

CATCHING HEAT



JANICE CANTORE

PRAISE FOR JANICE CANTORE

“Questions of faith shape the well-woven details, the taut action scenes, and the complex characters in Cantore’s riveting mystery.”

BOOKLIST on *Burning Proof*

“In *Burning Proof*, Cantore proves her skills as an author with multilayered plots, all with an underlying focus on faith. Her twenty-two years of experience on the police force lends her riveting police-crime drama totally suspenseful, authentic, and memorable.”

CBA RETAILERS + Resources

“[In] the second book in Cantore’s Cold Case Justice series . . . the romantic tension between Abby and Luke seems to be growing stronger, which creates anticipation for the next installment.”

ROMANTIC TIMES on *Burning Proof*

“This is the start of a smart new series for retired police officer-turned-author Cantore. Interesting procedural details, multilayered 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, Christianbookreviews.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

CATCHING HEAT



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COLD CASE
JUSTICE

JANICE CANTORE



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PROLOGUE

“**THIS LOOKS LIKE** a fairy-tale cottage, one you’d see painted on the cover of a kids’ book.” Abby Hart turned toward Robert “Woody” Woods as they reached their destination. “Trouble is, in those books something bad often lives in the cottage.”

Her partner laughed. “Think an ogre lives here?” he asked as they stepped out of the car.

“If this were fairy-tale Grimm, you can bet that’s what we’d find.”

She stood by the car door for a minute and took a deep breath, enjoying the fresh air. It had rained yesterday, but today was gorgeous—seventy-five degrees, puffy white clouds dotting a brilliant-blue sky with a gentle breeze rustling leaves on the trees. She turned as the patter of paws caught her attention. A medium-size shepherd trotted up to her, wagging his tail. Abby missed her own little dog, Bandit, and bent to scratch the shepherd’s head.

“Hey, cutie, you live here?”

Woody joined her, and for a moment they showered the dog with praise.

“Nice dog. Collar, no tag. Wonder where he belongs.”

“He’s a little on the thin side. . . . I wonder.” She looked toward the house. “We can ask, but first let’s find out about the odd guy that used to work here.”

They left the dog and walked toward the house. Around them birds chirped, and she noticed a hummingbird feeder hanging from a branch on one of the oak trees.

Abby knocked on the door and stepped off the porch to wait, noting that the dog had followed and was watching her, tail wagging. She’d try to remember to ask who owned the dog—if they came up empty on their search, that was. They were asking about a cold case, and you never knew if you were going to touch a nerve, unearth a buried clue, or receive blank, empty stares.

She took a police tactic out of habit, moving to one side of the door as Woody stood on the other. She had been part of the West Coast’s federal cold case squad since November and was now working with Woody and PI Luke Murphy. But she’d known and worked with Woody for years before that. He’d been her first training officer in uniform and a good, solid friend for the fifteen years since. Though he’d retired from the PD, Woody eagerly jumped aboard the cold case squad and Abby was happy to be teamed up with him.

She was about to knock again when the door opened. From the corner of her eye, she caught a blur of fur and realized that the dog had fled, tail between his legs. Frowning, she turned to the tall, dark-haired and bearded man who had stepped partially into the doorway but stayed in the shadows.

“Sergio?” Abby asked.

“*Sí. El jefe*, he send you?” Through his thick accent, his tone was guarded, suspicious, and it set Abby on edge. But there could be a lot of reasons he was nervous.

“Yes, I’m Detective Hart, and this is Investigator Woods. The owner told you we’d be coming by to ask you some questions?”

“About Chester?”

“Yeah, what kind of problems did he cause?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know where he is.”

“What can you tell us about the man?”

He shook his head, looking for all the world like he didn’t understand the question. Abby squinted, trying to read his face in the shadows.

“We’re not from immigration,” she said, hoping he’d stop being obtuse. “We’re looking for a witness to a crime that occurred near here a few years ago. Maybe it was this Chester.”

She glanced at her watch. They were scheduled to meet Agent Orson for an early lunch after this contact, and at this rate they would be late.

“Your boss told us you fired him. Do you remember anything about him?” Woody asked, trying a different tack.

“S~~h~~, I fire him, but I don’t know where he go.”

He looked bewildered again, and Abby got impatient with the shtick. And with the sun hitting her in the face, this was a position of disadvantage. She was ready to move on but wanted to be 100 percent certain.

“Maybe you have employment paperwork we could look at. Would you mind if we came inside to talk for a few minutes?” she asked, praying the man wouldn’t pretend he didn’t know what that meant. His employer had told them that most employee records were kept with Sergio. She hoped he’d have something that would provide a more detailed work history about Chester than they had so far.

Thankfully, Sergio nodded and stepped aside, motioning for

Abby to enter his home. Abby stepped up onto the porch and into the house, Woody behind her.

