

“A sweeping and romantic page-turner, the heart of this rich and ambitious historical novel is a love story that thrums with passion and self-discovery.”

—**Laura Ruby, two-time National Book Award Finalist and Printz Award-winning author of *Bone Gap***

“An absolute masterpiece.”

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—**Rebecca Kim Wells, author of *Shatter the Sky***

“A lovely, affirming, layered, and deft coming-of-queer-age novel.”

—**New York Times bestselling author Kate Elliott**

“Lo has really outdone herself here. I don’t think I can overstate how refreshing it is to read queer historical fiction that is so complex, nuanced, and tender. It’s my opinion that this book will quickly become a new touchstone of the genre of queer literature. What an accomplishment.”

—**Sarah Gailey, award-winning author of *Magic for Liars and Upright Women Wanted***

“The writing is so atmospheric and detailed that I am convinced I have lived in San Francisco in the 1950s. It’s a passionate, smoldering romance that perfectly captures the feelings of falling in love for the first time.”

—**Christina Soontornvat, New York Times bestselling author and Newbery Honoree**

“Malinda Lo was, for so many of us who write and read books about queer girlhood, the first introduction to seeing ourselves on the page. Her latest book continues that legacy with this startlingly beautiful historical coming-of-age.”

—**Leah Johnson for Reese’s Book Club**

“A must-read.”

—**Us Weekly**

“*The Price of Salt* meets *Saving Face* in this gripping historical thriller from the celebrated author of *Ash*. . . . *Last Night at the Telegraph Club* is proof of Lo’s skill at creating darkly romantic tales of love in the face of danger.”

—**O, The Oprah Magazine**

“Lush, ambitious and layered, Malinda Lo’s sweeping historical novel is the queer romance we’ve been waiting for.”

—**Ms. Magazine**

“A vivid must-read.”

—**Bay Area Reporter**

“Lo taps into the evocative San Francisco of yesteryear while deftly navigating McCarthyism, ethnicity, sexuality, and the ‘Lavender Scare’ in this striking novel that holds some unnerving contemporary parallels.”

—**Toledo Blade**

“A journey of self-discovery that’s as necessary as it is dangerous.” —**PopSugar.com**

“An enthralling historical lesbian romance.” —**WBUR**

“Malinda Lo is an absolute icon.” —**BuzzFeed**

“A joy to read.” —**The Advocate**

“A gripping novel where historical fiction meets romance, *Last Night at the Telegraph Club* is a whirlwind read set in San Francisco’s Chinatown during the Red Scare. Immersive and creative, Lo gets wrapped up in her fictitious world of adventure and adrenaline and follows Lily Hu as she seeks out the woman she loves.” —**Gay Times**

★ “Finally, the intersectional, lesbian, historical teen novel so many readers have been waiting for.” —**Kirkus, starred review**

★ “A must-read love story . . . alternately heart-wrenching and satisfying.” —**Booklist, starred review**

★ “*Last Night at the Telegraph Club* is a work of historical fiction that’s as meticulously researched as it is full of raw, authentic emotion. . . . Shout it from the highest hills: This is a beautiful, brave story, and Lily is a heroine that readers will love.” —**BookPage, starred review**

★ “This immersive, powerful coming-of-age novel tackles perceptions, expectations, and identity while sweeping readers into smoky lesbian nightclubs and ’50s culture.” —**BCCB, starred review**

★ “Smoothly referencing cultural touchstones and places with historic Chinese American significance, Lo conjures 1950s San Francisco adeptly while transcending historicity through a sincere exploration of identity and love.” —**Publishers Weekly, starred review**

★ “Historically accurate and well-researched.” —**SLC, starred review**

★ “A riveting, emotionally stirring tale. . . . *Last Night at the Telegraph Club*—focused on unapologetically embracing one’s true self—is a spectacular addition to the young adult historical fiction genre.” —**Shelf Awareness, starred review**

★ “This standout work of historical fiction combines meticulous research with tender romance to create a riveting bildungsroman.” —**Horn Book, starred review**

LAST NIGHT  
AT THE  
TELEGRAPH  
CLUB

*by* Malinda Lo

Nieuw Amsterdam

This book is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real places are used fictitiously. Other names, characters, places, and events are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual events or places or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. The publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for author or third-party websites or their content.

