

Chapter 1

A ghost in the city

My first memory is very distinct: a suited man in an old raincoat leans over me, his harsh face softened by an expression of concern. Far above us, black drops of water from a recent shower gather on stone gables. They swell and reluctantly, one after the other, fall through the dark sky.

‘Are you all right, little girl?’

‘I’m fine.’ I remember being a little embarrassed that I had been lying on the wet pavement, but even more ashamed that I hadn’t the faintest idea who I was.

‘Well.’ He hesitates; his grey eyes become distant. ‘In that case, I have to go.’

‘That’s fine, fine.’ I wave him on. ‘Thank you. For stopping to ask.’

That’s it. I suppose I was about nine years old at the time. I was in a state of total confusion, wondering if perhaps I’d just been in an accident and lost my memory; searching the emptiness in my head for clues: my name, my family, anything.

The dark girl reflected in the tinted window of a nearby aircar, that was me – I recognised the image; yet, frighteningly, I felt for a moment that she was a complete stranger. In that instant, I made at least one discovery about myself, which was that I was a thief. Without

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my even thinking about it, my hands had slipped inside the kind man's jacket, stolen his wallet and checked out the contents. He had a yellow pass card, which was classier than he looked.

'Mister!' I called out to him. 'Here, you dropped this.'

A thief with a conscience.

* * * *

So, here I was, about six years later, and still no closer to knowing who I was. Still wondering why I couldn't recall anything that had happened from when I was young, or even who my parents were.

Right now, I was riding the nose of my airboard, which might not be the most impressive stunt to look at, but for anyone who knows airboards, it's class. You see, all the thrust comes from the back of an airboard, so most of the time your weight needs to be on your back foot. It's very hard to steer with your feet side-by-side, toes just over the front of the board, arms outstretched, hair tugged by the wind. Hard, because shifting your weight around by a tiny amount causes you to veer wildly. But hey, if you are good, you can direct the board with the swaying of your arms. And I was good. Actually, I was the best.

Airboards work a lot like two magnets of the same polarity, the way they push each other apart. When an airboard is switched on, it is repelled by matter. So left to itself an airboard will float about half a metre off the ground, bobbing slightly. Fitted with a drive, it becomes your best way of getting around the City. We liked to ride pretty high, but you can go only so long through the air before you start to fall; then you need to find a solid object to slide over that will give you the uphit to rise again. Boarding is the greatest fun you can have in this world. There are plenty of railings, ledges, walls, and cars, moving or parked, to let you dance through the shadows of the

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City, riding the beat of one uphit after another, flitting erratically like a bat above the heads of the staring walkers.

I took an uphit from a parked car to come out of the nose ride, moving fast towards the factory. My next move was going to be a one-eighty off a windowsill and I needed my right foot back on the tail of the board. Somewhere down in the car park, my friends were watching and admiring.

With a screech, the window opened and a security guard thrust out his helmeted face.

‘Beat it, kid!’

‘Watch out, Ghost!’ Someone cried from below.

There was no time to pull out of my move. With a snarl, I tried to get some of the downhit from my board to smack the guard’s face as well as the ledge. He saw it coming and, at full stretch, he punched out at me with a wooden baton. My board twisted under my feet and spun away through the air. I was falling. About five metres above the tarmac.

They tell you at the front of every airboard manual that you have to wear a helmet. Then they tell you again. And just in case you don’t get the message, they tell you once more. Only after that do they tell you how to ride your new airboard. But I hadn’t learned much from manuals, just one fascinating fact. A drop to concrete from above ten metres will kill you; that’s pretty obvious. But did you know that there is a death zone created by falling from an airboard head first at exactly five metres above the ground? This is because for most people the one second it takes you to fall doesn’t give you time to get your head out of the way. Funnily enough if you fall from a bit higher, you are actually safer, you might only break a leg.

On the other hand, one second isn’t so bad if you know what you are doing.

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I launched a desperate adrenaline-fuelled kick, intercepting the middle strap of the board with my left foot, with just enough momentum to swing the board right around over my head, so from my friends' point of view it would have looked as if I had performed a mid-air cartwheel, bringing the board back beneath me, inches above the ground.

