

A SCATTER OF LIGHT

by Malinda Lo

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*To my Wellesley friends, with gratitude for a lifetime of friendship:
Aimee, Betty, Cameron, Hye-John, Lesly, Nicole, Sarah, Sarah,
and Vincent. Thank you for being there for me, always.*

2008

started calling my grandmother by her first name when I was thirteen. It was the summer before Grandpa died, and Dad and I were spending the month of July with them in Woodacre, California. They owned a cedar-shingled cottage there where they'd go for weekends and vacations, and after Grandpa retired from Berkeley, they moved into it permanently.

My grandmother was an artist who was known primarily for her paintings and photographs. She was always mentoring a few art students, and one of them had a show opening in San Francisco during our visit. My grandmother took me with her.

The show was in SoMa at a garage that specialized in hybrid and electric vehicles, and doubled as an art gallery. A red plug-in Prius was elevated on a lift at the back of the garage, which had the cleanest polished concrete floors I'd ever seen. I had expected to see paintings hanging on the walls, but this artist made wire sculptures. They hung from cables that stretched across the space, twirling slowly in the air like graceful dancers made of silver mesh. Other sculptures were installed on stands scattered across the floor. Most were abstract in form, but some resembled female bodies or animal-like shapes: arms and tails extended, or elongated heads that seemed to look at you, even without eyes.

I was the youngest person there. As soon as we arrived, my grandmother was pulled away by a stranger, and then another one,

and after a few minutes of awkwardly hovering a few feet away, I retreated to the rear of the garage by the Prius. Nearby, two couches were arranged around a sky-blue shag rug, and I sat down by myself while more people came through the garage's huge open doors.

I could see the traffic whooshing by on Mission Street in the dusk. As Saturday evening settled into Saturday night, growing shadows blurred the city's hard edges and turned them into soft-focus suggestions. I had been to plenty of art galleries before but not a Saturday night opening, and I'd dressed up for it in a teal-and-white sundress along with a carefully applied coating of lip gloss. Sitting on that sofa, I felt grown-up, almost.

I lost track of my grandmother in the gathering crowd. It was mostly women, mostly casually dressed in jeans and tees or tank tops, sneakers or boots, along with a smattering of all-black ensembles. Many of them had bare arms covered with tattoos: flowers or pinup girls or intricate abstract designs. A couple of women, one with pink hair, sat across from me on the other couch and set down small paper plates of cheese and grapes, while they toasted each other with clear plastic cups of white wine. I thought about making a plate of cheese for myself, but before I could get up, a Black woman with very short hair sat down beside me.

"This seat's not taken, is it?" she asked.

"No," I said.

"Thanks." She held a plate of cheese and grapes, too, but instead of wine she had a small bottle of Pellegrino. She twisted it open and took a sip.

I could see the brown skin of her scalp where her hair was faded in on the sides. I didn't want to stare, so I lowered my gaze. She was wearing black jeans and black motorcycle boots.

"Joan West is supposed to be here tonight," the woman said. "Have you heard of her?"

I looked up. “Yeah, she’s . . .” Her right eyebrow was pierced, and her eyes were sapphire blue. The edges crinkled as she smiled at me, and suddenly I didn’t want to admit that Joan West was my grandmother. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to be connected with her, but this woman was speaking to me as if I were an adult, like her. To be Joan West’s granddaughter made me a child, which I didn’t want to be. “She’s great,” I said. “I like her work.”

“Yeah? What’s your favorite?”

My grandmother’s most recent paintings were quite different from her previous work, but I liked them. Long, golden sweeps of light across doorways and honeyed wooden floors. When I looked at them, I thought of her and Grandpa on their deck in Woodacre in the late afternoon, the smell of wild grasses in the sun.

“I like her Time series,” I said.

She nodded. “Very meditative. I really appreciate her photography. The shots of her children especially.”

I knew the ones she was talking about. The pictures of my dad and Aunt Tammy when they were kids in Colorado. “Yeah, I’ve seen those,” I said. “People say they’re not about her children, but about the way we think about childhood.”

The woman’s smile broadened. “You know a lot about Joan West’s work. Are you a fan?”

I realized I had put myself on a path toward directly lying about who I was, rather than simply skirting the truth with careful omissions. It was a little exciting.

The woman’s smile softened as she looked at me, as if she knew I wasn’t telling the whole truth, but she wouldn’t push me. It was as if we were co-conspirators, and the thought of conspiring with her sent a nervous thrill through me. I wondered who she was.

“Yes,” I said. “I’m a fan.”

She nodded as if she had expected me to say that. “Joan’s been a

big influence on a lot of artists here in the Bay Area. She should be way more famous than she is.”

I felt shy as I asked, “Are you an artist?”

“I am,” she said, as if it surprised her.

“What medium do you work in?” I’d heard my grandmother pose this question to others before, and I thought it made me sound mature.

The woman blinked, her smile disappearing for half a second before it returned. “Metal and wire. Sculpture mostly.”

“Sarah! There you are.”

We both looked up as my grandmother came toward us. She was wearing a purple-and-gold-patterned blouse that draped around her in some complicated way that created wings when she opened her arms for a hug. The woman sitting next to me rose to her feet and embraced her.

“Thank you so much for coming,” she said.

“Of course I came. I’m so happy for you.” My grandmother saw me watching and said, “I see you’ve met—”

“Hi, Joan,” I said quickly, standing up and smoothing down my dress. I flushed as my grandmother gave me a funny look.

The woman grinned. “Yes, I think I’ve met one of your biggest fans,” she said.

My grandmother seemed a little puzzled. “Aria, this is Sarah Franco. She’s the artist featured here tonight.”

Metal and wire, she had said. I was embarrassed that I hadn’t put that together.

