



ONE

FINAL

TARGET

JANICE CANTORE

PRaise for Janice Cantore

“This timely police procedural from a twenty-two-year veteran of the Long Beach, Calif., police satisfies.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY on *Code of Courage*

“*Code of Courage* by Janice Cantore is an exciting romantic thriller. . . . I guarantee you will not be able to put this book down! It is a thrilling and inspirational read and one I highly recommend for anyone who enjoys romantic suspense.”

CHRISTIAN NOVEL REVIEW

“Another fantastic police procedural from one of the best. [*Code of Courage*] is completely satisfying and downright enjoyable!”

WRITE READ LIFE

“Cantore’s fast-paced and unpredictable suspense kept me burning the midnight oil for the next page and the next. Romantic suspense doesn’t get better than this.”

DIANN MILLS, bestselling author of *Airborne* and *Fatal Strike*,
on *Breach of Honor*

“*Breach of Honor* is one of the best stories I’ve read in a long time! Pulling on her years of expertise in law enforcement, Janice takes the reader on an edge-of-the-seat journey that makes you willing to lose sleep to find out what happens next! This one is on my keeper list and I’m eagerly awaiting the next book from Janice.”

LYNETTE EASON, bestselling, award-winning author of the *Danger Never Sleeps* series

“I can’t remember the last time I’ve been so invested in the outcome of a story or so satisfied with its conclusion. With *Breach of Honor*, Janice Cantore has crafted an adventure filled with brutal crimes, heartbreaking injustice, shocking twists, a gentle romance, and hard-won faith. Words like *page turning*, *breath stealing*, and *pulse racing*, while accurate, don’t begin to do it justice.”

LYNN H. BLACKBURN, award-winning author of the Dive Team Investigations series

“In *Breach of Honor*, Janice Cantore tells a complex tale of deceit and backroom deals that leaves you wondering who the good guys actually are. . . . I could not wait to get to the end and see how it all tied together.”

HALLEE BRIDGEMAN, bestselling author of the Song of Suspense series

“A fast-paced thriller with a strong Christian message . . . [*Cold Aim*] is an exciting and thought-provoking book.”

CHRISTIAN NOVEL REVIEW

“A complex tale of murder, deceit, and faith challenges, complete with multifaceted characterizations, authentic details, and action scenes, even a subtle hint of romance . . . [all] well integrated into a suspenseful story line that keeps pages turning until the end.”

MIDWEST BOOK REVIEW on *Lethal Target*

“Well-drawn characters and steady action make for a fun read.”

WORLD magazine on *Lethal Target*

“Readers who crave suspense will devour Cantore’s engaging crime drama while savoring the sweet romantic swirl. . . . *Crisis Shot* kicks off this latest series with a literal bang.”

ROMANTIC TIMES

“A gripping crime story filled with complex and interesting characters and a plot filled with twists and turns.”

THE SUSPENSE ZONE on *Crisis Shot*

“A pulsing crime drama with quick beats and a plot that pulls the reader in . . . [and] probably one of the most relevant books I’ve read in a while. . . . This is a suspenseful read ripped from the front page and the latest crime drama. I highly recommend.”

RADIANT LIT on *Crisis Shot*

“Cantore, a retired police officer, shares her love for suspense, while her experience on the force lends credibility and depth to her writing. Her characters instantly become the reader’s friends.”

CBA CHRISTIAN MARKET on *Crisis Shot*

“An intriguing story that could be pulled from today’s headlines.”

MIDWEST BOOK REVIEW on *Crisis Shot*

“The final volume of Cantore’s Cold Case Justice trilogy wraps the series with a gripping thriller that brings readers into the mind of a police officer involved in a fatal shooting case. . . . Cantore offers true-to-life stories that are relevant to today’s news.”

LIBRARY JOURNAL on *Catching Heat*

“Cantore manages to balance quick-paced action scenes with developed, introspective characters to keep the story moving along steadily. The issue of faith arises naturally, growing out of the characters’ struggles and history. Their romantic relationship is handled with a very light touch . . . but the police action and mystery solving shine.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY on *Catching Heat*

“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] 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

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Tyndale House Publishers
Carol Stream, Illinois

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Cover designed by Dean H. Renninger

Published in association with the literary agency of Books & Such Literary Management, 52 Mission Circle, Suite 122, PMB 170, Santa Rosa, CA 95409.