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*To all the butches and femmes,  
past, present, and future*



**LAST NIGHT  
AT THE  
TELEGRAPH  
CLUB**

- 1950 — Senator Joseph McCarthy produces a list of alleged Communists working in the State Department.
- The Korean War begins.
- Judy Hu marries Francis Fong.
- July 4, 1950 — LILY attends the third annual Chinese American Citizens Alliance Independence Day Picnic and Miss Chinatown Contest.**
- 1951 — Dr. Hsue-shen Tsien is placed under house arrest on suspicion of being a Communist and a sympathizer to the People's Republic of China.
- Judy takes Lily to Playland at the Beach.
- In *Stoumen v. Reilly*, the California Supreme Court rules that homosexuals have the right to public assembly, for example, in a bar.



# PROLOGUE

The Miss Chinatown contestants were clustered together behind a canvas screen near the stage. They hadn't been there when Lily Hu walked past the same area fifteen minutes earlier on her way to the bathrooms, and there was something startling about their sudden appearance.

Lily was thirteen, and she couldn't remember if she'd seen a group of Chinese girls like this before: in bathing suits and high heels, their hair and makeup perfectly done. They looked so American.

She slowed down. The pageant was about to start, and she'd miss the introductions if she lingered here. She should go back to her family's picnic blanket on the lawn in front of the stage, but she dawdled, trying not to appear as if she was staring.

There were a dozen girls, and their bathing suits were white or black, sea green or forest green, one piece or two. Their arms and legs were bare beneath the hot noonday sun, their gleaming black hair curled and pinned in place. Bright red lipstick on their mouths; scarlet polish on their fingernails; smooth, tanned skin. Each girl a variation on a theme.

Their high-heeled shoes were sinking into the grassy ground. Every so often one of them lifted her foot to make sure her heel wasn't stuck in the damp earth, like the slender-legged foals in *Bambi* learning to walk. The girl in the black two-piece bathing suit wore

particularly tall black heels, and as she shifted in place, the right heel stuck in the ground. Her foot rose out of the shoe, revealing an ugly red mark where the back of the shoe had rubbed against her Achilles tendon. The girl frowned, tugging again at the shoe with her toes, but this time her entire foot slipped out. The round pinkness of her bare heel; the intimate arch of her foot; toes flexing in midair. Lily had to avert her eyes, as if she were watching a woman take off her dress in public.

A microphone hummed on, and a man declared in English, “Welcome to the third annual Chinese American Citizens Alliance Independence Day Picnic and Miss Chinatown Contest!”

Applause and cheers rose from the audience gathered on the lawn. An older woman carrying a clipboard began to herd the girls into a line behind the screen, preparing them to climb the stairs onto the stage. Lily turned away and hurried down the path to the lawn.

She spotted her family toward the middle of the crowd, gathered together on the scratchy old army blanket stenciled with her father’s name—CAPT. JOSEPH HU—in white paint. They were surrounded by other families, all lazing beneath the clear blue sky, all facing the stage set up in front of the main lodge.

Lily saw her mother stand, pulling four-year-old Frankie to his feet. Her father, still sitting on the blanket, handed Mama her bag, and then she and Frankie began to make their way to the path along the edge of the lawn. Uncle Francis and Aunt Judy, seated next to Lily’s father, watched the stage with mixed expressions. Uncle Francis was absorbed; Aunt Judy looked skeptical. There was no sign of Lily’s other brother, Eddie, and she guessed that he was still off playing with his friends.

Lily met her mother on the path.

“I’m taking Frankie to the bathroom,” Mama said. “There’s still some fried chicken left.”

Someone set off firecrackers as Lily headed across the lawn. The summer sun was sinking hot and dry into her black hair. It was real summertime weather here in Los Altos—Popsicle weather, unlike cool and foggy San Francisco. All day Lily had been shedding the layers she put on that morning in their Chinatown flat, and by now she was wearing only a short-sleeved blouse and cotton skirt, and wishing she had worn sandals instead of shoes and socks.

When she reached her family, she knelt down to claim the last piece of fried chicken from the basket. Her friend Shirley Lum was seated nearby with her family, and she gestured at Lily to join them. “Can I go sit with Shirley?” Lily asked her father, who nodded as the emcee started to introduce all the pageant contestants. Their names rang out over the lawn as Lily straightened up, drumstick in hand.