Sergio let them enter and closed the door. Abby turned to look at him just as he brought his elbow up and struck Woody full force in the back of his head. Woody went down hard.

Shock gripped Abby by the throat, and she dropped her notebook to reach for her gun.

Too slow.

Sergio knelt on Woody's back, flipped open a switchblade, and held it to the fallen man's neck, just below the ear.

"Don't move or I will kill him," he ordered, voice calm, with no trace of an accent. Keeping the knife pressed to Woody's neck with his left hand, he held out his right hand. "Hand me your gun by the grip."

Abby hesitated as Sergio pressed with the knife and a drop of blood pinched out.

Face flushed, she tried to think, tried to see a way out of surrendering her weapon.

"Now. The gun. Hurry."

Knowing Woody would bleed out in bare minutes if Sergio pressed any harder, Abby carefully drew her weapon and handed it to Sergio. He took it and thankfully removed the knife from Woody's neck and stood upright, pointing her .45 at her. As he backed up, Abby knelt to check on Woody, who started to get up. He put a hand to his neck where Sergio had drawn blood and rose to his knees. To Abby he seemed okay, if a little shaky from the blow to his head.

"Kudos to you two for finding me after all this time. I've stayed well hidden but never lost my paranoia. Does Victoria know?"

Neither Abby nor Woody answered.

“Does she know?” he demanded.

“She will, when we take your butt in,” Woody said, the timbre in his voice telling Abby he was more than a little shaken up.

“You don’t get it. You think I’m the monster. You’re wrong. She’s the killer, and if she finds me, she’ll finish the job. I can’t let that happen. I can’t let you tell her that you found me.” He extended the gun their direction.

All Abby could think was *Welcome to fairy-tale Grimm.*

CHAPTER



THREE WEEKS EARLIER

“PLEASE STATE YOUR name for the court.”

Abby had to admit to almost feeling sorry for the woman sitting before the judge today. Less than a year ago, Kelsey Cox had retired as a deputy chief after a thirty-year, trailblazing law enforcement career. And here she was in a prison jumpsuit, no makeup, bad hairstyle, and looking so painfully thin, Abby winced. She also sported what looked like a fresh black eye. Someone in jail had most likely recognized her as an ex-cop. Abby wondered if that was why Kelsey insisted on the fast track for her confession. If so, she understandably wanted to get out of the city jail and into a state facility, where there were fewer chances of being recognized. She was set to confess to murdering and then concealing the body of Buck Morgan, Abby’s father, more than twenty-seven years ago.

Yeah, Abby thought, I almost feel sorry.

Cox cleared her throat. “Kelsey June Cox.” She stared at the microphone she spoke into, seemingly oblivious to anyone else

in the judge's private chamber. This had been one of Kelsey's demands—along with the plea to speed up the process and have her hearing as soon as possible—that she be able to give her statement in private, with only a few people present and no questions except from the judge. All in exchange for a mere fifteen-year sentence.

Sure, I'm getting a confession, Abby thought. But why do I feel as though in our effort to close this, we've dealt away justice—real justice?

She looked over at Walter Gunther, Long Beach's police beat reporter. She'd fought to have him here in a simple demonstration of petulance. It was one battle won in a lost war. As glad as she was that he was in her corner, she wished it were Luke Murphy by her side, giving her support.

"Please proceed with your statement, Ms. Cox, about what occurred on the night of June 16, 1988."

After a sip of water, Cox began. "On that night, I left work late, after 10 p.m., and returned to my home on Granada, in Long Beach, to hear two men arguing." Her voice was thin and reedy, not the same one Abby remembered barking orders when Kelsey Cox was a supervisor in patrol.

"I shared the home with Gavin Kent. He was a fellow officer and my fiancé. I recognized him as being part of the argument, but it was only when I stepped out onto the patio that I saw who the other person was. It was Buck Morgan." She paused to take a drink of water. Her gaze flickered briefly to Abby, then back down to the mic.

"Was Buck Morgan an acquaintance?" the judge asked.

"Buck Morgan was known to me as one of the owners of a restaurant that had burned down, the Triple Seven. The fire had

occurred two nights previous, and it was assumed by everyone that Morgan had died in it.”

“Did someone die in the fire?”

“We found three bodies. At the time we thought them to be Buck Morgan, his wife, Patricia, and Luke Goddard, their cook.”

The judge scribbled some notes.

“When you stepped out onto the patio, did the two men see you?”

“No, uh . . . I mean, I think Gavin saw me, but I was behind Buck.”

“What was the argument about?”

“I only caught bits of it—it really didn’t make sense, and like I said, I thought Buck was dead, and that concerned me. What if he had faked his death? It occurred to me that he might be a killer; he might have killed his wife, the cook, and set the fire . . .”

