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The Medusa Project: The Rescue

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SOPHIE McKENZIE

THE MEDUSA PROJECT

THE RESCUE

SIMON AND SCHUSTER



1: Arrival

Spain was unbearably hot. We'd made a pit stop at a roadside café after a solid five-hour drive and, even though it was late afternoon, the sun was still fierce on the back of my head. Everyone else was still inside the café, but I'd come outside for a moment by myself. I was leaning against the car, the metal hot against my back, looking into the distance. All I could see was desert: sand . . . rocks . . . and, further away, a range of purple-tipped mountains.

The café door banged and Ketty emerged. 'Kind of bleak, isn't it, Ed?' she said as she reached me. 'And way too hot to run in.'

I nodded. Ketty's my best friend – and a keen runner. Like me, she has the Medusa gene but whereas I can read minds, Ketty can predict the future. I glanced at her, trying not to look her in the eye – if I make eye contact with anyone I automatically see into their thoughts and feelings.

You probably think that would be cool.

Trust me, it isn't.

Ketty looked surprisingly unbothered by the heat. She was wearing shorts and a T-shirt. No sweat patches, unlike me, though a couple of her dark brown curls were stuck damply to her forehead.

'Did Geri say how much further?' I asked. Geri Paterson, the head of the Medusa Project, was driving us to a training camp where we were going to have to stay – with no contact with our families – for six whole months.

'Another hour or so.' Ketty sighed.

I shook my head. Everything felt wrong. The journey was long and boring, sure. But I was in no hurry to reach the camp either – the whole point of being sent there, Geri had said, was to 'learn discipline through hard work'. Goodness knows what it would be like, but the thought of it filled me with horror. Physical activities are not exactly my strong point.

Nico emerged from the café to join us. 'Depressed because you won't be going to school for half a year, Ed?' He put his arm round Ketty, a big grin on his face.

Ketty beamed up at him. I turned away. I'm not going into it here, but a few weeks before, she and I dated a bit. Then Nico told her he liked her and now they were all over each other. As Dylan might have said, it sucked *big time*.

Geri strode out of the café. It didn't look as though stopping for a break from driving had improved her mood at all. She was posing as the parent/school liaison officer responsible for taking the four of us to the camp. She jumped into the driver's seat, calling angrily for us to join her.

'Come *on*.'

We sat as before, Nico and Ketty in the back, Dylan on her own in the middle row of seats and me up front next to Geri. I get a bit car sick if I sit anywhere else. Mind you, the next part of our journey was enough to make anyone puke. The road quickly disappeared and we started bumping over really rocky ground. With a snarl, Dylan appeared from behind her oversized sunglasses and took out her headphones.

'When are we going to quit freakin' bouncing around?'

I closed my eyes. Geri was in a bad enough mood without Dylan provoking her further. Geri sucked in her breath. 'May I remind you that if you four hadn't taken matters on your last job into your own hands, then you wouldn't have to be here at all,' she snapped.

Behind me, Ketty sighed. Her brother, Lex, was the reason we'd gone off on our own on our last job. The criminal we were investigating, Damian Foster, had been holding him captive and Ketty had been attempting to find out where he was. The rest of us were helping. I knew Ketty felt responsible for getting us all into trouble with Geri. I turned round and smiled at her. She smiled gratefully back.

'Just because you're sending us to some brat camp doesn't mean it has to be in the middle of nowhere,' Dylan snarled, shoving her headphones back on.

'It's in the middle of nowhere for your own protection,' Geri said. I glanced down at her fists, gripping the steering wheel. She was holding on so tightly that her knuckles were white. 'And may I remind you that I was up for *hours* last

night finding a new camp after the original one was compromised.'

The atmosphere in the car chilled further. Geri had reminded us of this fact on average once every ten minutes for the entire journey.

'Yeah, you said,' Nico said sarcastically.

'This is *not* what I signed up for,' Geri muttered. 'I expected you all to behave . . . to do what I told you . . .'

I looked away. As usual I'd been lumped in with the others. It wasn't fair.

