

# TAKING HIS CONFESSION

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CLOTH & STONE - BOOK 1 - SAMPLE

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## ABOUT THIS BOOK

**Can a man of the cloth and a creature of stone save a troubled teen caught in the crosshairs of a ruthless drug lord?**

Gideon Fawkes longs to meet the handsome young deacon who teaches at St. Anthony's Boys Academy. There's just one problem. Gideon is a gargoyle, and he's pretty sure Deacon Cruz only dates humans.

Cordero Cruz knows a lot about forgiveness. It's the cornerstone of his calling. Too bad he can never offer it to himself. Because of him, people died, and there's no redemption for that kind of mistake.

But a lack of humanity and a heart filled with guilt are nothing compared to a young man's life. When a merciless criminal threatens Cordero and one of his students, Gideon will have to risk more than his stony hide to protect them. Cordero must do the unthinkable to prove he's deserving of the gargoyle turned guardian angel. But when their road to hell is paved with good intentions, they must learn only trust and redemption can pave the way for love.



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**CORDERO**

**T**he Church was supposed to be a happy place, a place of comfort, security, a sanctuary from the evils of the world. But that was an illusion generated in the fleeting minutes of daily mass. Most of the day it was an empty shell, silent and dark. The darkness clung to the walls within St. Anthony's, thick and impenetrable. The few novenas burning beneath the Blessed Virgin did nothing to dispel the shadows. It was a living darkness. Something breathed within it. Something with eyes.

Perhaps it was only my imagination. Or perhaps it was the rats. Ancient buildings always had rats, and only some of them were furry.

The largest one was standing in the vestibule just beyond the sanctuary. Dane Stevens leaned against the heavy oak door that led to the street. A shaft of sunlight crossed over his shoulder illuminating enough of the space to make out the maroon and grey striped sweater on his companion. The same sweater every student at St. Anthony of Padua loved to complain about wearing. Unless Stevens was sending his lackeys back to high school, this wasn't one of his, and if I had anything to do with it, this student never would be.

Echoes from the eaves of the church distorted the conversation, but whatever they were talking about couldn't lead to anything good.

I straightened my shoulders and rubbed the front of my roman collar. Deacons weren't required to wear it, but something about it was reassuring. It reminded me of why I was here, and what I was training to become. Somehow the collar helped me to play the part. Like any second-rate actor, I needed my costume.

Stevens made no indication that he saw me approach, but the young man nearly jumped out of his shoes.

Myles Martin was the school's starting running back. He was also an "A" student. Not that it mattered to the alumnae association. All they cared about was another state championship. Nevermind, that the school's mission was to educate young men, most of whom were on some kind of financial aid: scholarships, grants, alternative tuition plans, and even vouchers. It was something to be proud of. Every year St. Anthony's turned out 120 formerly at-risk young men ready for college and ready to lead. Most came from neighborhoods where their public school peers would likely never graduate, or worse, end up working for the likes of Dane Stevens.

As an educator, I had a duty to every student, but Myles was always on the top of my radar. I had known his older brother, and I owed it to Myles to make sure he didn't end up on that path.

"Myles, I just wanted to thank you for your help with the readings today." It was a terrible opening, but it was something. "But aren't you supposed to be on your way to the science lab?"

Myles' mouth dropped open. "Uh, I, Uh."

He glanced over his shoulder at Stevens, and then back at me. His eyes widened.

Stevens stepped back, opening the door further. The sudden brightness burned my eyes. After a few seconds the empty street emerged from the glow.

"Deacon Cruz is right, young man. I'd talk football all day if I could. Better get to class and not let me corrupt you." Contempt bubbled behind his eyes, but his face remained perfectly smooth.

My stomach clenched. Despite the early-September heat, Stevens wore a three-piece pinstripe suit, and I was sure the man had at least

one more piece hidden under that coat. Only a monster would bring a gun into a church. Someone should really do something about him.

I wanted to step between them, but my feet wouldn't let me. "Myles, let me walk you to class."

Myles shot one more nervous glance at Stevens before turning back toward the church and away from the street. It was a small victory.

We opened the double doors that connected the church to the school and crossed into another world. The thick air and dark shadows vanished into pristine white cinderblock and gleaming terrazzo. The school was old, but it was clean and safe.

