



## *The Eve*

“You’re making a mistake!”

The woman stopped midstride, realizing it should be *them* leaving, not her. “Get out of my room!” she yelled.

Neither agent moved.

“There’s a substantial reward involved,” the younger one said. “You’ll be able to pay off all those school loans.”

*They know about . . .*

Her skin began to crawl. What else did the FBI know about her? She felt researched . . . violated . . . but not coerced. She absolutely refused to feel coerced. “You think I’d betray him for . . . for money!”

“A large chunk of—”

The senior agent held up a hand, cutting off his younger counterpart. “Just be our eyes and ears tonight, Miss Dawson. That’s all we’re asking.”

“And I’m asking you to leave before I call the cops!”

“We are the cops,” he pointed out dryly.

Trembling with fury, she grabbed her purse and stormed out of her room. She didn’t dare glance over her shoulder as she raced down the

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hallway, nearly tripping in her high heels. Thankfully, Guillermo's assistant was already waiting for her as she burst through the front doors of the ski lodge. He quickly pulled open the back door of the gleaming Mercedes.

"Is everything all right, Señorita Dawson?" he asked.

"Yes. Fine. Just get me out of here," she replied, sliding in. "Fast!"

As Salvador brought the luxury engine to a soft purr, she pressed her hands against her stomach. Even as they pulled out of the crowded parking lot, her eyes stayed glued on the ski lodge, fully expecting the two agents to break out at any second.

So much for a Merry Christmas.

"Are you sufficiently warm, señorita?" Guillermo's assistant asked.

She glanced at her bare shoulders and cursed. In all the tumult, she'd forgotten her ruby red wrap that matched the rest of her Christmas ensemble. There was no way she was going back for it now. "I'm warm enough," she replied, leaning into the preheated leather. "I'm just anxious to get to the party."

"Guillermo is anxious to see you as well." Salvador's gaze lifted to the rearview mirror. "And if I might say so, you look . . . wow."

She laughed in spite of herself. With the ski lodge fading—and hopefully the last hour as well—she was already feeling much better. "Let's hope so, Salvador. Let's hope."



"A toast!" Guillermo called. "To the most beautiful woman in the world, *mi hermosa*."

It wasn't until her mom elbowed her that she realized everyone was looking at her. Her cheeks colored, knowing her thoughts hadn't been on her boyfriend or his exaggerated compliment, but instead on the thirty faces around the room. Guillermo's world was lavish, jovial, exciting. And safe. Definitely safe. *The FBI is wrong*, she told herself for the hundredth

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time. She quickly held up her Argentine wine high with the rest of the room.

Guillermo smiled at her first, then at his guests. “And to her mother. Also a lovely woman who . . .”

His words faded out as her gaze lingered on each face around the room. Two mayors. A few judges. A couple of attorneys with their wives. She shook away her thoughts, refusing to let those agents ruin her Christmas. *It's lies. All of it!*

Guillermo slipped an arm around her waist and pulled her into his side. She studied his waves of cobalt hair, his confident, million-dollar smile, and his black, gentle eyes. It simply couldn't be true.

He held something toward her. “And now, my Christmas present for you.”

She stared at his gift. It was a box, a black velvet box. Her breath caught—a *ring?*?—though she dismissed the notion almost immediately. The box was too large, too elongated to be a ring. Still, her heart sped up as she gently pried it open.

“Do you like it?” Guillermo asked softly.

She looked up at him and then back at her gift. How could she not? It was a necklace, pure platinum, and every inch around were delicate diamonds. It would have been rude to count, but her bulging eyes did anyway. Twelve diamonds. The necklace wasn't haughty or overdone, but . . . *diamonds!* She hardly dare touch it.

“May I?”

Guillermo grinned as he moved behind her. When he finished with the clasp, he turned and kissed her in front of his thirty distinguished visitors. They responded with grand applause. And with his kiss, the last of her doubt melted away. She didn't deserve him, she never would, but somehow he thought she did.

“*Feliz Navidad, hermosa,*” he whispered in her ear.

She smiled. “Merry Christmas, *amor.*”

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Long after the guests had left or retired to their rooms, she sat in front of a full-length mirror admiring her necklace. Her mom had made a comment before leaving, saying she had a “new sparkle” about her. Looking in the mirror, she couldn’t see anything different in her face, but her cheeks were tired from smiling. That had to be a good sign.