A fierce jolt of pain shot up my left leg, as if a giant pair of crocodile clips had been let shut around my ankle and a switch thrown. I let out a scream of distress and anger as the board and I rebounded back up into the air from our drop. My ankle was probably twisted. But I was furious now and, ignoring the pain, drove the board back into the wall, using its carbonsteel edge to cut into the surface of the bricks. Orange dust and the reek of ozone surrounded me, as the thrust of my engine fought the desire of wall and board to push each other apart. Just before the strain burned out my motor, I finished my attack on the factory frontage and looped away, coasting now from aircar roof to aircar roof. One glance over my shoulder confirmed that my writing had been as neat as always. A perfect ♥ about two metres tall. My calling card. See, I told you I was good.

The factory doors opened and three more security guards ran out, shouting and brandishing their batons. My friends hurriedly ducked under the straps of their satchels and buckled their helmets tight. We fled into the amber evening with a motion of sinuous lines and sharp cutbacks, like a flock of starlings.

We had to stick to single file on the main routeway that was Fourth Street, some of the others performing tricks along a power cable down the centre isle. But as the gang scattered into the pedestrian-only Fourier Avenue, on my right I caught a glance of fashionably ripped jeans and a screaming red t-shirt. Jay had come alongside me and we rode the bollards together, bouncing up, then gliding down

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towards the next as though we were cresting a series of waves.

‘You all right? That mudgrubber knew exactly what he was doing. He could have really hurt you.’

‘Yeah.’ I didn’t say anything about the throbbing ache in my ankle. Thinking about it brought tears to my eyes but I wasn’t going to show any weakness in front of Jay. He was the oldest of our gang and our leader. Between Jay and me was a friendship, but also a rivalry. I’m sure he disliked the fact that I was a better boarder than he was, and, punk though he was, he just could not bring himself to match my self-confidence by boarding without a helmet.

‘Good.’ He glanced across at me. ‘I thought you were going down that time.’

‘Yeah, it was close. But I caught it. No worries.’

Turning into Turner Square was a pleasure, lots of easy riding along the tops of the tidy bushes and plenty of room for the walkers to get out of our way. Then a number of climbs: the Castleford Hotel’s convenient awning; a series of window ledges; a grind along a power cable; an ollie to get that extra bit of height you needed to take you up to the stone ornaments of an ancient government building; finally we rode along the lamps that beamed light up onto a huge advertisement hoarding, currently selling a popular brand of toothpaste. As we came between the beams of light and the board, we were casting fleeting dark shadows like cavities on a whiter-than-white smile, so gigantic were the teeth. A quick glance and, having checked the sky was clear of surveillance choppers, a sharp cutback. We were gone.

Behind the advertising board was a disused office, and this was our den.

Chapter 2

Mall Raiders

Our den was class. It had once been a grade-orange workplace, with a million glowing threads of energy flowing in and out of a wide rectangular space. Imagine an open-plan office, ablaze with metallic-white strip lights and noisy with the hubbub of workers, buzzing like suited bees as they got up from their swivel chairs, talking all the while into their headsets. Time is money. I bet they didn't even pause to flirt by the water dispensers. This wide space was dark now; the only sound an occasional fluttering of pigeon wings. The windows were fastened up tight with shutters, sealing out any natural daylight. That is, apart from a broken one, which first the pigeons and now our boarder gang used to get in.

Jay discovered the room and the first time he showed it to us, we simply thought we had found ourselves an indoor board zone. Our combat-dressed pair of friends, Carter and Milan, were strong lads; they had no bother dragging around filing cabinets and tables to make a stunt course, with lots of ramps for lift and half walls for cut-backs. It turned out, however, that the roof was just a little too low for our best tricks. And anyway it wasn't long before the toilets and the kitchen area were discovered; amazingly they were still connected to running water. We all instantly realised the possibilities. So now, as a precaution, the four interior doors to the rest of the building

were heavily barricaded, in order that we could have this vast room for ourselves. It had been our den for the past three months.

A personal touch that had grown and grown as the weeks passed was that provided by our very own artist, Nathan. He was a gentle lad, so mild mannered in fact that you had to worry for him, hanging around with a gang of punks like us. But we all treasured him as he had a genius for tattoos, tags and murals, without which a gang could never hope to have any sense of identity.

