

The Rainbow Prison

Sophie Locke exhaled heavily before lifting the tarnished brass knocker, tiny shards of green paint chipping off with each of her three rhythmic knocks. She unhappily claimed weird Aunt Maisie as her only living family member. Sophie's mother had always said at thirteen years younger, Maisie was more like a daughter than a sister, and while at only ten years older than Sophie, Aunt Maisie should have been a contemporary, her eccentricities made her seem immensely older. Sophie didn't see Aunt Maisie and Uncle Stony (whose real name she'd never known) very often, especially since her parents had died in a car accident; they mostly kept to themselves in their old country house fifteen miles North of where Sophie lived.

When Aunt Maisie had called to invite her out for Christmas dinner, Sophie was less than excited, but, having been out of work for the last five months, wasn't in any position to turn down a gigantic free meal. Besides, Aunt Maisie and Uncle Stony were the only family she had. As she stood shivering at the front door, eyeing the neglected exterior of the old farm house her aunt and uncle called home, she began to wonder if she'd have been better off spending Christmas Eve alone in her one-bedroom apartment with a bag of Doritos and a bottle of Arbor Mist.

She smelled Aunt Maisie before she heard her turn the doorknob, a familiar scent she'd associated with Aunt Maisie for as long as she could remember but could never pinpoint - some strange mix with identifiable notes of Windex, minced garlic, and vinyl records.

"Come in, darling!" Aunt Maisie screeched in the narrow, wood-paneled vestibule, wearing a mile-wide smile doused in fuchsia lipstick.

Dinner was delicious, awkward, and relatively uneventful, with Uncle Stony's eyes glued to his lap and Aunt Maisie beaming intently at Sophie during the entire meal. Conversation had been minimal and strained, as Sophie had nothing in common with her aunt and uncle, and didn't have the "how's the job going?" talk to fall back on. As she spooned the final bite of Aunt Maisie's strawberry pie into her mouth, Sophie couldn't get over how full the house was, not because the house was small by any means, but because there was *stuff* everywhere. Stacks of newspapers, boxes full of VHS tapes, towers of plastic cups from the local Mexican restaurant, and curio cabinets on each wall that reached from unswept floor to yellowed ceiling, all crammed full of miniatures and other knickknacks. And the smell - the Aunt Maisie smell - invaded every corner of the house, attacking Sophie's senses every time she leaned away from the high table and the mouthwatering aroma of the brined turkey, now a splintery heap of bones and ligaments. She hadn't been in this house since she was a very young girl.

As if reading her mind, Aunt Maisie dotted the corners of her fuchsia smile with her napkin and chirped, "Would you like a tour of the rest of the house, Sophie?"

Uncle Stony sat bolt upright as if someone had poked him in the side after falling asleep in church. He shot Maisie a look of concern. "Are you sure there, dear?" he asked in a low, barely audible voice. Uncle Stony had always kind of creeped Sophie out.

"Well, of course," Maisie said, turning from Stony to Sophie, all the while still wearing the toothy perma-smile she'd managed to maintain ever since Sophie had walked in the door.

Sophie glanced at the spot on her wrist where a watch would have been, feeling woozy from the two glasses of plum wine she'd had with dinner. "Sure."

As they stood from the table, Sophie again smelled the Aunt Maisie smell, and she tried to mask the wave of nausea that came over her as they walked through the dining room into the formal living room, where the heads of all Uncle Stony's hunting trophies stood poised over the unlit fireplace under a thick layer of dust.

Sophie followed Maisie and Stony as they led her through an anteroom, nearly tripping over a bright red fire truck. She regained her balance, and looked down at the fire truck.

Even among the piles of random crap littered throughout the rest of the house, it seemed out of place. As she lifted her gaze from the floor, head slightly spinning, she found herself in a nursery. The fire truck had spilled out of a blue toy box brimming with shiny new toys. A pristine white crib stood against the far wall, a mobile with lazily spinning ABCs and 123s hung overhead. A matching rocking chair with a stack of fresh linen blankets draped over it sat ready on a cloud-shaped area rug. Sophie's blurry eyes went up and down the walls, each painted in exact width stripes the ascending colors of the rainbow. Each of the four walls followed the same unending striped pattern: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet. There was no clutter. This room was new. This room was *for* someone new. Sophie said the first thing that came into her spinning head.

"Aunt Maisie, are you pregnant?" As she turned from a rainbow wall to face Maisie, she saw that the smile she'd worn all night had fallen into a colorless flat line beneath two faraway, expressionless eyes.

"No, darling," Maisie said in a vacant voice, "That's your job."

Sophie's spine tingled, trying to think of the layout of the house so she could get back to the front door as quickly as her feet could carry her. She turned to run, only to find Uncle Stony standing behind her as she crumpled on top of her numb legs, catching her limp body as she attempted to flail her arms at his empty face. She could only faintly feel the needle pierce the soft skin of her tight neck.