I was really not the best person to have this talk with Myles, and I didn't know exactly how to start the conversation, so I just blurted something out. "I know you know who that man is. So why were you talking to him?"

Myles' shoulders tightened. "We were just talking about football."

Perhaps they were, but that wasn't the whole truth. "Lying is a sin, Myles."

He rolled his eyes at me. "Look, it's really not that big a deal."

All kids had what was and wasn't a big deal completely backward. "Are you sure about that?"

Myles suddenly found something on the floor very interesting.

"It's just a favor, and it ain't even for Stevens. Technically." He shrugged. "My mom really needs the money, Deacon C."

Just a favor? Which meant nothing above board. And if it wasn't for Stevens, then it was for one of his dealers, which could be even worse. I wanted to tell him that he was the kid, and it was his job to study hard and get good grades, not to take care of his mom's problems. I wanted to, but that wasn't the way things were here. Kids didn't get to be kids. It wasn't fair.

"But you already have a job."

Myles shrugged. "I had to cut back my hours for practice."

And he couldn't quit football. He was here on scholarship. If the world was right, the money would be for academic scholarships, not for tossing around a ball. Schools were supposed to be part of the solution,

but here we were reinforcing the idea that this kid's value had nothing to do with his brain. How could anyone fight against that?

"I know things are tough right now, but that kind of help isn't help, and if you get in trouble, you will lose your scholarship, and probably get expelled permanently."

Those really weren't separate consequences. If Myles lost his scholarship, he wouldn't be back. He'd be one more poor kid who wasted his chance. One more reason why the rich thought charity just turned people into leeches.

"I'm sorry, but I have to. Mom can't take more hours because she doesn't have me to watch the twins after school."

And daycare costs more than she would make.

"But you told Coach that you had it worked out." I really shouldn't be badgering him, but they had a plan. Myles was a kid. He shouldn't be in this position.

Myles groaned. "We did, and then the car broke."

My feet stuck to the floor. *God, why can't you just give these kids a break?* "Look, I know it's hard, but there has to be another way."

Myles clenched his fists and looked me square in the eye. "Then, you tell me how I'm supposed to fix the car?"

WHEN I GOT BACK to the rectory, all I wanted to do was have a nice quiet cup of coffee and a cigarette. Then I remembered I quit smoking a year ago. There was coffee, but no quiet. The sound of a thousand hammers clattered down from the roof. The number was probably closer to twenty, but the metallic clang of steel against copper multiplied through the ancient walls. I slammed my hand against the counter.

This was ridiculous. I knew the Church was supposed to be open to all, that Jesus dined with sinners and saints, but that didn't mean we needed to welcome the Devil into our flock. God could only save those who wanted to be saved. Dane Stevens wasn't here for salvation. He was here to recruit. Father Joe had to know that.

"So why doesn't he do anything about it?"

I heard nothing but the ceaseless hammering from above. I wasn't



actually expecting the voice of God. He always insisted on making us work for our answers, but just once it might be nice to get a freebie. Maybe an angel of justice with a flaming sword? I glanced up at the ceiling and waited, giving God just a few more seconds, but no, just more hammering. So much for “Ask and ye shall receive.”

After a cold cup of coffee, I headed down the hall to knock on Father Joe’s door. It opened.

The man standing behind it was a little shorter than me, maybe five-eight. He had thick white hair and bushy eyebrows to match. All he needed was the beard, and he’d be a perfect Santa. He leaned heavily on his cane.

“Ah, Cordero,” he said, “Come on in. I have some notes on your homily. Although I have to say I’m impressed.”

The tightness I hadn’t realized I was holding evaporated from my chest. I had completely forgotten about that. I’m such an ass. I was coming here in a huff, and Father Joe’s first thought was to compliment my ministry.

He walked back into the room, his cane making a scratch-thump cadence on the wood floor. It was the perfect counter-rhythm to the hammers above.

“Actually, I wanted to talk to you about Dane Stevens.”

Father Joe looked up from his desk and out the room’s leaded glass windows. The view was a shapeless blur of greens and yellows.

“Oh?” He played with some of the papers on his desk. “What about him?”

Maybe that he was a snake. That he was recruiting kids from our school to do God only knew what. That you needed to let him know he wasn’t welcome here.

