



VISIBLE THREAT

from veteran police officer **Janice Cantore**

VISIBLE THREAT

VISIBLE THREAT

from veteran police officer **Janice Cantore**



TYNDALE HOUSE PUBLISHERS, INC.
CAROL STREAM, ILLINOIS

Visit Tyndale online at www.tyndale.com.

Visit Janice Cantore's website at www.janicecantore.com.

TYNDALE and Tyndale's quill logo are registered trademarks of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

Visible Threat

Copyright © 2010, 2014 by Janice Cantore. All rights reserved.

Previously published in 2010 as *A Heart of Justice* by OakTara under ISBN 978-1-60290-155-1. First printing by Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., in 2014.

Cover photograph of woman copyright © pkripper503/iStockphoto. All rights reserved.

Cover photograph of road at night copyright © Visage/MediaBakery. All rights reserved.

Designed by Mark Anthony Lane II

Published in association with the literary agency of D.C. Jacobson & Associates LLC, an Author Management Company. www.dcjacobson.com.

Scripture taken from the Holy Bible, *New International Version*,[®] *NIV*.[®] Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.[™] Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com.

Visible Threat 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.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Cantore, Janice.

[Heart of justice]

"Previously published in 2010 as *A Heart of Justice* by OakTara"—Title page verso.

ISBN 978-1-4143-7554-0 (pbk.)

1. Policewomen—Fiction. 2. Bulgarians—United States—Fiction. 3. Human trafficking victims—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3603.A588H43 2014

813'.6—dc23

2013036929

Printed in the United States of America

20 19 18 17 16 15 14
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

HOPE

IVANA AND VILLIE SAT CLOSE, heads together as they pored over the magazines—*Glamour*, *Vogue*, *Self*—oohing and aahing at the clothes and the stick-thin models. The sisters had been up for almost sixteen hours, unable to sleep as they anticipated their new adventure. Ivana could hardly believe their good fortune.

They were about to dock in America.

After growing up in a small, poor village in Bulgaria, this trip was a dream, often imagined but rarely realized. But because of Demitri, Ivana and her older sister, Villie, were on the journey of their lives to the Promised Land. They'd lost their parents ten years ago when Villie was twelve and Ivana eight. A bleak orphanage had been their home since then, each being asked to leave when she turned eighteen. Now they had the hope of making a home together, just the two of them, in a magnificent new country.

While they giggled and imagined the wonderland where they would live and work, Demitri was behind them talking

on the phone, making plans. Ivana noticed he'd been agitated lately but had no idea why. She and her sister tried hard to keep out of his way.

"Just a lot of business on his mind," Villie had whispered one night, and Ivana agreed.

Demitri had gotten them away from their drab village and arranged work for them in America, so their debt to him was huge. They would work for a rich American. There was a Bulgarian shop in California—a wonderful place that paid clerks more money than Ivana and Villie could imagine. Or maybe they could even work for a movie star, taking care of her babies. For Ivana, the possibilities were endless and wonderful.

Currently they were on a huge ship. There were no windows to tell them if it was night or day, but they had not minded at all. Demitri had said they would be arriving soon, and the anticipation had kept their spirits up.

Demitri finished his phone call and stood. He walked to where Ivana and Villie had stored their belongings and began to pull things out.

"What are you doing?" Villie asked.

"I want your passports and visas—now. Hurry; give them to me."

"Have we arrived?" Villie asked, excitement in her voice as she rose from her chair in tandem with Ivana.

Suddenly dread hit Ivana's stomach like a fist. Something was wrong.

Demitri's face scrunched in a scowl. "Soon. Get me the paperwork now!" He reached out and grabbed Villie, and she screamed.

“Ow! What is the matter?”

Demitri gripped her by the shoulders and picked her up, pulling her close. “You move when I tell you to move,” he growled. “You are mine now; do you understand? Mine.” He shook Villie as if she were a rag doll, and fear cemented Ivana to the floor.

They had trusted Demitri; he had been their gracious benefactor. But now as he squeezed Villie until she cried out, he was the very devil.

