

# THE SECRET SHOPPER



The windows of Partridge's Department Store were plump with Christmas presents.

In Cosmetics, Max sniffed a tube of hand cream. His mum's hands were always raw from long nights cleaning the hospital. He only had a few coins in his pocket, but he wanted something perfect for her.

A security guard prodded Max's rumpled clothes. He barked at Max, who squeezed the cream in fright, squirting a long pink splat into the man's face. The furious guard chased him up the escalator.

Max fled, hiding in a wardrobe in Homewares. He sat still as he could, waiting for angry footsteps. But none came. It was warm and dark in the wardrobe. He felt sleepy.

As the last shoppers left, and Partridge's metal shutters came crashing down, Max opened the wardrobe, rubbing his eyes. Where had everyone gone? A jolt of fear gave way to joy. He had all night to find the perfect present. But first, he'd have some fun.

In Bedrooms, he bounced between mattresses, diving into piles of pillows. In Lighting, he swung from the big chandelier, and made shadow puppets chatter on the wall. He played football through Menswear, dodging through mannequins, scoring into the elevator. He celebrated in Confectionary with fistfuls of fizzy strawberry laces.

He rode a sled from Sporting Goods down the escalator, cannoning into Pets, where puppies played behind a fence. Max pulled out a caramel-coloured Labrador, who licked the strawberry sugar from his face.

The pup followed him to Womenswear, and the coat Max's mum always sighed over - bottle green with bright gold buckles, but much too expensive. He clutched the coins in his pocket. A stolen present was a cheat's gift.

When Max stumbled into Jewellery, he stopped dead. Gems and gold had vanished from every glass shelf. The guard squirmed on the floor, tied up and a thief's shadow moved in the corner.

Hearing movement, the thief turned. A huge dog's shadow on the wall made him freeze. And then, Max launched his football with one big kick - it smacked into the thief's balaclava, tumbling him backwards into a shatter of glass shelves. Max untied the guard while the thief groaned. The puppy yapped, running away from the guard's torch, its shadow shrinking.

The police arrived with Max's mother, who swept him into her arms. Mr Partridge, the shop's owner, wondered how he could ever repay him. Max knew how. On Christmas morning, Max's mum unwrapped a bottle green coat, and the Labrador puppy played under the tree.