

**T H I C K E R
T H A N
W A T E R**

B R I G I D K E M M E R E R



KENSINGTON PUBLISHING CORP.
www.kensingtonbooks.com

KENSINGTON BOOKS are published by

Kensington Publishing Corp.
119 West 40th Street
New York, NY 10018

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any means without the prior written consent of the publisher, excepting brief quotes used in reviews.

All Kensington titles, imprints, and distributed lines are available at special quantity discounts for bulk purchases for sales promotions, premiums, fund-raising, educational, or institutional use.

Special book excerpts or customized printings can also be created to fit specific needs. For details, write or phone the office of the Kensington sales manager: Kensington Publishing Corp., 119 West 40th Street, New York, NY 10018, attn: Sales Department; phone 1-800-221-2647.

KENSINGTON and the k logo are Reg. U.S. Pat. & TM Off.

ISBN-13: 978-0-7582-9441-8
ISBN-10: 0-7582-9441-7

First Kensington trade paperback printing: January 2016

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America

First electronic edition: January 2016

ISBN-13: 978-0-7582-9442-5
ISBN-10: 0-7582-9442-5

*For Sarah Fine, the bravest woman I know
I'm so glad I forced you to be my friend.*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

These are going to be rambling acknowledgments, but I'm better at telling stories than making lists, so here goes.

I started this book while lying in bed. Thomas leapt into my head, fully formed, and I had to start his story immediately. I didn't even waste time grabbing my laptop—I just started writing his book on my e-reader. On a touch-screen keyboard, people. I still remember my husband rolling over and saying, “Who are you writing an email to, this late at night?”

I said, “I'm not writing an email. I'm starting a new book.”

And in his usual way, he laughed a little, rolled over, and said, “Okay, honey. I'm going to sleep.”

So in *my* usual way, I'm going to say thank you to my amazing husband, Michael Kemmerer, for being my best friend and the man I'm lucky enough to spend my life with. I couldn't do this without him.

As always, love and gratitude to my mother, who is always an inspiration to me, and could not be more supportive. As a registered nurse, she's also my quick go-to for medical questions. I just have to be careful to let her know it's for book research. I still remember the night I texted her to ask what would happen when someone got to the ER with a bullet wound. Her response? “WHO GOT SHOT?”

I'm lucky enough to have critique partners who are also my closest friends. Bobbie Goettler, Sarah Fine, and Alison Kemper, you help me more than you'll ever know, and you inspire me as women, mothers, and writers. I couldn't do this without you guys.

My agent, Mandy Hubbard, is beyond compare. I once

viii *Acknowledgments*

wrote an email to Mandy while sobbing so hard I could barely see the screen, and her uplifting response is still one I trot out when I tell aspiring authors, “*This*. This is what you want your agent to do for you.”

Alicia Condon and the entire team at Kensington, especially Alex Nicolajsen and Michelle Forde, have been in my corner since day one, and I’m so glad to be working with you all. Thank you so much for allowing me to bring new characters to my readers. I’m so glad you loved Thomas and Charlotte as much as I did.

Jodie Webster and Eva Mills and everyone at Allen & Unwin are delightful people, and I’m so lucky to have gotten the chance to work with you all. Thank you so much for all you’ve done for the Merrick brothers, and now for Thomas and Charlotte.

Huge, huge, HUGE thanks to Officer James Kalinosky of the Baltimore County Police Department, along with his wife Nicole Kalinosky, for all the advice, insight, and anecdotes about the world of police work and the impact it can have on a family.

Much gratitude to the friends who read some (or all) of my early drafts and offered words of advice to help make the story better: Nicole Mooney, Nicole Choiniere-Kroecker, Tracy Houghton, Brenda Freeman, and Amy Laura Jackson. (Looks like I can make a list after all.)

Huge thanks to Dr. Darin Kennedy for providing medical knowledge when my mom wasn’t around, especially for helping me with some tricky situations. Any errors are mine.

I owe a great deal of thanks to the Kemmerer boys, Jonathan, Nick, Sam, and Baby Zach, for allowing me time to follow my dreams.

