

SEQUEL TO SADIE

Augustina

a novel by

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Gated Publishing

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To Michael, Laura, Andrew,
Katelynn, and Jacob

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CHAPTER 1

The funeral of Sarah Augustina Dawson was held on a Thursday in the church her mother attended for thirty-five years.

Every pew was filled with friends, coworkers, and tear-stained loved ones overcome with grief. Sadie's brother, Damien, was there from California, plus an aunt and uncle from Minnesota. Even Sadie's long-forgotten father came with his wife.

The ceremony was supposed to be short, and maybe it was, but it felt like the longest hour of Josh Young's life. Thankfully the pastor never used the word suicide, nor did the obituary in Kalispell's newspaper. Instead, the pastor focused on the happy things in Sadie's life: her love of music, her love of laughter, and most especially her devotion to her family.

As Josh listened, he kept his eyes on the large portrait of Sadie up front. It was a gorgeous picture—as if she was capable of anything less—showing off her captivating smile, her dark curly hair, smooth olive skin, and a set of eyes surrounded by the most beguiling lashes known to man. No one questioned why her beautiful portrait replaced a coffin. Ironically the fire in Sam's cabin simplified many things. No casket or body meant no viewing or grave. It was a blessing to

have things turn out so easily on this end. Everything else would be hard enough. Especially for Sadie's mom.

Ten rows up Marcela Dawson blew her nose.

Josh glanced sideways, wondering what his new bodyguard would do if he tried to move up there. Between Deputy Harrison's U.S. Marshal training and his linebacker body, Josh wouldn't get far. Besides, the last thing Marcela needed was a scene.

Frustrated, Josh sat back. The pastor was stuck somewhere in the Gospels, seemingly content to drag out the mock funeral all day.

Marcela's crying picked up volume. Though Sadie's mom was supposed to put on a show today, Josh had no doubt those tears were real. Saying goodbye to a daughter—even if temporarily—was never easy, but Sadie and her mom were especially close, talking on the phone every day. Yet until Sadie's ex-boyfriend, Guillermo, was found, caught, and brought to justice, the Dawson women would have absolutely no contact. No phone calls or texts. No online chats. Nothing. Josh admired Marcela's resolve. She was more than willing to endure pain and loneliness if it meant she could keep her only daughter safe.

Safe.

Josh's skin crawled.

He scanned the sea of mourners. Special Agent Bruce Madsen, the FBI agent running the show, expected Guillermo to have men in the church to verify Sadie's death. Guillermo Vasquez had eyes and ears in every corner of Montana these days. As a precaution Agent Madsen flooded the church with several of his agents plus a fleet of U.S. Marshals like the one next to Josh. No one in the congregation stood out to Josh, but knowing Guillermo's men could be checking on things was a disturbing reminder of how close they'd come to a real funeral for Sadie today.

Too close.

Too many times.

Josh's mind began filling with dark images: burnt-down cabins, Sadie's ashen face in the snow, and Guillermo's raging fist. He blinked hard and focused

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on her smiling portrait, silently praying the ‘death’ of Sarah Augustina Dawson was the death of Guillermo’s revenge. At least on the Dawson family.

Josh was supposedly a walking target.

However, Josh didn’t think Guillermo would carry through with those threats. Josh was a nobody. Plus with the FBI hot on Guillermo’s tail, the sleek Venezuelan had plenty to worry about. He wasn’t even in the country for all they knew. Josh was the last thing on Guillermo’s mind.

He hoped.

He scratched his week-old beard and his knee started bouncing.

A redhead on the other side of him shot him a look as if to say, *Who are you, and what is your problem?*

She was one of Sadie’s many friends Josh sat with. Deputy Harrison placed him there on purpose hoping Josh would blend in with the twenty-something group. While Josh might blend in, Deputy Harrison had to be pushing forty.

Josh forced his bouncing knee to go slack and wondered if he’d ever get to meet Sadie’s friends and family under normal circumstances—or if they’d recognize him when he did. He barely recognized himself. Thankfully his bleached-blond hair was only temporary. As was the matching itchy beard, brown contacts, and linebacker-sized bodyguard. And with any luck...all the lies.

He glanced down. The ring on his left hand felt more foreign than the rest of his disguise, but that would last long after his hair was dyed dark again. Though Josh and Sadie had never talked marriage—technically they’d never been on a date before—there were parts of this new identity he wouldn’t mind too much.

Mr. and Mrs. Josh Peterson.

Josh twisted the ring around and around as Marcela’s crying picked up volume. So much for a short funeral!

Kevin, Trevor, and Sam got the better deal today. They were with Sadie in the nursing home, entertaining her and hopefully keeping her mind off the funeral. Between night boarding, roasting marshmallows, and making fun of Trevor’s hair over Christmas break, Sadie had become part of their group. It was awesome. Josh smiled, momentarily forgetting his morbid surroundings. It was very awesome. But only he and Sadie were heading to Mississippi, and his buddies

wanted to spend their last few hours with her instead of enduring a pointlessly long funeral.

