

BURNING PROOF



JANICE CANTORE

PRAISE FOR JANICE CANTORE

“This is the start of a smart new series for retired police officer–turned–author Cantore. Interesting procedural details, multi-layered characters, lots of action, and intertwined mysteries offer plenty of appeal.”

BOOKLIST on *Drawing Fire*

“Cantore’s well-drawn characters employ Christian values and spirituality to navigate them through tragedy, challenges, and loss. However, layered upon the underlying basis of faith is a riveting police-crime drama infused with ratcheting suspense and surprising plot twists.”

SHELF AWARENESS on *Drawing Fire*

“*Drawing Fire* rips into the heart of every reader. One dedicated homicide detective. One poignant cold case. One struggle for truth. . . . Or is the pursuit revenge?”

DIANN MILLS, bestselling author of the FBI: Houston series

“This hard-edged and chilling narrative rings with authenticity. . . . 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*

“[Cantore’s] 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*

“*[Avenged]* offers plenty of procedural authenticity and suspense that will attract fans of Dee Henderson.”

LIBRARY JOURNAL

“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

BURNING PROOF



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COLD CASE
JUSTICE

JANICE CANTORE



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Summary: After months of investigating the brutal homicide of a young girl, Detective Abby Hart finally has the evidence she needs. But when the arrest goes terribly wrong, Abby begins to doubt her future as a police officer. As she wrestles with conflicting emotions, old questions about the fire that took her parents' lives come back to haunt her. "There is proof." PI Luke Murphy can't stop thinking about what Abby's former partner, Asa Foster, mumbled just before he died. When he uncovers a clue to the murder of Abby's parents and his uncle, he's reluctant to tell Abby, despite his growing feelings for the beautiful detective. A decade-old abduction case brings Luke and Abby together, but will his secret tear them apart?

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Therefore the Lord waits to be gracious to you, and therefore he exalts himself to show mercy to you. For the Lord is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for him.

ISAIAH 30:18

PROLOGUE

“IF GEORGE SANDERS weren’t already dead, I’d kill him.”

Kelsey Cox said nothing, knowing better than to interrupt when her boss was this angry. As if validating her silence, the tirade continued.

“He made this mess, opening his mouth when he should have stayed quiet. Feeding Detective Hart gossip that could ruin everything. He didn’t even know what he was talking about, for pete’s sake!” The last two words were punctuated by pounding the conference table.

Sanders had been a small-time criminal with a big-time mouth. He’d tried to implicate Governor Lowell Rollins in a twenty-seven-year-old triple murder. Any other cop would have seen the allegations as laughable. But since Abby Hart’s parents were among the victims, she’d taken every word seriously.

Sensing an opening to calm the situation, Kelsey spoke up. “But he is dead. There’s no way to verify anything he said. Don’t you think she’ll stop?” Kelsey sat across the conference table from her employer.

“Looking into her parents’ deaths? I doubt it. Not if she’s anything like her father.”

“But the Triple Seven case is closed. What could she possibly accomplish? There’s no proof connecting the governor to anything. Gavin—”

“Gavin, like Sanders, should have kept his mouth shut. If he was going to blow his brains out, he should have done it before he said anything.”

Cox flinched. The image of Gavin Kent’s suicide outside Governor Rollins’s Long Beach residence was all too fresh in her mind’s eye. And the fact that anyone could be so callous about his death abraded her heart; she still loved him.

“Oh, don’t get your back up.” Her boss smacked the table. “If you can’t move on, I can’t use you.”

Embarrassed and angry that she let her guard down and was so transparent, Cox gritted her teeth. “I have moved on.”

Standing, she turned her back to the boss and looked out the window. The beautiful blue, early fall sky did nothing to assuage her anxiety. “What do you want me to do about Hart?”

“Keep tabs on her for now. The governor will officially declare he’s in the senate race soon. She’ll have one more chance to accept his job offer.”

Kelsey couldn’t hide the shock, jerking back around. “You want her working *here* with Lowell?”