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One Final Target is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the author's imagination.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN 978-1-4964-5760-8

Printed in the United States of America

30	29	28	27	26	25	24
7	6	5	4	3	2	1

*Dedicated to first responders who face trauma on a
daily basis yet continue to work at helping people*

It is jolting when all of a sudden your life has been impacted by trauma. It may feel like your reality and the person you once were is not the person you are after trauma. Survivors of trauma often feel out of control of their self, their mind, and their body.

BETH SHAW, *Psychology Today* BLOG

Whenever our heart convicts us [in guilt] . . . God is greater than our heart and He knows all things [nothing is hidden from Him because we are in His hands].

I JOHN 3:20

CHAPTER 1

SERGEANT JODIE KING TAPPED the butt of her handgun with her index and second fingers, an outward sign of inward anxiousness. She figured when she stopped being anxious about serving a warrant, it was time to do something else. Unease would keep her on her toes.

Adding to the unease—the frigid predawn temp. *Cold* and *fidgety* described her team. Everyone was ready to move. Snow had fallen earlier and was threatening again. Jodie checked her team and saw four determined expressions and four spirals of icy breath swirling up into the air.

A beach girl at heart, Jodie felt out of her element in the mountain cold. But the target was here, and they would take him into custody. She and her officers—affectionately called RAT, an

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acronym for recidivist apprehension team—were staged beside a vacant home, on the west side of the target address. Paramedics were present just in case, and since they weren't in the city but in the county's jurisdiction, a deputy sheriff also stood by, monitoring the situation.

"Ready?" she asked.

"You bet, Chief," Tiny Peters answered first. At six-five and 250 pounds, the ex-football player held the universal key, the battering ram they'd use on the door. Convinced Jodie would be chief one day, he never called her sergeant.

Gail Shyler nodded, her cop expression firmly in place.

Tim Evers popped his bubble gum as a way of saying yes.

Gus Perkins gave his trademark thumbs-up.

Of course they were ready. RAT consisted of the best of the best. Jodie would accept nothing less. She ignored the hitch in her thought process that reminded her they were one day early and one man short. Proper planning would compensate for the change. Time to go.

"All right. Let's do it."

Jodie moved her people as a unit from the staging van across the neighboring yard to the overgrown, completely unkempt front yard of their target.

She and Gus trotted to the left side of the door. Tiny stepped to the right side. Shyler and Evers were the entry pair.

Tiny gave the announcement. "Norman Hayes, Long Beach PD. We have a warrant. Open the door." He repeated the phrase twice more.

No response. One practiced swing and the door splintered apart, leaving a gaping opening.

Shyler and Evers, weapons at the ready, moved in first, going

left. Jodie and Gus were directly behind them, moving right. In short order, the efficient twosomes cleared the small two-bedroom, one-bath mountain cabin.

Jodie took a breath as disappointment hit like a punch. This was supposed to be a sure thing. Norman Hayes had two felony warrants out of Long Beach and numerous connections here in San Bernardino. Besides her confidential informant, the sheriff's office had confirmed Hayes was living in the house.

Holstering her weapon, Jodie surveyed the living room, conscious of a few odd things: the smell of fresh paint, the warmth of the room from a heater, and the neat and tidy nature of the inside. While the outside of the house was obviously neglected, the living room was decidedly minimalist and even cozy.

"See what you can find. I can't believe Jukebox was so completely off."

"I don't know why you have so much faith in Juke," Gus said as he walked into the kitchen. "He's too many fries short of a Happy Meal."

"But he's from here and he hears things." Jodie frowned as she looked at the cozy room. "Someone has been living here. And recently." Glancing at Gus, she saw dismay on his face. "What do you see?"

"Coffee is warm."

"Shower is wet," Shyler called from the bathroom.

Tiny stopped his progress toward the back of the house, cocking his head, listening. He and Jodie both circled back and ended up at the front door.

Jodie put her hand on her service weapon. "He must still be here. What did we miss?" She looked up, wondering about an attic.

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A loud click sounded in the kitchen, like a big switch being pulled. This was followed by a hissing of released air or gas.