Even better, Josh's parents were there too. Not only did they want to get to know Josh's new girlfriend, but they brought Josh's stuff from Spokane since he hadn't been home since the fire at Sam's cabin—and wouldn't be returning home for who knew how long. If only the pastor would quit talking, Josh could get a decent goodbye with his parents and buddies.

Ironically the only goodbye he wouldn't get was with Sadie's mom. He'd been finalizing plans with Agent Madsen when Marcela left last night. Josh craned his neck to see her. Her hands covered her face as the tears continued to flow. Josh was sorely tempted to sneak up there.

"Don't even think about it," Deputy Harrison whispered without looking away from the pastor. "You have orders."

Josh nearly rolled his eyes, but Agent Madsen's lecture from this morning filled his mind.

Don't speak to anyone at the funeral, Madsen had said. Marcela most of all.

To which Sadie quickly jumped in. *It's the only way I'm letting you go, Josh. Guillermo can't know you're there. Seriously. Don't look at or talk to anyone—especially my family. Otherwise the deal's off.*

Whatever Guillermo said to Sadie in the back of that Mercedes had Sadie paranoid.

Why do you have to go to the funeral anyway? Sadie said. *Your parents and the guys want time to say goodbye to us.*

Josh couldn't explain why other than he needed to see, he needed to hear, and he needed to make sure this funeral was as real as real could be. All he told Sadie was that he wanted to make sure her mom was okay. Marcela didn't sound okay. Her sobs echoed through the church.

Frustrated, he shifted in his seat. That earned him another strange look from Sadie's redheaded friend.

The one bright spot in everything was Damien who sat with an arm around Marcela. Sadie's brother was one of the few people in the church who knew the truth about Sadie and how carefully the FBI was guarding their key witness in the

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murder of FBI Agent Dubois. The original plan was to pack up Marcela and let her disappear with Josh and Sadie in the backwoods of Mississippi and the Witness Security Program. But Guillermo would grow suspicious if Sadie's mom disappeared. He'd go searching. That meant leaving Marcela behind, which didn't sit well with anyone. But then Damien not only quit his job in San Diego, but volunteered to move into Marcela's apartment in Kalispell. Twenty-four hour surveillance that wouldn't arouse suspicion from Guillermo. Damien was just a concerned son coming home to console his grieving mother. Damien was a godsend.

Miracle of miracles, the pastor finally announced the closing hymn, "Be Thou My Vision."

Josh bit back another smile, remembering how Sadie fretted over her own funeral the last few days.

The music has to be perfect, she said. Especially the last song. It tells people how to feel going forward.

Josh still couldn't believe he found someone who loved music as much as he did. But when she showed him the closing song, he'd never heard of it. She smiled her radiant smile then—the one that made Josh wonder how a girl like her ever looked at a guy like him.

It's gorgeous, she said. It's been one of my favorites since I was a little girl. I know you'll love it—if I let you go.

He was already determined to go but he said, *I think you better sing it for me in case I don't. Otherwise I'll never get to hear it.*

Though it took a little coaxing, he was grateful he pressed because as the congregation started singing, Sadie's beautiful voice filled his mind instead, quickly making it his new favorite hymn as well.

*Be Thou my vision, O Lord of my heart;
Naught be all else to me, save that Thou art.
Thou my best thought, by day or by night,
Waking or sleeping, Thy presence my light.*

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*Be Thou my battle shield, sword for the fight;
Be Thou my dignity, Thou my delight;
Thou my soul's shelter, Thou my high tower:
Raise Thou me heavenward, O Power of my power.*

*High King of Heaven, my victory won,
May I reach heaven's joys, O bright Heaven's Sun!
Heart of my own heart, whatever befall,
Still be my vision, O Ruler of all.*

As Josh finished singing with the congregation, the lyrics became his silent prayer. *Be Thou my vision, Thy presence my light.* Joshua David Young, a man who planned out his entire life out at the age of five, was suddenly leaving his last semester of undergrad, his family, his three best friends, and the entire Pacific Northwest for the unknown. Had he not been absolutely certain it was the right path, he might be overwhelmed. As it was, he prayed for God's watch and guidance over him and Sadie in leaving and for those left behind.

Whatever befall, he repeated, *Still be my vision, O Ruler of all.*

And then it was done.

Damien helped Marcela to her feet as row by row was dismissed. People dressed in black stopped just shy of the door to offer their final condolences. Damien shook their hands first, and then person after person fell into Marcela's arms.

Josh filed out of the pew behind the redhead, realizing he might get that goodbye with Marcela after all. He just had to be discreet.

As they neared the front, Deputy Harrison leaned close and whispered, "Don't linger."

Josh nodded. He shook Damien's hand first and tried to communicate with his eyes what he couldn't say. Josh only met Damien a few days earlier but already liked him. Damien reminded him of his quirky friends, a mix of Kevin and Sam.

Then Josh turned.