Sarah extended her hand to me. “Hello, Aria. Nice to meet you officially.”

“Likewise,” I said. Her palm was rough, her fingers a little scratchy.

I wondered whether my grandmother was going to explain who

I was. We didn't look related because she was white and I'm half Asian, although there was something similar about the shapes of our faces.

"I'd better go get ready," Sarah said. "I have to make a speech."

My grandmother squeezed her shoulder. "I'm looking forward to it. And congratulations."

"Thanks. Nice talking to you, Aria," Sarah said, and then she headed off toward the front of the garage.

My grandmother looked at me with an amused smile. "Shall we go up front and get a good spot? I want to be sure to see everything." She put her arm around my shoulders, and I knew she didn't mind that I'd called her Joan, and maybe she even thought it was funny.

During Sarah's speech, she thanked my grandmother for mentoring her over the past five years, for pushing her to go beyond her comfort zone. The audience applauded when Sarah pointed out my grandmother standing beside me, and when she stepped forward to acknowledge their applause with a smile and a wave, she looked beautiful and wise. I felt a keen sense of pride to be related to her—to *Joan West*. She was my grandmother, yes, but she was more than that, and it seemed inadequate to call her by a name that said nothing about her accomplishments.

From that night on, she was Joan to me. When my dad told me I was disrespecting her, my grandmother laughed and said, "We're on a first-name basis now."

Barely a couple of weeks after my dad and I returned to Massachusetts, Grandpa was diagnosed with fourth-stage pancreatic cancer. It all went so fast.

In mid-August, we flew back to California. Dad took a leave of absence from Wellesley College, where he taught. Aunt Tammy and

her family came up from Pasadena, and we all stayed in a vacation rental near Woodacre. A hospital bed was set up in my grandparents' bedroom and Grandpa spent more and more time there, while nurses came and went twice a day.

Dad and Aunt Tammy kept scurrying back and forth—from the kitchen to the bedroom to the grocery store and back—as if they were trying their hardest to hold the world together with their bare hands. Joan sat at Grandpa's bedside and read to him, everything from the latest astronomy papers to his battered old Robert Heinlein science fiction novels. Sometimes I sat with them, and Joan's voice would lull me into a half-waking dream of rocket ships and the boys who flew them.

Grandpa died in September. It was one of those perfect, golden days in Northern California, the air warm and weightless, the light like slowly melting butterscotch. Dad had made plans to grill steak for dinner because Grandpa said he wanted some, even though he wasn't eating much anymore. He never ate it.

The memorial took place at the Unitarian church in Berkeley that my grandparents had gone to in the two decades they lived there. It was full of Grandpa's former colleagues from Berkeley's astronomy department, where he'd been a professor, but plenty of Joan's friends came, too. Afterward, when I was waiting in the church vestibule for my parents, I saw Sarah Franco, the artist from the garage show. She was dressed all in black, with a black button-down shirt and polished black oxfords. She came over to me and told me she was sorry for my loss, and I realized then that she'd always known I was Joan's granddaughter.

2013

Dad and I took a 6:00 a.m. flight from Boston to San Francisco. Our seats weren't together because he'd bought the tickets last minute, but I was relieved to be alone. I got a window way in the back, only a few rows up from the toilets.

As soon as the plane took off, I reclined my seat and stuffed the tiny airplane pillow against the edge of the window, trying to make myself comfortable enough to sleep. The plane smelled like bathroom cleaner and somebody's egg-and-cheese bagel. The constant hum of recycled air seemed to press against me, pushing me deeper into the hard plastic window shade. I began to imagine my body passing through it, envisioning my skin and bones as individual cells and then singular atoms and then only photons—energy itself. And each photon, each tiny particle of light, could be instantly inside the wall of the airplane and simultaneously beyond it. My whole body could be suddenly outside, thirty thousand feet above the earth's surface. I imagined the whirling air around me, nitrogen and oxygen and water vapor in the clouds and in me, the dawning sunlight scattered by microscopic particles of water and the atoms of my body.

I slept in that unsettled way I often do on planes, half dreaming, half awake. I still remember one of those dreams. It has stayed with me my entire life. I'm in the woods; the trees seem too tall to be real. I look up and up and can't see their tops, only their feathery, dark green needles draping down and down. My grandmother

is there, wearing a smock splashed in gold and blue and green. She holds a brush loaded with fuchsia paint and begins to sweep it across her torso, as if she is her own canvas. She notices that I'm standing nearby and raises her eyes to look at me.

She says: *Don't worry, something will happen.*

And then I'm on a beach, and someone is handing me a shell. Pink and white, coiled tight.

I say: *Is this something?*

The airplane shuddered and I jolted awake, and the captain came over the speaker and said, "We've reached some expected turbulence over the Rockies, so I've turned on the fasten seat belt sign. Please return to your seats."

The pillow slid down from the window. A bright white line shone from the bottom of the shade, and I inched it up, wincing against the sunlight. When my eyes adjusted, I looked out and down, and far below me the Rocky Mountains looked the way they do on topographical maps: wrinkled blue and brown, unreal.

If only, I thought. If only this wasn't real.

Morning traffic was heavy as we left the San Francisco Airport rental car center, and Dad was silent as Google Maps navigated us onto the freeway. I stared out the window as we passed Colma and Daly City, continued up the stop-and-start length of 19th Avenue, then through Golden Gate Park and the Presidio. Finally, we reached the Golden Gate Bridge, glowing red in the sun. To the right, the glittering bay and Alcatraz; to the left, the blue of the Pacific beyond the suspension lines, and then we were swallowed by the rainbow entry of the Waldo Tunnel through the Marin Hills.

