

# DRAWING

# FIRE

COLD CASE  
JUSTICE



JANICE CANTORE



## PRAISE FOR JANICE CANTORE

“This hard-edged and chilling narrative rings with authenticity. Cantore is a retired Long Beach, Calif., police officer with twenty-two years of experience on the force, and fans of police suspense fiction will be drawn in by her accurate and dramatic portrayal.”

**LIBRARY JOURNAL** on *Visible Threat*

“Janice Cantore provides an accurate behind-the-scenes view of law enforcement and the challenges associated with solving cases. Through well-written dialogue and effective plot twists, the reader is quickly drawn into a story that sensitively yet realistically deals with a difficult topic.”

**CHRISTIAN LIBRARY JOURNAL** on *Visible Threat*

“Due to Cantore’s background, her characters resonate with an authenticity not routinely found in police dramas. Her knack with words captures Jack’s despair and bitterness and skillfully documents his spiritual journey.”

**ROMANTIC TIMES** on *Critical Pursuit*

“Cantore is a former cop, and her experience shows in this wonderful series debut. The characters are well drawn and believable, and the suspenseful plot is thick with tension. Fans of Lynette Eason, Dee Henderson, or DiAnn Mills and readers who like crime fiction without gratuitous violence and sex will appreciate discovering a new writer.”

**LIBRARY JOURNAL** on *Accused*

“Cantore provides a detailed and intimate account of a homicide investigation in an enjoyable read that’s more crime than Christian.”

**PUBLISHERS WEEKLY** on *Accused*

“Janice Cantore’s twenty-two years as a police veteran for the Long Beach Police Department [lend] authenticity in each suspense novel she pens. If your readers like Dee Henderson, they will love Janice Cantore.”

**CHRISTIAN RETAILING** on *Abducted*

“The third series entry by a retired Long Beach, Calif., police officer offers plenty of procedural authenticity and suspense that will attract fans of Dee Henderson.”

**LIBRARY JOURNAL** on *Avenged*

“Cantore . . . delivers another round of crime, intrigue, and romance in her latest title.”

**JOYCE LAMB, USA Today** on *Avenged*

“Set in a busy West Coast city, the story’s twists will keep readers eagerly reading and guessing. . . . I enjoyed every chapter. *Accused* is a brisk and action-filled book with enjoyable characters and a good dose of mystery. . . . I look forward to more books in this series.”

**MOLLY ANDERSON, Christianbookpreviews.com**

“*Accused* was a wonderfully paced, action-packed mystery. . . . [Carly] is clearly a competent detective, an intelligent woman, and a compassionate partner. This is definitely a series I will be revisiting.”

**MIN JUNG, freshfiction.com**

“*Abducted* is a riveting suspense . . . [and] the many twists and turns keep the reader puzzled. The book is a realistic look into the lives of law enforcement officers. *Abducted* is one book I couldn’t put down. Can’t wait to see what Carly and Nick might be up to next.”

**PAM, daysongreflections.com**

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# CHAPTER



**TWO OPEN CASES**, *two dead ends.*

Two faces stared back at Abby Hart as she studied the chart she'd made chronicling the progress in her open homicide investigations.

Or lack of progress.

*I won't let them go cold.*

Turning from the chart to her desk and swallowing a bitter taste in her mouth, she closed the Dan Jenkins murder book and placed it on top of Mavis Snyder's. She'd been working these homicides hard without any leads—or suspects, for that matter—shaking loose. Snyder had been on the board for a month, Jenkins two weeks.

*What am I missing?*

She stood and walked to the coffee counter and drained the last bit of the pot into her mug. The Long Beach homicide office was empty; day shift had ended two hours ago. Homicide didn't field a night shift. Instead, there was always someone on call after hours. This week was Abby's turn in the "guaranteed to be awoken in the middle of the night" slot. A sip of the stale,

acid coffee finally convinced her she needed to surrender and go home as well.

