

TERI TERRY

RED
SKY
BURNING



Book 2 of The Circle Trilogy

h
Hodder
Children's
Books

1

I didn't see it coming. Nobody did.

I say that, but there was *something* that last night: a tightness in my chest, a pressure, inside and out, that made breathing feel like an effort even when I was still.

I couldn't sleep and I thought it was the relentless weather. Hot, humid, the air not moving at all, and OK, it *was* summer, but it shouldn't have been that hot in England. At least that's what they say, but it's mostly what I remember growing up: hot, endless summers, the only relief in the sea. I'm sure that has a lot to do with why I'm a swimmer.

So, I couldn't sleep, and I remember wondering why I hadn't told Tabby everything. Not about that Penrose Clinic she was worried about – I didn't know anything about it yet, then – but in relation to the other things she told me that were seriously weird. The way she, Isha and Zara had never even trained before, but were discovered and brought there – to the elite summer swim school. It was meant to be training for future stars of the sport; that they'd never even competed before didn't make any kind of sense. And also that between the three of them and Ariel, two of their parents were geologists and two worked for oil and gas companies. I'd said my dad was a politician – true, he's an MP in London – but didn't mention my mother.

I don't, generally – mention my mother. I don't even call her

that. It felt too weird saying ‘Mum’ or even ‘Mother’ to a stranger, so I’ve always just called her by her first name, Leila. I see her so seldom that she seems kind of like a story I’ve been told rather than one I’ve lived. But I could have told Tabby that Leila was on the other side – that she was part of Big Green in Washington DC, the umbrella environmental group that stands against oil and gas companies like Industria United.

So, lying awake, thinking, I decided I would tell Tabby about her the next day. And we could ask some of the other swimmers about their backgrounds, see if these parallels continued. And if they did, try to work out *why* – what it meant. This was a puzzle, and nothing gets my attention more than not understanding how something fits together.

But then there was a knock at my door.

2

Who could it be?

I squint at my tracker in the dark: 2.40 a.m.

There's another light *tap tap*.

I get up and open the door.

Becker? If there is anyone I wasn't expecting to see standing there at this time of night, our running trainer is it.

His hair is rumpled like he's just got up.

'Sorry to wake you, Denzi. You've got a call – Director Lang's office downstairs. Come on.'

A call. When we're not allowed our own phones, and only get to use theirs for one call home a week? And in the middle of the night?

'What the hell? Has something happened?'

He shrugs. 'I don't know. She just asked me to get you.'

I follow Becker down the stairs, through the front lobby and down a hall to the director's office.

He taps once, opens the door.

She's there at her desk – Christina Lang, the director of the swim school – and, OK, maybe I should be wearing more than my boxers. But she only looks concerned, and my gut is clenching.

'Denzi, take a seat. Here you go.' She passes me the phone.

'Hello?'

'Denzi?' It's Dad. *Relief* floods through me to hear his voice,

followed by panic at all the other things that could have happened.

‘What’s wrong?’

‘It’s your mother. I don’t know how serious it is – we haven’t got all the details yet – she’s been involved in an accident. Oliver called from the hospital. They’re asking you to go.’

‘*What?* What kind of accident?’

‘She was knocked off her bike by a car. That’s all I know.’

‘Shit.’

‘Yeah. Well, it’s totally up to you, I promise. What do you want to do?’

And I’m sitting there, not saying anything – not knowing what to say. She’s never been there for me, so why should I? But what if . . . this the last time I will ever see her?

‘Denzi? If you’re not sure what to do, consider this. In my experience, if you are ever in doubt about whether to do something or do nothing, it’s usually the things you don’t do that you regret.’

And I know he’s talking about something else completely, yet . . . he’s right.

‘I’ll go,’ I say.

‘All right. Jax has been checking flights. We can get you on a seven a.m. direct to Washington, DC if you can get to Heathrow in time. Can I speak to Christina again?’

‘Thanks, Dad.’

I hand the phone back to her. They’re talking details while my mind is reeling: my mother? An accident?

Director Lang hands the phone back to me.

‘Dad?’

‘All sorted. We’ll meet you at the airport with your passport; Jax is packing you a few clothes and things, too.’

‘Thanks.’

We say goodbye and I hang up.

‘All right, Denzi,’ Director Lang says. ‘Go get dressed and be out front in ten minutes. Becker will drive you to Heathrow.’

‘Thanks. Both of you: thanks.’

We don’t talk much on the way. It’s almost three a.m. when we leave; Becker’s sat nav says three hours. Will that leave enough time to get through security for a seven a.m. flight? But there’s hardly any traffic and we make it there in nearer two and a half.

He pulls up in front of departures.

‘Thanks again,’ I say.

‘No problem. Though this’ll be the first morning *ever* I’ve not made the six a.m. run. Hope everything is OK, kid.’

I get out, rush into departures and, as I do, wonder about Becker. I’ve never liked him much, mostly because he seems to pick on weaker runners. Maybe away from training he’s all right.

I find Dad and Jax.

‘Quick, they’ll close the gate soon,’ Dad says. ‘I’ve checked you in; here’s your boarding pass, passport, cards and cash, and your mobile. I’ve charged it. There’s a driver and car arranged to meet you there; he’ll have a sign with your name at arrivals, OK? I’ve texted you Oliver’s number in case you need it.’

Dad gives me a hug; Jax does too.

Jax hands me a small bag. ‘Only packed a carry on, no time to check anything,’ he says.

‘Go, go,’ Dad says. ‘We’ll wait a while in case you miss it. Text me. Love you.’

‘You too.’ I start to rush towards security.

‘Call us when you get there,’ Jax calls out.

‘Will do!’ I turn, wave as I go through and out of their sight.

Security is even slower than usual and, once I’m through, the gate is about as far away as it could be. I run full tilt to get there. A woman in flight-crew uniform is pulling the door closed.

‘Please! My mother has been in an accident. I have to get on this plane.’

She hesitates, then opens it again. ‘All right. You’ll have to hurry.’ I hand her my passport and boarding pass to be scanned.

‘Thank you,’ I say and rush up the tunnel to the plane.

I’m shown to my seat and sink into it before it registers – this is business class? God. It must have cost a fortune last minute like this.

I text Dad. Made it. Thanks for the posh seat.

Hope it’s all OK. Call whenever you need or want to.

Thanks.

I turn my phone to airplane mode, do up my seat belt. They start the usual inflight safety stuff.

I’d been so focused on worrying about catching this flight that now that I’m here, I’m remembering *why*.

Is she all right? I didn’t ask Dad if they knew anything else. They’d have told me if they did, wouldn’t they?

But if she isn’t all right . . . what if I’m too late?

I can’t think about that now and force my thoughts away, back to what I’ve left behind.

Tabby. I should have given Becker a message for her; I hope they’ll tell her where I’ve gone. Not sure anybody else will notice I’m not there, except maybe Dickens, the school cat.

So much for summer swim school and being in the next Olympics. I guess that's something else I can blame on Leila. Then I feel guilty for thinking that when I don't know if . . . well. I carefully don't think about that any further.

I hope Dad really *is* OK with me making this trip. Whatever went wrong between my parents all those years ago, he's never really been able to tell me. I mean, he's gay, which would be enough to end things once he'd worked it out, but somehow I sense there is more to it. Not that he's trying to keep things from me; it's more like he can't bear to talk about it.

We taxi to our runway. The engines power up and we're speeding down it now, then lurch as we climb into the sky. The mad pace of my heart gradually slows.

My mind is still spinning. I usually can't sleep on planes; I'm not great at getting to sleep anywhere, really – even at home it takes ages. But exhaustion has me.

I'm gone.