Leaning forward, she admired her other Christmas gift. A black sweater, hand-knit, gracefully fit around her petite frame, complimenting the diamond necklace perfectly. Her mother had devoted every spare moment since Thanksgiving trying to finish it. Guillermo said the black brought out her dark eyes. She wasn’t sure if her eyes stood out any more now than when she’d been wearing her ruby red dress earlier, but all she knew was that she felt happy. And if things went how she hoped and dreamed, this would be only the first of many perfect Christmases. That brought another smile to her lips.

“Augustina?”

Her head came up. “I’m up here, mi amor,” she called back.

“AUGUSTINA!”

She whirled at the sound of alarm in Guillermo’s voice. She left the mirror and flew through his spacious cabin to meet him and Salvador at the bottom of the spiral staircase. The sight of the two of them, eyes blazing, brought her up short. “What, amor? What is it?”

Guillermo took a menacing step toward her. “What have you done!” he yelled in her face.

Stunned, she fell back. In the two years she had known Guillermo, he’d never, *ever*, raised his voice. “What?” she asked half as loud. “What is it?”

He lunged, hand flashing, and in one powerful move, ripped off the necklace. She cried out as the diamonds tore across her skin. “How could you do this to me!” he roared. He turned and hurled the necklace against the wall.

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She stared at the small heap. “What?” her voice quivered, near to tears. “What did I do?”

Suddenly he was searching through a ruby red purse—hers—and in an instant, he shoved something in her face. Frightened and confused, she squinted, trying to make out the small object. It was tiny, the size of a watch battery, only square. She was sure she’d never seen it before. “I don’t know wh—”

Her stomach lurched. *The agents!* she breathed.

“What did you do!” he roared again.

She watched Guillermo’s fist form around the tiny object, the FBI’s listening device. She could see the fury in his eyes, yet she still refused to believe what was coming. *Not Guillermo*, she thought. *Not the man that I—*

Bright lights exploded. She spiraled backward, hit the hard tile, and everything went black.



# CHAPTER 1

## *The Dawn*

When she first awoke, she wasn't sure her eyes had opened. A thick blackness surrounded her. She blinked, verifying that indeed her eyes were open, just seeing nothing. The darkness was suffocating and began to drag her in. She battled against it, but suddenly couldn't find air to breathe. Frantic, she thrashed her head. The blackness moved. Feeling a small glimpse of freedom, she shoved a heavy blanket from her face and took in several deep gulps of air.

Her eyes flew through her semidark surroundings, trying to make sense of them. Log walls. A large, dark window. Both unfamiliar. From the bumps pushing painfully into her shoulder, she discerned she was on a couch, albeit a lumpy one.

She struggled to come up with an explanation, but her mind was covered in a thick haze of its own. It was heavy. Sluggish. *Where am I?* she asked, as she blinked slower and slower. *The ski lodge?* A few more blinks. *Too small. A cabin?* Then something registered. Her left eye was only opening halfway with each blink. Not only that, but it throbbed and pulsed painfully.

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Something wasn't right . . .

Her eye. The dark, unfamiliar cabin. Her thoughts sped up, remembering the party. The listening device. Guillermo's rage. In a torrent, her memories flooded back. Waking up in the locked room. The storm. The mountain. The truck. All of it rushed back in crystal clear memories. And with the memories came the terror, the blinding terror that sent her running into the blizzard in the first place. She'd only meant to stop a second in the truck, long enough to warm up, but now . . .

*Where am I?* she asked, heart pounding.

Yet there was an even more terrifying question. *Who found me?* The sound of her pursuers was like wolves hunting for prey, chasing her through that storm.

*"You're as good as dead!"*

She didn't know who had yelled it—FBI or Guillermo—nor had she stopped to find out. All that mattered was that she'd lost them. At least . . . she thought she had. Now that she was lying in a dark cabin, she was no longer certain. One thing she was certain of, though, was that she had to escape. Fast.

She rolled onto her side and choked back a scream. Pain. Everywhere.

She quickly ran through her damaged parts. Arms, legs, back: all stiff from trudging through the snow. Her stomach was in knots, her shoulder felt out of place—there was no memory for that one—and then there was her face . . . She reached for her left eye, wincing before touching it. She hadn't seen the damage yet, but she could feel it. The memory of Guillermo's blinding rage threatened to swallow her whole, but she shoved it aside to finish her assessment. Her head. Hot. Feverish. And pounding like it never had before.

Pretty bleak, but it could've been worse. She could be in a snowbank with a hole in her head. Or worse, still locked up at Guillermo's. Yes, she convinced herself, *it could be a lot worse*. With that knowledge, she ignored all the pain and dizziness, pushed the heavy blanket off, and sat up.

