

**The Last Time
We Saw Marion**

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Chapter 1

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Sarah

MARION HAD BEEN dead seventeen years when I saw her again. Cal had seen her too; the microphone on his shirt registered his sharp intake of breath and his “Fuck!” rang out into the packed auditorium. I’d half-risen out of my chair, and at his exclamation felt myself drop back like a stone. I was thinking of the night they had taken her body away. Now that image was juxtaposed with the white-lit girl sitting a mere couple of metres away from me in the audience.



Marianne

“YOU’RE LOOKING EVEN more unwell than usual,” her mother’s voice jangled in Marianne’s head. The grimace on Geraldine’s face was unmistakable as she tested her daughter’s forehead with the back of her hand; so was her involuntary wiping movement on the leg of her slacks after withdrawing it. “Maybe you should stay away from college.”

Impossible, thought Marianne. Geraldine didn’t know this was the day of the TV recording, the only chance Marianne would have to see the author Callum Wilde. “I’m fine.”

She went, inured to the physical discomforts of illness, pain or hunger. She sat through her lessons, not taking in a thing, and stayed on to eat the apple that passed as her evening meal in the canteen.

“Are you getting the bus to Broadcasting House?”

The lights in the refectory seemed to intensify as Nicola from her history group slid into a seat at the table with her. Marianne fought the urge to cover her mouth with her hand. She could not speak until she’d methodically chewed her bite of apple. “No, I’m just gonna walk.”

“It’s free, you know.”

Marianne avoided travelling in crowds. People always stared at her, even fellow students. She set off early, reached Woodhouse Lane before the college bus got there; climbed the grey stone stairs to the entrance of Broadcasting House alone. She flicked glances around the large atrium inside the glass doors, but couldn’t see the one she was searching for.

“Are you here for the Artists of the North recording?” A young woman scribbling notes on a clipboard hurried over to Marianne. Stopping just short of her, she paused to push her glasses up the bridge of her nose.

“Yes.” Marianne had to force the word from her throat.

“You want to go round the back. You’re not allowed in to the auditorium through these doors. You’ll see a sign with an arrow pointing the way.”

In the dust-hung space of the auditorium Marianne seated herself within view of the stage, moving several times before she could settle. She picked at the fluff on her white cotton dress, suddenly aware of her fingers’ extreme boniness. They seemed alien, belonging to someone else, not hers at all.

The auditorium filled up with people. Her coat and bag were on the seat next to her but she had to move them so that someone could sit down, a large girl whose flesh spread over the armrests, sweat mixing with cloying perfume. Marianne prodded her own arms, took short breaths. She hunched herself into the centre of her seat.

Music began; a man wearing headphones stood at the front of the stage. He encouraged the audience to break into applause as the tanned presenter entered. Another man walked in from a far corner. The air buzzed, rippling, cracking open Marianne's internal silence. The two men lowered themselves into leather chairs and exchanged a private joke. The audience applauded louder; the sound hurt her ears. The man on the right wore a white loose-sleeved shirt with designer jeans. It was him, the author. He looked much as he did in the picture Marianne had seen, but was heavier now around the face and shoulders. His eyes in the lights appeared golden. She glanced from side to side, shifting in her seat, wondering if anyone could feel the heat off her skin. She recognised him so strongly, it was frightening. The recognition of him sparked awareness of another version of herself, a foreign presence within her which she feared she would disappear into. She snatched a breath and looked around in confusion, but the large girl only gave her a grin, and offered her a mint from a ragged paper tube.