Finally, extra special thanks to Jim Hilderbrandt for reading an early draft and telling me where I was going wrong. You saved this book, friend. Your day is coming soon.

CHAPTER ONE

T H O M A S

I hate this suit.

Mom bought it two weeks ago, and I hated it then. But she started with the whole *please* and *for me* and *just this once* and I gave in. Because she knows my buttons.

Knew. She *knew* my buttons.

I hate the past tense.

I'm definitely not a suit guy. She *knows* that.

Damn it.

She *knew* that, like she knew how I liked my oatmeal and the reason my hair got too long and how I still don't like to sleep with my door closed even though eighteen is way too old to be afraid of the dark. If she'd walked into a store to buy me clothes on a random day, she'd walk out with the right things: T-shirts and hoodies and jeans and dark socks. She knew the right kind of charcoal pencils and the right brand of sketchpad and the right time to leave me alone.

The last time she bought me a suit was for Homecoming sophomore year. I wasn't a suit guy then either, but I'd worked up the nerve to ask Anne Marie Lassiter and she'd said *yes*, so a suit it was.

I outgrew the girl before I outgrew the suit.

Just this once.

Of all the things Mom said to me, that's the one that keeps echoing. Because it wasn't once.

I'm on my third try with this stupid tie, and I'm getting to

2 *Brigid Kemmerer*

the point where I just want to hang myself with it. It's yellow and navy, the colors of the ribbons on her wedding bouquet.

The colors of the bars on Stan's police uniform.

Ironically, they're the colors of the bruises on your neck when you die of strangulation.

Trust me. I got a firsthand view.

Just this once.

My hands are shaking now, and I yank the tie free and fling it on my dresser.

Stan knocks on the door and sticks his head in without waiting.

He does that. I hate that.

I don't hate him, though. Not yet, anyway. I barely know the guy.

Stan probably figured he was hitting the jackpot, marrying a single mom with an eighteen-year-old kid. Get the stepdad brownie points without the work. At first I was worried that he'd be a pain in the ass, being a cop and all. That whole gotta-be-the-bigger-man crap. But I stayed out of his way, he stayed out of mine. He treated her well and made her happy. Good enough for me.

He's still standing there, looking at me in the mirror.

"What?" I say.

"You about ready?"

I think about telling him I can't get the tie knotted, but then he'd offer to help me and this would be all kinds of awkward.

This is already all kinds of awkward.

"Yeah," I say.

He disappears from the doorway.

I ball up the tie and put it in my pocket.

Stan doesn't say anything during the drive to the church. I don't either. When he makes a turn, the click of the signal makes my head pound.

It's weird sitting in the front seat with him. I should be in

the back. Mom should be up front, providing a buffer of conversation, asking me about school and graduation while simultaneously asking Stan about cases he's working on.

Stan is a detective.

I wonder if it's a blow to his ego, a cop's wife murdered in his own bed ten days after their wedding. Poor ol' Stan, the subject of police gossip.

God, I'm such a dick sometimes. Maybe I do hate him. Words are trapped in my mouth, and I'm afraid to say any of them, because they'll explode out of me with enough force to wreck the car.

Why haven't you done something?

Why couldn't you protect her?

HOW COULD YOU LET THIS HAPPEN?!

Stan was at work when she died. I was in my own bed.

I don't know which is worse.

I didn't hear anything. I found her when I woke to use the bathroom.

Maybe I hate myself. Maybe I hate everyone.

"You all right?"

I glance at Stan. His eyes are on the road ahead, and his voice is quiet. I don't know why he's even asking. Of course I'm not all right. "Fine," I say.

He doesn't ask anything else.

Mom would pry. She'd dig the secrets out of me with the dexterity of an archaeologist, leaving my feelings intact while letting the truth rise to the surface. Like I said, she knew my buttons.

Then again, Stan is a detective, so he can probably do the same thing. Maybe he doesn't want to pry.

The dead heat of summer gives me a big wet kiss when I climb out of the car, reminding me why I don't wear suits. Reminding me that I probably should have gotten a haircut when she asked me. My neck already feels damp, and I'm glad I didn't mess with the tie.

