



“Laugh out loud funny and poignant. I loved it!”  
—LORI FOSTER, *New York Times* bestselling author

SARA READ

## **Praise for *Johanna Porter Is Not Sorry***

“Laugh out loud funny and poignant, this debut novel gem has it all, a messy soccer mom on the run, an art heist, dubious choices, and a heartwarming love story. I loved it! Sara Read is a writer to watch.”

—LORI FOSTER, *New York Times* bestselling author

“*Johanna Porter Is Not Sorry* is a story of one woman’s excavation of identity, and the inevitable mess before the beauty happens. Debut author Sara Read’s prose is agile and evocative in this nuanced exploration of human imperfection, reminding us how sometimes the transformation we seek can only happen when we get out of our own way. Vivid, visceral, and sexy—I loved it.”

—JEN DEVON, author of *Bend Toward the Sun*

**Also by Sara Read**

*Johanna Porter Is Not Sorry*

For additional information about Sara Read, visit her website,  
[www.sararead.net](http://www.sararead.net).

# **Johanna Porter Is Not Sorry**

*Sara Read*



For Bobby, who makes lots and lots of room for me.

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# 1

*The Pinedo family cordially invites you  
to a private party to celebrate the opening of  
the Nestor Pinedo Retrospective.  
Friday, January 20. Nine o'clock.  
Shimon-West Gallery,  
North Capitol Street, Washington, DC.*

Johanna,

I do hope you will join our little gathering. Father is finally starting to feel his age and hopes very much to see you again. There are so few friends left from the old days. Time comes for us all, no?

Saludos,

Pilar

Fuck their party. Fuck this expensive invitation, which some unpaid intern probably agonized over for weeks. Fuck Nestor Pinedo and his retrospective. Fuck Pilar Pinedo and her little personal note in her elegant handwriting. Fuck their amazing champagne and their interesting friends and all of Nestor's glorious paintings.

Fuck all of it. I am not going.

There's half a bottle of the good whiskey left in the cabinet above the fridge. I climb up there for it, then pour a glass, neat. Here's to telling Pilar and her heartless troll of a father to piss off. I slap the invitation down on the counter, which is none too clean, cross my arms, and stare at it, as if it's not quite safe to turn my back.

*Dear Pinedos, Johanna Porter warmly requests your presence at leave-me-the-fuck-alone.*

*Dear Pilar, For the sake of the young women in attendance, please ensure that Nestor keeps his withered old dick in his pants. My regrets.*

*Dear Nestor, My body will already be present on your canvases. The presence of my Self was never particularly important.*

*She doth protest too much—I know that's what you're thinking. And yes, I doth. (Have you ever tried this whiskey, Templeton? It's delicious.)*

A preopening party? Friends from the old days? Since when was I a "friend"? Not since twenty years ago, and even then—not exactly how I would characterize myself and Nestor. And Pilar hates my guts. Yet I still



can't throw this invitation in the trash, where it belongs.

*Johanna Porter disrespectfully declines.*

There will be no paintings by me at that show, but there will be paintings *of* me. I refill my glass. As much as I detest Nestor and Pilar, they form a direct line to the years when I was on fire. When I felt my own greatness. When I very nearly made it real.

But I failed. The fire is dead. I'm nobody. They are inviting me back inside—god knows why—but all that's in it for me now is great champagne and beautiful people and big, clean galleries full of someone else's art.

I hate galleries. They make me want to cry.

It's not that I didn't like to sell. I was good back then. I held a six-figure check with my name on it once. But now no one knows me. Not even me. I snatch that sophisticated square of cardstock from the counter, sloshing liquor on my wrist in the process.

*Boo-hoo. Pity the unfulfilled housewife.* That's what you're thinking now, right? I am not a housewife. I'm a single mother with a job. But fine, I am unfulfilled. The very people inviting me to this party strangled my career—my *calling*—in its cradle. It's been twenty years of exile and decline ever since. (Okay, I am getting drunk and dramatic. So be it.)