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From the looks of it Marcela hadn't stopped crying since she left last night. She shook Josh's hand as ritual demanded before she looked up. Her swollen eyes widened in sudden recognition.

"You came?" she whispered.

Josh couldn't think of a single thing to say—or at least that he was allowed to say—so instead he opened his arms. Marcela fell into them as more tears erupted.

Deputy Harrison shot Josh a dark look which he ignored. A hug was well within the realm of acceptable funeral behavior. Agent Madsen could have no complaints.

Josh whispered in her ear, "You hanging in there?"

"Barely," Marcela squeaked. "How is she?"

Deputy Harrison grunted a warning so Josh shortened his answer. "Strong. Like you." Then he released Marcela and cleared his throat. "I'm sorry for your loss, Mrs. Dawson," he added more formally.

"Thank you...uh..." Her brows furrowed, too distraught to remember his temporary name.

"David," Josh said. "I know it's hard, but you'll get through this. And I'm sure"—he closed his eyes, willing the words to be true—"I'll see you soon."

He squeezed her hand one last time and moved toward the doors. It wasn't a perfect goodbye, but it was more than he hoped.

"Wait!" She grabbed his suit coat. "You can't go. Not yet. Please! Just another minute. I'm not ready."

Josh stopped. Marcela wore the same expression she had a week ago—the same expression *he* wore a week ago—as they waited for news of Sadie's whereabouts. Josh and Marcela had been through the war and back, and he couldn't leave her like that. Not now. Not ever.

Shrugging at his bodyguard, he stepped behind Marcela and Damien, staying in the shadows while the church cleared out.

The look Harrison shot him could have split hairs. Josh knew he was going to hear about this later from the U.S. Marshal, Agent Madsen, *and* Sadie. But Deputy Harrison couldn't make a scene. He was forced to step beside Josh, hand

discreetly on the gun inside his suit jacket, as he scanned each person coming through the line.

Even though Josh stood to the side, a few people still stopped to shake his hand. He couldn't exactly ignore them. People wanted to talk to anyone, even a stranger, to make sense of Sadie's sudden "death." Names she mentioned in passing became real people overcome with grief. All of them dismissed him without a thought, too overwhelmed to realize he was introducing himself as his long-deceased grandfather.

"Hi, I'm David Peterson," he said to the next person.

The man could barely tear his eyes away from his wife falling apart on Marcela's shoulder. "I'm Martin. Sadie's uncle."

Josh's eyes widened. *Uncle Martin?* Martin was the BYU football fan and member of Josh's Mormon religion. Josh was desperate to pull Martin aside and ask about his and his wife's conversion—and Sadie's unfettered willingness to join as well—but Josh was forced to offer a simple, "I'm sorry for your loss, Martin."

Deputy Harrison caught Josh's eye and motioned to the door. The Marshal looked like a caged animal. Part of Josh was eager to leave as well, feeling his time with his parents and friends slipping away. He and Sadie had a four o'clock flight out of Missoula. But then he heard what Sadie's aunt said to Marcela, and suddenly he couldn't move.

"Where is Guillermo?" her aunt asked, dabbing her eyes with a tissue. "Augustina spoke so highly of him. I've been waiting to meet the man that captured my niece's heart. He must be so *angustiado*."

Josh's blood boiled. It wasn't Aunt Silvina's fault, but having anyone mention Guillermo at a time like this was nauseating. Guillermo was the reason Sadie disappeared after Christmas, the reason she disappeared a week ago, and the reason she was disappearing for a third time. Guillermo and Guillermo alone was the sole reason Marcela's olive cheeks had been tear-stained since Christmas. Without missing a beat Marcela gave the reply Agent Madsen suggested.

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“I am afraid Guillermo wasn’t able to attend today. He and Augustina broke up recently, but he is aware of”—Marcela cleared her throat—“what happened. He was even kind enough to send his sympathies.”

And Guillermo had.

Just yesterday Marcela received a bouquet of white roses with a card saying he’d “heard about Augustina’s untimely death.” That he felt a “deep sadness at losing such a wonderful creature.” The ease of his words and quickness of his response showed his utter confidence that he’d wiped out the only witness to Agent Dubois’ murder without implicating himself. However, he mentioned he was out of the country and unable to attend her funeral. “But I shall be there in spirit.”

Or in other words, Agent Madsen explained, he’ll have spirits there for him, so make it convincing.

The note didn’t mention his multi-million dollar cabin, or the fires that destroyed it and Sam’s, but Agent Madsen warned Marcela she might hear from his lawyers soon since Sadie was the supposed arson of both fires—her supposed suicide.

As if Josh needed another reason to loathe that man.

But the card was a stark reminder. Wherever Guillermo ran, whatever hole he found to hide in, he was keeping tabs on things—on Marcela.

It was another minute before Josh cooled down enough to focus on his surroundings. By then Sadie’s aunt and uncle were gone and only a few stragglers remained.

Another woman approached him, hand outstretched. He shook her hand. “Hi. I’m David Peterso...”

