

SACRED TRUST SERIES

**BANISHING**

**FELIPE**

BY CARRIE DAWS

# BANISHING FELIPE

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1. Christian fiction—contemporary. 2. Christian fiction—suspense.

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*Let the Lord lead you and trust him to help.*

Psalm 37:5

Contemporary English Version

# CHAPTER ONE

THURSDAY, JUNE 9<sup>TH</sup>

Dark clouds loomed on the horizon, but Detective Samuel Campos ignored them. He leaned back against his wife's dark blue minivan, watching fifteen-year-old Benjamin Torres practice tricks on his bike. After six weeks of working to infiltrate Ben's world, Sam wasn't sure how much progress he'd actually made. His younger brother, twelve-year-old José, seemed more open to Sam's efforts, but then José was the kind of kid who wore his heart on his sleeve. Ben's seemed encased in concrete.

Ben circled around the front of the van, lining his bike up parallel to the parking lines near Sam. He lifted the front wheel and twisted it to the side before somehow popping his back wheel off the ground and to his right, away from the van.

"Are you trying to hop over the line?"

"Yeah," Ben said as he circled back around and stopped near Sam. "It's a side hop. Kinda like a bunny hop but tougher to master."

"The bunny hop is where you jump over an obstacle in front of you, like a curb or parking block, right?"

"Sure. It's good for going over railroad tracks or potholes you can't go around because of traffic or whatever. Guys also use it on mountain trails to jump tree

roots or start down an incline. It's good in parkour to get up on platforms."

"And what about that quick stop move you were doing? The one where your back tire comes up off the pavement."

Ben stood and popped the back tire up, balancing on the bike with ease. "This?"

Sam nodded, tempted to go looking for a bike for himself this weekend.

"It's called an endo. It's the first step in learning the endo turn, which is good for tight corners and trail switchbacks."

Last time Sam and his family had gone camping in the mountains of western North Carolina, they'd walked a trail that cut back on itself, zigzagging across the mountain, making the pathway easier for those who weren't used to hiking steep inclines. He couldn't imagine taking a bike on such a route, but then, he wasn't sure he could pull an endo without tossing himself over the handlebars either. Maybe purchasing a bike wasn't such a great idea.

As Ben took off around the van, the school bell rang, signaling the end of the day for the elementary students. Sam walked to the back of the van and raised the lift gate, and Ben lifted his bike into the back without being asked. He was a good kid in spite of not having a father in his life and being raised on the rougher side of town. His mom Rosa had a lot to be proud of in both her boys.

Ben opened the front passenger door and stood tall, using the inside of the van to boost himself above the other adults and cars filling the parking lot. It wasn't long before Sam spotted his own two kids walking in their direction, eight-year-old Sophia chatting with both José and her ten-

year-old brother, Alex.

The moment Sophia spotted Ben, she squealed loud enough for Sam to hear her over the throng of people. He watched her check for moving cars before she darted to them, running straight for Ben.

“Ben!”

Sam saw pure adoration in her expression and a pang of jealousy mixed with pride filled his heart. Not so long ago, Sam was the only one who got that look from her, but then again, Ben needed love and open acceptance exactly like Sophia offered him. Perhaps this was good practice for down the road when she would eventually find a spouse and move out from under Sam’s watchful protection.

As Sophia peppered Ben with questions about his last week of school, Alex and José finally crossed over to the van.

“Hey, guys! How was your final day?”

Alex yanked on the driver’s side sliding door. “I’m so glad that’s over with. No more tests and homework for three whole months!”

“Three whole months, huh?” Sam indulged his son’s dramatic moment.

“No more Mrs. Smithy!” José said as he climbed into the third row of the van.

“Or Mr. Reynolds in gym class!”

Sam climbed into the driver’s seat, watching Ben close the passenger sliding door for Sophia before sitting down and closing his own door. “Hate to tell you this, guys, but I’m pretty sure Mr. Reynolds will still be here in the fall when you return.”