Actually, let's call it nineteen years of exile and decline, overlaid with seventeen years of my baby girl, Mel. That's her, clomping down the hall to our apartment, still wearing her soccer cleats from practice. I set my drink and the invitation on the counter and try to clear up the frown lines I can feel on my face.

She drops her duffel bag by the door and comes to the kitchen. Seventeen years old, nine feet tall, and built like the goddess of the hunt with a face to match. Not exactly, but that's how she reads to a room. More like five-nine, all long, lean muscle, and glorious hair. She towers over me as I hug her firm, sapling waist.

"Any plans tonight?"

At least half the time Mel comes over for her weekends, she takes a shower, transforms herself from warrior-athlete to sweet-smelling ingenue with a few swipes of powder and a hair tie, and is back out the door before I can even get a good look at her.

"Nothing tonight." She heads for the refrigerator. "You coming on Sunday?"

Home game at ten. "Yep. I'll be there."

She drinks some milk straight from the carton and forages a cheese stick from the dairy drawer.

“What’s the matter?” she says, not even looking at me.

“What do you mean?”

“Mom.” She turns and raises an eyebrow. I have never been able to do that.

They say predators can smell fear. Mel Porter can smell existential distress. If I’m just pissy about the dishwasher being broken, she barely notices. But if something is grating at my soul, she’s all over it.

I pick up the invitation. Holding it up by a corner, I let her read it.

Her brow crinkles. “I thought he was dead.”

“Not dead. Just old.”

“Who’s Pilar?”

“His daughter. And publicist. She hates my guts.”

“So why the note?”

“My question exactly.”

She takes the invitation and turns it over. Looks at the matte detail from an early Pinedo on the back. Chews her cheese stick in contemplation.

“Are you going?”

“I don’t know.” I may be expert at lying to myself, but I’ve never been any good at it with Mel.

She looks at me with those teddy-bear brown eyes. I wish I’d had half her emotional intelligence when I was her age. Or now, for that matter.

“What if you looked really smoking hot?”

I can’t help a good laugh at that. “Mel, this body does not *do* smoking hot.”

“It could. I mean for your age, with the right dress and some badass boots?”

I am writing mental *Fuck you* notes. Mel is already going shopping.

\* \* \*

Mel goes to bed early, giving me some alone time as I get ready for bed myself.

If it were just an invitation to see Nestor—a dinner or a cocktail party or something—I wouldn’t still be thinking about it. But it’s a gallery. And not just any gallery. Shimon-West is *the* elite gallery in the city. A shrine where Art and Money go to get married. No matter the passage of time, I am not over the lure of a place like that.

My invitation does not include a plus-one. I would gate-crash a date, but honestly it would all be too much to explain, even to Mel. If I go, it’s just easier to go alone, even if I have to manufacture a smile and carry the

weight of heartbreak in my chest the whole night.

Hanging on the wall in my room is a painting I did a year and a half after Nestor. As I've done many times before, I take it down and hold it in my lap. It's only twenty-by-thirty and unframed. A self-portrait, mother and child, me and my Amelia. My baby Mel.

No, she's not Nestor's baby. She's Ben's baby. As much as a girl can be like her father, Mel is, down to the big dreamy eyes and the shimmer of anxious energy.

I painted this one looking in a mirror with Mel at my breast. A local collector offered me decent money for it at the time, but there was no way I'd part with it, then or now. It's part of my soul. We have a weightless quality in this painting, almost hovering, but with the gravity of Mel's body on mine. Highly saturated shades of blue and purple predominate. In the near background, a vase of red flowers bursts through the midnight tones. The brushstrokes are subtle and confident. The arrangement of our bodies has both languor and energy, and the way my head is tilted says everything about how wholly I loved Mel, but also how I was burdened.

I shouldn't, but I run my thumb over my signature—in that corner, the paint is wearing thin—then hang it back above my bed. My own mother died when I was seventeen. On my bureau I keep a picture of her in a glass frame. She is wearing ice skates and standing by the entrance to the rink, her cheeks pink with cold, and her smile winter-bright. I never got a chance to paint her portrait from life.

