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Lola and the Boy Next Door

By Stephanie Perkins



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Lola 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.



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Editorial Review

Review

"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 Reviews*

"Snappy dialogue...a lively romance."--*Publishers Weekly*

About the Author

Stephanie Perkins (www.stephanieperkins.com) lives in the mountains of North Carolina with her husband.

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The boy next door

is back in Lola's 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 there's no sign of him. What am I supposed to say the next time we see each other? Why won't he stop ruining my life?

Why does he have to ask me out *now*?

And Max knows about him. It shouldn't matter, but it does. Max isn't 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?

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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 Amphetamine’s 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's *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 she's 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. It's unusually warm outside, so along with my pajama bottoms and Bakelite bangles, I'm wearing a tank top. I've 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 Year's resolution was to never again wear the same outfit twice.

The sunshine feels good on my shoulders. It doesn't matter that it's August; because of the bay, the temperature doesn't change much throughout the year. It's always cool. Today I'm grateful for the peculiar weather, because it means I won't 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, I'm 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. He's doing tai chi between the palm trees. "Hello, Dolores! How was your birthday?" Mr. Lim is the only person apart from my parents (when they're 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. "How's 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 Andy's 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. That's where we live, in Great-Grandma Dolores's mint green Victorian in the Castro district.

Which we'd 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. It's not a coincidence. Great-Grandma Dolores was named after the nearby mission, which was named after a creek called *Arroyo de Nuestra Señora de los Dolores*. This translates to "Our Lady of Sorrows Creek." Because who wouldn't want to be named after a depressing body of water? There's also a major street around here called Dolores. It's kind of weird.

I'd rather be a Lola.

Heavens to Betsy finishes, and we head home. I hope my parents haven't been torturing Max. For someone so brash onstage, he's actually an introvert, and these weekly meetings aren't 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 it's 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 can't 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 I'm not worth it anymore.

My hope is that someday, when we've been together longer than one summer, my parents will realize he's *the one*, and age won't be an issue anymore. But despite their inability to see this truth now, they aren't dumb. They deal with Max because they think if they forbade me from seeing him, we'd just run off together. I'd move into his apartment and get a job dancing naked or dealing acid.

Which is beyond misguided.

But I'm jogging now, hauling Betsy down the hill. Something's not right. And I'm positive it's 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 I'm 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, there's been a string of renters, and every time someone moves out, I can't 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 didn't notice a car in the garage when we passed earlier, but I've 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 it's just the movers. Betsy tugs on her leash, and I pick up the pace again.

I'm sure there's nothing to worry about. What are the chances?

Except . . . there's *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 don't know it. I peer inside the crammed truck, searching for anything familiar, and I'm met with stacks of severe modern furniture that I've never seen before.

It's not them. It can't be them.

It's not them!

I grin from ear to ear—a silly smile that makes me look like a child, which I don't normally allow myself to do—and wave to the movers. They grunt and nod back. The lavender garage door is open, and now I'm positive that it wasn't earlier. I inspect the car, and my relief deepens. It's something compact and silver, and I don't recognize it.

Saved. Again. It *is* a happy day.

Betsy and I bound inside. "Brunch is over! Let's 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. We’ve 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 didn’t see them, by any chance, did you?”

Andy’s 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 don’t register. My feet are carrying me toward the window while my brain is screaming for me to turn back. It can’t be them. It wasn’t their furniture! It wasn’t 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

She’s 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. “She’s all right. Nothing to get worked up over.”

As comforted as I am by his state of unimpress, it’s 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 don’t understand. She’s *Calliope Bell*.”

“You’re right, I don’t.” 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 he’s 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. She’s a year older.”

“Okay, when you were a freshman . . . what? She was mean to you? And you’re still upset about it?” His brows furrow like he’s missing half of the equation. Which he is. And I’m 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 eggy 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 didn’t 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, that’s all. I can’t believe you haven’t heard of her,” I add.

“Sorry. I don’t watch a lot of figure skating.”

“She’s been to the World Championships twice. Silver medals? She’s 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 don’t think I’m perfect?”

“No. You’re delightfully screwy, and I wouldn’t have you any other way. Drink your tea.”

When I finish, we take another stroll. The Japanese Tea Garden isn’t 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. It’s 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 I've been waiting for. His kisses are gentle and rough, spearmint and cigarettes.

