

MYTHOS



*The Caribbean, where fantasy
and reality collide...*

Heather McLaren

David couldn't move; his fear imprisoned him in a cast-iron grip.

He held his breath as the beast inched toward him, stinking like a deer carcass left to bake in the Florida sun.

When it was close enough to touch, David climbed over the seat and crawled to the back of the boat. He crouched there, waiting for the creature's next move. To his horror, it followed him.

He didn't know what to do. He couldn't keep playing musical chairs forever, but the thought of jumping overboard terrified him.

The creature lunged, and he hurled a cooler at it, knocking it into the water. He scrambled back to the pilot's seat and fumbled with the key, still lodged in the ignition. Before he could start the engine, however, the creature grabbed his arm and yanked him overboard.

David thrashed around, kicking his legs and pummeling his attacker's head, his mind spinning out of control. The beast took him by the throat and slammed his head against the hull. David socked it in the face, shoved it off, and tried to flee.

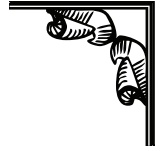
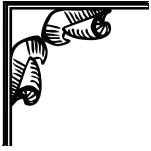
"Where do you think you're going?"

The monster grappled his collar and began dragging him through the water. That was his breaking point; what rationality he had left evaporated...



Also by Heather McLaren

Beyond Legend (2017)



MYTHOS

*Book 1
of
The Mer Chronicles*



HEATHER
McLAREN



ZUMAYA EMBRACES



AUSTIN TX

2016

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons or events is purely coincidental.

MYTHOS

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ISBN 978-1-61271-306-9

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: McLaren, Heather, 1978-

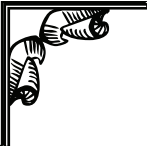
Title: Mythos / Heather McLaren.

Description: Austin, TX : Zumaya Embraces, [2016]

Identifiers: LCCN 2016004746 | ISBN 9781612713069 (trade pbk. : alk. paper)

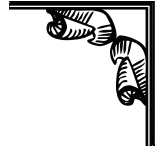
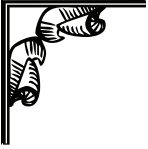
Classification: LCC PZ7.1.M425 My 2016 | DDC [Fic]--dc23

LC record available at <http://lcn.loc.gov/2016004746>



For my husband David





Acknowledgments

Mom, thank you for your support. You believed in me from the start, even when I had doubts, and I will always be grateful for that. I know I'm a woman now, but it means so much that you can still picture me a little girl dancing on your feet. The endless phone calls we shared and good advice you gave me is something I will hold onto for the rest of my life.

I want to thank my husband David for being such a great companion and father to our children. It's once in a lifetime someone meets their soul mate, and I feel lucky to have had that privilege. I'm thankful you let me use you to mold one of the most important characters in this book. David Cooley is sexy and kind because of you.

Oceans of thanks to my eldest child, Charlie Jane, for letting me use the computer when she would have rather been chatting with her friends. Your inner beauty shines through, enhancing your outer beauty that much more. Your love and support has been immeasurable. No matter where life takes us, you will always be in my heart.

Dakota, you came into my life sixteen years ago and expanded my family for the better. I see you as my daughter and am a better person for it. You're a beautiful girl with a wonderful heart.

Bryce, you're not only my son, you're one of my best friends. I am so lucky to have you in my corner, rooting for me and believing in these characters. You're a loving son, and I know you'll grow into a great man.

Kimber Lily, Mommy loves you so much. The day you were born, I was more afraid than I had ever been. When the doctors told me that you wouldn't make it through the night, it felt like someone had stabbed me in the chest. But you're still proving them wrong. We made that fourteen-year milestone, baby! Because of your bravery and fight,

Cindel's character was able to shine and give others who are differently abled a sense they can accomplish whatever they're willing to try.

I want to thank my father for becoming a part of my life when I needed him most—I know it wasn't your fault we were separated all those years, and I love you more than you'll ever know.

Mama Pauline, Daniel, and Jeremy, I am so glad you're a part of my life. You're wonderful people, and I feel lucky my children and I got the chance to know you.

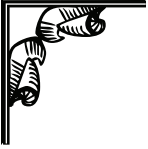
Roberta Phipps, I want to thank you for giving me good advice at a time I felt lost with my work. God bless you.

I also want to thank Jan Kafka for her crash course in creative writing. Without your help, the Mer Chronicles would never have made it to print.

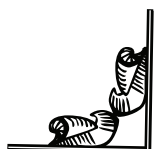
A ton of thanks to my publisher, Elizabeth Burton at Zumaya Publications, for taking a chance on a no-name writer. I can now see the light at the end of the tunnel.

I also want to give a shout out to Milton "Boom-Boom" from Bimini, Bahamas, and Aubre, Josh, and Kaleb Alexander.

Thank you, Niki Browning, for the beautiful cover art. You're a very talented woman, and I see you going far!



Remember your dreams; jot them down.
They could be your next inspiration.



1. *Freedom*

David breathed in the fresh scent of salty sea air as the speedboat bounced across the surface of the Atlantic. The wind whipped around him, and water splattered the seats every time they hit a bigger wave. The whitecaps of their boat's wake stood out sharply against the deep blue of the Gulf Stream.

He and his friends had left Miami two hours earlier and were approaching the Bahamian island of Bimini, ready to cut loose and have fun before their high school graduation. With college just around the corner, this could be their last chance to relax before reality hit them with fraternity hazing and long-winded professors.

He ruffled his short hair and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. The tropical air was cooler than he had expected, but the sun felt warm on his skin. He rubbed his chin, feeling the coarse stubble of his goatee beneath his fingers.

"Hey, Ryan," he yelled over the roar of the engine to be heard by the blond boy sitting next to him.

