

# ELEANOR

A woman with short, wavy grey hair is seated in a wooden chair, viewed from the side and back. She is wearing a dark, textured, long-sleeved shirt. She holds a paintbrush in her right hand, applying paint to a large canvas on an easel. The canvas features a portrait of an older woman with grey hair, wearing a light-colored, open-collared shirt. The background is a rustic studio with a window on the left showing a view of a city with a prominent dome. Various art supplies, including a jar of brushes, are visible on a table to the left. The overall atmosphere is quiet and focused.

EVAN CAHALANE

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Other Lives

Book Two



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*Eleanor*

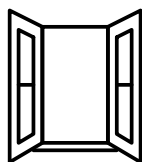
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# Part I



## Chapter One

The men had brought the wrong crate for the woman in the green dress, and Eleanor was pleased to have another half-hour with her.

One of them went out to the van while the other measured the frame again. Eleanor stood far enough away to let him work. Without the visitors, the first room seemed narrower than it had the previous afternoon; she could see how much of its apparent depth had depended on people moving between the paintings, approaching one and leaving another. The exhibition had closed on Sunday. On Monday morning the assistant had turned the sign in the window and put a stack of envelopes where the visitors' book had been.

Eleanor had come to discuss Dublin, but Inês was late, and for the moment she could look at a painting without being asked to explain it. The green dress had been cheap. She remembered the woman arriving in it, carrying her shoes in a bag because she had walked from the bus, and the effort she had made to stand comfortably once the shoes were on. Eleanor had wanted that effort in the picture. She had painted the fall of the cloth carefully, then disturbed it below the waist, drawing the green towards the weight of the body. From here she could still see the pale line she had left beside the woman's wrist. She had once meant to cover it.

The man put down his tape and asked if she could move a little to her right. She did, losing the line in the light from the entrance. For five weeks she had listened to people praise the dress as though she had chosen it for them. Now she wanted to take the picture home and stand it near the table, somewhere she could see it while working on something else.

"That one's yours, isn't it?" the assistant asked.

Eleanor nodded.

"The woman who came on Saturday asked. I said I'd have to check whether you wanted to sell it."

"You can give her a price."

The assistant took an envelope from the pile. There had been a girl with the woman, she said, who had waited on the bench while her mother went round again. Eleanor asked which other paintings she had looked at. The assistant had been answering somebody's questions about the catalogue and could not

say, but the woman had written down her number. She showed Eleanor the name, then kept the envelope beside the telephone.

Eleanor returned to the dress. She was already wondering what she would put in its place at the studio when Inês arrived, unfastening a scarf that had caught in the buckle of her bag.

"Before you tell me," she said, "they've found the crate."

"I wasn't going to."

"He rang me from the van. It's coming this afternoon."

Inês had brought the dimensions from Dublin and a plan printed across two sheets. They put them on the assistant's desk, moving the envelopes to one side. There was a long room with smaller spaces opening off it; Eleanor followed the walls, trying to imagine a visitor turning from the entrance. April had a question mark beside it. Inês had received the measurements on Friday, and the people in Dublin wanted to know whether they should continue looking at dates.

"Tell them yes," Eleanor said.

Inês smiled, a little more slowly than Eleanor had expected, and took out her pen. She had set aside two mornings next week to visit another artist, she said; if they went ahead with Dublin, she would need to keep those clear and find other days for the selection. They would have to approach the lenders again. Nothing could simply stay in its crate until spring.

Eleanor knew this. She let Inês finish, then asked for the smaller rooms to be included in the measurements they would check on a visit. She wanted to take the early landscape of the roofs, perhaps some of the work that had been left out here. The two portraits in the second room had occupied most of the newspaper coverage. She had agreed to the photographs and enjoyed seeing them in print, but there were other paintings she wanted people to know she had made.

Inês put a mark beside one of the smaller rooms. She wanted the commissions out again too, including the portrait of the woman who ran the travel agency.

"Lídia."