“I’m worried about having a known drug dealer in our congregation. What kind of message does it send to the students?”

Father Joe shifted a blank page from one side of his desk to the other. “It sends the message that God forgives.”

He couldn’t mean that. “Forgiveness requires penance. This man regrets nothing. Or are you going to tell me that he shows up to confession on his way home from a drug deal?”

Hammering filled the pause. “You know I can’t and won’t discuss that. However, I will remind you that it is not our place to judge Dane Stevens or anyone else who walks into this building.”

“What about our students? Don’t we have a responsibility to protect them?”

Father Joe’s eyes narrowed. “Do you have any idea what you are talking about? How many shootings have happened on this campus?”

The answer was five. Most were in the early 2000’s when LTV closed down, sending this working class neighborhood into poverty. The last one was eight years ago.

“And when was the last one in this neighborhood?” he continued.

The gas station just two blocks away was robbed last week.

“And when was the last time a car got broken into on campus?”

I didn’t actually know. There hadn’t been any break-ins in the two years I’d been here.

“You’re telling me that Dane Stevens, the drug lord, is responsible for the lack of crime on campus?”

That couldn’t be right.

Father Joe pushed his glasses up. “Do I really need to? Haven’t you seen the hundred dollar bills in the collection plate? Do you not hear the hammering? Who do you think is paying for the new roof? Dane has respect for the Church. He’s been a blessing here.”

The floor seemed to shift under my feet. How could he defend this man?

“But his money is tainted. He’s the very seed of corruption. How can you just turn a blind eye to this?”

“And what am I supposed to do? Tell him he isn’t wanted? Risk making him angry? If we get lucky he will just withdraw his protection and decide not to punish us. And then what? Are we just supposed to let the roof collapse on our heads? Do we let the soup kitchen close?”

“We can’t just pretend everything is fine. The students aren’t dumb. They know who Stevens is.”

“They probably also know that Dane is the reason why their school is safe. Most of these kids know someone in Dane’s...organization. They know that St. Anthony’s is off limits.”

It still didn't sit well with me. This was too close to a deal with the Devil. I couldn't justify doing evil in the name of good.

"You're asking me to sell my soul."

Father Joe shook his head. "I'm asking you to put this in God's hands."

Meaning there was nothing I could do and nothing Father Joe would do. Stevens had this entire school under his thumb. We were trapped. All I could do was follow Father Joe's command and, maybe, pray for a hero.



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## GIDEON

If someone ever asked me how to turn a gargoyle feral, I had the perfect plan. Just install a giant ticking clock across the street from him, then have the second hand on that hulking timepiece randomly malfunction—circling and circling while the other two hands remained frozen on its smug face.

Across the street from my rooftop perch, a forty-year-old bank clock taunted me. The tick-tick-tick of the second hand echoed in my head, but the reported time stayed at 7:02, like it had all day.

I glared at the clock. Really hard. Strain-my-brain hard.

Not a damn thing happened.

Why am I not allowed to melt things with my eyeballs, God?

I don't know if he actually heard me or not. As near as I can tell, all the prayers in a fifty-mile radius were being beamed straight into my brain. So maybe God was on vacation and heaven's switchboard was connecting everyone to me instead.

If so, humanity was fucked because after almost ninety years of this gargoyle existence, I was an expert at ignoring anything that came through on the prayer line. I don't think anyone would hold it against me.

Humanity was such a seething ball of wants and needs. They asked for miracles, for peace, for happiness. They begged for jobs, for clothes, for car repairs, for food to feed their children.

Not that I really blamed them for asking for help.

The world was a mess, had been for as long as I could remember, but some days—like today, when my patience was shot—their prayers overwhelmed me. That was when the voices jumbled together so badly I couldn't separate the man praying for a job and the guy begging for tonight's winning lottery numbers.

*Heavenly Father, please forgive me.*

A woman's pleading voice clawed down the chalkboard in my brain. Before she could elaborate on her need for forgiveness, I forcefully ejected her. I had no interest in hearing what she had done. Begging God for forgiveness was at the top of my "Most Irritating Things People Pray For" list.

I mean, I knew that the Bible said you were supposed to ask God for forgiveness for your sins, but it was a waste of knee time in my opinion.

