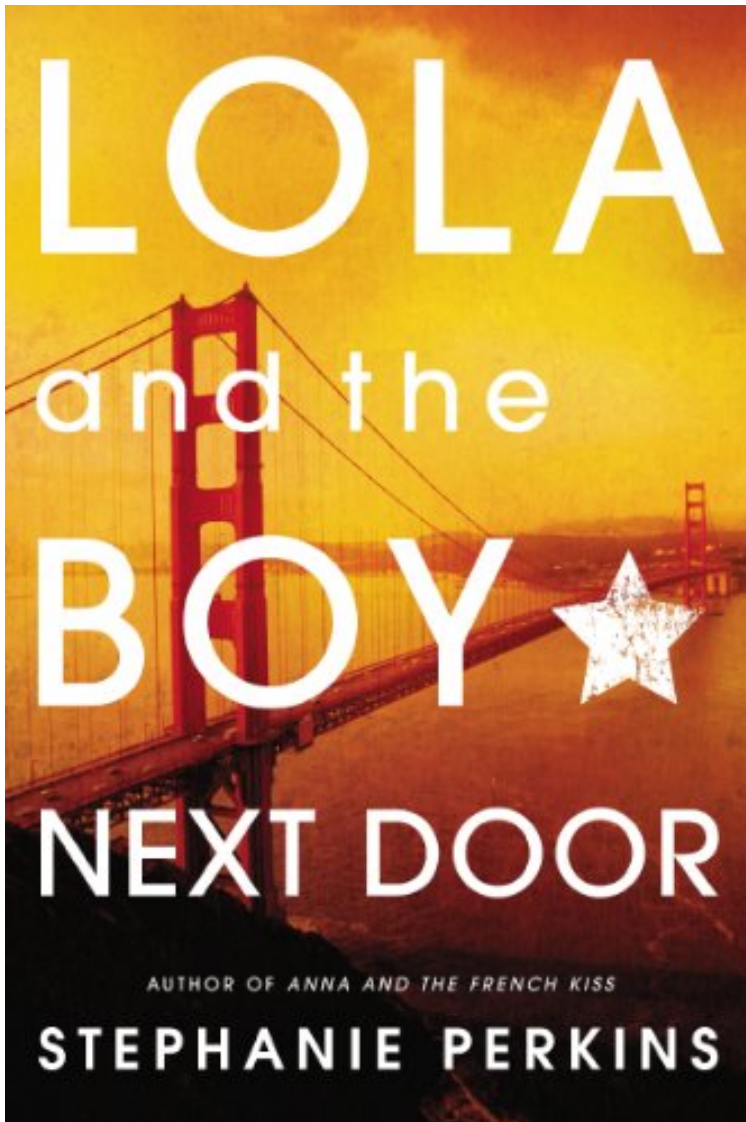


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Lola and the Boy Next Door



Par Stephanie Perkins
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurLola Nolan is a budding costume designer, and for her, the more outrageous, sparkly, and fun the outfit, the better. And everything is pretty perfect in her life (right down to her hot rocker boyfriend) until the Bell twins, Calliope and Cricket, return to the neighborhood. When Cricket, a gifted inventor, steps out from his twin sister's shadow and back into Lola's life, she must finally reconcile a lifetime of feelings for the boy next door.ExtraitThe boy next door is back in Lolas life. Cricket. His name explodes inside of me like cannon fire. I move toward our windows. His curtains are open. The bags he brought home are still on his floor, but theres no sign of him. What am I supposed to say the next time we see each other? Why wont he stop ruining my life? Why does he have to ask me out now? And Max knows about him. It shouldnt matter, but it does. Max isnt the type to keep bringing it up, but he is the type to hold

on to it. Save it for when he needs it. Did he believe me when I told him that I love him? That I don't even like Cricket? Yes, he did. And I'm in love with Max. So why don't I know if the other half was a lie? OTHER

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2011015533 For Jarrod, best friend true love chapter one I have three simple wishes. They're really not too much to ask. The first is to attend the winter formal dressed like Marie Antoinette. I want a wig so elaborate it could cage a bird and a dress so wide I'll only be able to enter the dance through a set of double doors. But

I'll hold my skirts high as I arrive to reveal a pair of platform combat boots, so everyone can see that, underneath the frills, I'm punk-rock tough. The second is for my parents to approve of my boyfriend. They hate him. They hate his bleached hair with its constant dark roots, and they hate his arms, which are tattooed with sleeves of spiderwebs and stars. They say his eyebrows condescend, that his smile is more of a smirk.