1

OFFICER BRINNA CARUSO rounded the corner just as the vehicle she'd come looking for pulled away from the curb. She'd know the car anywhere; the battered black Buick belonged to a registered sex offender named Henry Corliss. He'd been on her radar since his parole to the city of Long Beach three months ago with the designation of "high-risk offender." Her intuition had screamed that he would not be a model parolee, and today her suspicions were confirmed.

Corliss was wanted for abducting a young girl.

Brinna followed the Buick slowly, not wanting to spook her prey, wanting instead to stop him when her backup caught up with her. Three more units would be with her in minutes. Questions swirled through her mind: Had Corliss seen her? Did he know the police were onto him, or was his departure a coincidence? Where was the girl?

Even as she asked the last question, she knew the girl

was most likely in the Buick. This sick puppy's MO was to transport victims to secluded areas. With that thought, just following the creep at a residential speed caused a jolt of adrenaline to slam through her, and she tightened her grip on the wheel.

"Where are you off to, Henry?" she said out loud to no one. Today she didn't even have her K-9 partner, Hero, with her to talk to. Rain had been falling steadily for two days, so even if there was a need for a K-9 search today, this weather would hinder a dog, and she'd left him home. The vehicle's wipers beat a high-speed rhythm on the windshield, yet Brinna's view was still clouded by water.

She reached for her radio mike to inform dispatch and her backup that the suspect was on the move. The Buick slowed at a T intersection, and Brinna relaxed, thinking maybe Corliss's leaving when she showed up had been coincidental.

Her relaxation was short-lived. With a puff of smoke from the muffler, the battered vehicle accelerated rapidly to the left, rear wheels throwing up a cloud of water and steam, fishtailing on the wet streets. For a second Brinna anticipated the driver would lose control and crash. But the rear wheels caught and the car leaped away.

Brinna dropped the mike on the passenger seat and gave her black-and-white Ford Explorer as much gas as she dared, trying in vain to close the distance between her and the fleeing car. The rain seemed to fall harder, and the Buick flew through the next intersection against a red light. She knew it was Corliss behind the wheel, and he was not going to stop.

"No," Brinna yelled as she was forced to slow for the light,

nearly stopping before it changed to green and she could accelerate through the intersection. As she reached out to pick up the dropped mike, she clicked on her lights and siren. The Buick widened the gap between them.

“King-44, the suspect vehicle left the location just as I arrived. He’s westbound on Wardlow, approaching Orange.” She spoke a little too loud, her voice ramped up because of the noise from the siren. “I’m in pursuit.”

The vehicle extended its lead, making a wild, out-of-control left onto Orange. Brinna followed, frustrated as she was forced once again to slow. Her high-center-of-gravity SUV was no match for the more stable sedan on the wet roadway. The mixture of another siren caused her gaze to flicker across the rearview mirror. There was at least one assisting unit behind her.

“King-44, did you see the victim with the suspect?” Sergeant Rodriguez’s voice crackled through the speaker.

Brinna smacked the wheel before responding. *No, I didn’t see her, but I know he’s got her in the car* was what her mind screamed. What she answered the sergeant with was a simple “Negative, just the suspect.”

She again tossed the mike on the passenger seat as the Buick ran another red light and turned right onto Willow.

Corliss was the one and only suspect in the abduction of a local twelve-year-old girl, Nikki Conner. Two hours ago a 911 call had alerted police to the abduction and kicked off an intense search involving all of Long Beach and neighboring agencies in mutual aid. Corliss had been conversing with Nikki on the Internet, posing as a fourteen-year-old

boy, complete with a fake Facebook page. They'd arranged to meet at a park. Fortunately Nikki had a friend who followed and watched the meeting from a distance. Her description of the abduction that transpired in the park—complete with photos snapped with a cell phone—was what led police to Corliss. And Brinna wasn't about to let him slip away.

The radio speaker exploded with unintelligible gibberish as several units tried to get on the air at the same time. Brinna tuned it out to concentrate on her driving, struggling to keep the suspect vehicle in sight while preventing her SUV from hydroplaning.

When the dispatcher deftly regained control of the air, Brinna heard Sergeant Rodriguez assign a unit to check the suspect's house. She started to ask Brinna for an update on her location but was cut off.