The first thing Sophie could see when she regained consciousness was the brightly colored rainbow striped walls. She couldn't remember where she was, and briefly entertained the notion of having drunk too much cheap beer at a carnival before passing out in a pop-the-balloon booth, until she realized her arms and legs were bound with medical tape to a rocking chair. The rocking chair in Aunt Maisie and Uncle Stony's nursery. She jerked upright and looked around frantically. The room had no windows, and just one door, which Aunt Maisie and Uncle Stony were leaning against. She searched their faces.

"What are you doing?" was all she could think to say. They sat silent for several seconds. Sophie had no idea what time it was, and she could tell she'd peed her pants.

"WHAT the FUCK are you DOING!?" she screamed, causing Maisie and Stony to flinch.

"There's no use in screaming, child," Uncle Stony said, his voice sounding foreign and stern. "No one will hear you out here."

"What do you want with me?"

"We just want you to give us the baby we could never have," Aunt Maisie said, bringing her hands up to her chin.

"I can't. Let me go." Sophie's chest rose and fell between pained breaths.

"It's too late for that," Maisie said, turning and opening the door. A short, dumpy woman with dark skin and artificially red hair waddled into the room.

"This is Connie, our midwife. She performed the implantation."

Sophie's eyes widened with terror. "Implantation?"

"Stony and I found out years ago that my womb won't carry a child to term. All we ever wanted was a child, and our lives have felt empty. We met Connie in a support group, and she told us all we needed was a surrogate."

"Then why didn't you hire a goddamn surrogate? Why did you drug me, kidnap me, and perform surgery on me!?"

"We tried," Stony said, looking at the floor. "We didn't want any of those whores to carry our child."

"And," Maisie said, inching closer to Sophie's bound frame, "You're family."

"You can't do this. People will come looking for me." Sophie could feel her skin scraping open as she jerked against the arms of the rocking chair.

"Who's going to come looking for you, darling? You don't have a job. You can't keep a boyfriend for more than two weeks at a time. All your friends have families of their own. We're all you've got. We'll take care of you. You'll get to rest all day, eat anything you

want; we'll take care of everything."

"I won't do it. You can't make me."

"You're right," Uncle Stony said, drawing a buck knife from his back pocket and holding it against Sophie's flushed cheek. "We can't make you do anything, but we can make your life a living hell if you don't cooperate."

Sophie could feel a tear fall down her cheek and drop onto her paralyzed lap as midwife Connie changed her feeding tube. She'd refused to eat anything for nearly a week before they'd forced Connie to put in the tube. Nearly three months had gone by, and every day had been nothing but the changing of the feeding tube and old movies on the small VCR-TV combo they'd sat on top of the toy box as she sat bound in the rocking chair. She turned to Connie as she raised her squat body up.

"You can stop this," she said in nearly a whisper. Connie pretended not to hear her.

"You can cut me loose. You can let me go. You can run with me."

Connie sighed deeply and held the used tube in front of her face. "You're really doing this to yourself, you know. There's a big pan of macaroni and cheese in other room. I can put in another one of these, or I can go get you a big bowl right now. The baby needs you to eat real food."

"The baby. *Their* baby. What have they promised you? Why are you going along with this?" Sophie choked back tears.

"I have my reasons. Why won't you eat real food?"

"Why are you going along with this?" Sophie repeated.

"Why won't you eat real food?"

Sophie banged her head against the back of the chair. "You could at least cut me loose. You could lock the door and I could at least move around a little bit."

"No," Connie said, crossing her massive arms over her chest. "You might try to injure yourself or hurt the baby. I can't have that. My duty is this child."

"*Their* child." Sophie seethed, gritting her teeth.

Connie leaned in, unfazed, "I think it's a boy. Do you want that macaroni and cheese now?"

Without the aid of windows, Sophie could tell it was summer because her hair was resuming its annual summer curl. Two summers ago, Sophie had enjoyed her curly hair on a beach in Tampa with four of her best friends. This year, she sat bound in a creaky white rocking chair, watching *The Money Pit* for the seventeenth time, feeling the baby kick at her insides every few hours. It was the only measure of time she had. She sat, she ate, she shit, she watched movies from the eighties.

Connie entered the nursery, and hit the pause button, a fading blue ring of bruises around her left eye from Sophie's elbow the last time she'd taken her out for some exercise.

Every day, Sophie tried to figure out more about Connie, but she was a brick wall. Aunt Maisie had stopped coming in to visit Sophie after she'd taken to screaming as loudly and continuously as she could every time Maisie entered the room. It was just as well. Sophie had lost all will to scream, all will to fight, all will to live. Despair kicked at her insides harder than the growing baby she couldn't wait to get out of her body so they just could kill her and get it over with. She turned to Connie, unable to hold back a snicker as she viewed the black eye.

"You should put some makeup on that. I'd lend you some, but I'm a little tied up at the moment."

