

PACIFIC COAST JUSTICE SERIES

NO.

3

# AVENGED



*from veteran police officer*

## Janice Cantore

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*Avenged*

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## Prologue

*Bam!* The door to the van slammed shut.

Diondre struggled to sit up, spitting out blood. He'd bitten his tongue when the Ugly Dude shoved him in the van. *He never even said what it was he wanted.*

Next to him, Rojo cursed. On the other side, Crusher sobbed, and Diondre could tell by the smell that he'd wet his pants. The Ugly Dude was Crusher's friend, his new supplier, so this was his fault, and Rojo swore at him.

"Crush," Diondre said when Rojo finished. The van moved, jerking Diondre into his friend. "Come on, man. We got to get out of this. What does this guy want?"

"Us dead," Rojo hissed with heat.

Diondre ignored him. "Crush, talk to me." As he spoke, he tried to loosen his hands and felt the plastic cuffs cut into his wrists.

Crusher sniffled. "I don't know, man. He told me he had stuff for us to move—lots of stuff. He gave me the money for the TV. I swear I thought he was on the level. I don't know why he's trippin'."

"What did Trey say?" Diondre asked about their boss, the OG of the gang. Tough and smart, Trey would be outraged that three of his homeboys were being treated this way.

"Didn't tell him."

This brought more curses from Rojo, and fear erupted anew in Diondre. If Trey didn't know where they were, they were as good as dead. He pushed himself up a bit so he could

lean against the side of the van, fighting for control as panic threatened. He thought about what his friend Londy had said to him earlier in the day.

*“Man, the gang life ain’t no life. It’s just gonna get you sent to jail—or worse, dead.”*

Londy used to roll with the Ninjas, but no more. He’d been trying to get Diondre out of the gang. Diondre wanted out when he was with Londy, but when Rojo and Crusher came calling, he wanted to be with them. And now he was going to die.

*“God is there if you call.”* Londy’s words rang in Diondre’s thoughts as loud as if Londy were in the van with him. Diondre squeezed his eyes shut and focused on everything Londy had told him about God. He prayed all the words he remembered, trying hard not to cry.

“You praying, D.?”

Opening his eyes, he saw Crusher looking at him, face dirty with smeared tears.

“Yeah, as best I can, man. As best I can.”

“Pray for me, too, will you?”

Diondre nodded as Rojo cursed them both in Spanish. The van came to a stop, and the side door whipped open. Moist, foggy air that smelled like the ocean assaulted Diondre’s nostrils. He hoped they weren’t at the ocean. Diondre hated the ocean because he couldn’t swim.

But there wasn’t time to consider where they were because the Ugly Dude and his two friends were at the door and they all had guns. Diondre hoped Londy was as right about God as he had been about the gang life.

# 1

***“DIRECT EVIDENCE?”***

*Carly Edwards recognized the tone; District Attorney Martin had switched to his court voice.*

*“No,” she answered clearly, no sign of hedging or apologizing.*

*“DNA?”*

*“No.”*

*He took off his glasses and held her gaze. “You will be on trial here, Officer Edwards. Do you realize that? Galen Burke may be in jail charged with two counts of murder, but in a few weeks his lawyers will make you the focus of the trial.”*

*“I’m ready.”*

*“Are you up to having your entire eleven-year career dissected and second-guessed to the nth degree? Are you ready to have every arrest you ever made placed under a microscope and torn apart*

*without context by people who have no idea what it's like to be a uniformed cop?"*

*"I have to be because I'm not letting a murderer walk."*

*DA Martin sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. "He won't walk. We have him on the fraud and—"*

*"Galen Burke murdered Jeff Hanks, a good cop. He'll get off with a slap on the wrist over my dead body."*

*"Be prepared for what we're facing. Burke's lawyers want the jury to doubt you, to mistrust you. The game is deflect and obfuscate."*

Carly willed her thoughts to the present, yanked her .45 automatic from its holster, and released the clip onto the bed. She pulled the slide back to eject the last round from the chamber, and it bounced down next to the clip. She moved the slide back and forth on the empty gun. This was a pre-shift ritual. Always make certain the slide is operating correctly and then reload the weapon before reholstering and going to work. Tonight her movements were abrupt, jerky.

