



# Guilt

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**Category:** Romance, New Adult, Mystery

**Description:** Did she kill him? No. Was she involved in his death? Yes. Katrina Dawson's charmed life is coming to a grim end. Just when she thought everything was getting better after trying to cope with the events after her father's death, she finds herself in a harrowing predicament once again. These days, Kat has never felt more isolated, especially when consumed with guilt after being involved in Connor's death. Now, she avoids Mason – her boyfriend and Connor's twin brother – like the plague. With her friend circle growing smaller by the day, Kat navigates a life without most of the people she used to rely on. What Kat doesn't know is that things are only going to take a turn for the worst. There's an evil lurking in the shadows — one that only Kat sees. And it's been following her every move, with a feverous intent to kill her. What happens when she discovers that a man who once wanted her dead is back to uphold his deadly promise?

**Total Pages (Source):** 13

## CHAPTER ONE

I walked as fast as I could, sand and gravel crunching beneath my boots. Head lowered and hands clutching desperately unto the strap of my satchel, I tried not to look behind me to confirm my suspicion. Instead, I continued to walk faster, bordering on running as I almost reached my destination. I could hear the blood rushing in my ears, and my heart pounded with each step I took.

"You're almost there, almost there..." I whispered to myself as my breathing increased. When I went to open the door before me, I felt a solemn hand rest on my shoulder.

I screamed.

"Kat, it's me... it's just me," came the reassuring voice behind me. As I turned to face him, I heaved a sigh of relief. "Hey, are you okay?" Aaron asked, standing before me in a white T-shirt and blue jeans paired with combat boots that were similar to mine.

I wiped my sweaty palms against the yellow summer gown I was wearing, which my mom had gifted me just two days ago. "I'm fine, Aaron," I said, my eyes flitting around to make sure there was no one else around us but the students I was familiar with.

"Are you sure? You look so pale... and Christ Kat, you're burning up," he said as he placed a hand on my forehead.

I shrugged it off and adjusted my shoulder strap before turning back around to walk

into the school building with Aaron following beside me. "It's okay, Aaron. Everything is fine," I said again, even though I was absolutely sure someone had been following me.

He sighed when we reached my locker and watched me pull out my books. "Just know I'm here for you if you need anything, Kat, okay?"

My lips tugged up helplessly into a broad smile as my gaze found his. "Thanks, Aaron... for everything." I couldn't imagine what my life at Redwood would have been like if Aaron wasn't in it. Although I had initially started with four male friends, he was all I had left now, and I never took him for granted.

A lot had changed since the first few months I spent in Redwood. Liam, who happened to be responsible for my father's death - an occurrence that caused my mum and me to move to a new city in the first place - and killed two other girls for bullying me, was being reprimanded in a psychiatric home. Jake, though still my friend, was now dating a girl that I didn't particularly care for, and Mason...

"So..." Aaron drawled, adopting that tone that said he was about to say something I wouldn't like. "Have you spoken to him yet?" he asked, and my heart fluttered.

I averted my gaze and slammed my locker shut before walking away with a scowl.

"I'll take that as a no," he said as he ran to keep up with me. "Seriously, Kat, you can't keep doing this. You need to talk to him..."

I came to an abrupt stop. "And say what, Aaron? Hey Mason, I'm sorry I took your secret paralyzed twin brother out without permission and got him killed for reasons I still don't know?" I huffed and tugged furiously at my bun-styled blonde hair.

Aaron turned me around to face him, his beautiful green eyes staring into my bright

blue ones. "Mason isn't mad at you. He doesn't blame you for what happened. There's no way you could have known. You just have to talk to him, Kat."

"How do you know, huh? How do you know he doesn't blame me when he has been avoiding me for weeks now? He doesn't want to talk to me, Aaron. Just drop it," I snapped at him, my lips quivering as I willed myself not to burst out crying from hurt and from missing my boyfriend too much. If we were still dating at this point.

Shoving his brown hair back roughly, Aaron scoffed. His frustration with me was quite clear. "He's hurt, he's scared, and his parents are not letting him anywhere out of their sight because of the press and investigations going on. It doesn't mean he's avoiding you, Kat. You just need to reach out to him." His eyes softened when he spoke again, "He misses you."

I shook my head. "I can't, Aaron... I..." my voice caught as I whispered. I knew I was a coward, but I couldn't help myself. I couldn't bear seeing Mason just yet... or maybe ever.

What if he had stopped looking at me with love and adoration in those dazzling blue eyes of his? What if he no longer loved me because of what happened? What if he hated the sight of me because it reminded him too much of his dead twin brother? So many "what ifs" ran through my mind, pulling me further away from the boy I was in love with.

"Kat..." Aaron's voice bled of pleas, but I wouldn't budge.

Gritting my teeth with sheer stubbornness and determination, I began to walk away from him once again, but he caught up with me, of course. "I don't want to have this conversation again, Aaron. I mean it," I stared at him meaningfully, hoping he understood the seriousness of my request as we stood outside the classroom.

He nodded, even though it was clear he had more to say.

"Good," I said and pushed the door open as we entered.

The first thing I noticed was Jake's laughter - the laughter he had once reserved only for me - directed at Noelle, who beamed happily from where she sat on his lap. I swallowed down the ugly green monster that threatened to rear its ugly head, reminding myself that Jake was happier with her, and I was in love with Mason, but it still hurt.

I took my seat just as Aaron took his beside me and watched the two happy lovers jump apart when the teacher made his way in.

My eyes reverted to Mason's empty seat. I sighed longingly before they traveled toward the window that faced the school parking lot.

Far ahead, in the woods across the parking lot, I could see a man in a hoodie staring straight at me with his face hidden. My heart began to pound as I watched him point his finger at me.

