

BOUND
by
GUILT

a novel

C.J. DARLINGTON

Praise for C.J. Darlington

“We at the Christian Writers Guild couldn’t be prouder of our First Novel Contest winner. This one engages your senses and reaches your heart.”

JERRY B. JENKINS, novelist and owner, Christian Writers Guild

“Great job! You kept me turning the pages.”

FRANCINE RIVERS, *New York Times* best-selling author

“C.J. is a wonderful, talented writer . . . extraordinary. . . .”

BODIE THOENE, award-winning author of the A.D. Chronicles

“Thanks for taking on the all-too-familiar subjects of guilt, rejection, and loss in a story line that offers hope and healing through forgiveness!”

JENNIFER O’NEILL, actress, author, speaker

“*Bound by Guilt* is a beautifully told story with complicated characters who linger long after the last page is turned. C.J. Darlington is one of those writers who get better with every book. After reading this heartfelt novel, I’m more eager than ever to see what she writes next.”

SIBELLA GIORELLO, Christy Award–winning author of *The Stones Cry Out*

“C.J. Darlington’s *Bound by Guilt* is a fresh tale of broken lives, the longing for completion, the hard binding of guilt . . . and the power of forgiveness. Every reader will find a part of his or her own life within these covers.”

TOSCA LEE, author of *Demon: A Memoir*

“Darlington’s setting in the fascinating world of antiquarian bookselling is clever. . . .”

Publishers Weekly

“Fans of faith-based novels will enjoy Darlington’s modern twist on the parable of the Prodigal Son.”

Booklist

“Has the right amount of good versus evil and tension-building suspense. Darlington makes it easy to follow along with all the twists of sisterhood and forgiveness.”

RT Book Reviews, 4-star rating

“*Thicker than Blood* is a beautiful masterpiece.”

LORI TWICHELL, FictionAddict.com

“*Thicker than Blood* is everything Christian fiction should be. It’s well written, peopled by flawed characters, fueled by themes of family, loss, redemption, and forgiveness.”

ERIC WILSON, *New York Times* best-selling author

“Relationships broken by time and choices, lives trapped in the turmoil of addictions and abuse, and the power of redemptive love all collide in this compelling work.”

MARTI PIEPER, *Homeschooling Today* magazine

“With complex characterization and authenticity, C.J. gives readers a book that satisfies the soul and evokes heartfelt emotions as Christy attempts to deal with past transgressions and May desperately seeks a way to forgive.”

Relz Reviewz on *Thicker than Blood*



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Designed by Jennifer Ghionzoli

Edited by Kathryn S. Olson

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For Tracy

My sister, best friend, and biggest fan.

Your genuine interest and constant support mean the world.

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, thank You, God, for allowing me to share another story with readers. Help me to never forget that all good things come from You. May my words bring You honor.

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Diana Prusik, Candace Calvert, Marti Pieper, Jennifer Erin Valent, and Jan Watson—for wonderful inspiration, cheering words, and advice when I needed it most!

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

1

“DON’T YOU EVER FEEL GUILTY?” Roxi Gold cracked open her icy can of Dr Pepper and took a long sip.

Diego fell into the seat across from her at the RV’s dinette table, opening his own can. Fizz erupted over its side. He licked it away and took a big gulp. “Not like we’re hurting anybody.”

“No, we’re just stealing thousand-dollar books.”

Diego eyed her. “You getting cold feet?”

She bent the silver tab of her soda can back and forth until it broke off in her fingers. A warm breeze blew through the window screen and filled her nose with the scent of dry pine needles. Could that be it? She just didn’t have the guts?

“Any idea how lucky you are?” Diego leaned back, lacing his fingers behind his head. “Nothing but the wind at our back, the open road before us . . .”

