



T H I C K E R

T H A N

W A T E R

a novel

Carla Jablonski

THICKER
THAN
WATER

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藏书章

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Thicker than Water

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THICKER

T H A N

W A T E R

*For Jack K. and Rich O. for different reasons
and
For Liesa A. and Eloise F. for support, Shiraz, and smarts*

PROLOGUE

The feeling threatened to overwhelm her. That intense throbbing in her veins, the area midway up the arm where several tributaries branched off. Or came together; she wasn't sure. They vibrated; it was almost as if she could hear them hum. No—she would resist, she wouldn't do it, not anymore.

The sensation stayed with her all afternoon. She went for a walk after school, hurtling past shops, trying to find something to look at, searching for distraction. She walked fast, then faster toward the brisk autumn sunset, trying to keep the sun up, dreading darkness.

At dinner she alternated between silence, so focused on hiding the yearning of her forearms, and talking too loudly, trying to drown out the sound of need. Her dad didn't notice. Just a mood, just her, just a teenage girl going through stuff.

They went their separate ways—her father to watch a game on TV, she to her improvised room.

Homework loomed and beckoned her, but it was a false offer, a cover. She knew closing her door was dangerous; she did it anyway. Books pulled from her bag, notebooks opened, pen at the ready. She stared at the blue lines on the loose-leaf page. She shrugged, took in breath, stood up, turned on the TV, and still she could feel her veins filling, rushing, circulating.

She went into the bathroom and splashed water on her face, gazed into her hooded eyes in the mirror. What was it? Why the drive, the pull? Why tonight? Was there even a trigger anymore or was her body making demands all on its own?

She could hear music far away—down on the street, out the bathroom window, and echoed in a counterpoint in the living room from her dad's TV. There was a tinny sound coming from her own television and then shouting when it changed to a commercial. What she heard more clearly was a pounding in her temples, an oceanic roar in her ears. Tense tense tense. She wanted to cry and couldn't—no tears would come; she even tried to force them. She didn't know where this deep agitation came from, but she sure knew how to get rid of it.

She flipped open the medicine cabinet, erasing her reflection by leaving the cabinet open, the mirror facing the wall. She yanked out the razor, gripped the pink plastic disposable with her right hand, squatted on the floor, straightened out her left arm, and held it steady between her knees.

She still had a moment not to do it, but she couldn't come up with any reason not to. Her breathing became deeper but faster and she dragged the razor against her arm. She had to angle it so that the sharp edge could cut her skin, challenging to manage with a disposable razor. That was the promise she had

made herself—she would never use naked blades again. That promise she could keep. She plunged it against her skin over and over, not really seeing, just experiencing the welcome release, the rise of the blood filling the lines, the inside moving outside, the invisible being made visible; it was like magic. *Come out come out wherever you are.* First a thin white line, then the growing color marking the traces she'd made. Making it manifest. Present in the world. Ah, release. Then the final dispersing of energy so that she could stop. She was done.

She slumped against the bathtub, spent and satisfied. Her breathing came more regularly, less frantic, less labored. Good. That was good. But even as the word *good* entered her head, its opposite appeared. Shame crept into her and she flung the pink plastic tool skittering across the tile floor.

ONE

Is that what you're wearing?"

Kia didn't say a word. Why should she? It was an act. Her dad made the noises, affected the postures: bingo! Instant parent. He didn't *really* care that she had on heavy buckled black boots, fishnets, a gauzy black skirt, and a long-sleeved black T-shirt sporting the message I Bite. He knew the *form* of parental concern: *Parents comment on clothes, he comments on clothes, therefore he is a parent.* It was their little morning ritual that he express some semblance of involvement. No delving into her personal life (not that she'd talk to him about that kind of stuff), no checking on her slipping grades, no looking through her portfolio to be sure she was keeping up, no asking about her mom. Clothes were a battle without casualties.

She decided to play along; a shrug was her response. That was enough.

Her dad laughed and breezed through the dining room on

his way to his study—which was now her bedroom. “Well, I guess it could be worse. At least you don’t look like a hooker like your friend Marni.”

Kia took a bite of her bagel and wondered if she should tell him Marni wasn’t her friend anymore. Nah. His remark was standard Parental Comment Number Seven. She thought of various replies: “I could try that look tomorrow.” “Marni has the bod for it; I don’t.” “Shut up.” But she chose, “Hey, I’ve got my standards.”

Her dad grinned. “I know, kiddo. And thank God for that.”

Morning contact completed. Good deed for the day.

It had been like this for three weeks now. Three weeks since Kia had packed her laptop, art supplies, and a pile of clothes and moved in with her father. Before that she’d spent the last five years, since her parents’ divorce, seeing him every other weekend. Less, once Kia’s own life became full with school and friends and projects. He didn’t seem to mind—he hadn’t wanted shared custody in the first place.

Not that he didn’t love her in that global way that parents loved their kids. It was a given, right? Kia could see that. But she could also see she was in his way, and he was in hers.