Ryan's green eyes flicked from David back to the sea.

"Yeah?"

"Do you want to hit the beach after we get settled into our condo? Maybe there's a volleyball game going on somewhere."

"Count me out. There'll be plenty of time for volleyball, but when it comes to scouting for beach bunnies, you can never start too soon." Ryan folded his hands behind his head, leaned back, and closed his eyes. "I'd like to meet a redhead on this trip. I've never had a redhead."

Like hunting deer. Typical Ryan. The thought made David chuckle.

"What are you guys talking about?" Bryce shouted from the front seat. His black spiked hair remained motionless despite the wind. His tanned

arms bulged from beneath his red T-shirt, and his black shorts stood out against the boat's white leather interior.

"Just making plans," Ryan said and flashed David a devilish grin.

"Picking victims is more like it," David said with a short laugh.

Ryan ignored him.

"Isn't this great? No parents, no hassles..."

David rolled his eyes. Ryan had no right to complain—his mom and dad were rarely home. The parties he threw were legendary, especially among the lower-classmen. Waking up in the front yard, bottles and cans strewn about, boxers and bras hanging from tree branches, wasn't uncommon when Ryan was without adult supervision.

"Where are your parents, again?"

"I think they're in Cancún," Ryan said, his tone nonchalant. "It's hard to keep up with their busy schedules."

Something leapt into the air in the water beyond the boat and landed with a foamy splash. Before it disappeared into the depths, David caught a flash of bright yellow glistening in the sunlight. He squinted to get a better look. A couple of seconds later, it returned, but it wasn't alone. Now there were two, fighting something he couldn't see. As crazy as it sounded, he could have sworn they were human-like from the waist up.

"Look at that!" Ryan yelled, making him jump. "What are those things?" Without taking his eyes off the violent struggle, he screamed at Bryce, "Stop the boat!"

Bryce didn't hear; he kept going as the creatures once again disappeared beneath the waves.

When the surface had grown still, Ryan repeated, "What the hell were they?" He shielded his eyes with both hands. "Did you see that? Bryce, turn off the engine."

"What? Why? What's going on?"

"Just turn it off!"

"What's going on? Do we need to get the hell out of here?"

"No, we aren't in danger." David's eyes flicked to Bryce. "But you have to see this."

When the engine died, the boys scanned the water.

"They were over there." David pointed. "I don't know what they were, but they had to be some kind of new species. I've never seen anything like it."

"Man, I can't believe I didn't get that on video. Where's my cell?" Ryan searched under his seat and around the deck, coming up empty-handed. "Have you guys seen my phone since we left Miami?"

"You probably packed it," David said.

"Shit! I need it in case those things come back," Ryan complained. "Bryce, let me see yours."

“Why don’t you just walk to the front of the boat and get your own?”

“Come on,” Ryan said with an exasperated sigh. “I have no idea which bag it’s in, and you always have yours strapped on like it’s your Siamese twin.”

“Fine.” Bryce grabbed his cell and handed it to Ryan. “But you’d better be careful with it, unless you want to go for a swim to get it back.” He relaxed in his seat and watched the water as Ryan brought the camera up. “They were probably just dolphins. I don’t know what you’re getting so excited about.”

David raised an eyebrow and smirked.

“Yellow dolphins with arms? I don’t think so. Besides, dolphins are mammals. They have to come up for air at some point. Do *you* see them anywhere?” He gestured at the water.

“Arms?” Bryce laughed. “Seriously? Dave, you’re talking like a sailor who’s been out at sea too long.”

“Ryan saw them, too. What did they look like to you?” he asked Ryan. Ryan threw him under the bus.

“Hey, I never saw arms. Long yellow tails, yes. Arms, no.”

Thanks for nothing. David fought his irritation.

“Well, I don’t care what either of you say. I know what I saw.”

The water was calm now, gently lapping at their boat. Whatever was hiding in the depths was probably halfway to Florida, so why did he feel like unseen eyes were watching them?

“Well, whatever they were...” He sighed, still sure it hadn’t been an illusion, “...they’re gone now. I say we get to the resort. I don’t want to find out the hard way the office closes at two.”

Bryce groaned. “You didn’t ask the lady on the phone when we needed to check in? What time is it now?”

Ryan glanced down at the phone.

“Fifteen till two...but I want to hang out for just a few more minutes to see if those things come back. With all the tourists that come through here, two o’clock sounds pretty early to close the concierge desk.”

“We can always come back later,” Bryce suggested. “I don’t know about you guys, but I really don’t want to sleep on the beach tonight. I don’t do camping.”

“Well, as soon as we—”

Something bumped the boat from underneath. The boys froze. No one spoke.

It bumped them again, knocking a blue cooler over and rattling fishing rods under the back seats. Duffel bags on the deck jostled with every rock.

David tried to control his shaking voice.

“What in God’s name was that?” He leaned over the edge of the gunwale, scouring the dark depths. “Damn it, I can’t see *anything*.”

The unseen threat rammed them. Hard. As David lurched forward, the sea came up to meet him in slow motion. His breath caught in his throat, and he frantically reached for anything to stop his fall.

Ryan grasped the back of David’s shirt before he could tumble overboard and screamed at Bryce, “Get this thing going!” He yanked David back onto his seat, his gaze darting around in all directions. “Start the engine! Hurry!” And when Bryce still didn’t move: “*Go, go, go!*”

David’s heart threatened to beat a hole through his chest. He couldn’t think straight as he scanned the water for their attacker.

Bryce snapped from his horrified trance. He cranked the engine and opened the throttle, and Ryan and David gripped the seats in front of them to steady themselves. Bryce got control, and they raced toward the island in the distance.

“Is it following us?” Bryce’s shout quivered. “Do you see it?”

