

Point of Origin
A Samantha Church Mystery
By Betta Ferrendelli
[Chapters 1-3]

Chapter One

Thick flames climbed into the night sky.

Flashing lights from emergency vehicles produced a kaleidoscope of brilliant colors, made only more vibrant by the darkness.

Fire engines hummed over a collection of men's voices, who were shouting to each other in deep, hurried tones, as they pushed, pulled and pointed two-and-a-half-inch-thick hoses, fat and heavy with water everywhere, soaking everything in its path. A waterfall cascaded from one of the fire engines, drenching the rooftop of a single-family home. Despite the deluge, flames continued to shoot out the windows.

Television stations had their reporters and camera crews in place. Newspaper photographers combed the perimeter, armed with telephoto lenses. Police officers had gone house to house, banging on doors, telling people to evacuate in case firefighters could not contain the blaze. Neighbors had gathered on both sides of the street and watched the crews work. They observed in silence, their faces grim. Some had their arms crossed tightly against their bodies. Some had their cellphones out taking videos. Others pointed at the firefighter's

efforts. Another woman with two small boys stood away from the rest. She had her arms draped over their shoulders and had pulled them as close to her as she could. They were trying to look up at her as she spoke to a fireman.

“They’re going to be alright, right?” She stammered, barely able to form her words.
“You’re going to be able to get them out and they’ll be okay, right?”

The fireman removed his thick gloves and placed one hand lightly on her shoulder. He towered over her in his red helmet, heavy coat and rubber boots. “Ma’am, we’re doing everything as quickly and as safely as we can.”

Moments later, he stepped in front of her and the children to deliberately shield them as two EMTs a short distance away pushed a gurney inside a waiting ambulance. Within minutes, a second pair of EMTs emerged, pushing a gurney toward another ambulance.

The crowd of onlookers continued to gather on the street corners.

“Look!” someone, a woman, shouted, pointing vigorously toward the ambulance. “It’s one of the kids!”

Chapter Two

Samantha Church was sitting at her desk, the phone cradled against her shoulder, her hand poised above her Reporter's Notebook.

It was a few minutes before seven a.m., but Sam had already been in the newsroom at the *Grandview Perspective* for more than an hour. The staff photographer had called her on his way to work to tell her about the deadly fire.

She was talking to Susan Summers, the Grandview Fire Department's first female public information officer, or PIO. Her soft, steady voice spilled out of the phone, giving Sam more grim details about the tragedy that had gutted the single-family home and claimed two lives.

"It's the third one, just like the other two fires," Sam said. "It's the arsonist, again, isn't it, Susan."

It wasn't a question.

There was silence on the other end of the line until Susan said, "There's going to be an investigation, but, yes, we think so. I know you don't publish until Friday."

Sam's nose wrinkled as she looked at her desk calendar, two days away. It was one of the only disadvantages to working as a reporter for the *Grandview Perspective*, a large community weekly publication that covered Denver's west side and came out on Fridays. Often by the time the Friday Edition published, major stories that had happened earlier in the week were already old news. Reporters kept that in mind as they wrote the leads to their stories either for print or online. Instead of writing for the print edition, *A deadly fire destroyed a single-family home on Wednesday that claimed two lives*, they would write a two-day lead, *Investigators are still trying*

to determine what caused a deadly fire this week that destroyed a single-family home and claimed two lives.

“This is for the website as soon as I get it written,” Sam said into the phone.

“Right, I get it,” Susan said. “I’d like you not to write anything about it being arson, though, at least for the initial post.”

“That’s fine,” Sam said. “I can always update the story later today when you give me the okay.”

Of course, the reporter in Samantha Church wanted to publish what Susan had already told her, but as long as she wanted to keep Susan Summers as a source, the reporter in Samantha Church had to maintain her integrity and professionalism.

“Do you know who reported the fire?” Sam asked.

“It was the woman who lives there. She was screaming at the ER dispatcher that her child was still trapped in the house and her husband had gone back inside to get her.”

“Dear Lord. What made the child go back in there?”

“You’re not going to believe this, Sam, and it’s not for publication, at least for now, but she ran back in to get her pet turtle. I guess she sprinted into the house so fast her father didn’t have a chance to stop her before it was too late.”