I've never been to this church, a long, squat brick build-

4 *Brigid Kemmerer*

ing with a steeple at one end and an aluminum roof. Stained glass windows glitter with the Stations of the Cross. Nice. Colorful depictions of suffering and torture. Great place.

I don't know why we're having the funeral in a church anyway. Mom dragged me to church all the time when I was a kid, but we haven't gone in years. Maybe she and Stan went. I don't know.

Cops are everywhere. Clustered in groups clinging to the shade along the side of the building, off by the parking lot grabbing a quick smoke, slapping Stan on the shoulder.

They ignore me. Good. Sort of.

The atmosphere is wrong here. There's no sense of loss, no anguish and grief. I feel like I'm trapped in a glass box with my own twisting emotions, watching everyone else at a social event.

It's infuriating.

I don't know anyone except Stan. I'm sure I met a few of these people at the wedding, but it was a small ceremony at the courthouse, and no one stands out. Mom's two friends from back home called to tell me they couldn't get time off again, couldn't make the drive out for the second time in two weeks. I said fine, whatever. The only thing worse than being here alone would be mom's friends treating me like a six-year-old who can't get a straw into a juice box.

Everyone is standing in groups. Only one other guy is across the parking lot, standing under a tree. He's not in uniform, but that doesn't mean he's not a cop. He's built like one. He looks like he's texting. Must really be feeling the loss.

He feels me watching him, because his eyes lift from his phone.

I look away before he can catch my gaze, then pull into the shade myself. It doesn't help. Part of me wants to put a fist through this brick wall. Another part wants to run from here, to pretend none of this is happening.

Suspicious glances keep flicking my way, as if I'm the odd-ball here, instead of all the people who don't even know the woman they're supposed to be mourning.

Maybe it's just me. Cops make me nervous. Always have. Maybe it's a teenager thing, the way they always look at you like you're on the cusp of doing something wrong. Maybe it's the year Mom and I spent avoiding the law because Daddy was a very bad man, and we couldn't risk any kind of trouble.

Maybe it's the interrogation I had to sit through after finding Mom's body.

I don't know what I'm doing here. When we moved in with Stan, I left my friends three hours away. Now we're way on the south side of Salisbury, in the middle of nowhere, at this frigging church with death scenes embedded in the walls and a bazillion cops who are all here for *him*, not her.

I yank at the collar of my shirt and feel someone watching me.

At first I think of the guy with the cell phone, but when I glance across the parking lot, he's gone. It's a girl in a purple dress. She stands with an older woman, and by *older* I mean that there's a chance her wrinkled skin might give up the fight and slide the rest of the way down her body. Ol' Wrinkly is wearing an honest-to-god navy blue hat with a veil. She looks emotional while she talks to Stan, dabbing at her eyes with a tissue.

What a joke. If she knew my mother, she didn't know her well. I've never seen her before.

I've never seen the girl before either, but since she's looking at me, I look back at her. She's got to be about my age. Thick, curly caramel hair, skin too pale for summertime, dark framed glasses, curves in all the right places. She'd be a challenge to sketch, because the tiny waist and the curves would make her look like a superhero comic, especially with that rack.

6 *Brigid Kemmerer*

I jerk my eyes away. I shouldn't be checking out a girl at my mother's *funeral*. Mom would cuff me on the neck and tell me to behave myself.

But the girl peels away from the overwrought woman and heads my way. She's wearing high-heeled sandals, and she stumbles a bit on the crooked pavement. The movement makes her hair sway, and she brushes it out of her eyes.

I'm staring.

Then she's in front of me, holding out a hand. "I don't think we've met."

I shake her hand, and it feels too formal, like I'm meeting a college recruiter. But I can play this game because it's better than thinking about my mother rotting inside a wooden box. "We haven't."

"I'm Charlotte."

"I'm Thomas."

She doesn't let go of my hand. "Tom?"

She could call me Princess Sparklepants if she wants. I couldn't care less about my name at this point. "Whatever."

She finally releases my hand. Her expression says she's picked up on some of my tension. "Thomas, then. How do you know Stan? Is one of your parents on the force?"

Of course she thinks I'm here for him. No one in this place knows Mom.