The word *game* echoed in her mind and stung like being slapped with a whip of a thousand razor blades. DA Martin and the special Sunday afternoon trial-prep session had left a sour taste in her mouth.

*I don't put my life on the line every night to play a game.*

"Maybe you need a change, babe." Nick leaned in the doorway, arms folded, watching as Carly put her things together for work.

Her brows scrunched as she looked at him and frowned.

After a few seconds she turned away and reloaded the weapon. “Do you consider what we do a game?”

“The DA really got to you.”

She shoved the gun into its holster. “Our job is to put bad people—guilty people—in jail and keep innocent people safe. That shouldn’t be a *game*.” She spit out the last word and turned to face him, dragging her kit off the bed, suddenly feeling downright grumpy.

“The court system is what it is. We have to build the strongest case possible so it’s a game where we’re the favorites.”

“I hate that. Burke killed Jeff. He’s up to his neck in his wife’s murder. He can’t get off.”

Nick stepped toward her and put his hands on her shoulders. Carly let out a huffy breath and then held his gaze. Grumpiness fled when she lost herself in the deep blue of those eyes.

“You’ll do fine on the stand. The DA just doesn’t want you blindsided. It’s a circumstantial case, and Burke’s lawyers will do just about anything to save his skin. But I have faith in you.”

She dropped her kit, and he pulled her into his arms. “Why do you always know the right thing to say?” she said as she snuggled into his shoulder and felt his lips on her brow.

“Don’t let the pressure get to you.” His strong hands rubbed her back and Carly could have purred.

“Sometimes I’m just tired of it, you know?” She spoke into his shoulder. “I feel like I work hard to do the right thing and all my effort means nothing.”

“It’s not for nothing, but I know sometimes it feels that way. Like I said, maybe you need a change. Consider a detective slot so you’re playing a different position in the game.”

She pushed back to glare at him and saw his grin.

“Ha.” Sighing, she stood on her tiptoes and gave him a kiss. “When I’m not so tired and cranky, I’ll think about it. Deal?”

“Deal. I’ll walk you out.”

•••

All the way to the Las Playas police station, Carly brooded about Galen Burke’s upcoming trial. Testifying in court was, for her, the worst part of the job. It did seem to be a game—one of gotcha. Lawyers were able to seize upon a misplaced comma in a police report and make it look as if that meant everything else was wrong or misleading. Even though she went to court confident in her work and conclusions, she found the mental gymnastics involved in testifying more exhausting than a five-mile swim. The Burke trial would be the biggest one of her career, and she dreaded it.

As she stepped into her uniform, buckled her gun belt, and stood in front of the mirror to check her appearance, she pushed the trial out of her mind. *I have to put my game face on*, she thought, a mirthless smile on her face as she took the stairs to the squad room, arriving just in time for the 10 p.m. squad meeting.

“Okay, listen up.” Sergeant Barrett brought the graveyard

squad meeting to order at a minute after ten. “Captain Jacobs is here to address the watch.”

Carly cast a tired, raised eyebrow toward her partner, Joe King, at the next desk. The captain rarely addressed the night watch unless it was important. Joe gave a slight shrug as friendly banter in the room quieted.

“Good evening, gentlemen and ladies.” Jacobs smiled, his tone authoritative but genial. “I’m here this late because I wanted to personally address every watch. The last couple of weeks have been trying, but all you guys in uniform have been doing an exemplary job. Keep up the good work. We expect more protests, and we know these people want a confrontation. I’m proud that none of my officers have let themselves be baited.”

Carly felt somberness grip the room. For the past month they’d been dealing with loud, messy, and sometimes-violent protests over a revamping of the old marina and the addition of a new marina and shopping area on the water. A radical fringe environmental group calling itself Oceans First wanted the marina and oceanfront returned to a pristine state and had been trying to halt the renovation. They wanted the shoreline free of all commercial development. They’d been successful in stopping the removal of part of the old marina and pier, pending an environmental impact report, but they hadn’t been able to stop the new construction.

“We’ve been in the process of appealing the protestors’ camping permit,” Jacobs continued. “I’m optimistic we’ll win and be evicting them from Sandy Park soon.” Applause

broke out in the room. Sandy Park was a large grassy area between the marina complex and the mouth of the commercial harbor. It had been a peaceful picnic spot, but was now turned into a trash heap/tent city by the protestors.