The vast canvas provided by the walls of our den had been Nathan's biggest opportunity of showing his talent. By the violet bubble-plastic glow of portable xenon lights, a wild jungle had grown up around us. Leaves of black and indigo twisted a design of intense complexity, in which you could lose yourself, following a tendril as it looped towards the roof and back down to the carpeted floor. Deep in this fantastical jungle lurked all sorts of wonderful creatures and absurd characters. We were all there of course. I was little more than two shadowy eyes peering from a tree trunk which displayed my trademark ♥. Swinging from a vine came Jay, the boss, lord of the jungle, jaw set proud, king of all he surveyed. Below him, comically anxious that he might fall, were Carter and Milan, both in their martial arts gear. Our techie, Athena, was portrayed sitting in a tree house, quietly reading, while Nathan painted himself as walking dreamily through a grove of giant palm trees. We loved it, even Jay, who had understood the mockery signalled by his pose in the design, but still enjoyed the world that the mural created. It was as though by entering our den we left the City behind, to live in a magical forest where we were free to pursue our dreams.

What the mural could not possibly have portrayed, though, was the tension that existed between Jay and the rest of us, arising from our classifications. All of us were reds, holders of the lowest-ranking

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social card. Strictly speaking, I wasn't even a red because I hadn't been issued a card at all. But I considered myself to be a red; you simply can't get any lower. On the other hand, Jay was a yellow. His parents were managers of the biggest printing company in the City. Half the posters and paper media you saw about the streets were theirs. Like the big smile outside. Normally being a yellow was not a problem, but an asset. A yellow card got you into pleasant shopping areas, nice restaurants, civic utilities like libraries and museums that the rest of us were banned from. But if you were the leader of an anarcho-punk board gang, being a yellow was more than slightly embarrassing. Which is why Jay overcompensated by being more reckless, wilder, more dangerous than the rest of us. He played guitar in a band, NoPhuture, took heeby-jeebies like they were chocolate biscuits and had spider-web perma-tats down both his arms. This meant he fooled everyone, including himself.

Right now, Jay was rummaging in the filing cabinet he had made his own, tearing open a foil pack of jeebies and scooping out a couple.

'Want?' he asked.

The rest of us shook our heads, apart from Carter who held up his hand. A dark disc flitted through the air. Carter gulped it down in one, then lay back with his eyes closed to let the hit sink in.

'Ouch,' I winced as I settled into a big black executive chair, relieved to be taking the weight off my left leg.

'Did that drop hurt you?' Nathan came over, catching his blond fringe back behind his ear to look at me sympathetically.

'Aye, maybe sprained it.'

'Let me see.' He moved his satchel around behind him, so he could kneel and take my foot in his hands. The boot I was wearing took some effort to remove, but he worked at the laces gently until, with one hand bracing my leg, he could lever it off. Then he rolled

down my sock, and, although it was painful, the sensation was also sweet.

‘Yes. It’s swelling badly. You’d better have some ice on it.’

I nodded and watched fondly as Nathan left for the kitchen, having first carefully placed my sore leg on a desk he had dragged over for the purpose.

‘That calls for revenge.’ Milan looked over at me with a scowl. Revenge. This was Milan’s way of showing concern for me and I smiled back at him appreciatively.

‘Yeah,’ responded Carter immediately; you could see the rush of energy that the jeebie had released in the flush of his face. ‘Yeah, let’s do something.’

‘You really want to do something?’ Jay’s face glowed eerily in the pale violet light cast by the strips of xenon bubbles that we had stirred into life by boarding over them on entering the room.

‘Yeah.’ Carter was rubbing his hand around and around his close-shaven head. ‘Yeah, let’s do something really class.’

‘How about a mall raid, on a green mall?’ suggested Jay, looking around the room from one of us to the next, knowing he had our attention.

‘Green? Which one?’ It was Athena who was going to have to deal with the security system, and I could see how the idea had instantly appealed to her. Up to now we had ridden only yellow mall raids.

‘Fourteenth and Coleridge. Mountain Vistas Mall.’

‘Got it.’ Athena had already unrolled her notebook, the glow from its screen reflecting in the piercings of her lip, nose and eyebrow and turning them from silver studs into turquoise jewels. She switched on a projector that I had stolen for her the previous month, and soon we were focused on a 3-D image, which she scrolled around so we could all examine the mall from every angle.