And they're sick of hearing his music blasting from my bedroom, and they're tired of fighting about my curfew whenever I watch his band play in clubs. And my third wish? To never ever ever see the Bell twins ever again. Ever. But I'd much rather discuss my boyfriend. I realize it's not cool to desire parental approval,

but honestly, my life would be so much easier if they accepted that Max is the one. It'd mean the end of embarrassing restrictions, the end of every-hour-on-the-hour phone-call check-ins on dates, and best of all the end of Sunday brunch. The end of mornings like this. Another waffle, Max? My father, Nathan, pushes the golden stack across our antique farmhouse table and toward my boyfriend. This is not a real question. It's a command, so that my parents can continue their interrogation before we leave. Our reward for dealing with brunch? A more relaxed Sunday-afternoon date with fewer check-ins. Max takes two and helps himself to the

homemade raspberry-peach syrup. Thanks, sir. Incredible, as always. He pours the syrup carefully, a drop in each square. Despite appearances, Max is careful by nature. This is why he never drinks or smokes pot on Saturday nights. He doesn't want to come to brunch looking hungover, which is, of course, what my parents are watching for. Evidence of debauchery. Thank Andy. Nathan jerks his head toward my other dad, who runs a pie bakery out of our home. He made them. Delicious. Thank you, sir. Max never misses a beat. Lola, did you get enough? I stretch, and the seven inches of Bakelite bracelets on my right arm knock against each other. Yeah, like, twenty minutes ago. Come on, I turn and plead to Andy, the candidate most likely to let us leave early. Can't we go now? He bats his eyes innocently. More orange juice? Frittata? No. I fight to keep from slumping. Slumping is unattractive. Nathan stabs another waffle. So. Max. How goes the world of meter reading? When Max isn't being an indie punk garage-rock god, he works for the City of San Francisco. It irks Nathan that Max has no interest in college. But what my dad doesn't grasp is that Max is actually brilliant. He reads complicated philosophy books written by people with names I can't pronounce and watches tons of angry political documentaries. I certainly wouldn't debate him. Max smiles politely, and his dark eyebrows raise a titch. The same as last week. And the band? Andy asks. Wasn't some record executive supposed to come on Friday? My boyfriend frowns. The guy from the label never showed. Max updates Andy about Amphetamines forthcoming album instead, while Nathan and I exchange scowls. No doubt my father is disappointed that, once again, he hasn't found anything to incriminate Max. Apart from the age thing, of course. Which is the real reason my parents hate my boyfriend. They hate that I'm seventeen, and Max is twenty-two. But I'm a firm believer in age-doesn't-matter. Besides, it's only five years, way less than the difference between my parents. Though it's no use pointing this out, or the fact that my boyfriend is the same age Nathan was when my parents started dating. This only gets them worked up. I may have been his age, but Andy was thirty, Nathan always says. Not a teenager. And we'd both had several boyfriends before, plenty of life experience. You can't jump into these things. You have to be careful. But they don't remember what it's like to be young and in love. Of course I can jump into these things. When it's someone like Max, I'd be stupid not to. My best friend thinks it's hilarious that my parents are so strict. After all, shouldn't a couple of gay men sympathize with the temptation offered by a sexy, slightly dangerous boyfriend? This is so far from the truth it's painful. It doesn't matter that I'm a perfect daughter. I don't drink or do drugs, and I've never smoked a cigarette. I haven't crashed their car. I can't even drive, so they're not paying high insurance rates and I have a decent job. I make good grades. Well, apart from biology, but I refused to dissect that fetal pig on principle. And I only have one hole per ear and no ink. Yet. I'm not even embarrassed to hug my parents in public. Except when Nathan wears a sweatband when he goes running. Because really. I clear my dishes from the table, hoping to speed things along. Today Max is taking me to one of my favorite places, the Japanese Tea Garden, and then he's driving me to work for my evening shift. And hopefully, in between stops, we'll spend some quality time together in his '64 Chevy Impala. I lean against the kitchen countertop, dreaming of Max's car. I'm just shocked she's not wearing her kimono, Nathan says. What? I hate it when I space out and realize people have been talking about me. Chinese pajamas to the Japanese Tea Garden, he continues, gesturing at my red silk bottoms. What will people think? I don't believe in fashion. I believe in costume. Life is too short to be the same person every day. I roll my eyes to show Max that I realize my parents are acting lame. Our little drag queen, Andy says. Because that's a new one. I snatch his plate and dump the brunch remains into Betsy's bowl. Her eyes bug, and she inhales the waffle scraps in one big doggie bite. Betsy's