When the applause petered out, Jacobs continued. “I know the protestors are more active in the daytime when cameras are present, but there’s been an uptick in vandalism during your hours that private security can’t seem to stop. I want extra patrols around the construction site. If you contact any protestors, be the professional officers I know you are. And most of all, be safe.”

Murmuring began as Jacobs left. Barrett didn’t try to quiet everyone; he talked over them and sounded irritated, Carly thought. He added some housekeeping items about keeping patrol cars clean and paying closer attention to radio traffic, then dismissed the watch.

“I can’t wait for the construction to be over and all these troublemakers to be gone,” Joe said as he and Carly grabbed their kits and headed for the elevator.

Carly grunted in agreement. The demonstrations had started out as annoying, with mindless chants and marches and outrageous lawsuits. The protestors had lost all lawsuits but two. Two days ago a mini riot had erupted for no apparent reason, ending in multiple arrests and two cops going to the hospital.

Carly’s watch had been held over to day shift too many times in the last two weeks, and sleep deprivation contributed to her cranky mood. She found herself wistfully hoping

that all she and Joe had to deal with tonight was vandalism and they'd hit EOW on time.

They stepped out of the station into the rear parking lot. It was a mild June night with the kind of haze that developed into thick fog as the night wore on.

"I'll get us a sled," Joe said.

Carly nodded and stood on the top step to wait for him. She let her mind wander over the past eleven years. She'd always only wanted to be a police officer, a *patrol* officer. Had the dream run its course? Was it time for detectives?

"Edwards."

"Yes." Carly turned to face Sergeant Barrett.

"You and Joe have a DCC down in the construction area. Walk around the yard for a bit first thing."

Carly nodded and was about to ask if they were to look for anything in particular, but Barrett had already gone back inside the station.

"Why do they call it a district car check anyway?" Joe asked as he turned left out of the lot and headed for the construction area.

"I think it comes from the old days. Beat cars were district cars, and they were given special assignments—DCCs, or district car checks. You know cops hate change, so it stays the same."

"Hmph. I guess BCC just wouldn't have the same ring to it."

They reached the construction yard quickly. Since the marina was part of their beat, Carly and Joe had walked the

area many times. The yard was also patrolled by private security 24-7, but Carly never thought they were as vigilant as they were paid to be.

Joe stopped at the gate, and Carly got out to unlock it and pull the gate open so he could drive through. Once she was back in the car, Joe drove to the far end and parked at the old marina, where the pier with a boarded-up Walt's restaurant would stay until an environmental impact study could be prepared, outlining the ramifications of its removal. From Walt's north, a beautiful new seaside shopping plaza was taking shape. It would be connected to the inland Apex shopping complex by a pedestrian bridge over Seaside Avenue.

As they got out to walk around the yard, Carly told Joe about the DA, her frustration about the upcoming trial, and Nick thinking she needed a change. "I know I'm not tired of my partner, but . . ."

He didn't say anything for a minute.

"It's not a bad thing to think about change," he said finally. "Sometimes I think about doing something different."

"Detectives? What detail?"

"Narcotics would be my first choice, but I think it would take too much time away from my family. Violent crimes would be interesting. Don't feel guilty about wanting a change; you've been in a pressure cooker over Burke. And the closer the trial, the higher the heat."

Carly rubbed her face. "Don't remind me."

She stopped as they reached the stairway leading up to

the new pedestrian bridge. “I, uh . . . I had no idea they were almost finished.” Her stomach fluttered.

Joe chuckled. “I hear they’re on track to finish in less than three weeks.”

A dedication ceremony was scheduled for when the pedestrian bridge was complete. The bridge would be called the Teresa Burke Memorial Pedestrian Bridge in honor of the late Las Playas mayor.

Carly shivered as they continued past the bridge toward partially finished restaurants and shops, not afraid to admit that yeah, she was nervous. Her nerves jumped and tingled when she thought about it, much different from the trial anxiety.

“The thought of the trial is frustrating and irritating, but the thought of being singled out in a huge public ceremony is downright scary,” she said.