Marianne couldn't take in what the interviewer said, or the responses of the author. He had once been the boy from the back of a book, but was now a vibrant physical presence. Thick, coppery hair fell across half of his face; he looked young still, but real now, not a shadowy figure from her dreams. *Small steps, Marianne. This must have happened for a reason.*

Her awareness of the spotlight's movement, the sway of the audience following the microphone on its fish pole; questions from around the auditorium, camera crew sometimes blocking her view of the author, all were secondary to the gravel voice of Callum Wilde. It rumbled through her like a pounding bass from amplified speakers. The spotlight settled on her, the microphone hovering just above her head. Time to ask her question. Her thighs pressed into the seat beneath her, but at the same time her mind and body felt disconnected from each other. She knew her lips worked, and felt air escaping as she spoke, but she couldn't hear her own voice.

A single sharp response rang from somewhere, a rolling wave through the audience. She saw the author's mouth moving and tried to make eye contact with him through the white light.

The girl in the next seat nudged her, still grinning. As she moved, scents of perfume, sweat and cigarettes broke away from her and hung in the air. Marianne held her breath. The girl offered another mint. "Get you, you made him swear!"



Sarah

I SENSED RATHER than heard the audience's collective gasp after Cal swore. I fished for my inhaler among the debris in my bag, tried to convey thoughts of calm to my brother. Cal's twin sister, apparently sitting in the audience only a few metres away from us, looked the same age as when she died.

It was impossible, but she was there. The white light on her face made her look like a ghost.

Sitting slightly behind and to the left of Cal, out of the stage lights, I saw his jaws moving. The Marion girl had asked him what made him write the brutal story of *The Shell* and he seemed to struggle for an answer. A few coughs came out of the audience and eventually the lengthening pause registered with Cal. He flexed his shoulders and straightened his spine. His shirt jutted out from the back of his neck and then settled uneasily against his skin again as he folded his arms. I noticed that my fingernails were digging into my palms and let them out slowly.

Part of me wanted to push my way into the audience and shake her shoulders. I was right back in our teenage years, when everything Marion did was calculated for greatest effect, most of all her prolonged death. Cal glanced at me, then slid down in his seat. The air in the studio felt unbreathable and hot. My mind was pulled between the present and the past, and I saw again Cal's hands clenching and unclenching the day he told Marion about the book.

"It was a long time ago; I was young," managed Cal, finally finding his voice deep in his chest. "I wouldn't have written it like that today." *The Shell* was the story of a deaf, mute girl who was raped. "I would not have had Maria murder her rapist."

After speaking about it, he barely held his composure. The muscles in his neck tightened and his hands clenched in his lap. He sat up straight again, jiggled his long legs. I calmed myself by counting my breaths.

The spotlight in the second row had dimmed. Stage lights between me and the audience meant I could no longer see

them. I craved another glimpse of Marion then. And I was sorry. *So sorry Marion, that in those few moments I was angry with you.* It was ironic that I always associated Marion with hunger: mine – to have done something different.

The presenter, Rick Dibley, had worked with Cal before. I could see him monitoring Cal's erratic movements, the restlessness of his long limbs, taking care to speak for him as the conversation tripped and waned. Cal cleared his throat a lot and had frequent sips of water. I was sure the interview would fall apart if I took my eyes off Cal. The fabric of my dress trembled. The final section of the programme was a discussion of Cal's current book.

"I've asked you a similar question before" Rick said, "but bear with me on this occasion. For the benefit of our young audience, can you tell me why your books always feature a female protagonist?" When Cal didn't answer immediately Rick said, "I'm just trying to remember whether the main characters of any of your novels are male, and I can't think of any."

Cal took another sip of water, lowered the glass carefully to the table. "I was brought up in a mainly female household. I guess my earliest influences just stuck with me." Rick was sensitive enough not to mention Marion. He paused while a screen behind the stage lit up. "We're going to finish by having a look at some footage of you at a recent awards ceremony." He looked up at the audience. "This is Callum Wilde, ladies and gentlemen, receiving the Johnson-Davies prize for *When Angels Came*, voted best psychological thriller of 1988. Please put your hands together and join me in thanking Cal for his time this evening."