After ditching the nasty dregs and rinsing her mug, she gathered her things and headed out, turning off the lights and locking the door behind her. Her thinking had been clouded lately, and it didn't help that she was exhausted. For the last two nights the same nightmare had sent her sleep screaming into the abyss, leaving her tired and sluggish. The dream was always about fire. Abby hated fire. Fire, and murder, had stolen her parents from her when she was only six, and the disturbing nightmare dredged up old, painful shadows of memories.

Abby calling for her daddy and getting no answer.

Smoke burning her eyes, her throat.

Blistered hands holding her, saving her, then melting away.

A treasured stuffed animal consumed by angry, red tongues of fire.

Worst of all, the dream reminded her of how frozen cold the case of her parents' murders was and threatened to remain. For twenty-seven years investigators had come up empty.

Abby's single-minded interest in solving the case had propelled her to homicide investigator status after eight years on the police force. But once there, other influences had kept her away from the very personal case. She vaguely wondered if the dream was telling her she should sit on the sidelines no longer.

No homicide case should go unsolved—not her parents', not any case currently on her desk.

*Not on my watch*, she vowed as she started her car and drove home.



“I don’t need you to protect me by keeping the harsher aspects of your job from me.” Ethan frowned and his displeasure vibrated across the miles as Abby rested her chin in her palm. They’d been chatting on Skype—Abby in her home in Long Beach, California, and her fiancé, Ethan Carver, in Western Africa on a mission trip.

“I’m not doing that. You’ve said you didn’t care to hear the details of my cases.”

“That doesn’t mean you can’t tell me what’s wrong when you’re having a bad day.”

Abby rubbed her brow, hating this fine line she suddenly had to walk with Ethan. She’d looked forward to a happy talk about their approaching wedding, the first discussion in two weeks, and he’d turned it into an argument.

*Or was it something I said?*

She didn’t even know how this had started. “You think my job weighs on me—it doesn’t. It’s what I do. Chasing killers is as much my mission field as building homes in third world countries is yours.”

“Stop. Don’t compare the two. I bring hope. You deal with depravity. Your world is dark and dangerous, and I don’t want it to destroy you, Abby.”

His complete dismissal of her work left her speechless for a moment. This resistance to her career was new and growing: the closer their wedding date, the more he voiced his thoughts along those lines. Abby was sure she loved Ethan and just as sure she was not going to quit being a cop now or when they were married.

“Ethan, I—”

She could hear the music begin, the haunting strains of Cher’s classic “Bang Bang,” the song that served as her ringtone for homicide callouts.

“I can’t believe it,” she said, chest tightening as she reached for the phone. It was three thirty in the morning her time—the Skype session had been arranged for Ethan’s schedule. Abby had prayed she’d be spared an early morning callout this once. Guess not.

Ethan’s frown deepened and further increased Abby’s discomfort. This uneasiness with her job assignment was burgeoning from a pimple to an abscess.

“I do bring hope to people,” she said while Cher sang. “The hope of justice for their loved ones.”

He shook his head. “I think it’s more about you and one case that you let define you.”

She bit her lower lip, not believing he went there when she couldn’t respond. “I have to answer.”

“I know.” The frustration faded from his features, replaced by resignation. “Be safe. We’ll finish this later.”

*Oh, good,* Abby thought as she answered the call.

“We have another elderly victim. Similar to last month.”

Wide-awake, Abby cleared her throat. The watch commander was on the line, and he’d called her himself; he hadn’t left it to dispatch. She knew why: this was bad. A cat burglar had murdered octogenarian Mavis Snyder. If this homicide showed the same MO, then they had a monster in the city on the prowl for defenseless old women. The definition of serial killer echoed in her mind—*“the unlawful killing of two or more victims by the same offender.”*

“We could have a serial killer on the loose.” He voiced her thoughts.

Abby had been trained not to jump to conclusions, but two similar killings a month apart was not a good sign.

“I’ll have to take a look before saying for sure.”

“Confirm as soon as you can.”

Abby promised she would and sped to the address she’d been given, though the exigency was long past. She was struck by how close the address was to the west police substation as well as being close to the address of the Snyder murder. Her stomach tightened as the ticks began to mount up that this had been committed by the same offender—a very bold offender.

