

This is how I'm going to die, she thought. Ground to mush under somebody's wheels while an idiot yells at me. And I don't even know who I am.

She wrenched the steering wheel hard to her right, but it wasn't enough to avoid the SUV as it slammed into them again, their increasingly fragile car buckling under the impact.

"Faster, faster! Get in front of him!" he barked.

"You want to get out and push?" she snapped back.

"Look out!" He lurched into her, braced for impact. The motion caused her to swerve dangerously to the right but helped them dodge their pursuer's next sideswipe.

"Stop doing that!" she yelled, but he was already looking behind as the SUV dropped back, kicking up dirt as it recovered from the missed attack.

"Right. Good. He's slowing down. We need to get off this road," he said, one hand urgently gripping her shoulder.

"There's nowhere to go," she replied darkly. "Straight road all the way from here."

"He's gaining, he's gaining!"

She risked a glance in the rear view mirror – and received a blinding flash of light for her troubles.

Disorientated, glowing trails in her vision from the SUV's high beams, she started to drift off line. Their car bounced awkwardly as the road gave way to soil.

"The hell are you doing? This way!" he said, grabbing the wheel and pulling to the left.

With a jarring crunch, the car briefly left the tarmac then bounced again as it slid back into the centre of the road.

He shouldered her out of her seat, taking the wheel fully as she squirmed into the passenger side.

"I can't see, I can't see!" She swore and frantically rubbed her watering eyes.

"I... I don't know where we're going," he admitted, the fear in his voice shaking her out of her panic.

"You have to fight it," she said. "If we forget, after everything we've seen tonight..."

"They win, I know." He gripped the wheel grimly. "There's just one problem." He turned to her slowly. "I don't know who you are."

She held his gaze.

Light flooded the cabin along with a deafening roar, as the SUV blasted into their rear at full speed.

Glass shattered. Burning smell of rubber as tyres skidded.

Something hit her across her forehead, and suddenly everything was --

The first thing she heard was the noise.

A loud, continuous sound, like one of those horns in old petrol cars. Metallic, angular.

The next thing she heard was a loud *slam*, kinetic enough to rouse her. She found herself slumped face first across something circular and leathery.

The girl stirred, disturbing long tresses of auburn hair. She lifted a hand to brush the hair away and it came back sticky. Wet and red. Blood, and unfortunately for her it seemed to be her own.

She lifted herself a little further, easing the pressure on what she now saw was a steering wheel, definitely from an old gas-driven vehicle. The horn stopped blaring, her head carried on pounding.

She looked around, disorientated, peering out through a splintered windscreen. Her vision was still foggy. The cut across her forehead continued to bleed.

Outside, she could see smoke rising from the engine, the front of the car crumpled up against a large, solid object like discarded origami.

Well, she thought to nobody in particular, *here I am*.

With a blink, she realised she had no idea who she was, where she was or how she'd come to be spread across the dashboard of what she was fairly sure wasn't her car.

Flush with the knowledge that she at least still knew what origami was, she reached across and tried the door handle. It took a few painful slams with her shoulder before the door popped open, and the girl spilled onto the harsh pavement outside.

Untangling herself from the seatbelt with some effort and several muttered curses, the girl managed to get to her feet.

She had just enough time to take in her black dress, scuffed boots and fetching red leather jacket before she keeled over, head spinning. The pavement welcomed her with open arms.

Deciding she'd maybe better take it easy until she got her wind back, with the help of the car's chassis she hauled herself back upright to take a better look around.

It was dusk, the sun burrowing a burnt orange trail through the dark blues around it.

In the distance, a twitching hand had sketched a jagged skyline of buildings, spires of every shape and dimension pushing away from the unwelcome streets below and roughhousing each other in competition. Dark specks rolled steadily through the sky at several heights, pinpricks of multi-coloured lights starting to flick on across the cityscape.

She looked over the car – some kind of mass-produced Japanese model, too much damage to identify it cleanly. They were so easy to import these days, people bought them as easily as their groceries, much to the chagrin of petrolheads and other outdated enthusiasts.

The immovable object that had so rudely brought the car to a halt was a metro stop, a functional shelter of plain, coloured plastic and steel. Cubic sprinkles of shattered Plexiglas lay scattered across the pavement.

The pole-mounted display board seemed to have taken the brunt of the impact, keeled over drunkenly to one side. Its cheap red LED screen flashed up epileptic patterns of unintelligible characters. No times, no locations.

She squinted, instinctual memories rising through the soupy mess of her short-term memory to tell her these sorts of outdoor metro stations only serviced the old tramlines these days, banished for the most part outside the city limits. A reminder of a past the urbanites would rather forget.

