

SACRED TRUST SERIES

**FINDING
BENJAMIN**

BY CARRIE DAWS

FINDING BENJAMIN

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

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“I will be found by you,” declares the Lord...

Jeremiah 29:14

New International Version

*If you do what the Lord wants,
he will make certain each step you take is sure.*

Psalm 3:23

Contemporary English Version

CHAPTER ONE

TUESDAY, APRIL 19

Only a blackened shell remained of the modular home set on a brick foundation. A quick-thinking neighbor had seen the blaze and awakened people on both sides. He went to work with the widow's hosepipe while the couple on the other side got theirs turned on, keeping the fire contained to the one house until firefighters arrived on the scene and got it under control. Detective Samuel Campos stood with the four neighbors in the front yard across the street, looking for answers from witnesses as Deputy Fire Marshal Cassandra McCarthy sought them in the ashes.

"Did anybody live here?" The yard was more weeds than grass, many of which reached past Sam's knees.

"Nah," a burly, dark-skinned man said. He crossed his arms over his bare chest. "Ain't no one been there for goin' on six months."

"Pretty sure they were getting foreclosed on," his wife replied. "I know Betsie—that's the woman that was livin' there—she got real sick like. Spent a buncha time in the hospital."

Sam nodded. The homes in this neighborhood were largely cared for well but were on the less expensive side of ownership. Folks commonly didn't have a lot of resources for emergencies like a health crisis. "Do you know if they

still stay around here?”

The widow living alone shook her head. “I think they moved back to family. Georgia maybe. I know she had a sister she liked to go visit two or three times a year. I met her once. Seemed like a right nice gal. Brought me cookies they made together.”

Sam made a note about their possible location. “Did you ever see anyone hanging around the house? Someone who didn’t belong or seemed suspicious?”

“Yeah.” The husband scratched the side of his belly, shifting his weight to his left foot and pointing behind his house. “I had to repair a couple of boards on our fence line, so I walked around the side there. I saw a couple of kids sitting on the back deck, almost like they belonged there. Had a dog with them too.”

“Did you talk to them at all?”

“I asked them what they were doing, but they took off round the other side. By the time I got back out here, they were halfway down the street.”

“Have you ever seen them before?”

“Can’t say I have. What about you?”

The husband looked at the neighbor who had first seen the fire. His close cropped hair and clean shaven face indicated military, common to the area as they were on the backside of the most populated army post in the world.

“I doubt it. I leave pretty early to get my exercise in before the work day, and I’m frequently not home again until seven or eight o’clock at night.”

Sam looked back to the husband. “Could you describe them?”

“Probably not enough to be helpful.” He nodded at

Sam. “I think they were about your skin tone, so Hispanic maybe? One was probably about fourteen or fifteen, short dark hair. The other one looked three or four years younger. They weren’t, well ... I don’t know. They weren’t unkempt like no one cared about them, but they didn’t exactly have that well-cared-for look about them either. More like life had maybe knocked them around a bit, but they was still fightin’ through, if you know what I mean.”

“What about the dog?”

“Good sized. I didn’t get close, but guess the head was about here, maybe.” The man motioned to his mid-thigh. “Black, with one of them tails that curls around.”

Sam nodded as he made notes in his small notebook. He could imagine the type of kid the man was describing. Problem was, they were plentiful in Silver Heights. The dog, on the other hand, narrowed down the possibilities considerably.

He pulled cards from his pocket that included his contact information and handed them to everyone. “I don’t imagine they’ll be back since the house is gone, but if you think of anything else or you do happen to see them or anyone else about that doesn’t belong, I’d appreciate you giving me a call.”

Sam shook their hands and crossed to where medic Kelan Bratcher was finishing up recovery for the last of the firemen who had been in the house. Kelan, a close friend and a soldier assigned to the Pediatric Clinic at Womack Army Medical Center, volunteered with the Beaver Creek Fire Department as often as he could.

