

PACIFIC COAST JUSTICE SERIES

NO. 1

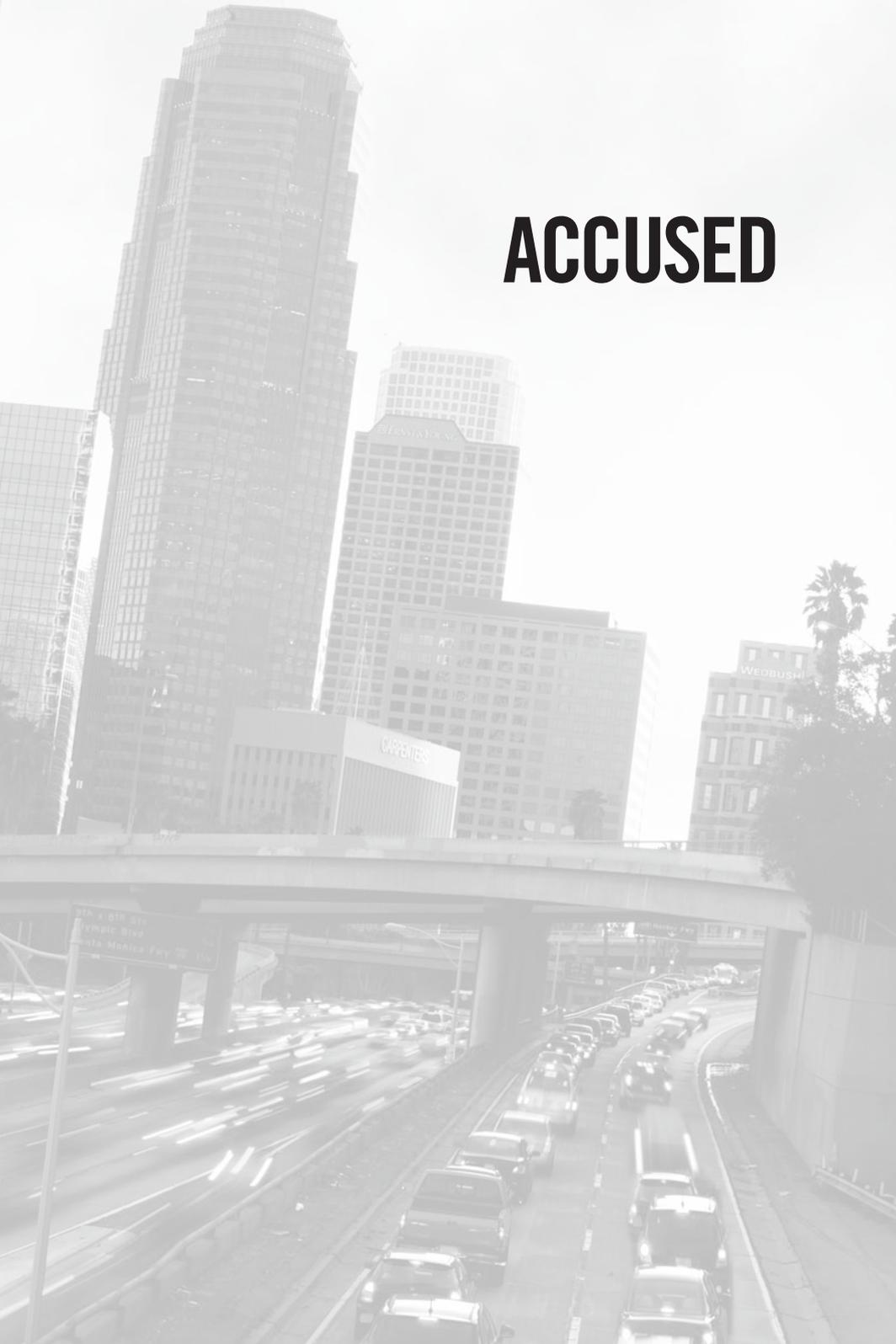
ACCUSED



a new series from veteran police officer

Janice Cantore

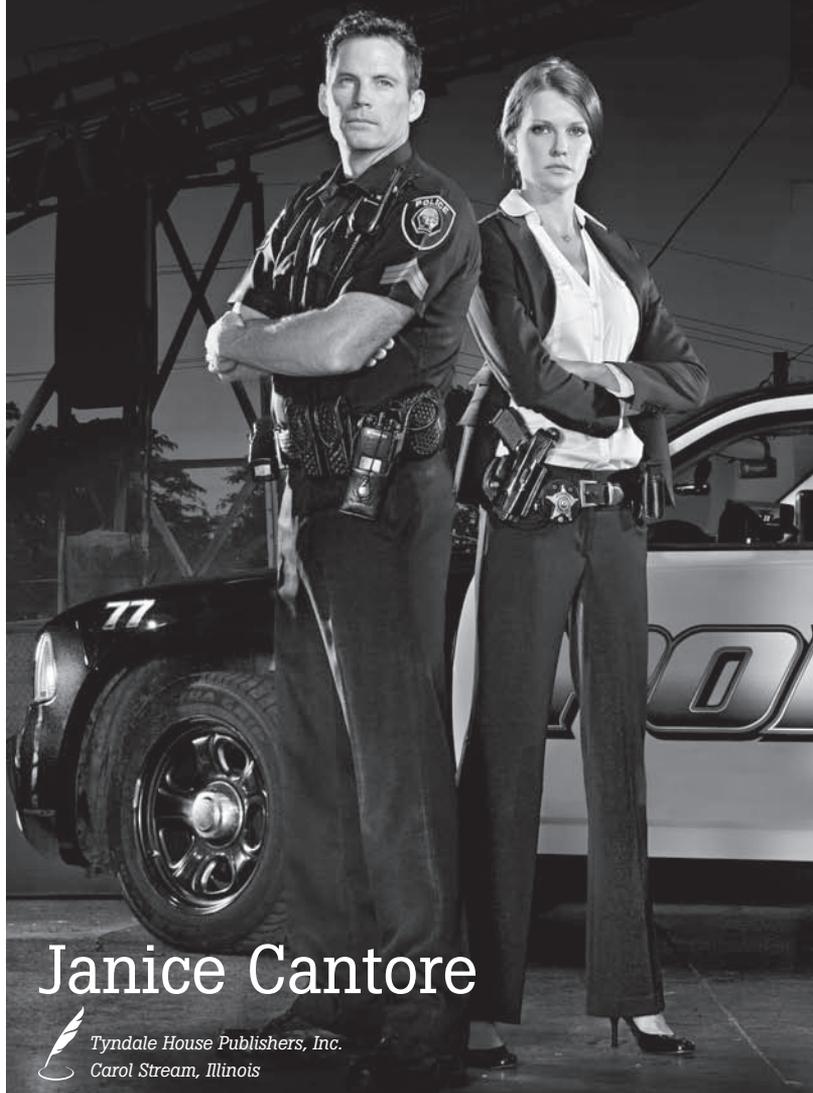
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Accused

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*To Lauraine and all the reunioners: thank you for your help,
support, and prayers over the years. The talking, laughing,
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Prologue

“ANY UNIT TO HANDLE, 2464 Orange Avenue, 417, man with a gun threatening apartment residents. Any unit to clear and handle, priority one.”

“Isn’t that the address of the gang shooting last week?” Carly Edwards asked the question half to herself and half to her partner for the night, Derek Potter, as she slowed the cruiser. They were two blocks from the address given.

“You’re right. Let’s take it; we’re close!” Potter grabbed the radio and responded to the dispatcher.

“We should wait for backup. Two gangbangers were shot last week.”

“They’ll be here! Come on, let’s go! We can get this guy.”