“Oh, my God,” Sam said.

“Tell me about it,” Susan said. “Nothing about this part of my job is ever easy, especially when it involves children.”

“Can you release the names of the two victims who died in the fire?” Sam asked.

“Still waiting on confirmation.”

Sam nodded and scribbled 'still waiting' in her notebook. "Thanks, Susan, I'll go with 'the names of the two victims have not been released' for now. We'll do an initial post for the website within the hour. Our photographer was at the scene this morning."

"Yeah, I saw him," Susan said. "Knowing him, I'm sure he's got some good stuff."

"We can bet on that," Sam said. "I'll be in touch, and thanks, as always."

Sam grabbed her coffee cup, left her desk and started to walk through the newsroom. It was still empty, but it wouldn't be long before reporters would start to trickle in. Save for the occasional squelch from the police scanner, the quiet allowed her to hear cars rushing north and south on Wadsworth Boulevard, as the morning commute was beginning to build. She walked the length of the newsroom to the photographer's area, passing some chairs that had been neatly pushed into desks, and others that were scattered here and there.

Film photography was mostly a thing of the past for print media now. While darkrooms had been dismantled and converted to smaller work areas, almost nothing could erase the distinct smell of stop baths and fixers, pungent chemicals that were once commonly used to develop black and white film. In the digital age, photographers now worked on computers and large high-resolution monitors to clean up digital photos in Photoshop.

Sam found Jake Kelly standing in front of his computer, his left hand covering his mouse. She saw the smooth band of gold covering his ring finger.

"Mornin', Sam." He kept his eyes on the monitor, and Sam could see the glare from the screen reflecting a bluish tint in his black-rimmed glasses.

Jake had been the staff photographer at the *Perspective* going on five years. His award-winning work was always top in the state when it came to Colorado Press Association awards in their newspaper category. He had also won two national awards for his work, including for

breaking news photography, which was his specialty and his favorite. His goal, of course, was to someday win a Pulitzer Prize.

“You guys aren’t the only ones who have to edit and re-edit,” Jake often told Sam and the other reporters and editors. “We don’t just take a photo or two and call it a day.”

Photographers have to use techniques that involve on-site equipment adjustments, while others involved post-processing editing, he would tell them. “I have to put the work in just like you guys do when you write and rewrite your stories,” he would say, and then he would touch the tips of his fingers to his chest. “I have to use a variety of editing techniques to revise an image to look the way *I* want it, not the way it is.” Then he would use his fingers to count. “There’s the basics of exposure, then there’s tips that are helpful for low lighting, low resolution and resizing photos. You don’t just point the camera and shoot; there’s tips for focusing, too. Framing the subject and color tips are also just as important. You can write a great story, but if the photos suck? Who is gonna look at ’em? I want my photos to be compelling enough to help push that story over the top, to make someone really want to stop and read it.”

Sam couldn’t help thinking of one of Susan Summers’ only reproach when it came to Jake Kelly’s photography, that sometimes he got a little too personal with his camera lens, always zooming in on some of the grisliest aspects of a crime scene. Sam consistently came to his defense whenever Susan complained, telling her, “Yeah, he does like to get his lens right in there, but that’s what makes him so good.”

Jake was tall, with a wiry physique. He was thin enough that his Adam’s apple had an odd way of protruding when he spoke or swallowed. Though he was only thirty-three years old, his short-cropped hair had prematurely turned white before he hit twenty-five. His tony black-rimmed glasses made his white hair look more severe and aged him by another decade.

“Mind if I take a look,” Sam said, peeking over his shoulder.

He stepped aside, allowing her a better look at the screen, which revealed a horrid scene of broken windows and scorched wood.

“Looks bad.” Sam grimaced.

“It sure does,” Jake said. “Just like the other two fires before this one.”

“I can’t print that yet,” Sam said, her attention still captured by the images on the screen.

“That it’s arson?”

Sam nodded. “Susan wants me to hold off initially while they do a little more digging, but it’s the arsonist, same MO and everything.”