I have to clear my throat, because my answer will embarrass this girl, but it's not like I can lie about it. "He married my mother."

Her face goes more pale, if that's possible. I don't like that. It reminds me of another pale face, which makes me start thinking about bruised necks again.

"It's fine," I say, even though it's not. I try to keep the anger out of my voice, because she doesn't deserve it. I don't even know what good it's doing me. My voice comes out all gravelly. "I've only lived here a few weeks. I don't know anyone."

"I'm so sorry," she says softly.

What am I supposed to say to that? I don't even know this girl.

I find myself shrugging before realizing that makes me look indifferent. People are watching me again. The attention weighs on my shoulders. Do they know who I am, or are they wondering like Charlotte? Which would be better?

I've been quiet too long. My jaw feels tight. She reaches for my hand again. Her fingers are small and gentle and soft against my palm, such a contrast to the businesslike formality of her handshake. "You don't need to stand here by yourself. Come meet my family—"

"I'm fine." I hold fast, jerking my hand away from her. I can keep it together here, alone, by the wall, but I can't take a dozen strangers talking at me.

"Okay," she says softly.

I take a long breath, then blow it out through my teeth. "Sorry," I grit out.

We stand there in silence for a moment.

"Do you want me to get Stan?" she finally asks quietly. "You don't seem . . ."

Her voice trails off, and I frown. "I don't seem what?"

Again, my tone is rougher than she deserves, and she licks her lips, recalculating. Her spine straightens, but she doesn't move away. "You don't seem like you should be alone right now."

Stan is thirty feet away, talking to two other guys in uniform. They're doing the guy version of sympathy, clapping him on the shoulder.

I knew her longer, I want to shout.

Mom would shush me and tell me to be more respectful.

I don't miss her yet. It doesn't even feel like she's dead. It feels like she's on vacation or something. I keep thinking I need to store all these thoughts and memories for later, when she gets back.

I look back at Charlotte. "No. Leave him."

"Is anyone else here for you?"

8 *Brigid Kemmerer*

I laugh humorlessly. “None of this is for me. I feel like I’m crashing a stranger’s funeral.” I sound like an angry freak, and I rub my hands down my face. “I don’t know anyone.”

Now I just sound pathetic.

“Is that your tie?” she says suddenly, and I realize she’s looking at my pocket. “Too hot?”

“I couldn’t tie it,” I admit without thinking, and then I feel like a real moron. What kind of guy can’t tie a tie? And then brings it with him, like he’s waiting for someone to get around to helping? I glance away, embarrassed. “She bought me the suit. Made a big deal about matching it—”

I have to stop talking. Pathetic has reached a new level. I want the anger back. Anger was better than this tight, choking feeling in my throat.

Charlotte tugs it out of my pocket and threads it between her fingers. “May I?”

It takes me a moment to figure out what she’s talking about. She’s too short to get the tie around my neck without my cooperation. I could refuse. I could grab the tie and shove it back in my pocket and send her scurrying back to her people.

But it’s a needed distraction, and I find myself ducking down, letting her loop it over my head, enjoying the soft feel of her fingers as she tucks it below the collar of my shirt. She’s close, and I catch her scent, something clean and citrusy.

“People are staring,” I murmur.

“Let them stare.”

“Is this a service you provide?” I say, intending to tease, but my voice is too broken for that.

But she’s kind, so she takes the bait and runs with it. Her eyes are on the knot as she threads the fabric. “Absolutely. Tying ties, buttoning jackets . . . you should see me pin on a flower.”

I almost smile, but then her hands make the final loop. Satin slides against cotton, and then the knot hits my neck. Quick and sudden and tight. I can’t breathe.

I jerk the fabric out of her hand without thinking.

My movement is too sudden. She stumbles back, catching herself against the wall.

I gasp, pulling at the knot of fabric. It's barely tight, but I can't stop myself.

"I'm sorry," she whispers. "I'm sorry."

"No, it's fine," I choke out. This is insane. I need to get it together. The knot finally gives an inch. Air can't seem to make it into my lungs. "It's not even tight."

I suck in a breath and sound like an asthmatic. I run a hand down my face. This is not getting it together.