\* \* \*

In the morning, I startle awake to the sound of Mel making a smoothie in the kitchen. Staring hard at the ceiling, I contend with the truth.

Right in the center of who I am, a fire once burned bright. It has been dormant a long time. Most of Mel's life. She brought me a long way from the broken young woman I was, accidentally pregnant at twenty-six, but she is almost a woman herself now, and when I held that goddamn invitation to Shimon-West in my hand, an ember sparked and glowed to life. I tried to drown it with whiskey, but it's tenacious. And it's hungry for a source of fuel. Who am I kidding with my snark and resistance?

I find Mel at the breakfast table, feet up, looking at her phone.

"I'm going to that party."

She puts down her phone and claps her hands. "Yes. I knew it."

At a gallery party you either need to look like you make art or like you make money. Thus, smoking-hot women who used to be artists ("Still *are*,

Mom”) do not go to private Pinedo parties in Gap dresses. Not even Anthro dresses. No. While working artists can and do wear practically whatever they want, smoking-hot women go to Pinedo parties in Rodarte dresses, Miyake suits, and handmade shoes.

Mel understands this. She also understands that smoking-hot former artists who teach art at her high school do not shop anywhere within a mile of Rodarte, so she has located a consignment store downtown. I may still spend half my paycheck on a garment, but according to Mel, we will achieve a high-class-kiss-my-ass look that will make me feel like I’m doing them a favor showing up at their fucking party.

If only a dress could do that. But I do know that a dress can buy a person that crucial hour of self-confidence that will get her through the door. And once I’m in, I’ll sip some champagne, flirt with rich men, and let the Pinedos see I’m *fine*, thank you very much.

It’s gray out but mild for January, and Mel and I take a comfortable walk with coffee in hand down the block from the subway. She finds the building and the narrow door, and she leads us up a flight of stairs to the boutique. The proprietress, sixtyish and slender with a gray updo and amazing eyeliner, nods at us as we enter.

I’ve been in a lot of used clothing stores, and I have no idea how this one got rid of that smell that all the other ones have. Instead of dust and stagnation with an undertone of feet, this place smells like a boudoir. And it’s not jammed with clothes the way they always are. We move easily between racks of slacks, blouses, cocktail dresses, gowns, coats. The side wall is tastefully arranged with shoes and accessories, and windows in front let in a gentle light. Behind the antique desk that serves as a counter, a large reproduction of Beardsley’s strange art nouveau drawing *John and Salome* gives the whole place an air of sex and conflict. I love it here.

Mel holds up a velvet minidress. I shake my head. I’m too old for mini. I examine the garments, feeling like I should have washed my hands. Gucci, Chanel, Ford, Herrera. I lift a long-sleeved black gown off the rack.

Mel frowns. “You’re not going to a funeral.”

“Can I help you find something?” the lady with the eyeliner says from her desk.

Mel waves her over. The woman is about my height and less intimidating than I first thought.

“She’s going to a private party at a fancy art gallery,” Mel says. “Like really upscale. And she hates everyone who’s going to be there, so she needs to look smoking hot. But not like she’s trying. Like she just *is*.”

Lady Eyeliner laughs. Where Mel learned to talk to salespeople, I have

no idea. It has to be genetic, and not from my side. Mel is wearing slides, baggy sweats, and her father's fleece pullover, and her bun is coming loose, but this sophisticated woman takes to her immediately.

They stand me in front of a full-length mirror, and together they size me up, clearly confident that they can pull this off. I wish I felt it myself. All I see are dark circles under tired eyes. Narrow shoulders and a smallness in my posture. A woman who does not command space. Mel brings over a dress that looks like a full-length slip in blood red. I shrink some more.

