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HER PERFECT ESCAPE

RACHEL WOLF



An Aries Book

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For Aine

Prologue

Greece

Friday night/Saturday morning

There's a stillness to a summer's night. A stillness to a calm sea. A stillness to this death.

The sea laps gently as the body expels its last puff of air. The sky black; the bright stars blinking a vigil.

You are not alone. We are watching.

A figure on the beach. Silent.

Does judgement await?

Greece has its own names for its gods, but they can be cruel; maybe this is the safest place for this to happen. The oldest of all the deities. They've been overseeing for so long. They must hold the best secrets.

Taking a life corrodes something within you, and the figure – hands clenched; cheeks tear-stained; blood thudding loudly behind the ears; cloaked in the same darkness that shrouds the floating form – desperately wants to rewind the last half an hour. Could it have been avoided?

A pain inside so sharp it could cut.

One step backwards, from the gluey, sinking sand by the water's edge to the warmer grains further up the beach. The footsteps sink in on themselves. The beach covering up the clues.

I was never here.

The pain again, a sliver of ice on such a hot night, lodging itself in the heart.

Greece will know what to do. Greece is not a stranger to blood on the beaches.

The party is – should have been – tomorrow. Or is that today?

How did it come to this?

1

Tash

Present

Friday morning

Tash thinks she sees her.

The Acropolis is flooded with people at 8 a.m., and it's 32 degrees Celsius. It isn't the first time Tash's been here. It's a well-trodden vigil, and it's not just the heat that makes her legs heavy as she climbs.

People queue to ascend and descend the steps. Families gather for photos. Swarms hover and collect up the hill – guides holding folders aloft to gather their tours.

She stands looking out over the city in the early sun, her back to the history everyone clamours to see. The Acropolis – the highest point. If there's anywhere she can spot her from, it's here.

This is where she saw her sister last. A year ago. She'd barely touched her as she'd said goodbye. Blown a kiss, watched her laugh as she waved.

There. Up ahead.

Her eyes fix on the young woman – is she too young? She follows the fall of blond hair. Curls. Of course, she's older now. She'd be twenty-five. Maybe she's dyed her hair.

But the laugh. It's the same.

A blue dress against the bleached stone, marble, sand and path. The tourists with cameras, phones, hats, guides – all the languages around her twisting tongues in different vowels, reeling out facts that have been told for centuries to those paying to hear them for the first time.

She's sure. Can't breathe.

'Emma!' she shouts.

But she's gone.

Tash runs, chest tight. Pushing up and against the crowds, someone shouts, *Hey, watch it*. She trips on a stone – the ground uneven and some of the original marble slippery. There are gasps as she bangs her head, and when she opens her eyes, she can't move right away. One of her shoes has come off. The white, bright surrounds spin, and strangers come to check she's OK.

An ambulance is called. A path parts, and her head aches in the light. People often faint up here. The heat and the climbing aren't easy for anyone.

She'd come on her own. She'd taken the public boat, first thing, wearing dark glasses and a hat. She hadn't got Stani to bring her on the yacht or taken the helicopter on the trip from the island.

She hadn't told Megan, her other sister. Megan is the only guest who's already at the villa. Everyone else arrives later today or tomorrow. If she can just find Emma today – bring her back for Dom's party on Sunday. His actual birthday on Monday. Persuade her to come a year after she vanished.

Megan is convinced Emma died at sea last year – the same day she went missing. Tash hates the look on Meg's face when

she talks about the hope that Emma is alive somewhere. Kind of blank. Partly scathing.

Tash had wanted to blend into the crowd, like it might shake loose secrets. She's convinced that Emma swam away and faked her death, though who knows why?

It's not the first time she's thought she's seen her. The numbers run into the thousands. Sometimes the footfall on a street. Not just in Greece, but at home, in London. On the island in the Caribbean. In the villa in Italy.

It's just another day. Another sighting. Can she be sure this time is any different?

The same weekend last year held all the clues. She just needs to unpick them. Almost everyone who was here last year will be here again this weekend. Dom's birthday weekend. Bookmarked.

She sees their faces last year at the villa, round the table: her son Dom, his friend Theo, Mark – her now (almost) ex-husband, Sam – their friend and colleague, and Megan.

Nancy, Theo's mother will be missed – she'd died around Christmas time. Tash can't bear Theo's father, Richard. He's too busy with the senate anyway. She hasn't seen him since Nancy's funeral. So almost all the same people. Plus a few new ones. Dom and Theo are bringing girlfriends, and now Mark is bringing his.