"You all right, Char?"

It's another cop in dress uniform, talking to Charlotte but looking at me like I'm a purse snatcher or something.

No, looking at me like I'm a murderer.

This guy's young, not much older than I am. His hair is military short, almost blond, and his eyes are just looking for trouble. I swear to god he's holding his hand near his gun, and I'm tempted to fake him out, just to see if he'd pull it.

Knowing my luck, he'd probably shoot me.

Right this instant, I'd welcome it.

"I'm fine, Danny," Charlotte says. "This is Thomas. Stan's new—"

"I know who he is." Of course he does. Everyone in uniform probably does. I'm sure some of them still think I did it. But Danny takes the edge off by putting a hand out. "I'm sorry about your mother."

I shake his hand. "Thanks."

His grip is solid, almost too tight. He doesn't let go, and I can tell he'd hold fast if I tried to pull free. "You want to tell me why you put your hands on my little sister?"

Oh. Now I get it.

Charlotte is looking worriedly between the two of us. "It's fine, Danny—he didn't touch me."

"I saw him shove you." His grip tightens. "You'd better watch yourself."

His tone grates against my nerves and reminds me why I don't like cops.

"He didn't shove me," Charlotte says.

"Watch myself?" I say to him. "It's my mother's funeral."

He gives a little laugh, and he lets go of my hand, somehow making it feel like a shove. "Yeah, you look really broken up about it, taking the time to rough up a girl."

My hands are in fists again, anger weaving its way through the less aggressive emotions. This narrow stretch of shade has turned too hot, almost stifling. I can smell my own sweat.

I hate this suit.

Danny's watching me, his eyes almost predatory. I've gotten in my share of scrapes, and I can read the signs. Dangerous potential rides the air. He wants to hit me.

My mother's voice is like a whisper in my head. *Behave yourself, Tommy.*

I force my hands to loosen. Danny's right, in a way. I did shove her. I shouldn't have put my hands on her. Someone spends five minutes being kind, and I act like a caged animal.

It takes a lot of effort to back down. "Sorry," I say, turning away from them. "I didn't mean to cause a problem."

"Yeah, well, I don't want to find my sister dead in her bed. Get me?"

Something snaps inside of me. Anger splits into fury. My fist swings.

I'm strong, and years of being the new kid taught me how to throw a punch. It's stupid, and reckless, and my mother's voice is screaming in the back of my skull.

Tommy! He is a police officer!

It sucks that he's a cop, too, because he knows how to deflect a punch. He catches my arm and slams me into the wall of the church. My hand is pinned behind my back and I inhale brick dust. The tie drags on the bricks, too, pulling tight against my neck.

I am such an idiot.

He's enjoying this. We're the center of attention now. He's

probably hoping I'll fight him so he can continue playing the badass.

I don't want to fight him. This is her funeral. Her *funeral*. My throat is tight and my eyes are hot. Reason catches up with action and I'm swimming in a special blend of humiliation and shame.

I will not start crying right now. I *will not*.

Charlotte is smacking her brother, it sounds like. "Danny! Danny, stop it! What is *wrong* with you?"

Hot breath finds my neck, followed by a little shove. The bricks scrape at my skin. I expect him to hold me here, to suffer the judgmental stares of the crowd that I can hear gathering. Or maybe he'll tell Stan to keep me in line, or something equally demeaning.

Instead, he speaks low, just to me. "Did you get off on it? Think about it in the shower this morning? All hot and bothered for killing your mother?"

Rage flares, hot and painful, blinding me with fury. I jerk back, trying to break his hold, knowing it's futile.

But suddenly I'm free. My head is buzzing, and he's on the ground, yelling. Clutching his head. Charlotte is standing back, glancing between me and him, her breath quick.

Did I hit him? What just happened?

Before I can get it together, a hand falls on my shoulder, pushing me back against the wall. I feel metal against my wrist.

I freeze. Another one of these jerkoffs is cuffing me and talking about assault on a police officer.

Now Danny's on his feet, talking about resisting arrest. He grabs my arm and drags me away from the wall. The crowd grows.

We're heading for a police car.

I'm going to miss the funeral.