“Hey, without you, Burke would have gotten away with murder and Londy would be in prison right now. Have Burke’s lawyers given any hints as to their defense strategy?”

“So far I think they’re just trying to make me look wrong. They also reiterate every time they can that Burke is a victim; his wife was murdered. He may have been a poor bookkeeper, but he’s not a murderer.” Carly imitated Burke’s lawyer with the last sentence and drew a smile from Joe.

*Bang.* A sharp, distinct gunshot close by cut off her next comment. Her hand flew to her gun.

*Bang.* Another sounded, and before she could speak, a third. She looked at Joe, intently peering into the darkness.

Carly pulled out her radio to advise dispatch. “Can you tell where they came from?” she asked him before she keyed her mike. “Flanagan said the protestors wanted to go out with a wallop. You think some nut in there has a gun?”

Joe shook his head. “Sound echoes here, but I think that came from farther out, near the Catalina dock.”

Carly keyed the radio. “1-Adam-7, we heard what sounded like three gunshots, possibly from the Catalina dock area. We’ll be investigating. Please advise if you get any calls regarding possible gunshots.”

“10-4, Adam-7. Be advised, we’re getting a call now. Stand by.”

They hurried back to the black-and-white. Joe started the unit and turned for the gate. By the time Carly pushed the gate open, dispatch said they had one call about possible shots, a complaining party who lived in the old marina. The CP also thought the shots came from Catalina Shores.

They weren’t that far away. The new Catalina Shores terminal was attached to the north end of the marina complex but on the other side of Sandy Park. There was also a large hotel, the Bluestone, between them and the park. It was encircled by construction fencing and was dark and unoccupied at the moment.

“The CP called from a cell phone.” Carly read more information sent from dispatch on the computer screen as Joe turned north on Seaside. “From a marina employee. It’s Jarvis; he lives aboard a boat. Says he heard three distinct gunshots.”

“I know Jarvis,” Joe said, making a face. He slowed as they rolled past the park. Now calm, none of the protestors seemed concerned about anything. “He sleeps at work during the day. Why doesn’t it surprise me that he’s up now?”

A longtime marina patrol officer, Jarvis had a well-earned reputation as a slug.

“He doesn’t want contact; just called to make sure the beat car checks it out,” she read.

Joe sighed. “I doubt we can blame Oceans First; they’ve mellowed out.”

Carly’s gaze roamed and her ears strained for any noise out of the ordinary. But other than the hum of the black-and-white and the sound of the water in the distance, the night was quiet. When Joe turned left onto the ramp to Catalina Shores, Carly unsnapped her holster.

Marina Access Way ended at the Catalina Shores parking structure and dock, a business that ferried people back and forth to Catalina, twenty-four miles across the channel. This was the only part of the renovation that had finished early.

Carly picked up the radio to announce that she and Joe were 10-97, on scene. Carly had seen no traffic or headlights anywhere. They reached the parking structure attached to the Catalina Shores pier, and again Joe slowed so they could listen. During business hours a parking arm would be down and drivers would have to pull a ticket to get in. At this time of night, the arm was up, and from what Carly could see, the lot empty. She knew that a section of the lot on top was marked off for long-term parking, for those people leaving

their cars to spend more than a day on Catalina and for Catalina residents who wanted to keep a car on the mainland. She couldn't see up there at the moment.

Yellow fog lights illuminated a good deal of the area in spite of a lingering haze. Joe cruised slowly. Both he and Carly had their windows down, and heavy, foggy salt air swirled in. Joe brought the unit to a stop at the drop-off area as Carly advised dispatch they would be out of the car.

After sliding her nightstick into its ring, Carly waited for Joe to meet her on the passenger side of the car. They both carried flashlights but didn't need to turn them on as they walked up the steps to the ticket offices. Then Carly saw the foot.

Hand out, she stopped Joe. "Here." Sliding the flashlight into her sap pocket, she drew her weapon. The foot stuck out from behind a stone bench.

"Hello?" Carly called as she and Joe separated slightly to come at the person from different angles.

There was no response to her hails.

And as she made her way around the bench, she saw that there wouldn't be.

Three bodies lay partially hidden behind the bench, face-down, hands secured behind their backs. They'd been shot execution style.