“Of course. Keep your enemies close. But if she doesn’t take the offer . . .” A cavalier shrug. “I’ll come up with another, more permanent solution.”

Cox put a hand behind her on the windowsill to keep from sliding sideways. In another time and place the thinly veiled threat her boss made to stop Hart would not have shaken her

so. In spite of her long law enforcement career, stepping up and doing the unpleasant—even the illegal—for a greater good was a no-brainer. But the mention of it now rocketed her back to the day she'd watched the governor's right-hand man, her lover, put a gun to his head and pull the trigger. She'd lost her balance that day, feeling as though the bullet had struck her as well, knocking her off a cliff, where she now hung by one hand, like a stuntman in the movies.

Unlike the movies, there was no rescuer rushing to the precipice to grab her hand and pull her up.

And every so often something would happen that made Kelsey feel like her fingers were being pulled back. Any minute now she could lose her grip completely. She hated Hart as much as her boss did—even more—but the woman was not a threat. There was nothing she could prove. Another murder was a risk, a finger being peeled back.

"Hart can poke around until frogs grow beards. All she'll get is frustrated." As soon as the words were out of her mouth, Kelsey wished she could take them back. Her boss did not take kindly to being questioned.

"Nothing, I mean nothing—not Hart, not that irritating PI Murphy, and not you dragging your feet—is going to get in the way of Lowell being a senator. Is that clear?"

Cox nodded, having to look away from the vicious, murderous glint in her boss's eyes.

"Can you do the job or do I need to find someone else?"

"You can count on me," she said as she was dismissed for the afternoon.

CHAPTER



MONDAY MORNING Detective Abby Hart filled her coffee cup as soon as the pot finished, then settled in at her desk and turned on the computer. She yawned, covering her mouth with the back of her hand, still a little foggy without caffeine. She'd participated in a beach volleyball tournament over the weekend. It'd been hard and tested her conditioning, but she and her beach partner had triumphed and taken home the trophy.

As she stretched and grimaced at the sore muscles that screamed, she was glad the office was quiet; she was first in and anticipating a court appearance later in the week. A reminder about her scheduled meeting with DA Drew in an hour popped up on her calendar. Homicide cases could take years to get to trial. When they did, she needed her head to be right back in the midst of the investigation as if it were fresh. She had several cases pending in various stages of the court process. The one Drew wanted to discuss was a gang shooting that occurred nearly a year ago. It was due to go to jury selection soon, so she planned to review all the pertinent details. A sharp pang of sadness sliced through her as she scanned the summary. She'd

consulted on the gang shooting with her first partner in homicide, her mentor, Asa Foster. He was retired at the time, but still a great resource. His death a few months ago still stung.

Shoving the sadness aside, she looked at the rest of her to-do list. She also wanted to review her most pressing open homicide case, spending her day after the meeting with the DA going over the Adonna Joiner homicide details. She heard footsteps but didn't look up because it was bound to be just another office mate or her partner, Bill.

"Abby."

The sharp, clear voice demanded her attention. Lieutenant Jacoby strode toward her desk. Something was in the works. The LT wasn't usually in until later. He dropped a manila envelope in front of her. "Glad you're here early. Just got this regarding the Joiner case."

Abby reached for the envelope. "I planned on pulling that file and calling the lab for an update."

The brutal rape and murder of a ten-year-old girl was a study in firsts: the first case she and her new partner, Bill Roper, had caught on their first on-call shift. Together they'd hit it hard for forty-eight hours and gotten nowhere. Then frustration set in. For the months since, it was their priority case. Evidence had been collected from the victim's body, but there was no hit in CODIS, the national offender database. Abby and Bill had knocked on doors and collected voluntary DNA swabs from several persons of interest, only to be stymied by a backlog at the lab. She often called Clayton and Althea Joiner, the victim's parents, to touch base. In fact, she planned to pay them a visit tomorrow.