Lady E understands me better. First a black strapless. She shakes her head before I have a chance to. Too plain. She comes back with a military-style shirt dress. Mel grimaces. Finally I retreat to the fitting room and try on a minimalist gray knit. Too big. Then a color-block shift. Not bad, but Lady E says, "Cliché." I unzip myself from it and sit on an upholstered stool in my underwear. This is supposed to be fun, and I suppose it is. Fancy shopping with my daughter is always fun. But this time the fun competes with the voice inside that says *Fraud. Poser*. I could find the perfect dress, but all it will take is someone asking me that most miserable of cocktail-party questions—*What do you do?*—for it to all fall apart.

"Can you do one-shoulder?" Lady E calls from across the store.

"I guess so."

In a moment she slips a black velvet dress through the door. The zipper is stiff and sticks in a couple of places as I get it open. Then I step in and shimmy the dress up over my hips.

"Do you need help?" Lady E says. I crack the door, and she steps in.

As she works the zipper closed, the dress embraces my body like it's known me carnally. Fitted around the ribs and waist, it angles from the shoulder sharply across the bust, showing one collarbone. The skirt is gathered at a seam below the waist where the velvet falls in sculptural folds.

"What do you think?" Lady E smiles at my reflection. She turns me so I can see the back.

"I think I like it."

"Oscar de la Renta." Her voice is gentle, and I wish she were my friend. She smooths the skirt. "This wrap here is such a nice detail. Like an upside-down tulip."

I smile back at her. It's the strangest thing, a dress like this. It makes me feel like it could be possible. It could even be fun.

## 2

The dress flirts with me from its hanger in my closet for two and a half weeks. As conflicted as I am about the event, I can't wait to put that thing back on. Late January is an odd time to throw an art party. But DC is secondary in the art world. Nestor would pick New York or Los Angeles for a glittery December event. On the other hand, late January is a good time to have somewhere to go. All the glow of the holidays is past, and ahead lies the long slog through February and March to spring. People are dying for something to get their minds off the gray and the cold. So in a way, it's an excellent time for a party, even one you dread.

The invitation says nine, nobody ever arrives until ten, and if you're there before eleven it's just awkward. So it is nearly midnight when I arrive at Shimon-West. Two couples idle smoking on the sidewalk in front of the gallery. They look at me with only mild interest as I approach. I could turn back now—pretend I left something in my car and never return—but I press on under my own momentum.

The woman at the desk can't be more than twenty-five, but she carries herself like she owns the place. Deep brown skin and a diamond in each ear. I show her the invitation.

She makes an elegant gesture with her hand. "Elias will take your coat."  
"Thank you."

She finally graces me with a smile. Her front teeth are crooked.

A blond man in a black suit relieves me of my underwhelming outerwear. (I bought the dress, but I was not about to spend another paycheck on a coat that I would take off two minutes inside the door.) That leaves me with the fancy little purse Mel found at the consignment store and my own hand-painted silk scarf that I can use as a shawl, or a wrap, or something to do with my hands. And I'm here.

I'm here.

The crowd mills in diffuse gallery light. Bright spots illuminate the paintings. Women in tall shoes and thick, rich-looking men glide across the gleaming concrete floor. Black dresses and suits predominate, but here and there bits of chartreuse, pink, violet glint through the gloom. I left the house feeling glamorous, and I still do. Mel slightly overestimated this crowd. There is even an older woman in ruffled linen. Probably an artist.

A tray of drinks appears at my right. I take a flute of champagne and try to make eye contact with the server but fail. They are trained to be

invisible.

And yes, it's the real champagne. My heart pounds and my hands shake. All around me are Nestor's paintings. They are beautiful. The small *Child with Scissors* hangs near the entrance, leading me in toward the larger works. *Woman in a Green Room*, *Magician*, *Girls of Central Park*. Masterful. Dense brushwork up close, but such a feeling of lightness when you step back. Bodies stripped to the essence of a perfect, frozen moment. If I didn't know Nestor so well, I would be enthralled. Instead, I feel confused and a little horrified at the dissonance between the love so evident in the work and the lovelessness of the man.

