



BEYOND THE VEIL



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Beyond The Veil

Alastonia Realm Chronicles – The Start

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What Lies Beneath – The Bloodstone Chronicles – Book Three (w/Sam Beach)

A Broken System – Karma Trials – Book One

Special Dedication

First, God. Thank you for the courage and the willpower to get through the temptations and the deadline to finish it. The words and scenarios you gave me kept me writing and understanding enough to make people see before it's too late, hopefully.

To my fiancé Sam—you're my rock when I'm unsteady, a teacher when I need guidance, and a student when I need to teach. Thank you for always being there in every situation and keeping me laughing ... even when I didn't want to. I love you more than life itself and cherish the day you came into my life!—In loving memory of Sam Beach, you will always be in my heart. I will love you until the day I die, and I will see you again, my love. Rest in Peace and keep God laughing with your witty zingers. I miss you. Until we meet again, I am forever yours.

The couch crew – the lovable fun you bring into my life is priceless. I love you all.

My fans – you know who you are.

All of you mean the world to me, and I would be devastated if I lost *any* of you. Thank you for everything.

In a world of warriors, be a merciful knight.

CHAPTER ONE

Creation of a Miracle

In the softly lit corners of the lab, shadows danced playfully on the walls, which held shelves bursting with a chaotic mix of blinking gadgets and high-tech devices. The air hummed with the gentle buzz of machines, each working diligently in the dim space. Logan Chase hunched over a sleek workstation, his wiry frame and tousled brown hair giving him an air of constant motion. His vibrant green eyes sparkled with determination as he concentrated on his ambitious project.

All around him, an array of testing tools lay organized with care. Circuit boards gleamed under the warm overhead lights, their intricate pathways winding like tiny highways, each one leading to a different destination in the world of technology.

Compact data analyzers stood ready, screens alive with fluctuating graphs that pulsed in rhythm. Advanced virtual reality headsets sat nearby, their lenses catching the light and appearing like windows to another universe, poised to immerse users in experiences beyond imagination. Each item on his workstation served a distinct purpose in the grand design he envisioned.

With unwavering focus, Logan studied the maze of screens flickering before him. Each display lit up with vibrant colors and intricate lines of code, creating a lively digital tapestry that unfolded beneath his gaze. The lab transformed, turning into a futuristic command center where every second edged him nearer to a groundbreaking discovery.

At one of the other desks, Brita Cole hunched over intently as golden strands of her hair cascaded gracefully down her shoulders. Her striking blue eyes gleamed with enthusiasm as she wrestled with a string of code for one of the VR headsets. Scattered notes cluttered her workspace, and she muttered softly to herself, piecing together the complex puzzle. "I think I got this coding. I just have to string it into the main code." Her fingers poised over the keyboard, ready to add the last little bit needed.

Logan looked up, a broad grin spreading across his face. "Did you figure out what was holding it up?"

Her gaze lifted from her work, a playful giggle escaping her lips. "Yeah. One little symbol."

"Ugh, I hate when that happens. It's like, where did you come from?" He shook his head in mock frustration.

With a twinkle in her eye, Brita leaned back in her chair, crossing her arms. "Do you think this is going to work?"

Logan tilted his head, curiosity sparkling in his eyes. "What do you mean?"

She leaned forward, a serious expression crossing her face. "I mean, do you think this will really let you and anyone else who can't feel emotions, pain, love, pleasure... actually experience it for real?"

He couldn't resist the urge to tease. "I can feel pleasure." He winked, his playful tone lightening the mood.

Brita rolled her eyes, scoffing lightly. "Not that kind of pleasure, silly. I mean true, from-the-heart pleasure. Like when you look into your baby's eyes and know that you brought that child into the world. That kind of pleasure fills your entire body with warmth, knowing you created life. That pleasure."

Logan paused, the weight of her words settling heavily on him. He had never felt the warm embrace of human emotion or the sharp sting of physical pain. Instead, a relentless drive consumed him, propelling him forward to create something extraordinary—a virtual reality experience that would allow him to explore feelings through the eyes of others. In his mind, dreams swirled of grasping the joy of a child's laughter or the tranquil contentment of a serene moment, capturing the essence of emotions that had always slipped through his fingers. "That's the goal," he finally replied, determination etched into his features as he turned back to his screens, ready to dive deeper into the world he wanted to create.