"Miss Dawson, care to repeat the last word I said?" the teacher's angry voice flowed into my ears. I turned to him with a blush, but luckily, Aaron saved me by answering the question.

I looked back out the window, but the man in the hoodie was gone.

### CHAPTER TWO

After school, I said a quick goodbye to Aaron and ran home, all the while trying to see if the strange man was still following me. As soon as I made it into my house, I slammed the door shut behind me.

My eyes searched the living room as I panted, leaning against the door. "Mom, you're home," I said in relief as soon as I spotted her coming out of the kitchen with a napkin in hand. "Why?" I scrunched up my nose in confusion as soon as I realized she wasn't usually home at this hour.

"Oh, I finished work early, so I decided to come home," she replied with a smile. "We never really hang out anymore," she said with a pout, her pretty brown eyes shining with feigned sadness.

"Oh," I said simply, my breathing slowing returning to normal.

My mom walked toward me carefully with a raised eyebrow before gently placing a hand on my arm. "Is everything okay, bebé?" she asked, worry dripping from every word.

I swallowed and shook my head frantically before pushing myself off the door. "We have to move mom. Away from this house, away from this town... From everything," I whispered as I gazed up into her eyes.

Instead of giving me a reply, my mom simply watched me with sadness and a hint of worry before dragging me to the couch, where she sat me beside her.

"I know you think I'm crazy, but mom, I'm not. This man keeps following me everywhere I go, and it's too... I'm scared, mom," I whimpered.

"Oh honey, I don't think you're crazy. I think seeing Mason's brother get killed that day must have scarred you deeply, and I wish you'd talk to Dr. Martin about it. He says you only come into his office and stare at the walls for an hour..."

I sighed, frustrated that she still didn't believe me even after all we've been through. "How can you not believe me, mom? One of those men is coming after me, and they want to kill me. Please..."

"For God's sake, Katrina, these men have been arrested! All three of them, and you identified them yourself... including the dead one," she waved her hands erratically around, then her voice softened. "The police have it under control, darling. I promise you."

I nodded, even though I was sure I was being followed. The words in the letter I had received at Connor's burial still rang in my head, but I was done making my mom worry. I was going to handle whatever issues I had by myself.

"I understand, mom. Thanks," I said and laid my head on her lap.

Her hand caressed my hair lovingly as she asked, "What about Mason? Have you talked to him?"

I groaned at the direction of our conversation, and sat up, dislodging myself from her touch. "No," I grumbled, looking everywhere but at her.

She sighed. "Bebé, you can't keep avoiding that boy. God knows what he's going through, seeing as his parents keep him under lock and key because of all the reporters swarming their house everyday..." She shook her head as she trailed on and

on, not realizing how much I was getting crushed by her words.

Mason, the boy I claimed to be in love with, was having a hard time. Yet here I was hiding out in my house like a coward and whining about being followed by a man that apparently only I could see.

I picked up the satchel I had dropped on the floor earlier and stood up. "I need to finish my calculus homework, mom. I'll come down when dinner is ready," I said. There was no assignment, but my heart ached too much whenever anyone talked about Mason or even mentioned his name.

"Okay, darling," my mom replied with a smile and watched me head upstairs and into my room.

Seated by my desk, I pulled out my phone and stared at his contact - as I did every day since the incident - with my finger hovering over it. If only I dared to dial Mason's number and talk to him, then I wouldn't miss him so damn much.

Torturing myself further, I pulled up a picture I had taken of him during one of the school's football games. It displayed a sweaty Mason as he pulled up his shirt to wipe his forehead and revealed a well-sculpted chest and tanned six-pack. I had run my hands all over it in the throes of passion just a few hours before I got his brother killed.

'Way to go, Kat,' I thought to myself bitterly.

In a fit of rage, I threw my phone across the room, aiming for the wall, but it was caught by a large hand instead. I raised my head to see Jake crawling into my window.

"Katrina..." he whispered as soon as his feet landed in my room, closing the window



I had left open behind him, and I couldn't help myself.

I ran into his open arms and broke down in tears. "I miss him," I sobbed into his shirt.

"I know, Katrina," he said, his hand running up and down my back. "I know."

### CHAPTER THREE

The vintage, chestnut grandfather clock that hung on the wall kept ticking and filling the silent room with its noise while I glared at it. I had never really understood the clock's point when there was another perfectly normal wall clock just inches away from it. Then again, Dr. Martin was a peculiar man.

I thought my conclusion of him being weird was valid because what therapist was okay with sitting in his office for an hour with a client who refused to speak a word ever since their sessions began? The first day had been the only day he had tried to get me to talk, but I had been so angry for being there that I refused to speak and so every hour I spent with him was in total silence.

My mom had suggested I see a therapist after witnessing Connor's death and waking up covered in sweat from my nightmare-ridden periods of sleep. As much as I had been mad at her for making me see Dr. Martin every Friday after school, I did as she asked because it was the only way I could reassure her. Also, telling her on several occasions that I was being followed by a strange man did not help my case.

Her eyes had told me how scared and sad she was at my predicament, and I was pretty sure she thought I was going crazy at some point. The last thing I wanted was for my beautiful and bubbly mother to be drained of whatever energy she had left, after everything she has endured since my father's untimely death. So, I went to therapy and sat there in stone-cold silence, unable to put an end to it so my mother's heart wouldn't be broken once more.

I watched as Dr. Martin continued to scribble into his notepad, his dark eyes peering

from his thick-rimmed glasses. He stopped to scratch his grey hair at some point. Still, my therapist immediately continued with furrowed eyebrows. I wondered what he wrote in there, just as I always did whenever I came around.

For some reason, I felt the urge to lash out at him today even though I never used to care. "Aren't you supposed to be helping me?" I spat out bitterly even though I was the one who had refused to speak in the first place.