I wasn't supposed to be here. I was supposed to spend the summer on Martha's Vineyard with my friends, not in the remote woods

of Marin County with my grandmother. The interior of the car suddenly felt airless, and I fumbled for the button to unroll the window. Traffic noise and warm dry air blasted inside. It smelled like Northern California: brown grass and sunshine and something else, some kind of tree or plant that grew here, and I remembered Grandpa taking me out on his precarious rooftop deck on late-summer nights to look at the stars. An ache inside me. He died five years ago, and I still missed him.

“Smells like California,” Dad said loudly over the rushing wind. They were the first words he’d spoken since we got in the car.

I glanced at him, and maybe because I had been thinking about Grandpa, I noticed how Dad looked like him. His eyebrows were bushy in the same way. “Yeah,” I replied.

Dad gave me an eager smile. “You always loved visiting here.”

I knew he was trying to get me to feel better about this summer, but I didn’t feel better and I didn’t want to pretend like I did.

“It’s too bad we never visited here with your mother,” he said. “She has family here, too.”

I felt like I must have known this before, but even so, it surprised me. “Who?” I asked.

“Some cousins. They’re out in the East Bay, but I think they used to live in Chinatown.” He looked at me encouragingly. “You should ask your mom.”

Now I knew what he was trying to do: get me to call her. But she had a phone, too. She could call me if she wanted.

We exited 101 North at Sir Francis Drake Boulevard, which we took all the way to Woodacre. The road passed through well-manicured suburbs with relatively tasteful strip malls at first, but bit by bit the strip malls became more worn-out, and the trees and hedges became

wilder and less trimmed. We drove past Safeway, the last supermarket before Woodacre, and Sir Francis Drake High School, and then we went through the little hippie town of Fairfax, and at last the road broke out into open space. Brown hills dotted with green oak trees rose up on either side as the road wound between them, and all was laid bare beneath the wide blue sky. It felt like an entirely different world from the New England we'd just come from, where one town merges right into the next, and the sky always seems to be held at bay by trees and buildings.

Just past Spirit Rock Meditation Center, Dad turned left onto Railroad Avenue, which led into Woodacre. It was barely a town—a post office and a market and that was about it. The road narrowed and lost its center stripes, curling up and around the hills. The air smelled of sunbaked wood and grass, and the wind had hushed so that we could hear the birds singing. At last we rounded the final bend, and Dad pulled up behind my grandmother's car, an old Honda Civic, in a gravel-covered pullout at the side of the road. Just ahead of the pullout was the green-painted gate that led up to the cottage.

After Grandpa died, I thought my grandmother might move back to Berkeley, where her friends were, but she had stayed. She had adopted a dog—a black lab that she named Analemma—and told everyone she preferred the remoteness of Woodacre.

Now I climbed out of the car and followed my dad to the trunk, where we pulled out two big suitcases and two backpacks. Dad was only staying for a couple of days before flying north to the Deer Bay Writers' Colony in Washington, where he was spending the rest of the summer. He was supposed to finish his second novel there, but it was six years late by now, so I had my doubts. As I lugged my suitcase toward the gate, the reality of my summer began to sink in. I was staying here. *Here.*

I unlatched the gate and clumsily shoved the suitcase through. I heard a dog start barking. Analemma.

“I’ll get that,” Dad said. “Will you take the backpacks?”

He held them out, and I took them without meeting his eyes, but I saw the expression on his face: that sad hesitation he’d worn almost continually since that day a month ago.

I turned away and started up the brick steps to the house. It was built on the side of a hill, so you had to climb up a meandering, mossy brick path to access it. Along the way were several terraced gardens planted with ferns and hostas and flowers that could grow in the shade. A wheelbarrow filled with a tray of flowers was parked beside one of the garden plots, and a water bottle was perched on a nearby bench as if the gardener had stepped away for a moment.

Around the next bend the house came into view. The front door was painted turquoise blue, and it was opening already. Analemma shot outside, a blur of shiny black fur, and I had to drop the backpacks on the brick patio and kneel down to greet her, slobbery tongue and soft floppy ears and wriggly muscle.

“Hey, hey,” I said, laughing.

“Analemma, come,” my grandmother said. Ana’s ears perked up and she glanced back at Joan for an instant as if she were contemplating disobeying her, but Joan snapped her fingers, and Ana went. Then my grandmother smiled at me and held out her arms. “Aria,” she said. She was in her seventies, but you wouldn’t have known it by the way she looked. She was wearing faded jeans rolled up at the ankles, Birkenstocks, and a loose red-and-orange peasant blouse. Her gray hair was trimmed in a short, stylish cut that revealed dangling bronze earrings.

I got to my feet and let her enfold me in a hug. “Hi, Joan.” She smelled like coffee and lemon-scented soap, and as my arms went around her I felt a loosening within me, and for a horrifying second,

I was afraid I would start to cry. I suppressed the urge, but when I pulled back, my grandmother gave me a sympathetic look and kissed me on the forehead as if I were a little girl.

“We’re going to have a good summer,” she said.

I didn’t have time to respond, because behind me Dad was arriving with my big suitcase, and then Analemma bolted forward, and Dad had to squat down to greet her. Joan told me I would be staying in the guest room. Dad would have to take the sofa bed for the couple of nights he’d be here.

Because the house was built on a hillside, the interior was on three levels, with most of the living space on the second floor. I carried my suitcase upstairs and rolled it through the living room, with its vaulted pine ceiling, Joan’s painting *Southern Cross* on one wall, and into the guest room. The double bed was covered in a patchwork quilt that looked like it was about a hundred years old; I recognized it from every previous visit. Over the bed were three black-and-white family photos, though they didn’t look like anyone else’s family photos.