Potter’s adrenaline rush flooded the car and infected Carly. She hit the gas. In seconds they were 10-97, on scene.

“Drop me off in front. You take the back.” Potter didn’t wait for a response. He leaped out of the cruiser as Carly slowed.

“Wait—” The slam of the door covered her angry shout. Potter should know better. He’d been on the police force longer than Carly had, and she was nearing her ten-year anniversary. Even though things looked quiet as she scanned the area, it was never a good idea to split up on gun calls.

She wouldn’t be in this situation with her regular partner, Joe King. But he’d called in sick, and she was stuck with “Punch-Drunk” Potter, Las Playas PD’s troublemaker and fight starter.

Against her better judgment, Carly continued to a rear alley and parked the black-and-white. As Potter worked his way back from the front, she’d work forward from the rear. With luck, they’d meet in the middle and be able to clear the call unfounded.

Wind whistled with an eerie sound, funneled between apartment buildings. Tepid gusts flung trash everywhere. Lit only by the glow of parking structure lights opposite the dispatch address, the alley was deserted, strange for a hot night when people generally hung around outside.

The problem address itself was silent—no TV noise—and all the windows overlooking the alley were open but dark. Carly strained to differentiate between wind noise and any people noise. A back gate connected the complex courtyard to the alley, but she was not going through it until she had more information.

Carly pulled out her handheld radio. “Who called?” she whispered to dispatch.

“Your CP is anonymous. He did not want contact.”

This information opened the floodgates in Carly's mind for a new set of concerns. *Is this a setup?*

Glass crunched under her heels as she stopped to survey the gate and surrounding area.

Sliding the radio back into its holder, she unsnapped her handgun and drew it from its holster. The radio cackled with the news that backup was close. Emboldened, she shone her flashlight into the semidarkness and moved closer to the gate.

Movement near some trash cans to the right of the gate caught her eye, and she directed the beam of her light there. She saw a face.

"Hey! Police!" Her gun and flashlight steadied on the target, and her heart thudded, straining the confines of her vest. "Show me your hands!"

The man moved, and a bright object flashed in his hand. He lunged forward.

Time slowed for Carly. Everything around her faded as tunnel vision took over. There was no time to call Potter, no time to get on the radio.

Certain the object in the man's hand was a gun and that her life was in danger, Carly fired twice.

The crack of her .45 echoed like a bomb blast in the alley. The man crumpled in front of her, supporting himself on one hand to keep from falling flat on his face.

Before she could speak or inspect the object the man had dropped, Potter burst through the back gate. On Carly's left and several feet closer to the man, Potter fired.

Bang, bang, bang . . .

In rapid succession, the deafening sound of fifteen gunshots rang in Carly's ears.

The man danced with the impact of several bullets, then went down all the way, but Potter kept shooting, emptying his gun.

The next seconds were cauterized in Carly's mind. Permanent impressions: the man wasn't a threat, he didn't have a gun, and still Potter reloaded.

"Derek, stop! He's down!"

1

“I SWEAR IT’S AS IF my life is caught in a riptide, Joe.” Carly hated the whine in her voice, but the frustration in her life that started six months ago had lately built to a fever pitch. “I feel like there’s a current pulling me under, and every time I try to raise my head, I get buried by a wave.” Her angry strides pounded an uneven path across the damp beach.

“Don’t raise your head, then; you’ll just get water up your nose,” Joe responded. He walked alongside, dodging the sand Carly’s feet kicked up.

She shot him a glare. He laughed, and in spite of her mood she managed a half smile. “What would I do without you? You always try to cheer me up even when I bet you think I’m just whining.”

Matching her stride, Joe placed a calloused hand on her shoulder and said, “Hey, I know this isn’t you. Being wrongly accused sucks—doubly so when you can’t even defend yourself. I’m not sure I’d have handled the last six months as well as you have if I were in your shoes. If you need to vent, vent.”