Already the ball of regret and loss I've carried around for twenty years presses up against my throat. This used to be my world. My friends. My paintings. Could be worse, though. I'm halfway through the gallery and I haven't had to talk to anyone. Then, of course, Pilar Pinedo herself appears in my line of sight. Daughter and publicist of the Great One. She recognizes me immediately and smiles. Bright red lips, bright white teeth. She murmurs something—a polite excuse to her partner in conversation—and comes my way.

Pilar is the type of person who can make anyone feel small. She's tall and firm, favors platform shoes, and wears her perfect hair piled up on top of her head. She has not covered up her gray, and it only makes her look more powerful the way it sweeps through the black. But more than that, she has mastered the art of personal presentation, down to her perfect fingernails. (I don't trust people who have perfect hands.) We are at opposite ends of our forties now, but even when I was young and hot, she had this effect on me—like she is visiting from a superior country and her manner says *I am charmed by your quaint customs*.

“Johanna—”

Jo-HONN-ah. Pretentious bitch. I know it's just her accent, but still.

“Hello, Pilar.” Pih-LAHR. At least I go to the trouble to get her name right.

She leans in for an air-kiss on each cheek, then looks me up and down in a practiced, admiring way. “I'm so glad you could make it. You look like a dream. That dress?” She laughs as if at herself. “I must have it.”

“Thank you. Used. Or *vintage*, I should say.”

“Marvelous. Such a find.”

We stand next to *The Acorn Child*, an intimate domestic scene showing one of Nestor's children. He has seven, but Pilar is special among them. She was born of the one and only Wife. I remember his wife. A fashion model from Lithuania, and severely beautiful.

He had many more than seven mistresses, but I am special among them as well. I am the only one who was also a painter.

“Which of the kids is that again?” I ask Pilar, nodding at the painting.

“Inez, I think. I remember that rug she’s on.”

I heard the Wife died of lung cancer a few years ago. She called me once. I think it was when I was pregnant. She tried to run me down with her car one time—back when I was her husband’s mistress—and she wanted to apologize, especially after what Nestor and Pilar had done.

God, it’s all so long ago. It feels like another life entirely. Like all those things happened to someone else.

Another tray of champagne floats by, and I replace my glass with a full one.

“Would you come with me?” Pilar says. “Father will want to know you are here.”

As if we are old friends. As if we might have anything to say to one another. But then again, I suppose the victor sets the terms of diplomacy. And that wouldn’t be me.

Why am I here? The champagne is heaven, but I look around and I’m not moved by these paintings anymore. The glamour, the art. People are speaking the once-familiar language. Something about *ductility*. The *gaze*. *Underpainting*. *Sotheby’s*. I know the words, but they don’t seem to mean anything. Just an empty display.

I follow Pilar as the crowd parts before her. As we approach a sitting area toward the back, I see him. I remember that profile, the bulbous nose, and the eyebrows that look like they are going to crawl right off his face. His skin looks leathery now, with intense folds around his mouth and eyes. His hands, once so deft, are crabbed and arthritic.

He is, of course, engaged in deep conversation with a young woman. He does not look up as we approach. They sit close together on a white sofa, and he leans toward her, elbows on knees, head tilted so he is looking up. (A ploy to give her a false sense of power.) He nods. So interested. So entranced. She laughs at something he says, then gestures at the room. She is a gleam of shiny blond hair and porcelain skin, dressed businessy for an evening like this, and a good deal less than half his age. I can’t help but roll my eyes. I did the math before I came. Nestor is seventy-eight.

Pilar touches his shoulder. “Father?”

Nestor looks up. Then stands and strides over with all the presence of a man who has been the center of attention in every room for half a century. He holds out both arms.

“*La Rosa. Querida.*” He grasps me by the forearms and kisses both my



cheeks. Contact kisses. Then steps back. “So beautiful. Like it was yesterday.”