'We didn't sign up for any of this, either,' Nico muttered.

I could hear Ketty whispering in his ear, presumably telling him to calm down. I sighed. Nico was right, of course. None of us had chosen to be part of the Medusa Project – not the original gene implantation before we were born, nor the crime-fighting work we were being trained to do now. Geri was forcing us to work for her.

After another half an hour or so, with the sun hovering over the distant mountains, a long, white building shimmered into view.

'Is that it?' I leaned forward, straining to see the place that was going to be our home from now until October.

'Yes, dear.' The sharp edges of Geri's bob batted her chin as she gave a vigorous nod. 'Camp Felicidad.' She raised her voice. 'Dylan, take those headphones out. I need to go over your final briefing.'

Grumbling, Dylan did so.

'What does Feliss-y-whatsit mean?' Ketty asked.

‘Camp Happiness,’ I translated. ‘Hey, maybe the name’s a good sign.’

Behind me, Dylan snorted. ‘Yeah, right, Chino Boy.’

Dylan was always taking the mickey out of my clothes . . . out of me generally, in fact. Not that I cared, really.

As we drew nearer, Geri went through our cover stories again. We had each been assigned a new surname and background, part of which was that we’d all attended the same school. I was Ed Jones, bright but lazy – a formerly straight-A student, who was now giving his wealthy parents a massive headache because he wanted to spend his days smoking weed instead of concentrating on his GCSEs.

‘Remember, you’re all the delinquent children of well-off, middle-class, concerned parents,’ Geri cautioned. ‘Like everyone else at the camp.’

‘Oh good,’ Dylan drawled. ‘Six months with a bunch of spoilt brats . . . I can’t wait.’

‘Don’t worry, Dyl,’ Nico said. ‘You’ll fit right in.’

‘Freakin’ shut up,’ Dylan snapped. ‘And don’t call me Dyl. It’s bad enough going to some hellhole brat camp, without you starting on me.’

Geri just pursed her lips. ‘Discipline . . . discipline,’ she tutted.

The large, white building was now identifiable as three separate houses. The biggest was in the centre – a low, sprawling concrete structure with small windows and a few thorny bushes by the front door. A man stood outside, arms folded.

‘Camp Happiness isn’t very nice-looking, is it?’ Ketty said, disappointed.

‘It’s not supposed to be,’ Geri snapped. ‘You’re here to learn to behave yourselves. It’s perfectly adequate, with a good record on discipline.’

Nico muttered something from the back of the jeep.

‘Most importantly, it’s safe. No one here knows who you are so you’ll be able to lie low while we make sure your identities are still secret from Damian Foster and Blake Carson and all the other criminals who’d give their eye teeth to get their hands on you.’

I gritted my teeth. The worst part of us being sent here was that, in the outside world, everyone apart from our parents thought we were dead. Geri had gone to extreme lengths over this. She’d exploded a bomb in our school, then changed all our records to say we’d died in the blast. She insisted this was necessary for our own protection but it made me angry – if Geri hadn’t forced us to become the Medusa Project, we wouldn’t *need* protecting.

Anyway, we were under strict instructions to keep our skills under wraps while we were at the camp. *That*, I didn’t have a problem with. I hate being able to mind-read. It’s an invasion of privacy. It’s *wrong*.

The jeep juddered over rough paving stone and came to a halt. I opened my eyes. We’d arrived. The man who’d been standing by the door was now advancing towards us, a big smile on his face. He looked very Spanish – dark hair and eyes and the same olive skin as Nico. He pulled open Geri’s door

and extended a hand to help her out. The hot air surged into the car like somebody had trained a hairdryer on us.

'Welcome to Camp Felicidad. You must be Ms Paterson.'

I stared at him. Apart from a slight nasal twang in his voice, the man sounded English.

'Welcome.' The man glanced round at the four of us. I quickly averted my eyes, not wanting to make eye contact and be forced to dive into his mind.

'Do any of you young people speak Spanish?' the man said.