Sam looked at his watch. “It’s almost midnight, dude,” he said to Kelan. “Are you going to get enough beauty

sleep tonight?”

Kelan tossed a full water bottle at him. “More than you, I wager.”

“Got another one of those?” Cassandra walked up, smudges of soot on her jean-covered legs. She pulled off her pink hard hat and sat it just inside the ambulance, reaching up to redo her ponytail. Kelan loosened the cap of a water bottle and sat it beside her hat.

“You didn’t loosen my cap.” Sam worked to suppress his grin.

“Didn’t know you were getting too weak to open it yourself,” Kelan shot back.

Cassandra rolled her eyes. “You two are ridiculous.”

“Filled with nonsense,” Sam offered, waiting to see if she would take the bait.

“Yes,” she said, looking up at him after finishing up her ponytail.

Sam swallowed a chuckle, waiting for Kelan to pounce. Kelan had been spending time with Sam’s eight-year old daughter who had been obsessed with all things Willy Wonka and Alice in Wonderland for the last year. Kelan had even picked up a copy of the old Lewis Carroll tale and had been discussing it with her, between viewings of her favorite 1970 version of the chocolate factory, that is.

Kelan leaned in close to her. “A little nonsense now and then is relished by the wisest men,” he sang quietly.

“Willy Wonka?” The tone of her voice gave away her disbelief. “You’re seriously going to quote Willy Wonka.”

Kelan’s wide grin aimed directly at Cassandra loosened Sam’s chuckle.

She gave in to the merriment, pushing back on Kelan’s

shoulder. “You two are impossible. And don’t—” She quickly cut Kelan off. “Don’t even start quoting Alice in Wonderland.”

“But I do sometimes believe as many as six impossible things before breakfast.”

She rolled her eyes again. Oh, how Sam loved the cases where he got to work with these two.

Once Sam had his laughter under control again, he got back to the problem in front of them. “What can you tell me about the fire?”

Cassandra swallowed the drink of water she’d just taken. “Well, depending upon what you found out from witnesses, of course, I’m leaning toward accident, Sam. The ignition point was in the living room. The house looked like it had a bit of trash and small items left in it, like the owners picked up and moved quickly and didn’t clean up behind themselves. I saw several cigarette butts lying around as well. It looks like someone was just careless and flicked a lit cigarette too close to something that ignited.”

“From what I know right now, that’s very likely.” Sam tightened the lid on his water bottle and put it in the outside leg pocket of his cargo pants. “One neighbor saw a couple of kids hanging around. The house has been vacant for a few months, so they might have been using it as a place to hang out and just got distracted or reckless.”

“Could it have been a dare?” Kelan offered. “Like kids being stupid?”

Sam nodded. “Yeah. Or gang initiation, I suppose. That’s been a bigger problem of late. I’ll talk to Eddie and see what he thinks. He’s the detective that’s been tagged on

most of the teen cases for the last year, so he might have an idea of what we're dealing with here."

"I did see one thing that gives me some pause, like maybe an accelerant was used. But I'm not sure. It's not the clear doughnut-shaped ring that we frequently see, but I grabbed a sample to get tested."

"Lassie!" The department's fire chief, Scotty, yelled in his mildly Scottish accent from his position near the fire engine parked in front of the house. "You all done? We're ready to pull out."

All the chiefs knew to check with the inspector on the scene before they pulled out. As long as the firemen were there, the fire marshal's office could access the property and freely investigate what happened. However, once the engines pulled out, Cassandra would have to get a search warrant.

"I'm good, Scotty. Thanks!" She tightened the lid on her bottle and reached for her hard hat. "Let me know if Eddie thinks we should be watching for a particular angle, Sam. Otherwise, I'll get you my report after I hear back from the lab."

"Sounds good, Cass."