I thought of a million things I could say at this moment, but none of them come out. All I can manage is a tense smile, no teeth. He smells like cigarettes and cologne. To the left of the sofa, Nestor’s manager, Cesar, acknowledges me with a slow sweep of his eyes—savage old bear that he is. Pilar looks on approvingly. The blonde woman remains seated.

One of Nestor’s largest canvases hangs above us. A group of men standing in what appears to be a market square. It is striking and oozes dominance, but I always thought it was a rip-off of Rodin’s famous sculpture, *The Burghers of Calais*.

“All by yourself?” Nestor says.

“As you see.”

“Please, join us.” He waves to the blonde woman. “This is Miss Reifenstein.”

The woman stands up. “Ashleigh Reifenstein,” she says. She has a weak handshake.

“An author.” Nestor beams faux humility at the circle around him. “She is writing a book about me.”

“A biography,” Ashleigh says. “It’s very nice to meet you—”

I notice that no one has said my name. I take the opportunity to correct Pilar’s pronunciation. Short *a* sound. Not long.

“Johanna. Johanna Porter.”

“Yes. An early student, I understand.”

Student? Is that what they are telling you? I wish I could raise an eyebrow like Mel.

Nestor laughs. “She was always a quiet one. So much below the surface.”

He drags out the *much*: mahhh-ch. He sounds like a caricature of himself.

Small talk follows. How is my daughter? My husband? Divorced? So sorry.

Finally Pilar asks, oh-so-casually, “How is your painting going?”

Nice, Pilar. You know it’s not going anywhere. I could seriously ruin her makeup with this glass of champagne. Nestor takes my hand as if he’s going to kiss it, which, thank god, he doesn’t, and thus I am rescued from having to talk about my art by the very man who cares about it the least. It’s fitting, in a way.

“Would you like to see something very special?” He smiles, playing the benevolent patriarch.

I shrug. “I suppose so?”

Holding my hand like some sort of ceremonial object, he leads me to the back of the gallery in the obvious certainty all will follow. And they do.

“They broke the frame in shipping. It will be fixed tomorrow. But you must see.” Still holding my hand, he turns and gives a little twinkle of the eye to the entourage at his heels. “I know Johanna will want to see.”

The crowd parts as we pass, and all eyes are on him, on Pilar, even on Ashleigh. It suits me to be unknown.

Seven or eight inner-circle types join our little procession, and Nestor leads us past a velvet rope and through a door to a cavernous staging room. A sideways light shines from a fixture on the wall. It’s ten degrees colder back here, and I wrap my shawl around my shoulders. Along the back wall is a rolling cargo door twelve feet high, which lets out into the alley where the trucks deliver the crated art.

I follow Nestor to the left, and the image hits me like a blast of summer heat.

There she is. My face burns. Tears prick at my eyes.

There she is.

The painting stands on a worktable, leaning against the wall, resting its cracked lower frame on a packing blanket. *La Rosa Blanca*. The White Rose. Nestor’s iconic portrait of his lover, his muse.

Me.

\* \* \*

All these people need to fucking leave. Just get the fuck away. Don’t look at me. Don’t look at *her*. But they stay. They hover and get too close and look from the painting to me and back again as if they can’t quite believe that spark of life on the canvas turned into this actual grown woman.

*La Rosa Blanca* is only about thirty inches by forty. She has the characteristic Pinedo high contrast, with a light gleaming off one shoulder. Her bare back is turned to the viewer, and she looks over that bright, right shoulder, face nearly in profile, neck twisted and tight. Her back speaks where her mouth does not—full of tension, with a jutting right scapula—and the eyes, outshined by the shoulder, both retreat and accuse. She is beautiful. She is young. And she is angry.

If I’m not careful, I will burst into tears. Next to the cargo door, there’s an exit, and two of Nestor’s people, probably nephews or interns or something, go outside. The door doesn’t close all the way, and in a moment I smell cigarette smoke.

I want everyone gone, yet I also think, how can they walk away from this painting? I wish I could. I wish I could walk away and never see it again. It glows even in the poor light. It snaps with restlessness. I want to walk right up and put my hands on it.