'Ed does,' Geri said, indicating me. 'And Dylan here's good at it too.'

Senor Fernandez looked at us expectantly.

'Hola,' Dylan said, sulkily.

'Como se llama usted?' I asked, trying to sound polite.

'You may call me Senor Fernandez,' the man replied. 'I hope your stay here will be fruitful. Now, I'm sure you're eager to get your bearings.' He stood back to make way for Geri and pointed towards the house. 'Beautiful ladies first.'

Geri smiled – one of those knowing smiles that basically mean the person knows they're being flattered but likes it anyway.

We followed them into the house. It was still steamily hot outside, despite the fact that the sun was so low in the sky. The contrast inside the house was startling. So cool I almost shivered. The thick stone walls clearly blocked out much of the heat. A fan blasted away in the corner. I blinked, taking in the stone flags on the floor, the reception desk in the corner and the long trestle table down the middle of the room.

‘Looks like a hostel,’ Ketty whispered in my ear. ‘I thought it would be worse from what Dylan said about brat camps.’

‘This is where we eat.’ Senor Fernandez indicated the table with a sweep of his hand. ‘Our other young people are busy with evening chores. You’ll meet them a little later.’ He turned to Geri. ‘Is it to your satisfaction so far, Ms Paterson?’

Geri gave him a brisk nod. ‘It seems suitably basic,’ she said. ‘Though to be honest, dear, I don’t care what it looks like, so long as these kids learn some discipline while they’re here.’

Ketty and Nico exchanged exasperated glances behind Geri’s back.

‘Of course.’ Senor Fernandez gave a little bow. He led us down a corridor to the girls’ quarters – a six-bed dorm, much bleaker than the one back at Fox Academy. The walls were plain white – no posters or pictures. Each bed was covered with a pale blue quilt and stood next to a small locker. The tops of the lockers were completely clear.

Geri nodded, approvingly.

‘Clean and simple,’ Fernandez said.

‘. . . like a cell,’ Nico muttered.

Senor Fernandez flashed a fierce look at him. ‘Rule number one,’ he snapped. ‘Young people must ask for permission to speak.’ His face relaxed. ‘However, an adjustment period for new young people is only fair, so no demerits tonight.’

‘De-what?’ Nico said.

Senor Fernandez shook his head and made a clicking sound at the back of his throat. He turned his attention back to Geri.

‘The boys’ room is identical, just in a different part of the building. Would you like to see that now?’ he asked.

Geri hesitated, checking her watch. ‘I really don’t have time,’ she said.

‘Absolutely fine, of course, you need to get going.’ Fernandez gestured back to the main lobby. ‘Let me see you out.’

We left Dylan and Ketty in their room and followed Fernandez back down the corridor.

As we reached the lobby, Geri turned to me and Nico.

‘Please use this as an opportunity to learn some discipline,’ she said, with heavy emphasis. ‘I’ll call in to the camp phone one week from tonight to see how you’re getting on.’

I nodded. Nico just stared sullenly at the floor.

‘Right, well, goodbye then.’ She took a step towards the front door.

‘Let me see you to your car, Ms Paterson,’ Fernandez said. He turned to Nico and me. ‘You boys wait here. *Don’t move*.’

Geri and Fernandez left. I sighed and looked round the room. The trestle table had been scrubbed so hard that the wood in the middle was almost white. The dresser behind was stacked with plates and glasses. There was no mess . . . nothing that made it feel homely at all.

‘Ed.’

I spun round. Nico was standing beside the door on the far side of the room, beyond the long table. He opened it softly and peered round. ‘Come on,’ he said quietly. ‘There’s a corridor down here, with a door and a window.’

'*Nico*, for goodness sake.' My heart thudded. 'That man told us to stay here.'

'Lighten up, man.' Nico made a face. 'I'm just gonna take a quick look. I'll be back before Senor Fussypants knows we were gone.' He disappeared through the door.

Muttering angrily to myself, I crossed the room towards him. It was all very well Nico saying he would was only taking a 'quick look'. If Fernandez came back and found him gone, I could just imagine how much trouble we would *both* be in.