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It was a beauty, with only the world's most exclusive chains on display: clothes by XFK, 0n02 and mr. green; jewellery by +++, and Quintain; perfumes by L'yele. They made me snarl like an angry dog, these companies who paid a great deal of money to shut me out of their world and I suddenly found I was no longer weary or feeling the pain from my ankle.

'Sweet.' Carter looked around laughing. 'That's a sweet-looking mall.'

'Class,' agreed Athena. 'This has to be done.'

'But how did you check it out if it's green?' asked Milan.

'Just from the outside, just the outside. But don't worry. Athena can get us all the schematics. The only question is access. See here.' Jay switched on a red laser pen and flashed its light at the projection. Athena kept up with his moves, zooming in as the red beam led us around to where a road dipped into a tunnel under the building. 'There. Underground delivery access, lifts to the top. Security just seemed the usual to me, trips and echo stuff. Ghost, you can get us through that, right?'

'Yeah.' I spoke that one word with confidence because I knew that I could enter any building from red all the way up to violet, card or no card, and maybe I could even get into violets too. I'd have tried, but for the fact I'd never even seen a violet-access building.

Nathan returned, the only one of us not interested in the luminous emerald structure that revolved as we examined our target.

'Now, stay still.' He had tied ice into a cloth and was trying to wrap it around my swollen ankle. I waved him away.

'No time for that, Nath. We're going on a mall raid.'

His face fell. 'You should rest, keep the weight off it.'

'I'll be fine. Toss me the medic bag, will you?' This was directed at Milan, who looked up from the projection, then pushed himself

across the floor, the wheels of his chair allowing him to coast to where we kept a bag of medical supplies.

‘Here.’ He lofted it over.

There was a lot of junk in the bag, in no particular order, but I rummaged out some spray and elastic binding. The effect of the spray was instant and I prodded at my ankle, curious that I couldn’t feel the pressure of my finger, let alone any pain. After I had bound my ankle tightly, the boot went back on easily. I was aware of Nathan’s anxious presence somewhere behind me.

‘I’m set,’ I announced.

‘Me too.’ Carter beamed happily.

‘We’re out of here in ten, then.’ Jay snapped off his laser pen and jumped from his chair, looking for his gear.

‘Nobody is going anywhere!’ You hardly ever got to hear Athena shout, so when she did, you listened. Even the pigeons stood still. ‘We are not setting out while you two are rushing. Let the jeebie burn off some or you’ll charge out thinking you can do anything and you’ll forget the basics.’

‘But I can do anything!’ Carter laughed.

Milan gave Carter a long, steady look. ‘Athena’s right. Take your time, get your head together.’

While we packed our satchels, Nathan came over to me again.

‘You gonna tell me not to go?’ I looked at him defiantly.

‘Of course not. I brought you this.’

It was a board tattoo.

‘Oh. Sweet. Thanks, Nath. Let’s see it.’ I heaved my board around and we knelt either side of it. Holding back his hair with one hand, Nathan sprayed off the old tattoo, and then peeled the backing from his new one. The tattoo settled on the centre of the board, before spreading its tendrils towards the edge. The focus of the design was a

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black ♥, but all around it a terrible spectre took form, a wraith of bony claws and hooded eyes. When the design stabilised, it was perfect. I had a board from hell.

‘Wow, Nath! That’s your best one yet.’ I leant over and gave him a light punch on the shoulder. ‘Thanks, mate.’

He smiled, a very shy and genuine smile. ‘Pleasure.’

* * * *

Thirty minutes later, we were mall raiding. A professional hit squad, not a bunch of kids. T-shirts and torn jeans had been swapped for combats, pockets filled with sprays, tags, gum, tack, ball-bearings: anything that could really make a mess of a shopping centre in a short space of time. Then there was the high-tech gear donated to us by a variety of stores with poor security systems. We all had Levcast™ body armour: ‘Tough times demand tough protection.’ Our coms were Fcom™ Ava 440s, ‘pure sound, pure listening’, and I was particularly pleased with our anti-tracking Celere™ V IIs: ‘freedom is a right.’

Right now, our coms were saturated by a series of two-minute punk anthems. *The greatest of the greatest punk bands volume 34*, no less. They weren’t bad for hyping you up, although I’d never have deducted good credit to download them.