There was one of Dad and Aunt Tammy as kids, double exposed so that their faces appeared to be echoed inside each other’s. One shot of Grandpa and Dad, when Dad was a teen, both looking directly at the camera with exactly the same curious expression on their faces. And a self-portrait of my grandmother, taken when she was much younger, her reflection floating in a window.

I heard Dad and Joan and Analemma coming upstairs, and Joan called, “Come and have lunch.”

Analemma dashed into the guest room and bumped my hand with her wet nose. “You want me to come?” I said, rubbing her ears with my fingers. She gave a soft woof, so I followed her out into the living room.

Dad had left his suitcase by the cold woodstove across from the

purple velvet sofa. In the kitchen, lunch had been laid out on the round wooden table: a big bowl of salad with olive oil and balsamic vinegar, a take-out rotisserie chicken, a loaf of sourdough bread, and a pitcher of iced tea.

“Help yourself to food and let’s go sit on the deck,” Joan said, taking out plates and silverware.

I had only eaten a stale bagel on the plane, and as I watched Dad cut into the chicken, I realized I was starving. I piled salad and chicken onto a plate and tore into the bread, and Joan gave me a glass of iced tea. I took my lunch out to the deck, which opened off the kitchen and had a view of the Marin Hills through the trees. Gently rolling golden-brown waves beneath a powder-blue sky. It was warm but not too hot, and the air was dry. Northern California summer.

“Matty, you sure you don’t want to stay a bit longer?” Joan asked as she sat down.

“Sorry, I can’t,” Dad said between bites of his salad. “The timing has been difficult this year.”

He was being diplomatic, but I knew it was my fault.

“I have to get some work done today, too,” he said. “Do you mind if I use your studio to write?”

Grandpa had built an art studio for my grandmother on the highest part of the property, so that she could get as much natural light as possible. But after Grandpa died, she had moved most of her work into the house, into his office, which was on the third floor along with their bedroom.

“I haven’t been in there for a while,” Joan said. “It’s probably covered in dust.”

“I don’t mind the dust. I just need a room.” Dad took a swig of iced tea and looked at me. “Ari, you need anything else before I get to work?”

“No.”

“We can talk about your plans for the summer,” Joan said.

In the distance I heard the front door close, followed by footsteps crossing the wooden floors. Analemma, who was lying in a pool of sunlight on the deck, thumped her tail against the floor as a person in dirt-stained cargo shorts and a baseball cap came out onto the deck.

“All finished?” Joan asked.

I figured this was the missing gardener.

“Yep. All done.”

I gave the gardener a second look and realized she was a woman, although if you didn’t pay too close attention it would be easy to mistake her for a man. She was boyish, with short hair beneath her Giants baseball cap, dressed in what looked like boys’ clothes. She was probably in her twenties. Both her forearms were dark with tattoos; I couldn’t make them out, but the designs looked intricate.

“Steph, this is my son, Matthew, and my granddaughter, Aria,” Joan said. “Matty, Aria, this is Steph.” Joan went back into the kitchen, where I saw her rummaging through her purse.

“Nice to meet you, sir,” Steph said to my dad, extending her hand to him as if they were man to man. As she came closer I saw some of the tattoos more clearly. A snake, maybe, or fish—something with scales.

“You helping out my mother?” Dad asked.

“I do a little yard work,” Steph said.

“She’s good,” Joan called from inside. “You know all my neighbors want to hire you. You could have a monopoly on Woodacre yards if you wanted.”

“Thanks,” Steph said.

Joan came back with a check and handed it to her. “Same time in two weeks?”

“I’ll be here,” Steph said. She glanced at me. “Nice to meet you, too. Your grandma’s told me a lot about you.”

I felt the tiniest bit self-conscious. “Oh yeah? You know she lies.”

Joan’s mouth quirked into an impish grin. “Everything I said was true,” she insisted.

Steph smiled and pocketed the check. “I wouldn’t doubt it. I’ll see you in two weeks.” She gave me a quick look as she left, as if she wasn’t quite sure what to make of me.

It wasn’t like I was struck by lightning or anything, but I remember that last look, that fraction of a moment before she left. I remember thinking *I wish you were a boy*, because then my summer would be a lot more interesting.

This is why I was spending the summer in Woodacre instead of on Martha's Vineyard: A boy took some topless photos of me and posted them on Tumblr. The photos got around, and somebody spray-painted *slut* on my locker, which meant the school counselor got nosy and called me in to her office. I wouldn't tell her what the graffiti was about, so she poked around on her own and found the photos somehow, and then she called my dad and told him.

I came home from school one afternoon to find my dad waiting for me in the living room, where he sat me down and forced me to tell him about the whole thing. Even though I warned him not to look at the photos, I think he did. He couldn't meet my eyes for days after that.

That might have been the end of it, except my dad then called my mom in Vienna, where she was playing the title role in *Tosca*. My parents divorced when I was six, and I suppose it was my dad's duty as a parent to tell her what had happened, but the second he told me he was calling her, I knew it wasn't going to end well. I had to listen to her yelling at me over the phone about how I had no respect for myself and she was ashamed of me.

"It could've been worse. At least it's just my top," I said flippantly.

"I don't know how you can joke about this," my mom said. "How could you let your boyfriend take pictures like that?"

He's not my boyfriend, I thought. But I said, "You don't understand."

"Then explain it to me."

But I couldn't.

After that call, my summer plans completely unraveled, and before I knew it, I was on that plane to Woodacre, to spend the summer before college under my grandmother's supervision.

I'm telling this all wrong. I should start over.