Roxi managed a smile. He was right. For the past three weeks she'd been traveling with her seventeen-year-old second cousin and his mom, Irene. The thirty-foot RV was like an apartment on wheels. She'd been to places other people only saw on the Internet, experiencing things she'd never forget. Not all of them were earth-shattering, Grand Canyon moments, either. In Flagstaff, Arizona, she'd seen her first bald eagle perched high in a rustic pine, majestic and totally unreal. She even rode in an Amish buggy in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

"This is our life," Diego said, raking his hands through his black hair. "And it sure beats standing in line at a book sale for three days like we used to."

"Doesn't it ever bother you?"

He chugged down more soda, then belched. "Nope."

"What if we get caught?"

"Come on, Rox."

"They'd send me back to juvie."

Diego leaned forward, both hands holding his drink. "Listen, we're okay. We're not gonna be caught. Ma's careful."

She downed half of her Dr Pepper in one shot just to keep herself from blabbing. She didn't want Diego to know how she really felt.

"Why the change?" he asked. "I thought you were into this."

"I am; it's just . . . I don't know."

"Well, you better get a hold of yourself before Ma comes back."

Roxi blew air out of her mouth in frustration. Why couldn't she be more like Diego? Hungry for adventure. Strong under pressure. More than anything she didn't want to disappoint Irene. Because of her, Roxi had seen half the country this summer. How many sixteen-year-olds could say that?

"I've got a surprise for you," Diego said.

"You're making dinner?"

"Surprise, not shock." He pulled a slip of paper from the back

pocket of his Levis, handing it to her with a grin. "I was gonna wait till your birthday, but I think you need it now."

"Wow. I've always wanted a piece of paper."

"Just read it."

Roxi unfolded the sheet. *Marie Greeley. 1264 Poplar Lane. Amarillo, TX.* She looked at Diego. "Is this supposed to mean something?"

He got serious. "Remember when we were talking about your mom? how you wished you knew where she was?"

Marie. That was Mom's name.

"I did some searching online, and I think I found her."

"But her last name . . . ?"

"Looks like she married a guy named Tom Greeley."

Roxi's mouth went dry. She hadn't heard from her mother in eight years, and she wasn't sure she wanted to now. Mom was married? Roxi didn't even know who her bio dad was, and now she had a stepfather?

She got up from the table and rested her back against the fridge a few feet away. The RV was designed to utilize every inch. Even the table where Diego still sat folded down to become her bed at night.

"She ditched me. Why would I care where she is?"

"Because she's your mom."

"Like that meant anything to her."

"Hey, people do dumb stuff." Diego crumpled his empty can with one hand and pitched it into the plastic trash bag they kept rubber-banded to a cabinet knob.

Roxi crossed her arms. "Not even a phone call?"

"You don't have to do anything with it now, Rox." He slid out from behind the table and opened the microwave, pulling out a bag of chips. With space at a premium, they used it more for storage than for cooking. And Irene never used it. She swore microwaves were bad for their health and mutated food.

Roxi stuffed the paper into her back pocket. Sometimes Diego could be annoyingly macho and cocky, but other times he surprised her. Like now. She'd tried to dig up this information herself a few years ago and found nothing.

"Thanks," Roxi said.

Ripping open the chips, Diego held them out to her, but she shook her head. She definitely wasn't hungry anymore. "I'm taking a walk."

"Ma should be back soon."

Which meant Irene would want to talk to both of them about tomorrow's plans, something Roxi didn't want to think about. She'd get some fresh air. Maybe things would look better after that.

She swung open the RV's door, bounded down the three metal stairs, and slammed the door behind her. This was one of the nicer campgrounds. No screaming kids or low-life slobs leering at her from their lounge chairs. The Fall River was within walking distance. Up here in Rocky Mountain National Park, late August was usually the height of tourist season, but for some reason, today there weren't many other campers. Just a few full-time RVers with satellite dishes mounted on \$200,000 rigs. The place would probably be packed over the weekend.