“Miss Elizabeth Ding!”

“Miss May Chinn Eng!”

Lily joined Shirley on their blanket—an old white tablecloth—and curled her legs to one side, tucking her skirt over her knees like a lady.

Shirley leaned toward her and said, “I like the third one best—the one in the yellow two-piece.”

“Miss Violet Toy!”

“Miss Naomi Woo!”

Lily took a bite of the chicken. The skin was still crispy, the meat juicy and salty. She cupped her hand beneath it to catch the crumbs that fell. Onstage, the girls were walking across one by one. They sashayed in their heels, causing their hips to sway back and forth. A few whistles rose from the audience, followed by laughter.

“I think the girl in the black bathing suit is a little too flashy,” Shirley said.

“What do you mean?” Lily asked.

“Look at her! She’s acting like she’s a Hollywood star or something. The way she’s standing.”

“But they’re all standing like that.”

“No, she’s doing it more, as if she thinks she’s perfect.”

The girl in black didn’t look any different from the others to Lily, but she remembered the sight of her naked foot in the air, and she was strangely embarrassed for her. The contestants were all smiling, hands cocked on their hips, shoulders proudly held back. The emcee explained that they had to circle the stage again for the judges to assess their face and figure, and the audience clapped some more.

The judges were seated at a table on the ground in front of the stage. Lily couldn’t see them, but she had heard all about them. Two were Chinatown leaders, one was a prominent local Caucasian businessman, and one was a woman—the Narcissus Queen from Honolulu, Hawaii. Lily had seen her taking photographs with fans earlier; she was wearing a pretty floral-print dress and a big pink flower in her hair.

“Look—my favorite’s going around now,” Shirley said.

The girl in the yellow two-piece was taller than the others, and her figure was curvier. She had wavy black hair pulled back with combs, revealing sparkling drop earrings. As she crossed the front of the stage, whistles rose from the audience. When she reached the far side she paused, bending one knee and glancing back over her shoulder coquettishly. The audience erupted in applause, and Shirley joined in enthusiastically.

Lily, still holding her half-eaten drumstick, looked away from the stage uncomfortably. She didn’t understand the shrinking feeling inside her, as if she shouldn’t be caught looking at those girls. She saw a group of older Chinatown men nearby, sitting casually

and smoking as they studied the contestants. One grinned at another, and there was something off-putting about the expression on his face. He made an odd gesture with his left hand, as if he were squeezing something, and the other man chuckled. Lily dropped her gaze to her fried chicken, and the bone of the drumstick reminded her of the girl in black's Achilles tendon, rubbed red from the hard edge of her shoe.

"Let's go up on the stage," Shirley said conspiratorially, taking Lily's hand to pull her across the lawn.

"We shouldn't—"

"Don't you want to see what it's like?"

It felt dangerous, rebellious—but only moderately so. The afternoon sunlight was golden and heavy now; the show was over; and the spectators were packing up and preparing to go home.

"All right," Lily agreed, and Shirley squealed in response.

They almost ran the last few yards, and then they were at the bottom of the steps and Shirley came to an abrupt stop. Lily bumped into her.

"Just imagine," Shirley said dreamily, "what it must be like to be Miss Chinatown."

There had been controversy when the judges declared the winner today. Lily had heard a faint chorus of boos amid the applause, and she saw the winning girl's face go pink with both pride and dismay. A man had shouted at the stage in English: "She looks like a pinup, not like a Chinese girl!"

Lily had eyed him surreptitiously; he was sitting near the man who had made the lewd gesture, who then leaned toward him and slapped him on the shoulder. They had begun an animated conversation that

Lily couldn't quite understand—they were speaking Toishanese—though she made out the words for *beauty* and *woman*.

“Lily, aren't you coming?”

Shirley had bounded up the steps, and Lily realized she had fallen behind. She put a hand on the railing—it wobbled—and quickly went up the stairs. The microphone and its stand had been removed, leaving the stage entirely bare. Shirley walked toward the center, sa-shaying like the contestants as she pretended to be a beauty queen.