Connie shook her head and lifted Sophie's snug t-shirt to rub some baby oil on her expanding belly. "Did it take you all day to come up with that one?"

"I didn't have any other pressing engagements." Connie's hands were cold on her skin that would normally be a rich bronze this time of year. She said nothing.

Sophie sighed. "I'm not going to fight you anymore. I'm not going to run. I just want to

be untied. My feet are starting to swell and I need my hands to move the baby when it starts kicking my pelvis." She blinked rapidly to keep the tears pooling in her eyes from falling.

Connie did not look up from her work. "You did not say you would not hurt the baby."

"I'm not going to hurt the baby. He could be born today for all I know, and he didn't do anything wrong. Stony and Maisie want this baby; they're gonna get him. I hope he's hyperactive and has behavioral problems."

"He?" Connie asked, her cool brown eyes meeting Sophie's.

Sophie turned from her gaze to the obnoxious rainbow stripes on the wall. "Or she."

"You called the baby a 'he'."

Sophie shrugged. "Feels like a he."

Connie walked back to the rolling cart she brought in every day, three times a day, and picked up a small brown box. "I thought you might want this."

"What is it?" Sophie asked, taking the gift from Connie's outstretched arms.

"Just open it. And don't say thank you. It'll help keep you from getting depressed."

"What if I'm already way beyond depressed?" Sophie asked, opening the package at one end. She withdrew its contents. It was the first three seasons of *Lost*. She looked up at Connie.

"Unless you'd rather keep watching *The Money Pit*. It all works out in the end this time, too."

Sophie's jaw ground heavily, full of rapidly melting ice cubes. She was in her eighteenth hour of labor, and was ready to push. Sophie heard the heavy plastic of the tarp laid across the nursery floor crumple as Stony and Maisie entered the room. The Aunt Maisie smell almost made her vomit. Her entire body flushed with rage as she eyed their anticipating faces. She tried to summon all her will to lift her body off the floor and lunge at them, but her pain was so intense she could barely move. Desperate, she began kicking her wide legs in hopes that she'd at least hit one of them. They huddled in a far corner of the hideous rainbow striped walls.

Sophie's anger quickly turned into a bellowing blast weep.

"HOW COULD YOU DO THIS TO ME?! YOU'VE RUINED MY LIFE! JUST KILL ME AND CUT THIS GODDAMN BABY OUT OF MY DEAD BODY!"

She could feel her eyes flashing pure terror at Stony and Maisie. They looked at one another, frightened. Connie came running in as fast as her squat little body could carry her.

"Okay, step back. I'm going to give her something to calm her down."

Connie brought her cart close to Sophie so that her body was blocking it from the view of Stony and Maisie. Sophie watched her withdraw a large syringe and turned away so she didn't have to see it as Connie stuck it into her arm. She'd always been uncomfortable around needles. Sophie then felt Connie press something hard and cold into the palm of her open hand. She turned to view it. In her hand the overhead light flashed a bright reflection on a clean, shiny steel scalpel, honed to razor sharpness. Sophie eyes widened and she looked up at Connie, who wore a knowing look on her aged face as she lifted the cuff of her always-long sleeve to reveal a ring of perfect pink scar around her wrist. Sophie knew the scar well. It was the same one she had on both wrists from forty weeks of medical tape, most of which involved struggling to get free. Connie furrowed her eyebrows and nodded.

"There you go," she cooed. "All calm now?"

Sophie nodded, feeling a rush of energy surge through her body.

"Are you ready to push now? Wanna take a *stab* at it?"

Sophie nodded again, propping herself up on her elbows and taking a deep, easy breath before digging her scarred hands into the floor for the first push.

Forty-two minutes later, Sophie heard the first blood-curdling scream of the baby and she collapsed into a tired heap.

"It's a boy!" Connie cried, holding the baby up for Maisie, Stony, and Sophie to see. Sophie realized tears were falling freely down her hot cheeks.

"We want to hold him!" Aunt Maisie squealed, gripping Uncle Stony's hand tightly.

Connie towed off the baby, tight-lipped. "You'll have to wait. He needs to be held by his mother first."

"I *am* his mother," Maisie pressed.

"Not today you're not," Connie snapped, her brown eyes sharper than Sophie had ever seen them before.

Maisie pouted, but did not press the issue further. Still, her eyes never left the shrieking baby as Connie gingerly laid him on Sophie's heaving chest. Sophie's left arm wrapped around the shaking infant as his cries halted suddenly. Her right arm tightened its grip on the base of the scalpel.

"We should name him Sam," Maisie said to Stony, who nodded an expressionless head.

No, Sophie thought to herself, gazing at the face of the trembling newborn. His name is Henry John Locke. After his grandfather, and the true hero of Lost. She glanced around the nursery, across the four rainbow striped walls, her gaze finally settling on Maisie and Stony, who stood locked in a proud embrace. They've got to go, Sophie thought to herself. And these striped walls need to go, too.