She headed for the river and sat at the water's edge, knees to her chest. Living with Irene and Diego was better than any of the foster homes she'd been placed in over the years. The last one had two other guys her age living in the house. One afternoon she'd come home from school to find they were the only ones home, as usual, since both parents worked. The moment she walked into the kitchen and saw their faces, she knew what they planned to do to her. That split second of intuition saved her. She dropped her backpack right there and ran away. Never went back. Three days later the cops picked her up for shoplifting from a grocery store, and she'd spent a month in

juvie. Finally her caseworker placed her in a group home. Only after she got beat up for the third time did they manage to find a relative willing to take her in. Irene Tonelli was her mom's cousin, and Roxi thought living with the Tonellis was the best thing that ever could've happened to her. Diego wasn't like those other guys, and she finally felt like she belonged somewhere.

Roxi heard the trill of a broad-tailed hummingbird's wings, then caught sight of the bird diving toward the rushing stream. All her life she'd prayed for a family. She used to imagine she'd wake up one morning and find everything had been a dream, and she really did have a mom and dad who loved her. Straightening her legs, she stared at the deep blue sky visible through the treetops. But no, this was her life. She shouldn't complain. Irene needed her to be a team player.

Swallowing back her emotions, she unbuttoned the cuff of her left sleeve and slowly rolled it up. With each flip of the fabric, more of her scar came into view. From wrist to elbow, a thick purple line wormed across her arm. She'd been eight when the glass had etched her with this eternal reminder of the night she lost Mom.

The night that changed her life forever.

About the Author



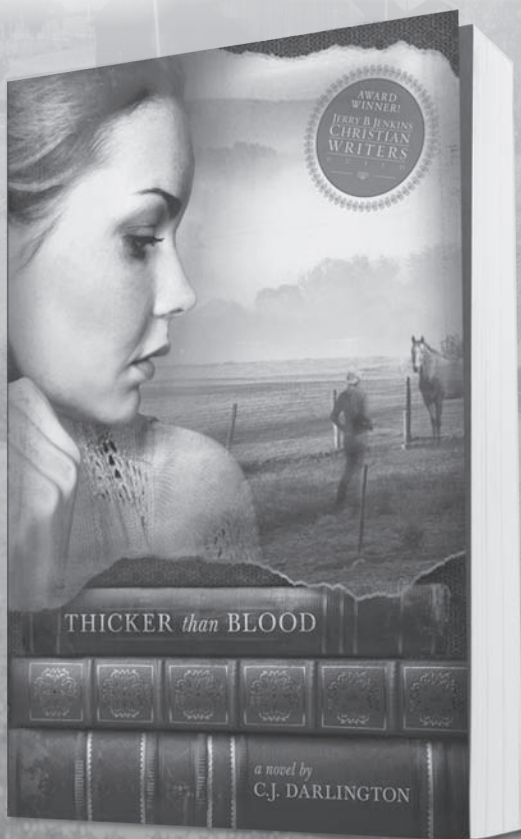
C.J. began writing the story that would become her first novel, *Thicker than Blood*, when she was a fifteen-year-old homeschool student. Later it won the 2008 Jerry B. Jenkins Christian Writers Guild Operation First Novel contest. She has been in the antiquarian bookselling business for over twelve years, scouting for stores similar to the ones described in her novels 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.

“An imaginative new novel of modern-day sisterhood that triumphs over the raw challenges of life to find the real endurance of both family ties and God’s amazing grace.”

—REBECCA ST. JAMES,
Grammy Award-winning Christian singer
and best-selling author

“With careful attention to detail, emotion, and scene-setting, C.J. Darlington scores with her debut effort.”

—JERRY B. JENKINS,
NY Times best-selling author and
owner of the Christian Writers Guild



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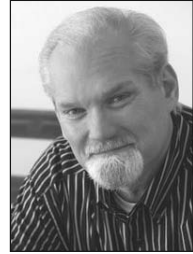
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