

Perilous Pink

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June Furious Fiction

- Take place at a party
- Include a button
- Include: The air was thick with

I can't blame Jodie. She couldn't know that pink cupcakes would trigger my memory. But when she presented her morning tea offering, my face registered nothing but shock. In an instant, I was back in 2004.

It was Zara's fifth birthday and we'd invited the entire class to her party. She could hardly contain her excitement as she greeted her guests under the pink balloon archway, splendid in her pink fairy dress and sparkly shoes.

Steven and I had put together a pink-themed, old-style party with traditional games, party food and plenty of free-range play. We'd organised pass the (pink) parcel, musical (pink) cushions, and pin the (pink) wand on the fairy (no dowdy donkey for our pink-loving Zara). The party food was themed pink and red, the table crowded with pink lemonade, pink fairy bread, pink marshmallows and pink rice-bubble slice. Even our 'healthy options' were pink or red: little tomatoes, margarita pizza, cocktail sausages, slices of apple.

At cake time, we realised something was wrong. I was in the kitchen, feeling like the fairy godmother adding the final touches to the pink cupcakes, when Steven rushed in and announced he'd lost the birthday girl. There was an edge to his voice that took me by surprise. I remember laughing, saying she was probably hiding. But Steven was worried. Every other child was accounted for.

That's when I took it seriously. The atmosphere had shifted; the air was thick with tension. Parents hung awkwardly at the edge of the room, clearly unsure what to do. Some wandered through the house, calling for Zara.

I went to Zara's 'safe place', though Steven had checked there already. Somehow I knew that's where she'd be. A mother knows.

It took a moment to see her. She was there, curled in a ball, tucked behind the blue suitcase. I tried to coax her out, thinking she must be upset. But this was no normal upset. When I reached to pick her up, I could see she was shivering and wet with sweat. I lifted her to my arms, noting her pale face, blue lips and half-closed eyes.

'Call an ambulance.' My instruction was loud and urgent. 'Get them here fast. Tell them we're losing her.'

To this day I have no memory of what happened next. I'm told there was an ambulance and adrenaline. I returned to my senses at the hospital, absently fiddling with a button on my shirt. Zara was sleeping peacefully beside me. A kindly nurse roused me with tea. 'You look like you need this,' she said. 'She's going to be fine.'

That day we learned about pink. It isn't pretty, gentle and benign. When it's pink food colouring, and when you're five, it can be toxic. In the 15 years since that party, we've never touched anything coloured pink.

I came back to the present, took a deep breath, and managed to shake my head with a wry smile when Jodie offered me the pink cupcake.