We cheated, we lied, we stole, we hurt the people we loved. And then we asked God for forgiveness.

Why ask God? It didn't change what we did. It was never going to right the wrong, never going to reverse the outcome. So, why ask Him? Just to feel better about ourselves?

People said, "I prostrated myself before the Lord, and he offered me absolution."

Did He? Did you actually hear Him?

See, in the past, I've asked God to forgive me. Many times. I begged every day for two thousand days straight, multiple times a day. Wanna hear what He said to me?

Nothing.

God doesn't really deal in forgiveness. He deals in punishment. And if we stepped out of line, the boom got lowered. Fine. Maybe we deserved it and maybe we didn't, but none of that mattered because there wasn't a damn thing we could do about it.

I would know.

I've been cursed to loom on the roof of a church for the past eighty-nine years—eighty-nine years, nine months, and thirteen days to be exact. That gave a fella a lot of time to think about punishment and to come to terms with certain situations.

I used to be a man. Now, I was a stone gargoyle. All things considered, it could have been a lot worse. I could have been burning in a fiery pit of eternal damnation. Instead I was forced to watch over the streets of Cleveland and reflect upon the consequences of my actions, presumably, for the rest of my unnatural life. Or until someone took a wrecking ball to this place.

Judging by the hammering that had gone on all day over on the other side of the roof, that wasn't going to happen anytime soon.

I glared at the clock's frozen face, and then at the darkening horizon. Just a few more minutes and I could stretch my muscles and—  
*Lord, it's me Cordero.*

In a cacophony of voices, there was only one that cut through the noise and my apathy. One person's prayers who stole one hundred percent of my attention.

Cordero Cruz, a young deacon at the very church I perched upon.

I first noticed him when he was a teenager. His prayer started like many others, "Lord, I know I am not worthy of your forgiveness."

That phrase was normally followed very quickly by a "but" and then a long list of reasons why the person deserved absolution from the Almighty. They were charitable. They were kind. They made their bed every day.

Because nothing earned a person a ticket to hell like dirty bed linens.

However, from Cordero there was never a "but." He left himself out of his prayers. Instead, he asked God to help others, like his family. A teenaged Cordero hadn't been worried about his own eternal soul. He'd been worried about his grandmother's. She'd just passed on, and he prayed for her to have a place at God's side.

Over the years, I listened for him and with every passing day, my admiration for him grew. He wasn't perfect. He was a bit of a scallywag.

He reminded me of myself, except he was kind, not bitter. There were times when I thought about revealing myself to him. If anyone could look kindly upon a cursed man, it was Cordero. Worry for his safety nixed that idea, though.

What if God didn't take kindly to me making a friend? What if He decided to give me a companion instead? The thought of Cordero ending up as another gargoyle on this roof was abhorrent. I couldn't chance it. So, I decided to keep him safe by staying away from him.

I tuned in more closely to hear who Cordero was praying for tonight.

*I ask that you watch over Myles. He is walking down a path that leads to terrible danger. He's gotten involved with Dane Stevens. Everywhere I turn, there is Stevens. He's even been giving money to the church. I spoke to Father Joe today and asked him to cut ties with the criminal, but he refused. I understand that the church needs money, but not this way. Am I supposed to enjoy getting a patched roof while a young kid's life is destroyed? I can't do that. Stevens has to be stopped. Myles needs a hero. I know that I'm supposed to leave my problems in Your hands, but I'm not sure I can do that either.*

If my lungs weren't already cast in stone, that prayer would have left me breathless.

Being completely honest, my reasons for staying away from Cordero, for keeping him safe, were more than a little selfish. In my dark, lonely world, Cordero was a bright light. His prayers always seemed to come when I was at my most impatient, my most reckless. I knew that he had no idea I existed, and it was the height of narcissism to think that he did anything for my benefit, but it didn't stop me from being grateful for him. He was a voice of sanity in my insane world.

So I was more than a little worried about his prayer. Hanging from the roof all day, I heard a lot about what went on in the neighborhood, not just from prayers, but from the mouths of the boys who went to school next door. Dane Stevens was spoken of in whispers of warning.

It sounded like Cordero meant to challenge Stevens. I needed—I mean, the world needed Cordero alive. But insinuating myself into his life would be a deadly mistake.