His voice trailed off. It was the redhead he’d sat next to during the funeral. Josh already followed her through the line once. For some reason she was back, looking up at him in an eerie, hair-raising way.

“Hi Da-vid,” she said, drawing his temporary name out a little too long. “I’m sorry for your loss, but I...um...” She looked around and moved in close. “I like your beard.”

“Huh?”

“The color is perfect,” she whispered. “Sadie would have loved it.”

Josh stared at the redhead, pulse quickening.

“I’m supposed to give you something,” she said, digging through her purse. “It’s from some guy outside that—Wait,” she interrupted herself. “What is this?”

Time slowed as Josh watched her pull an object from her purse. It was small, black, and looked an awful lot like a—

Deputy Harrison leapt forward. “Gun!”

He shoved Josh aside. Josh flew into Marcela, sending them both sprawling as a dozen agents jumped the girl.



CHAPTER 2

Sadie glanced up at the clock. The funeral should be over by now. She was anxious to get Josh's report on how her mom did, plus Damien and everyone who ever meant anything to her. It seemed cruel to drag them through a fake funeral. If she wasn't convinced it would protect her mom, she would have never agreed.

Agent Madsen sat in a dark corner of her nursing home room that served as her recovery place. He was going over a stack of paperwork with Deputy Croff, Sadie's new bodyguard. Madsen didn't seem bothered by the time. Sadie took a deep breath and tried to relax.

"Hold still, girl," Trevor said.

"Sorry." Sadie straightened her leg, struggling to hold up her heavily casted foot. "What are you writing anyway? A novel?"

Grinning, Trevor swirled the permanent marker as he finished. Sadie bent her leg to read his message on her cast.

Don't think this gets you out of snowboarding—Stud Man

She laughed. Not hard, but it stabbed her three broken ribs. Rookie move. Laughing was for lying flat in bed. She knew that. But between the neon green

cast—Josh’s idea—and Trevor’s message, she was stuck thinking about a frigid night and a bright green snow beast.

Night boarding with the boys.

She pushed herself up in the chair to find a comfortable position. “I don’t think there’s any snowboarding in Mississippi, Trevor. Or snow, thankfully.”

“No snow?” Kevin said. “What are you gonna do, Ice Woman?”

After two days of freezing—literally—in the Montana snow, that was the best part of going south. “Sip lemonade and work on my tan. How did you get that nickname anyway, Trevor? Stud man? Really?”

Trevor jerked back. “What else would you call me?”

Sadie was more careful when she laughed the second time. It still killed. Stupid ribs.

With a roll of the eyes, Kevin grabbed the marker from Trevor. She held up her foot again. Though it might have been a little juvenile to have them sign her neon green cast, she was thrilled to have a piece of her friends to take with her to Mississippi, personality included.

“How am I supposed to sign your cast?” Sam asked from the small screen in her hand. He wanted to come back and say goodbye as well, but he was in over his head in medical school in California. He’d already missed the first few days of the semester when Sadie went missing and his family’s cabin burned to the ground. She refused to let him miss any more school.

Her foot grew heavy while she tried to think of something. The video chat was nice, but she wouldn’t be taking the phone with her either.

“No worries,” Kevin said. “I just signed it for you.”

For a second time, Sadie strained to see what was written. And for a second time she forgot she was sitting up. She laughed and had to grab her ribs. “Ow!”

“What?” Sam asked. “What did Kevin write?”

Sadie read the message again with a shake of her head.

Even though you broke my heart and you’re running off with my best friend, I’ll never forgive forget you—Sam

Not only was it untrue, Sadie refused to read it aloud.

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Kevin flashed her a conspiratorial grin. “I just signed your name, good buddy.”

“Kevin!” she mouthed. Sam was going to kill him if he ever saw it. Not that he would. The cast would be off long before she saw Sam again. Still.

Trevor leaned over, read Kevin’s message, and burst out laughing. Sam’s face turned red on the small screen. “What? What does it say? Kevin!!!”

Kevin ignored him to sign the bright green cast for himself.

To Ice Woman, the perfect woman for my man, Josh.

Take care of him for me—Kev

By the time he finished, Sadie’s voice clogged with tears. She wanted to ask how in the world she could take care of anyone, but she couldn’t. Nobody knew anyway. Besides, they all promised to keep things light today. Enough heavies.

“You wanna sign it, babe?” Kevin asked over his shoulder.

Kevin’s wife, Amy, shook her head. “No. That’s okay. It looks like you guys took all the room.”

They hadn’t but Sadie wasn’t surprised. Though she’d only spent a few hours with Amy, Kevin’s wife hadn’t exactly been friendly. She laughed and joked with the guys, even with Josh’s parents, but she barely spoke to Sadie. Sadie didn’t blame her. Her naiveté endangered more than herself and Josh. Guillermo burnt down Sam’s cabin without a second thought. He could have easily gone after Kevin and the others.

Josh’s mom scooted closer to her. “Are you alright?”