In his lab, Logan sat at a cluttered desk, surrounded by flickering screens that cast a pale glow on the walls. The soft hum of computers filled the air, blending with the aroma of old paper and a hint of freshly brewed coffee. Papers and sketches lay scattered across the surface, each one displaying rough drawings of fantastical creatures and detailed maps. Logan's fingers tapped rhythmically on the keyboard as he leaned closer, his brow furrowing in concentration.

With a determined glint in his eye, he envisioned a video game unlike any other. It wasn't just a series of levels or simple quests that he wanted to create. No, his dream was to design a whole new world, vibrant and alive. He imagined players stepping into this universe, their faces lighting up with wonder as they encountered lush forests, sparkling rivers, and bustling towns.

Every element mattered. He pictured sprawling landscapes filled with unusual plants, colorful skies that changed with time, and characters rich with stories. Logan scribbled furiously, his heart racing with excitement. He aimed to weave together the deepest desires and wildest dreams of all who would enter this magical realm, creating an unforgettable adventure waiting just beyond the screen.

In this magical place, a quadriplegic could glide through lush, enchanted forests. Towering trees with leaves shimmering like

jewels swayed gently under the warm sunlight, casting dappled shadows on the soft, grassy ground. The sweet, rich scent of blooming flowers drifted through the air, filling his lungs and making his heart race with joy. Someone who had never savored the aroma of fresh blossoms would find themselves utterly amazed, inhaling the delightful fragrances that surrounded them.

In this world, even a person who had always lived in silence would hear the soft rustle of leaves, as if the woods were sharing whispers meant only for them. Colors exploded everywhere, painting the landscape in vivid hues, so that those who could not see well could feel the warm breeze on their skin or touch the cool grass beneath their feet, making every moment feel real.

As players soared across a bright blue sky on virtual wings, their hearts pounded with excitement. Each ascent into the air brought a rush of freedom, and they could glide over stunning landscapes dotted with floating castles. These castles, soaring with tall spires that shimmered in the golden sunlight, were adorned with delicate banners that danced playfully in the wind. Each castle held secrets and treasures just waiting to be discovered, inviting players to embark on thrilling adventures.

Logan imagined a place where users could revisit moments of triumph, like the time someone faced their greatest fear or chased a long-held dream. Each replay would flood their hearts with the same feelings of pride and joy as if they were living it all again. This fantastic game he was creating would connect thoughts and emotions, merging the real world with imagination like never before.

The technology would weave seamlessly with the user's mind, using a network of tiny sensors nestled within the headsets. These sensors worked busily to measure heartbeats, brainwaves, and feelings with stunning accuracy. As players journeyed through this virtual adventure, the game adjusted itself, crafting a story that responded to their joy and thrill. A player who felt a rush while jumping off a high platform would find the game enhancing that adrenaline, throwing even more excitement their way.

With tactile feedback devices, players would truly feel the warmth of the sun on their skin or the soft touch of a gentle

breeze. This level of realism brought forth an emotional journey, as if they were stepping into a living dream. Logan's excitement bubbled inside him as he pictured users sharing their stories, a colorful tapestry woven from countless emotions and experiences. The advanced technology didn't just imitate the physical; it drew players deep into their characters' lives, turning every heartbeat and flutter of excitement into a reality that felt entirely their own.

In the heart of his lab, Logan wasn't just building a game; he was crafting a bridge to endless realms of imagination. Every player could rise to new heights, uncovering feelings that had always seemed just out of reach. With a determined sparkle in his eyes, he repeated to himself, "That's the goal."

CHAPTER TWO

Purchasing An Adventure

Tia nestled into her soft, deep-blue couch, feeling cozy after a long day at work. The plush fabric wrapped around her shoulders like a warm embrace, inviting her to unwind. Tia snuggled under her fluffy blanket, decorated with bright yellow stars against a midnight backdrop, which brought her a sense of security. Warm, golden light from the lamps around the room bathed the space in a comforting glow, softening the shadows.

Colorful posters lined the walls, featuring her favorite movies and bands. Each one burst with vibrant colors and images that brought stories of fun, laughter, and music to life. Stuffed animals with big, happy eyes peeked out from every corner, ready to cheer her up with their silly expressions. On the bookshelf, stacks of books stood tall, their spines glinting as if to whisper secrets to Tia, beckoning her to dive into their tales.

With a flick of her wrist, Tia picked up the remote, her fingers tingling with anticipation as she flipped through the channels. When she finally spotted her favorite show about mysterious vampires, her heartbeat quickened, and she leaned forward, her excitement bubbling up like a fizzy soda.