Carly stopped a few feet from the surf and blew out a breath as tears threatened. Emotions a jumble, she was touched by Joe’s unwavering support. He’d been her partner on the force for three years—until the incident six months ago—and they’d been through car chases, foot pursuits, and fights together, developing a partnership that was as comfortable as her favorite pair of sweats. She knew, no matter what, she could count on Joe. She was lucky to have him, and he deserved better than her current bad attitude.

For a minute they were both silent, standing side by side watching the waves churn the salt water. The crash of the surf—a little rougher than she had expected—and the smell of the sea relaxed her a bit as the tableau soothed raw nerves.

Joe broke the silence. “Anyway, nothing will happen until all the facts are in and the litigation ends. Request your transfer back to patrol then. For right now, relax and be patient.”

Carly swallowed the tears and dropped her beach bag. “I’m a horrible bench sitter. You know me; when they handed out patience, I stood in the ice cream line.”

At that, Joe laughed and Carly was glad to hear it. One of the things that made them a good pair was the divergent way they looked at problems, Carly ready to kick the door in and Joe willing to wait hours if need be. Other officers teased

them, labeling them Crash and Control. Carly would jump into things with both feet, while Joe would test the waters first with his big toe.

“I shouldn’t dump on you. I’m just frustrated.” Carly met his eyes and forced a smile.

“I don’t mind listening.” He shrugged. “That’s what partners are for. You’ve listened to me enough over the years. We’ll work together again.” Joe tossed his bag next to Carly’s.

Nodding, she bent to pull a towel out of her bag, biting down on her bottom lip, trying to swallow the frustration she felt and embrace the encouragement her partner gave.

“You sure you need to celebrate your birthday with a swim in this kind of weather?” Joe asked, hugging his arms to his chest. “Can’t I just buy you a milk shake?”

Glad for the subject change, she followed his gaze to the water. The Pacific was a stormy deep-green color, pinched by small but choppy swells, melding to a gray and overcast horizon. Far to the left, several surfers bobbed on their boards, riding the swells while waiting for a good wave. Though late February, Southern California’s mild water temperature made surfing and swimming possible. Dark, cloudy weather didn’t bother Carly; it simply mirrored her mood. And for her, water normally made things better—even when it was forbidding and cold.

“It’s good training.” She looked down her nose at Joe. “You’re not going to chicken out, are you? And you can also buy me a milk shake.”

“No chicken here. Just giving you a chance to back out

gracefully.” He peeled off his sweatshirt and rolled his shoulders. “I mean, it could be embarrassing for you, the ocean star, to get an old-fashioned thrashing on your turf by a pool swimmer.”

“Ha. I plan to *give* an old-fashioned thrashing. You haven’t been training.” She pointed to his slightly paunchy stomach before she pulled off her own sweats. The cold air brought on a shiver.

Joe proudly patted his bit of paunch. “This will only make me more buoyant.”

Casting Joe an upraised eyebrow, a cop glance reserved for obviously guilty crooks who protested innocence, Carly laid down the swim’s ground rules. “Okay, it’s a mile and a half to the buoy. Last one back to the beach buys lunch, milk shakes included.”

Joe nodded, and they both pulled on their goggles and shook out their arms. She counted, and on three they ran together into the surf and dove into a wave. The cold winter water took her breath away, but Carly wasn’t worried, even when Joe pulled ahead. Joe was taller—five-ten to Carly’s five-seven—and took longer strokes, but he also carried a good sixty pounds more than she did. In spite of her teasing, it was mostly muscle, which made him denser in the water, not more buoyant. All she needed to do was settle into her stroke. This race would go to the one with stamina.

Carly warmed up fast and swam hard, determined to leave her frustration on the beach. Joe was right; this wasn’t her. She rarely indulged in pity parties. But today, as she woke up

to her thirty-third birthday, everything in her life seemed to converge in a perfect storm of failure.