She looked at the envelope and realized that it was from

the forensics lab. Her head snapped back and she stared at the lieutenant. “They got a match?” She undid the clasp and pulled the contents out, tense now and wide-awake.

“They did.” He pointed. “Halfway down. They got a match from one of the samples we took to exclude.”

Abby read the finding and was up out of her chair. “Unbelievable. It’s Curtis. I had a feeling.”

Javon Curtis, a single man, a loner living two doors away from the victim in a house he’d inherited from his mother, had been Abby’s number one suspect. He had no prior record and cooperated completely, even willingly providing the buccal swab that just implicated him, but her gut had told her something was off about the man.

“As soon as Bill gets in, go pick him up and bring him in for an interview. Hopefully he’ll open up.”

The adrenaline evaporated like smoke. “I have a meeting scheduled—”

“DA Drew is in the loop on this. Knowing you, you’ll have a confession before noon.” Jacoby gave her a half salute and left the office.

Abby looked at the clock. Bill should be in any minute. She couldn’t sit back down. She did a happy dance all the way to the file cabinet to pull the Joiner file.

“Hallelujah!” she said to the empty office. “I knew it was him. I just wish we could have proved it two months ago.”

She wanted to call the young victim’s father. He’d been waiting to hear that his daughter’s killer had been identified, and Abby knew better than anyone what that kind of wait was like. But she decided it would make more sense to have the suspect in custody first and, as the LT had hopefully implied, have a

confession. The killing of Adonna Joiner had been horrific, and the close-knit neighborhood she'd lived in was volatile.

Abby sat at her desk with the file and remembered that the suspect, Javon Curtis, had stood next to the grieving parents at many of the numerous press conferences while they pleaded for any witnesses to come forward. What a Judas. She and Bill were the only ones who suspected him, but there was no evidence. When Curtis claimed to have been out of town at the time the murder occurred and provided his buccal swab for testing in order to exclude, she'd wondered then if her instincts had betrayed her.

He snowed everyone with his easy compliance—tried to throw us off. Abby's annoyance was tempered by the knowledge that he couldn't fool the science of an exact match. But match notwithstanding, she wanted a confession. Abby hated relying solely on DNA in court. As strong as a DNA match like this was, she wanted an admission and, if possible, a little contrition. She rarely got the contrition; usually criminals only felt bad about getting caught. But a case where someone actually expressed remorse always made her feel a little better.

Abby had kept tabs on Curtis and a finger on the pulse of the neighborhood in the months since the murder. There had been understandable anger over the lab situation. But the Joiners were patient, churchgoing people. They had faith they'd get their answers, and Abby was overjoyed that it appeared their faith would be rewarded today.

Bill walked in, and Abby hit him with the news before he could fill up his coffee mug.

It was just before 9 a.m. when they arrived in the quiet neighborhood and knocked on the front door of the suspect's

residence. The only precaution they'd taken was having a black-and-white cruise the alley to be certain the man didn't flee. But neither Abby nor Bill expected the suspect would give them any trouble.

He didn't. Javon Curtis invited them inside his house and then quietly accepted being handcuffed after they informed him that DNA identified him as at least a rapist and at most a killer.

Then everything went sideways.

Abby stepped out of the house onto the porch, Bill and Javon behind her. Bill pulled the door closed, and Abby turned to take the first step down. She snatched her weapon from its holster as training kicked in.

There was a man on the lawn pointing a gun at them.

From the corner of her eye she saw Javon try to bolt left. Bill grabbed at him while conflicting emotions swirled through Abby's insides like a debris-filled tornado. The man with the gun was her victim's father, Clayton Joiner.

"Put the gun down now!" she ordered, reflexively shifting left to shield Bill and Javon.

Joiner ignored her, also stepping to the left. "He murdered my baby!"

"Please, Clayton." Abby's gun was up and on target. A thousand questions begging—most of all: *How did Clayton know?*

"He'll be charged; he'll pay. Put the gun down."

Something like a sob and a groan escaped his lips. He raised his gun and fired.

So did Abby.