If Dr. Martin was shocked at my outburst, he didn't show it. He simply placed his pen gently on the notepad and raised his head to stare at me with kind eyes. "Of course, Miss Dawson," he replied with a smile that only made me want to scream.

I needed him to be angry, to yell at me, to tell me that I was the one to blame for everything. Instead, he smiled at me and watched me like parents watching their baby about to make his or her first step.

Glowering at him, I said, "I see now that you're perfectly okay with taking my mother's money for each session, without doing your job. I should have known you were nothing but a quack." His smile only got more expansive, and I felt my teeth clash against each other. "Why are you smiling? None of this is funny," I bit out furiously.

He leaned back in his chair with a pointed gaze at me. "No, it isn't Miss Dawson..."

"Kat," I corrected.

"Kat... I'm merely excited that you are ready to talk. I apologize if my excitement made you feel uncomfortable." Even his voice was soothing, but I didn't want to be calm. I tried to stoke the fire that was burning hot within me.

"I never said I was ready to talk about anything. There's nothing to talk about." I

averted my gaze from his soul-searching eyes and fidgeted with the strap of my bag.

"I beg to differ, Kat. I think there's a lot you ache to talk about starting with Connor's death and how it made you feel. Your fear of everyone blaming you, guilt, and, most especially, your father's death."

His last words made my head jolt up to glare at him with narrowed eyes. "What does my father's death have to do with Connor?"

Dr. Martin leaned forward, his elbows on the desk as he watched me with careful eyes. "It has a lot to do with everything, Kat. If it wasn't for his death, you would never have been uprooted from your life and moved to this town where horrible things have been happening to you, your mother, and your friends."

I gasped. He had spoken the exact words I had been thinking every day since Connor's death, and from the way he watched me, he knew how spot on he was. However, I refused to be vulnerable around Dr. Martin.

If there was anything I hated, it was being considered pitiful by anyone, and something about my father's death immediately made me defensive and cold.

"This was a mistake, I never should have come here," I whispered, but I knew he could hear me.

I shot up from the chair, my bag secured on my shoulder and bolted out of his office as I willed the tears not to fall while he watched me leave. It wasn't until I was out of Dr. Martin's building that I let the tears fall as I gasped desperately for breath.

I clutched tightly at my burning chest, wishing my mom and I had never moved here in the first place. Also, cursing Liam Eddison a million times in my head for delivering the killing blow on my father.

Running far away from the building, as my newly purchased boots pounded against the concrete, I went toward the only place I knew could grant me comfort at the time.

Hopefully, I wouldn't run into any of the boys there.

### CHAPTER FOUR

Seated on a wood log, I picked up a rock and began to write names with it in the sand, starting with Liam's.

I was in the spot the boys and I had discovered just a little way down from Aaron's house, which wasn't quite far from my home or Jake's. We had been on a study date when we found the spot during my third week in Redwood.

There was nothing exceptional about it. No lake, no flowers, no meadow; it was just a bare stretch of grass with scattered wood logs around. Yet we had claimed the place because of the calmness it provided. No insects or birds were chirping, just complete and utter silence. It was the perfect place to stay hidden from everyone and mope about my life.

My hand shook as I wrote down the names Leila and Gina; the memory of how Liam had admitted to killing them because they hurt me filled my mind. Mason's name was next, but I couldn't write it without breaking down in tears. I missed him with every bone in me, but I couldn't bring myself to see him. It scared me to think of what I would find if I went looking.

The sound of a twig snapping alerted me, and I quickly turned back to see what it was, my heartbeat accelerating, but there was nothing there. I sighed. Maybe everyone was right, and I was starting to imagine things.

However, that thought soon left my head when I felt an arm snake around my neck and a hand covers my mouth to stop me from screaming.

"You're coming with me," came the gruff voice of a man.

Now genuinely terrified, I kicked out my legs and trashed against the person who held me as my eyes widened with terror. My screams couldn't be heard as they were muffled in my assailant's palm, but I soon managed to bite down on his palm and let out a loud scream before my mouth was covered again.

Determined not to give up, I stamped down on the man's leg with my heavy boots causing him to groan in pain. Luckily for me, the grip he had around me loosened, and I was quick enough to jab an elbow into his stomach and run like hell.

"Help!" I screamed as I ran blindly away from the man who was now chasing me. "Please, help!" I yelled, tears falling from my face now and making it harder for me to see the fallen branch before me, which I soon tripped on.

'This is it, I thought as I lay on the ground with scraped arms and a cut on my forehead, wincing in pain. I'm going to die.'

As I lay there, eyes closed, and awaiting death, I felt an arm embrace me, and the sweet scent of roses filled my nose. "Kat, what's wrong? What are you doing here?" Aaron asked.

Slowly and gently, I opened my eyes to see my best friend crouched by my side, and I quickly fell into his arms. "Aaron, over there... there was a man and he... he tried to kill me. He kept dragging and chasing me... he said..." I would have continued, but his expression stopped me. It was clear Aaron had no idea what I was talking about. "Didn't you see him? He was right over there, Aaron."

Aaron shook his head in confusion. "There was no one here, Kat. No one but you," he whispered calmly, and I began to sob.

"Oh God, I need help, don't I?" I asked a question we both knew the answer to. It was clear to me now that I was hallucinating things. I had to start taking my therapy sessions with Dr. Martin seriously.

Aaron smiled kindly, his green eyes glinting with the reassurance. "It's alright, Kat. We'll figure it out," he said as he pulled me up and led me toward his house.

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I was seated on one of the kitchen chairs in Aaron's house, and I noted that his parents and younger sister, Renee, were not home. I watched as Aaron fumbled around while searching for the first aid kit.