Sadie smiled. Where Amy had been distant, Josh’s mom, Kathy, was the complete opposite, asking Sadie every question imaginable: where she’d grown up, what types of music she wrote, and if she liked southern cooking. Josh’s mom was easy to talk to, like an old friend. Technically she was Josh’s stepmom, but Sadie wouldn’t have guessed that on her own, not with the way she and Josh teased each other. When Kathy mentioned she was the one who “knocked some sense into Josh’s thick skull” she completely won over Sadie’s heart. If Kathy hadn’t convinced Josh to come back to Montana, he might be in school and Sadie would be...

Dead.

She shivered. It was cold outside of her heated blankets, but she was thrilled to be in her own clothes again. No more hospital gowns. No more nursing home beds. No more pink walls and old-lady curtains. No more doctors and nurses. Maybe. Hopefully.

Possibly.

Josh's mom looked even more concerned.

"I'm fine," Sadie said, realizing she hadn't answered. "I'm just ready for it to be over."

"I am, too. Although"—Kathy's smile faded—"I'm not ready to say good-bye yet."

"Me, neither." Sadie barely met Josh's parents. How long before she saw them again? Before Josh saw them again?

With a sigh, she twisted her leg around. "Do you want to sign my crazy neon cast?"

Kathy's smile returned. "I'd love to."

"Hey, Sadie," Trevor said. "I got this buddy in Spokane who can rig up some internet thing where we can chat without being tracked by Guillermo or any of his—"

Deputy Croff whirled around. "Exactly what part of 'no contact' don't you understand, Mr. Fillion?"

Trevor scowled but didn't answer. Though Deputy Croff was an elegant black woman, the kind Trevor might hit on under different circumstances, she had a commanding personality—plus she was six feet tall, towering over Trevor's obnoxiously curly head. It was amusing to watch him squirm under her steady gaze. Sadie was glad Josh picked out Deputy Croff for her.

Once Deputy Croff went back to her paperwork, Trevor leaned toward Sadie. "I'm telling you," he whispered. "It can be done. Nobody would be able to trace a daaa—rn thing." He glanced up at Josh's dad as he corrected himself mid-curse.

Sadie smiled. She was going to miss Trevor's wild hair and wild ideas. Most especially she would miss watching him try to curb his language around a bunch of Mormons. Josh's dad didn't even notice.

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“Sadly,” Peter said, “this setup is for the best. If you or Josh need anything, Sadie, you can always contact us through the U.S. Marshals’ office.”

“Or myself,” Agent Madsen added from the corner.

Yes, but only in an emergency, which there better not be any.

She looked at Josh’s dad. “What about you? What if”—she swallowed—“Guillermo goes looking for Josh in Spokane? Or at your house?”

Peter Young ran a hand through his peppered gray hair the way Josh always did when he was stressed. Even his face was Josh’s, minus twenty-five years of law-enforcement-induced wrinkles.

“It’s possible,” he said, “but unlikely. Young is a popular last name, and with my police job, we’ve kept our phone and address unlisted for thirty years. You wrote little about Josh’s hometown in your journal other than to say he was from the Spokane area. We should be fine.”

Sadie winced as she remembered her little blue journal, the one Guillermo used to convict her; the same journal the whole world seemed to have memorized of late.

“All things considered,” Peter said, “I think it would be impossible to track us down.”

Kathy patted Sadie’s arm. “Guillermo won’t take his revenge on Josh that far, if at all. There’s been no sign of him since he left. Really, sending Josh with you is just a precaution, not that he gave us much choice,” she added with a wink. “Don’t worry about us. We’ll be fine.”

They sounded confident enough, but Josh had five younger siblings. Could Sadie ever forgive herself if something happened to them? Could Peter and Kathy?

Could Josh?

A deep ache filled her chest, not from her broken ribs, not from holding up her neon green cast for so long, but from how many people she dragged into her nightmare life.

Guillermo dragged. Josh was always quick to insist everything that happened was because of Sadie’s ex and not her. Even though she dated Guillermo

in the first place. Even though she ignored the FBI's warnings about him. And even though she went back to Guillermo when Josh told her not to. Twice.

And now the number caught in the middle kept climbing. Josh's parents. His siblings. Her mom and Damien. Kevin and Amy. Trevor. Sam. Sam's parents. All twenty-five members of Sam's family for that matter, since it was their beautiful cabin Guillermo burned to the ground.

And what about Special Agent Stephen Dubois?

A lump lodged itself in her throat. A week ago Agent Madsen's former partner followed Sadie to Guillermo's cabin. That was the night of the four shots. What would Dubois' wife and two kids say if they knew Sadie stayed on the couch when she heard the gunshots, trying to save herself instead of finding a phone to call for help? Still Guillermo's fault?

Josh's mom squeezed her hand. "Are you sure you're okay sweetie?"

Sadie's lungs began to constrict. She closed her eyes and took in a slow breath. "Why don't you come with us? All of you."

"We'll be fine. I promise."