Inês wrote the name beside the plan, then asked whether Eleanor had anything better than the yellowed print they had used in August. They had begun the argument about that picture with heat rising from the café through the open studio windows, and Eleanor had hurried them on to something else because she wanted the morning's work finished. Now she could almost enjoy the prospect of disputing it again, with different rooms to fill and enough time to look at the original. She offered Thursday afternoon, when they could spread everything on the table.

“Three?” Inês asked.

Eleanor agreed. She pressed the curling edge of the plan flat with her palm. There might be room for a new painting as well. She had two unused boards at the studio and the portrait whose shoulder she kept changing, although she did not want to begin Dublin by promising to finish that one. The sitter had been patient through alterations that had made very little difference to her face. Eleanor had started asking her to come later in the day, as though a different hour might alter what she saw.

Inês asked what she had in mind.

“I’d like to work for a few weeks before I answer that.”

“All right. We have enough to begin with.”

Eleanor felt the small disappointment of being believed. She had wanted time and had been given it; there would be no need to describe the painting until there was something to describe. She drew the plan towards her again and asked how the light entered the long room.

They were still discussing it when the assistant came back from the entrance. A woman was asking for Eleanor. She had been told that the exhibition was closed, but she wanted to speak to her rather than look round.

“Did she give a name?”

“Marta Sequeira.”

Eleanor kept her hand on the paper. Inês was checking a message on her phone and had not looked up. For a moment Eleanor considered saying that she was expected elsewhere. She could leave by the door at the back, let the assistant take a number, and decide later what the visit required. Instead she asked the assistant to show the woman in.

Marta stood inside the entrance with her coat open and a large brown envelope held against her side. Eleanor recognised the shape of her face before she could make sense of the grey in her hair. It had been dark when they last met, drawn back tightly from her forehead. Now it was cut just below her ears, with one side pushed behind an arm of her glasses. She had seen Eleanor and was waiting for her to come over.

“Do you know her?” Inês asked quietly.

“She used to do restoration work.”

Inês began gathering the plan. She had another appointment at eleven and needed the assistant to find a receipt before she left. Eleanor could use the desk if they wanted somewhere to sit. She went towards the office, calling back that Thursday was in her diary, and Eleanor crossed the room.

Marta greeted her in Portuguese. Her voice was lower than Eleanor remembered, though perhaps that was because she was making an effort to keep it from carrying.

"I went to your studio. The café said you were here."

"I'm sorry you had to come twice."

"It's not far."

Eleanor offered her a chair at the desk. Marta looked towards the men in the next room, then at the assistant sorting through a drawer. There was no one else close enough to hear, but Eleanor suggested that they could go out for coffee if she would prefer it. Marta shook her head and sat down.

"I have to be at work by one. This will do."

She opened the envelope and took out a sheet of paper. The picture on it was black and white, printed with a wide border, and Eleanor knew it before Marta had turned it fully towards her. A woman sat beside a window, her left hand lying across her right forearm. Beyond the glass was a narrow strip of buildings. The sill ran too far into the room; where it met the figure, the painter had lost the space between her arm and the wall.

Eleanor had signed a declaration saying she had painted it. She had examined the canvas in António's rooms, with him standing beside her, and had known it was not hers. The awkward sill had troubled her then too. She had spent several minutes looking at it while he waited for her to take the pen.

"Where did you get this?" she asked.

Marta touched the white border below the image. There was a reference number, followed by the name of a photographic collection. The photographer who had worked for António had retired and deposited his archive. Part of it had been listed during the summer. Marta had found the entry under a group of commercial commissions, requested to see it, and received this reproduction the previous week.

She said it all quickly, as though she had expected to be interrupted. When Eleanor leaned closer, Marta moved the sheet towards her.

The canvas was standing on a chair. Behind it, half hidden by the top corner, was the curved handle of a cupboard Eleanor remembered from António's old rooms. She had helped him move the cupboard once, emptying drawers of photographs and packing the contents in boxes that he kept reopening because he needed something from them. The chair had a woven seat. One of its front legs was visible below the painting.

"That's before it came to me," Marta said.

Eleanor looked for a date beneath the photograph, although she knew the room. There was none on this sheet. Marta took out another page, an enlargement of part of the image, and laid it beside the first.

"There are more. This is the clearest one of the front."