Brinna swerved around a slow vehicle as a high-pitched, nasal male voice came through loud and clear. *Lieutenant Harvey*. Brinna groaned. He was new to the watch; he'd just been promoted last week and he was by the book.

"King-44, this pursuit is not authorized. Weather conditions are too severe. Terminate immediately!"

Brinna kept after the Buick with a white-knuckled grip on the wheel. She'd feared this response from Harvey. A pursuit with the rain falling in buckets would never be approved except in the direst of circumstances. And someone like Harvey, a bean counter in a blue suit, would never agree with Brinna that this was the direst of circumstances. Henry Corliss had kidnapped a young girl.

Harvey would say: “We know who he is and where he lives; we’ll get him.”

Brinna would respond: “The girl is in danger now.”

Harvey: “If she is in the car, you’re endangering her by your pursuit. What if he crashes?”

Brinna: “I know him. You don’t understand what he’ll do to her if he’s not stopped now.”

All of this played in Brinna’s mind as she raced over city streets on the suspect’s tail. She heard Harvey continue to try to raise her on the radio, but she ignored him.

“The victim is not at the suspect’s house,” the unit assigned to check the residence announced on air when the lieutenant took a breath.

“Brinna.” Sergeant Rodriguez’s voice came over clear and calm, using her first name and not her call sign. Brinna flinched as she heard the pleading in her sergeant’s voice, asking for her location. “What is your 10-20?”

They were downtown now, and the path of the Buick was more erratic, with the driver crossing to the wrong side of the street, moving perilously close to the Blue Line train tracks, not slowing for stop signs or red lights and nearly crashing every few seconds.

Brinna blew out a frustrated breath and pounded the wheel. She couldn’t shut out Sergeant Rodriguez like she shut out Harvey. She clicked off her siren and picked up the mike.

“He’s still heading south, now on Atlantic, crossing PCH.” She kept following without the benefit of her light bar and noted that one assisting black-and-white stayed with her as well. It had to be Maggie and Rick.

“King-44, I want that pursuit terminated and you to return to the station. Meet me in the squad room. Now!” Harvey was practically hysterical.

Just then the Buick slowed to make a tight right turn onto Tenth Street. Brinna finally had a chance to close some distance between them, and she took it, accelerating. Copying the next wild left he made on Magnolia, she pulled even closer. As a testament to her good fortune, even the rain seemed to be letting up, pounding drops giving way to a light shower. Lieutenant or no lieutenant, Brinna knew she couldn't quit yet.

She also knew Harvey had issued his order over the radio so it was clear and easily documented. But for Brinna, a young girl in danger mattered more than anything Lieutenant Harvey could say.

Brake lights flashed as the fleeing driver attempted to turn right onto the Seventh Street freeway on-ramp but couldn't; the ramp was closed for repairs. For the first time since the Buick had sped away from her, Brinna smiled. The vehicle fishtailed back onto Magnolia and continued south. Brinna knew that if he tried the Third Street ramp, he would be out of luck there as well. God bless Caltrans. The puke had finally made a mistake.

Sure enough, he made the same aborted turn attempt at the Third Street ramp, almost coming to a complete stop. For a moment Brinna thought she'd won. Off came the seat belt, and her hand gripped the door handle. But once more the driver of the Buick punched it, continuing south on Magnolia toward the harbor, with Brinna gaining ground.

They passed the police station and the main fire station before the driver made a final, crucial mistake. Standing water in a low spot on the street disguised the depth of the puddle. The vehicle never slowed as it approached the dip. The Buick hit the water hard, and the driver lost all control.

Brinna slammed her brakes as the black car spun out in front of her. The driver couldn't pull out of it, and with a sickening bang, the vehicle's back end hit a parked car, sending the driver's side careening around into another parked car, where it came to rest in a splash of water, steam, and amber and red plastic from the taillights.

Brinna flung her door open and hit the pavement at a full run, dodging the falling rain and the deep puddles. She saw movement as the driver slid to the passenger side and pushed the door open. He jumped out, cut between two parked cars, but Brinna was on him as he reached the sidewalk. She grabbed his shoulders and threw her weight into him, knocking him off his feet and into a planter. She managed to keep her balance and hold one of his arms.

