

THICKER
than
BLOOD



C.J. DARLINGTON



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Thicker than Blood

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More Praise for *Thicker than Blood*

“With *Thicker than Blood*, C.J. Darlington proves she’s a novelist for the long haul, a strong new voice in Christian fiction. This book speaks to the heart, from the heart, about the heart. Readers will not soon forget it.”

SIBELLA GIORELLO, Christy Award–winning author
of *The Rivers Run Dry*

“*Thicker than Blood* explores addiction, betrayal, and the common bond of family through the eyes of two sisters, both heartbroken, both longing for restoration. You’ll cheer as the sisters discover each other’s heart.”

MARY E. DEMUTH, author of *Daisy Chain*

“Darlington provides a fascinating peek into the world of antiquarian books, as well as a riveting glimpse of a family undone and God’s powerful reach in all their lives. *Thicker than Blood* will have you turning the pages, entranced with its beautiful prose and characters who won’t let you go.”

JENNY B. JONES, award-winning author of *Just Between You and Me* and *A Charmed Life* series

“C.J. Darlington explores the bonds between sisters and beautifully portrays the hope of redeeming a past full of regrets. A colorful cast of supporting characters rounds out a first-rate first novel. I look forward to more from this promising new writer.”

DEBORAH RANEY, author of *Above All Things* and the Clayburn Novels series

For Mom

My friend, encourager, and first editor.

I love you so much, squeeze, and I love you.

Acknowledgments

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Erica Nantais—our childhood games inspired this story. I hope someday we'll meet again and that you'll get to read this book.

A decorative flourish consisting of symmetrical, ornate scrollwork and floral patterns, framing a large, bold, black number '1' in the center.

1

CHRISTY WILLIAMS DIDN'T see the cop until his red lights flashed in her rearview mirror. By then it was too late. He was tailing her, and she had no choice but to ease her Honda Accord onto the snowy shoulder of the freeway and let the cruiser slide in behind.

Jerking up the emergency brake, she threw herself back into her seat with a curse. She hadn't been speeding. She was sure of it. Christy forced herself to focus on the cruiser, squinting to see past its blinding headlights. She could barely make out the cop's silhouette behind the wheel. What was he doing?

At last the burly officer emerged from the patrol car, approaching slowly, his hand resting on his holster.

Christy put down her window, and a blast of frigid night air hit her face and rolled across her lap.

“Turn the car off, ma’am.”

She did.

“I need your license, registration, and proof of insurance.”

“What’d I do?” She fumbled for the items, then handed them to the cop. The name tag opposite his badge read *T. Jones*.

Jones glanced at them with a smirk. He gave one back. “License. Not grocery card.”

Christy flushed as she flipped through her wallet again. *Real smooth*. She finally found her license and passed it to the cop. He took it with the other cards to his patrol car. What was this all about? Had she been swerving? She quickly crunched down on two fresh squares of peppermint Dentyne Ice. *Deep breath now. Chew. It’s just a routine stop. My taillight’s probably out. No need to panic. He doesn’t know.*

Without the engine on, the car turned cold fast. Christy zipped up her fleece jacket and checked the cop again. After a minute his door opened, and her pulse kicked up a notch. *Please. Let this be nothing.* She couldn’t face any more disappointment tonight.

Jones returned to her window. “Miss Williams, where you going?”

“Home.”

“From where?”

“Just a late movie with some friends, Officer.” She forced a smile, wishing it wasn’t a lie. To celebrate with friends and family who loved her was the way it should be. But instead she’d spent her birthday alone as usual, longing for what could have been.

“How many drinks have you had?”

Adrenaline splashed across her chest, and she tried to relax her arms. *Don’t look nervous. Don’t look guilty.* “None.”

“Know why I stopped you?”

“I wasn’t speeding.”

“You were doing 40 in a 65 zone.”

“Just being careful. I don’t like driving at night.”

Jones rested a thick hand on her door. He looked at her with a slight grin like he’d heard it all before. “Please step out of the car.”

Christy resisted the urge to glance at the passenger seat. Underneath it she’d carefully hidden her half-empty bottle of sherry. Knowing it would be useless to protest, she obeyed.

Outside, she shielded her eyes from the cruiser’s spotlight. “Sir, I’m tired. It’s my birthday. I just wanna get home.”