The divorce had started her funk; the final papers had arrived two days ago, and reading them abraded Carly's still-raw heart. Now was the time she always imagined she would be starting a family, not filing away the proof that one had disintegrated. Nick had taken so much of her with him that she felt hollow. As good a partner and friend as Joe was, he didn't understand.

And Carly felt like a failure when she faced her mother. No one in the family had ever divorced, until now. Mom's solution was church, as though that would somehow fix a busted marriage. Her roommate Andrea's response was more realistic but even less doable: "Forget about him and find a new man."

Work used to be her respite, a place of security, support, and camaraderie, but lately her assignment in juvenile was more a black hole of boredom, sucking her life away. Compared to LA, a neighbor to the north, Las Playas was a small city, but it had its share of big crime. Carly wanted to be back on patrol, crushing her portion of it. Joe hadn't talked about it, but she knew the entire force was on edge over Mayor Teresa Burke. The popular and high-profile mayor had been missing for four days. Carly wanted to be out in a black-and-white, chasing clues and leads, not stuck inside babysitting juvenile delinquents. She kicked the water with a vengeance.

Carly caught and passed Joe just before the buoy. Ignoring

his presence, she made the turn and sliced through the swells with her best training stroke. Her shoulders heavy with fatigue, she pushed harder. She conjured up an image of Joe as a shark bearing down on her heels, his fin parting the water in hot pursuit, a mind game to keep her from slowing.

A local celebrity in rough-water swims, Carly laid claim to a perfect record: undefeated in eighteen races. “Whenever life closes in, retreat to your strength” was an adage she lived by. Lately the ocean was a second home.

The shoreline loomed before she was ready to stop punishing the water. But the ache in her shoulders and lungs forced surrender, and as she eased up in the waves, pushing her goggles off to look back for Joe, she realized she did feel better. The ocean was magic. She’d beaten an imaginary shark in Joe, and even though there were still real ones on land threatening to drag her down, she felt energized by the swim.

Carly glided to where she could float and relished a peace she hadn’t felt in a while. She willed it to last. Joe was right on his second point as well—there was no reason to be impatient. Between the buffeting swells and the pounding of her heart, she wondered if she should just take a few days off, get away from her current assignment in juvenile, with all the reminders of what she couldn’t be doing, and relax somewhere far away. She breathed ocean air and tasted salt while floating, the water a rolling cocoon, protecting her from life’s demands and drains.

Joe soon joined her, and together they treaded water, facing one another.

“Boy,” Joe gasped, “you swam possessed. Bet that would have been a record.”

Carly splashed her friend, the smile now not forced. “Thanks for the swim. I feel better.”

He splashed her back. “My pleasure. Just call me Doctor Joe.”

She laughed and it felt good. “Anytime you want a swimming lesson . . .” Carly turned with another splash and kicked for the shore.

“Ha,” Joe called after her. “You missed your calling. Instead of a cop, you should be a sadistic swim coach somewhere, yelling, ‘One more lap, one more lap.’”

Carly headed straight for her towel as the cool air turned her skin to gooseflesh. Joe followed.

“You need to get back into competition again,” Joe said as he reached for his towel. “Admit it, you’re half fish.”

“I’d like to, but working an afternoon shift makes it difficult.” She quickly slid into the comfort of dry sweats and wrapped her thick auburn hair in the towel. “But you’re right; the water helps my mood as much as good ole Doctor Joe does.”

The shrill chirp of a work BlackBerry cut off Joe’s rejoinder. He looked toward his bag. “Yours or mine?”

“Mine.” Carly dug the offending device out of her pocket, eyebrows knit in annoyance. The BlackBerry, or “TrackerBerry” as most officers who were issued the phones

called them, rarely brought good news. The text message flashing across the small screen read, CALL THE WATCH COMMANDER ASAP, 911, 911. Her pulse quickened with a jolt. *What kind of emergency?*

“Look at this.” She showed Joe the message.

“Whoa, I wonder what’s up.”

Carly shrugged and hit the speed dial for the watch commander’s phone.