My attention bounced to the darkening sky. With Fall upon us, sunset came quicker, one or two minutes at a time. Right now, I had ten hours of solitary confinement in my stony prison. I felt every single one of them as I waited for my release into the general population. I hoped tonight wasn't the night God forgot about me or misplaced the key to my cell.

The slam of the church's heavy front doors startled me, and I nearly fell off the roof. My muscles had unlocked, coming alive but achingly stiff, as I pitched forward. "Thank you," I whispered, partly in sarcasm and partly in true gratitude.

I peeked down at the street with as little movement as possible in case whoever came out happened to look up. Cordero's tousled dark hair filled my gaze. Speak of the angel himself. His fists were clenched, shoulders hunched around his ears and leading his body in a march that would put an avenging angel to shame.

What are you doing? Where are you going? It wasn't my business, not really, but something about Cordero's attitude plus his prayer left me with a bad feeling. I've been on this ledge long enough to know that this could end with the police coming to inform Father Joe that he was now down one deacon.

Was I willing to let that happen?

I already knew the answer to that.

For the moment, I'd follow Cordero. With no time to stretch, my launch into the sky was clumsy, but no one was there to watch my ungainly flapping. Grace wasn't important. All that mattered was keeping Cordero out of trouble.

If it were anyone but Cordero I would have made a different choice. What does that say about me? Nothing I didn't already know.

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OPERATION SAVE CORDERO turned out to be a trip to the grocery store.

All that foot stomping coming out of the church had made Cordero look like he was a man on a mission, but apparently I had worried for

nothing. Unless Cordero was planning on egging Stevens' house or throwing toilet paper at his trees, there was probably no need for me here.

For the next twenty minutes, I lounged on the roof while the grocery store serenaded me with easy-listening music and beeping cash registers every time the automatic doors whooshed open. Below me, people scurried to and fro, pushing their squeaky-wheeled shopping carts filled with bags of food. About half of them dumped their buggies willy nilly all over the lot, leaving them to clog up handicapped spaces or drift into parked cars.

Suddenly, I remembered why it had been a while since I'd people-watched. People were annoying, and it was time to blow this popsicle stand. I could do some fly-bys at the zoo. I hadn't pissed the monkeys off in weeks. That would be infinitely more fun than watching some toddler racing across the pavement.

Whoa. Wait a minute. Where were that kid's parents?

There was a man and a woman by a minivan. They had an empty car seat. Bet she'd wiggled free and climbed out and they were too busy arguing to notice their daughter darting away. They also didn't see the pickup truck bajaing over the parking lot speed bumps towards her.

"Slow down, damn it." I edged forward, eyes glued to the little girl, and it was like I stepped into the past.

Another little girl with blond hair raced into danger—

No. I pulled sharply back and pressed against the roof. Nothing about the past could change what was happening now. This was none of my business.

Unless this was a sign.

I looked around, like I'd suddenly see a burning bush or some heavenly voice would boom down from above. Nope. Not an angel in sight. The only thing with wings around here was me.

But that didn't mean I was willing to stand by and see another child suffer a horrible death. I crouched and prepared to dive, but the little girl screeched to a halt. She stared at the ground for a long moment, then squatted down.

What was she looking at?

She scratched at the pavement, then gripped something and pulled. A long pink string dangled from her tiny fingers. Ugh. Gum. She opened her mouth.

“Don’t do it,” I whispered.

The urge to grab her was even greater now, but somehow I held back. My control was herculean, especially when she jammed the gum into her mouth and started chewing. If I had a working digestive system, I would have thrown up in my mouth. Instead, I just shuddered and pressed back into the shadows.

A sign. Since when did I believe in signs? Ninety years of silence and suddenly God was going to send me a sign? I had almost given myself away for a toddler scavenging germ-ridden gum in a parking lot.

This was the real reason I stopped people-watching. There were a million people in this world who needed rescue from one thing or another, and they were perfectly capable of saving themselves. I was a goddamn gargoyle, not an angel.

“Yeah, right.” I scoffed.

A mythological creature skulked in the darkness right above them, and they never bothered to look up. They couldn’t even keep their children from eating gum off the ground. Humanity was doomed. It was good that I wasn’t getting involved with them. It was good that I was minding my own business.