Everyone else around the room echoed Kathy's sentiments, but none of them had been in the back of Guillermo's dark Mercedes and looked into his black, murderous eyes. None of them heard his dark laugh when he promised to hunt Josh down like it was a game. No one felt Guillermo's fist in their face or his gun to their forehead. They didn't know. They didn't.

But she did.

If Guillermo knew every word and every step she took from Christmas until the fire, who was to say he didn't know theirs?

She looked at the tiled floor as hot tears pool behind her eyes. The only one who looked as scared as Sadie felt was Amy. That's when Sadie understood. Amy wasn't mad about the past. She was terrified of the future, the future Sadie created the second she stumbled into Sam's truck.

Her fault again.

Sadie rubbed her eyes, feeling a migraine coming back. The headaches never went away for long. She didn't reach for the nurse's button, though. She was done with the pain medication and accompanying fog. Instead she checked the

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clock again, wondering what was taking Josh so long. They had to leave for their flight soon. Josh's family and friends were waiting to say goodbye. Time was slipping away.

Kathy patted her hand. "Stop worrying about us and just take care of yourself and that son of mine. I'm worried Josh will be so wrapped up in making sure you're safe, he'll forget to eat and—"

Agent Madsen leapt to his feet. "When? Where? How?!" he shouted into his phone. He listened a second and then swore over and over again.

Before Sadie could think, Deputy Croff whipped out her phone and punched several numbers.

Madsen shook his head as he received more of the report. Then he whirled and glared at Sadie across the room.

"The funeral," Sadie breathed.

Her pulse pounded. Something happened at the funeral.

"And Mr. Young?" Madsen asked. "Was he hurt?"

Sadie's heart stopped.

Kathy grabbed her hand.

"Josh," they whispered together.

Madsen slammed the phone down. "Everybody out. Now!"



CHAPTER 3

“Go! Get up!” Harrison yelled at Josh.

Agents and deputies sprang out of the woodwork, shouting orders at Josh and the others. Damien scrambled to get Marcela to her feet. Yet Josh couldn’t move.

Two men in suits had the redhead on the ground. Her face was smashed against the floor as they cuffed her ten feet from Josh. Her wide, frightened eyes locked on him. He had to look away. Past her another five feet, a small gun lay silently on the church floor.

“Get up! Go!” Harrison shouted, kicking Josh to get him to move.

Josh finally came to his senses. He went to push himself up, but pain shot up his right arm. Wincing, he stumbled to his feet.

“What about Marcela?” he huffed. “Where is she being taken?”

“GO!” Harrison yelled.

Josh’s feet obeyed. He trotted outside the church in the direction he was ordered.

A black SUV screeched up to the curb. Harrison opened the back door and shoved Josh in. Josh landed on the same bad arm. He yelped in pain and barely righted himself when the driver tore out of the church parking lot.

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As they sped down the highway, Josh cradled his arm, trying to make sense of what happened. What had the redhead said? Something about the color of his beard? A guy outside?

Josh froze.

Guillermo?

No. It couldn't be. Guillermo was too smart to show up to Sadie's funeral. He sent someone else. The redhead? But she sat quietly beside Josh the whole service. If she was working for Guillermo, why wait until the end to...to... He didn't even know what she intended to do.

"Was the gun loaded?" Josh asked, breathing heavily.

Harrison answered without turning. "Yes."

Josh felt sick. Marcela. Damien. Everyone. *What have I done?* His heart pounded as the adrenaline coursed through his veins. His arm was pulsing, too. Ignoring both, he rubbed his bleach-blond beard that hadn't done a thing to hide him.

Not good. Not good!

Harrison glared at him. "Just so you understand, Mr. Young, no Witness Security Program participant who followed guidelines—strictly followed guidelines—has ever been harmed while under the active protection of the U.S. Marshals."

"I know." Josh was counting on that. With the FBI's mounting case against Guillermo, Josh wasn't the only one anxious to keep Sadie alive. Two government agencies were protecting them now. He just wasn't sure which one did what moving forward—or who jumped that girl at the church. FBI or Marshals. Probably both.

"Then I expect you to trust my judgment!" Harrison snapped. "I have a job to do, and I suggest you let me do it!"

"Right. Sorry." Josh forced himself to breathe slowly. "I'll do exactly as you say from now on."

"You better believe you will!"

The SUV grew chilly and silent. Snow and sleet whizzed past.

Josh was a rules guy. He always had been. What possessed him to stay behind with Marcela? He knew better. He knew better!

He almost took off his suit coat to examine his throbbing arm but then thought better of it. Burning or not, broken or not, his arm didn't matter. Nothing mattered except keeping Sadie and her family safe.

Harrison shot him another dark look. "What's wrong with your arm?"

Josh stopped massaging it. "Nothing."

"You better believe it's nothing, not compared to what could have happened. Let that little nothing of yours become your new reminder. No more mistakes."

He got it now. He didn't need a reminder. His knee was bouncing again, only he didn't stop it.

"What were you thinking?" Harrison muttered. "Why not draw a target on your forehead?"