“No,” David yelled back, “it looks like we lost it.” He hoped he was right.

“That was awesome!” Ryan’s eyes were as big as saucers. “Can you believe that just happened?” He swallowed hard, slumping down in his seat as if trying to blend in with the white vinyl.

“While I don’t share your enthusiasm,” David said, “we’ll have one hell of a story to tell people back at school. Some sea creature tried to eat us, I almost fell overboard practically ringing the dinner bell, and we could have sunk Bryce’s boat.”

Although he couldn’t stop his own hands from trembling, he had to laugh at his friend’s rattled demeanor.

“You looked like you were going to crap all over yourself.”

“Ha-ha, very funny.” Ryan glanced at David’s fidgeting hands. “So, what’s *your* problem? Did you have too much caffeine this morning, or are you going through withdrawal from an addiction we don’t know about?”

David snickered nervously, still trying to quiet his thumping heart.

“Well played, Ryan, Well played.”



2. Home Away from Home

The trio rode in silence for the rest of the trip. No matter how brave they tried to act, fear had become a fourth passenger until the marina drifted into view like a beautiful mirage in the midst of a watery desert.

Beaches glittered like powdered diamonds, and the deep blue of the sea abruptly transformed to a beautiful turquoise. Swaying palm trees and two-story pink stucco townhouses with red roofs and white balconies hugged the shore, welcoming them. Tourists crowded around an infinity pool just down the coast, horsing around and dancing to hip-hop.

“Okay, one of you guys needs to hoist the quarantine flag. All foreign vessels have to fly one until they clear customs.”

“What flag? All you brought was a ratty old T-shirt.”

Bryce slowed the engine and scrunched his face at Ryan.

“I know that. It’ll pass.” He plucked the garment in question from the floorboard, and handed it to David as he passed by on his way to the front deck. While Bryce guided the boat through the narrow entrance, bypassing other boats leaving the safe-harbor marina, David attached the shirt to the bow staff and took a seat next to the luggage to admire their surroundings.

Rock walls and rows of condominiums greeted them on either side, and signs warned against hunting sharks. The floating docks were jammed with yachts, sailboats, and speedboats. Tourists thronged the piers, lounged around a smaller pool, and swarmed the tiki bars.

“Yee-hah, guys,” Ryan said, doing a terrible imitation of a Southern accent. He combed his fingers through his hair, leaned back in his seat, and stretched his legs out in front of him. “We finally made it.”

David was relieved to be back in civilization. Here, the attack seemed a distant memory. One he would shove to the back of his mind for safekeeping.

The buildings ringing the marina made a low impact, and guests watched the comings and goings from the comfort of their balconies. A young couple aboard one of the more luxurious vessels across the way were grilling out on their deck. Quarantine and Bahamian flags attached to staffs and masts fluttered in the breeze.

Bryce steered toward the nearest empty mooring.

“Let me know when to shut the engine down,” he told David. “I don’t want to ram the dock. If I damage this boat in any way, my dad will kill me.”

David focused on the approaching concrete structure.

“A little closer,” he said. “A little closer... closer... now.”

Bryce turned the ignition off, allowing them to drift, and David snagged the hawser lying on the pier. He attached it to the cleat and then to the post leg, minding not to scratch the bow.

“I’m heading over to pay for our permits.” Bryce climbed onto the dock and looked back at Ryan. “Behave yourself,” he joked. “If I come back and see cops, I’m running. I swear I’ll leave you here to swim home.” With a wag of his finger, he walked away.

Ryan batted his thick, dark lashes—a trait he considered his secret weapon with the ladies.

“Me? I never get in trouble. I’m a perfect angel.”

Talk about snapping the truth in half, David thought.

“Really?” he said. “How soon you forget Dawn Littleton, Lisa Miller, Leanne Riley...must I go on?”

“Yeah, yeah.” Ryan grumbled, staring at a bikini-clad sunbather a few boats away. “Lisa, Riley, Dawn Miller...I’ll be right back.”

As he started to climb onto the pier, David stopped him.

“We have to wait until Bryce gets back. I’ve told you that a hundred times. Until we clear customs, only the captain can leave the boat.”

Ryan sat back down and slumped into his seat again.

“Well, he’d better hurry,” he mumbled. “I don’t want to spend the rest of the day just sitting here.”

Sorry, buddy. Your hormones will just have to wait.

Ten minutes turned into twenty. Approaching thirty, time seemed to stand still. Then, David thought of a way to make their grounding more entertaining. He dug through his bag for his passport and smartphone.

Shorts, T-shirts, shaving cream...Aha! He grabbed them, brought up his phone’s video camera, and strolled back to his seat with it down at his side.

“We know how you are with the ladies,” he egged Ryan on. “What does your momma think of her man-whore?”

“My mother raised me right. I’m a perfect gentleman, and I’d never do it on the first date, blah, blah, blah.” He smirked at David. “Please. What my mother doesn’t know won’t hurt her...or me. Because if she knew how I love

the ladies...” He stopped when he realized what David was doing. “Hey, give me that!” He landed on top of David, trying to snatch the evidence from his iron grip. “Turn it off, man. I’m serious.”

“But don’t you think Mama deserves to know what her little boy’s up to?” David teased him. “The truth shall set you free, after all.”

“Are you two getting engaged, or are we starting this vacation?”

Bryce stood above them, along with a Bahamian official dressed in a crisp white shirt and black pants. David felt his cheeks warm and shoved Ryan onto the floor.

“Get off. People might get the wrong idea.”

“Yeah, you wish,” Ryan snapped. “And you’re erasing that video, too.”

“I need you to fill out these immigration cards, please—sections one and two—and sign near the bottom,” the customs agent told them in a thick Bahamian accent. “And since you arrived by boat, your passports?”