Sam walked back to his unmarked, silver Dodge Charger, watching as the engines pulled out, followed by Cassandra in her Tahoe and Kelan in the ambulance. The neighbors had all returned to their homes, and the street was quieting down for the night. Yet Sam couldn't leave the house quite yet.

He stared at the remains that now needed to be demolished. It once held a family and hope for the future. Did the medical crisis also take out this family, or had they

somehow fought through, realizing that hope wasn't in a place or a treatment plan but in a Person?

"They need you, Samu."

Sam took in a deep breath. The voice was the same as he'd heard the month before when he'd been looking for a missing teen, but that had been in a dream. This was out loud on a neighborhood street in Silver Heights. Well, maybe not out loud, exactly.

God had reassured Sam then, confirming His instructions and proving faithful in the investigation. Sam wanted to proceed forward in bold confidence, but questions filled his mind. Who needed him? The family who had once lived here? Or the kids who might have burned the house down? And what was so desperate that it took this kind of destruction to get his attention?

CHAPTER TWO

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 20

Sam leaned against the doorjamb of Detective Eddie Phillips' office as he relayed the facts he'd gained from the neighbors the night before. Eddie sat behind his small desk neatly covered in several piles of folders and binders.

"Yeah, I know those two. The dog is a protective sort. I've not heard any reports of her attacking anyone, but she pays attention and sticks close to them."

"What's the deal with the kids?"

"Age old story, best I know. I don't believe dad's in the picture, but mom works long hours at basic jobs trying to feed and clothe them. They seem decent, but they're not hanging out with the right people if they want to continue to stay out of trouble, if you know what I mean."

"No, be more specific for me."

"I don't have a lot of specifics. Some of the teens seem to be more organized than you'd expect."

"Like a gang?"

"Sort of, but maybe not in the traditional sense. They are answering to someone—the name Felipe crops up from time to time, but we're guessing it's a street name, and we don't know if he's top dog or just the main muscle."

"Are they centered around drugs?"

"No, at least not that we can tell. Most of what we've

been able to tie to the kids is petty crime that doesn't amount to a hill of beans. Enough that puts them in contact with us, but not enough to bring any serious penalties."

"And these kids I'm looking for, they're part of this gang."

Eddie shrugged. "Again, we don't have a lot of information. Every one we've caught clams up better than my dog around his favorite bone. We really don't know a lot."

"But it appears that we're in danger of losing them to the system."

Eddie shrugged again, which annoyed Sam more than anything else about this conversation. So many of the people he talked with on the local level seemed nonchalant, but he thought that it was probably more about everyone being overwhelmed with the size of the problem. At least, that was his hope. Surely the vast majority of those who were supposed to serve and protect these kids hadn't truly given up on them.

Eddie leaned forward, resting his arms on his desk. "What can we do?"

"More!" Sam swung his arms wide. "We have to. We're losing a whole generation!"

"Got something on your mind, Campos?"

Focused on the discussion with Eddie, Sam hadn't heard his boss, Captain Lawson, walking down the hallway behind him. Over the past month, Sam had quietly been doing research about the teen problem sweeping the nation, but he'd only shared what he'd been learning with his wife, Kelan, and Cassandra.

He'd begun formulating a plan, but it was still rough,

with far too many unanswered questions. Now that he'd passionately blurted out his biggest concern within earshot of his boss, he had to decide whether to keep going with the opening he'd created or keep quiet until he had more concrete answers. He felt unprepared to present the new program he thought could make a difference, but backing off now would only have Captain Lawson asking more questions later.

He turned, pushing his shoulders back to stand up straight while working to keep his stance neutral and non-confrontational. "Sir, have you heard of the J-RIP program?"

"J-RIP? You mean that thing up in New York? Isn't it a miserable failure?"

Sam had expected this question, which is why he hadn't yet approached his captain with it. He'd been looking for more than the testimony from a few enthusiastic mommas. But J-RIP was less than a decade old, so long-term effects were unknown. "Yes, sir. Juvenile Robbery Intervention Program, and the hard numbers from the most recent reports are not encouraging."

