

## Prologue

She was freezing and her head was bursting.

*This is not a piano player at a chill out bar, she thought, it's more like a steamhammer, trying to crack open my skull from the inside.*

She was not even sure whether she wanted to open her eyes. She decided that she did not need a closer look at her surroundings and tried to turn onto her side to sleep it off.

But now she could no longer pretend - not even to herself - that she was at home and inside her comfy bed: her shoulder and the hip she was lying on burned with pain.

Her fingertips started to prickle, as she tried to explore the ground. It was not wet, although that was her first impression.

She managed to open her eyes. It was hard work, the lids felt swollen. A rattling sound made her catch her breath. She could not see anything and it took a moment to realise that it was her own teeth chattering.

*Come on, she tried to encourage herself, let me wake up from this stupid nightmare, or am I in a Harry Potter movie? But if she had been she would have seen the wan moon looming through the foliage above her. What she could see was nothing at all.*

*Try to concentrate! What has happened? An accident? Am I blind? Am I the victim of a car accident? She felt her stomach churn and a bitter liquid reached the back of her tongue. She swallowed and felt like a lost school kid. Do I actually have a driving licence?*

Her hands fumbled around like ants on a picnic blanket to discover that she must be inside a building. She was lying on tiles, small ones, not much bigger than her hands. A bathroom floor? But it did not smell pleasant like soap or perfume. The smell in this room evoked some sensation, which she could not get hold of. She instantly admitted that she was not willing to try very hard.

Miss Piggy appeared, prancing in a pink tutu, did a little pirouette, smiled at her and took a deep bow. The apparition somehow comforted her for a split second, but was gone before she could get hold of the image. A bittersweet feeling of pink sugar candy was the only impression that lasted. *Something must be wrong with my brain.*

She lifted her arm to figure out what was causing the pain at her forehead. When she moved her hand backwards in the pitch-black darkness she stroked something soft and heavy right above her. It was not a towel, that was for sure. But did she want to find out?

Her hand dropped as if it did not belong to her, her body stiffened automatically and seemed to spread on the floor. A very tender flow of air fondled her bare arms and she recognised her hair rising. *I have to get out of here.*

She turned her head in the other direction. A small beam of light got lost on its way towards her, but she distinguished it clearly.

Her eyes were working, and her ears as well: a far away humming was to be heard, like from a lawnmower? *Impossible!*

She started dragging her body towards the light. Her back seemed already half-frozen, and she felt the urge to turn onto her side again, but she did not dare because she was afraid of brushing against whatever was hovering above her. So she pushed her hurting body sideways on her back like a crab in agony.

Again and again she had to stop and gulp down little, flat mouthfuls of air, but even those covered her tongue with a disgusting furry layer. The humming had almost vanished but that did not comfort her at all.

She could hear murmuring now and moved closer to what seemed to be a door. *Voices? People? Shall I call?* Swallowing was a problem, her mouth as dry as sandpaper, but on second thoughts she convinced herself that it was better to wait.

*What are they talking about?* She pushed herself closer and reached the small beam of light. *Flores? Who is Flores?*

A puddle moved from outside her prison towards her and the smell of acid hit her nasal passages. Her eyes filled with tears and a chain reaction of nausea and pain flushed through her body. Finally the memory exploded in her brain: the waxy, cold touch of a single human ear in her hand.

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