To the WC, it was an important line on his incident log. To Abby, it was a slap in the face, a taunt that she was not doing her job. The Snyder case had attracted the nickname the “granny murder” in the homicide office. A priority, it occupied the lightest murder book because up to now she had nothing to go on in the way of evidence.

*Until tonight.* The upside of this callout—if there was ever an upside to murder—was that the watch commander indicated there was a witness on scene who could provide the first lead.

She arrived at the small bungalow, thankful for the early morning hour and that the place was not crowded with press and curious neighbors.

Abby reclipped her hair to keep it out of her face and briefly checked her appearance in the rearview mirror before climbing out of the car. The department allowed casual dress for early morning callouts, which for Abby meant pressed black jeans, a belt with a holster for her Sig Sauer .45 auto and cuff case, a homicide polo shirt, and a dark-blue police Windbreaker. She

stuffed her handheld radio into a back pocket and grabbed her kit. A tepid, early summer breeze rippled the Windbreaker as she closed the car door. An immediate observation set her on edge as she approached the first officer on the perimeter.

“Where’s the witness?”

“He went to the hospital with Officer Woods. The woman with him got hurt when they tried to chase the suspect. Woody said he’d bring the wit back as soon as they know how bad the lady’s injury is. I have his information here.” He handed Abby a neatly filled-out field interview card.

Abby read the card, but any peace she might have felt at knowing that the witness would be back evaporated when she saw his name. Warning bells exploded in her head. “Seriously? This is my witness?”

The uniform grinned. “Yeah. Isn’t it cool? He’s like Chuck Norris or Jason Bourne.”

Abby glared at him until the grin faded and he went back to his perimeter position. If arguing with Ethan hadn’t left her tweaked, the name of this witness would have.

One bright spot shone in the predawn darkness: Woody had responded to this call. Robert Woods, or Westside Woody as he was affectionately known, was a legend on graveyard patrol and, to Abby, a mountain of stability and police wisdom. Not only was she certain he’d bring the witness back, he’d help her put things into perspective. Right now she needed a strong focus.

The victim was hers now, a responsibility Abby took as seriously as a mother caring for a toddler. Justice for the dead, closure and assurance for the family that their loved one was not just a number on a crime log—these were goals Abby tenaciously clung to, earning her the nickname Superglue.

Closing out all but the scene she was preparing to enter, Abby took a deep breath and got her head into the investigation. She began with the outside. The victim's residence was a small, probably two-bedroom home neatly kept in a neighborhood of shabby homes with barred windows. She surveyed the exterior of the house and walked around to the alley, noting by the screen carelessly tossed on the ground that the point of entry was an unbarred window there. At this she frowned. Even if homeowners didn't like barred windows, they usually had the sense to bar the windows on the alley side. But it was a moot point; Abby couldn't ask the resident now.

Returning to the front door, she observed the other houses close by. Abby knew from Woody that before her time, this westside Long Beach neighborhood had been solidly middle class and Mayberry-like. But the freeway and the demise of the Navy base, coupled with an increase in shipping and truck traffic and the migration of a different demographic, had changed the vibe. Now, a diverse mix of street gangs dominated, and drug trade flourished, while decent, low-income folk hid behind the bars and tried to get by.

She walked up two steps, across the porch, and into the house. A narrow hallway led to the living room, and there she saw the body. A frail-looking old woman in a flowered nightgown lay on a frayed area rug. Like the previous victim, she'd been posed flat on her back, hands lying one on top of the other on her stomach, as if she were sleeping peacefully.

Except, of course, for the blood.

Abby's jaw tightened. Murder shattered more than just the victim. She knew that firsthand. Life would never be the same for family and friends, and she couldn't change that. But she

was certain that giving the grieving the comfort of seeing someone arrested and prosecuted would allow for a modicum of closure. Many victims had told her as much, and it was that knowledge that pushed her hard to solve every case.