Gus looked down at his feet, then raised his head, eyes wide. Jodie turned toward Tiny and saw a look of absolute horror on his face.

“It’s a trap! Everyone out!” Tiny grabbed Jodie by the shoulders. She resisted, wanting more of an explanation. In a split second, he physically lifted her up and carried her out the door.

“What—?” The question died in her throat as Tiny literally threw her into the yard.

“Get clear,” he yelled as he strode back into the house, calling for Gail and Tim to get out.

Momentum from Tiny’s toss propelled her across the yard, but Jodie couldn’t flee. *I have to save my friends.*

Catching her breath, she rolled to her feet and pivoted to go back in—too late. The horrific boom of the blast obliterated Tiny’s yells and exploded chaos in Jodie’s frantic thoughts. A punch of hot air, much stronger than Tiny, lifted her from the ground as if she were a rag doll and pitched her across the yard again.

Jodie’s stomach lurched, her eardrums popped, and pain screamed up her right arm as it took the full force of her landing, the thin layer of snow doing nothing to cushion her fall. All around, the sky rained flaming debris. Scrambling to her left side, she pushed herself to her knees, ignoring the bits of jagged glass abrading her palm.

The house she’d just been inside became a fireball.

Heat hit her face in a wave, and Jodie watched in horror as angry flames consumed the house and her coworkers. Staggering to her feet and holding her good arm in front of her face to shield

it from the heat, she stumbled toward the inferno, screaming for Tiny, Gus—*anyone*.

Voices clamored behind her.

“Sergeant King, get back, get back!”

Someone grabbed her.

“My guys! They’re still in there.” She tried to pull away, but the arms were strong.

“No one could have survived that blast,” the voice said as the man dragged her back.

Another explosion rocked the house, and a wave of searing, noxious heat rolled over them.

The foul smoke from the burning log home brought hot tears that stung her eyes. Coughing and fighting, Jodie could not prevent herself from being dragged to safety. The paramedics forced her behind the waiting ambulance as fast-approaching sirens from alerted fire personnel drowned out her complaints. A swirling cloud of black smoke snaked across the cloudy sky, smearing it like ink.

As darkness closed in, one thought ran through Jodie’s mind: *How did something so routine go so horribly wrong?*

CHAPTER 2

THREE MONTHS LATER

“A memorial plaque and four blue spruce pines, dedicated to your team.”

Jonah Bennett meant well by offering to plant a memorial to the dead somewhere on the mountain, but when Jodie parked her car and stared at the still-desolate square footage where they’d lost their lives, realization dawned—she’d have to say no to the offer. At least for now. A memorial honored something that was finished, over. Nothing about the case was over for Jodie, not by a long shot.

She got out of the car, a shiver running through her when the cold wind assaulted her face. Who knew it was cold in hell?

She knelt in front of the charred foundation, unsteady, nearly bowled over by the intensity of the emotion vibrating through her. Coming back to the scene hurt more than she’d imagined it would.

Fueled by a busted gas line and open propane tanks, the fire had obliterated the house. A black smudge on the ground pierced Jodie as a sharp reminder of all she'd lost.

Jodie was no stranger to loss, having been orphaned at eight. As devastating as losing her parents had been, she survived. Now, losing her team made her feel orphaned all over again. More than Jodie's arm and wrist had broken because of the blast. She felt as if she were Humpty-Dumpty, broken in pieces by the memories hounding her day after day. Surely no one—not all the king's horses nor all the king's men—could put her back together again.

But God.

Those two words gave Jodie comfort and stabbing pain at the same time. With all her heart, she believed God was present and in control. Yet she could not climb out of the pit she found herself in. The valley walls surrounding her kept her from God's line of sight.

A cold wind sent an involuntary shiver down her spine. She hugged her arms to her chest when an eerie snapping sound drew her gaze to the lot boundary. The remnants of yellow crime scene tape popped and cracked as it twisted in the frigid breeze.

Closing her eyes, she saw the fire, smelled the acrid smoke, and grieved for her lost teammates and friends. Tiny appeared in her mind's eye, bloodied and charred, expression accusing.

"You let us down, Chief."

