

## The Red Circle

by Fran Duffield

Gasping for breath and crouched in the dust she couldn't see much. For a split second, the Guardia's headlights lit up the hoarding of the gigantic happy advert family in the red circle logo, then swung through the narrow entranceway, tyres screeching and bumping over the concrete kerbs. The cars circled to form a corral and multiple doors slammed, the sound bouncing off the empty shopping centre.

She tried to keep absolutely still and her head down, so her pale face and blonde hair wouldn't show up in any searchlight, but her legs were shaking violently and she thought she was going to throw up.

There was a crackle of police radios, and a coordinated ratcheting clicking. Oh shit, they've primed their guns, she thought, and her heart thudded loud enough to hear.

There was a skittering noise, and a shout of "Parese!" More clattering and running footsteps, "Parese!" rang out again from the police. The air crackled with heat, and a searchlight raked the far end of the car park. It stopped. "Dejelo!" The command was distorted through a loudhailer, sounding bizarrely like a local radio station with bad reception. She didn't know what it meant, but she guessed.

There was a confused noise, another blare of the loudhailer then, unmistakable and final, a shot. The radios crackled again, and the police moved cautiously towards the dark end of the car park.

Now. The only chance before they spread out to search the area. She edged slowly along the dust covered wall behind the tropical flowers and succulents to the sharp angled corner. Carefully round the angle, it was the only exposed spot. Scrambling over the rough wall of the flowerbed, she ran for the cover of the carwash. She froze as more headlights lit up the driveway, but it was only an ambulance.

They weren't rushing. There was no need. She knew that. But she was still here and breathing. On the edge of the almost vertical bank, she hesitated. She pictured the kid sleeping in her sister's spare bed with English rain pattering the window. This was a better risk than the civil guard. She gripped the chainmesh fence and hauled herself over. Lowering herself branch to branch, it wasn't so bad. Then she was slipping. Sliding uncontrollably, ripping her arms and legs against rock and thorn, she resigned herself. This would be it. Then in a sharp pain of landing it stopped. Lying dazed for what seemed a long time, the whole thing replayed, the grinning family in the red circle lit like film stars, the guards. The shot. The red circle which by now would have stopped spreading on the tarmac of the car park, left behind by the departing, pointless ambulance.

Moving with difficulty, she felt her way along the bottom on the bank. All was quiet now above, and she knew she would eventually come out at the tunnel that led between the beach and her apartment. If she could get back to the apartment, it would all be ok. Had to be. Pete was gone, no one else would know she had been there at all. Tomorrow had to be a different life, no longer Judy Smallweed's.