A little tongue of pale paint interrupted the dark edge of the woman's sleeve. Eleanor had noticed it when the picture was brought back after the sale. At

the time she had disliked having to look closely at something she had already decided to disown. Now the enlargement gave her the same small defect, made coarse by the reproduction, and she found herself trying to judge how much of the surface had survived the printing.

"I'd have to see a better copy."

"You can. I've written down who to ask."

Marta pulled a third sheet from the envelope. It was a short letter addressed to Eleanor, with a paragraph at the bottom and two contact details. She put it down without covering the photograph.

From the office came Inês's voice, followed by the assistant's laugh. Eleanor wanted them to leave before Marta said anything more, then disliked the thought of sitting alone with her in the front room. She asked whether the photographer had supplied a date himself or whether it had been assigned by the archive.

Marta pushed her glasses up. The appointment book and the sequence had been kept together, she said. She had asked about that because she knew it mattered. She had copies of the record, but she would rather Eleanor got confirmation from the archive than later say she had accepted Marta's account without checking it.

"I'm not asking you to take my word for the date."

"I didn't say you were."

Marta drew a breath and looked away towards the painting of the green dress. One of the men had come into the room for his tape. Eleanor waited until he had found it. She could hear the assistant putting the telephone down on its cradle, the little scrape of a chair across the office floor.

"I have the photographs from my workshop," Marta said. "I still have the report. You saw them then."

Eleanor had seen them. António had told her there was no reason to accept that the first photograph had been taken as soon as the picture arrived. A substitution could have happened before Marta began documenting the work. He had made it sound like an omission someone experienced would notice, and Eleanor had repeated it when the buyer asked what she thought.

She turned to Marta's letter. The first paragraph identified the sale and the statement she had made afterwards. Sixteen years had passed. Written down in a letter addressed to her at the studio, the number seemed both excessive and entirely possible; she could account for those years through exhibitions, rooms she had rented, the two winters in which the light from the upper window had been obstructed by scaffolding. She could remember what she had been painting while Marta was trying to make people look at her photographs.

"What are you asking me to do?"

“Write to the people you told. Say the picture wasn’t changed in my workshop.”

Marta had folded her hands beneath the edge of the desk. Eleanor could see the pressure of one thumb against the other. She had expected anger, perhaps a prepared speech about what she had lost, and had begun considering what she might say about the difficulty of recalling a picture after so long. Marta was asking her to write to people whose names she still knew.

“The people involved in the sale?”

“Them. The gallery. The people who asked for their work back.”

“I don’t know who all those people were.”

“I can give you the names.”

Inês came out carrying her bag and the folded plan. Eleanor put her hand beside the photograph, resisting the impulse to turn it over. Inês paused a little way from the desk and asked whether Eleanor wanted a copy of the measurements sent to her email. Eleanor said yes, thanked her, and watched her leave. Marta had lowered her eyes to the letter. She waited until the door closed before speaking again.

“There was a piece in the trade paper. I brought that too.”

She found the cutting in the envelope, already folded to the column in question. The paper had yellowed, and a line of print disappeared into the crease. Eleanor remembered being pleased that the article had kept her statement short. It had said that she could not recognise the painting returned by the restorer as the work she had authenticated before the sale. Her name was set in heavier type near the beginning.

“They’ll need to correct it,” Marta said. “With my name. Not just something saying doubts have been raised.”

Eleanor read the paragraph twice. Beneath it, a different story began with the announcement of an appointment she had forgotten. She knew the man who had got the job; he had since left it. She found herself following the first line of that story until Marta reached across and pointed to the sentence above.

“That’s the one.”

“I can see.”

She had spoken too sharply. Marta took her hand away and began aligning the edges of the papers. Eleanor wanted to ask how she was, whether she still lived near the old workshop, but could imagine what it would sound like now. Instead she asked whether the workshop was still there.

“It’s a kitchen showroom.”

“I meant whether you were working somewhere else.”

Marta shook her head.

“I work at the reception desk of a dental practice. I’ve been there nine years.”