"So?"

Sam sent up what his wife would have called a flare prayer, a quick call for help from the heavenly realms. "I think it has merit."

Sam worked to control his body language. He hadn't meant to be so blunt, to lay out the bottom line without any supporting information. His mind flooded with doubts as he watched the captain's face. Even with all the training he'd completed on reading people, his boss was tough to figure. Sam did know one thing that might work to his advantage:

Captain Lawson didn't like wasted time or excess verbiage. Maybe the quick five words were the best plan after all.

Seconds stretched out. *Wait*, Sam heard the Holy Spirit whisper. He wanted to cover the silence with information and defend his position. To blurt out all the research he'd done in the last month, responses from the New York community that showed the police there were getting some things right. But, he would obey the voice of God. He wouldn't be the first to utter the next word. He would wait.

Chin steady, he told himself. *Don't raise it and offer a challenge. Look him in the eye. Don't shift your weight.* His training on body language scrolled through his head.

Finally, the captain nodded. "Give me three reasons to consider it."

Sam tried not to audibly release the breath he'd been holding. "First, the anecdotal evidence shows positive results. Some families praise the program for saving their kids—and not just the teen that was in the program itself, but every child within the family, making the program more far-reaching than was adequately measured in the reports that we've seen."

Sam held up two fingers. "Second, neuroscience proves the judicial system hasn't understood the basics of what is physically going on in teens. As we learn more, the courts and lawyers are making changes that are showing positive results. Law enforcement is falling behind."

"Example," barked the captain.

"Judgment is housed in our frontal lobe, which doesn't fully develop until our mid-twenties. Until then, our actions are ruled by our amygdala, which tends to be much more impulsive and allows us to take bigger risks because we

don't fully appreciate the consequences.”

Sam saw the captain's jaw clench. He knew the funds for officer training had been cut over the last twenty years. It was an easier place to cut than officers on the road or protective and emergency equipment. Still, that decision had ramifications that those in control likely hadn't thought about.

“Continue.”

“Finally, as officers, we are taught to assert authority, which works against us with many kids depending upon their experiences, environment, and current emotional state. Again, returning to the amygdala, they might be pressed to challenge and defy rather than submit and cooperate.”

Sam finished his three best arguments and again focused on his body language, refraining from gushing more of the research he'd done. He kept his arms relaxed at his side and his hands out of his pockets. He would not show dominance or insecurity. Feet planted, he fought the tendency to fidget while he waited for a response. He didn't know what Eddie was thinking behind him, but Sam hadn't heard even a chair squeak since the captain had first spoken.

“One.” Captain Lawson held up one finger to emphasize the single teenager he was offering. “You get one teen from one family. And you keep up on your caseload. No excuses.”

Sam wanted to jump in the air and pump his fist, but he kept his joy contained everywhere except his face. “Yes, sir. Understood. Can I—”

The captain glared, and Sam knew he was pushing his luck. Or rather, perhaps, his prayer. He definitely needed to

spend more time in prayer about this.

“If the teen happens to come with a younger brother?”

The captain turned and strode away. “Keep up your caseload!” he bellowed.

Sam turned back to Eddie, who was shaking his head. “I don’t know whether to congratulate you or not. I hope you know what you’re doing.”

“Oh, I’m certain I don’t know what I’m doing, Eddie, but I can’t keep doing what I have been. I have to get involved. I can’t keep being a detective, watching these kids self-destruct, and not try to do something to stop it.”

Eddie watched him closely. Sam recognized the scrutinizing look and suspected he’d be getting that a lot in the days ahead. He needed to call his wife and update her, getting her praying more intently for this as well.

“I hope you succeed, man. I really do.”

Sam nodded in response, a man’s nod that communicated his respect and appreciation without the use of words. “You can help me. I need to know where to find those boys with the dog.”

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