The boy's name was Jacob Krieger. He took the photos during Haley's big party in mid-May. Haley Pierce was one of my best friends, along with Tasha Lewis. I'd known Tasha since second grade, and Haley since she moved to Wellesley in seventh grade. In eighth grade, we became a trio. Because Tasha was Black, I was Asian, and Haley was white, Haley's parents treated us like the multicultural promised land and were always encouraging us to do things together. But the three of us moved in somewhat different circles in school (Haley was a swimmer, Tasha was a debater, and I did Science Olympiad), although there was always an overlapping area—the intersection of our Venn diagram. In March of our senior year, Tasha and Haley had a falling-out I didn't understand, and for a while we no longer overlapped. Our intersection was empty.

Then Haley had the idea to throw a house party before prom and senior week—the last party of our high school years, the kind we'd all remember at reunions to come. And we intersected again. It felt like old times, with the three of us lying on Haley's king-sized bed, making a YouTube playlist on our phones while talking about who to invite.

Jacob was an automatic choice, along with all the guys on the lacrosse team, because they overlapped with Haley's swim team circle.

He had a reputation for being a partyer and a commitment-phobe, but in that charming way that guys can get away with. He looked kind of like Chris Hemsworth, but less built. I knew who he was, but before the party, I'd never given him much thought. It wasn't that he was out of my league; our leagues were simply different.

The day of the party, I walked over to Haley's to help set up. Her house was only about a mile away from mine, but it was in a different universe from the condo my dad and I lived in behind Central Street. We dealt with drafty windows and old doors that either stuck or didn't quite close. Haley lived in a mansion on a hill. It looked like a classic white colonial with black shutters, but it had been extensively remodeled. Everything inside was new and seemed to be made of marble or glass.

When I arrived at the foot of the long driveway, I saw Tasha's red-and-black Mini Cooper already parked at the top. It was early evening on a Saturday in May, and it finally felt like spring. It was just warm enough to wear shorts, and the trees were thick with white and pink blossoms. I headed for the gate to the back patio, where I knew Haley and Tasha would be setting up for the party. Haley's mom had taken us to Whole Foods the day before, and she'd paid for huge amounts of guacamole and chips, fancy cheese and crackers, organic sodas, and bottled water. Haley's mom had even gotten us a bunch of prosecco to celebrate our upcoming graduation. We expected people to sneak in beer and liquor, and we expected Haley's parents to look the other way. As long as nobody drove drunk, it would be fine. We were seniors and deserved to let off some steam.

As I came around the side of the house, I saw Haley and Tasha before they saw me. They sat facing each other on the edges of two loungers. Haley was saying something and leaning toward Tasha, one hand outstretched. Tasha was looking at her through her oversized sunglasses, so I couldn't see her eyes, but there was a weird stiffness

to her face. I wondered if they'd had a fight. But then she caught sight of me and jumped up.

"There you are!" Tasha said, looking relieved. She pulled a bottle of prosecco from the giant cooler nearby. "Let's have a toast!"

"Hey, Ari," Haley said. She got up and grabbed three red Solo cups from the party supplies, passing them out.

Tasha poured in generous slugs of fizzing prosecco and said, "To graduating."

"To partying," Haley said.

"To us," I said. We knocked our plastic cups together and drank, but I noticed that Haley and Tasha avoided looking at each other.

The party officially started at eight o'clock, but it didn't really fill up till almost nine. A lot of people came, spreading out over the backyard and going in and out of the basement, although "basement" was a misnomer. It was an entire floor dedicated to entertainment that opened directly onto a lower patio. There was a kitchenette with a wet bar stocked with prosecco and the sneaked-in booze, a home theater with velvet seats where music videos played on a big screen, a game room with Ping-Pong and foosball tables for increasingly drunken gaming, and a lounge area with squishy sectionals for conversations that would lead to hookups.

By the time Jacob noticed me, I was pretty drunk. I left Tasha and Haley dancing in the home theater while I went to get some water. As I was digging in the fridge, Jacob asked me to grab a bottle for him, too, and then we had to edge around the crowd in the kitchenette, and we ended up trapped in a corner of the lounge watching one of Jacob's teammates attempt to down way too much beer way too fast.

Jacob leaned over and said in my ear, "I always wanted to kiss you."

I almost wasn't sure I'd heard him correctly, but the sensation of his breath on my ear was unmistakable. A shiver went through me involuntarily.

I could have said *You're lying, you've never thought about me before this minute*. I could have said *That's a terrible line*. I turned toward him, intending to give him a withering look, but the expression on his face stopped me. A small grin on his mouth, a sparkle in his eye, all mischief.

"You're always so mysterious, Aria West," he said.

"I'm not mysterious," I said, but I felt flattered. I wanted to be mysterious.

"I've known you since, what, sixth grade? How come we've never hooked up?"

I thought I should be offended by his question, but the feeling of flattery only seemed to intensify. In the lounge, they were chanting for his lacrosse buddy to drink faster. Strains of "Blurred Lines" floated out from the home theater. I didn't say anything in response, which only made Jacob lean close to me again, his mouth practically on my neck as he whispered, "We don't have to talk if you don't want."

He must have felt the shiver go through me again. I was a little irritated by my body for responding when I wasn't sure if I wanted it to, and then I thought, *Why not?* This could be the twist of the night for me—even the twist of the year. Ever since sophomore year, I had made it my rule to never hook up with anyone from school. I knew that was one reason Jacob thought I was mysterious. But now, school was almost over.

I didn't say anything, but I turned my face to his, and I let him kiss me.

There were a couple of guest rooms tucked in the back of the basement. We found one of the empty ones and locked the door behind us. I pulled his shirt off before we even made it to the bed. I was

wearing a white off-shoulder tee printed with a gold tiger, with a lacy red bra underneath. His fingers fumbled a little on the clasp, so I took it off for him. His skin was warm and his body was firmly muscled, and I wanted him physically in a way I hadn't felt in a while. There was something transactional about it, but that's what made it work for me. I was under no illusions that he'd want something more with me, and I didn't want anything more from him. Just this experience, on this bed, his body above and against me, my hands pulling him in.