She looked at her watch and began telling Eleanor when she could be reached. Afternoons were difficult. She could answer an email in the evening, but she did not want messages left with the practice. Eleanor said she would use the address on the letter. While Marta was pointing it out, Eleanor remembered the old workshop's large window and the canvases standing on a shelf above the floor, each separated from the next. She had been there only once. She had disliked the smell and admired the order in which things were kept.

"You can keep those," Marta said. "They're copies."

"I'll need a little time."

"How long?"

Eleanor considered Thursday, when Inês would be at the studio, then Friday, which offered the rest of the week. She said Friday. Marta took a pen from her bag and wrote the word at the foot of her own copy of the letter.

"Will you ring me, or write?"

"I'll write."

Marta put the pen away. She had contacted Eleanor first, she said, because it was Eleanor's statement she wanted withdrawn. She would send the same material to the gallery and the paper. She wanted to give them a response from Eleanor along with it, but she would send it in any case.

"Have you spoken to António?" Eleanor asked.

"No."

"He arranged the sale."

"I know what he arranged. I'm asking you about what you said."

Her voice rose on the last words. The assistant glanced across from the office door, and Marta stopped, pressing her lips together. When she spoke again it was more quietly, with some of the words running into each other.

"I couldn't get people to let me finish telling them. They would say they'd heard from you, or that you knew your own work. That was enough. I'd go home and write it down because I thought, if I could put it properly, they would understand. I wrote to you."

"I remember."

"Then answer this one."

Marta put the remaining papers in the envelope. Eleanor stood when she did and offered to walk her to the door. Halfway there Marta stopped to let the two men carry a wrapped painting through. She moved close to the wall, holding the envelope against her coat, and watched until they had cleared the entrance. Then she said goodbye and went out. Eleanor stayed beside the door while she crossed the pavement and waited at the lights.

The assistant asked whether she wanted the papers put in a folder. Eleanor returned to the desk and gathered them herself. She had meant to stay until

the green dress came down, but the proper crate would not arrive for hours. She told the assistant she would be at the studio if anyone needed her and left with the photograph tucked inside Marta's letter.

\* \* \*

At the café she bought a sandwich she did not want and carried it upstairs with a glass of water. The studio had cooled over the weekend. She shut the high window she had left ajar, took off her coat, then put it on again before sitting at the table.

The portrait she had been working on stood where she had left it, its unfinished shoulder broadening the figure in a way she had once intended. She had been pleased with the head after the last sitting. Now she could see that she had pulled the chin too far into the light, losing a weight that the neck needed. She got up and moved the painting so that she would not have to look at it while she ate.

António had been at the opening. He had arrived late, kissed her cheek and told her that the room with the interiors was better than the photographs suggested. They had spoken for perhaps ten minutes before somebody wanted her for a picture. She had looked for him afterwards and received a message the next morning apologising for leaving without saying goodbye. A few days later they had lunch. She could still remember which table, how he had moved his glass out of the sun and asked whether she wanted the last piece of bread.

She took out her phone. His name was below a message about a book he had promised to bring her. She could tell him Marta had come, ask what he knew about the archive, and listen to what he thought they should do. The ease with which she could arrange those steps was familiar. She had imagined telling him she would write to Marta first, but there was no letter begun, and she wanted to hear his voice before she decided what to put in one.

He answered on the fourth ring.

"Eleanor. I was going to call you. How was the last day?"

"Busy enough."

"Good. I'm sorry I didn't get back. Have you eaten? I've only just stopped."

She told him about the sandwich. He wanted to know whether it was the one she had made him try, with far too much mustard, and for a few seconds she was explaining that the café had changed the bread. Then she said why she had rung.

"Marta Sequeira came to the gallery this morning."

There was a sound at his end, something being set down. He asked whether she had been on her own.

“She brought a photograph. From your old rooms. The one with the picture on the chair.”

He said nothing for a moment. Eleanor looked at the reproduction on the table. The cupboard handle behind the canvas was clearer here than it had been under the gallery lights.

“Have you got it with you?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Send it to me. Let me see what she’s found.”

She moved the glass away from the paper and laid the photograph flat. Then she held her phone above it, brought the corners into the frame and sent him the image.