"You're under arrest, Corliss. Stop resisting." Brinna almost lost her grip because both she and the suspect were drenched and muddy within seconds.

"Police brutality!" Corliss wailed.

"No audience here," Maggie yelled at the man as she appeared on Brinna's right and grabbed his other arm. Between them, they had Corliss handcuffed and sitting on the planter ledge in short order.

"Where's the girl?" Brinna demanded, hands on hips, glaring at the suspect through the rain, blood pumping,

heart racing. A slight man with thinning hair and a sallow complexion, Corliss looked like a muddy, drowned rat and wouldn't meet her gaze.

"I want my lawyer."

Brinna caught Maggie's eye and shook her head. It was times like these she wished she could shake information out of uncooperative suspects. But she couldn't. She couldn't touch him or talk to him now that he'd cried for a lawyer, and he knew it.

"Rick's checking the car as we speak," Maggie said, and Brinna followed her gaze back to the Buick. "He also told dispatch where we are." She caught Brinna's eye and looked down her nose, lifting an eyebrow, an unspoken reprimand for Brinna's radio silence during the chase and a reminder that Brinna was in trouble. Harvey would not just drop the matter of her ignoring him. It would make no difference that the suspect was in custody.

"Hey." Rick stuck his head out of the suspect's car. "She's here, and she's okay!"

Brinna looked at Maggie and then at Corliss, whose head was down, rain dripping from his forehead.

"Go." Maggie waved toward the car. She pulled Corliss to his feet. "I'll put him in my car because he is most certainly going to jail."

Brinna hurried to the Buick and peered into the backseat. Nikki Conner had been tied up and wrapped in a blanket. As Rick loosened the rope and pulled the blanket from her face, she sobbed but appeared otherwise unharmed.

Brinna felt every negative emotion drain away. This was

what mattered. The girl was safe, and the creep was in custody. Her throat clogged with emotion.

She looked up to see the lieutenant's car turn the corner, coming her way. Brinna folded her arms, ignoring the rain and her drenched uniform. Whatever the consequences for her now, it just didn't matter.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

IT SEEMS AS THOUGH every day there is a new article about someone being arrested for human trafficking. According to HumanTrafficking.org, an estimated 14,500 to 17,500 people—mostly women and children—are trafficked to the US each year.

When I was still working in law enforcement, I saw a training video that told the story of an apartment complex turned into a virtual prison by traffickers. They brought laborers to the US illegally and then kept them in apartments, only letting them out to work, and even then they were closely monitored. They even set up a company store in the apartment complex for the captives to shop at, but they charged exorbitant prices, basically taking back the little money they paid the captives for their day labor. The apartment complex was not out in the boonies; it was right in the middle of a normal neighborhood.

Traffickers often prey upon the poor and the struggling. They promise high-paying jobs in countries like the US, Italy, France, and Germany. The victims often leave their home

countries willingly with the trafficker, but once they get to the desired country, the trafficker will confiscate the victim's ID and papers and keep him or her confined, unable to do anything but what the trafficker wants. Traffickers tell their victims that the police can't be trusted, that they are in the country illegally, so if they complain to anyone, they will go to jail.

I got this from the FBI website in May 2013 (<http://www.fbi.gov/news/stories/2013/january/targeting-human-traffickers-helping-victims>): "Last month, a Kentucky cardiologist and his ex-wife pled guilty to recruiting a Bolivian woman to work as their domestic servant and holding her unlawfully for nearly 15 years. The couple took her passport, threatened her with deportation, and falsely promised that her wages were being put in a bank account."

Traffickers are not always shadowy men who look like drug dealers.

Also on the FBI website are resources if you have information or suspicions about a situation near you: "If you believe you are the victim of a trafficking situation or may have information about a potential trafficking situation, call the National Human Trafficking Resource Center (NHTRC) at 1-888-373-7888. NHTRC is a national, toll-free hotline, with specialists available to answer calls from anywhere in the country, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, every day of the year related to potential trafficking victims, suspicious behaviors, and/or locations where trafficking is suspected to occur. You can also submit a tip to the NHTRC online" at <http://www.polarisproject.org/what-we-do/national-human-trafficking-hotline/report-a-tip>.