stayed focused on the road.

Trees blurred by, blending into a canvas of greens and browns in the

headlights. The soft hum of the car was the only sound. It lulled him, his already-tired mind drifting off to other things. Warm days, soft music, the girls.

The girl.

Maybe it was the exhaustion and the claustrophobic feeling that plagued his mind, but in the blur of the road and the trees, he could see her face. The smile she wore when he first walked up to her was astonishing, bright, and kind. The smile of a girl just stepping out into the world without anyone holding her hand. The smile of a girl who hadn't been touched by suffering or pain yet, something that Vic knew was rare to see in his line of work.

Vic jerked the wheel to the side and righted the car. He had been steering them off the road. Lucas cursed and grabbed onto the handle above the window, keeping himself straight. "Jesus, man, keep it steady. It's like this is your first time."

"I haven't slept in twenty-two hours," Vic hissed. He gripped the steering wheel tighter, "I'm doing my best."

"Do better."

In the lights, Vic could see a yellow sign glaring back at him. "Keep an eye out for deer," he said to Lucas.

"I'm trying to sleep. You do it. It's—"

"It's not your job?"


Lucas wasn't the worst person to spend hours with. He was a good partner, at the very least. Vic knew he couldn't handle things without him. They didn't agree on most things, but Lucas was a necessary annoyance.

Of course he enjoyed the girl's company more. Vic's mind returned to her smile and the way her green eyes had looked into his. She had been cautious but ready to believe he was kind enough to help her with the kind of trust that put people in danger.


Headlights were coming down the road again. Lucas shifted lower in his seat and looked down at his feet. Glancing at him, Vic said, "Are you going to do that every time a car drives by?"

Lucas sat silent until the headlights passed them. When the dark covered them again he looked up.

"Can't be too cautious."



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Vic rolled his eyes and shook his head, feeling himself slide into a relaxed state again. Lucas was right, unfortunately. They had to be careful. Everything had to be handled with care if they wanted a big paycheck.

The forest carried on, lost and lonely. Vic had met the girl here. She was a lot like them, lost and lonely, yet she managed to smile when he approached her. She had a bike with a popped tire. "I must have rolled over a nail or something." She had laughed. Her voice was light and lovely and reminded Vic of the music his mother used to play.

"I might be able to help you," Vic told her, picking up her bike. "I've got a car not far from here. I could give you a ride wherever you need to go."

She had been cautious, but Vic was persistent. He never had to try hard to get a girl to like him, he was charming. As they walked back to the car, her sweet voice filled the cold air as she turned everything she could think of into a conversation. His hands hurt as he carried her bike back to the car, but the girl beside him made it bearable.

Vic blinked slowly and removed one hand from the steering wheel to rub at his face. He slapped his cheek a few times to try to wake himself up. Lucas sighed and leaned against his window again, shutting his eyes.

At the edge of the headlights, Vic saw a shape dart out into the road. Slamming his foot on the brake, he braced himself and twisted the wheel. His body crashed into the window, knocking his head against the glass. Lucas gripped the handle. The car spun, the engine sputtered, and the tires screamed as they fell off the asphalt and onto the soft ground. Vic's breathing hitched and the headlights seemed to fade. In front of them, a doe stared at the car, eyes wide and legs locked in place.

Lucas swore and kicked open the door. Vic reached for the headlight switch, hands shaking, and turned them off as Lucas ran forward to see if the car had been damaged. Behind him he heard a groan of pain. Vic glanced in the rear-view mirror and saw the girl in the back.

Her hands were still tied and the tape on her mouth seemed secure. Beside her, the bike rested on the floor of the car, ready to be disposed of when they got to their final stop. A huge red welt had formed on her forehead. Her green eyes were watery and as wide as the doe's.

"Damn it." Vic opened the door and hopped out. "Lucas! She's awake."

Lucas emerged from the darkness, a silhouette against the sky. He walked past Vic, face set in a frown. Vic kept his back to him. The car door opened and he heard a squeal. A heavy thud made everything quiet once again. Without a word, Vic climbed back into the driver's side and shut his door. Shame boiled inside him as Lucas stalked around the front of the car and got into the passenger's seat. They both knew Vic should have been paying more attention but it was too late to talk about it. They had somewhere to be. He twisted the key and started the car, pulling it off from the side of the road and leaving only the skid marks behind.

It was fifteen minutes before Vic finally broke the silence. "Is she well enough?" Vic glanced in the side mirror and watched the forest disappear behind them as they cleared the trees. "You hit her pretty hard."

"Doesn't matter. Someone will take her."

Vic's hands gripped the steering wheel tighter. Beside him, Lucas cleared his throat and settled deeper into the seat. Behind him, the girl was quiet, her breathing labored and strained. He blinked his eyes and lifted a hand to rub at them, thinking about how he could rest for as long as he wanted when the job was done.

The road stretched on, wide and open and lit by streetlights as far as he could see. •