“I need you to do some standard roadside maneuvers for

me.” Jones gripped her left bicep, his fingers closing almost entirely around it, and led her to stand between the two cars.

She’d seen sobriety tests on *COPS* enough times. This was her chance to prove herself. Christy concentrated hard on the officer’s instructions. She was gonna show this guy.

“You’ll stand with your heels together and your arms at your sides,” he said. “Then when I tell you, lift one foot about six inches off the ground and hold it there. Don’t use your arms. And no hopping or swaying. You understand?”

“Yeah.”

“Now at the same time, count aloud like this: one thousand and one, one thousand and two, one thousand and three. For thirty seconds, looking down at your foot.”

Christy crossed her shaky arms, nodding. As much as she hated the embarrassment of being on display, she had to do it. If she refused, he’d arrest her for sure.

“I’ll tell you when to put your foot down.” Jones looked her right in the eyes, his breaths condensing and swirling around his head. “Understand exactly what I want here?”

“I got it.”

He repeated the instructions, demonstrating the moves himself, and Christy assured him she knew what to do. If she passed this thing, would he let her go?

Jones stepped away from her. “You can start now.”

She filled her lungs, then slowly let her breath out, willing

herself to calm down. Uncrossing her arms, she squeezed them against her rib cage and lifted her right foot. Was that six inches? She raised it a little more. That seemed right. Her heart pounding, she made herself breathe, determined not to take her eyes off her foot. *Focus. Don't sway.* Then she remembered to count. She hadn't been counting. She risked a glance at the stoic cop. Had he noticed?

"One thousand and one. One thousand and two." Christy felt herself sway slightly. For a split second she tapped her toe to the ground just to right herself, but it was quick and then she was back to counting. "One thousand and three."

Half a minute. That's all we're talking about. Just to thirty.

"One thousand and four. One thousand and five."

I can do this.

"One thousand and six."

Keep my balance. Keep my cool.

"One thousand and seven."

Christy got to thirteen before she realized her arms had somehow lifted away from her body, like a trapeze artist walking the wire. She smacked them back down and kept counting. "One thousand and fourteen. One thousand and fifteen."

Her leg was made of lead. *Lift it up. A little higher.*

"One thousand and sixteen."

Quit shaking.

"One thousand seventeen."

Focus!

“One thousand eighteen.”

“Okay, you can put your leg down.”

She let out a burst of air. She must’ve been holding her breath. “How’d I do?”

Jones didn’t answer, his face a mask of professionalism.

It was downhill from there. He put her through two more sobriety tests. She messed up four times walking that stupid line, and she had no idea what he was after when she followed his pen back and forth with her eyes.

Then the cop started grilling her again. “Honesty would go a long way here. Sure you didn’t drink anything?”

That’s when reality sank in. Christy knew better than to get behind the wheel, yet she’d risked innocent lives and driven anyway. The last thing she’d ever want to do was cause an accident, especially tonight.

“I . . .” She blinked back the tears that sprang to her eyes, desperate to keep from bawling in front of this cop who was only doing his job. After a late day at work, she’d spent the evening in her car parked by Union Reservoir, sipping sherry and reading Hercule Poirot mysteries by the dome light. All she’d wanted was to forget it was her birthday. Revel in the buzz that would abandon her by morning.

Christy let out a long breath. “There’s a bottle of sherry under my seat.”

Jones nodded, producing handcuffs from his belt. He pointed at the car. “Hands on the hood, please.”

Christy rested her palms on the gritty, salt-stained metal, the front bumper jamming into her knees. She deserved to be locked up.

“Carryin’ anything I should know about?”

“No.”

After frisking her, he pulled each of her arms behind her back, clicking icy cuffs around her wrists. A semi zoomed past them, spraying cinder-filled slush against the cruiser door, and she imagined the trucker craning to see who the loser was this time.

Jones led her to the back door of the patrol car, opened it, and guided her head inside. She barely had time to glimpse a second cruiser pulling up before the door slammed shut behind her, as much like a cell door clanging as the one she knew waited for her at the police station.

Her shoulders went limp. Another truck sailed past, shaking the patrol car. The cop’s garbled voice came from outside. She didn’t try to comprehend what he was saying. No doubt he was reporting to his buddy about the drunk he’d caught.

Christy hung her head as the cuffs dug into her flesh. Thirty-three years old.

Happy birthday.