When I reached for the waistband of his jeans, he told me to wait while he got out a condom. But when I lay back against the pillow, he had his phone in his hand—he must have taken it out of his pocket—and he snapped a bunch of photos.

“What are you doing?” I said, putting a hand up over my face. Even then it didn't occur to me to cover my breasts.

“You look so beautiful,” he said. “I just want to capture the moment.”

The day after the party, the photos appeared.

Haley sent me the link. I was at home, watching mindless TV to get through my hangover, when her text made my phone vibrate.

Someone sent me this. You're in these pics. WTF?

I clicked through without thinking, and when the first photo loaded, a shock of heat went through me. I sat up abruptly. There I was on the bed in Haley's basement, one arm over my head, looking straight at the camera as if I'd posed for it. There were four photos, almost identical, as if he'd kept his finger on the red shutter button and snapped them off within a second or two.

The number of likes on the post clicked up as I was looking. The heat that had flushed my body seemed to pulse through me now, my blood surging with each heartbeat.

I had told him to put the phone down before we continued, and he had. But it hadn't occurred to me to ask him to delete these.

A cool, snarky voice inside my head commented, *At least you look good.* And I did. I had sexy hair and bedroom eyes, my lips were puffy from kissing him, and my breasts looked fantastic. But as the likes kept going up, a nauseating feeling took hold of me, a groundless, falling sensation that made me think I was about to vomit. I ran to the bathroom and gagged while bending over the toilet. My phone clattered onto the tile floor, barely missing the toilet bowl. Two hundred and fifty-three likes and counting.

Everything happened pretty quickly after that. I was supposed to go to Martha's Vineyard with Haley after graduation. Her parents had invited me to stay with them at their Edgartown house through the Fourth of July. By then, Tasha would be back from her marine ecology internship in Thailand. Her parents had a summer house in Oak Bluffs, also on the Vineyard, and I was going to stay with them till August. Then I was going to California to see my grandmother for a couple of weeks before coming back to get ready for college.

My dad had been relieved when the plan came together, because he'd been accepted at the Deer Bay Writers' Colony in Washington State, and he wanted to be there the entire summer. Martha's Vineyard was the perfect plan. I'd have one last summer with my friends before we all scattered to different colleges in the fall. Haley was going to NYU, Tasha to Spelman, and I was starting at MIT.

But the day after *slut* was painted on my locker, Haley's mom called my dad to say that unfortunately they were not going to be able to host me on the Vineyard. Haley told me it was because her mom had seen the pictures, recognized the seashell lamp on the nightstand next to me, and realized the photo had been taken in their basement.

I tried to convince my dad I could stay at home by myself until it was time to go to Oak Bluffs with Tasha, but then Tasha called and explained that her mom was taking her to France for a couple of weeks after Thailand, so I couldn't stay with them anymore.

"I'm really sorry," Tasha said gently.

And just like that, my parents decided I'd spend the whole summer with my grandmother. No amount of arguing could convince them that I would be fine on my own, that I hadn't done anything wrong.

Jacob didn't seem to get punished at all. In fact, he only seemed to get more popular. Somehow the fact that he had managed to get my shirt off made him someone the other guys looked up to, but the fact that I had taken my shirt off made me a slut.

Officially, of course, the school condemned what happened. But there was also a kind of collective shrug. Jacob and I were both eighteen. We were two weeks away from graduating. The photos had been taken after school hours, off campus. They would have disciplined whoever defaced my locker, but nobody was talking. Maybe if I'd made more of a fuss about it—maybe if I showed school administrators the nasty messages I got after Jacob posted the photos—maybe then they would have done something. But I didn't want to show anyone. I just wanted it all to go away, and the best way to make it go away was to say nothing.

I'm still telling this wrong. You have to understand something. I grew up in Wellesley, surrounded by all these rich people, but I was never one of them. It's not like we were poor—we weren't—but my friends were *rich*. Haley's dad ran a hedge fund and had a collection of Rolexes; her mom headed up a wealthy arts organization that gave money to struggling artists. Tasha's dad was a partner at a law

firm who was always traveling to London or Geneva; her mom was a biotech executive who wore the most amazing suits I'd ever seen.

They all knew that my dad was a professor and a sort-of famous author, and that my mom was an opera singer, even though she was never around to impress them. That had some cachet, especially with Haley's mom, but my artsy, educated parents could not make up for the fact that I didn't have the money to buy Birkin bags or take spontaneous weekend trips to Paris. And I definitely didn't have the resources to summer on Martha's Vineyard without their charity.

They always made me feel like a guest in their homes, but as a guest, I was easily uninvited.

The morning my dad left for the writers' colony, I pretended to sleep late, until there was barely enough time to say good-bye on the doorstep before he drove off in the rental car. Joan asked if I wanted breakfast, but I mumbled that I would shower first. The guest bathroom was painted buttercup yellow, and there was a skylight in the ceiling that let in the sun, but when I stepped under the hot spray, I closed my eyes so I could be in the dark.

I washed my hair with shampoo from the near-empty St. Ives bottle in the basket hanging from the showerhead. The sweet, buttery smell brought me back to previous visits here. Christmas with the whole family—Aunt Tammy and Uncle Brian and their twins, Luke and Noah, running up the stairs eager to open presents. Summer evenings with Dad and Joan on the deck, grilling tri-tip beneath the redwoods. And earlier, Grandpa greeting me with his giant swinging hugs.

I didn't want to miss them, and I didn't want to be here. I felt displaced and yet cornered.