Just as the plot thickened and the tension in the storyline rose, the screen suddenly switched to a commercial, shattering her focus. Tia let out a frustrated sigh, her irritation mounting as

she tossed the remote onto the couch and grabbed her phone. Scrolling through social media, notifications buzzed and popped up like fireflies in the dark, pulling her attention away. Still, she sneaked glances back at the TV, eagerly waiting for the familiar theme music to play once more.

Suddenly, a bright commercial captured her gaze. A man appeared on the screen, set against a plain white backdrop that made him stand out. "Hello, adventurers and dreamers!" he announced with a wide grin that made his eyes sparkle. "My name is Logan Chase, and I have an adventure for you! I want to tell you about Brimstonia, a fantastic VR game that will whisk you away on an incredible adventure. You'll uncover secrets and meet characters whose stories link to yours. Your choices will shape the world around you."

Tia leaned forward, her light brown hair catching the glow from the screen as her hazel-blue-green eyes lit up with curiosity. She held her breath, absorbed in the excitement he conveyed.

The simple background shifted into a breathtaking landscape. Bright blue skies stretched endlessly above, dotted with fluffy white clouds that drifted lazily. Lush green hills rolled gently in the golden sunlight, their grassy slopes alive with wildflowers dancing in the gentle breeze. Floating cities sparkled high in the air, their towers glistening like diamonds against the azure sky.

"Imagine a world filled with clear skies, rolling hills splashed with colorful blooms, and cities that float gracefully above the ground. Each corner of this land hides stories of heroes and legends just waiting to be discovered. Welcome to Brimstonia."

Tia's eyes widened in wonder as the scene shifted again, revealing enchanted castles with tall, spiraled towers. Each tower glimmered with vibrant banners swaying playfully in the wind. Below her, vibrant meadows, thick, mysterious forests, and shimmering blue waters teeming with lively creatures stretched out in a breathtaking panorama.

"In Brimstonia, you won't just play a game; you'll step into the shoes of a hero! When you wear your VR headset, you'll dive into an exciting world bursting with colors and characters ready to join you on your adventures."

The screen glowed with vibrant colors as Tia soared high above, the cool breeze tousling her hair. She envisioned herself riding a magnificent drake, its shimmering scales sparkling like jewels under the bright sun. Below her, the tall towers of Cairnheim, the central city, stood tall and proud, their pointed tops stretching towards the clear blue sky. In the center of the bustling town, a grand castle rose majestically, surrounded by busy markets. Colorful stalls lined the streets, filled with fresh fruits, handmade crafts, and delightful treats. People hurried by, their laughter mixing with the sounds of chatter as they exchanged stories and friendly greetings.

"From the sparkling beaches of the Chalendria Coast," Logan declared, and with a wave of his hand, the scene shifted like a curtain rising, "to the shadowy depths of the Anfange Caverns." With a flick, the display transformed, revealing the dark, mysterious entrance to the Anfange Caverns. Jagged cave openings appeared, and inside, glowing crystals shone in vibrant shades of blue and green, casting a magical light that danced across the rough stone walls.

As the stunning landscapes changed, the world sprang to life around Tia. Lush green forests stretched across the screen. Thick branches swayed gently as cheerful birds sang their sweet melodies. Towering mountains rose regally in the background, their snow-capped peaks reaching towards the heavens. Every corner of this enchanting land felt meticulously crafted, promising unforgettable adventures to those brave enough to seek them out.

Tia sat up straight, her heart racing with excitement. She imagined herself plunging into the adventure waiting for her. The scene shifted again, and Tia leaned in closer, her eyes sparkling with wonder. Colorful animated characters sprang to life, each bursting with charm and personality.

"Meet clever vendors on the lively streets," Logan continued, "and wise sages eager to share their secrets for your journey."

Tia pictured the vibrant market corridors bustling with activity, the air rich with the enticing scent of exotic spices. Joyful vendors called out to passersby, their voices creating a happy chorus.

The images swirled back, revealing breathtaking skies painted in shades of orange and purple, as if a sunset had spilled across

the canvas of the world. Imposing mountains loomed in the distance, and swaying trees dotted the rolling hills. Glimmering rivers flowed like silver ribbons, meandering through the captivating landscapes. Tia gasped in awe, feeling as though she had been transported to a world where every detail beckoned her to join the journey.