Hours later Christy perched on the edge of the jail cell's plastic bed, her hands covering her face. The Breathalyzer test she'd taken a few minutes ago had confirmed to the cops what she already knew. Her blood alcohol level was well over the legal limit. And they'd booked her for it. Her mug shot and fingerprints were probably already scanned into some offender database, marking her for what she was—a criminal. They'd left her with nothing but her grubby jeans, sweatshirt, and sneakers. Not even one cigarette, which she'd do a lot for about now.

Her gaze wandered to the ceiling, where a video camera glared downward, scrutinizing her every move. They could probably hear her too.

Earlier, the cops had offered her the phone, but she didn't know who to call. The only lawyer she knew was Harvey Kurtz, but she hadn't talked to him in over two years.

She'd thought of Hunter Dawson, the owner's son and manager of Dawson's Book Barn, Longmont, Colorado's largest used bookstore and where she worked. Although she had a feeling he'd jump at the chance to help her, he was her boss, and she didn't want any problems there. Things were going so well. She'd finally found a job she loved, and she couldn't lose it now.

Christy rested her elbows on her knees. Who could she possibly call? Even if she did have friends, she'd be too ashamed to drag them into this. And family? They were hours away and probably wanted nothing to do with her. Not that she'd blame them. She was the one who broke the family ties and left without even a good-bye. What May must think of her after all these years . . .

That left Vince. She still flinched when she thought about him, but what other choice did she have? It was either him or spend the night in this creepy place where the stench of old urine hung in the air.

A few minutes later a balding cop with a gut hanging over his belt showed up to check on her, and she decided to make the call she dreaded.

When she was sitting in front of the phone, the cop picked up a pen. "Name?"

"Vince Dubois."

"Relation?"

Two weeks ago she would have responded *boyfriend*. Now she didn't know how to answer. "Coworker," she finally said, and it was the truth. Vince also worked at Dawson's Book Barn, overseeing online sales.

She held the receiver, the dial tone humming in her ear as she contemplated one last time what she was about to do. Then with a sigh she punched in his number.

It rang twice, and a deep male voice answered with a crisp “Hello?”

“It’s me. Christy.”

“A little late, isn’t it?”

“I . . . need your help,” she said, hating to admit it.

“So you’re finally coming around.”

“I’m in trouble.”

The line was silent for a moment. “What kind of trouble?”

She told him what happened, lowering her voice. “I don’t want to stay here.”

“Give me thirty minutes,” he said without hesitation. “And don’t worry, darling. It’ll be all right. I promise.” It felt good to hear someone say it, even if it was Vince.

“He’ll be here in half an hour,” she told the cop.

And he was. When they released her into the waiting area, Vince stopped pacing, and his quick survey up and down her figure made her wish they’d let her clean up a little. She ran trembling fingers through her stringy blonde hair, regretting she hadn’t taken the time this week to cover the dark roots. She must’ve looked as awful as she felt.

Vince, on the other hand, looked the same as always. Even at this hour he was meticulously dressed in crisp jeans and a ribbed gray sweater, his wavy black hair full of mousse.

She got back her purse and was given an arraignment date. She’d be in court for this at the end of the month.

“Let’s get out of here,” Vince said, wrapping an arm around her waist, shepherding her toward the parking lot. He kept his arm there until they got outside, then cloaked her shoulders with his leather jacket. A few wet snowflakes drifted from the sky as he helped her into his white Lexus. She breathed in the air, redolent with Vince’s imported cigars.

“I’ll pick up your car tomorrow,” he said, buckling up and starting the engine.

Christy already had a Winston lit. She took several drags before speaking. “Thanks for coming.”

“You don’t belong in a place like that.”

She pulled in another drag and exhaled, relief flowing through her limbs. Closing Vince’s jacket tighter around herself, she sat silent, waiting for the heater to work.

“You did the right thing calling me.”

“Please take me to my apartment.”

The car’s turn signal ticked off and on. Vince drove out of the parking lot in the wrong direction.

“My apartment.”

“I heard you.”

“I want to go home.”

“Home?” He laughed and patted her leg. “Seems to me my place is your real home. Come on, Christy. Let me take care of you.”

She was tempted to allow it. She didn’t want to be alone,

but she'd be giving in by agreeing. She'd be going back to him. At least that's the way he would see it. "I don't wanna fight."