In fact, what the hell was I even doing here? Cordero was a big boy. Surely, he could walk himself home without getting killed. He didn’t need an animated block of rock playing bodyguard.

I gave the sky a dirty look.

He had God on his side.

As if summoned by my righteous fury, the blessed deacon, head full of dark curls, exited the grocery store. He nodded politely to people as he passed, his hands too weighted down with plastic bags to wave or do the priestly handshake. No one seemed to mind that he didn’t pause for small talk.

I certainly didn’t. Because, even though I thought Cordero’s face was gorgeous, I could probably write a poem about his bubble butt. Several stanzas long. Might even be able to put it to music.

A black muscle car rolled up alongside Cordero. It's revving engine and blasting stereo were in a competition to see which could shatter all the nearby windows first. Why did some people think everyone wanted to listen to their music?

The passenger of the car yelled over all the racket, "Hey, Father. Stocking up on the blood of Christ?"

His friends laughed as I rolled my eyes. Obviously, this jackass didn't know Cordero or he wouldn't have called him that. Cordero didn't bother to correct him. He didn't answer at all or even look at the man. He just went into murderous stomp mode again.

The taunting smile dropped from Jackass' face. "I asked you a question, Father."

Cordero ignored the man again, but every line in his body screamed I-wanna-kick-your-ass.

Shit.

From where Cordero was, I knew he couldn't see the man's lap, but I had a perfect line of sight. Jackass had a handgun resting on his thigh. The metal glinted under the pole lights. When he wrapped his fingers around the grip, my world went silent and my heart stopped cold. Then, I heard him rack the slide and chamber a round.

God, I really wasn't daring you when I said that Cordero could walk home alone without getting killed. Why do You hate me so much?

I locked my gaze on Cordero's shoulders, and for the second time that night, I prepared for a dive into the grocery store parking lot.

A car horn blared and the black car slammed on its brakes, throwing Jackass into the dash and his gun onto the floorboard.

I drew back and looked up at the sky. "Okay. Now, You're just fucking with me."

The driver of the pickup from earlier jumped out, waving his arms. "That's a stop sign, asshole!"

Jiminy Crickets, that guy needed to find a parking spot before he either killed someone or ended up a chalk outline on the blacktop.

"You sure 'bout that?" The driver of the potential drive-by vehicle flashed his gun at the loudmouth. Apparently, he hadn't dropped his.

While the truck driver scurried back into his vehicle and burned

rubber out of the parking lot, Cordero made his getaway. His strides were quicker and more spirited than a flapper. The grocery bags swung in time to the staccato beat of his hasty withdrawal out of the parking lot and across the street.

Jackass and the bully boys roared across the parking lot and exited in the opposite direction of Cordero. Breathing a giant sigh of relief, I launched into the sky, determined to get the hell out of there and forget about my humanitarian mission once and for all.

Unsurprisingly—because I was an idiot—I found myself still tracking Cordero from high above, while also keeping an eye on the car full of armed men. The car made a right turn and headed around the block. Two more turns like that would put them on the same street as Cordero. That wasn't a coincidence. They weren't going to let his snub go.

“Hell and blast it.”

Cold sweat wicked off my body as quickly as it left my pores. My thick claws dug into my palm. Cordero was in real danger now.

How was I going to fix this?

The seething, low-grade anger that constantly burned in my belly became an inferno.

Why was I even getting involved in this?

Just because I liked Cordero? Because I felt some kind of kinship with him because he seemed to share my views on forgiveness? But how did I know he actually shared them?

I didn't. I'd just assumed that he felt the same since he never asked God to forgive him for anything. Maybe he didn't think he had anything to be forgiven for. Maybe he thought he was Mr. Perfect or something.

Not without reason, mind you, because damn...Cordero was one beautiful man with an ass like—

For fuck's sake. Focus, Gideon.

You know what, it didn't matter what Cordero believed or didn't believe. The fact remained that he was a good man who didn't deserve to die because some bastard with a gun felt disrespected, or had a point to prove, or just wanted to burn down the world one victim at a time.

I looked up into the cloudless sky and spoke to the brightest star I saw. “I’m going to save him. You hear me? And I dare you to punish me for it.”

The star took on a kind of a reddish hue.