"Brimstonia is not just about exploring; it's about making lifelong friends," Logan explained. "You'll team up with players from all over the globe, creating bonds and alliances along the way. Together, you will embark on exciting quests filled with tricky puzzles and formidable foes. Each battle will challenge your skills and require teamwork. You'll choose unique powers for your character—whether it be a brave warrior wielding a flaming sword or a clever sorcerer casting dazzling spells. And don't forget about the incredible stories!"

A thrill coursed through Tia as she imagined all the adventures ahead of her, possibilities swirling like colorful leaves in the autumn breeze.

"You can unlock powerful magical items, learn new abilities, and watch your character evolve in remarkable ways. You'll brew sparkling potions and discover hidden strengths that will shape your journey and determine Brimstonia's fate."

Logan stood in front of the camera, his eyes shining as he spoke directly to the viewers. "So, gamers," he said, his voice bubbling with excitement. "Get ready for the adventure of a lifetime!" He threw his arms wide, as if inviting everyone to join him. "Together, we'll embark on epic journeys that go beyond just playing a game. We will create stories that stay with us long after the screen turns black." He leaned closer, a grin spreading across his face. "I invite you to step into the enchanting realm of Brimstonia. In this magical land, every moment offers a chance to explore. Each challenge you face helps guide you toward your ultimate destiny. Plus, every player adds their special touch to the incredible adventure we will share. Let the journey begin!"

As the colorful visuals slowly faded to a crisp white background, Logan's words grew more urgent. "So, what are you waiting for? Pick up your phone right now," he urged, pointing toward the viewers. "Order your premium virtual reality headset! It will pull you into this grand adventure!" His

eyes sparkled with enthusiasm. "Call today, and not only will you unlock a world of possibilities, but you will also receive a full year of dedicated customer support to help with any questions or issues. Don't hesitate—grab this moment and order today!"

Tia sat on the edge of her seat, her heart racing. A thrill surged through her, and she reached for her phone. Her fingers tingled with excitement as she imagined the adventures awaiting her in Brimstonia. It felt alive and filled with endless possibilities, just waiting for her to jump in and discover what lay ahead.

CHAPTER THREE

Bright Light

As the sun rises over the horizon, golden rays spill across the water, transforming Killigan Beach into a stunning palette of warm pinks, fiery oranges, and deep cerulean blues. The waves, shimmering with hints of silver, roll in steadily, gently kissing the soft, powdery sand of the shore like a friendly wave from an old friend. A brisk, salty breeze twirls through the air, playfully tossing strands of hair and bringing the invigorating scent of sea salt and adventure waiting just beyond the shoreline.

Alex, Riley, and Dalton leave Killigan's Bar, their vibrant hangout that usually thumps with life and laughter, but now is quiet due to being closed. Excitement bubbles within them as they prepare for the morning's surfing session.

Leading the charge, Alex Killigan strides confidently ahead. He stands tall with a strong, athletic build, and his charming, relaxed smile easily draws the attention of anyone nearby. Sunlight spills over him, causing his blond hair to glint like spun gold as it catches the light with every step he takes.

Close on his heels is Riley Killigan, her short, tousled blond hair bouncing with each energetic stride. Her vivid green eyes gleam with pure enthusiasm, reflecting the joy bubbling within her. Known for her contagious laughter and fun-loving personality, she enthusiastically chats about the perfect waves they hope to ride, her voice ringing with excitement as she paints images of thrilling rides and spills in the surf.

Beside her, Dalton Killigan keeps pace effortlessly. His dark hair frames his face, contrasting sharply with his striking blue eyes, which sparkle with determination and an eagerness for adventure. Each movement he makes showcases his fit physique, revealing his dedication to surfing. As he walks, he can already feel the rush of adrenaline coursing through him, excited for the wave-catching escapades just waiting in the ocean's embrace.

When they reach the beach, the lively sounds of the ocean surround them—waves crash against the shore, seagulls call overhead, sounding like children laughing in the distance. Suddenly, the atmosphere shifts like a dark cloud moving across the sun. They stop in their tracks, their wide smiles fading into expressions of confusion and concern. The air grows heavy, and a sense of unease blankets the scene.

Before them lies a woman, motionless on the sun-soaked sand, her body pale against the golden grains. Her hair is a tangled mess, strands sticking to her brow and framing her face like a wild halo. Droplets of seawater cling to her sun-kissed skin, glistening like tiny jewels under the bright sun. Alarm bells ring loud in Alex's mind as he rushes forward, his heart pounding, and the earlier joy of the beach day vanishes into thin air.

