

ease her muscles on a treadmill, maybe, after some weights. As the rain grew more violent, trickling down the back of her neck and plastering her fringe to her forehead, it occurred to her to run.

*Just cut your losses; tonight's not the night for it. Make an excuse later. You've got plenty of time to think one up.*

Over the bridge, she glanced at the eerie phosphorescence of the rain-swollen river, a muted white explosion as the flow of the water met the boulders at the riverbank. *I wonder if there's a troll under here*, she thought, then quickly thought of something else.

Once she was past the bridge, the road grew straight and flat, bordered only by bushes separating farmland on either side. The rain eased off into a steady drizzle, and Stephanie felt comforted in the simplicity of the route ahead.

A big, heavy vehicle approached behind her. Even before its headlights picked her out in the road ahead, Stephanie could imagine the water it displaced, as if a tank was fording a river. Looking over her shoulder, all she could see were twin beams, painfully bright in the gloom. The vehicle slowed, and pulled up beside her, the rain cast in molten sparks through its headlights. Rain slicked the passenger-side window as it slowly lowered. A cheery, broad face appeared. ‘You all right there, love?’

‘I’m fine,’ she managed, making eye contact with him. Then she spoiled this assertiveness by adding: ‘I do wish I was a duck, all the same.’

The driver grinned. ‘That’s the truth. Don’t suppose I can offer you a lift? It’s a devil of a night to be out here on your own.’

‘I’m fine, thanks. I’m just going along the road, here.’

‘You sure?’

‘Absolutely sure. Final answer.’

‘Well... I had to ask. Take care. I hope your god goes with you.’ The window buzzed closed again, and the Land Rover moved off, its tail-lights receding in the horizon, and then lost in a sudden bend.

His name was Jed Mulrine, and the police were very interested in him for a long time afterwards. They took great care to trace his movements, as well as examining his Land Rover in quite literally forensic detail. These inquiries established firmly that Jed Mulrine had made no physical contact with Stephanie, that he was telling the truth, and that he was most likely the last person to see her walking on that road.

This final part of their conclusions was not correct.

After another half a mile of progress, a set of lights approached her from the opposite side of the road.

Stephanie had a long time to consider the vehicle. It had full beam on – understandably, given the conditions and the fact that she was out here in the sticks, utterly alone – and as the laser-bright beams flashed past her, she anticipated that the driver would douse them, upon seeing her. But the driver didn't, and Stephanie flinched. The light was unbearable, even with her eyes closed, searing through her eyelids. She had to hold up a hand to block off the unruly brightness.

The car slowed down as it passed. Then the brakes squeaked; she heard the backwash as it came to a complete stop.

Stephanie looked back to see the twin red eyes of the brake lights. Then the reversing lights blinked on, and the car backed up.

Something in this jolted her, and she quickened her step. But the car was quicker, of course, and soon it had stopped just a few feet before her.

The full beam was still on, and she could not make out any details, other than dark paint. The driver's side door opened, and a long, black silhouette appeared, the image as blurred and inconsistent as a lick of flame in negative.

Even before the figure lunged at her, Stephanie knew what was about to happen. It was the same feeling as when she swam in the sea, and realised she was out of her depth. A yawning sensation, a realisation that what was beneath her might drop down for all eternity. That something that lurked down there might grab her.

She turned; there was a break in the treeline to her left, leading onto the farmland, and she sprinted flat out for it.

Footsteps pounded the road behind her.

No one reported any screams; no one drove past; and that was as far as Stephanie travelled along that long dark road.