"Found it," he said, his voice muffled from his head being in one of the kitchen cupboards.

I smiled as he came toward me with the first aid kit and sat on the chair before me. He placed the kit gently on the kitchen counter before digging out a bottle of antiseptic, cotton, and plasters. I soon started wincing as he began to dab the antiseptic on my injuries.

"Sorry," he muttered as he blew on my injuries.

"Thanks," I whispered back when he was done treating them all.

He responded with a broad smile of his own before watching me with a severe look on his face. "You know I'm here for you whenever you need someone, right?"

Feeling too emotional to speak, I simply nodded my head with a warped attempt of a smile. "I know Aaron, and I really appreciate that," I whispered when I finally found my voice.



He stretched out a hand and caressed my cheek while his eyes shone with love. "I love you, Kat."

Instead of responding, I leaned closer to him and captured his lips with mine. Hesitant at first, Aaron began to kiss me back, burying his hands in my hair while I sighed contentedly. My hands trailed upward to rest around his neck as my tongue tangled with his.

Groaning, his hands came to rest on my waist, and he soon picked me up to set me on the counter while I wrapped my legs around him to pull him even closer. "Kat," he whispered.

I moaned when his soft lips left mine to trail kisses down my neck, sucking and lapping at it as he went. He bit my ear playfully and licked the dip behind my ear, causing me to shiver in delight.

My body quivered when his hand pushed at my leather skirt and caressed my thighs in a way that made me beg for more. "Please, Mason..."

As soon as I spoke, I felt Aaron go rigid, and I swore beneath my breath at my stupidity. 'What on earth had I been thinking?'

Aaron pulled away from me with his head lowered, and his fists clutched beside him. "We shouldn't have done that," he said, his breath still irregular from our make out.

"I'm sorry, A..."

"You should go, Kat. Go after him. He's the one you want," he said to me with a sad smile, and I didn't need to be told twice.

I nodded frantically, picked up my bag, and went ahead to find the one my heart

sought after.

### CHAPTER FIVE

I was a ball of nerves as I walked to my destination. My throat felt clammy, my palms were sweaty, and I kept contemplating turning back and running far away, but something kept me going.

Perhaps it was because of how everyone had been telling me to go after him, or I had just reached the limit of my tolerance from being apart from Mason too long. Either way, something about the kiss I shared with Aaron made it clear that Mason was the only boy I wanted to kiss. He was the one I wanted to be with, and if there was a chance that he would take me back, I would fight for it.

I released a shallow and anxious breath as I came to a stop before the gates of the enormous mansion that belonged to the Welsh family. My finger lifted to ring the bell, shaking intensely as it did.

"Who is it?" a voice I recognized as Miss T's, the household maid, rang through the intercom.

I cleared my throat to speak, "It's me, Kat," I said, hoping she wouldn't ignore me or send me off.

Luckily for me, the intercom buzzed, signaling for me to go in, and I did. I had just walked up to the door to knock when it opened to reveal a tall, blonde and beautiful woman I recognized as Mrs. Welsh, Mason's mother.

Her blonde hair was styled into a low tight bun, and her icy blue eyes, coupled with

the white pantsuit she wore, made her look cold and a little bit scary. I swallowed as I held her gaze. The only times I had seen her was at the hospital when Mason had been shot by a serial killer and at Connor's funeral, and both times her appearance left me tongue-tied.

"Um, you probably don't remember me, but I'm..."

"The girl that got my son killed."

I gasped at the raw hate and accusation that dripped from her words. Even though I had known this was a possibility, I still hadn't prepared myself for it. "I'm sorry, I didn't... It wasn't..."

She simply watched me fumble with words while staring at me with cold eyes and a blank expression. When it was clear I was at a loss, she sighed and folded her arms across her chest. "What do you want, girl?" she snapped.

Shaken, I begin to stammer "I... I just want to... Ma... I just want to see... Mason."

A short bark of laughter filled the air as she watched me with an expression that said she found my request unbelievable. "Teenagers, they never fail to amuse me," she muttered under her breath with her head lowered, but I caught every single word. Then she raised her head to glare at me. "Mason doesn't want to see you," she said, shattering my heart.

"That's not... that can't be true. He wouldn't..."

"You think he would want you anywhere near him after you got his twin brother killed?" she asked, and I lowered my head in shame and guilt. "In case this has escaped your notice, that boy in there has been unable to have a normal life for the past few weeks because of the reporters that keep swarming our house wanting to

know what on earth happened. All this is happening because of you. Because you just couldn't mind your own damn business," her voice had now risen several pitches higher.

However, something in me clicked as soon as she was done speaking, "No," I said.

"What?"

I raised my head to glare at her "None of it was my fault. If anything, the people that are to blame here are you and your husband. I saw that video Mrs. Welsh, the one those men were threatening your family with, and the one Connor tried to bargain with them for your family's protection."

Mrs. Welsh came to stand nose-to-nose with me, her voice lowering to a dangerous tone as she stared at me with rage. "You better keep your mouth shut about that video, or you won't like what happens next," she said as her nostrils began to flare in anger.

"Is that a threat?" I asked defensively, and she jumped back in shock.

"No, that's not..."

"I wasn't going to tell anyone about that video anyway. The last thing I want to do is put Mason in danger like that and have Connor die in vain. But I won't have you blaming me for something that wasn't my fault. If you and your husband had stuck around instead of traveling, you would have known what Connor was going through. You would have been able to protect him," I paused to suck in a breath and make sure she was listening. "Your son is dead because of you and your husband, Mrs. Welsh, and it's high time you both took responsibility for it," I finished and turned around to storm off.

It wasn't until I was a few feet away from the door that I turned back to say, "As for Mason, I completely understand if he doesn't want to see me, but please tell him that I'm sorry and that... I miss him," I gulped and ran off, my eyes dripping with tears.