"Is she okay?" Riley whispers, her voice quivering with worry as she stares at the stranger. Her wide eyes, once bright with excitement, are now shadowed with concern.

Dalton kneels beside the woman, his hands trembling slightly as he fumbles to check for a pulse. He presses his fingertips against her wrist, but there's nothing—just the stillness of the sand beneath him. With urgency coursing through him, his hands move quickly to her chest. He places his palms firmly over her heart, pressing down with a determined rhythm. His chest compressions echo in the charged silence, each push filled with hope and desperation, but he feels a crushing reality set in as no response comes. The pulsing beats seem to slip away into the vast emptiness around them, leaving behind a heavy silence.

In that moment, bright light floods Tia's vision as she lies on the warm, sandy beach. The sun hangs high above, casting a soothing golden hue that wraps around her like a gentle

embrace. She gazes upward, feeling a swell of overwhelming joy growing within her. Every flicker of light dances above her, urging her to reach out and immerse herself in its warmth. It feels as though the shimmering glow is whispering to her, inviting her to dive deep into its comforting embrace, promising to wash away the sadness that has weighed her down for far too long.

Dalton's brow furrows with determination, and his blue eyes blaze with urgency as he applies pressure against her chest, hoping to bring her back to life. The life-saving rhythm fills the air, like a heartbeat echoing back at them, but hope begins to slip away. The tide of despair washes over them, thick and heavy, as their hearts sink with the weight of the situation.

Tia longs to surrender to the warm, radiant glow surrounding her, to let go and embrace the enticing promises of peace and relief. A deep sense of weariness presses on her shoulders, as if she has been carrying an invisible weight for an eternity. With every fleeting moment, she feels herself drifting closer to the light, emotional waves crashing over her, offering a comforting sense of wholeness and tranquility.

Dalton's expression twists with frustration. His determination wavers as he looks up at Alex, a knot of uncertainty thickening the air around them. "It's too late. I've done everything I can. She's gone." His voice is heavy with the crushing weight of despair, as if the words themselves are more than he can bear.

Riley's eyes shimmer with unshed tears, reflecting the deep ache in her heart for this stranger in need. "Oh no." It feels like part of her is breaking at the thought of a life slipping away, leaving only silence in its wake.

"No, no, no." The urgency in Alex's voice crackles with electricity. He shakes his head, determination lighting up his features. "I won't let her go!" He kneels beside Dalton, an unwavering presence that radiates fierce hope. A warm, invisible hand reaches out, promising strength and support. "Let me try."

Dalton leans back, skepticism shadowing his gaze. "It will be a miracle if you can breathe life into her. She's gone." His words linger in the air, heavy and cold, like a stone dropped in silence.

As brilliant light swirls around Tia, a soothing sense of readiness envelops her, wrapping her in a warm, reassuring embrace. Peace washes over her like a gentle summer breeze, soft and inviting. It fills her with comfort, and in this moment of sweet release, she imagines stepping through a shimmering doorway that opens into a realm of soft, golden light—the Pearly Gates.

"Tiana Forest. Reservation for one," she thinks with a flicker of humor. She visualizes a serene place above the world, a soft cloud where laughter dances among the stars, and the world's weight seems miles away.

With a deep, steadyng breath, Alex places his hands on Tia's chest, pressing down with firm, rhythmic pressure. He focuses all his energy and hope into each pump. Desperation swells within him, urging his heart to beat louder, wishing it could sync up with hers. His hands almost glow, emanating an intense warmth as he channels everything he has into bringing her back to life.

CHAPTER FOUR

Killigan's Beach

Suddenly, after what feels like an eternity, caught in a heartbeat, Tia's eyes flicker open. They are wide, filled with panic, as her chest heaves in quick, desperate gasps for air, battling against the thick haze of tiredness that blankets her. It feels like she is being dragged back from a dazzling light, trapped between two worlds, her body caught in the heavy grip of something dark and sinister.

With a violent gasp, she coughs, water erupting from her mouth in forceful spurts, mingling with the coarse grains of sand at her side. Each convulsion shakes her whole body, sending waves of urgency as she fights against the ocean's drowning grip.