While Ryan dug around in his pockets for his papers, David handed the man his passport and took the cards. To his surprise, there wasn’t much to it. Country of birth and citizenship, passport number, and questions found on any ER admissions form—first and last name, sex, contact information, and date of birth. Easy enough.

A couple of minutes later, when everything was in order, the man took the forms and shuffled them together.

“Welcome to the Bahamas,” he said with a smile. “You may now take down the quarantine flag. I hope you enjoy your stay with us.” With a stiff back, he made his way down the pier to the customs building.

David took down the yellow “flag” and replaced it with the yellow-black-and aquamarine flag of the Bahamian people.

“Okay, we’re ready,” he said, setting his luggage on the dock.

Bryce helped him from the boat and picked up his own bags.

“Let’s find our condo.”

They ambled along the wharf, unable to take their eyes off their new-found paradise. Parents chased disobedient children, and couples walked hand-in-hand. David recognized many of the other kids from school.

As they passed the office of the townhouse where they were staying, he stopped.

“We still have to check in.”

Bryce handed them their keycards.

“Already did it.”

“Wow, that was fast,” David said. “My aunt told me it took two hours for her to clear customs and check into their villa.”

“Which one is ours?” Ryan gestured toward the buildings.

“We need to look for Three-A,” David said. “It *should* be oceanfront.”

“According to this map, it’s in this direction,” Bryce said, leading the way.

They hadn't gone fifty feet before Ryan waved at a group of women having a drink at a nearby tiki bar. When they waved back, he grinned triumphantly.

"Man, did you see that? They want me."

Bryce chuckled. "You're like a rabbit," he said. "You think every girl wants you."

"Just call me Thumper...and they do."

The boys continued the length of the boardwalk to the far side of the marina.

"There's unit eight." Ryan gestured at the buildings they bypassed. "Seven...six. Bryce, you couldn't have docked the boat farther from *our* condo if you tried."

A voluptuous brunette wearing a yellow halter top and the shortest cutoffs David had ever seen meandered past. She flashed Ryan a coy smile and kept walking.

Ryan flung his bags down and darted away, calling back over his shoulder, "Welcome to paradise, guys."

"I hope he doesn't expect us to carry those," David said with a laugh. "Maybe we could leave him on someone's doorstep."

"As long as they don't have daughters." Bryce turned to watch Ryan and made a pained face. "Oooh...struck out. Looks like Daisy Duke isn't here alone."

David swung around to see a teenage boy with a body like the Incredible Hulk interrupting Ryan's little get-to-know-me-and-we-can-go-back-to-my-place routine. And needless to say, he didn't look happy.

"Why does Ryan always go after girls who are attached to musclebound steroid freaks?" He shook his head, unable to turn away from the train wreck. "Think we should step in?"

"And do what? You take one arm, I take the other?" Then, Bryce groaned in good nature. "Fine. We'll go to his rescue *again*, but only if things get out of control."

Thankfully, the Hulk let Ryan bow out with his kneecaps intact. He caught up with them, his irritation evident on his face.

"Okay, grandpas, you're telling me you didn't think she was hot?"

David had given up trying to figure Ryan out long ago. Interest in the opposite sex was normal, natural. He knew this. But Ryan took hormones to a whole new level—somewhere between rabbits and satyr.

"You're unbelievable," he said. "That guy could have killed you, and all you can think about is how hot his girlfriend is? You need to settle down," he warned him. "One of these days someone's going to kick your ass, and we won't be there to stop them."

"I know this will probably sound lame to you," Bryce stepped in with his usual words of wisdom, "but when do you think you're ever going to get seri-

ous about someone? You haven't had a solo girlfriend the entire five years I've known you. And you can't consider what you do with girls dating," he added when Ryan started to defend himself.

"Listen, Romeo," Ryan said, picking up his bags. "You should know by now, I'm not interested in anything serious. I just want to have fun."

"At least you could find a girl who can read," David said with a snicker, thinking of the airheads Ryan usually hung out with.

"I know exactly who you're talking about—Kylie, right?" Ryan said as they walked. "Let me tell you something. That girl had *many* hidden talents, and she *can* read, no matter how dumb she acts." He hoisted his oversized bag higher on his shoulder, grunting under the strain. "I'm not interested in chicks for their high marks on the SATs. By the way," he added, directing his statement at Bryce, "serious is for when I'm forty and too old to get the hot ones."

"What are you talking about?" David asked. "You'll *still* be chasing tail when you're forty...fifty, I bet."

Bryce added, "Sixty," and laughed.

"All right, all right, all right." Ryan quoted David's favorite movie, his Matthew McConaughey impersonation spot on. "The good thing about high school girls, man, I get older, but they stay the same age."

They rounded the corner of townhouse number fourteen—a mere stone's throw from the infinity pool crowded with dozens of tourists—and started the trek across the long parking lot.

"There it is...building three." Bryce looked down at the diagram of the resort. "Now we just need to find the right unit."

David looked for numbers or letters on the aquamarine doors.

F...E...D...C...B...

A.

"Finally," Ryan exclaimed.

Bryce unlocked the door into a small foyer. They lugged their bags up the staircase directly ahead to the second floor and into the first room they came to. From the whitewashed walls to the granite countertops, tiled floors and aquatic decor, everything about the kitchen screamed *modern*. The air freshener sitting on the microwave emitted an enticing aroma that reminded David of an intense ocean breeze.

Beyond the bar separating the kitchen from the living room, double glass doors looked out onto a balcony equipped with more chairs and tables; the open blinds revealed a stunning view of the Atlantic. Its splendor welcomed them, inviting them to dip their toes in the warm sunlit water licking the sand. Down by the surf, a man relaxed in a beach chair.