Alright, not total memory loss then, she decided with relief. That would imply I do not have a serious head injury.

Bracing herself against the car's wing for support, she took a moment to three-sixty her surroundings, looking for clues. Preferably a big neon sign looping footage of the last twenty-four hours, but failing that a written summary would be just fine.

The creeping, distant sun illuminated a cluttered vista of irregular buildings, old pressed up against new like commuters on a busy train carriage. Ugly concrete grey next to faux modern plasteel frontages. No distinctive logos, signs, or more importantly road signs to tell her where she was.

Some of the buildings were apartment complexes – the playset-style straight edges and happiness vacuum colouring made that clear enough. Others looked like they'd once tried to be small shops and businesses, but the padlocked steel shutters protecting every windowed entrance showed what a capital idea that hadn't been.

Wincing, she pressed a hand to her injured forehead while rifling through her jacket pockets for fresh data.

She produced a wallet, stuffed with what she already knew wasn't money, but she parked her bruised behind against the car and opened it regardless.

A few tatty photographs, which she clamped under one thumb to check in a moment. Definitely no cash or cards. A jumble of receipts, standard wallet detritus.

Finally, salvation – a rectangular card, its rough surface sparking an instant sense memory as she slid it into view.

An ID card. A glinting hologram of a woman's face, late twenties.

Leaning back through the open car door, the girl checked her face in the wonky rear-view mirror, and to her relief the faces matched, albeit one more bloodied than the other. Same light blue eyes and pale skin. Could use more moisturiser.

She checked the card again, turning it over to scan tiny printed lettering on the reverse:

Name, Natasha Anastasia Tyreen.

Anastasia?

Date of birth, July 29 2018. A home and office address. Birmingham Central, a street she already knew was best avoided after dark.

Success! Her elation lasted right up until she read the field marked 'Occupation'.

Private investigator.

Somewhere in her mind, a lantern swung onto a filing cabinet, its top drawer lazily sliding open to let a tumble of memories drift to the floor.

"Okay," Natasha said aloud. "That's a start."

She checked the photos next – herself standing next to a currently unidentified man, both mugging for the camera. They suggested familiarity. Maybe even intimacy?

She peered at his face again, grimacing. He didn't look like her type.

Shoving the wallet back into her jacket, Natasha gingerly put her weight on one foot, then the other. Safe to walk. For now, at least.

She glanced back at the car. Golden fluid was now dribbling out of some mangled component within the engine, as if the vehicle was weeping over its own demise.

Thinking better of trying to start it, Natasha looked up and down the long, featureless street – more blank, lifeless buildings however far she scanned – before looking back at the car.

It was facing east. Wherever she was going, she'd been trying to get away from what lay back west.

"Wagons ho..." she muttered, stuffing her hands in her jacket pockets and marching down the street in the direction the car was still pointing.

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Trudging on, Natasha took a moment to survey the terrain, looking for more sparks to light the cavern of her recent memory.

Let's review the facts, she thought. I crashed somebody else's car in a part of a city I don't immediately recognise, so given the fact I'm an investigator, that would suggest I was either trying to catch or run away from someone or something.

Lots of construction work all around – half-finished shells of towers and office blocks like filleted animals. Abandoned and complex-looking heavy machinery and vehicles. Piles of unattended supplies too bulky or low value to try and steal.

I woke up alone, so maybe I was trying to get to somewhere?

As tarpaulin sheets rustled in the light breeze, exposed steel girders and foundations creaking forlornly, Natasha tried to make out construction firm names, recognisable logos, anything that would tell her where she was.

Did I even know where I was going, or did I just have my foot down hoping for the best?

The vehicles were bulky, advanced, many sporting multiple cabins, long articulated arms resting casually atop cinder blocks. It looked enough like break time at the robot factory to elicit a dry chuckle from Natasha.

And where the frig am I?

Still no answers. Head down, she powered on.

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Natasha found herself passing a long row of parking garages, stacked symmetrically many storeys high. Ladders and ramps criss-crossed at regular intervals to allow easy access even for the unlucky cabins at the top.

Graffiti slogans covered every locked steel shutter – gang tags, abuse, immature political slogans. Even if she recognised any, Natasha had a feeling she wouldn't be able to read the spiky lettering.

One door had been wrenched open – inside, dozens of once carefully-stacked boxes had been torn through and looted. Miscellaneous computer equipment was strewn across the floor, making Natasha curious enough to crouch down and sift through it.

Something bubbled up from her memories, rushing towards the surface quicker than she could process it --

An office. Arguing with somebody. A man. Stubborn. Something about storage capacities of flash drives. Then --

With a start, she was back in the present. Whatever that memory was from, it wasn't much help right now. She'd need to wait for more.