I remembered Jacob's face afterward, so pleased with himself.

There was a weird, frantic fluttering in my chest.

I scrubbed the shampoo out of my hair, raking my nails across my scalp, the sudsy water running over my tightly closed eyes. The rich scent made me gag. I needed new shampoo.

The Safeway parking lot was laid out in diagonal rows that made it difficult to figure out how to approach the entrance. I ended up parking Joan's Honda out by the edge, facing Sir Francis Drake Boulevard. When I got out of the car, the dry summer heat radiated up from the asphalt with an almost physical force. I headed quickly for the store, plunging into the freezing air-conditioning.

I'd been to this Safeway on previous visits, and everything was the same as before, right down to the same eighties power ballads playing in the background. I was only here for shampoo, but I took my time getting to the toiletry aisle. I didn't have anything better to do. I was finally narrowing in on the shampoo section when my phone dinged. I pulled it out of my purse to find a text from Tasha.

Haven't heard from you in a while. You in Cali now? Everything OK?

I felt that panicky feeling in my chest again. I shoved my phone back into my purse.

After the slut situation, Tasha had been so supportive, reassuring me over and over that it wasn't my fault. But she still canceled our summer; she was still going to France. She told me it had nothing to do with what happened with me. She swore that her mom just wanted to take her to Paris for some mother-daughter time before college.

What would it be like to have a mother who wanted to do that?

I didn't know what to say to Tasha. I plucked a bottle of Pantene from the shelf and left without even smelling the other options.

At the checkout, only one cash register was open, and there was a line. I pulled a *Cosmopolitan* off the rack to distract myself. An article about sexual positions of the ancients featured a thin, white model draped in part of a toga, her lips painted bright red. She looked straight at the camera, just as I had.

"Excuse me, miss?" A woman in a Safeway vest was gesturing to me. "I'll take you over here."

I followed her to the next checkout lane and realized I was still carrying the magazine. She looked at me, clutching the shampoo and *Cosmopolitan*.

“Are you ready?” she asked a little impatiently. She had brownish-blond hair pulled back in a ponytail and a name tag that read LISA, MANAGER.

“Sorry,” I said. I put the magazine on the conveyor belt along with the shampoo. I hadn’t intended to buy it, but now it felt weird to put it back.

As Lisa rang up my purchases, the woman who did Joan’s yard work showed up—it looked like she had come straight to my lane from the entrance—and said, “Lis, you ready?” She sort of did a double take when she saw me and said, “Oh, hey.”

“Hi,” I said to Steph.

Lisa shot Steph a puzzled look. “You know each other?”

Steph said, “I do her grandma’s yard—you know, Joan West out in Woodacre.”

“Oh.” Lisa shrugged. “Do you want a bag?” she asked me. “It’s ten cents.”

“Um, that’s okay,” I said.

She handed me the shampoo, *Cosmo*, and a receipt.

“Thanks.” I stepped out of the aisle and started to head toward the exit, but Steph was still there. “Nice to see you,” I said. I didn’t want to appear rude, but I didn’t want to be in the Safeway anymore either.

“Yeah. Hey, hang on,” Steph said. She glanced at Lisa. “Are you ready to go soon?”

“Maybe five, ten minutes,” Lisa answered. “There’s a backup. Cheryl didn’t come in today.”

“I’ll meet you outside then.” Steph looked at me. “You have five minutes?”

I hesitated, but I had all day. “Sure.”

“I’ll walk you out,” Steph said.

We headed for the exit and I flipped my sunglasses back on. As we left the store, my phone chimed again. I ignored it and asked, “What’s up?”

She gestured to a bench nearby in the shade of the entryway and we both sat down.

“I wanted to talk to you about your grandma,” she said. “You’re gonna be here all summer, right?”

“Unfortunately.”

She grinned. “I got the impression this was a last-minute kind of thing.”

“Yeah.” I wondered what Joan had told her. Did Steph know why I was here? The idea of her knowing made me uncomfortable.

“I know your grandma’s pretty healthy, especially for someone her age, but I worry about her, you know?” Steph said.

This surprised me. “I thought you just did her gardening.”

“Yeah, I do that, but I help her out with other stuff sometimes. If she needs something fixed, she’ll call me and I’ll come climb a ladder to change a light bulb or whatever. And sometimes I help her move her canvases or set things up.”

There was something in the tone of her voice that made me apprehensive. “Just tell me,” I said. “Did something happen?”

She was turned toward me, right arm along the back of the bench, and now she crossed her left ankle over her right knee. She was wearing cargo shorts again, and her legs weren’t shaved. For some reason, noticing that made me notice—really notice—the rest of her. Her hair was dark brown and cut very short on the sides, longer on top like a guy. She had little black gauges in her earlobes, and up along her right ear a line of silver studs. There was an easy boyishness to the way she moved. Yesterday I had thought she was

cute but dismissed her because she was a girl. Today I just thought she was cute—exactly the way I might feel about any boy. It was confusing. I couldn't remember if I'd ever looked at another girl that way before.

"A couple months ago," she said, "I came over to help your grandma with her dishwasher. It's pretty old and sometimes it acts up. Anyway, I got there and she had totally forgotten she'd called me. I know that can happen when you get older, so I didn't think too much about it. But there have been other things—little things—but together they make me worry about her. Like, she told me she couldn't find Analemma's leash one day, which is weird because it's always on the hook by the front door. I was there that morning so I helped her look, but I only found it on accident. She'd put it in a kitchen drawer. For a while she was acting a little strange. Not only forgetful—sort of like she wasn't sure what was going on. She asked me when Matty was coming home for dinner a couple of months ago, when she knows he doesn't live here. She's better now, but I think it's a little dangerous for her out there all alone, you know?"