full name is Heavens to Betsy, and we rescued her from animal control several years ago. She's a mutt, built like a golden retriever but black in color. I wanted a black dog, because Andy once clipped a magazine article he always clipping articles, usually about teens dying from overdoses or contracting syphilis or getting pregnant and dropping out of school about how black dogs are always the last to be adopted at shelters and, therefore, more likely to be put down. Which is totally Dog Racism, if you ask me. Betsy is all heart. Lola. Andy is wearing his serious face. I wasn't finished. So get a new plate. Lola, Nathan says, and I give Andy a clean plate. I'm afraid they're about to turn this into A Thing in front of Max, when they notice Betsy begging for more waffles. No, I tell her. Have you walked her today? Nathan asks me. No, Andy did. Before I started cooking, Andy says. She's ready for another. Why don't you take her for a walk while we finish up with Max? Nathan asks. Another command, not a question. I glance at Max, and he closes his eyes like he can't believe they're pulling this trick again. But, Dad. No buts. You wanted the dog, you walk her. This is one of Nathan's most annoying catchphrases. Heavens to Betsy was supposed to be mine, but she had the nerve to fall in love with Nathan instead, which irritates Andy and me to no end. We're the ones who feed and walk her. I reach for the biodegradable baggies and her leash, the one I've embroidered with hearts and Russian nesting dolls and

shes already going berserk. Yeah, yeah. Come on. I shoot Max another apologetic look, and then Betsy and I are out the door. There are twenty-one stairs from our porch to the sidewalk. Anywhere you go in San Francisco, you have to deal with steps and hills. Its unusually warm outside, so along with my pajama bottoms and Bakelite bangles, Im wearing a tank top. Ive also got on my giant white Jackie O sunglasses, a long brunette wig with emerald tips, and black ballet slippers. Real ballet slippers, not the flats that only look like ballet slippers. My New Years resolution was to never again wear the same outfit twice. The sunshine feels good on my shoulders. It doesnt matter that its August; because of the bay, the temperature doesnt change much throughout the year. Its always cool. Today Im grateful for the peculiar weather, because it means I wont have to bring a sweater on my date. Betsy pees on the teeny rectangle of grass in front of the lavender Victorian next door she always pees here, which I totally approve of and we move on. Despite my annoying parents, Im happy. I have a romantic date with my boyfriend, a great schedule with my favorite coworkers, and one more week of summer vacation. We hike up and down the massive hill that separates my street from the park. When we arrive, a Korean gentleman in a velveteen tracksuit greets us. Hes doing tai chi between the palm trees. Hello, Dolores! How was your birthday? Mr. Lim is the only person apart from my parents (when theyre mad) who calls me by my real name. His daughter Lindsey is my best friend; they live a few streets over. Hi, Mr. Lim. It was divine! My birthday was last week. Mine is the earliest of anyone in my grade, which I love. It gives me an additional air of maturity. Hows the restaurant? Very good, thank you. Everyone asking for beef galbi this week. Goodbye, Dolores! Hello to your parents. The old lady name is because I was named after one. My great-grandma Dolores Deeks died a few years before I was born. She was Andys grandmother, and she was fabulous. The kind of woman who wore feathered hats and marched in civil rights protests. Dolores was the first person Andy came out to. He was thirteen. They were really close, and when she died, she left Andy her house. Thats where we live, in Great-Grandma Dolores mint green Victorian in the Castro district. Which wed never be able to afford without her generous bequeathal. My parents make a healthy living, but nothing like the neighbors. The well-kept homes on our street, with their decorative gabled cornices and extravagant wooden ornamentation, all come from old money. Including the lavender house next door. My name is also shared with this park, Mission Dolores. Its not a coincidence. Great-Grandma Dolores was named after the nearby mission, which was named after a creek called Arroyo de Nuestra Seora de los Dolores. This translates to Our Lady of Sorrows Creek. Because who wouldnt want to be named after a depressing body of water? Theres also a major street around here called Dolores. Its kind of weird. Id rather be a Lola. Heavens to Betsy finishes, and we head home. I hope my parents havent been torturing Max. For someone so brash onstage, hes actually an introvert, and these weekly meetings arent easy on him. I thought dealing with one protective father was bad enough, he once said. But two? Your dads are gonna be the death of me, Lo. A moving truck rattles by, and its odd, because suddenly just that quickly my good mood is replaced by unease. We pick up speed. Max must be beyond uncomfortable right now. I cant explain it, but the closer I get to home, the worse I feel. A terrible scenario loops through my mind: my parents, so relentless with