The dark silence was shattered by the sound of an animal scurrying

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across the floor. Before she could flinch, she was nose to nose with a giant dog, breathing its horrible breath in her face. The dog panted heavily, waiting for her to acknowledge its presence. She didn't move. Didn't breathe.

*Don't bark, she begged silently. Please . . . don't . . . bark.*

As if to spite her, the dog started barking. Her eyes searched the darkness, desperate for an exit, but it was so dark—so ominously dark—and the dog grew louder by the second.

A door cracked open behind her.

She froze, wondering if her life were over. Guillermo was going to attack her again. Or it was the FBI here to arrest her. It didn't matter who was behind that door, she knew it was over. Falling back on the lumpy couch, she smothered herself with the blanket.

"Rocky!" a man whispered urgently. "Come!"

The barking dog left its post. She braced herself for an assault, or at the very least, a barrage of questions from her unknown captor, but the only sound was of the dog's paws clipping across a wooden floor, followed by a door shutting quietly behind both of them.

In the returning silence, she raced through the only options she could find: fight or flight.

So far she'd taken the flight option, breaking out of Guillermo's cabin and running as far and as fast as her frozen body could take her, but was she any better off? She wasn't tied up—or locked up either. But her legs felt thirty pounds heavier than normal. They would be slow. Too slow. *Fight, then?* Even as the idea entered her head she knew it was ridiculous. Physical strength wasn't a quality she possessed even at peak health. And now that she was beaten, bruised, exhausted, and starting what felt like a full-blown fever, there was no way she'd be able to take on anyone, man or beast. *Run it is*, she groaned. *Again.*

Her eyes threatened to spill, but she gritted her teeth. This wasn't the time to fall apart. Instead she convinced herself that she really did have to plunge back into a blinding, freezing blizzard. *I'm stronger than I think. I'm*

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*stronger than I think.* And on the third time of chanting it to herself, she began to move. Up. Slowly. All she needed was a door—preferably a back one. With ears pricked for the slightest noise, she rolled up to a sitting position. When all stayed quiet, she scanned the rest of the dark room. It was a large family room of sorts with a kitchen disappearing in the distance. Definitely a cabin. Possibly the one by the truck she'd taken refuge in.

Then she spotted it. A glass door to the outside.

Feeling every damaged part, she pushed herself to stand up. Her head spun, her stomach as well, but she planted her feet, pinched the rim of her nose, and when the room stopped spinning, began to creep toward that door. Inch by painful inch, she slid across the cold, wooden floor, knowing that taking five minutes to escape was better than alerting the beast in the next room and never escaping at all.

Halfway there, she realized her feet were cold—her *bare* feet. She stopped. Between that and the dog, she might as well have been tied up. No one would think she was crazy enough to escape without shoes. Not in knee-deep snow. Little did they know she was beyond crazy . . .

. . . she was surviving.

As she neared the door, she spotted a large pile of something. *Boots!* Even more amazing was that her shoes—her incredibly thin, and probably still soaking wet shoes—were lying on top. Without a thought, she bypassed them for the nearest pair of boots. They were ridiculously big and awkward on her feet, but awkward she could deal with. It was frozen that wasn't much fun.

A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. She was going to escape again. And this time so easily! The feeling of elation surged adrenaline through her aching muscles.

As she reached for the door handle, a small, green light caught her eye. It was shining from a box that resembled an alarm system. *No!* she corrected, *It is an alarm system!* She read and reread the green screen, trying to make it untrue. Five letters. One blaring message:

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She whirled around, scrambling for another answer. Windows. Stairs. But each option produced the same ending. The alarm would sound, the dog would outrun her, whoever was holding her captive would come, and then . . . The end of life as she knew it.

Whatever hatred she felt for the dog grew tenfold. Without it, she might have made it, outrun her new captor before help could arrive, but now she was a prisoner. Again.

The defeat was paralyzing. Tears ran down her hot cheeks. Time rewound to the bottom of that spiral staircase, Guillermo's fist cocked, black eyes blazing, and suddenly nothing mattered anymore. All she wanted was sleep.

She followed her path back to the couch, taking half the time, and collapsed into a heap right back where she'd started. The emotions clouding her mind were such that it took a minute lying on that uncomfortable couch before she remembered the awkward boots. The tears that had stopped, started again, but there was no way she was making another long journey. Not for a stupid pair of boots. She yanked them off, pulled the blanket over her head, and welcomed the unconsciousness that quickly followed.

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

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