Helping your children choose books they will love

I ♥ reading

Lovereading4kids.co.uk is a book website created for parents and children to make choosing books easy and fun

Opening extract from

Lola and the Boy Next Door

Written by

Stephanie Perkins

Published by

Usborne Publishing Ltd

All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk

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 towards 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 home-made 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 towards 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 get good grades. Well, apart from biology, but I refused to dissect that foetal 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 favourite 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 pyjamas 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 colour. 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 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 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 pyjama 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 house 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 favourite co-workers, 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 neighbours. 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 removals 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 being so relentless with enquiries that Max decides I'm not worth it any more.

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 any more. 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 removals truck.

Not the brunch.

The removals 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 Emmental and collected medical oddities like shrivelled livers in formaldehyde and oversized 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 removal men. 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 men 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 men. 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 neighbours 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 towards the sink. "Nope." I laugh. "What? Do they have another plastic vagina? A stuffed giraffe? A medieval suit of armour— 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 towards 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.