Tash had wanted so desperately to prove she didn't care that Mark has moved on, she'd been almost militant about inviting this new girlfriend of only three months. Her husband of fifteen years.

But Dom's birthday weekend is the anniversary of Emma's vanishing – her younger sister going missing. That's the only thing that really counts.

Something seismic must happen in the next few days.

So much has happened this year. The world has turned upside down.

If she's right, and Emma is still alive, then why is she hiding?

This weekend will shake out its secrets.

There's a banging on the gates to the walled secrecy of it all. Some hidden clue one of these visitors must know. A truth that will creep out when no one is looking and stir up justice.

If not, then Tash is ready to burn it all down.

2

Tash

'I think I saw Emma,' Tash says, standing atop the hospital, looking out across the gleaming white of Athens and the blue of the sea. The helicopter is in view, blades lashing, and she raises her voice. 'I'll be back soon.'

'You should have told me you were going! I woke, and you'd vanished! Are you OK?' Megan is shouting now to be heard. Tash can't tell if she's cross or concerned.

'Yes!' It's harder to hear. The helicopter is so loud. 'Look, I'll see you in half an hour!'

The ambulance had taken her to the hospital, and after she'd been scanned and checked, she'd signed herself out and summoned the helicopter back to the villa.

She looks down at the sea as they fly back to her home. She's so sure Emma isn't buried on the seabed. So sure.

Emma had been a late surprise to her parents. Seventeen years younger than Tash. With Megan she'd grown up with all

the usual sibling rivalry. With Emma, she'd just felt protective, particularly after her parents died.

Megan waits near the helipad at the villa as Tash lands. Tash pulls off her seatbelt and jumps down.

The emptiness and peace of this space, one of her favourite homes, is a relief after the busyness of the capital. It will be even quieter in a few moments, once the helicopter has left. This spot looks down on the white villa, the pool, the private beach – her sanctuary.

Megan cradles a coffee, looking out over the sea of the Greek island, then back to Tash who ducks her head a little. She hates the beating of the air. It's aggression she could do without today.

Behind Megan, the sea lies flat and blue like an iced pancake. It's late morning now, and everyone will begin to arrive.

'Come on. I bet you haven't eaten.' Megan takes a sip of her coffee and then tucks her other arm through Tash's. 'You were quick. Next time, tell me if you're going. Of course I'd come.'

The housekeeping staff are discreet as they move quietly, preparing for the house guests and the birthday weekend.

Megan slides a plate to Tash, and they sit at the kitchen island, its smooth cold granite a relief after the sun. Megan looks at her, expressionless.

'Thanks,' Tash says, watching her sister, whose dark hair gleams and is perfectly tied up in a loose bun. She wears a white bikini, covered by a tasselled throw. She's already nut brown and small diamonds sit at her ears, catching the sun.

'This is delicious.' Tash chews smoked salmon and contemplates the fact that she has felt her own shine slip away this year, but Megan, if anything, has heightened hers. Instead of six years older, Tash feels twenty. At thirty-six, Megan exudes

sophistication and is stunning. At forty-two, Tash has lost her taste for fine clothes, for expensive shopping. She's as fit and active as she ever was. But the idea of having her nails done, of sitting beneath the hands of a hairstylist for blow-drying feels exhausting.

She's stepped away from their company. It was up and launched in the States by last Christmas. They'd had Mark's old college roommate – Richard Fowler – to thank in part for smoothing their path, but it had been her husband, Mark (the now almost ex-husband, which today gives her pause), who had leaned in and tackled everything with gusto when she'd frozen after the summer. They'd got in Sam as the new CEO for the US firm once it was launched, quietly alleviating the pressure on Mark, the vacuum of Tash, empty in her grief for Emma, sucking him briefly dry. Once Emma had been lost, she'd had no time for Mark.

Autumn through to winter had been a crazy time for the firm, and Tash had walked the streets in Washington and Boston as the snow fell and lost herself in the white drenching. The zeal she'd had for the company faded. The zeal for her marriage – for Mark – had iced over. Emma had drowned, and Dom had gone to university. She'd hung on to who she'd been as long as she could.

It wasn't so much that she'd stepped away from Mark and work, more that she'd slid. Slipped and glided away. It had been beyond her control.

But there's a spark in her now. This weekend. Surely it will turn the key to this time last year. She knows she missed something. It's almost a year to the day that Emma vanished. Today is Friday. Dom's party is Sunday, then he turns twenty-one on Monday.

Megan had been the first guest to arrive, and Tash had been overjoyed to see her.