inquiries that Max decides Im not worth it anymore. My hope is that someday, when weve been together longer than one summer, my parents will realize hes the one, and age wont be an issue anymore. But despite their inability to see this truth now, they arent dumb. They deal with Max because they think if they forbade me from seeing him, wed just run off together. Id move into his apartment and get a job dancing naked or dealing acid. Which is beyond misguided. But Im jogging now, hauling Betsy down the hill. Somethings not right. And Im positive its happened that Max has left or my parents have cornered him into a heated argument about the lack of direction in his life when I reach my street and everything clicks into place. The moving truck. Not the brunch. The moving truck. But Im sure the truck belongs to another renter. It has to, it always does. The last family, this couple that smelled like baby Swiss and collected medical oddities like shriveled livers in formaldehyde and oversize models of vaginas, vacated a week ago. In the last two years, theres been a string of renters, and every time someone moves out, I cant help but feel ill until the new ones arrive. Because what if now is the time they move back in? I slow down to get a better look at the truck. Is anyone outside? I didnt notice a car in the garage when we passed earlier, but Ive made a habit out of not staring at the house next door. Sure enough, there are two people ahead on the sidewalk. I strain my eyes and find, with a mixture of agitation and relief, that its just the movers. Betsy tugs on her leash, and I pick up the pace again. Im sure theres nothing to worry about. What are the chances? Except . . . theres always a chance. The movers lift a white sofa from the back of the truck, and my heart thumps harder. Do I recognize it? Have I sat on that love seat before? But no. I dont know it. I peer inside the crammed truck, searching for anything familiar, and Im met with stacks of severe modern

furniture that Ive never seen before. Its not them. It cant be them. Its not them! I grin from ear to ear a silly smile that makes me look like a child, which I dont normally allow myself to do and wave to the movers. They grunt and nod back. The lavender garage door is open, and now Im positive that it wasnt earlier. I inspect the car, and my relief deepens. Its something compact and silver, and I dont recognize it. Saved. Again. It is a happy day. Betsy and I bound inside. Brunch is over! Lets go, Max. Everyone is staring out the front window in our living room. Looks like we have neighbors again, I say. Andy looks surprised by the cheer in my voice. Weve never talked about it, but he knows something happened there two years ago. He knows that I worry about their return, that I fret each moving day. What? I grin again, but then stop myself, conscious of Max. I tone it down. Uh, Lo? You didnt see them, by any chance, did you? Andys concern is touching. I release Betsy from her leash and whisk into the kitchen. Determined to hurry the morning and get to my date, I swipe the remaining dishes from the table and head toward the sink. Nope. I laugh. What? Do they have another plastic vagina? A stuffed giraffe? A medieval suit of armor what? All three of them are staring at me. My throat tightens. What is it? Max examines me with an unusual curiosity. Your parents say you know the family. No. NO. Someone says something else, but the words dont register. My feet are carrying me toward the window while my brain is screaming for me to turn back. It cant be them. It wasnt their furniture! It wasnt their car! But people buy new things. My eyes are riveted next door as a figure emerges onto the porch. The dishes in my hands Why am I still carrying the brunch plates? shatter against the floor. Because there she is. Calliope Bell. chapter two Shes just as beautiful as she is on television. I poke at the complimentary bowl of cookies and rice crackers. Just as beautiful as she always was. Max shrugs. Shes all right. Nothing to get worked up over. As comforted as I am by his state of unimpress, its not enough to distract me. I sag against the railing of the rustic teahouse, and a breeze floats across the reflecting pool beside us. You dont understand. Shes Calliope Bell. Youre right, I dont. His eyes frown behind his thick Buddy Holly frames. This is something we have in common terrible vision. I love it when he wears his glasses. Badass rocker meets sexy nerd. He only wears them offstage, unless hes playing an acoustic number. Then they add the necessary touch of sensitivity. Max is always conscious of his appearance, which some people might find vain, but I understand completely. You only have one chance to make a first impression. Let me get this straight, he continues. When you guys were freshmen When I was a freshman. Shes a year older. Okay, when you were a freshman . . . what? She was mean to you? And youre still upset about it? His brows furrow like hes missing half of the equation. Which he is. And Im not going to fill him in. Yep. He snorts. That must have been some pretty bitchy shit for you to break those plates over. It took fifteen minutes to clean up my mess. Shards of china and egg frittata bits, trapped