Oh no. Kia’s hand froze halfway to her mouth. He was in her bedroom—would he also go into her bathroom? Were there signs left from last night’s slip? The bloodstained tissues that she had wrapped around her forearm—flushed. Nothing weird about the tossed Lady Sleek in the wastebasket. Not that he would even notice.

Holding up her hand, she pulled the fabric of her sleeve uncomfortably across her latest tracks. She put the bagel back

onto the plate and eased the fabric away from her skin, wincing. She was out of practice. *I used to have this stuff down cold.* She couldn't risk loose sleeves because they could flop up and expose her and that was the last thing she wanted. But sleeves this tight could chafe her raw skin and maybe even start her bleeding again.

Dad crossed back in, having retrieved several folders from Kia's "bedroom."

"So," he said, flipping through some folders before stuffing them into his briefcase, "plans after school?"

Kia cleared her throat. A crumb scratched on its way down. "Hospital," she said. She coughed.

"Ah." Her dad didn't look at her, just fiddled with more papers. Arranging. Re-arranging. "Right." He snapped the briefcase shut. "I'll probably be late tonight."

He patted his jacket for his glasses, nodded, then felt his back pocket for his wallet and nodded again. Kia could remember him going through this routine ever since, well, ever since she could remember *him*. She always imagined that he was silently saying the word *check* after every pat and nod.

He smiled at her, obviously satisfied that he was set for the day. "Can you fend for yourself for dinner?"

"Yeah, no biggie." Kia took another bite of the bagel. "I can grab something at the hospital."

Her dad's brown eyes flicked away.

"And even if the hospital cafeteria food sucks," Kia continued as she chewed, "there are loads of cafés and restaurants and stuff around the hospital." For some reason, Kia felt like saying "hospital" as many times as she could before her dad left for

work. Maybe because she was the only one who ever went, and she needed to make the place real to him, the way it was for her.

Only it wasn't. All that real. More like super-real, like it was the only true reality and everything outside that noisy, airless building full of pain was fake, a time-out.

It might have been easier to go if it weren't a hospital where most people didn't get better. Specializing in cancer meant that they had the best staff, best surgeons, best specialists, best blah blah blah, but it sure made it hard on the visitors, knowing that every frail person strolling down a corridor in a blue gown wasn't likely to survive. Every child in a wheelchair was facing a probable death sentence. At least in other hospitals you went in to get cured, you went in to have babies—you went in anticipating coming out. But the place where Kia's mom was, most of what they did was maintenance. Pausing in the process toward dying.

Not always, Kia reminded herself. Not every time. She came out before.

Kia pushed the plate away, leaving half the bagel, and got up.

"You finished?" her dad said.

"Yeah." Before he could say anything annoying, like "breakfast is the most important meal of the day," Kia grabbed her backpack and left for school.

Aces. Made it out of the building without having to deal with some neighbor in the elevator. Often Kia skipped the elevator ride and clomped down the fire stairs. Her dad's apartment was on the Upper East Side, where the kids all went to private school, and small children were never taken there by

actual parents but by nannies of other ethnic groups. Kia's dad had moved up in the world since the divorce, while she and her mom had been lucky just to hold steady.

She'd been in the apartment plenty of times before it had become her new address, of course, but now that she was fully ensconced, the differences between her and the rest of the people in the neighborhood were glaring. She stood out walking down the street—long multi-toned hair, all-black clothes, pierced eyebrow, nose stud, heavy-duty makeup were rarities on the Upper East Side.

At least there was one benefit from her temporary headquarters at Dad's, she thought as she scratched off a flyer pasted inside the bus shelter. No early morning subway ride. Kia went to a nearby public school that specialized in music and art. She had always hated the subway ride from her mom's funky little apartment in the West Village.

The bus arrived and Kia squeezed her way to the back. She plopped into a seat and stared out the window at the gray world. The windows on the bus were surprisingly clean, but the late September drizzle and fog turned everything outside impressionistic. Fuzzy. Like her thoughts.

This sluggishness was a familiar feeling. The morning-after uglies. Back when she was hitting the blades regularly, this was always the aftermath. Today, though, there was an added undercurrent of bewilderment. She had managed to stop for such a long time.

Kia couldn't remember the first time she took a razor blade to her skin. It had begun with her nails, scratching herself with a violence she didn't recognize. At some point she graduated to

blades. What she remembered most clearly were her attempts to stop. The shame and fear she felt—what kind of freak *does* this kind of thing? But she also recalled with absolute clarity the sense of release and relief the cutting provided.

She'd quit because ultimately the tugging stopped or at least lessened enough for her to get control back somehow. Until last night.

But why? Why was it back now? Her mom had been diagnosed six months ago—she hadn't done it then. Her mom was back in the hospital three weeks later—she didn't start then. And since she didn't really understand how she had managed to stop last time, she wondered if she'd just keep on doing it now.