“Not for me!” José pumped his fist in the air. “I’m

moving on to the middle school.”

Alex groaned. “I don’t want to come back here by myself.”

“I’ll still be with you, Alex,” Sophia said.

“Sister’s don’t count,” he retorted.

“Then why do brothers?”

Her quick reply made Sam smile. He loved that she considered Ben and José as her brothers, even if it weren’t literal biological truth.

“Brothers are different,” Alex replied, “especially if you choose ’em.”

“That’s not true, is it, Daddy?”

Sam took a deep breath before answering. He needed to reassure Sophia without crushing Alex, but he also wanted to tighten the bond among all four of the kids. “Family is family. Whether God unites you by blood or brings you together otherwise, the work He does when he combines your heart with another—well, it’s special and should be cherished. Protected. Cultivated.”

José leaned toward the middle of the back seat. “Cultivated? What’s that?”

“You know that little plant Ms. Julie gave your mamá?” Sam’s wife was a gift-giver by nature, so when she had found out that Rosa liked pansies, she’d been sure to pick a small purple and yellow one to grace Rosa’s low-rent apartment.

“Yeah. She babies that thing. Won’t let us near it.”

“I bet she is careful to make sure it gets some water every so often, maybe a bit of sunlight. She keeps it off the floor where you boys or your pup might knock it over.”

“Chica’s not going to mess with no flower,” said José.

“No, she probably wouldn’t, but your mamá isn’t going to take that chance. She protects that little flower so that it won’t get harmed. And she makes sure she gives it all it needs so that it will grow and continue to bloom. That’s what it means to cultivate.”

“Our friendships need water?”

Sam giggled at Sophia’s concrete thinking. “Not exactly, Sophie-girl, although some time together at the splash pad this summer probably wouldn’t hurt!”

Another squeal from Sophia, thankfully at a somewhat lower pitch. She was slowly getting better at using her inside voice when they were confined inside a vehicle.

Sam turned right onto Main Street and headed to the edge of the downtown area where the Allenby Family Restaurant sat beside the local grocery store. Rosa was working today, expecting Sam to bring all the kids by for ice cream to celebrate the beginning of summer break.

As Sam parked and the kids piled out, all four of them chatted easily together.

“Oh, yeah!” Alex grabbed José’s arm as he looked back at Sam. “Can we plan a cookout for later this month? When the Sox and Rangers play?”

Alex and José loved baseball, though they preferred different teams. Any game was typically used as an excuse to get together, but they’d been looking forward to their favorites facing off.

“I can’t imagine that will be a problem, although you’d better clear it through both your moms. And, if the Red Sox are playing and I’m grilling, you’d better invite Miss Cassandra too.”

“And Mr. Kelan?” Sophia’s eyes filled with hope.

Sam worked often with Cassandra McCarthy, the Silver Heights Deputy Fire Marshal. Originally from upstate New York, she and her two brothers closely followed all things BoSox. Kelan, on the other hand, a soldier assigned to Womack Army Medical Center on Ft. Bragg and volunteer paramedic for one of the local fire departments, liked a good game, but he didn't particularly care who won. Which meant that Sophia could monopolize his attention away from his beloved Cassandra for a bit, talking about her favorite subjects at the moment: Alice in Wonderland and Willy Wonka.

"If he's not working, I'm sure he'd love it," Sam replied.

Sophia squealed in delight as they approached the door to the Allenby. Sam reached out for the door just as it swung open. A man stepped out, wearing a grimy, dark blue jumpsuit, not paying Sam any attention as he responded to another man behind him.

"Miami is next ..." The man faced forward and came to a quick stop. "Sorry 'bout that." He nodded at Sam.

"Not a problem," Sam said.

The man paused, taking in all the kids around Sam. "After school treat?" He smiled, but something about it caught Sam's attention. The smile seemed off somehow, although Sam couldn't say why.