A few feet from the gate, I raised my head just in time to see the curtains in Mason's window draped shut.

He had seen me; I was sure of it.

### CHAPTER SIX

"So, he said nothing?" Aaron asked, and I shook my head as I bit down on my sandwich. We were currently seated in the cafeteria, having lunch alongside our other classmates. "And you are sure he saw you?"

"Yes, Aaron," I said, already tired of repeating myself. "He must have been standing by his window the whole time because when I raised my head to his room window, the curtains were immediately pulled close."

"What if it was Miss T? I mean, you didn't exactly see Mason's face, so it could have been someone else." My expression must have said a lot because he quickly looked away and muttered a half-hearted, "Sorry."

I sighed, "I just don't want to talk about it, Aaron. I should have known better than to go there in the first place. I knew he wouldn't want me around, yet I went there anyway."

Aaron lowered his head dejectedly. "I'm sorry, too. If I hadn't pushed you to go and see him, none of this would have happened."

"It's okay," I shrugged, chewing on my food even though I couldn't taste a thing. "At least now I don't have to wonder about him and me anymore. It's clear that he doesn't want me."

"Come on, Kat, don't talk like that. I'm sure if I talk to him, he will come around."

"No," I said a little loudly, attracting the attention of those seated behind us. "No, please don't. Just leave it alone, okay?" I begged him, lowering my voice. "Promise me, Aaron," I watched him meaningfully, only relaxing when he assured me with a nod.

"I promise," he said seriously and then groaned as his gaze swiveled to something behind me. "Oh, what now?" he said in exasperation.

"What...?"

I didn't get to finish my sentence before Noelle slapped the rest of my sandwich out of my hand.

"What the hell, Noelle?" I yelled at the perpetrator who now stood before me with raging green eyes and a stormy expression. "What was that for?"

"You just can't stay away, can you? You have to have them all, huh?" She screamed in my face with an arm propped on her hip.

I watched on in confusion, having no idea what she was going on about. "What are you talking about...? Jake, what is your girlfriend talking about?" I asked the boy who had come to stand beside Noelle and was trying to pull her into his arms.

"No, you talk to me and not him. Stay the fuck away from Jake," she said, shoving my shoulder.

Now furious, I pulled a rising Aaron back down to his seat and stood to face Noelle. By now, everyone in the cafeteria was staring at us. "If you would speak with a little more clarity Noelle, that would be much appreciated," I said calmly, holding onto the little patience I had left.



"Stay away from my boyfriend, bitch," she enunciated.

"Noelle, baby, it's not like that," said Jake as he kept trying to pull her into his arms and away from Aaron and me to no avail.

"Stay out of this babe," she answered him.

I shut my eyes tightly as I tried my hardest to remain calm. "Noelle, I thought we've been over this. I have nothing to do with your boyfriend. Jake and I rarely even talk or hang out anymore. He even stopped sitting with us during lunch. What else do you want from me?"

"That's just what you want everyone to believe, then at night you start acting all pathetic and weepy, making up stories about seeing strange men following you just to get Jake crawling through your window to console you because you know he's a gentleman and that's what he'll do."

My gaze swung to Jake's, the feeling of betrayal sweeping all over me. "You told her?"

"Oh, don't look so surprised. Jake tells me everything," she said with a smirk, looking pretty pleased with herself.

"It's not like that Katrina, I didn't mean..."

"My lowest moments and you told her?" I screamed at him. "I trusted you enough to be my friend, to be there when I needed you, but your precious Noelle just had to know too, didn't she?" I ignored him as he shook his head in denial, "What? You two must have enjoyed mocking me and laughing behind my back at my expense, right?"

Jake moved closer to me and held my hand. "Katrina, I swear, that's not what it is,"

he said, staring at me with tormented eyes that pleaded to be understood, but I was far too angry to listen.

"Let go of me," I yanked my arm out of his grip.

"Jake, baby..."

"Stay out of this, Noelle," Jake growled at her, causing her to step back in shock.

## Page 7

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I shook my head in disbelief. "I need to get out of here," I whispered, pushing the books I had left on the table blindly into my bag.

"Katrina, please listen to me..."

I turned sharply to glare at him, letting him see exactly what I was feeling at the moment - so much pain and hurt. "You know, you were the first person I connected with in Redwood Jake, and I used to think you would stand by my side no matter what, but I was wrong. You don't care about me at all."

Aaron stood; his bag held tightly in his fist as he wrapped his other arm around me. "Come on, Kat, let's get out of here. These two are not worth it," he said, glaring at Jake and Noelle.

As we walked away from our table, everyone else whose attention had been on us soon went back to their business when they realized the drama was over.

However, just by the entrance to the cafeteria stood the last person I expected to see.

"Mason..."

### CHAPTER SEVEN

Seated on a swing in my backyard beside Aaron, who had walked me home after school, I kept replaying the events of the day in my head. First, I had gotten into a fight with Noelle, after which I had learned of Jake's betrayal. Mason had shown up at school, but as soon as I called his name, he simply walked away and ignored me for the rest of the day.

"Hey, are you okay?" Aaron asked, concern written all over his face. He had insisted on walking me home and staying with me until my mom got back because he didn't think I should be alone.

I shook my head in response, "I'm not..." I let out a dry laugh. "...but I'll be fine. I just thought he would at least say something, you know?" I said, turning to watch Aaron, who stared back at me. "If he had yelled at me, called me names, or even said anything, anything at all, it would have been better than the silent treatment he had given me. What's worse is that he had carried on with everyone else normally but ignored me like I didn't exist," I sniffled.

I felt Aaron's arms around me as I tried to stay strong. "We'll get through this, I promise you. Mason is a dumbass for hurting you."