"Wow." Ryan set his bags down. "I'm moving in."

David had to admit the villa was impressive, more so than he had expected. Because of the size of the tiny island, he had anticipated less modern and more “third-world country.” What a misconception that had been!

He left the kitchen and followed Bryce and Ryan into the living room. To their left, a vase filled with purple Bimini twists—water lilies indigenous to the island—sat atop a long oak table. The beige loveseat and sofa were of the finest weave, and the dark cherry coffee table and end tables shone as if someone had recently polished them. Another staircase led to the loft, situated over the bar separating the living room from the kitchen and running along the opposite side of the room.

With Ryan hot on his heels, Bryce took the steps two at a time, leaving David behind to explore. Once he was alone, he sauntered downstairs to the remaining bedrooms.

Down a short hallway, he peeked into the first room he came to. Twin beds against the wall to his left took up most of the space. The ornate headboards were of white wood, and the bedspreads bore a strong resemblance to pink flowered curtains. Intricate sketches of sharks and dolphins covering the walls reminded him of artwork he would have found in a five-star hotel.

Straight ahead, a large window had its shades drawn to block the sun. He took one last look around and continued down the hall. A small bathroom might have been behind a door to his right, but it didn’t interest him enough to find out.

The master bedroom at the end of the hall was bigger and more luxurious. David passed double closets and a large bathroom into the main area. A black dresser overflowed with miscellaneous items someone might need to take on vacation. It had gold-handled drawers etched in elegant ribbons of amber and matched the nightstands.

He dumped his things on the king-size four-poster bed and went over to the sliding glass door. Beyond a thin strip of lush grass and hedges, the white sand absorbed the sun’s rays like a crystallized sponge. Palm trees scattered around the waterfront rustled in the slight breeze traveling from across the Atlantic. In the distance, where the drop-off plummeted thousands of feet into the great abyss of the Gulf Stream, the water morphed from clear to cobalt.

He stepped out onto the patio, relishing the refreshing scent of the sea all around him. David loved that smell. It reminded him of the first time he’d seen the ocean. If he concentrated hard enough, he could remember building sand castles near the surf while his mother looked on from the comfort of her lounge chair.

Ryan’s sudden complaint ripped him from his memory.

“This is a girl’s room. Are you serious?”

David smiled, ducked inside, and shut the sliding door. On his way back upstairs, he ran into Bryce.

“I can’t believe we got lucky enough to have most of the building to ourselves,” Bryce said. “I guess we don’t have to worry about neighbors calling the cops on us in the middle of the night.”

David had to agree it was a perk.

“No kidding. Now I can count my laundered money in private.”

“Tell me how that turns out in case I need to represent you in court.” Bryce laughed and slapped him on the back. “Just make sure you don’t get caught until after I finish law school.”

Ryan hollered across the house, clearly agitated.

“Are we going to the bar, and have you asked David if he wants to go yet?”

“After we make a trip to the BTC building to set up our phone service, I was planning on it. That is, if they let us in. It blows my mind we didn’t think to find out what the drinking age is before we got here,” Bryce yelled back. “And no, I haven’t asked him yet, but I was just about to.”

“Which bar?”

“Mackey’s Sand Bar. It’s a part of the Bimini Beach club just a few minutes south of here. I figured we’d take the boat.”

“Hell, yeah, I’ll go,” David said, more than ready to sample what the island had to offer. “Let’s see what kind of trouble we can find.”

Ryan pushed past them in a huff, not speaking.

“He’s sulking,” Bryce stated the obvious, stifling a laugh.

David followed him to the front of the villa, hot on Ryan’s heels.

“It’s a girl’s room. It’s a girl’s room,” Bryce mocked, raising his voice a few octaves.

“Shut up,” Ryan snapped. “You both got the rooms you wanted, and I don’t sound like that.”

On his way out the front door, David mumbled, “Big baby.”



3. Spring Break

The boys arrived at the tavern twenty minutes later, eager to start partying. While people danced to music blaring from a speaker, others either lounged by the pool or played an intriguing—and naked—game of water volleyball.

The sign hanging next to the door leaped out at them.

NO UNDERAGE DRINKING!

“What is the drinking age?” Ryan handed over his driver’s license and craned his neck to get a better view of what was going on inside.

“Don’t worry,” the doorman said as he handed the ID back. “You’re old enough.”

“All right!” Ryan exclaimed as he entered. “This is my kind of place.”

The bouncer looked past David, and his eyes widened.

“Get your clothes back on!” he shouted over the music. “Excuse me!”

The naked girl didn’t hear and kept playing, breasts bouncing.

“Steven,” the doorman hollered to another employee of the bar. When the man had strolled over, he gestured to the game. “Please see to it that our guests don’t turn this place into Sodom and Gomorrah. The owner would be pissed if he found out about this.”

The man took off, mumbling, “Spring breakers.”

After flashing the bouncer his ID, David followed Bryce into the bar. The first thing he noticed was the floor—or the lack thereof. Soft white sand took the place of wood or linoleum.

The building was crowded and noisy, well over capacity. The same reggae music playing outside filled the interior, and tourists and locals had turned several areas of the solid oak bar into their own personal dance space. It looked as though this was a normal, everyday occurrence. The bartenders didn’t seem to mind; some of them even joined in the fun.

It wasn't long before David lost Ryan and Bryce in the crowd. Strolling around, he noted the big-screen TVs scattered throughout the room were stuck on the same station—BSNSports. A giant marlin hanging on a far wall stared down from its roost; its bulging eyes, cartoon-like and creepy, gave him the heebie-jeebies.

He ordered a Jack and Coke and wandered, catching up with friends from school he encountered. So far, he hadn't seen Bethany. He had to admit he was relieved. Considering their nasty breakup, she was the last person he wanted to run into.