"Good."

When he got like this, it was like trying to have a conversation with an oncoming freight train. Jump out of the way or get flattened. She didn't have the will for either.

A few minutes later they pulled into the garage of the two-story country house Vince rented from his uncle.

Vince was immediately by her side to guide her to the door. "You're still unsteady."

"I'm fine." She tried to push his arm away.

But he held on. "I can see that."

At the door, she obediently slipped off her shoes, as Vince required of everyone, and he led her inside. The ubiquitous classical music station she remembered so well played faintly through the whole house over the speakers Vince had wired and installed himself.

Leaving the lights off except for the one over the kitchen sink, he pointed her to the living room and sat her on the pin-striped damask sofa. He knelt in front of her, holding her hands between his. "Hungry?"

"No."

"I can fix you something."

"I'm tired."

“Then let me get you a drink.” Without waiting for a response, he rose and went to the bar in the corner of the dark room. A cabinet opened and glasses clinked. She could picture the scrupulously arranged rows of wineglasses, tumblers, and cordial glasses she’d watched him hand-buff countless times.

Vince returned with a tumbler half-full of sherry. “This’ll calm you down.”

Christy closed her eyes and sipped at the alcohol as Vince sidled next to her, drawing her into himself. His Siamese cat, Socrates, jumped up beside them, purring and butting his head into Vince’s arm. Vince petted the animal, his arm still around Christy.

She stopped resisting. It wasn’t important anymore that he’d hit her. That was only a distant memory. And she *had* provoked him. She hadn’t been thinking of his side. As usual he’d vowed it would never happen again, and Christy believed him now. He’d come to her rescue tonight, something he would only have done if he truly loved her.

“You can rest now,” Vince whispered, rubbing her back in comforting circular motions. “It’s all over.”

“I was . . . so scared. I didn’t know what to do.”

“Shh.” He stroked her cheek with his fingertips. “You don’t have to think about it anymore.”

Christy rested her head on Vince’s chest, his Polo Sport

cologne bringing back memories of other nights they'd shared together. It would be all right to fall asleep in his arms one more time.

About the Author



C.J. BEGAN WRITING the story that would become *Thicker than Blood* when she was a fifteen-year-old homeschool student. She has been in the antiquarian bookselling business for over a decade, scouting for stores similar to the one described in *Thicker than Blood* before cofounding her own online bookstore. In 2006 C.J. started the Christian entertainment Web site www.TitleTrakk.com with her sister, Tracy, and has been actively promoting Christian fiction through book reviews and author interviews. She makes her home in Pennsylvania with her family and their menagerie of dogs and cats. Visit her Web site at www.cjdarlington.com.

Discussion Questions

IF YOUR BOOK CLUB reads *Thicker than Blood* and is interested in talking with me via speakerphone, please feel free to contact me by e-mail at cj@cjdarlington.com, and I'll do my best to arrange something with you. Thanks for reading, and you can always visit my Web site, www.cjdarlington.com, for more info.

1. Aunt Edna counsels May that God could be bringing Christy to her thoughts for a reason. Do you believe God often leads us through prompts like this? Where during the story do you see God prompting May?
2. How would you describe Christy and Hunter's relationship? Are they just friends or something more? Do you think their relationship will change after the events of the story? In what way?
3. What antiquarian book fact surprised you the most? Have you read any of the books Christy found in Aunt Edna's library?

4. What was your first impression of Vince? When did it change? Are there negative influences in your life that you need to leave behind?
5. Why do you think Christy goes to the funeral only to run away from it early? What is she running from and why?
6. Who was your favorite character in the story? Which one did you most relate to?
7. Talk about the relationship between Christy and Jim. How would you describe it? Why do you think he pushes Christy's buttons, and why does she respond the way she does?
8. Even though May says she forgave her sister years ago, do you think she really did? Why or why not? What causes May to change the way she thinks about Christy?
9. What is your favorite scene in the book? What makes that scene stand out for you?
10. Why do you think Christy has trouble believing God could love her? How did her perceptions about God change throughout the story? How have your ideas about God changed over time?
11. Which character do you think impacted Christy most for the Lord? What people in your life encourage you to grow closer to God?
12. What do you see as the theme of this novel? How does the title *Thicker than Blood* play out in the story?
13. How do you think May will react to Christy's final gesture toward her? What would that scene look like?