"No," I said, shaking my head as I wiped off the tears that wouldn't stop falling. "No, he's not. I deserve this."

Aaron groaned loudly, "Will you just stop saying that? You didn't do anything; you didn't even know Connor existed! You were just doing what seemed right at the

moment.”

"Yes, but if I hadn't enabled him..."

"That's enough, Kat. I don't want to hear this again, okay?"

I nodded my head reluctantly and dissolved into his warm hug, wondering what I did to deserve having Aaron in my life. "I love you, Aaron."

"I love you too," he declared and then planted a sweet kiss on my forehead.

We stayed in each other's arms for a few minutes until the sound of footsteps approached us. Aaron saw who it was before I did. "Now is not the right time, dude," he said, and I raised my head to see Jake.

"Please, I just want to talk," he pleaded, his hands in his pockets as he shuffled his boots against the ground nervously.

I stared at him for a few seconds before signaling him to speak.

"Katrina..." he started, and I glared at him; he had no right to call me that anymore.

"Sorry, Kat... I know I've been a horrible friend to you lately, and I am sorry. It's just, with everything so different now, there's no one to talk to except Noelle. I know I distanced myself, but I was only trying to make things easier because I know you two don't get along," he paused, waiting for me to say something, but I remained mute. He cleared his throat and continued anyway. "Just know this, Kat. I've never stopped caring about you, and I do love you."

"What about Noelle? Is she going to be a problem?"

"No," he shook his head. "I broke up with her."

To say I was shocked was an understatement.

"What? Why would you do that? You love her."

He simply shrugged, his face taking on a stony expression.

"What she did... the things she said to you were inexcusable, and she has to understand that she can't just say things like that to you anymore."

"But Jake..."

"It's fine, Kat, I promise," he smiled. "Just forgive me?"

Grudgingly, I pulled away from Aaron and beckoned for Jake before hugging him tightly. "I love you too, Jake, and I forgive you for being an ass," I said with a smile.

He chuckled and kissed the top of my head before taking a seat on the swing next to me, leaving me in the middle of my two boys. He gave Aaron a short nod, which was reciprocated before turning to me. "I saw what happened with Mason... he's an idiot if he blames you for what happened."

It was my turn to chuckle. Jake wasn't known for sugarcoating things "I think that has been established." I answered with a knowing smile directed to Aaron.

Jake cleared his throat, drawing back my attention. "So, about the strange man. Do you still... you know?"

"Do I still see him?" I asked, and he nodded. "No, I haven't in a few days now, and I think everyone was right about it being a hallucination. I've decided to take my

therapy sessions with Dr. Martin more seriously now,” I beamed at him, finally feeling a little bit better.

He nodded his head solemnly. "That's good to hear. It couldn't have been any of those men involved with Connor's death anyway. After all, you identified all three of them, including the dead one.”

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"Yeah, I..." I trailed off.

"Kat, what's wrong?" Aaron asked, noticing my sudden silence.

I stood up from the swing, my pulse increasing as several thoughts ran through my head, and I pushed my long, blonde hair back anxiously.

"Kat? What's the matter?" asked Jake this time.

I turned around to face them. "It's something you said, Jake, and something my mom said a few days ago."

Aaron came to stand before me, his hands gently placed on my shoulders. "Tell us," he urged.

"I did identify those men, but I never saw the third one because I was too scared to go into the morgue, and now that I think about it, the cops never really described him to me for identification. We all just assumed it was him," I swayed as I suddenly felt lightheaded, thankful that Aaron was there to catch me.

"What are you saying, Kat?" Jake stared at me, bewildered.

"I think I know who has been following me," I whispered.



### CHAPTER EIGHT

If there was something I wouldn't forget anytime soon about the death of Connor Welsh, it was the face of the man that had pointed a gun at me with a sinister smile on his face that showed he would enjoy every bit the of rush that came from killing me. A look that had me jolting awake, screaming like a banshee every morning since the incident.

After my discovery the previous day, Jake, Aaron, and I had run straight to the hospital morgue, sneaked in, and discovered that the dead body of the third man that had tried to kill me was, in fact, someone else's and not Kaleb's. How he had managed that was beyond any of us.

The next step would have been to run and tell the cops, but there was no way we could tell them without revealing how we had made our discovery, so we concluded. Since Kaleb still didn't know we knew he was alive, we would wait for him to stalk me again, and when he did, we would be prepared.

I closed the book I was pretending to read at our spot with the hopes that Kaleb would come looking for me there again, but it had been hours, and he was still nowhere to be found.

Picking up my bag, I stood up and started to walk away when I was stopped by someone. "Mason..." I whispered.

He looked everywhere but at me, his hands shoved deep in his pockets with a blank expression on his face. "Can we... can we talk?" he bit out.

"Of course," I said immediately, grateful that he was finally speaking to me. We both walked toward the nearest log of wood and sat down. "I'm sorry," I said, breaking the tense and awkward silence.

"Why?" he turned toward me, finally staring me in the eyes.

"For getting your brother killed."

The silence resumed, lasting for close to a minute before he spoke again. "My brother wasn't always crippled, you know. When we were eight, a set of gunmen came into our house looking for our parents, and when they didn't find them, they tried to kill me. Connor, he... he ran in front of me, and they got him instead. Thankfully, the shots had alerted the neighbors, and they had called the cops who came just in time, but my brother could never walk again," he released a bitter laugh. "You would think that would get my parents to stay home and protect us, but they simply kept Connor hidden while they continued with their political aspirations."

"I'm sorry, Mason," a sob caught in my throat.

"The worst and most painful part is that those same men had been the one to kill him, and I think Connor knew that too. They've been after my family for years because of something my parents got involved with, something they wouldn't even tell me about," he kicked a rock off in a rage.