We've dated all summer, but I'm 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 Verge's rough concrete wall. He walked straight up to me like he'd done it a hundred times before.

"I'm sorry," he said. "You must have noticed me staring at you during the set."

This was true. His stare had thrilled me, though I didn't trust it. The small club was crowded, and he could've been watching any of the hungry girls dancing beside me.

"What's 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 who'd ever spoken to me. Semicohesive sentences tumbled around in my head, but I couldn't keep up with any of them long enough to spit one out.

"What'd you think of the show?" He had to raise his voice above the Ramones, who'd started blasting from the speakers.

"You were great," I shouted. "I've never seen your band before."

I tried to yell this second part casually, like I had just never seen *his* band before. He didn't 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 I'm strange. "What's 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 don't you give me your number?" he continued. "I'd 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 didn't 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 I'd 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 couldn't 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—I'm 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 didn't have a mother, and I told him I didn't really either. And then, as I wiped the last crumbs from my mouth, he said this: "There's no polite way to ask, so I'm 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 don't want to insult you either way. So you'll have to tell me."

It's true. My face is round, and my cheeks are pinchable, and my ears stick out farther than I'd 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 you're eighteen."

"Of course I'm 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 wasn't?"

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 you're still living at home?"

“How old are you?” I asked a third time.

He grimaced. “I’m twenty-two, Lola. And we probably shouldn’t be having this conversation. I’m sorry, if I had known—”

“I’m legal.” And then I immediately felt stupid.

There was a long pause. “No,” Max said. “You’re 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 hadn’t 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—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.”

“I’m not a nice guy.” He stepped closer.

“Maybe I’m not a nice girl.”

“No. You’re a very nice girl. That’s 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, Étienne."

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 Étienne 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 scrubbings. "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—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 wont believe who i saw jogging in the park. prepare yrself.

"Lola!" Anna rushes forward to catch me, but I'm not falling. Am I falling? Her hand is on my arm, holding me upright. "What happened, what's 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. It's 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, it's nothing compared to the pain that overwhelms me whenever I think about her twin.

They'll be seniors this year. Which means that despite the no-show this morning, there's no reason why her twin *wouldn't* 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, it's that guy we kicked out of the theater yesterday, isn't it? That crazy guy with the giant phone and the bucket of chicken! How did he find your numb—"

"It's not the guy." But I can't explain. Not now, not this. "Everything's fine."

Anna and St. Clair swap identical disbelieving glances.

"It's Betsy. My dog. Andy says she's acting sick, but I'm sure it's 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. "Betsy's 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 didn't 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, Nancy’s flirty, shop-happy friend, but I wasn’t 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 I’m definitely not George, Nancy’s other best friend, because George is an athletic tomboy with a pug nose. George would never wear a Marie Antoinette dress—even with platform combat boots—to her winter formal. Which left Ned Nickerson, Nancy’s 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 that’s how she knows about the new coach. Though I wouldn’t put it past her to have walked up to Calliope herself. Lindsey isn’t easily intimidated, which is why she’ll make a great investigator someday. She’s rational, straightforward, and unflinchingly honest.

In this sense, we balance each other out.

We’ve 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 isn’t 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 Debbies 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.”

I’m very loyal to her.

I wonder if she’ll 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 you’re okay? You’ve been really distracted tonight.”

“I’m 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 don’t like me riding the bus late at night—he 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 Adam’s apple bobs in his throat, a dead giveaway that he feels guilty for asking. Maybe there’s 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, doesn’t 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 he’s 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.” They’re both gay men. Duh.

Besides, it’s not like all *women* fit into those stereotypes either.

“Is it . . . our neighbors?” Andy’s voice is tentative. He knows if it is about them, I won’t talk.

“It’s nothing, Dad. It was just a long day.”

We ride home in silence. I’m shivering as I climb out of the car, but it’s not because of the temperature drop. I stare at the lavender Victorian. At the bedroom window across from my own. There’s no light on. The cold gripping my heart loosens, but it doesn’t 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 I’m at my bedroom door, I’m afraid to go in. Which is absurd. I’m a brave person. Why should one window scare me? But I pause to make sure Nathan isn’t coming up. Whatever waits for me on the other side, I don’t want interruptions.

He isn’t coming. Andy must have told him to leave me alone. Good.

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