between the cracks of the hardwood floor, and sticky raspberry-peach syrup, splattered like blood across the baseboards. You have no idea. I leave it at this. Max pours himself another cup of jasmine tea. So why did you idolize her? I didnt idolize her then. Only when we were younger. She was this . . . gorgeous, talented girl who also happened to be my neighbor. I mean, we hung out when we were little, played Barbies and make-believe. It just hurt when she turned on me, thats all. I cant believe you havent heard of her, I add. Sorry. I dont watch a lot of figure skating. Shes been to the World Championships twice. Silver medals? Shes the big Olympic hopeful this year. Sorry, he says again. She was on a Wheaties box. No doubt selling for an entire buck ninety-nine on eBay. He nudges my knees with his underneath the table. Who the hell cares? I sigh. I loved her costumes. The chiffon ruffles, the beading and Swarovski crystals, the little skirts Little skirts? Max swigs the rest of his tea. And she had that grace and poise and confidence. I push my shoulders back. And that perfect shiny hair. That perfect skin. Perfect is overrated. Perfect is boring. I smile. You dont think Im perfect? No. Youre delightfully screwy, and I wouldnt have you any other way. Drink your tea. When I finish, we take another stroll. The Japanese Tea Garden isnt big, but it makes up for its size with beauty. Perfumed flowers in jewel-toned colors are balanced by intricately cut plants in tranquil blues and greens. Pathways meander around Buddhist statuary, koi ponds, a red pagoda, and a wooden bridge shaped like the moon. The only sounds are birdsong and the soft click of cameras. Its peaceful. Magical. But the best part? Hidden nooks, perfect for kissing. We find just the right bench, private and tucked away, and Max places his hands behind my head and pulls my lips to his. This is what Ive been waiting for. His kisses are gentle and rough, spearmint and cigarettes. Weve dated all summer, but Im still not used to him. Max. My boyfriend, Max. The night we met was the first time my parents had let me go to a club. Lindsey Lim was in the bathroom, so I was temporarily alone, perched nervously against Verges rough concrete wall. He walked straight up to me like hed done it a hundred times before. Im sorry, he said. You must have noticed me staring at you during the set. This was true. His stare had thrilled me, though I didnt trust it. The small club was crowded, and he couldve been

watching any of the hungry girls dancing beside me. Whats your name? Lola Nolan. I adjusted my tiara and shifted in my creepers. Lo-lo-lo-lo Lo-la. Max sang it like the Kinks song. His deep voice was hoarse from the show. He wore a plain black T-shirt, which I would soon discover to be his uniform. Underneath it, his shoulders were broad, his arms were toned, and right away I spotted the tattoo that would become my favorite, hidden in the crook of his left elbow. His namesake from Where the Wild Things Are. The little boy in the white wolf suit. He was the most attractive man whod ever spoken to me. Semicohherent sentences tumbled around in my head, but I couldnt keep up with any of them long enough to spit one out. Whatd you think of the show? He had to raise his voice above the Ramones, whod started blasting from the speakers. You were great, I shouted. Ive never seen your band before. I tried to yell this second part casually, like I had just never seen his band before. He didnt have to know it was my first show ever. I know. I would have noticed you. Do you have a boyfriend, Lola? Joey Ramone echoed it behind him. Hey, little girl. I wanna be your boyfriend. The guys at school were never this direct. Not that I had much experience, just the odd monthlong boyfriend here and there. Most guys are either intimidated by me or think Im strange. Whats it to you? I jutted out my chin, confidence skyrocketing. Sweet little girl. I wanna be your boyfriend. Max looked me up and down, and the side of his lips curled into a smile. I see you already need to go. He jerked his head, and I turned to find Lindsey Lim, jaw agape. Only a teenager could look that awkward and surprised. Did Max realize we were still in high school? So why dont you give me your number? he continued. Id like to see you sometime. He must have heard my heart pounding as I sifted through the contents of my purse: watermelon bubble gum, movie-ticket stubs, veggie burrito receipts, and a rainbow of nail-polish bottles. I withdrew a Sharpie, realizing too late that only kids and groupies carry Sharpies. Luckily, he didnt seem to mind. Max held out a wrist. Here. His breath was warm on my neck as I pressed the marker to his skin. My hand trembled, but somehow I managed to write it in clear, bold strokes below his tattoos. Then he smiled that signature smile, using only one corner of his mouth and ambled away, through the sweaty bodies and toward the dimly lit bar. I allowed myself a moment to stare at his backside. Despite my number, I was sure Id never see it again. But he did call. Obviously, he called. It happened two days later, on a bus ride to work. Max wanted to meet in the Haight for lunch, and I nearly died turning him down. He asked