"Mason..." I reached out a hand to pat him but quickly pulled it back when I remembered that I had a hand in his brother's death. "Mason, I'm sorry."

He pushed back his hair roughly as his beautiful blue eyes watched me with naked pain and regret. "No, I should be the one that's sorry. I'm sorry, Kat. For not telling you about my incredible twin brother, for hiding him away from the world like my parents did..." Tears fell from his eyes as he spoke, and it made my heart hurt for

him. "I'm sorry for not being there when you needed me the most, and I'm so sorry for making you feel like any of this was your fault when it wasn't. I'm sorry for being a coward Kat. Forgive me, please?"

I nodded my head frantically, my own eyes shimmering with unshed tears as I tried to stay strong for him. "Of course, I forgive you, Mason. You did nothing wrong. I should have been there for you, but I was too much of a coward. I was worried about what you'd think of me, I was worried that you didn't want me anymore or worse that you hated me and couldn't stand the sight of me."

"Never, never Kat. I would never feel that way about you, and I will never stop wanting you either."

"I know that now," I agreed, finally coming to my senses and feeling my broken heart being mended almost immediately.

He lifted his hands to place them gently on my cheeks as he gazed lovingly into my eyes, the hurt in his eyes now cleared by the love we felt for each other. "You are my everything Katrina Dawson, and I am irrevocably in love with you," he whispered to me.

Pulling his head to mine, I kissed him with vigor, pouring my heart and soul into the kiss so he would know how much I loved him. "You have my body, heart, and soul, Mason Welsh, and I am never going to stop loving you," I whispered back.

He stood up and held his hand out, which I took before getting picked up and twirled around in his arms. Giggling loudly, I held on to the love of my life before planting several kisses on his face that made him laugh, his eyes sparkling with delight.

"Well, it's about time," Aaron said, standing a few feet from us beside Jake, who whistled loudly, causing us all to laugh.

"I love you, Katrina Dawson," Mason said with a wide grin, placing me on my feet while still holding onto my waist.

"I love you, Mason Welsh."

His head lowered, his lips closing against mine, causing my body to light up in a way it hadn't in a long time, and everything was right in the world again.

### CHAPTER NINE

Mason and I had only been back together for a few hours now, and those were the best hours of my life. We had spent most of it in each other's arms, kissing and touching, yet we still couldn't get enough of each other. Seeing him come to pick me up for school the following morning simply made me lightheaded.

Giggling as he tugged me into the school building and into a broom closet, I followed obediently, eager to feel him against me. My breathing increased when he shut the door behind us and pushed me against the wall.

"I want you, here, now," he whispered, his eyes searching for permission, and I nodded immediately, granting him what he wanted.

I felt Mason's mouth cover mine in a kiss, our tongues clashing and urging the other to succumb. He pulled me against his body and my thighs brushed the growing bulge in his pants, causing him to release a deep groan.

Within seconds, Mason tugged off the straps of my flimsy, flowery gown, leaving the red lacy bra I had worn explicitly for him exposed.

"Fuck, this is... beyond sexy, Kat," he whispered and continued to trail kisses from my lips down to my bare neck.

I tightened my hold on his forearm as I tilted my head, leaning into his kisses as my insides quivered in anticipation. Loving the feel of his mouth against mine, I felt his hand trace my thighs, gingerly pulling up my dress as he went higher while his other

hand unfastened my bra. He cupped my now exposed breasts in his calloused palms, rolling the stiff peak between his fingers and squeezing ever so gently, making my nipple pucker and turn a bright shade of red.

My back arched, and I pressed my breast more firmly against his hand, letting out a moan. I felt his mouth descend over my sensitive tip and I lost all sense of reasoning. He held complete control over my body, rendering me powerless as wave after wave of heady sensations crashed through me. Heat spread across my skin and rushed between my legs as they shook and I gripped his broad shoulders more tightly to brace myself as his demands grew more frenzied.

I felt his fingers slide higher, deep between my thighs, and with one last tug on my breast, Mason lifted his head to watch my reaction as his fingers entered me. A loud moan escaped me, all thoughts that we were in school and someone could hear us flying out of my brain, but he quickly kissed me to suppress my moans.

"I can't wait anymore, Kat," was all Mason said before he hoisted me against the door and entered me in one swift move. I hadn't even noticed him unbuckle his pants or put on a condom.

I threw my head back and savored the pleasure as he pounded into me fast yet gentle. It was nothing like our first time together when I had felt a little tinge of pain. Now all I felt was nothing but intense, hot sensuality.

My breasts bounced as he continued to thrust in and out of me and my breathing quickened in short gasps as he continued to stir my body into a wicked frenzy of need. I could feel the pressure elevate until I thought I would burst, and I knew what was coming, craved it even.

"Cum for me baby," Mason whispered in my ear and I surrendered to the soothing caress of his voice until I clenched and then finally shattered, just as Mason groaned

out loud and followed after.

Still feeling high from our recent activity, I entered the classroom with a broad smile and rosy blush while Mason's arms were wrapped around my waist. I took my seat and grinned when Mason stole a quick kiss before taking his seat.

"Whore," I heard someone mutter.

Sighing with resolve, I turned in the direction of the insult and saw Noelle, who glared at me. "Do you have something to say to me?" I snapped at her.

"Nothing, just to congratulate you for finally succeeding in getting them all. It's all you've ever really wanted anyway."

I rolled my eyes and turned back to face the board.

"You don't want to be ignoring me right now, Katrina," she spat my name out like it was venom.

"And why can't I do that?" I glared at her with equal dislike.

"Back off, Noelle," Aaron said, coming to my rescue as Mason's eyes met mine. I shook my head to let him know it was okay.

