

# THE PEAR AFFAIR

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## Chapter One

You would think, thought Nell as she aimed a kick at one of the marble cats that sat either side of the front door, if you named your daughter after your favourite handbag, you would cherish her as much, if not more, than you cherished the bag.

But Nell's parents did not cherish her. She wasn't sure they even liked her. Today for instance, they'd actually forgotten about her!

Sometimes Nell stayed at school for the holidays. 'Out of sight, out of mind,' was one of her parents' favourite sayings. But this term it was being redecorated and all the families had been expressly told that not one pupil was to remain on site.

Yet even though the Magnificents had received exactly the same letter as everyone else, when all the other parents started to arrive – surprise, surprise – there was no sign of them. No car swept up the drive for Nell; no mother or father leapt out, calling greetings. And no one, in a flurry of suitcases, hockey sticks and spinning tyres, whisked her away.

Instead, Nell was forced to do what she always did: hang around by the steps, watch as the crowd dwindled, and practise an air of studied nonchalance, as if she didn't give tuppence that nobody cared.

'You'll have to make your own way home,' the head had said, making it sound like a piece of cake and not the epic journey (three trains, two buses, a long walk) that it really was.

To make matters worse, the gates to Magnificent Heights were locked when Nell had finally arrived, and she'd had to climb over them, which was truly precarious, and she'd snagged her favourite jeans on one of the spikes.

Nell flumped down on the top step and scowled. She had heard the hateful bag-naming story about a thousand times. It had been purchased, Melinda Magnificent liked to recount, during the heady days of her and Gerald's honeymoon, from the swankiest

shop in Milan. It was called The Penelope, a chunky affair made of crackly crocodile skin and adorned with a gold chain and diamond clasp. Melinda Magnificent adored that bag. She carried it *everywhere* and went into paroxysms of rage and despair if there was ever the slightest fear that it might be lost.

‘How could I not name the baby,’ she told her friends, ‘after my dearest, darling bag?’

Nell knew that her mother did not love her *more* than her handbag. She knew she didn’t love her as *much* as the bag. She wasn’t completely certain her mother loved her *at all*.

All the Magnificents cared about was expanding Magnificent Foods, their supermarket chain, which already generated gazillions of pounds.

‘More stores mean more things sold; more things sold means more money in the bank; and more money in the bank means we can spend, spend, spend,’ Gerald liked to expound, pound signs practically winking in his eyes. The ping of cash registers was music to the Magnificents’ ears.

Nell, however, was a hindrance.

It wasn’t unusual for Melinda to mutter that her daughter was nothing more than unwanted baggage. She had used those actual words along with ‘utter

nuisance' and 'dead weight'. Nell was used to it now, but when she was little, they had pierced her heart like sharp arrows tipped with ice.

*'Je t'adore, ma petite,'* Pear had said when Nell reported what she had heard, tears stinging her eyes. Pear had been Nell's au pair before she had been packed off to boarding school. Her real name was Perrine and she was from Paris.

'You're too old for an au pair,' Melinda had said on Nell's seventh birthday. 'I'm fed up with you two jabbering away in French.'

The thought of it still made Nell burn hot from head to toe. Pear was the sweetest, kindest person in the whole wide world, more of a mother or a father than Melinda and Gerald had ever been! The day of their parting had been so swift, so sudden, so viciously unexpected, that Nell felt like a wolf had tossed her up in the air and then, with tooth and claw, torn her apart.

She still didn't really understand what had happened. It was a question she had asked her parents again and again. But instead of giving her answers, they had sent her to Summer's End, which was a horrible place, the sort of boarding school where the dormitories are always freezing cold and the food has to be choked down or you will starve.

Nell sighed and stretched her legs out in front of her so that she could examine the damage done to her jeans. With a needle and thread she could fix them. Pear had taught her how to sew. She remembered Pear's hand over hers, the flash of the silver needle, the pull of the thread. Her heart ached a little. She had loved Pear with all her might.

The memories of their time together were far, far away, but they still had a golden tinge: Nell and Pear in the kitchen making banana splits, Pear squirting them with cream moustaches; Nell and Pear playing hide and seek, or French skipping with knicker elastic; Nell curled up in bed listening to endless stories about child runaways. The memories were like a glorious patchwork quilt, each square different, pieced together in Nell's mind.

Nowadays, Nell wasn't sure what was worse – being ignored at home, or being stuck at school. Then there was the inexplicable fear of the dark, which had struck the day that Pear had left. And the constant feeling of dread, that only shifted when one of Pear's letters arrived.

For five solid years Pear had written once a month, pages and pages of loops and swirls, always in turquoise ink. The letters were so rich and so vivid, that even if Nell was in the deepest of deep, dark doldrums, they

never failed to lift her up. Pear wrote reams and reams about her life in Paris: her tiny top-floor apartment; her cat, Sylvie; her work as an embroiderer for Crown Couture. But best of all was the line that always appeared at the end. *One day I will come and rescue you. Stay patient, my little friend.*

But six months ago the worst had happened. The steady flow of letters stopped.

January, February, March, April, May, June. Not one letter. Suddenly there was nothing to look forward to. A cold sharp stone wedged itself into the pit of Nell's stomach and refused to budge.

Of course *she* had written again and again to the address in Belleville, feverish letters pleading for a reply. Nothing came. Nell's feelings had progressed from concern to anger and eventually fear. On very bad days she was convinced that Pear had abandoned her. On less bad days, she worried that something terrible had happened to Pear.

But what could that be?

Now, after six letter-less months, here she sat between the mean-faced cats, waiting for her parents to remember they had a daughter. At last the gates swung open and the Rolls – was it a new one? Nell was pretty sure it had been red before – purred up the drive.



‘Good God, Gerald!’ Nell could hear Melinda shrieking before she had even climbed out of the car. She was dressed in head-to-toe white as usual, an affectation intended to set off her silvery cap of white-blond hair. ‘What’s Penelope doing here? Is it the summer holidays already? But we’re off to Paris tomorrow!’

Nell stood, a tangle of muddy brown hair, freckles and torn jeans. Her hand, which she had raised in greeting, froze.

In one fell swoop the despair, which had bogged her down for days and weeks and months, disappeared and a wild thread of hope surged through her.

Escaping to Paris had been something she had planned and hoped and dreamed of for years and years.