As Tia sputters, pushing the salty water out of her system, she sits up in the warm embrace of the golden sand. She struggles to shake off the fog of confusion that clouds her thoughts. Sunlight filters through the air, casting a soft glow on her brown hair that shines with golden natural highlights, creating

an otherworldly halo around her head. Her blue eyes widen in shock, desperately scanning her surroundings as they try to piece together fragments of memory. She recalls only her name, a solitary spark lost in a thick haze. Glancing around, she takes in the beach scene, the waves crashing steadily against the shore, each swell serving as a reminder of her near escape from their depths.

Feeling a sudden surge of energy coursing through her, Tia bravely attempts to stand. Yet her limbs feel heavy and unresponsive, as if they are being weighed down by thick fog. She sways precariously, her feet sinking into the cool, damp sand, then crumples back to the shore. Once more, she coughs, salty water spilling forth in a steady stream, each heave exhausting her further. Each breath feels difficult and frail, her body a fragile reminder of the ordeal she has just faced.

Alex Killigan: "Easy, take it slow." He watches as her chest rises and falls, each breath shaky and uncertain, like the fluttering of a scared bird.

The morning sun spills golden rays over the beach, painting everything in a warm glow and creating a beautiful symphony of light and hope, as if the world is celebrating her return.

Dalton Killigan: He leans casually against a nearby rock, a cheeky smirk tugging at the corners of his mouth. He shoots Alex a teasing glance filled with playful admiration. "We're going to call you the miracle worker, Alex. Good job."

Alex Killigan: "We're not out of the woods yet." He kneels beside her. He leans closer, concern etched on his brow. "Hey there. We thought you were a goner. I'm Alex, and that's my cousin Dalton—and over there is Riley."

Dalton Killigan: He waves his hand enthusiastically, his bright smile lighting up his handsome face, and his deep blue eyes sparkle. "Hey there! Nice to meet you!"

Riley Killigan: With her bright blond hair shimmering in the sunlight, Riley leans closer, her vibrant green eyes dancing. "Hi! So glad you made it back to us. It was touch and go there for a minute." Her bubbly personality radiated joy.

Alex Killigan: "Do you have any injuries?" His brow furrows with concern as he positions himself at her eye level, gaze steady and reassuring.

Tia Forest: She carefully glides her hands over her arms and legs, searching for any cuts, bruises, or other signs of injury. She feels the mottled skin—a few scrapes sting where the rough sand has irritated her. "I don't think so." Her voice trembles like a fragile leaf caught in a gentle breeze, barely escaping her lips. Suddenly, a harsh wave of coughing erupts from her chest, forcing her to spit out seawater that tastes bitter and metallic. "Ugh. That's nasty."

Riley Killigan: She smirks. "Better out than in."

Tia Forest: Her widened eyes dart around, searching for clues. "What happened?"

Alex Killigan: "We're not sure." He glances at the crashing waves rolling in with a steady roar. He then focuses his attention back on her. "You just washed up on the beach this morning. Maybe you were swimming? I don't see a boat anywhere, so ... unless something else happened?"

Tia Forest: "Where am I?" Her voice is barely above a whisper as she looks around, taking in the unfamiliar scenery.

Alex Killigan: "You're on our beach, Killigan's Beach." He carries a hint of pride in his tone.

Tia Forest: She furrows her brow, the strange name slipping through her thoughts like the grains of sand between her toes. "Never heard of it." Confusion swirls like a fog rolling in from the ocean. Everything feels foreign, as if she has wandered into someone else's story without remembering how she arrived. "What state is it in?"

Alex shares a quick look with Dalton and Riley, then shrugs.

Alex, Riley, Dalton: "State?" They echo, all three of them looking puzzled.

Alex Killigan: He turns back to the woman on the beach. "Umm, well, it's pretty dry right now. We could really use a good rain soon. The fields are still plentiful, though."

Tia Forest: She blinks, her expression one of disbelief. "No. I mean, where is Killigan's Beach located?"

Alex Killigan: "In Killigan."

Tia Forest: "Where is Killigan located?" Her frustration rises, and she wonders if they just don't understand her inquiry.

Alex Killigan: "Brimstonia." His matter-of-fact tone creeps into his voice.

Tia Forest: She blinks again, her thoughts racing. "I ... have never heard of ... Brimstonia. Then again, I don't really know much right now."

Alex Killigan: He chuckles softly. "That's okay. What's your name, then? I mean, we could call you 'beautiful mermaid'."