She jerked to her feet, running her palms across her cheeks to wipe away the tears, as grief threatened to overwhelm her. Would the tears ever stop? For a few minutes she stood still, hoping her legs didn't give way beneath her. When her thoughts cleared, she hugged her arms to her chest as tight as she could, wishing she'd wake up from this nightmare.

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Even in her grief and pain, Jodie wanted to move from this place, this mire she found herself in. She just didn't know how. She had tried. After the last funeral, days morphed into weeks, weeks into months. Slowly, feeling as if maybe time helped ease the heavy crush of pain and loss, she'd resolved to take steps forward, to return to the land of the living. The removal of her cast signaled it was time to go back to work. She tried.

Two weeks ago, while still in physical therapy for her wrist, she accepted an administrative position. Jodie sat at a desk reviewing arrest reports. She lasted only a week before turning in her badge and filing for early retirement, against the advice of her friends and the department psychologist.

Her team had been multijurisdictional. Gail hailed from Seal Beach PD, Tim from El Monte PD. Gus and Tiny were from her department, and the station seemed filled with ghostly memories: Tiny working out in the basement gym. Gus boasting about the retirement home he had planned. Gail pretending she didn't notice Tim was sweet on her and working up the courage to ask her out.

And there was one who wasn't a ghost: Ian Hunter, Jodie's second-in-command on RAT. Because Jodie had chosen to go a day early and he had to be with his wife, who was having surgery, Ian wasn't there during the raid. Every chance he got, he reminded Jodie that she had rushed things. *"You should have waited."*

In the days before returning to work, Jodie had smiled through the pain. *"I'm ready, back on my feet. I want to go back to work."* Those words now rang hollow in her memory as empty lies. Jodie did not know how to go back to life as a police officer—not without her friends and colleagues.

Doc Bass begged her to be patient. *"Allow yourself time to grieve. Emotional wounds don't heal as fast as physical ones. Stop looking at*

this as your responsibility. Focus on the cause of the explosion: Hayes. Not you. Forgive yourself. The deaths of your friends were not your fault.”

“Four good cops died on my watch. They. Were. My. Responsibility.”

Jodie couldn't forgive, and she couldn't blame anyone but herself. She'd missed something in the weeks leading up to the warrant service, something she should have seen.

I should have known.

Norman Hayes was still missing. Once the fire was out and forensics responded, they discovered a partially collapsed tunnel leading from the target address to the lot behind, where an unoccupied vacation home had been burglarized. Someone *had* been in the cabin, ostensibly Hayes, and fled, probably after the first knock. This prompted a huge manhunt—which came up empty.

Investigators theorized Hayes fled the residence through the passageway to the vacant home, escaping before the blast, eventually finding a way off the mountain and possibly out of the country.

Jodie didn't buy it. Her CI, the man who'd given her the tip about the cabin, was also missing. A local lifeguard, Jukebox had no criminal record. It was inconceivable to her to think he was part of this heinous ambush. She'd stayed quiet and let the investigation run its course, and here she was, three months later, with no satisfactory resolution.

There had to be a way to discover what really happened and who was responsible. Jodie vowed to find it.

She kicked a piece of burnt wood and watched it disintegrate into black flakes. “I'm finished crying. I will find out the truth somehow.”

No echo bounced back. Her words faded in the chilly wind.

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She jerked a therapy ball out of her pocket and squeezed it in her right hand. Her injuries had healed slowly. The therapy ball became a nervous habit. Frustration fueled each squeeze.

She'd lived while the people she supervised went up in smoke in the blink of an eye. Guilt kept telling her she shouldn't be alive while her whole team had perished. Her knuckles turned white around the ball. She wondered if she'd pulverize it.

Another shiver ran through her, as much from the memory as from the wind, which seemed to get colder with every gust.

The sound of an approaching vehicle caught her attention. Turning, she saw a late-model black Jeep cruising slowly up the drive toward where she had parked, the crunch and snap of large off-road tires rolling over gravel loud. The vehicle was unfamiliar. She could see a man in the driver's seat, but he, too, was someone she didn't know. Tensing, Jodie wondered who else would have business here, at this lot, which was essentially a graveyard now.

Suddenly the Jeep leaped forward, straight toward her, and the man laid on the horn. Startled, Jodie lurched from his path and sprinted for her car just as the sound of gunfire destroyed the mountain morning quiet.