"I found us a seat," Bryce said, appearing behind him holding a drink in each hand. Well, more like juggling them.

"Cool. Where's Ryan?"

Bryce pointed to the back of the large room.

"Follow the perfume."

They pushed through the mob toward the only section of the bar with elbow room, where Ryan sat at a private table with a couple of girls. The red-head loved the attention he was giving her. The brunette, ignored and forgotten, soon slipped into the masses to get away from the awkward situation. Ryan never seemed to notice her absence.

When Bryce and David reached the table, Ryan introduced his new squeeze.

"Meet Abby," he said. "Isn't she beautiful? I think I'm in love."

Abby giggled and gave him a playful shove.

Yeah, and I'm Santa Claus, was David's silent reply. Too bad Ryan was full of crap. He was no more in love than David was. The only one Ryan loved was Ryan.

For the next two hours, David did his best to ignore the stories of Ryan the Incredible. It was amazing how easy it was for his friend to pump himself up. Skiing with one ski and a beer in hand, climbing Mt. Everest in six hours, revealing that he was Brad Pitt's long-lost younger brother, and saving an entire family from a school of hammerheads in the midst of a feeding frenzy were just a few. It was nearly impossible to listen to that last one with a straight face. Ryan was terrified of sharks.

However, he wasn't put off by public displays of affection. David gave Bryce an *Are you kidding me?* glance, suddenly mortified by their friend's relentless intent to gnaw this girl's face off in front of the entire bar.

"Hey, punk!"

Someone leaped from out of the crowd and punched Ryan in the face, knocking him out of his chair. His Bud Light flew from his hand, and he almost took Abby down with him. Bryce and David jumped to their feet, ready to fight; and Abby squealed in surprise.

"What is your problem?" Ryan shouted, getting up off the sand. He wiped his bloody mouth on his shoulder and stared at his attacker.

The boy ignored him.

“What do you think you’re doing?” he asked Abby.

“Gregg, we were just talking, I swear.”

David knew then who their unexpected visitor was.

Enter boyfriend, stage right. Here we go again!

The tendons in Gregg’s neck stood out like whipcords, and he clenched and unclenched his fists.

“With your tongue shoved down his throat?”

Ryan rammed Gregg into the crowd. A couple of girls screamed, and the people around them stopped what they were doing to watch. Gregg managed to keep his balance and tackled Ryan back to the ground. He seized the back of Ryan’s head and shoved his face in the sand.

David jumped in, yanking Gregg off Ryan and pinning him to the ground as Bryce helped Ryan to his feet. A bouncer stepped from the mass of spectators and scowled at them.

“What the hell are you doing?” he demanded. “There’s no fighting in here.” He looked down at Gregg and then at David and his friends. “Out!”



“I can’t believe we’ve been on this island less than four hours, and we’re already in trouble,” David grumbled, following Bryce and Ryan into the night.

Even though it was hard to imagine stuffing anyone else in the bar, hordes of people still arrived in search of a good old-fashioned romp. Those not dancing formed a single-file line outside the door and gathered around the large pool. Purple underwater lights cast an eerie glow over the partygoers.

Gregg stepped up to Ryan, towering over him by at least four inches.

“You’d better watch yourself, little man,” he warned. “I ever catch you around my girl again, you’re dead.”

Ryan puffed his chest out and scowled.

“I’m ready right now if you want to do something about it.”

David intervened quickly, hands in the air.

“I don’t know about you,” he told the angry boyfriend, “but me and my friends are here to have a good time. There’s no need to start something the cops will be more than happy to finish.”

Without taking his eyes off Ryan, Gregg snapped, “I mean it—watch yourself.” He flashed David and Bryce a last hateful glance before stalking away, fists still clenched at his sides.

Abby rushed off to catch up to her fuming boyfriend.

“I’m sorry, Ryan,” she said in passing.

“Can you believe that guy?”

“Ryan, you *were* making out with his girlfriend,” David pointed out.

“She never told me she had a boyfriend. How was *I* supposed to know?” He paused a moment, hands on his hips. “But thanks for sticking up for me.”

“Hey, don’t worry about it,” Bryce said with a chuckle. “We’re used to it by now.”

David tuned them out and focused on the people relaxing by the pool. It looked like their entire school had shown up for spring break, so why did he suddenly feel so alone?

“You’re looking for Bethany,” Bryce accused him.

“So what if I am?”

Ryan groaned. “I thought we were trying to avoid her.”

“Habit, I guess.”

Even though Ryan was right—she *was* the last person David wanted to see—four years of love and laughter were hard to forget overnight.

“Why would she be *here*?” Ryan added with disdain. “I thought her parents sent her to Aruba.”

“She changed her mind when she heard about that girl disappearing some years back,” David said. “Besides, most of our class came. You know as well as I do she can’t go more than a few days without talking to her posse.”

“We should have gone to Nassau. That’s where the party *really* is,” Ryan reminded them. “But you wanted to see the more relaxed side of the islands.”

“No, we should have gone to Hawaii,” Bryce said. “The whole point in coming to the Bahamas was to help you get over that little—”

“Watch it,” David warned. “I don’t want things to be weird between us if Bethy and I decide to get back together.”

Ryan grimaced. “She’s a scheming bitch, plain and simple. We’re all thinking it, including you, choirboy,” he added when David shot him a dirty look.

David couldn’t be too upset with Ryan. The guy was as tactful as a chimp—it was in his nature. And despite Bethany’s betrayal of sleeping with half their class behind his back, David couldn’t help loving her.

“Bethy has a side you’ve never—”

“Hey, David,”

The slender blonde in faded jeans and blue bikini top stood on the far side of the pool, her purse in one hand and a drink in the other.

Speaking of Bethany.