Sam nodded, putting his arm around José, who had suddenly leaned into Sam's side. "Celebrating the end of the school year."

"Peach cobbler today," the man said. "Best in town."

"That it is." Sam held the door for the man behind the guy in the jumpsuit, then motioned the kids to enter the

restaurant in front of him.

As Sophia rushed to wrap her arms around Rosa's waist, Sam looked back and watched the man cross to an old model Ford truck. Without any delay, the man got in and pulled out, driving right in front of the Allenby on his way toward Main Street. The writing on the side of the truck was faded and tough to read, but Sam made out the words Samson Salvage.

Still unsure why the exchange bothered him, he turned back to join the kids at a back table where Rosa had pulled out a bucket of ice cream to go with their cobbler. Ben, José, and Alex were crammed in together on one side of the booth, and José and Alex watched Rosa dip their treat.

But Ben's eyes were affixed on Sam, taking in his every move.

# CHAPTER TWO

TUESDAY, JUNE 14<sup>TH</sup>

Six boxes of old files sat on Sam's floor, which wouldn't be that big of a deal if his office was large enough to also give him a walkway through the boxes. His only way out of here today, according to his sergeant, was to clear some out.

Some detectives hated combing through cold case files looking for anything that might have been missed or modern technology that might bring new clues to light. Sam wouldn't say it was his favorite job, but it did rank higher than working on his regular paperwork. And being able to dig out from his desk and go home was a significant bonus.

Although nothing caught his attention in many of the case files, he had found one where a forward-thinking detective thought he had DNA evidence, but the technology to read a sample degraded by weather wasn't yet available to him. He'd preserved the stained shirt hoping that a future detective would close the case. DNA technology had advanced tremendously in the seventeen years since the case first opened, so Sam was confident the lab could finally be helpful.

Sam grabbed the next file and flipped it open. Marjorie Whitshire, a missing grandmother. He remembered hearing

about this case from 2005. A local mail carrier disappeared without a trace. Her car was still at her house, no sign of forced entry, and her breakfast sat half-eaten on the table. Her daughter had reported her missing after one of Marjorie's friends at work had called to say she'd missed two days in a row—almost unheard of, as Marjorie loved what she did. But best they could find, no one had talked to her since the afternoon three days before her daughter alerted authorities.

He finished reading through the thin file and glanced at the crime scene photos. The home looked neat except for the one chair at the kitchen table that was knocked over onto its side. The nearby counter was tidy with only a coffee maker and one other small item sitting on it. A padlock, maybe, although its shape was odd. Snapshots of the living room and the inside of her car looked similar in her minimalistic lifestyle.

Crime scene technicians had dusted the main living areas, doors, and her car, but they only found prints matching Marjorie, her daughter, and a sister who lived locally. A hair had been found on the counter near the lock, but the DNA profile wasn't a match to anything in the system. Detectives had cleared the family and couldn't find any enemies or disgruntled customers. Sam set the file to the side. He could always have the DNA run through the system again to see if they got a hit.

The next file included a couple of gruesome photographs. A singlewide manufactured home caught fire and burned with a sixteen-year-old female caught inside. Neighbors could hear her screaming, but two men who tried to rescue her before the firemen showed up said the

door had been padlocked from the outside. One ran to get bolt cutters while the other tried to break out a window, but the fire raged hottest at the points of entry.

The entire structure was consumed in less than two minutes after neighbors noticed the smoke. The detective noted that the fire inspector had traced the fire to the living room and suspected accelerant around the windows.

Sam looked at the date on the file. April 16, 1998. He had been a senior in high school, focused on graduation, getting into the Police Academy, and convincing Julie to marry him after she graduated. Still, this girl would have been at the high school with him and Julie. Maybe in Julie's class.