The music suddenly stopped mid riff, which was slightly disconcerting. We were in position, on a walkway behind a restaurant. My face screwed up against the odour of rotting vegetables. That stink wasn’t on the schematics.

‘See it?’ Jay pointed to a nearby alley.

‘Aye aye, Cap’n.’ You could hear the mockery in Carter’s voice.

‘Masks on, here goes,’ Jay continued, unperturbed.

The masks were not just for disguise; vision actually improved in

their goggles; dark shadows were enhanced and glare cut out by a green tint.

This was my part of the raid and I was the first to tip my board over the edge of the walkway, gliding down the alley to where it joined the delivery road.

‘Two cameras. Wait here.’

I left them in the shadow of the wall, while I double footed. The alley was sufficiently narrow that you could ollie your board to get alternative uphits, frontside and backside, zigzagging to get some height. Once high enough, I took off, to land on the cameras from above. Then I slid my toolkit from its pocket and paused the video send. I quickly boarded over to the other camera. Both were frozen in less than a minute, locked onto an image of innocent order.

Once I was down again, opening the gates took less than thirty seconds.

‘Go.’

Silent and swift, they boarded past me and into a vast underground car park, from which trucks unloaded their goods into lifts. There were a few trucks around and several workers in overalls, but they were a long way off.

We continued along the shadows of the walls to a corridor that led to the lifts we had identified as the best way in. There were two ways of reaching the end of the hall undetected. One was to disable or fool the swipe-card access, which I could certainly do. But the second was the quicker way.

‘Fibres in the hole!’ I tossed a grenade.

Fummpffff. With a soft sigh, the corridor was filled with miniscule strands of polypropylene. As they swirled around, millions of tiny reflections revealed the path of some fifty laser trips. Now we rode the corridor like a stunt course, ducking and weaving along a path

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created by the gaps between the beams.

Once we were in the lift, it was Athena's turn to set to work, opening a panel to get at the colourful wires behind, and clipping her notebook into their system. I felt a surge of affection for her. It was fantastic to have someone so competent on your team. I hoped the others felt the same way about me. The lift carried us all up, smooth and swift, a gentle mall broadcast in the background.

A polite warm female voice spoke over a distant melody. Carter was nodding his head to the background muzak, and I couldn't tell whether this was a parody or the effect of the jeebie he had taken earlier, turning the music into something he actually enjoyed.

'Customers, enhance your shopping experience with a visit to Fowler's manicure and pedicure parlour. Browse the catalogues of all our stores while you relax in their award-winning comfort seating, and receive the attentions of the finest beauticians in the City. All free and part of the service of Mountain Vistas Mall.'

The muzak swelled up slightly.

'Fowler's can be found on the fourth floor, between the swimming pool and Café Noir.'

Ding. The lift doors opened.

There are chemicals in the air of shopping malls, I'm sure. Every time we got in one, I was struck by their smell, a kind of sweet vanilla. Probably years of research have gone into the subject, to make the air as shopper-friendly as possible.

This mall was worth its green rating. We looked down a wide central space through which we were about to descend, at six floors that glowed with a pleasant shopping ambience, created above all by the huge glass dome above us.

Time for chaos with wings.

'Customers, as a special offer ...'

mall raiders

We will never know what treat was in store for the green-card shoppers. A massive heavy guitar chord crashed through the mall's p.a. as if someone had thrown a piano down all six floors. Drums kicked in, a thunderstorm breaking in the ears of the people below.

I have no future, I have no past

You can stick your green card, up your ...

'Customers, we apologise for ... bzzt.'

Athena shrugged. 'Sorry, they have a good system. But it's ours now.'

And the band played on.

Don't tell me where to stand

Don't tell me what to do

Every command you give

Is gonna come right back to you.

Personally I preferred more sophisticated lyrics. But it was Jay's band and it did make mall raiding more fun to have it blasted out around us by the mall's own system. A kind of revenge for the muzak they forced on people.

I was already on floor three, the tropical island experience. Security guards were beginning to recover from their initial shock and were all talking at once into their non-functioning walkie-talkies. Rapidly I fired out a few slogans. I began with big red anarchy signs. They looked good on the glass frontage of a swimwear store. Even better on the autobarman's white shirt at Malibu Bar. Best of all, a nice row along 'Vistas of Heaven – art prints for the discerning home.' A red-faced guard, waving his arms, caused me to cut back, but no harm. I hadn't yet gummed the escalators, which I did now, smiling to see the consternation of those who now found themselves having to engage in the unexpected exercise of walking up a staircase.