They looked at another half-dozen photos before Jake stopped on an image that showed the EMTs pushing one of the gurneys toward the ambulance.

“Look here.” He enlarged the photo until it nearly covered the screen, and pointed with a pen toward the back of the ambulance. “It’s the smaller of the two bundles, probably the kid.”

Sam drew in a breath and sighed. She stared at the small bundle wrapped in white a moment more before she lowered her head and stepped away from the screen.

“I’ll have a few photos for you whenever you’re ready,” Jake said.

“It won’t take long to write something, there’s not much to go on. Thanks, Jake.”

Sam went to the kitchen and started the coffee, forcing herself not to think about the sickening images she just saw on Jake’s monitor. She filled her cup with warm water and let it heat up in the microwave until it boiled. Nothing like a warm cup to keep coffee hot a little longer. With the overhead lights spilling in from the newsroom and enough natural light that filtered in through smaller, upper windows that lined the kitchen, she never bothered with the lights. She closed her eyes and rested against the sink; her arms folded. The semi-darkness, and

taking in the fresh scent of the dark roast brewing, allowed her a quiet moment to collect herself and her thoughts.

Sam's phone was ringing as she reached her desk. She quickly set her coffee down and snatched up the receiver before it could ring a fifth time. "Sam Church."

"I have the names of the victims."

"Oh, good," Sam said, reaching for her notebook. "Whenever you're ready."

"The father's name was Richard Brown, age forty-two. The little girl, this is a tough one." Susan paused, trying to find her voice. She cleared her throat. "She was only twelve. The girl's name was Carol—"

Sam cut her off. "You don't mean Carol Brown?"

"Yes, Carol Brown. Why? Do you know her?"

"She's April's classmate. They've been best friends since the moment they met in kindergarten."

Chapter Three

“Oh my God,” Susan said. “How are you going to tell her, Sam?”

Sam stared blankly into the newsroom; her index finger wrapped around the phone cord.

“I have no idea.”

Sam had taken April to school early yesterday morning, listening to her daughter chatter endlessly about the project she and Carol were working on for the annual science fair: How do different types of acid affect the rate of corrosion on steel?

“We’ll finish today, Mom, and then tomorrow we get to set everything up in the gym. That’ll be the fun part, and Friday is the fair.” The enthusiasm in April’s voice had been almost contagious and Sam couldn’t help smiling.

“Sam, you still there?” Susan’s voice brought Sam back to the newsroom; it was bustling with reporters now.

“Sorry, Susan, I was thinking about Carol, she spent the night last Friday, and her and April must have worked on their science project all day Saturday, testing their experiment. I brought April to school early yesterday, and it’s all she could talk about. Howard is bringing her to school for me this morning, and I don’t know what she’s going to do when Carol doesn’t come.”

“Well, I can tell you that the school, administration, the teachers, no one there can share anything about what’s happened unless they’ve already consulted with the family.” Susan spoke in a serious voice. “I think it’s pretty safe to say that hasn’t happened yet, Sam, but with the release of the names, social media and everything else, it probably won’t be much longer.”

Sam took a quick glance at the time on her computer. Almost nine a.m. Too late. April would already be in class, wondering, no doubt, where her friend was. She'd have to set up their science project on her own.

"Why this house? Do you know?" Sam asked.

"At the moment, no, still a mystery," Susan said.

"Anything else you can share with me about the fire?"

"One thing, but still not for print."

"What's that?"

"It's the arsonist again. They know it is."

"Not surprising," Sam said. "Based on point of origin?"

"Yes, but they're keeping it out of the public for now."

"Thanks, Susan, I appreciate all the info," Sam said in a grim voice that matched the darkness in her mood. "I'll update the website with their names."

Sam kept playing with the phone cord after she hung up, her mind racing like a stopwatch. She snatched up the receiver again and dialed the number to the Catholic school where April attended.

Sam centered the mouthpiece in front of her when the school secretary answered.

"Hi, it's Samantha Church. May I speak to the principal, please?"

"Yes, right away, Mrs. Church, please wait on the line. She'll be right with you."

Sam could tell from the way the secretary hurried through her words, the school already knew that Carol Brown, April's inseparable best friend, had perished in the fire.