Now I could stop watching Cal. I got out of my seat with as little fuss as possible and left the auditorium. Away from the stuffy studio, a cool breeze reached where I stood in the foyer, blowing through my dress. I slipped on my jacket, irritated by its weight on my arm. I needed freedom to move quickly, determined to catch a glimpse of the Marion girl before she had a chance to leave and then...I didn't know what. I just had to see her. Maybe I suspected that if she was real I would discover reassuring differences between her and our dead sister.

I could just hear the programme's closing music through the seal of the doors behind me. The girl behind the reception desk looked as if she wanted to ask me something. It would be about Cal. She opened her mouth and blurted, "I remember you, Miss."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You taught me in Art about two years ago. You've changed your hair, Miss. It used to be longer but it's nice like that."

I was flattered for a brief moment. I tried to make conversation with her and it helped me to stay calm until the doors at the end of a corridor were wedged open. The cramped space quickly filled up with people. I pushed into the crowd against the forward flow, scanned as many faces as I could. The noise of mingled voices was confusing. I was in a dream. I couldn't see her, even when the crowd had thinned right out. I must have missed her. Relief, warm as bathwater, trickled through me. At least if Cal asked I'd be able to say I tried to find her. We would go home and in the morning we'd remember seeing a girl whose hair was the same colour as

Marion's, who had the same eyes and the same skeletal face. But the memory would fade.



Marianne

THE LIGHTS CAME up in the auditorium as the recording finished. Marianne's compunction to raid a vending machine she'd spotted on the way in was powerful. She badly needed to challenge her strength of will, confront the source of her greatest fear and desire. Food. She pictured herself eating, saw how the food would blur her edges, swamp her outline until she would disappear inside the blubber. She waited until there were only a few people left, not wanting to meet anyone she knew from college. She wrapped her arms tightly around herself to control the quaking which threatened eruption. Her shell would finally break open, expose her real self. A relief, perhaps.

She thought she was alone in the passageway, but as she moved towards the brighter lights of the foyer she saw the figure leaning against the wall. The small woman, face turned away, had blonde hair cut into a kind of cap that curled around her face. Marianne knew without being able to see that the woman's eyes were blue. She was certain of it. But as she drew level with the preoccupied figure she saw that they were covered by her eyelids. Oh, surely they would fly open in a moment! She must try and slip past unnoticed.



Sarah

I REACHED FOR my inhaler again, bending forward as I leaned against the wall and took a deep breath. Held it in. Spots floated in front of my eyes. I closed them and steadied myself. When I straightened up my bag slipped off my shoulder and dropped onto the floor.

I hadn't heard her approach; the two feet almost tripped over my bag. Instinctively my hand went out to catch the girl's elbow, a sharp bone in my palm. I met her eyes, oh so familiar, felt her exhale at the same moment as I did: *You*.

Her breath was warm, bitter – an olfactory recall for me. I recoiled. *The last time I saw you, Marion, you were dead.*

She *was* dead. I'd touched her cold skin afterwards. A feeling prickled at the back of my neck: pine needles caught in my clothes. The drumming in my ears was the irregular beat of this young woman's heart. I saw it, her near skeletal hand trembling to its rhythm over her fragile ribs. She jerked her chin up and I saw her carved cheeks were furred like the skin of a peach, holding a haze of light.

"Excuse me..." I made my voice low, unthreatening.

She stared at me, light on her face making her hair seem to hover.

"I'm really sorry, I don't know how to..." *Get a grip on yourself Sarah – you're going to lose her.*

"You look like...are you?"

She slipped past me with the smooth movement of a dancer. I suddenly heard my sister's violin music in my head.

"Marion!" It broke out.

A pause. She turned to face me, the foyer lights preventing me from seeing her expression. But if I could I

think she would have been looking at me in that hard way she had. Marion had. “My name is Marianne.”

The light outlined her hair from behind now, throwing shadows across her face. “Marianne?” I blinked, reminded myself to breathe. Her gaze raised hairs on my arms. Her frame jerked as if she had just snapped back into herself. She raised her palms, white and empty. “Marianne Fairchild.”