Tia Forest: She pauses, her brow deepening as she sifts through her muddled thoughts, searching for something familiar. "Tia... I think." The name emerges like a long-lost secret. A rush of relief washes over her, mixed with a disorienting cloud of confusion, not quite sure what that name means but grateful to have something to hold onto.

Dalton Killigan: He stands close, his dark hair tousled by the breeze, and his striking blue eyes gleaming. "Can you walk, or do you need to be carried?"

Tia Forest: Tia rises unsteadily, clutching her head where a painful bump has formed, her fingers brushing against the sticky residue of dried blood on her skin. Her name feels like a beacon of light despite the fog clouding her thoughts. Taking a deep breath, she steadies herself. "I can walk." Her voice is firm, leaving no room for argument. But as she takes a tentative step, her legs feel like jelly, and she stumbles backward.

Alex Killigan: In an instant, Alex is by her side, swift as a hawk. He reaches out with strong arms, catching her just before she falls, cradling her against him. "Whoa! No way! I think I'll carry you in. The last thing we need is for you to trip and fall."

Tia Forest: The warmth of his body is comforting against the stress of the moment. "No, really, I can walk." Frustration creeps into her voice. Yet as she fights against helplessness, her determination crumbles, realizing her body is still unsteady, like a small boat rocking in a turbulent sea.

Alex Killigan: He shakes his head with a smirk, his grip firm yet gentle, expressing strength and kindness. "I got her. You guys go ahead and catch some waves. I'll take care of her."

Dalton Killigan: He raises an eyebrow. "Okay, if you're sure you've got her? I want to see if I can spot any boats or maybe find a sign of a wreck."

Riley Killigan: She jumps in with infectious enthusiasm. "Good idea! I'll open the bar while you two are busy with that." She gives a cheerful wave and skips toward the bar.

With Tia still nestled in his arms, Alex starts the short journey back to the bar. The wooden structure stands invitingly against the vibrant backdrop of the beach, warm sunlight spilling like honey across the golden sand. The sound of crashing waves fills the air around them, a constant, regular reminder of the world outside their small but significant moment together.

CHAPTER FIVE

Killigan's Bar

Killigan's Bar stands just a short stroll from the beach, nestled in a lively coastal community. The wooden deck, smoothed by years of sunbathing visitors, stretches out beneath the open sky, each weathered plank telling a story of countless summer days spent soaking up the sun. Its faded gray color gives it a nostalgic charm, whispering tales of laughter and relaxation as the salty ocean breeze brushes against it. Sturdy wooden beams rise imposingly above, creating a striking contrast against the fluffy white clouds drifting lazily overhead, shaping a vivid scene.

Sunlight dances on the ocean's surface, where the waves roll gently ashore, their frothy edges sparkling like diamonds in the warm, golden light. The bar's walls are painted in vibrant shades of sea blue and coral pink, capturing the spirit of tropical warmth and the enchanting hues of a sunset sky. This joyful palette evokes a sense of relaxation and adventure, making it a perfect oasis for beachgoers yearning to unwind.

A cheerful row of tiki torches lines the winding path that leads to the entrance, their flickering flames swaying gracefully in the salty breeze. Their warm, inviting glow illuminates the pathway, welcoming visitors with excitement and energy. A

large chalkboard near the entrance features the day's specials, showcasing enticing drink options with colorful illustrations that catch the eye. The delicious aroma of sizzling grilled meats—chicken wings, juicy burgers, and crispy fries—wafts through the air, drawing hungry guests closer to the promise of a mouthwatering meal paired with a breathtaking ocean view.

Inside, when the bar buzzes with activity, the air fills with laughter, the cheerful clinking of glasses, and the lively melodies of a live band or the familiar sound of a karaoke machine belting out favorite tunes. Yet this morning, the usual lively chatter is replaced by a serene silence, with most seeking coffee, letting the gentle sounds of waves tumbling onto the shore echo softly within the space. Bright murals depict scenes bursting with life: surfers expertly navigating crashing waves, palm trees gracefully swaying under a radiant sun, and vibrant fish darting among colorful coral reefs.

The polished wooden bar stretches elegantly across one side of the room, its smooth surface reflecting the soft light filtering through the large windows. Behind it, a mirror runs along the back wall, displaying an impressive shelf laden with an array of liquors, each bottle glinting. The panoramic windows frame breathtaking views of the waves rolling in, their rhythmic roar merging seamlessly with the upbeat tunes playing softly in the background. At Killigan's Bar, every detail invites guests to relax and savor the simple joys of life by the sea, creating unforgettable memories that linger long after the sun sets.