about the next day. I was working then, too. And then he asked about the next, and I couldnt believe my luck that he was still trying. Yes, I told him. Yes. I wore a pink soda-fountain-style waitress dress, and my natural hair Im a brunette, average in color was in two buns like Mickey Mouse ears. We ate falafel and discovered we were both vegetarians. He told me he didnt have a mother, and I told him I didnt really either. And then, as I wiped the last crumbs from my mouth, he said this: Theres no polite way to ask, so Im just gonna go for it. How old are you? My expression must have been terrible, because Max looked stricken as I struggled to come up with a suitable answer. Shit. That bad, huh? I decided delay was my best tactic. How old are you? No way. You first. Delay again. How old do you think I am? I think you have a cute face that looks deceptively young. And I dont want to insult you either way. So youll have to tell me. Its true. My face is round, and my cheeks are pinchable, and my ears stick out farther than Id like. I fight it with makeup and wardrobe. My curvy body helps, too. But I was going to tell the truth, I really was, when he started guessing. Nineteen? I shook my head. Older or younger? I shrugged, but he knew where this was headed. Eighteen? Please tell me youre eighteen. Of course Im eighteen. I shoved the empty plastic food basket away from me. Outside, I was an ice queen, but inside I was freaking out. Would I be here if I wasnt? His amber eyes narrowed in disbelief, and the panic rose inside of me. So how old are you? I asked again. Older than you. Are you in college? I will be. Someday. So youre still living at home? How old are you? I asked a third time. He grimaced. Im twenty-two, Lola. And we probably shouldnt be having this conversation. Im sorry, if I had known Im legal. And then I immediately felt stupid. There was a long pause. No, Max said. Youre dangerous. But he was smiling. It took another week of casual dating before I convinced him to kiss me. He was definitely interested, but I could tell I made him nervous. For some reason, this only made me bolder. I liked Max in a way I hadnt liked anyone in years. Two years, to be exact. It was in the main public library, and we met there because Max had deemed it safe. But when he saw me in a short dress, tall boots his eyes widened into an expression that I already recognized as an uncustomary display of emotion. You could get a decent man in trouble, he said. I reached for his book, but I brushed the boy in the wolf suit instead. His grip went loose. Lola, he warned. I looked at him innocently. And that was when he took my hand and led me away from the public tables and into the empty stacks. He backed me against the biographies. Are you sure you want this? A tease in his voice, but his stare was serious. My palms sweated. Of course. Im not a nice guy. He stepped closer. Maybe Im not a nice girl. No. Youre a very nice girl. Thats what I like about you.

And with a single finger, he tilted my face up to his. Our relationship progressed quickly. I was the one who slowed things back down. My parents were asking questions. They no longer believed I was spending that much time with Lindsey. And I knew it was wrong to keep lying to Max before things went further, so I came clean to him about my real age. Max was furious. He disappeared for a week, and I'd already given up hope when he called. He said he was in love. I told him that he'd have to meet Nathan and Andy. Parents make him edgy; his father is an alcoholic, his mother left when he was five but he agreed. And then the restrictions were placed upon us. And then last week, on my seventeenth birthday, I lost my virginity in his apartment. My parents think we went to the zoo. Since then, we've slept together once more. And I'm not an idiot about these things; I don't have romantic delusions. I've read enough to know it takes a while for it to get good for girls. But I hope it gets better soon. The kissing is fantastic, so I'm sure it'll happen. Except today I can't concentrate on his lips. I've waited for them all afternoon, but now that they're here, I'm distracted. Bells ring in the distance from the pagoda? from outside the gardens? and all I can think is Bell. Bell. Bell. They're back. There were three of them this morning, Calliope and her parents. No sign of Calliope's siblings. Not that I'd mind seeing Aleck. But the other one . . . What? I'm startled. Max is looking at me. When did we stop kissing? What? he asks again. Where are you? My eye muscles twitch. I'm sorry, I was thinking about work. He doesn't believe me. This is the problem of having lied to your boyfriend in the past. He sighs with frustration, stands, and puts one hand inside his pocket. I know he's fiddling with his lighter. I'm sorry, I say again. Forget it. He glances at the clock on his phone. It's time to go, anyway. The drive to the Royal Civic Center 16 is quiet, apart from the Clash blasting through his stereo. Max is ticked, and I feel guilty. Call me later? I ask. He nods as he pulls away, but I know I'm still in trouble. As if I needed another reason to hate the Bells. chapter three My supervisor is rearranging the saltshakers. She does this with an