

TERI TERRY

DARK
BLUE
RISING



Book 1 of The Circle Trilogy



1

I breathe the sea.

Eyes closed, I draw air in oh-so-slowly until the wave I follow reaches its peak on the beach. As the water falls back I relax, release the air I was holding inside, drawing it out until the next wave begins its return. In a ritual of controlled breathing and rising tide the rhythm is so perfect I almost lose connection with my body and float away, asleep, on the water instead.

But part of me is still watchful, still aware. All I hear is the music of the sea, but is there a small change in the way the air moves on my skin, some disturbance nearby?

I open my eyes. Warm brown ones are looking back into mine from above. I smile, stretch, sit up.

‘I thought you were asleep,’ Jago says.

‘I was, nearly. And I thought you couldn’t come today?’

‘Made an excuse and got away early.’

‘To see me?’

He grins and those dimples in his cheeks appear like magic. ‘Yes, to see you.’

He sits next to me on the damp sand, close, but not quite touching my bare arm with his. ‘I couldn’t wait to tell you something.’

‘What’s that?’

‘You wouldn’t tell me, but I found out your name. I saw you

leaving the library yesterday; the librarian said your name is Tabitha.'

Guilt stirs inside me. The only library I can get to from here is the mobile one in Boscastle, and it's only there for a short time every four weeks; I couldn't sit in it and read. To let me borrow books she said she had to know my name, and I wanted to read them so much that I told her the true one even though I knew I shouldn't. And now Jago knows it, too.

'That *is* your name, isn't it? Tabitha?'

'She said she wouldn't tell, not so long as I brought the books back when I should.'

'It's not her fault. I kind of tricked her, made her think I already knew what it was, and then she said it.'

'Oh.' I raise my eyes to his, trying to think what I should say, but there is nothing I can do when looking in those eyes but tell the truth. 'Yes, I'm Tabitha – Tabby, really. But don't tell anyone.'

His eyes crinkle in the corners. 'OK, Tabby Cat, how about this: I won't tell a soul if you give me your number?'

My number? I'm confused for a moment, then think I get what he means. 'Do you mean, my phone number? I haven't got one.'

'You don't have a mobile?' His eyes open wider with surprise.

'No.'

'Landline, then.'

I shake my head.

'Is that no, you won't tell me, or no, you haven't got one?'

'Haven't got one.'

He looks both amazed and doubtful, like not having any sort

of phone to be traced and reached by is so unbelievable that I must be lying.

‘It’s the truth,’ I say. ‘We don’t have anything like that. But I can meet you here again tomorrow afternoon?’

‘What if something happens and you can’t come? Take my number just in case.’

I shake my head, unable to think of anything that could happen that would stop me from being here tomorrow. This whole feeling of having a friend of my own, someone who smiles to see me, talks to me and wants to meet up every day, is all so new; I couldn’t stay away. But still he insists. When I tell him I don’t have anything to write it down on he says the numbers over and over again until I can repeat them back without fault. Will I ever call him? Would I dare?

The sun is pulling further across the sky. Cate will be back from her second cleaning job soon, and if I’m not there when she gets back and she asks where I’ve been and what I’ve been doing – well. What would I say? Talking to an outsider like this breaks so many rules. If she found out, that’d be the end of it.

‘I have to go,’ I say, and reach across the sand for my trainers. But when I look up again his smile is gone, his eyes focused beyond me. There are footsteps, voices. Laughter.

I turn and there are four of them walking towards us – three boys and a girl – gawping like they’ve found something unpleasant washed up by the tide. Another two boys hang back behind them.

We scramble to our feet.

‘Honestly, Jago. How could you sink that low?’ the girl says.

Hard eyes flash with anger, disdain, and something else. Is she jealous?

‘This is none of your business,’ Jago says.

‘Who is she?’ one of the boys says, looking at me up and down in a way I don’t like.

‘Nobody,’ another of them answers. ‘She’s from one of those caravans parked up the hill. They’ll be asked to move on soon.’

‘They should get the push, shouldn’t they? Dad says property values will fall if they stay.’

They laugh. Jago doesn’t stand up for me; he says nothing. Maybe he didn’t know that’s where I live, and now that he does, he’ll disappear. I thought Jago was my friend, that I could trust him, but townies are all the same, aren’t they? Even though he seemed different, he’s still one of them.

Cate’s voice is in my head. *Don’t react to stupidity, Tabby. Ignore them.* And I listen for once, turn, start walking away – across the sand towards the steep, stone steps that wind up the cliff to the coastal path.

Footsteps follow behind me.

‘She’s kind of cute.’

‘Don’t get too close, you might catch something.’

‘We could give her a good wash first, maybe?’

There’s an edge to their voices, beyond their mocking. Where is Jago? Why didn’t he say anything else to them, or come with me now? Even as I wonder these things there is certainty in what I must do:

Run.

When I reach the steps I try to ignore the sharp pain of jagged rock on bare feet, but it drives home my mistake. I’m not a good

runner; I should have turned to the sea instead. They'd not have followed and, even if they did, could never swim as fast as me.

I get to the top and dash for the path to the road.

Another step, two, three – and then one of them grabs my arm from behind, yanks me around to face him.

'Let me go!' I say, and add a bunch of words Cate wouldn't like to hear, wouldn't like to think I even know, but he twists my arm around my back.

'Such filth. We need to wash out your mouth,' one of the other boys says, having caught up now, along with the rest of them, except for Jago and the two that were behind. I'm struggling and then one of them has a bottle in his hand and twists my head back, and now I'm coughing, choking, on something vile – some spirit – while they laugh.

I twist and elbow the one holding me, hard, in the stomach. He falls to the ground.

The girl grabs my hair. Furious now, I swing out with my fist, catch her full on the side of her face, and push her back into the other two.

Again: *Run*. Not even feeling my feet any more with adrenalin and fear, as fast as I can up to the end of the path to the road, and then –

Headlights—

Brakes, screaming—

I'm hit hard, and fly through the air.

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