Lily hesitated, watching her friend turn to face the broad, emptying lawn. Someone whistled, and Shirley flushed with pleasure as she bobbed a curtsy.

“Next time it'll be you!” a disembodied voice called out.

Shirley giggled and glanced over her shoulder at Lily. “Come on! Come and see the view.”

Lily joined Shirley at the front of the stage just as a raft of firecrackers popped in the distance. The afternoon sun was behind them, casting their shadows across the ground, and as Shirley raised her hand to wave, queenlike, Lily watched her shadow stretch dark and thin over the grass. The ground was dotted with empty glass bottles and crumpled paper sacks, and the grass was flattened into the irregular impressions of blankets and bodies.

“Lily!”

The voice came from the left, slightly behind the stage. She stepped back to get a better look and saw Aunt Judy coming up the path from the parking lot, waving at her.

“It's time to go!” her aunt called.

Lily waved in response and tugged at Shirley's arm. “We should go.”

“Just a minute,” Shirley insisted.

Lily retreated to the stairs, then turned back to see Shirley still standing at the edge, gazing out over the lawn. The back of her head was crowned in sunlight, casting her face in shadow. The profile of

her nose and mouth was still sweet and girlish. But there was a modest swell to her breast, and she had cinched in the waist of her dress to emphasize the slight curve of her hips. Lily wondered if this was what a Chinese girl should look like.





# PART I

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# I Can Dream, Can't I?

August–September 1954



That woman is so glamorous,” Shirley said, nudging Lily to look. Two Caucasian women were seated across the restaurant at the table in the alcove. “I wonder if she’s going to a show.”

It was Friday night in the middle of the dinner rush, and the Eastern Pearl was almost full, but Lily knew immediately who Shirley was talking about. The red paper lanterns hanging overhead shed a warm glow over the woman’s blond hair; it was pulled up in a twist and pinned with something glittering that matched the droplets in her ears. She wore a royal-blue satin sleeveless dress with a scoop neckline, which showed off her creamy skin, and a matching blue bolero jacket hung over the back of her seat. Her companion was dressed much less glamorously. In fact, she wore trousers—gray flannel ones, with a soft-collared white blouse tucked in at the waist. Her hair was cut short in the current style, but on her it looked a bit less gamine than mannish, which drew Lily’s attention. There was something about her posture that felt subtly masculine. Lily couldn’t put her finger on it, but it intrigued her.

Lily realized she was staring and turned her attention back to the messy pile of napkins in front of her. Beside her, Shirley was moving rapidly through her own stack, transforming them into crisp swans. Lily had spent countless hours in the restaurant with Shirley since they were little, and over the years she’d helped out with various small tasks as needed. Now they were about to start their senior year

in high school, but she still couldn't fold a napkin into a decent swan. She picked apart the one she had been working on and started over.

On weekend nights, the Eastern Pearl mainly attracted tourists rather than local Chinese. Shirley said it was because one of the tour companies that brought people to Chinatown recommended it, which led to good business for the restaurant. Lily wondered if the women in the alcove were tourists, and she snuck another glance at them.

The blonde was removing a silver cigarette case from her handbag, and her companion pulled a matchbook from her trouser pocket, leaning toward her as she struck a match. The blonde cupped her hand around the flame, drawing her friend's hand close to her face as she inhaled. Afterward, she sat back and offered the case to her friend, who removed a cigarette and lit it quickly, pulling the cigarette away from her mouth with her thumb and index finger. Smoke curled up into the red-lit ceiling.

"You're making a mess of those," Shirley said, glancing at Lily's poorly folded swans. "Ma won't like them."

"Sorry," Lily said. "I'm no good at this."

Shirley shook her head, but she wasn't annoyed. This was the way it always was. "I'll redo yours," Shirley said as she pulled Lily's napkins toward her.

Lily sat there for a moment, watching Shirley shake out her messy swan, and then she reached for the *Chronicle*. She always enjoyed the theater and film reviews and society columns, with their photographs of women in furs and diamonds, and she wondered idly if the blonde had ever been in the paper.

"Maybe she's an heiress," Lily said to Shirley. "The blonde over there."

Shirley glanced across the restaurant again, briefly. "An heiress to a gold mine?"

"Yes. And her father recently died and left her with a fortune—"