Noelle laughed. "Of course, you'll defend her; after all, you are in love with her and constantly shoving your tongue down her throat while her actual boyfriend is stuck at home mourning his brother."

My head snapped up at her words, suddenly remembering the kiss Aaron and I had shared in his parent's kitchen. "How...?"

"I saw you both through the window when I went to study at Giselle's house." Giselle, who happened to be another classmate of ours, was Aaron's next-door neighbor.

"Kat... what's she talking about?" Mason's voice drew my eyes to him, and I could see the confusion there, an emotion that would soon turn into pain and hurt when I confirmed it was true.

"Mason, it was nothing... I didn't..."

He stood up abruptly, betrayal shining in his eyes as he watched Aaron and me.

"I can't believe this, did you kiss him too?" he yelled bitterly as he pointed to Jake, the entire class now watching our fight.

"No, no, I didn't. Mason, you have to believe me; it didn't mean anything!" I stood up too, raising my hand to hold his, but he quickly pulled away from me. "Mason, please, I was sad and alone..."



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"Mason..." Aaron began.

"You stay the fuck out of this," Mason screamed back, looking at him with rage. He turned around to me. "And I suppose that was enough reason to kiss someone else, huh? What else did you do, sleep with him? This whole time, you didn't come to see me because of him?"

"No, no, Mason, please! You know that's not true," I cried, my voice cracking in between sobs.

"I don't know what to believe anymore," he screamed at me just as the teacher came in.

"Miss Dawson, Mr. Welsh, have your seats, please..."

Instead, Mason looked at me and said, "We're over, Kat. I can't do this anymore." He picked up his bag and walked out of the class.

"Mr. Welsh, get back in here," the teacher called just as he called my name when I ran after Mason and Aaron and Jake's words when they ran after me.

By the time I reached the school building entrance, I had seen Mason drive off in his car, taking my heart with him.

### CHAPTER TEN

"Kat..."

"Katrina..."

The voices called after me, but I kept running anyway even though I knew there was no way to meet up with Mason's car.

"Katrina..." They finally caught up with me. "Wait," Jake said. "Please, you have to stay calm." 'I couldn't stay calm, though,' I thought with heaving breaths.

"Let's go back inside. Come on, Kat," Aaron said, but I couldn't bear to look at him or be around anyone else.

I shook my head and pushed them off me. "I need to be alone," I whispered tiredly.

"Katrina, please..." Jake began, putting more steel in his voice.

"I need to be alone!" I screamed at them, "Don't come looking for me," I said before running off again, and this time, they didn't follow me.

Just a few miles before Redwood's neighboring town's boundary stood a really high cliff that had a massive lake spread out beneath it. On several occasions, students from Redwood High and the neighboring town have been known to go cliff diving at this particular spot. I wasn't a fan of extreme sports, which was why I headed there; it was the last place the boys would come looking for me.

Seated at the very edge of the cliff with my legs swinging, I stared blankly ahead as I threw rocks unconsciously into the water, thinking of how I could have stopped any of this from happening.

‘I never should have kissed Aaron,’ I thought for the umpteenth time, wondering again what was wrong with me and why I found it difficult to just choose Mason and stick with him. Why did I have to be attracted to all three of them initially, and why had I found comfort in Aaron's arms instead of looking for Mason?

It was very glaring to me now that I couldn't live without Mason because I knew none of the others could affect me the way that he did. When Jake had stopped hanging out with me or when I had stopped kissing Aaron to go after Mason, I hadn't felt this crushed and alone. It was Mason; it had always been him.

Someone whistled behind me, and I quickly turned around to see who it was. When I did, my heart skipped a beat.

"Little girl, fancy seeing you here," he said, his dreadlocks swinging as he walked toward me. "I told you I would come for you," Kaleb grinned sinisterly.

I shot to my feet and made to run, but I was no match for him, and he grabbed me immediately.

"Where do you think you're going? We haven't even had any fun yet, hmm?" He swept my hair away from my face and sniffed my neck, causing me to shiver in fear.

"Let go of me!" I screamed.

His loud laughter filled the air. "You know, back in that warehouse, I ached so much to kill you. There was just something about you, something different from others, and I just knew how much satisfaction killing you would bring," he said, licking the side of my face.

I whimpered, his touch making my skin crawl. "Please, let me go."

"Good, beg..." he screamed, "Beg me." He began to walk with me in his arms toward the edge of the cliff.

"No, no, please," I begged as I tried to push myself back to no avail; I couldn't swim, not after being traumatized by my dad's death. His body had been found in his car at the bottom of a lake, and from my experience in the massive pool at Mason's house, it was crystal clear that I was going to drown if I was tossed into the lake.

"Help!" I screamed, hoping someone would hear me, but my voice merely echoed back.

Kaleb's hand closed against my neck, squeezing it and choking me. "There's no one here to help you, little girl. Oh, how I will enjoy watching you fight for your life," he whispered before chuckling devilishly in my ear. "Goodbye, Katrina Dawson," he said and tossed me right into the lake.

Free falling, I screamed for no one else but my dad because, at that moment, he was all I could think about, and I recalled what Dr. Martin had said. I needed to come to terms with his death.

"I love you, Dad," I said just as I fell into the water.

I didn't bother to try and swim out of it because it was of no use and I didn't want to give Kaleb the satisfaction of watching me struggle for my life.

Letting myself go, I sank deeper and deeper into the blue waters with one voice echoing in my head. "You are my everything Katrina Dawson, and I am irrevocably in love with you."

Far, far away, I could hear a familiar voice call out for me, and I wanted to reach out

to it, but I had no strength left. Fading away just seemed more comfortable and there was no pain left anymore.

"KATRINA!!!" I heard again, then the darkness came, and I embraced it.