I reached the door and peered round it. Nico was standing in a gloomy corridor, staring out of a window onto an empty, shaded courtyard.

'Come back,' I hissed.

Nico shook his head. 'We've got a second.' He frowned, still staring out at the courtyard. 'Where d'you think everyone is?' he whispered.

'Working, remember?' I said.

'Oh yeah. "The *young people* are doing their chores",' Nico said, in a fair imitation of Fernandez' voice. 'Don't you hate being called that . . . young people? It's so patronising.'

'Nico, will you—'

'Jesus, man, *look*!' Nico held up his hand to silence me. '*Look*,' he repeated, pointing through the window. A line of five or six kids – some about our age, others younger – were crossing the bleak stone courtyard after a thickset man with a snake tattoo down one arm.

The kids were dressed shabbily, though they looked clean.

But there was something defeated about the way they were walking that sent a chill down my spine.

As we watched, one of the younger kids said something, and the man with the tattoo hit him across the head. The boy stumbled sideways, then carried on walking. My mouth fell open. I moved closer to the window.

Nico sucked in his breath. 'That doesn't look like the *young people* doing their chores, does it?'

I shook my head, frowning.

We watched for a moment longer. As they reached the edge of the toilets in the centre of the courtyard, Tattoo Man struck another member of the group, a skinny girl with long dark hair. The girl fell to the ground. The man pointed to her trailing shoe lace and the girl knelt, meekly, to tie it.

'Jesus Christ,' Nico breathed. 'What the hell *is* this place?'

I glanced back into the camp lobby. The front door was still firmly shut. I caught the echo of Geri's high tinkly laugh in the distance. She and Fernandez must still be talking.

I took a deep breath and joined Nico by the window. From here I could see the whole courtyard. It was paved with large stone slabs and flanked on one side by what looked like a barn and on the other by a white building similar in style to the main house. Apart from the toilets in the centre, the courtyard was empty.

As we watched, Tattoo Man and the other kids vanished round the side of the toilets, leaving the skinny dark-haired girl in plain view, still struggling with her shoelace.

Nico darted down the corridor to the door that led onto the

courtyard. He yanked on the handle. Locked. He raised his hand in the gesture he uses to perform telekinesis.

'What are you doing?' I said, appalled.

'Listen,' he said, urgently. 'If what we've just seen is typical of what goes on in this camp, then we need to find out and tell Geri before she leaves.' He twisted his hand. There was a click as the lock undid and the door sprang ajar. I stared, impressed in spite of myself. I'd never tell him this, but Nico's telekinetic skills are pretty amazing to watch.

Nico pushed the door open and stepped into the courtyard.

I hesitated for a second, then followed. Nico was right, we had to find out what we were letting ourselves in for.

The heat hit me hard. Even in the shade of the courtyard it was like stepping into an oven. I glanced round as we crept across the paving stones. No one at the windows. At least we wouldn't be spotted from inside the house.

Nico had already reached the girl. She jumped as he touched her shoulder. He said something in a low voice while I ran past and peered round the side of the hut.

The other kids and Tattoo Man were gathered next to a ramshackle old VW bus, parked in the shade of a single tree. Next to the bus was a huge wooden well, with a fenced area beyond. This area was strikingly lush and green compared to the arid desert all around us. Tattoo Man was talking in Spanish. His speech was too rapid for me to catch any of the words, but he was clearly barking out orders.

I turned back to Nico and the girl.

'Que?' she was whispering. 'Quien eres?'

Nico turned to me. ‘I don’t understand what she’s saying,’ he whispered.

I barely heard him. I was staring, transfixed, at the girl. I wasn’t looking into her eyes – that would have meant automatically mindreading her – but I’d already seen they were beautiful: a sea-green colour that stood out against her tanned skin. And it wasn’t just her eyes. *She* was beautiful. About my age, with a worried, oval face, a long nose and silky dark hair that curled onto her shoulders.