I realized that the tattoos on her arms were koi fish swimming in a yin-yang pattern. "She has a dog," I said. "She's not alone, exactly."

Steph gave me a strange look, as if I wasn't getting it but she didn't want to hurt my feelings. I flushed and glanced out at the Safeway parking lot. The cars were gleaming in the sun; it was getting hotter. This conversation with Steph about my grandmother was the least sexy topic I could imagine, but inside me I felt a tiny unfurling, as if a tender green shoot were turning toward the sun.

"Analemma is a great dog, but unfortunately she can't call 911," Steph said.

"You think she needs to call 911 a lot?" I said, suddenly worried.

"No, no," Steph assured me. "I just—it's that she's on her own, and she's—well, she's getting older."

I crossed my legs, and my right foot bobbed out of the shade into the sunlight. I was wearing flip-flops, and my purple toenail polish was chipped. I became aware that I was wearing stringy cutoffs and a faded blue tank top with tiny holes near the hem. And of course, even though I'd washed my hair, I'd pulled it back in a ponytail when it was still wet. I didn't look that great, and here was Steph looking at me and expecting me to be a responsible adult.

"I know," I said. I sat up, uncrossing my legs and tucking my feet beneath the bench so the chipped nail polish wasn't visible anymore. "I know she's getting older, but Joan's very independent." I saw Steph note my use of her first name. "I call her Joan. She's not really a 'grandma' type. So it's good she can ask you to come over and help her. I'm pretty impressed that she'll do even that."

"Did she tell you about her memory lapses?" Steph asked.

"No. But I'm her granddaughter. I don't think she would tell me."

"Well, now you know," Steph said gently.

"Yeah," I said. This was awkward. "Maybe I can talk to my dad about it."

"Okay. I hope it's all right that I brought this up—"

"Yo, Steph, what's taking so long?"

A woman was walking toward us from the parking lot. She was stocky, wearing a striped rugby shirt, knee-length baggy shorts, and sneakers. Her black hair was in a ponytail pulled through the back of a baseball cap.

Steph glanced up. "Lisa's running late."

The woman stopped a few feet away from us and flashed me a grin. "Hey," she said. "How do you know Steph?"

"This is Aria West," Steph said before I could answer. "She's Joan West's granddaughter."

"Oh, the artist lady," the woman said, nodding.

I was about to ask how she knew about my grandmother when Steph said, “Aria, this is Mel Lopez.”

“Hi,” I said.

“I hope Steph’s not boring you with all her xeriscaping theories,” Mel said. “She’s a little obsessed.”

I glanced at Steph, who cracked a tiny grin.

“No, she’s not boring me,” I said.

The Safeway doors whooshed open and Lisa emerged, looking a bit frazzled. She had taken off her Safeway vest and was pulling a pack of cigarettes out of her back pocket. As she lit up, Steph went over to her and rubbed a hand over her back. “You okay?” she asked.

Lisa frowned and nodded. “Just busy.”

The way they stood together—Steph leaning in, Lisa letting her get that close—made me realize they were a couple. It jolted me a little, a tiny jab of disappointment.

Mel sat down next to me, taking Steph’s place on the bench. “Hey, what are you doing Wednesday night?” Mel asked.

“Um, I don’t know, why?”

“Steph’s performing at the open mic at the Bolinas Café in Fairfax. You wanna come?”

“Mel, leave her alone,” Steph said. “She doesn’t want to come to some open mic night.”

Mel looked at me almost slyly. “You sure?”

Lisa stood there smoking and staring at me, and then she slid her free hand into Steph’s, their fingers lacing together.

“Where are you from?” Lisa asked.

“Massachusetts,” I answered. “I’m visiting for the summer.”

Lisa looked a little confused. “But originally, I mean?”

A prickle of irritation went through me. “I was born in Boston.”

“We better get going,” Steph said abruptly. “Thanks for talking, Aria.”

“Sure,” I said.

Lisa still looked confused, but she let Steph pull her toward the parking lot.

Mel stood up and asked, “So you want to come with us on Wednesday? Steph’s got a new song.”

“You don’t have to come,” Steph called back.

Mel waved off Steph’s comment. “Come on, don’t make me be the third wheel again. Only you can save me.”

Mel was joking, but there was a wicked sparkle in her eyes, a challenge I didn’t quite understand. I glanced at Steph, who looked a bit self-conscious.

“I don’t know if I’ll have a car,” I hedged.

“We could pick you up,” Mel said.

“Oh no,” I said quickly. “I’m all the way out in—”

“Woodacre, yeah,” Mel said. “It’s not that far from Fairfax. I’ll come get you. Steph has the address, right?”

“Um, yeah. But I don’t want to make you—”

“Not a problem. What’s your number?”

She already had her phone out. She was very pushy, and if a boy had been that pushy, I would’ve given him a fake number. But there was something flattering about Mel’s interest, so I told her. I heard my phone ding after she texted me.

Lisa ground out her cigarette on the side of a nearby trash can and tossed the butt inside. “Mel, we gotta go,” she said.

Mel gave me a quick grin. “Be ready at seven thirty on Wednesday.”

As they walked out into the parking lot, Steph glanced back at me, mouthing the words *I’m sorry*. I wasn’t sure if she was apologizing for Mel’s pushiness or for Lisa’s asking me where I was from

originally, but I shook my head slightly. *It's okay*, I mouthed back.

Steph waved at me briefly before the three of them climbed into a dirty white VW Golf, and then I watched them leave. As soon as I saw the Golf turn onto the street, I got up and headed for Joan's car. I kept thinking about the twinge of disappointment I'd felt when I realized Steph and Lisa were together. When Lisa took Steph's hand, claiming her.