alarming frequency. The theater is in a between films night time lull, and I'm using the opportunity to scrub the buttery popcorn feeling from my arm hair. Try this. She hands me a baby wipe. It works better than a napkin. I accept it with genuine thanks. Despite her neuroticisms, Anna is my favorite coworker. She's a little older than me, very pretty, and she just started film school. She has a cheerful smile, a slight gap between her front teeth, and a thick, singular stripe of platinum in her dark brown hair. It's a nice touch. Plus, she always wears this necklace with a glass bead shaped like a banana. I admire someone with a signature accessory. Where in the bloody hell did that come from? asks the only other person behind the counter. Or more precisely, on top of the counter, where her ridiculously attractive, English-accented boyfriend is perched. He's the other thing I like about Anna. Wherever she goes, he follows. He nods toward the baby wipe. What else are you carrying in your pockets? Dust rags? Furniture polish? Watch it, she says. Or I'll scrub your arms, tienne. He grins. As long as you do it in private. Anna is the only person who calls him by his first name. The rest of us call him by his last, St. Clair. I'm not sure why. It's just one of those things. They moved here recently, but they met last year in Paris, where they went to high school. Paris. I'd kill to go to school in Paris, especially if there are guys like tienne St. Clair there. Not that I'd cheat on Max. I'm just saying. St. Clair has gorgeous brown eyes and mussed artist hair. Though he's on the short side for my taste, several inches shorter than his girlfriend. He attends college at Berkeley, but despite his unemployment, he spends as much time here at the theater as he does across the bay. And because he's beautiful and cocky and confident, everyone loves him. It only took a matter of hours before he'd weaseled his way into all of the employee areas without a single complaint by management. That kind of charisma is impressive. But it doesn't mean I want to hear about their private scrubblings. My shift ends in a half hour. Please wait until I've vacated the premises before elaborating upon this conversation. Anna smiles at St. Clair, who is removing the giant ASK ME ABOUT OUR MOVIE-WATCHERS CLUB! button from her maroon work vest. Lola's just jealous. She's having Max problems again. She glances at me, and her smile turns wry. What'd I tell you about musicians? That bad boy type will only break your heart. They're only bad because they're lame, St. Clair mutters. He pins the button to his own outfit, this fabulous black peacoat that makes him look very European, indeed. Just because, once upon a time, you guys had issues with someone, I say, doesn't mean I do. Max and I are fine. Don't do that. I shake my head at St. Clair. You're ruining a perfectly good coat. Sorry, did you want it? It might balance out your collection. He gestures at my own maroon vest. In between the required Royal Theater buttons, I have several sparkly vintage brooches. Only one manager has complained so far, but as I politely explained to him, my jewelry only attracts more attention to his advertisements. So I won that argument. And thankfully no one has said anything about the vest itself, which I've taken in so that it's actually fitted and semiflattering. You know. For a polyester vest. My phone vibrates in my pocket. Hold that thought, I tell St. Clair. It's a text from Lindsey Lim: u won't believe who i saw jogging in the park. prepare yrself. Lola! Anna

rushes forward to catch me, but Im not falling. Am I falling? Her hand is on my arm, holding me upright. What happened, whats the matter? Surely Lindsey saw Calliope. Calliope was the one exercising in the park, as a part of her training. Of course it was Calliope! I shove the other possibility down, deep and hard, but it springs right back. This parasite growing inside of me. It never disappears, no matter how many times I tell myself to forget it. Its the past, and no one can change the past. But it grows all the same. Because as terrible as it is to think about Calliope Bell, its nothing compared to the pain that overwhelms me whenever I think about her twin. Theyll be seniors this year. Which means that despite the no-show this morning, theres no reason why her twin wouldnt be here. The best I can hope for is some kind of delay. I need that time to prepare myself. I text Lindsey back with a simple question mark. Please, please, please, I beg the universe. Please be Calliope. Is it Max? Anna asks. Your parents? Oh God, its that guy we kicked out of the theater yesterday, isnt it? That crazy guy with the giant phone and the bucket of chicken! How did he find your numbrIts not the guy. But I cant explain. Not now, not this. Everythings fine. Anna and St. Clair swap identical disbelieving glances. Its Betsy. My dog. Andy says shes acting sick, but Im sure its prob My phone vibrates again, and I nearly drop it in my frantic attempt to read the new text: calliope. investigation reveals new coach. shes back 4 good. Well? St. Clair asks. Calliope. Oh, thank God, CALLIOPE. I look up at my friends. What? Betsy! they say together. Oh. Yeah. I give them