

FIRE THAT KILLED KIDS COST \$1,000, COPS SAY

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Three children who died huddled in an upstairs bedroom closet as the Detroit house around them went up in flames were the victims of a woman who was angry at her ex-boyfriend and paid to have his home torched, police said Wednesday.

The Detroit woman divided \$1,000 between two hit men to do the job -- botched because the intended victim wasn't even home when the blaze was set early Sunday, police said.

One of the children, who turned 5 on Sunday before the pre-dawn fire took his life, was the nephew of the ex-boyfriend, James Featherstone. Two youngsters remained in critical condition Wednesday, and two others were in serious condition, all at Children's Hospital of Michigan.

"I think she should die. I think she should pay with her life," Featherstone said. "That's exactly what she deserves."

On Wednesday, Detroit police said they had made four arrests in the arson, including the 31-year-old woman they say was angry enough to mastermind the fatal inferno to get back at a man she once loved.

The woman, who is expected to be arraigned today with the other three on murder and conspiracy charges, was also an occasional babysitter for the three children, who will be buried today. The woman's brother is one of the suspects, accused of finding the two arsonists for her.

The woman and the others could go to prison for life without possibility of parole if convicted on first-degree murder charges. The suspects' names were not made public Wednesday.

"She specifically wanted the house burned while he was present," said Monica Childs, a homicide investigator at the Detroit Police Department. "Ironically, he was not there at the time they burned the house."

The fire killed sisters **Queen Steadman**, 3, and Samantha Winters, 4, and their nephew, Antoine Brand. Three of the four children in the hospital were just spending the night at the house, where three adults also lived.

"I think it's very sad -- \$1,000 for three people's lives," said Melissa Featherstone, James' sister and the mother of Antoine Brand. "I'm happy to know that the police have locked up these people. But the way those kids were tortured, being locked up is not enough."

James Featherstone said he had been overwhelmed by feelings of guilt since learning who was behind the fire.

He said he walked away from a stormy relationship with the suspect two months ago when she shot at him after he slapped her during an argument. The couple had been together for more than a decade.

He also said the woman, a live-in nurse who cared for elderly patients, had a history of angry behavior and several years ago hired people to burn the bicycle of someone she disliked.

"She was the jealous type, always accusing me of being with another woman," he said.

Arson investigators knew they were investigating a triple homicide after quickly determining the blaze was set by someone dousing the front of the house with gasoline.

The break in the case came, according to relatives of the victims, when a friend of the ex-girlfriend called to tip them off about the murder-for-hire plot.

"She was obsessed with my brother," said Melissa Featherstone. "She wanted to get back with him. He's very hurt. He feels responsible, but he's not. She did this."

On Wednesday, as news of the arrests spread in the 1200 block of Belvidere on Detroit's east side, mourners continued to stop outside the badly burned house. On the front porch, several people had left stuffed animals and cards and flowers, all of them soaked in the cold rain that fell most of the morning.

"It's pitiful that they did that because of an ex-boyfriend," said Timia Revels, 22, who lives across the street. "To pay \$1,000 to set a fire with babies in it, that's really conniving. It makes me sick to my stomach."

A funeral service for Antoine Brand, Samantha Winters and **Queen Steadman** will be held at 1 p.m. today at Swanson Funeral Home, 806 E. Grand Blvd. in Detroit. Family hour begins at 12:30 p.m. All three children will be buried in Gethsemane Cemetery in Detroit following services.

Caption: Photo GABRIEL B. TAIT/Detroit Free Press

James Featherstone, 27, talks Wednesday of losing relatives in a fire that police said was aimed at him.

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