“Okay, I didn’t really mean dare. I just meant maybe try to see my side of things and look the other way this one time.”

The star winked at me.

“You really are a jerk.”

Whatever. It was just a star, and I was an idiot gargoyle.

In for a penny. In for a pound.

Operation Rescue Cordero was back on.

But while I’d been stargazing, the black muscle car had made another right and was now stopped at a light, about to turn towards Cordero. Their loud, angry music punched the air, thumping inside my eardrums louder than my own thundering heartbeat.

Cordero seemed to be almost running towards his death now. It was only a coincidence the church was in the same direction.

I streaked across the sky, then curled my wings around my body and dropped, like the giant boulder I was, between two office buildings. A few feet above the ground, I unfurled my wings and bobbed in the air for a second before touching down with a soft thud.

Cardboard boxes and loose sheets of paper whipped up in a tiny tornado before scattering down the alley behind me. The streetlights didn’t fully penetrate the darkness here which probably explained the sharp stench of urine. I shuddered to think what I might be stepping in right now, but I didn’t have time to worry about it.

Cordero would pass by any second and if I missed him...

Tires squealed.

“No!” I shouted. Cordero came into view and I grabbed his shoulders, yanking him into the alley. He struggled against me until I banded my arms around him and locked him against my chest. His clean, woody scent filled my nostrils. “Oh, wow. You smell so good.”

Shit. Did I actually say that out loud? All my fiery rage left my belly, raced up my chest, and settled onto my cheeks.

Cordero froze and croaked out. “You’re hurting my ribs.”

The fog of lust swirling inside my head cleared instantly. “Sorry.” I loosened my grip, but put my hand over his mouth. “Just be quiet for a minute.”

I waited for Cordero’s would-be murderers to drive by and in those moments, I forgot the reason he was in my arms. All I knew was that for the first time in eighty-nine years, I was touching another man’s warm, tight body. He felt fantastic.

Time passed.

The black car never did.

A siren wailed somewhere down the street. Perhaps the pickup driver hadn’t gotten the last word in that parking lot dust up.

Or maybe God had set me up.

Again.

I glared up at the sky to see if that star was twinkling—a sure sign that the Almighty was laughing at me. It was nowhere to be found.

Two sets of footprints in the sand, my ass.

I sighed and dropped my hand off Cordero’s mouth. How the hell was I going to get out of this mess?

“Listen, I’m not sure what you’re looking for, but I’m a deacon at the church. If it’s money you want, you grabbed the wrong person,” Cordero said.

His voice was calm and clear, but the tension in his body told me he was preparing to take action. I needed to do something before he turned around and saw what I was. Since I already had him, though, I might as well carry out my original objective.

That penny and pound was feeling more like a million bucks.

“Listen, pal,” I said, the gravelly sound of my voice revealing just how much I liked having him pressed against me. “You need to forget about ousting Dane Stevens from the church. If you don’t, you’ll regret it. Do you understand me, Cordero Cruz?”

The groceries dropped from Cordero’s hands. Glass broke and something wet and cold splattered against my feet. Surprised, I jumped back, releasing my hold. Cordero whipped around to face me. I froze.

“Who do you think—” His green eyes widened, shining bright even in the dim alley. “What...what are you?”

Time to scam.

He backed away from me, making the sign of the cross as he went. “A demon?”

“Ah, horsefeathers.” I lunged up into the star-filled sky and streaked toward my perch.



## ABOUT PJ FRIEL


PJ writes steamy, action-packed paranormal romance novels starring both gay and heterosexual characters. She delves into themes such as fate and overcoming the past. Her characters are strong, capable, and complex regardless of gender, and her world-building is a little...intense.

When PJ isn't terrorizing the highways of Ohio in her red, mid-life crisis sports car (appropriately named Scarlett) or crunching numbers in Excel spreadsheets, she's writing or playing with her grandpuppies.

She is currently single and lives with her son and his two dogs, who all think they're the boss of her. (They totally are.)

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## ABOUT SAFFRON HART

Saffron grew up in rural Ohio, but she considers Cleveland her hometown. She lives there with her husband, daughter and their dog.

During the 9-5 she orchestrates murder-for-hire for people who want to rid their homes of unwanted guests and other pests.

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