Josh didn't answer. Sadie was going to kill him—so were his parents. Madsen, too. He wasn't sure how much protection a boyfriend of a key witness normally received, but he was more than grateful Agent Madsen acted like Josh was as important to the case as Sadie was. He wasn't. But without Harrison back there...

Not good!

It was another minute before his mind slowed enough to register the green sign above. He jerked up. "Where are we going? We just passed the exit."

"To the airport," Harrison said. "We're getting you out of Montana right now."

"But..." Josh watched Kalispell fade from view. His parents. Kevin, Trevor, Sam. No contact. No goodbyes.

He rubbed his right arm and focused on the pain. It was time to stop thinking of himself and start playing by the rules. No more mistakes.

"Okay," he said.

With a last glance out the window, he said a silent goodbye.

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Breathe.

That's what people were supposed to do in extreme situations. Just breathe. Keep calm. Keep the brain oxygenated. Sadie's cracked ribs wouldn't allow it. So she stared at Agent Madsen who cleared her room to break the news.

"We have the woman in custody now," Madsen explained. "But she's claiming to be a friend of yours. I need you to identify her before you get on the plane. It won't take long. With any luck you'll still make the four o'clock flight."

"Josh?" Sadie asked, blinking slower and slower.

"He's fine. The deputies intercepted before anything happened. Can you walk, or do you need a wheelchair?"

Her body forced a first breath. It exploded against her lungs painfully. Almost as painful as knowing Josh was attacked by a woman with a gun. Almost as painful as knowing Guillermo found Josh.

"And if they hadn't intercepted?" she whispered.

"Mr. Young is fine. He's headed for the airport, and everything will go as planned. But you won't make it unless—"

"What?" Sadie looked up. "Is he being followed? If Guillermo knew he was at the funeral, then he knows what Josh looks like now...that he was there...and...and...He knows everything! And he tried to...to..." Her breaths came in short bursts, punching against each and every rib. Guillermo was back. Back and hunting Josh.

I wish I had known then what I know now, Guillermo sneered from her memories. I would have finished your new boyfriend off then. Although—Sadie remembered the second his dark smile turned evil—I shall truly enjoy the game of hunting him down.

"They've switched cars and changed routes twice," Madsen said. "He's completely safe and will make your scheduled flight, but unless we get moving, you won't. So..." Madsen scanned her empty room, stopping on the only other person left. "Deputy Croff, get Miss Dawson a wheelchair."

Sadie picked up her crutches and hoisted herself to standing. She couldn't breathe, but she could walk. Sort of. After all the cast signing, her leg ached like the rest of her body. She'd come to terms with her injuries. She'd brought every one of them on herself. But Josh...

She pushed herself down the long hallway behind Deputy Croff and Agent Madsen. If identifying that woman meant helping Josh or stopping Guillermo, then so be it.

That's all she and Madsen did lately. Identify people in Guillermo's inner circle. Though she'd known Guillermo for two years, they only dated the last three months. Yet she had twenty-two names and counting already. People from his dinner parties, people he introduced her to at the New Year's Eve party. Judges. Attorneys. A few mayors. All suspected to be on his payroll. The most important ones she identified were the two men with Guillermo the night she heard the four shots. Agent Dubois' murderers.

This woman is just another face, she told herself. *Number twenty-three*. Only this time it was personal. This one went after Josh.

Madsen drove them down the icy streets of Kalispell to a standard-looking office building. They drove behind a solid fence and past three security guards. Deputy Croff helped Sadie out of the car and into the two-story building.

Only then did Sadie realize she wouldn't be identifying this woman from a picture like the others. She was being taken to the actual person. To Josh's attacker.

The three moved in silence down a long white hallway and into a dark room. The only light in the room shone through a large window. On the other side of the window was a man in a dark suit and a redhead. They sat at a small, white table, as white as the rest of the room.

Sadie took in the size of the redhead and shuddered. Unlike huge Mr. Ugly that Guillermo left her with in the cabin, this woman was tiny, almost Sadie's size, looking smaller as she hunched over.

"I swear it!" the redhead said, half sobbing, half yelling at the officer. "I don't know anything!"

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Sadie stayed in the furthest corner of the dark room, away from the window and out of sight. Though the redhead had her back to them, Sadie couldn't risk anyone knowing she was alive. *Especially* someone working for Guillermo.

"Do you want to sit?" Deputy Croff asked her. "There's a chair by Agent Madsen." When Sadie shook her head, Croff added softly, "It's a one-way mirror. She can't see or hear us."

"Oh." Sadie still wasn't thrilled to approach the glass. But if she was going to identify the redhead, she needed a better view. Still not proficient with crutches, she pushed her way up to Agent Madsen and eased herself into the chair.

"Look," the redhead said, "This man just came up to me and asked me to give that David guy a card from his mom. That's it, I swear. You have to believe me. I didn't do anything wrong!"

"Do you recognize her?" Madsen asked Sadie softly.