She wore an old-fashioned white dress with a green woollen coat: a heroine in an Emily Brontë novel. Her fingers trailed the insides of her wrists, thin as branches. She plunged one hand into a deep pocket on her coat, and moved a strand of hair off her face with the other. *She could leave now, I'm not stopping her, but she's just standing here. She seems to expect something from me. I'm not ready for this. I hoped when I saw her it would be obvious she wasn't Marion. But it's not obvious enough. I don't know what to say.*

“I’m Sarah Wilde. You look just like my sister, her name was Marion... My, err – my brother is Callum Wilde, the author. Would you be interested in meeting him? I’m sure he’d be pleased to meet you...”

She was taller than me. Her hand came out of her coat pocket with a tube of lip balm, which she applied first to her bottom lip and then the top. “You look like someone as well, but I can’t think who.”

I forced myself to breathe in and out. The moment stretched; my impulsion to keep looking at her apparently matched by hers to stare at me.

“I’ll meet your brother, if you like.” Her hand shook as she replaced it in her pocket. I had the strongest sense that she had planned our meeting.

“There are some seats over there, if you don’t mind waiting; I’ll go and get him.”

I half hoped she’d be gone when I got back.



I WAITED FOR Cal outside the Green Room, wondering if I’d done the right thing. What good could it do – bringing Marion back into our lives now? When the door opened he barged past me. He ignored the huddle of students waiting for autographs. I hurried after him but a cough built in my chest and I had to slow down.

He stopped. “You should have dealt with them, Sarah. Why haven’t you been handing out those precious bookmarks of yours? I signed enough.”

He set off again. I’d forgotten all about the bookmarks. I got my breath. “You’d better stop a minute. There’s a girl... I asked her to wait in the foyer.”

He slowed down and then stopped. He had a wardrobe of faces for different occasions but I couldn’t make out the one he turned on me then. “Is it that girl, that one...?”

“She said she would meet you. Don’t be aggressive with her. Or too charming. She’s just a girl.”

I could feel sweat under my arms. Cal was highly-strung enough as it was on a good day. As for her, I couldn’t work it out. Physically she seemed brittle, but there was a steely dimension when she’d looked at me.

There she stood at the vending machine in the corner of the foyer. When she heard us, she furtively shovelled some things into her knitted bag – chocolate bars. The combination of the gaunt girl and the chocolate was jarring. She raised her

chin and gave me a half-smile, flicked her eyes over me. I knew her, and she compounded it with that artful look.

Her stark face was framed by a fringe, wings of dark reddish hair like Cal's. Almond eyes that in the foyer appeared green but memory told me would reflect amber in other lights – large and deep-set. She had a narrow nose and a deep indent above her upper lip. She pushed her lower lip out slightly at our approach, a defiant look. I told my brother her name. He took no notice of what I was saying. “Marion?” he said – “Sweet Jesus!” She didn't move or speak at first. Did she recognise him? She seemed nonchalant. Her glance slid over mine and alighted on white-faced Cal.

“Good to meet you.” A clear, cool voice. I hardly remembered Marion's. Someone began to turn off the lights but we remained in the foyer. Marianne fiddled with the shoulder strap of her bag. She shaved at a straying thread with her thumbnail. We seemed to have synchronised our breathing. I had that ‘three of us’ feeling I had grown up with. Could a ghost be so physical?

The words came fast. “Would you like to come for a coffee at Strawberry Fields with us? It's just across the road.” I could feel the blush spread across my face. My heart thumped. Marianne looked impassively from my face to Cal's. She always did well in a game of ‘cheat’, Marion did. She hooked her hair back behind her – ‘pixie ears’, we used to call Marion's. She had the shutters in her eyes down, but she changed everything with her response.

“I'll come, just for a while.”