Then I lined up on some immense advertising hoardings and shot.

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Shop, don't stop till you drop. That looked good on a sports footwear ad.

Property is theft. A classic. Worked well, I thought, on a board showing green-card apartments.

Poverty is a crime. Lacking in humour, but still, needed to be said.

Consume more. It is the measure of your life. Exaggerating the real slogans of the corporations sometimes worked well to expose the absurdity of their claims. Occasionally, though, the advertisers themselves shamelessly used the very same slogans.

'Four more minutes.' Athena's voice came through our headsets.

'How we doing?' asked Nathan.

'I've got the giggles. I'm still twisted; I can't stop giggling.' And we could hear a constant gurr-gurr sound as Carter chuckled away to himself.

Time for a couple more slogans. I weaved in and out through frightened shoppers, leaving the chasing guards far behind.

'Heads right up, look at this!'

It took me a moment to reach the centre so I could look up and see what Jay was referring to. He was grinding along a metal stanchion right underneath the roof of the dome. A can was in his hand from which he was spraying a jet of yellow and blue flame.

'Lunatic,' Milan muttered.

'What are you doing?' asked Carter with genuine curiosity.

Jay didn't have to answer. A moment later, cascades of water sprang from the fire-safety nozzles. Soon a thousand wonderful rainbows glittered throughout the mall, created by the reflection of the bright lights of the shops in the thin haze made by the spray.

'Class, huh?' Jay laughed.

'Classimundo!' cheered Carter.

It was a good touch. I had to admit it.

'You have a hundred and fifty seconds to get out. Time to leave.'
Athena called it. She was monitoring the police systems.

As I nose-boarded down towards my designated exit, arms outstretched, feeling the simulated rainfall, I took a moment to enjoy the view. Green-card holders in expensive dresses and suits were hurrying towards the exits, bags with the logos of the large corporations held above their heads, flimsy protection from the thin but persistent spray of the fire alarms.

The others had done a good job and the mall was a parody of its former self. Bedraggled and smeared with a hundred anarchist slogans, it looked like a waistcoated groom who had run through a factory paint shop, staggering out the other side a bright and dishevelled ruin.

'Get out now!' Athena cried into our headsets.

'What's up?' asked Milan. But there was no reply.

A moment later, everything shut down.

Instinctively I ducked down to grab my board, but it was no help. For the second time today, I fell, this time hitting the escalator stairs and rolling head over heel to their bottom, lucky not to have broken an arm or worse. Every neon sign in the building was off, including the green safety signs. All my equipment was dead. Someone must have fired a high-energy radio frequency bomb into the mall. Someone who really wanted us and didn't care about the cost.

Above the glass roof, a giant shadow, like fingers spreading, reaching down to clasp the whole mall, and the slow ominous throb of a powerful aircraft.

Limping with the resurgent pain in my left leg, I ran into mr. green's. Frightened and desperate, I even left my beloved airboard behind; it couldn't help me now that its engine and anti-grav units were fried. Two security guards saw me and, with a shout, came running.

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Somewhere deep down, a little nine-year-old girl was screaming with terror. Never, even when I was sneaking around blue zones, had I felt this close to capture. The very thought of it made me gag. I was sobbing aloud as I staggered through eveningwear, dragging over the rails of black suits to slow down the pursuit.

They were only ten metres behind me when I leapt over a credit desk and through the swing door beyond into a staffroom. I kicked open another door that opened up to women's casual wear, but ducked back into a small kitchen instead of heading out into the sea of pink, white and pastel colours.

They blundered past. Fooled? No, they had stopped.

'Where'd she go?'

'You keep going, I'll check the staffroom.'

By this time, I was squeezed tight into a cupboard, crushing beneath me packets of instant soup and nutribars. The urgent steps of the guard came into the room. Tears were in my eyes as I tried to control my heart. It was banging so hard inside my chest that I was more worried about dying right there than the fact that he might hear me.

The cupboard door opened.

'Hello, little girl.'

Oh mercy.