Not until she died or anything. Suicide was not appealing, nor was it the reason she sliced her skin. And this was no "cry for attention," since to get attention for it, someone would have to know and no one did. Kia made sure of that.

Kia rolled her hands up so she could tug her sleeves down a little farther onto her wrists. The cuts were higher up: they ran the length of the veins from the inside of her elbow to just above the cuff of her shirt. Even in the throes of the cutting, she knew where to stop. Kia smirked. *I'm the most in-control out-of-control person I know.*

The bus pulled up to her stop and Kia got off and joined the packs of kids heading into school.

"Hey, Gloomy!" A tall, scrawny redheaded guy banged into Kia so hard she nearly tripped.

"Aaron," Kia scolded, pulling her bag back up onto her shoulder.

"I called your name like three times before I hip-checked you back into this world," Aaron said. "Everything okay?"

"I'm not gloomy," Kia said. "Just . . . thinking." She did her best to stretch her mouth into a grin. "But now that I'm at school, I won't have to think anymore, will I?"

"Oh no, thinking is highly frowned upon here!" Aaron said. "And if you indulged in such an activity, you'd be in the minority anyway."

"So, really, why the cheer?" Kia asked. She fluffed up her bangs while examining her reflection in the glass window of the entrance doors. Her thick dark eyeliner was drawn expertly, no wobbly lines, and just the right amount to make her look intense but not raccoonish. Her purple-black lipstick created the perfect pout with no going outside the lines at all and no smudging. Mornings after, she tended to be extremely meticulous.

Her outfit had been chosen for comfort and camouflage. She tended toward layers—all in various shades of black—and today, with the requisite long sleeves. Kia was tall, with definite curves, and liked the way loose clothing sort of kept her shape hidden. She wasn't fat, but next to skinny Aaron and their slim friend Carol, it was hard not to feel big.

"I have plans for tonight—and not just for me," Aaron said. He pushed open the door and they went into the building. "For you and Carol too."

"I'm supposed to go to the hospital today," Kia said.

"That's okay; this is a night thing. And since it's Friday, there's no backing out because it's a weeknight. Not even from our overly conscientious Carol."

"And what is this nighttime thing?" Kia asked.

"Tell you at lunch!" Aaron called before being swallowed by the swarm of kids finding their homerooms. Kia saw him wave hello to some of the other students in the music program, then she turned and headed for her classroom.

"Hey," a boy sitting in the back row greeted Kia as she slid into her seat next to him. Virgil had choppy hair dyed as black as Kia's and three studs in his ear. His leather jacket had a skull and crossbones on the back. He was tilted back in his chair and his sturdy boots, similar to Kia's, were up on his desk.

"Hey, Virgil," Kia replied.

Virgil thudded the front legs of his chair back onto the floor and rummaged in his backpack. He pulled out a CD and tossed it onto Kia's desk. "Made this for you."

Kia picked up the CD. "What is it?"

He shrugged. "More of those bands you liked. I was trolling through some MP3 stuff and burned you some."

"Thanks. I liked the last one you gave me."

Virgil grinned, flashing his dimples. He didn't smile that much and suddenly she wondered if it was because he knew that the dimples made him look really sweet, like a goth cherub. His smile definitely took the edge off his hard-core image. So did his personality, but Kia didn't want to break it to him that for all his swagger, he was actually nice.

She slipped the CD into her bag as Ms. Romero walked in and took attendance. One good thing about school: Kia wouldn't have to worry about a slip for a whole six hours.

Kia was hit by a wave of noise as she entered the cafeteria. Was it something about the Formica surfaces and hard plastic

that made sound reverberate? She nodded hello to Marni and the rest of her old group of friends, the ones she never talked to anymore. It wasn't like they'd started being mean to her or anything—they just got distant. As if her mom's cancer were contagious or after all the drama of the diagnosis, before the summer and the first round of chemo, they just didn't know how to deal with Kia anymore. Maybe it was all just too boring. It was sometimes boring to Kia.

She easily spotted Aaron's lanky frame and red hair loping through the maze of tables. Aaron had grown six inches over the summer without putting on a single pound (at least it looked that way), so he really stood out in the crowd. Unfortunately, a glimpse of his face did the trick too since acne had recently taken hold of his skin like an invading army. Aaron sat down at a table near the windows with the third member of their trio, Carol Avery.

Carol's long auburn hair was backlit by the dim rays struggling to get through the grime on the chicken-wired windows. Carol was like a cat—she always managed to position herself in the most flattering, photogenic spots completely unselfconsciously.

Carol was in the music program with Aaron—she was a flute player and also had a light soprano voice. But she and Kia had been friends long before high school. They had grown up in the same neighborhood, so they had gone to the same middle school together too. Not long ago, Carol's older brother had dropped out of college and run away: a different kind of grief than Kia knew, but for both of them loss was always possible, always hovering. As a result Kia and Carol shared a similar anxiety around telephone rings. They communicated mostly by e-mail.