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At 2 a.m., Terry Bronson put on her boots, coat and scarf, and left her house, locking the front door behind her. She'd looked in on her friend, Nicky Hallett, who was dead to the world, snoring loudly. The little tabby cat, who'd claimed this room as her own since her son Patrick had left for varsity, was crouched uncomfortably, and clearly indignantly, at the foot of the bed.

Terry started her car, switching on the windscreen wipers and the demister for both front and back windows. Scratching around in her bag, she found her glasses, and put them on.

She hated driving in the dark, and it was infinitely worse in the rain – although, fortunately, it seemed to have stopped for now. She hoped it would hold off for a while.

She pulled away from the pavement and drove to the stop-street at the end of the block, then she turned left, right at the next stop, and left onto the main road to the farmlands.

This would have been the route her daughter's friend, Jess, had driven earlier – if, Terry thought, Rosanne and Jess had actually gone to a party on Ryan Chapel's family's farm, where they'd said they were going, and not somewhere else completely. Her 17-year-old daughter, Rosanne, or Annie, as most people called her, had become so economical with the truth that Terry never knew when she was being told fact or fiction; she suspected that almost everything Rosanne told her at the moment was a lie of some dimension.

At this time of night and in this weather, the road was deserted, for which Terry was grateful. She drove slowly, concentrating hard. It was pointless for her to scan the roadsides. Her extreme shortsightedness and night-blindness made it impossible for her

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to see much beyond the headlights. What she did do was open the car's front windows. If there was anything critically audible in the cold, still night, she didn't want to miss it.

She drove the eight kilometres towards the bridge like this, hearing the shushing sound of the car's wheels on the wet road, but nothing else. Twice she had to swerve to avoid tree branches lying in the road, and once a tiny creature, its eyes glittering in her headlights, dashed across in front of the car. Thankfully she was driving slowly enough for it to make the crossing unharmed.

Approaching the bridge, Terry could hear the roar of the water. The heavy rains had swollen the river to the point where it had broken its banks, flooding the surrounding vineyards and putting them under water that would take weeks to subside.

She drove slowly onto the bridge, and the sound of the river became much louder. It was the continuous thunder of an unstoppable life force ... sobering to think that mere water could make such a powerful noise. She had to swerve to avoid something low, squat and solid protruding a short distance from the hard shoulder into her lane, but, again, it wasn't hard to do because she was driving so slowly.

Terry exhaled with relief when the car got safely to the other side.

The Chapel farm was down a dirt road to the left, about a kilometre on. As far as she could tell, the only thing growing there was old cars in various states of dilapidation, up on bricks. The front yard was full of them.

She'd dropped Rosanne at the farm on a few occasions since her daughter had started seeing their son, Ryan. The father seemed to be as poorly socialised as his offspring. Although Rosanne had absolutely forbidden her mother to come in and meet him, Terry had waved to him from the car from time to time, but she never got a friendly reaction. Once there'd been a

very brief, almost imperceptible nod, but usually it was just a short, hard stare. The mother, according to Rosanne, had run off when Ryan was a baby. No surprise there.

The dirt road was a horror story, churned to mud by the rain and the passage of other vehicles that had come this way before her. Terry tried to keep her speed slow and steady but she could feel the tyres slipping, and was afraid that if she stopped, she wouldn't be able to get the car moving again.

She hunched over the steering wheel, staring through the windscreen at the chocolate-coloured waves of road ahead, carefully navigating holes and ridges, the car occasionally slewing sideways. She was all too aware of the powerfully rushing water of the river in the inky darkness somewhere to her left, running parallel to the road. Fearful and anxious, she was suddenly also filled with anger at Rosanne: how dare she put her through this bloody worry!

At last, she saw the entrance to the Chapel farmstead on the right. It had no identification other than an untidy hand-lettered sign wired to the gate that read 'Trespassers will be shot. Survivors will be persecuted'. The message – and the mistakes – tell you all you need to know about the people living here, she thought uncharitably.

She stopped her car in front of the gate. Her headlights illuminated the car graveyard. She could vaguely make out the looming shape of the house behind it, and could see only one dim light on in a room at the far end of the building.

She turned off the engine, killed the lights and sat quietly, listening.

There was silence, other than the perpetual rumble of the invisible river, now behind her, across the muddy road. The party – if there had indeed been a party here – was clearly over.

She took her phone out of her coat pocket. It was 2.45 a.m.