‘*Ed*,’ Nico hissed.

‘She asked who we were,’ I explained.

‘Ed,’ I said to the girl. ‘Me llamo Ed. Este es Nico. Y tu? Como te llamas?’

The girl was trying to look into my eyes, but I kept my gaze averted.

‘Luz,’ she whispered. ‘Me llamo Luz. You . . . Eds, English . . . please, help . . .’

‘What are you saying?’ Nico hissed beside us.

‘Just our names,’ I said. ‘She’s called Luz.’

‘Loos?’ Nico said.

‘Luz, donde estas?’ Tattoo Man shouted from round the corner.

Luz froze. Nico grabbed my arm with one hand and Luz’s with the other and dragged us into the WC marked *Senors* – the men’s toilet.

We stood in the narrow, dimly lit corridor. A stench drifted out from the toilets.

‘Ask her what the hell’s going on here,’ Nico demanded.

A second later, a shadow fell across the doorway. I held my breath and pressed my back against the cool concrete wall.

'LUZ, ven aqui!' It was the man, even angrier than before. He swore in Spanish, then said something I just about understood about there not being time for a toilet break.

He thought Luz was in the ladies' toilet next to this one.

Luz took a step towards the door. I grabbed her arm. I didn't dare speak in case the man heard us. If I wanted to know what was going on here, I was going to have to mind-read. I pulled Luz round until she met my eyes.

In a second I was inside her mind. People always freak when that happens the first time, and Luz was no exception. Her mind was jumping around, full of fear and confusion. Mind you, my own thoughts were jumping about just as badly.

Hola, I stammered – not knowing what else to thought-speak. *It's okay. Who is that man?*

Que? Luz's mind was still all over the place, her thought-speech tumbling out.

How this? A single strand of thought stood out above the rest: *We must quick . . . Eds, English . . . you just come in camp, no?*

Si. I tried to make my mind settle.

This place no es good. Senor Fernandez es bad man. You go. Tell persons . . . help . . .

Where are you going in the van?

Que?

Donde vas en el . . . el coche grande?

Damn it, why did my Spanish have to desert me now?

No se . . . I don't know . . . Ed. Por favor. Ayudame.

Ayudame. Help me. My stomach turned over.

'*Luz!*' The man outside sounded very close. 'Are you in the *men's* toilet?' he said in Spanish.

Need go, Luz's thought-speech grew panicky. *Help*.

'Ed, leave it,' Nico hissed, right in my ear.

I will help, I promise. I broke the connection.

Luz burst through the door. We waited, holding our breath. I could hear the man yelling at her, then the slap of a hand, presumably making contact with Luz's head. I raged silently at the thought of her being hurt.

A few more seconds passed, then Nico peered out after her. 'They've gone, come on,' he said.

He slipped outside and raced across the courtyard.

I followed, more slowly, a large part of me wanting to find Luz. I could hear the bus revving up round the corner.

What was happening to her? Where was she being taken?

And then a large hand clamped down on my shoulder and Senor Fernandez's heavy, nasal voice sounded in my ear.

'Only in camp five minutes,' he said, 'and you, Ed, are already in the deepest of deep shits.'



2: Punishment

I was shaking as we walked inside. Fernadez took his hand off my shoulder only when we were back in the entrance area of the main building. Nico and the girls were standing round the long dining table at the back of the room. The girls were wide-eyed with shock. Nico's expression was a mix of guilt and concern. Clearly he'd managed to make it inside without being spotted by Fernandez or any of his workers.

'What were you doing outside?' Fernandez demanded.

'Where's G— er, Ms Paterson?' I said.

'Gone.' Fernandez glared at me. 'I'll ask you once more. What were you doing outside? *How* did you get outside?'

I thought rapidly. 'I needed to use the toilets in the courtyard,' I said. 'The door was open.'

I stared at the floor. The tiles were set in an alternating pattern of creams and browns. Across the room I could see Ketty fidgeting from side to side. I looked up at her, hoping she wasn't about to leap to my defence and get herself in trouble.