The Moon was Low and Close

Her bed was warm and through the crack in the curtains she could see stars stamped across the hard, black sky. She turned over and looked at the clock. The digital display was green and it glowed midnight. Her mobile phone was ringing and she picked it up.

'Lydia, it's Felix,' the voice said. 'The car has come off the road into a ditch and I can't get it out. I'm not too far from home but not walking distance. Can you come and pick me up?'

'Where are you?' she asked. 'Were you driving too fast?'

'No,' he said, 'I don't know what happened exactly but I think the tyre blew out. The car turned over on its side and I had to climb out. But don't worry. I'm fine - just cold and a bit shaken.'

'Okay, I'll get dressed and jump in the car now. Whereabouts are you?'

'Well it's dark but I think I'm on Gartree Road. All I can see is fields but I'm sure I passed a sign not long ago. I'll stay by the car. You can just about see it from the road as you're driving. But I'll move further out when I hear you coming.'

'I'm getting up now,' she said. 'I won't be long.'

Lydia took off her pyjamas, pulled on jeans from the bedroom floor. She shivered as the cold material settled around her legs. Her eyes were beginning to adjust to the dark and she saw her breath form white clouds in front of her face. She pulled a jumper over her head and picked up the coat hanging on the bedroom door. Then she pushed her phone deep into a pocket and ran down the stairs.

Outside the street was frozen. The moon was low and close but nothing shone underneath its white light: the frost was too hard, too solid. She hesitated for a second before she turned the key in the ignition: everywhere was so quiet and still. She scraped the ice from the windscreen until her fingers ached and then she climbed inside the car. She turned the heater to full and she sat and waited for the glass to clear.

There was no traffic and it didn't take long to leave the bright city streets, to pass into the darker, twisting country roads and to find the road where Felix said he was. She would be there soon. Trees crowded inward, formed a canopy above her and in some places they blocked the light of the moon. She was close to the pub they'd often visited together when her phone began to ring. She took it from her pocket and the screen glowed: *Felix*.

'Hello,' she said, 'I've just passed the pub. It took a while to get off the drive because I had to de-ice the car. The roads are quiet, though, so I won't be long.'

'I've started to walk,' he said, 'I was too cold standing still and I don't like the noises from the trees.'

'What noises?' she asked.

He laughed.

'I don't know. It's dark and probably just the wind. I'm scaring myself over nothing, I'm sure. I think my nerves are frayed from spinning off the road. Anyway I'm walking now. It should be in the direction you're coming from if I've worked out where I am properly.' She could hear in his voice that he was walking fast: he was slightly out of breath.

'Okay,' she said, 'see you soon.' She ended the call and put the phone back into her pocket. The heater was blowing hot now and she turned it down.

The zip of her coat dug into her throat and she coughed. There was a gap in the trees and the moon was a crescent. This was her favourite kind of moon. Its light haloed across the sky and she thought of work the next day and how she would be tired.

How long had she been driving now? She looked at the clock: fifteen minutes had passed. This was the stretch of road where Felix said he would be, but there'd been no sign of him yet. Maybe she'd been driving too fast. What if she'd passed him already but didn't see? Despite the heat in the car, she shivered.

She could hear the wind in his phone when he answered.

'Hi, I'm on the road where you said. I've been driving for fifteen minutes now. I thought I would have found you.'

'Just keep going, you can't be far. I'm still walking.' He sounded impatient this time. And was there panic in his voice? She couldn't decide.

'Are you walking in the right direction?'

'Yes,' he said, 'I was just further back than I thought. These country roads all look the same, don't they? Have you noticed how low the moon is? It's giving me a shadow. I never realised you could cast a shadow in the dark.'

'Felix,' she said, although she didn't quite know why.

'I'll keep walking,' he said, 'and you won't miss me. Don't worry.'

Lydia locked the car doors. He was much further out than she'd thought.

The moon shone from behind the trees and it looked like a silver sunrise in the sky. Her throat was dry and she wished she'd brought a drink. It was then that she saw the tyre tracks on the road. They veered towards trees across grass that was slashed with mud.

The car. No Felix. It took her a few seconds to stop. Her stomach twisted: she hadn't passed him.

She pulled over. The wind was icy when she stepped outside and it took her breath. She moved towards the car although she wasn't sure what she was looking for. Of course he wasn't there and for a second she didn't move.

Twisted high-pitched notes crowded the air around the car. The wind picked up the noise, scattered it amongst the trees. The car radio was smashed, the display off and yet the noise kept playing. She turned the volume button but the sound stayed the same. She wondered how long a car battery took to die and she looked upwards, looked towards the dark sky.

Back at the roadside she held her phone in a shaking hand, pressed it to the side of her head. She listened to the ringing and she waited but this time Felix did not answer.