a relieved smile. False alarm. She just threw up a shoe. A shoe? St. Clair asks. Dude, Anna says. You scared me. Do you need to go home? We can handle closing if you need to go, St. Clair adds. As if he works here. No doubt he just wants me to leave so that he can tongue his girlfriend. I stride away, toward the popcorn machine, embarrassed to have made a public display. Betsys fine. But thanks, I add as my cell vibrates again. u ok? Yeah. I saw her this morning. Y DIDNT U TELL ME??? I was gonna call after work. You didnt see . . . ?no. but im on it. call me l8r ned. Lindsey Lim fancies herself a detective. This is due to her lifelong obsession with mysteries, ever since she received the Nancy Drew Starter Set (Secret of the Old Clock through Secret of Red Gate Farm) for her eighth birthday. Hence, Ned. She tried to nickname me Bess, Nancys flirty, shop-happy friend, but I wasnt pleased with that, because Bess is always telling Nancy the situation is too dangerous, and she should give up. What kind of friend says that? And Im definitely not George, Nancys other best friend, because George is an athletic tomboy with a pug nose. George would never wear a Marie Antoinette dresseven with platform combat bootsto her winter formal. Which left Ned Nickerson, Nancys boyfriend. Ned is actually useful and often assists Nancy during life-threatening situations. I can get down with that. Even if he is a guy. I picture Lindsey parked in front of her computer. No doubt she went directly to the figure-skating fansites, and thats how she knows about the new coach. Though I wouldnt put it past her to have walked up to Calliope herself. Lindsey isnt easily intimidated, which is why shell make a great investigator someday. Shes rational, straightforward, and unflinchingly honest. In this sense, we balance each other out. Weve been best friends since, well . . . since the Bells stopped being my best friends. When I entered kindergarten, and they realized it was no longer cool to hang out with the neighbor girl who only spent half days at school. But that part of our history isnt as harsh as it sounds. Because soon I met Lindsey, and we discovered our mutual passions for roly-poly bugs, sea-green crayons, and those Little Debbie shaped like Christmas trees. Instant friendship. And later, when our classmates began teasing me for wearing tutus or ruby slippers, Lindsey was the one who growled back, Shove it, fartbreath. Im very loyal to her. I wonder if shell find out anything about the other Bell? Pardon? St. Clair says. Huh? I turn around to find him and Anna giving me another weird look. You said something about a bell. Anna cocks her head. Are you sure youre okay? Youve been really distracted tonight. Im great! Honestly! How many times will I have to lie today? I volunteer to clean the fourth-floor bathrooms to stop incriminating myself, but later, when Andy shows up to take me home my parents dont like me riding the bus late at night the eyes me with the same concern. You okay, Lola-doodle? I throw my purse at the floorboard. Why does everyone keep asking me that? Maybe because you look like . . . Andy pauses, his expression shifting to barely masked hope. Did you and Max break up? Dad! He shrugs, but his Adams apple bobs in his throat, a dead giveaway that he feels guilty for asking. Maybe theres hope for Max and my parents after all. Or, at least, Max and Andy. Andy is always the first to soften in difficult situations. Which, by the way, doesnt make him the woman. Nothing annoys me more than someone assuming one of my dads is less-than-dad. Yeah, Andy bakes for a living. And he stayed at home to raise me. And hes decent at talking about feelings. But he also fixes electrical sockets, unclogs kitchen pipes, squashes cockroaches, and changes flat tires. And Nathan may be the resident disciplinarian and a tough lawyer for the ACLU, but he also decorates our house with antiques and gets teary during sitcom weddings. So neither is the woman. Theyre both gay men. Duh. Besides, its not like all women fit into those

stereotypes either. Is it . . . our neighbors? Andys voice is tentative. He knows if it is about them, I wont talk. Its nothing, Dad. It was just a long day. We ride home in silence. Im shivering as I climb out of the car, but its not because of the temperature drop. I stare at the lavender Victorian. At the bedroom window across from my own. Theres no light on. The cold gripping my heart loosens, but it doesnt let go. I have to see inside that room. Adrenaline surges through me, and I jolt up the stairs, into the house, and up another flight of stairs. Hey! Nathan calls after me. No hug for your dear old pop? Andy talks to him in a low voice. Now that Im at my bedroom door, Im afraid to go in. Which is absurd. Im a brave person. Why should one window scare me? But I pause to make sure Nathan isnt coming up. Whatever waits for me on the other side, I dont want interruptions. He isnt coming. Andy must have told him to leave me alone. Good. Revue de presse "Step back--it's going to fly off the shelves."--School Library Journal "A delectable companion to [Perkins's] debut hit, *Anna and the French Kiss*."--Kirkus s "Snappy dialogue...a lively romance."--Publishers Weekly