Seeing nothing else of use, Natasha headed on. It was starting to get darker, rows of tall neon lights lining the streets casting a chilly blue-white glow.

Natasha heard something closer to actual human civilisation up ahead – voices, music, rumblings of traffic. Time for some answers.

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Natasha turned a corner and onto a street containing a cluster of shops – squat buildings nestled in between large, anonymous tower blocks. The first open businesses she'd encountered so far. Still no building looked like the one next to it.

People at last – but nobody seemed willing to make eye contact. As an elderly couple hastened their shuffle to get past her, Natasha took a moment to look herself up and down.

With the bruises forming, the dirt and tears on her clothing and the crusted smear of dark red across her forehead, given the choice she'd probably cross the street to avoid herself too.

Chewing her lip, she spotted a pay phone, the universal blue-handset-in-a-circle symbol illuminated by a strip of neon like an angel was waving her over.

Natasha peered inside and exhaled bitterly at the sight of a video screen hammered to inactivity by some persistent vandal. The keyboard was missing all the useful letters of the alphabet, and she didn't even want to guess what biohazard the handset seemed to have been dipped in.

There was an open doorway behind her to some kind of convenience store – trestle tables outside had been cleared of goods, but the tinny bhangra music floating outside drew her in like a cartoon dog following the smell of bacon.

Natasha strode towards the entrance, glancing to her side as she heard a suspicious shout of alarm, instinctual danger senses triggered.

Attention diverted, she collided with a man stumbling backwards out of the shop. The two bumped together in a moment of mumbled apologies.

"Sorry, sorry," the man said, before Natasha could get a good look at him.

She reacted with a jolt – it was the man from the photographs in her wallet, looking as disorientated as she had when she woke after the crash.

He was lean enough to warrant feeding, good-looking in that suspicious way a naughty old dog can be, and sporting a day's stubble and bleary red eyes.

He made to step away, but she grabbed his arm, eyes wide.

"Wait – wait!"

He turned to face her, brow furrowing in confusion as he scanned her features. "Do I..."

"Know me? God, I hope so. I can't remember a fat lot of anything else."

"Me either," he said. "Good job I found this."

He opened one half of his scruffy jacket, revealing a label sewn into the lining. Blocky characters spelled out 'Property of Jack Segreto.'

Natasha raised her eyebrows as Jack grinned proudly back at her. "I'd like to think I did that myself, because I'm that clever," he said, "but I'm pretty sure my mum did it for me, in preparation for a situation just like this."

Noticing a brown paper bag in his hand, Natasha glanced inside – a bottle of whiskey, freshly purchased. Already open.

"Found some change in my sock," Jack shrugged. "I was running on instinct."

Taking charge, Natasha led him by the arm away from the shop entrance. The jowly Indian owner was already peering critically at the battle-scarred duo, and Natasha was keen to avoid rousing further suspicion.

"Alright, Jack... I'm Natasha. Apparently." Taking out her wallet, she showed Jack the photos, letting him flip through them. "And I think you and I need to talk."

Jack met her gaze, nodding solemnly. "Can I bring my booze?"

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Seated within a booth occupying a quiet corner of a brightly-decorated fast food outlet, Natasha shifted uncomfortably in her seat, craning round to take in their temporary sanctuary.

Video screens on the wall looped corporate adverts and jingles, each more nauseating than the last. Flickering, cheaply-processed 3D visuals floated in the air around the screens.

The other patrons were the usual dregs, trapped in the no-man's land between the shops closing and dinner being ladled out of the hydrator. Disinterested faces poked at orange brown nuggets masquerading as chicken, slurped from oversized cups, and in some cases forwent civility altogether, scooping variously-colourised mush by hand straight out of its cardboard containers.

Natasha turned back round, shoving the leaves of an offensively plastic potted plant out of her face. She'd been able to clean up her injuries a little in the dingy bathroom, but trying to avoid touching any actual surfaces in the process hadn't left her with much improvement.

Her eye was drawn to another video, something showing a sizzling slab of meat on an open-flamed grill, the dancing yellows suddenly hitting her like --

Fire. Screams. People running, shouting. A column of flames, stumbling towards her.

No! A man, a figure burning, crying out for help, and she was turning away, knowing she had to run.

A girl's voice called out her name, somebody she knew but couldn't see, somebody just behind her if she could only turn and --

She jumped, nerves still a little tight, as a stereotypically bored waitress deposited two sorry-looking burritos on plates before them.