Her sister is more likely than anyone to pull her up short.

Megan tops up their water glasses, and says, 'Go on then. I know you want to tell me – you thought you'd seen her?'

Tash nods. She lowers her fork. 'I'm sure I did. There was something … I'm sure it was her.' She tells Megan about seeing Emma to test out the truth of what she saw, and already, she is disappointed – from the look on Meg's face, it starts to feel unreal.

Megan has a mouth half-pursed and her shiny slick lips clamped shut, preventing anything from slipping out.

'Aren't you going to say anything?' Tash asks, frustrated. She'd been unable to talk in the ambulance, her tongue thick and useless, her head aching. She'd wanted to tell them to go and look for Emma.

Then, when the doctors checked her, sent her away with a list of instructions, she felt silly. Had she really seen her at all? When she'd landed back at the villa, she'd been both pleased to be home and devastated to have felt so close but so far.

'Was that before or after the fall?' Megan asks, blowing on another coffee.

Tash shakes her head. 'Before. Of course. I tripped – I'm sure it …'

Megan nods. She waits a moment. 'It won't have been,' she says, softly.

Tash looks away, out across the sea, touching the two identical bracelets she wears. She squeezes her eyes against the tears that bead up, and she shakes her head quickly, decisively. Then she stands. She's so sick of being alone in this. She will not be wrong-footed. 'I'm going for a walk.'

'Natasha,' Megan says.

She rarely uses her full name. Tash pauses.

'I'm not trying to be cruel. You know that. Emma is gone. You've banged your head – the doctor said to take it easy for the next few days. It's Dom's birthday. I mean, I know how much Emma … hurts. It hurts me too. She was my sister as well. But your only son is about to turn twenty-one. Don't make this weekend about Emma. I mean, you were twenty-one when you had him and you've aced it – this mothering business. Let him have his celebration and you have yours. It's going to be hard enough for you as it is with Mark bringing his new girlfriend. It's practically abuse, asking you to spend the weekend with her. You've got enough to deal with. Maybe …'

But Tash doesn't hear anything else. Megan has told her enough times how stupid she's being, letting the new girlfriend of her ex-husband come here, to her home.

She doesn't hear her because the sound of the laugh at the Acropolis is loud in her ears, and it's all very well for Megan. Ever the killer lawyer, she can dole out advice like the best of them.

Once again, she marvels that Megan is able to put Emma behind her.

We've moved on. We have to! Megan had screamed at her about six months ago. Or maybe accused, or disrespected (*a Megan word*), or blamed.

And as for Mark bringing his new girlfriend, well, she said it would be fine. The divorce is almost done. Mark needs to be here for Dom. If he's got someone new, then they may as well push past the hard part quickly.

Tash carries Emma like an open wound. If she was cut and bleeding right now, she's pretty sure no one would tell her to just ignore it.

'Tash!' Megan's call falls behind her.

'I'll just check the beach towels.' She forces herself to sound cheery and pushes out into the sun, striding past the outdoor pool, with its bleached wood loungers and stone-coloured furnishings. She takes the steps down to the beach. Their private bay is inaccessible from any other point other than by boat. The cove is sheltered and quiet. The sea calm.

She pulls off her clothes, wading in to the cool water until it's up to her neck, washing off the antiseptic hospital smell. She ignores the doctor's advice about taking things easy, doesn't care she's the only one here. The beach is her sanctuary.

A ferry travels at speed in the distance, taking hordes of people from Athens to Mykonos, to Santorini. Greece has six thousand islands, perfect and tranquil. So many tourists choosing just a few of them. This island is quiet. It's why they'd bought the villa years ago. When the popular tourist islands had built up quickly, springing five-star hotels out of the sand and filling tiny roads with huge SUVs, this island had retained its serenity. A small village half an hour away by car, near the port. A few villas like theirs, but the centre of the island is rocky, and they don't get any footfall. The only visitors who wind their way down the main road to the villa are invited. Close to the bigger islands, the party islands. And their boat, named *Lulu* after Tash's mum, with Stani, its skipper, can take them anywhere. Plus the helicopter if they need it. The bonus of wealth. Their tech company, huge in Britain, stretching across Europe and now the US.

She lets herself float, the sun hot, and she closes her eyes.

Mark. For years, they'd been a team. The two of them together had grown a tech empire, making gaming consoles successful enough to rival the biggest of names. It's eased their lives in ways she hadn't thought possible. She'd designed products with him and watched them fly. They'd met in London, living out of a tiny