Alex strides into the quiet bar, the thick wooden door creaking gently as it swings open. Golden light spills from vintage lamps, casting a warm glow that softens the polished wooden tables and the rustic decor hanging on the walls. The rich aroma of aged whiskey mingles with the fresh scent of varnish, creating a welcoming atmosphere.

He gently lifts Tia, cradling her against his side like a fragile treasure, her head resting lightly on his shoulder as he guides her toward a cozy booth nestled in the far corner. The cushioned seats, upholstered in soft fabric, hug her as she sinks in, inviting her to relax. He carefully sets her down, making sure she's settled comfortably, adjusting the cushions around her with the tenderness of someone handling glass.

Alex Killigan: "Stay right here. I'll be back with some ice for your head. That's going to leave quite a mark when the swelling starts." He furrows his brow.

Tia Forest: She nods slowly, her eyelids heavy and drooping, fatigue tugging at her like an invisible weight. "Okay, I do feel tired. I might just take a quick nap." A soft yawn escapes her lips, her voice barely above a whisper as she fights back sleep, the shadows under her eyes almost as dark as the bar's wood.

Alex Killigan: "No. No nap." His concern deepens as he studies her face. "You might have a concussion. Resting isn't a good idea right now." His words hang in the air, a gentle but firm reminder of the seriousness of the situation.

Riley Killigan: Nearby, she leans closer, her serious expression locking onto Tia like a light beam. "Listen to him, Tia. He's right. You have no idea what you hit while fighting the ocean's waves. You could have crashed into reefs, sharp rocks, or worse, who knows what else lurks under the water."

Alex Killigan: He shoots her a quick glare, a mix of irritation and amusement. "Thanks for that cheerful reminder." He turns back to Tia, his expression softening again. "But let's focus on getting you better instead of imagining what could have happened."

Tia Forest: She let out a soft, defiant sigh, the corners of her mouth twitching in protest as if trying to mask the discomfort swelling within her. "Okay. Just get the ice already. I don't need you hovering over me like a mother hen. I have one of those." Her mind swirls with uncertainty as she can't place who it might be. "At least... I'm pretty sure I do."

Alex Killigan: "Of course you do, and we'll help you find her! Alright, I'll be back, and no sleeping." He hurries off, his footsteps echoing softly on the wooden floor.

As soon as he leaves, Tia rests her head on the cool, smooth surface of the table, the polished wood slick against her skin, calming her racing thoughts. Drowsiness washes over her like a wave, her eyelids growing heavier, dragging her closer to sleep's welcoming embrace.

Back behind the bar, Alex quickly fills a plastic baggie with glistening ice cubes, the small chunks clattering together as he

wraps them snugly in a thick dish towel, preparing a makeshift cold pack. The sound of sparkling water fills the air as he pours a glass, watching the animated bubbles leap and dance to the surface.

Alex Killigan: He dashes back to her side, cheeks flushed with a hint of warmth. "Hey! Wake up! You can't go to sleep." His voice is firm but laced with concern.

Tia Forest: She stirs, blinking slowly as if just emerging from a dream, her thoughts a muddled haze. "I'm not sleeping. I'm just ... resting my eyes is all." Her voice is muffled against the cool surface of the table, each word a struggle as if they carry the weight of her weariness.

Alex Killigan: "Yeah, right." He slides into the booth beside her. He gently cradles the back of her head, placing the cold, damp ice pack against her forehead.

Tia Forest: She flinches at the sudden frostiness, its chill a sharp contrast to her warm skin, instinctively pushing him away with a reflexive jerk. "Ow! Let me do it!" Tia snatches the ice pack from his hands and presses it firmly to her head. "Isn't there someone else you can bug?"

Alex Killigan: He chuckles, shaking his head. "Nope. My appointment book is exclusively for you."

Tia Forest: "Fine, then cancel my appointment. All I want is to go to sleep. Sleep helps with the healing process, you know!" A hint of frustration laces her tone as she tries to maintain her resolve, determination warring with exhaustion.

Alex Killigan: "Not in this situation." A warm, affectionate smile spreads across his face. "It's part of my job as your lifesaver to keep you awake and alive, and I plan on doing just that."

Tia Forest: "And that was when Tia knew she would never sleep again." She rolls her eyes dramatically, the sarcasm dripping from her voice. "My hero. Ugh," she adds, half-exhausted, half-exasperated.