“Tucker.”

The name took her by surprise. Sergeant Tucker was the head of homicide. Why was he answering the watch commander line?

“Uh, Sergeant Tucker, it’s Edwards. Did you page me by accident?”

“Nope, you’re the one I wanted. We found the mayor and . . . uh, hang on.”

Carly could hear muffled voices in the background. Shock brought on by the sergeant’s comment about the mayor left her slack jawed. *We found the mayor* coming from the *homicide* sergeant was not a good thing. She’d just been thinking about the woman! Speculation about Mayor Burke’s fate had run the gamut among department personnel during the past four days. Now Carly’s stomach turned as she guessed at the reality. She repeated the sergeant’s words to Joe, who whistled low in surprise.

“You still there?” Sergeant Tucker came back on the line.

“Yes, sir.” More questions clouded her mind. *Why is Sergeant Tucker calling me about the mayor’s case?*

“I can’t tell you much right now. The area is crawling with press. The mayor was murdered. We need you at the command post ASAP.”

“What?” Carly’s hand went numb with the confirmation of her suspicions. “Uh, sure, where?” *Mayor Teresa Burke was murdered.* This news would devastate the city she worked for. Carly listened as the sergeant told her where to report and broke the connection.

“Earth to Carly, you still with me?” Joe tapped the phone. “What happened?”

“Mayor Burke was murdered, and they want me at the crime scene now.”

“Wow.” His face registered the shock Carly felt. “What do they want you to handle?”

“Tucker didn’t say.” She held Joe’s gaze. “Why me? I work juvenile invest, not homicide.”

“My guess would be there’s a minor involved somewhere. But why ask why? Go for it; this will be an important investigation. The fact that they want you says something.”

“After six months of telling me to pound sand, suddenly they need me?”

Joe laughed. “You know what they say about gift horses? If you look them in the mouth, they bite! Just go and be the outstanding investigator I know you are.” He gripped her arm. “Stop thinking less of yourself because they’ve stuck you in juvie. You’re a good cop.”

“Thanks. You’re right, I guess, about doing my best with

whatever they've got for me." She shrugged. "At least I've got nothing to lose. Thanks for the swim."

He applauded as she left him at the water's edge and jogged across the mostly empty beach toward home, a block and a half away.

After a quick shower to wash away the salt, Carly took a minute to shuffle through her wardrobe. Juvenile was a non-uniform assignment, the dress code business casual, which for her afternoon shift usually meant jeans and a department polo shirt. But this was a big case. Deciding that she wanted her appearance to scream competent and prepared, she chose a pair of black slacks, a dark-green sweater, and hard-soled shoes rather than the running shoes she normally wore.

A quick glance in the mirror left her satisfied. She double-checked the gun and badge in her backpack on the way to the car, the familiar ritual helping to calm her jumping nerves. But the adrenaline rush was intense.

I'm going to be a cop again. I'm going to do police work, sang in her thoughts. She locked the seat belt across her chest and started the car. A question popped in her mind and zinged her pumped-up nerves like tinfoil on silver fillings.

Why would anyone want to kill Mayor Teresa Burke?

About the Author

A FORMER LONG BEACH, CALIFORNIA, police officer of twenty-two years, Janice Cantore worked a variety of assignments, including patrol, administration, juvenile investigations, and training. She's always enjoyed writing and published two short articles on faith at work for *Cop and Christ* and *Today's Christian Woman* before tackling novels. A few years ago, she retired to a house in the mountains of Southern California, where she lives with two Labrador retrievers, Jake and Maggie.

Janice writes suspense novels designed to keep readers engrossed and leave them inspired. *Accused* is the first book in the Pacific Coast Justice series, featuring Carly Edwards. Janice also authored the Brinna's Heart series, which includes *The Kevlar Heart* and *The Heart of Justice*.

Visit Janice's website at www.janicecantore.com and connect with her on Facebook.