A lump formed in David’s throat he couldn’t swallow. His hands felt clammy, the music blaring from the speaker silenced by the pounding in his head.

“Don’t do it,” Bryce said.

Focused on Bethany, David barely heard him. Like a Class-5 storm, the old butterflies and hurt feelings swamped him, but he couldn’t turn away from her.

“And...he’s going down, ladies and gentleman,” Ryan added as David walked away. “The doormat returns.”

“I’m only going to talk to her,” David said over his shoulder. “I’ll just be a minute.” Although he knew he might still welcome her back with open arms if she asked.

“Don’t you have any pride?” he heard Ryan call after him.

He knew his friends were right. After everything she had done to him, why was he still willing to work it out? Like every other man in love—blinded stupid to faults others easily saw—he was realizing pride was a luxury he couldn’t afford.

Before he could reach her, a boy walked up and wrapped his arms around her waist. Bethany stared over his shoulder at David as they kissed, obviously rubbing her make-out session in his face.

David saw red; he clenched his fists tight to keep from hitting the first person he came close to. Still, even though he wanted to beat the crap out of the guy who had taken his place, he turned on his heel instead.

“I’m out of here,” he told Ryan and Bryce as he walked past. “I’ll see you later.”

“Where are you going?” Bryce asked. “Come on...stay. She isn’t worth it.”

Ryan intervened. “Let him go. He has a right to pout.”

David ignored them both and crossed the street to the beach. After passing thatched umbrellas and swaying palm trees, he sat down by the surf, his mind a million miles away.

He could remember Bethany’s touch as if she were sitting next to him with her head against his chest. He could smell her strawberry-scented shampoo and taste her blackberry-flavored lipgloss.

The longer he stared out at the water, the more his anger subsided; and he was grateful for that.

In that moment, an epiphany hit him like a freight train. No matter how hard it had been to see Bethany with someone else, tonight was the turning point. He knew he could finally put her out of his mind for good and move on. And Ryan was right—she was a bitch.

Bryce came up behind him, kicking sand with each step.

“Hey, Dave. You okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Where’s Ryan?”

Bryce chuckled and pointed back at the pool.

“He recovered.”

David looked, and shook his head when he saw Ryan flirting with a new girl.

“Hopefully, this one doesn’t have a boyfriend.”

“I wouldn’t count on it.”

For the first time, David was envious of his friend. Ryan might never experience heartache the way he and Bryce did—not at the rate he was going. He was too self-centered.

“I gotta get out of here for a while,” he said. “Do you care if I take the boat?”

“I don’t care, but be careful with it, or I’ll never see the light of day again.” When David started to walk away, Bryce stopped him. “Are you sure you want to go alone? I could go with you. What if you run into another sea serpent...or whatever the hell it was that attacked us.”

David had all but forgotten about their “brush with death.” Now, compared to what he’d just witnessed at the pool, the thought didn’t even bother him.

“It was probably just a shark. And I appreciate the offer, but I think I’d like to be alone for a while.”

He had only gone a few more feet when Bryce called out to him again.

“Hey, you might want these.”

David caught the keys and kept going.

“Come on. Don’t leave me here with Ryan.”

“You guys need to learn how to play nice,” David called back, jogging up the beach to the marina.

He strolled down the boardwalk, watching the tide roll in. He could still hear people partying at the bar, but the music sounded muffled. All around him, the soothing ebb and flow of the surf dominated the night.

David boarded the royal-blue speedboat and headed out to sea, avoiding the ten-foot-tall wooden posts marking the entrance to the marina. The water flew past a dark blur, barely visible in the dim harbor lights. Now that it was just him and the open ocean, he could relax and push Bethany to the back of his mind.

Farther out, the light of the crescent moon barely illuminated the surface. The vast emptiness made David feel small, but it was also comforting, like a home away from home. Ever since he had arrived in the Bahamas, it had called to him, more so than the beaches near his Florida home; and he didn’t know why.

He went another ten minutes before shutting the engine off. He set his phone and wallet on the dash, settled back in the seat, and closed his eyes, relaxing to the boat’s soft rocking. The only sound was the slight lapping of the waves against the sides as he drifted.

The stern dipped suddenly then sprang up again; sloshing water splashed David’s clothes. He straightened and looked around, but nothing was there. He leaned over the seats to get a better look, but he couldn’t see anything beyond the railing. The gentle rocking continued as if nothing had happened.

He sat back and clenched the wheel with both hands. He stared into the dark, his mind reeling back to the earlier attack. Something seized the bow and climbed aboard. He couldn’t make out details—it was just a black shape-

less form—but as he watched it come closer, the sound of its breathing grew heavier.

David couldn't move; his fear imprisoned him in a cast-iron grip. He held his breath as the beast inched toward him, stinking like a deer carcass left to bake in the Florida sun.

When it was close enough to touch, David climbed over the seat and crawled to the back of the boat. He crouched there, waiting for the creature's next move. To his horror, it followed him.

He didn't know what to do. He couldn't keep playing musical chairs forever, but the thought of jumping overboard terrified him.

The creature lunged, and he hurled a cooler at it, knocking it into the water. He scrambled back to the pilot's seat and fumbled with the key, still lodged in the ignition. Before he could start the engine, however, the creature grabbed his arm and yanked him overboard.

David thrashed around, kicking his legs and pummeling his attacker's head, his mind spinning out of control. The beast took him by the throat and slammed his head against the hull. David socked it in the face, shoved it off, and tried to flee.

"Where do you think you're going?" the monster said.

It grappled his collar and began dragging him through the water. That was his breaking point; what rationality he had left evaporated.

The beast jerked him underwater, and David fought to see through the inky blackness. He tried to pry its hands from his shirt, kicking and biting. He was sure this was the end. He was going to die in the most beautiful place on Earth.