*“One case that you let define you . . .”*

*Ethan, I do bring hope. Why can't you see that?*

The small space was furnished with old-fashioned, ornate, and well-worn furniture. Abby pulled latex gloves from her kit and snapped them on as she began a methodical and careful inspection of the area, searching in an ever-widening circle without disturbing the body, leaving that for the coroner's investigator.

An eerie déjà vu gripped her. As with the other homicide, it appeared as though the burglar had woken the victim and then committed the murder by bludgeoning with something close at hand. Here, it was a brass-handled cane, tossed on the floor and already marked with an evidence tag.

Same MO. She shot off a text to the watch commander; he could enter serial killer on his log.

“What's your name, dear?” she asked absently, searching for information that would identify the victim. From what she could see, the woman lived alone but for a dog—obviously not a watchdog. Abby figured animal control had already responded.

Drawers were open and contents strewn around the house. In the previous murder, the suspect had taken small items—coins and jewelry, easily concealed and carried away—which was typical if the suspect were a crackhead. But the murder made it atypical if this was a simple burglary for quick cash. The posing said something as well, as it was a rarity with serial killers and usually done to shock, not to lessen the blow. Ultimately,

the old women were no threat, so why kill them? Abby chewed on this question as she continued her survey.

On the bureau in the bedroom she found a California ID card and put a name to her unfortunate victim. Cora Murray smiled in the picture on the card, and Abby noted by the birth date that she was three months shy of her ninety-fifth birthday.

On the nightstand Abby spied an open Bible. She picked up the well-worn book, open to the fourth chapter of Hebrews. Goose bumps rippled down her forearms. Abby's favorite work verse was in this New Testament chapter, verse 13. She read it in the King James: "*Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do.*"

She liked to say the verse was a holy version of her homicide motto: *You can run, but you can't hide*. What a coincidence. Her eyes perused a bit more of the chapter. Much was underlined, and neat handwritten notes covered most of the space around the text.

Abby paused as a bittersweet memory interrupted her train of thought. The only personal effect she had from her mother was an old Bible. It was the Bible her mother had been given upon her baptism at age ten. Patricia had used it all through her high school years, up until she married Abby's dad and apparently walked away from God. Aunt Dede found the book in their mother's things after Patricia was gone, and Dede eventually gave it to Abby. She cherished the small brown Bible because it was filled with notes and insights—much like this one belonging to Cora—and it was all she knew about her mother's thoughts and dreams. She prayed that this Bible would be as important to someone in Cora's family.

"Why the frown?"

Abby looked up and set the Bible down. Woody was back; she hadn't heard him come in. A tall, lanky patrol officer with a full head of steel-gray hair, Officer Robert Woods studied her with an expressionless cop face. Woody had thirty-four years in harness, almost all in graveyard patrol, and as far as Abby knew, he had no intention of retiring anytime soon. It always tickled her to know that he pinned on the badge the same year she was born.

"I hate this," Abby said, not surprised she'd been frowning. "Why kill an old woman?"

He hiked a shoulder and rubbed the gray stubble on his chin. Then Abby saw the pain in his face, and it brought her up short.

"You knew her?"

He grimaced. "Been here a few times on calls—415 music complaints, prowlers, you know. Sometimes she'd make me a cup of coffee. Tried to talk her into bars on the windows, but she refused to live in a prison. Poor lady had a hard time adjusting as this neighborhood went from quiet and genteel to—"

"Noisy and slummy?"

Weariness settled over his craggy face. "I'll fill you in later. Your wit is back. I left him on the porch. I know you'll want to hear what he has to say." His body language told Abby he had more to say and that this murder affected him more than he would ever let on.

She rubbed her nose with the back of her gloved hand. She'd finished enough of the scene survey to draw a diagram, and the lab tech had arrived to process and collect the evidence. And now the witness was here to be interviewed. That was a whole different problem.

Abby had one more question for Woody before dealing with the witness.

“Can you tell what’s missing? Were you in here often enough to notice?”

He looked around. “Not really, but I’ll take another look.”

“Thanks.” Abby turned and, shedding the latex gloves, stepped out of the living room and through the doorway to talk to the man who’d called in the crime: Luke P. Murphy, private investigator.