Jack rubbed his hands together happily, nodding his thanks to the already-retreating waitress before starting to unwrap the foil covering of his affront to Mexican cuisine. He looked up, noting Natasha's sudden lack of colour. "Are you alright?"

"I think we're both a long way from alright," she said, rubbing her eyes. "I keep getting flashes of things I'm pretty sure I'm not going to enjoy remembering."

"Then it's a good job I remembered enjoying the output of this particular franchise," he said, jerking a thumb towards the purple-toned logo on the wall. "Eat. It'll help."

Natasha poked at her package experimentally, as if making sure the meat was actually dead.

"Come on, now's not the time to be fussy," said Jack through a mouthful, a habit Natasha realised she'd hated about him for years. "Brain food."

Is it good or bad that we seem to have known each other for years?

She leaned forward and rubbed her temples. The smell rising from her burrito-in-name-only didn't help her headache, nausea or feelings towards kidney beans. "My brain feels like it's in open revolt at the moment," she said. "I don't think introducing whatever this is into the equation will help."

"This magnificent feast represents most of what little cash I had left, so eat up," he replied.

She leaned back, stretching and wincing as her side pulled painfully. "What's the last thing you remember?"

Jack paused. "Wanting a sandwich."

"I mean before five minutes ago."

Jack put his food down, staring thoughtfully as he chewed. "There was... something we were meant to do. Vaguely important. I don't think it had gone the way we planned. After that, I kind of remember being in a car and travelling pretty fast."

"Do you remember crashing?" Natasha asked.

Jack shook his head. "I remember waking up in the back of a car wrapped round a metro stop, and not knowing where or even who I was. Got out, started walking. Navigated to the offy on autopilot."

"Same for me, more or less," said Natasha. "We were doing... something, then some shouting, then a car, then... either side of that, blurred lines refusing to form into a coherent visual."

"What about the basics? Where you went to school, name of your first pet, that kind of thing?" asked Jack, still focused more on his lunch than the mystery at hand.

"Coming back to me, but nothing I can rely on. I might have had a cat, or a rabbit. Nothing about school except I had a maths tutor called Vijay whom I disliked intensely, because he always marked me down for my algebra." She ran a hand through her tangled hair unhappily. "My memory seems to be working like a bookshelf that's been given a shake – the newest stuff at the top is gone, the older memories at the bottom are still there."

Natasha tapped her chin thoughtfully, looking across to Jack as he munched noisily. Strings of melted cheese were making a break for freedom. "I've ruled out one theory, at least," she said.

"Which was?"

"That we were boyfriend and girlfriend, on the run from our oppressive families after they tried to keep us apart."

Jack snorted a laugh. "What, you don't think we could be?"

Natasha quirked an eyebrow. "Watching you eat is making me want to develop an eating disorder, so no. Did you find an ID card or anything?" She reached into her wallet for her own, sliding it across the table for Jack to read. "Maybe we work together?"

"Do I look like a private investigator to you?" Jack smiled after reading it.

"No more than I do," she countered, starting to empty out her jacket pockets onto the chipped Formica table.

More receipts, a pen, a portable music player with no charge, a scratched and broken phone (one of the cheap models without the usual VR or 3D augmented displays) also without power, and several printed plastic tabs Natasha recognised as public transport tickets.

Jack tapped the tickets. "Start with them."

Natasha scooped them up, scanning for dates, times and destinations. "I'm wondering if it wouldn't just be quicker to call the police," she said.

Jack froze, mid-bite.

Natasha looked up, frowning. "Are you alright?"

"Every muscle in my body just tensed when you said the..." Jack lowered his voice. "... 'p' word."

"Fine. No police," she replied testily. She held up one ticket, tapping the destination. "We have a place to start looking now. I think I saw a tube entrance not far from here. Let's follow our own trail backwards."

"Hang on," Jack replied. "Given the speed we hit that station, we were in a pretty big hurry to get away from wherever our trail started. Why should we hurry back there?"

"Because I don't like not knowing things," said Natasha, rising to her feet. "I'm tired, dirty, and in just the right amount of pain for it to infuriate me into action." She stepped away from the table, leaving her unopened burrito.

"Don't you want --"

"No," she answered.

With a greedy grin, Jack snatched up the foil package, shuffled out of the booth, and followed Natasha out of the restaurant.

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Back at the scene of the crash, police tape and cordons marked off a wide area around the half-demolished metro stop. Small flashing blue cones guarded the edges of the no-entry zone. The cordons were defiant hoops of modular hardened plastic, easily reconfigured and arranged to keep the snoopers back.