Ashleigh's eyes shift from Nestor to me and back. Pilar's body is set in reverse, looking away.

Nestor puts his arm around me and pulls me against his body. "This one is not for sale."

I want to punch him in the face, but instead I manufacture a nostalgic smile and lift my glass to my lips. It is empty. Still unable to speak without crying, I play the flirty ex-girlfriend with a little pout, holding up my empty glass for Nestor to see.

"Unacceptable," he exclaims. "Let us find you some more. We can visit La Rosa again later."

He steers me back toward the party, his hand on my waist, followers in tow, done with his little *Ta-da!* novelty exhibition.

Quit fucking touching me.

Coming out of the dark cave of the staging room and past the rope, the party crashes around me in a cacophony of voices, light, and motion. Nestor locates a waiter and replaces my glass. For a solid half hour I force myself to talk with this group. I didn't come all this way to be a socially inept outcast, plus it seems that the Pinedos are going out of their way to make me feel like an insider. But why try so hard?

At last I escape to the bathroom, collecting another glass along the way and sipping on it as I take a piss.

There's a desperate feeling when you try to stop yourself from crying. It's like trying to stop your heart from beating. Impossible, and success feels a bit like death. That's how I feel sitting in the little marble stall and trying to take a deep breath. Like the halfway-drunk woman I am, the exhalation comes out all uneven. Maybe if I just go to my car. Maybe if I just leave.

If only. Leave and chalk it up to nostalgia. If I could look at the whole thing as the remnant of a long-gone world that has no relevance in my life, I would. But I can't. And it's because I saw *La Rosa Blanca*, and she saw me, and I know it sounds strange to say, but we need each other.

I'll go to the car. Take a break. Regroup.

I *pardon-me* my way all the way to the coat check, avoiding Pilar and Nestor, and get my black parka. The midnight, midwinter cold fortifies me as I make the two-block walk, a little unsteady after four glasses of champagne.

I was twenty-four years old. He wanted to pose me lying nude on a platform. Just a couple of hours, he told me, but he took up my whole day delaying and preparing. I had work to do. We argued.

I was supposed to be his model—

I wasn't his model, I was his girlfriend.

I should appreciate everything he was doing for me.

He should support my work.

It wasn't the composition he wanted.

Well, it was the composition he was getting.

My right hand lifted for a moment, holding a red pencil, which makes a spark of color in the dark background. I look impatient—which I was. He painted my body lean and angular—which I was. He intentionally exaggerated the tone of my skin to a porcelain white and my long hair to a near black, disheveled and wild. He loved my hair. And though the painting shows nothing more than my face, hand, and back, it radiates a heat that has been known to make art critics squirm.

I climb into my car and turn on the engine, shivering in my bare legs. She was strong, La Rosa. She had shit to do, and in the painting it looks as if she is about to get up and leave the frame. I should have. I should have gotten up and left and taken my integrity and my career with me. But it may have already been too late.

The tears come. This was a mistake. A stupid mistake. I was just fine, and then I had to come back to this miserable place? Why? What did I think was going to happen? Nestor Pinedo didn't break my heart. He wasn't the love of my life. I don't even regret the affair. What I regret is that by the time it was all over, I had lost myself. I lost the girl in that painting, and I never got her back.

No. I didn't lose her. He stole her. He and his power and influence, and Pilar—the fucking Svengali of my generation of artists. The Great Pinedo's daughter who could make or break you with her access and her unerring taste. They stole the girl in that painting right out from inside of me. And I let them. I was young. Dazzled. Infatuated. Stupid.

The steering wheel presses hard and cold against my forehead. The seat warmer is too much. My back is sweating. I peel off my coat.

I want her back. I've grown older, and with the exception of Mel, who is about to go to college, my life has grown smaller and smaller around me. But the girl in that painting is still there. I can feel it. Twenty years ago I pulled from the deepest well of my being and drew up buckets of light, shadow, passion, grief, and love. Maybe the rope is broken, but the well is not dry.