The creature wrapped itself around him. Stinging pain, like heated metal branding him from all sides, shot up his legs, hurling him into a tidal wave of agony. And he had to breathe.

Just when David was sure he would drown, something rammed the creature, knocking him free. He fought back to the surface and gasped for air. Before he could swim to the boat, something yanked him under again. Two bodies crushed him between them, one on each side, but the darkness hid them. It seemed like forever before he was suddenly free again. He swam back to the surface.

The boat, silhouetted in the moonlight, was more than fifty feet away and still drifting. With his heart pounding in his ears, David ignored his pain and swam for his life. His arms and legs ached, and his eyes burned. Every now and then, he looked over his shoulder to see if he was being followed. He wasn't—not on the surface, anyway.

As soon as he climbed aboard, he started the engine with shaking hands and sped the mile and a half back to the marina. The ocean was no longer a comforting friend—it felt more like the means to an end; and David wasn't

the innocent tourist he had been an hour earlier. He had looked death in the eye and survived to tell the tale.

As soon as he got back to the marina, he snagged his phone and wallet off the dash and tied up the boat. He climbed onto the pier.

When he examined his wounds, he was shocked to find burns etched deeply into his flesh like red-hot railroad tracks crisscrossing one another. Injuries he knew were from a jellyfish.

No, no, that's impossible! That thing had to be human. It had hands! It spoke to me!

Haunted, he jogged back up the short stretch of beach to the tavern. He looked a mess, with fresh stings and his clothes torn and soaking wet; but his appearance was the least of his worries. With terror, all he wanted to do was get back to the villa in one piece.



The pool was nearly vacant. From the looks of it, many tourists had retired to the bar; David could see their happy faces through the large windows lining the front of the building. He envied their ignorance, the bliss of vacationers. He would never again see the Bahamas as a place for relaxation. Instead, the islands would be inspiration for an endless parade of disturbing images and violence.

It wasn't long before he located Bryce, sitting poolside talking with another classmate. David dropped the keys next to the lounge chair and started away.

"Dave, what happened to you?" Bryce teased. "Did you fall overboard?"

"Yeah, something like that."

Bryce hopped up when he noticed David's injuries.

"Hey, are you okay? What happened out there?"

"Nothing. I'm fine."

"But your legs. Do you need a doctor?"

"I'm *fine*," David repeated, doing his best to hide his discomfort. The last thing he wanted to do was to drum up a logical explanation for his condition.

Bryce stared over at the marina.

"How's my dad's boat?"

"Don't worry," David said. "It's fine."

"Hang on," Bryce told the boy sitting next to him. "I'll be right back. I need a minute with my friend."

David held his hand up.

"It's *okay*. I'm done partying for the night," he said. "I was thinking of calling a cab and heading back to the villa to get some sleep."

"Are you sure? I don't mind—"

A man hanging out the window of a blue-and-yellow bus interrupted them.

“Does anyone need a ride?”

“I do.” David signaled for him to wait, and the man ducked back inside.

“Don’t go, Dave,” Bryce said. “Have a beer with us. We didn’t get kicked out of the restaurant next door—not yet, anyway—and they serve alcohol. Ryan’s already inside talking to a bunch of girls.”

“Thanks, but I’m ready to call it a night. It’s been a long day.”

He didn’t wait for a response. He went to the bus, paid the driver, and climbed aboard. Settling near the rear of the vehicle, he dug his knees in the back of the seat in front of him. Although the angry slashes crisscrossing his thighs and calves were still beet-red, the burning pain had thankfully downgraded from forest fire to campfire. He ran a hand along the longest injury encircling his left knee and sucked in a pained breath.

For future reference, he thought, don’t ever do that again.

“Thanks. I really appreciate this,” he said. “You saved me a phone call.”

The man watched him in the rearview mirror.

“Where to?”

“Bimini Sands Resort.”

As they started the journey back, David stared out the window, watching the lights of Port Royale roll by; they cast a creepy flush over the canals snaking through the countryside. One- and two-story homes looked cheerful enough, but he couldn’t see their beauty. All he could think about was the creature yanking him underwater, the feel of its muscular arms wrapped around him, its stinging appendages...

“How long have you been on the island?” the driver asked. “Are you enjoying your vacation so far?”

Not really.

“I just got here today,” David said, determined to think of anything but the stinking beast for the next five minutes. “Spring break.”

“Ahh...I remember those days. Wild times.”

Beyond the glass, a lush forest replaced the cheerful houses and unsettling canals. The breeze blowing through the trees seemed to be scolding David, accusing him of knowing too much about the darker side of Bimini. Even the moon appeared menacing, demanding his attention. He breathed a sigh of relief when the resort finally came into view.



He was glad the beach was deserted when he got back to the villa—it would be easier to ponder the terror lurking beneath the waves without the sound of laughter in the background. The tide was stronger than he remembered. The rolling surf was proof the winds had picked up.

His attacker's voice haunted him. David could still smell its putrid odor and see its indistinct form crawling toward him. But what had saved his life—a shark or dolphin, perhaps?

He kicked his shoes off and carried them down to the water's edge. Despite the terror the sea concealed, a big part of him couldn't stay away. He felt drawn to the deep as if it were an addiction he couldn't break.

Dropping his shoes on the sand, he sat down to enjoy the warm bubbling surf washing over his bare feet. To his surprise, his uneasiness quickly dissipated. Now all that mattered was the sea.

He lay back, folded his hands under his head, and focused on the sound of the water's rhythmic melody. His eyes grew heavy, the blackness behind his lids a screen on which he mentally projected images of sunlit waves. As he fell into a deep slumber, it seemed as though the wind whispered, *Sleep.*



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