*Keep reading, Samu.*

Sam recognized the still quiet voice and the nickname only his family used. God wanted him to see something in this file. Flipping back to the photos, he found an arrest photo of the victim. Pia Ventura looked two or three years younger than her age indicated. Her long brown hair parted on the side partially covered an established bruise near her left eye. She lived with her father, who was more absent than present and at the time of the fire had been sitting in the Cumberland County jail charged with assault and disturbing the peace. Sounded like a good, old-fashioned bar fight, and Sam wondered if he drank at home and ever took out his frustration on his daughter. Was he the source of the black eye?

Buried in another folder, Sam found Pia's arrest record. Possession, unlawful use of a firearm, damaging or removing signs, trespass. All Level 2 and 3 misdemeanors. Assuming she didn't have any adults in her life helping her

to make wise choices, the charges told Sam that she and her friends were out having fun without considering the consequences of their actions. A very different crowd of friends than his mamá allowed around him. Maybe this is why he didn't remember her, but why didn't he remember word of the fire? Surely talk of one of their classmates dying in a fire would have made the rounds at school.

Then Sam saw two charges that sent his brain into overdrive: Concealment of merchandise. North Carolina's term for shoplifting. Her entire file was petty crimes that got her noticed by the system but not so much that she got into any real trouble. Sam looked for more information on the fire, but came up empty.

*Felipe.*

The word was almost audible, and Sam's breath hitched. Could Pia's case have anything to do with Felipe? Or was he hearing things, wanting to make the leap between her house fire and the unsolved fires from the last couple of years? This case was almost two decades old. Could Felipe have been operating in Silver Heights under their radar for all that time?

Sam sat back in his chair, thinking critically about all he knew. The recent fires had been at abandoned buildings, not residences. And no one had gotten hurt, at least that they knew about. Unless this fire with Pia so many years ago was also part of whatever was going on now. If it was, and if the occasional person was killed—was that accidental or purposeful? Retaliation, or a warning?

Even without the noted suspicion of accelerant, the speed of the fire alerted Sam to its possibility. He scoured the file again for any record that it had been tested. He

didn't see any lab results but wondered if Cassandra would be able to put her hands on the original reports from the fire marshal back then.

Looking back to the detective's notes, he saw the investigating officer was Detective William Lawson. Sam felt his heart speed up. His boss had been in charge of the case. And Sam would bet that the man remembered it like he'd just walked the crime scene last week.

Sam typed a quick email to Cassandra, sending her the details of the case and asking her to look up whatever she could put her hands on. Sam dared to hope that her boss, Chief, also investigated the fire. If so, that would give him two investigators with first hand knowledge, two seasoned veterans who didn't like unsolved cases.

Sam picked up his phone, hoping the detective in charge of the local teen cases was at his desk. The man picked up on the second ring.

"Phillips."

"Eddie, how long have you been running across the name Felipe?"

"Ever since I've been here, five years now. But I know it goes back farther than that. Why?"

"I'm looking at a cold case from '98. I might be jumping to conclusions, but ..."

Sam hesitated, trying to decipher his motives and intent. Was he making unfounded assumptions, creating suspicion where none logically existed?

*Keep pressing forward, Samu.*

"But what, Sam?"

"You got time to look this over and tell me what you think? I have no concrete evidence to point to, but I think

Felipe might be the reason a sixteen-year-old girl is dead.”

The pause coming through the phone echoed in Sam’s ear. Eddie was not a believer, but he’d been watching Sam closely over the last month, beginning to ask an occasional probing question.

Finally, Eddie answered. “You gonna tell me this is another one of your God things?”

“I think so.” Sam wanted to say more, but he held back. So many of the men he worked with needed fewer words, not more.

Eddie’s heavy sigh came across the phone line. “All right. Bring it to me. I’ll skim through and see if anything jumps out at me.”

Sam pumped his fist in the air, not realizing before how much he wanted Eddie’s help. He stood, then remember what surrounded him. “Umm, Ed. Can you possibly come to me? I’ve got something of a fire hazard currently blocking my path today.”

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