Though the redhead was mostly faced away, Sadie didn't recognize her. She would have remembered that bright shade of hair anywhere. The red was very distinct. Almost orange. Like the fire in Sam's cabin.

"No. I've never seen her before," Sadie said. "Not even at the ski lodge."

Madsen nodded. "Another of Guillermo's pawns. Seems he has an endless supply these days."

Sadie thought about a different pawn of Guillermo's, an FBI agent from Madsen's own group. When Sadie went missing a week ago, Agent Griffin supposedly checked out Sam's cabin inside and out at Josh's request. Griffin reported nothing. He also claimed innocence when questioned. Guillermo trained them well.

She hugged herself and tried to focus on what was being said.

"And what did this man outside of the church tell you to do?" the interrogator asked.

The redhead wiped her nose. "He told me to give a note to that David guy, the one I sat next to at the funeral."

"Why didn't he do it himself?"

"I don't know!" she cried. "The guy was wearing a mechanic's uniform. He was all dirty and oily like he just left work. He wasn't dressed for a funeral. He

said his mom was sick and asked me if I could go back and give the note to David. That's it!"

Sadie looked at Agent Madsen. The redhead sounded convincing enough. The fake mechanic was Guillermo's employee, not the redhead. It was easy to believe her. Madsen was stone-faced. Croff, too. Both looked unsure. Then Sadie remembered the loaded gun and shook her head. The redhead was just a great actor. Like Guillermo.

Madsen leaned forward and spoke into a small microphone. The interrogator received the message in his ear and repeated it. "Why did you comment on David's beard?"

The redhead grabbed a handful of tissues and blew her nose. "The guy said it was important because Sadie always wanted him to grow a beard or something. The guy wanted David to know she would have liked it."

The interrogator shot her look of disbelief.

"Look," she said defensively, "I know it sounds crazy, but I just came from my friend's funeral for crying out loud! I wasn't thinking straight!"

Friend? Sadie shuddered at the word. She'd never seen the girl.

"What about the gun?" Madsen asked in the microphone.

When the officer asked, the redhead shot to her feet. "I didn't know it was in my purse, I swear! I've never even held a gun before. Check for fingerprints or whatever, you'll know I'm telling the truth. Except"—she swore loudly—"I pulled it out when I reached for the note, but that's the only time I touched it. And that's only because I was surprised to see it in there. Wait!" Her head jerked up. "Oh no! Wait! You don't think I was going to...No! I wouldn't hurt that David guy. I don't even know him. Please! You have to believe me! I was just trying to help out that mechanic. That's all. I loved Sadie. I didn't mean to do anything." She buried her face in her hands. "I loved Sadie."

Sadie's skin crawled with the familiarity of her words. "I've never seen her before," she insisted, reminding herself as much as Croff and Madsen.

Deputy Croff looked at Agent Madsen. "What do you think?" she asked.

Madsen sighed. "I think it's time to get Miss Dawson on a plane."

Croff nodded. "Are you ready, Sadie?"

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Sadie's eyes stayed on the redhead. The anger started to bleed through the shock. She'd never seen that woman before. How dare she say otherwise? How dare she add more pain to Sadie's family? To Josh's?

Sadie ran through the information, trying to find anything to convict her. A woman with a note. A mechanic. A gun. Nothing made sense. Of course, nothing ever did these days.

"What did the card say?" she asked Madsen.

"Yours is next," Madsen quoted. "Better start planning."

Sadie repeated the words, coming up blank. "What does it mean?"

"The redhead insists she doesn't know, but with a little pressure she might remember. She might also agree to identify the man who gave her that note if she thinks it will save her hide, although I can already guess it will be a dead end."

"Do you have a lawyer?" the officer asked the redhead.

She grabbed more tissues. "No. Do I need one?"

"Yes. You're definitely going to need one. Let's go."

The woman stood and turned, giving them their first clear look at her face.

Sadie's hands flew to her mouth. "Chalyce?"

Madsen whipped around. "You know her?"

"High school," Sadie choked.

Agent Madsen grabbed the microphone. "Bring her forward!" he yelled loud enough the redhead turned to see where his voice came from. The officer pushed the woman in front of the mirror where she froze, realizing for the first time she was being watched.

"Miss Dawson," Madsen said clear and slow. "Do you know this woman?"

Sadie squeezed her eyes shut, summoning the courage to identify one more face, just one. This one was flushed and tear-stained, but she already knew. Though she hadn't seen her in eight years and though her bright red hair was nothing like the dark shade it once had been, she had no doubt.

"That's Chalyce Krauss," she said. "My senior-year locker partner."

The world spun out of control. Guillermo was using her high school friends now—people he'd never met—to hunt the enemy. To kill Josh.

Who else?

Rebecca Belliston

When?

Suddenly Guillermo's note hit her. *Yours is next.* Josh's funeral.

Better start planning.

"I can't do this anymore," she whispered. She grabbed her crutches and stumbled out the door.



End of sample. Thank you for reading a selection of *Augustina*, by Rebecca Belliston. Enjoyed the preview?

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