Abby was almost up out of her seat. Beside her, DA Drew gripped her hand, and Walter shook his head. Face hot, heart pumping, Abby slowly settled back into her chair. For the first time Cox steadily looked her way, expression blank.

Abby fumed. Gavin Kent was the one who burned down her father’s restaurant, killed her mother. Of course her father had a reason to be arguing with him. What was it Kelsey was going to confess to? A bad hair day and taking it out on Abby’s dad?

The judge cast a frown Abby’s direction and then nodded for Cox to continue.

“I didn’t really know what to think, or what was happening, but I could see that Buck was trying to get Gavin to go somewhere with him. Fearing for Gavin, I moved in behind Morgan.”

“Did you have a weapon?”

“I’d left my duty weapon in the house and I didn’t want to waste time by going back to get it. I grabbed a shovel—we were having work done in our backyard and there was one handy. Morgan was getting more animated. Gavin was vulnerable—he’d hurt himself and was not 100 percent.”

“How had he hurt himself?”

“Helping with the yard remodel.”

Abby could not hold back a snort. Gavin Kent had been wounded in a gunfight, shot by her father, after Buck had witnessed Gavin kill Abby’s mother. Her dad then killed the drug dealer Gavin had brought with him. After that he ran out of ammo and had to flee the restaurant for his life.

Another angry glance from the judge, and she forced herself to nod an apology.

“What happened then?”

“I just reacted. I saw Morgan move toward Gavin, and I swung the shovel and hit him in the head as hard as I could.”



Abby left the courthouse angry and frustrated. She remembered when she was a kid in foster care, in the weeks right after her parents’ murders, filled with anger. She used to pound big rocks into smaller rocks and pretend she was pounding the people who had murdered them. It had been a long time since that anger—rage, really—had surged so completely through her. A rage that made her want to pound something—or someone. What Kelsey called a confession was a farce.

A social worker back then had given Abby a Bible verse from the book of Deuteronomy. It took years before six-year-old Abby completely understood the verse, but when she did, it

became a lifeline and something that eased her anger. *“He gives justice to the fatherless and widows . . .”*

“Hey, Abby, hold up.”

She stopped and turned. She’d tried to ignore Gunther but wasn’t angry enough to make the old guy chase after her. Besides, he wasn’t the one who infuriated her.

“Trying to give me a heart attack?” He caught up to her, breathing hard, bending over, and putting his hands on his thighs to catch his breath. “You stormed out of there and made the judge mad,” he said after he straightened up. “Hope you don’t have to try any cases in front of him right away.”

“I don’t know what I expected in there. I didn’t want a trial any more than the DA did—too risky with the shaky evidence we have—but somehow what Kelsey had to say just didn’t sit right with me. She wanted my dad to be the bad guy, threatening Gavin Kent. And Kent is the man who killed my mother!”

Gunther raised both hands. “Calm down. I’m on your side here.”

Abby took a deep breath, glancing around the street in front of the courthouse, at the people coming and going. This was the place where people came for justice, she thought bitterly. On one level she knew she had no right to be so angry. She had more answers now about the murders of her parents than she’d had a year ago.

After Gavin Kent killed her mother, her father fled, thinking that by doing so he’d saved Abby, that Kent would leave her alone. But Kent still burned the restaurant down to destroy evidence, nearly killing Abby and killing an innocent cook, Luke Murphy’s uncle. Her father had come out of hiding to try to take Kent to the police, but Cox killed Buck Morgan before

that could happen. Then she buried him under tons of concrete in her backyard, where he'd lain hidden for all these years.

Now, at least, there would be one person in jail, sentenced for part of the crime. Abby had hoped Kelsey would finally point the finger at the person responsible for ordering the massacre at the Triple Seven restaurant: California's First Lady, Alyssa Rollins. But after hearing Cox's self-serving confession, it stung like a thousand bee stings to Abby's heart that Alyssa effortlessly slipped through every crack and avoided judgment. She was the real killer, and she would stay free.

She looked at Gunther. "I know you are. This is just aggravating."

"Well, step into my office." He pointed to a street hot dog vendor. "Let me buy you lunch and we'll talk about it."

In spite of everything Abby laughed. "Yeah, that used to be Asa's favorite place to take me for lunch too." Her old partner Asa Foster had been the one to introduce her to the crusty reporter Gunther. "But he did it because he was cheap."

"I resemble that remark," Gunther said with mock insult.

"Thanks for the offer, but I've got some training to get back to, for the cold case squad. Rain check?"

"Sure." He stepped close. "I'd still like to pick your brain about the Triple Seven someday. It's not settled in my mind, and I don't think it's settled in yours either."

Abby cocked her head and shrugged, then continued on to the parking structure.

She'd thought all of this had been settled in her heart and mind a long time ago, but it wasn't, she realized. *I doubt that it will ever be settled. I'm that orphan talked about in the Bible. God is supposed to give me justice. Will he ever deliver?*