A handful of said snoopers had gathered at the fringes of the barrier – passers-by with little better to do, an international student taking an excessive amount of pictures and a few lean-faced characters making sure police attention was focused elsewhere for the time being. Rubberneckers hadn't changed much over the years and seemed unlikely to start now.

Two sleek police cruisers were parked alongside a bulky white van, its roof racks crowded with an array of exotic equipment including cameras and adjustable boom microphones. The cruisers

enjoyed an aquatic edge to their bodywork that betrayed their cheaply-contracted origins, but with enough of them lined up, blue lights circling, they managed to cut an intimidating presence.

Two uniformed officers, clad in thick protective body armour, kept watch at the barricades. A clear lens over each officer's right eye connected to an earpiece, the officers scanning the nearby crowd with practised sweeps.

Inside the crashed car, a white-overalled forensics officer was leaning lightly across the front seat, running a handheld scanner the size of a hardback novel across the steering wheel and dashboard. A pop-up 3D display was building up a set of fingerprints line by line, building detail with each pass.

A third car rolled up to the scene, dash-mounted blue light pulsing softly from within. It paused at the edge of the cordon, waiting for one of the officers to tap commands into a flexible keyboard mounted on his sleeve.

At the remote instruction, the cordons shifted and compressed, making a gap wide enough for the late arrival to roll safely into the scene before easing shut behind it with a faint whirr of hydraulics.

The car disgorged two plain clothes detectives – a tall man speaking into his phone and a slim woman already surveying the crash site. He was all business – smartly dressed, clean shaven, reserved of movement. Her crisp cheekbones and luxurious hair suggested an affluent background, but her tight body language hinted at an attitude born on the streets.

"Alright, appreciated as always," Detective Sergeant Burton Wilkes said into the phone, "over and out." He tapped his thumb against the phone to end the call and lock it, joining his partner Jessica Clemens as she examined the abandoned car. "Plates are a match," he said.

"So where's the driver?" asked Jessica.

"Same place as the passengers, I expect. Continuing to make their way from the scene of the accident."

Jessica looked round, taking in the chilly quiet that only the absence of life could create from the anonymous concrete buildings all around. "Lozells is such a charming part of town, isn't it? Nearest thing resembling civilisation out here would have to be..."

Her gaze found the cluster of shops and buildings some way up the road, a sprinkle of lights amidst the blackness from the tower blocks all around.

Burton nodded an affirmative. "Get a head start, I'll pick up what I can from here and meet you on the way."

Jessica set her jaw and started walking, stepping over the barriers without so much as a glance towards the uniformed officers.

One officer shook his head after Jessica. The other joined Burton near the car and waited for the SOCO inside to finish her initial sweep.

"Three guesses how many people are volunteering information at the scene, guv," the officer said, hands tucked inside his flak jacket for warmth. Burton noticed tiny green lettering scrolling past

inside his eyepiece lens, the officer's eye flicking and blinking to select and respond to prompts as required. The devices were known as SmartEyes, and Burton was glad he rarely had to use one, given the migraines they always caused him.

"About as many as I'd expect. Witnesses won't count for much out here, constable. This whole postcode's been a ghost town ever since the riots."

"What brought the suspects out this way, do you think?"

"If we're dealing with who I think we are, a prodigiously poor sense of direction," answered Burton.

"Got someone in mind for this already?" asked the constable.

Burton shifted towards the forensics tech as she emerged from the car. "Anything newsworthy?" he asked as the tech removed her hood and mask. She held up the scanner's screen to him, showing a clear set of fingerprints.

"Whoever was driving wasn't concerned with keeping their identity a secret, guv," she said.

"Database is running, should have a hit back shortly if there's a match."

Burton nodded, leaving her to head back towards the van to log her findings. He chewed his lip, taking out his phone and rotating it absently in one hand.

"Shall we call another few cars in, start canvassing the area?" asked the constable. "I can get a bulletin out on P-Net in a minute if you like."

Burton shook his head, putting his phone away. "DC Clemens and I can handle it from here. Keep the perimeter and wait for the recovery vehicle to get this all cleared up."

The officer nodded, stepping away to resume his watch over the crash.

Behind him, the forensics officer was pulling on a large glove-shaped instrument. She flexed her fingers experimentally a few times. Once secure, she held it out, palm down, and pulled a finger towards her to trigger a pulse of light, radiating out from where she stood.

As it passed over the tarmac and pavement around the crashed vehicle, footprints were illuminated in a weak yellow glow, the device highlighting traces of tracks leading out and away from the car.

With some space to himself, Burton exhaled heavily, concern showing through his professional veneer. "Please don't let this be you," he muttered, heading for the cordon and stepping over to follow Jessica's trail.