

Christmas Shopping
Can Be Deadly
by
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“The trouble with this town is it’s too small to have any decent stores.” As he spoke Chris halted under a converted Victorian street lamp to check his money.

Too busy staring around to notice Chris had stopped, Will nearly bumped into him. “I think it’s great. Everyone’s gone to such trouble with Christmas lights and decorations. And quaint old-fashioned shops are better than any department store.”

“Well, coming from a country where nothing’s much older than a hundred years you would think that wouldn’t you? Give me big modern stores any day.”

They moved off, only to pause in surprise as they turned into another, less well lit street, and the window of a shop that Chris had said only yesterday had been empty for ages suddenly blazed with coloured lights.

Will glanced at the shop’s huge sign. “Hey! A second-hand shop. Your mum loves old china ...” But abruptly he lost interest in old china. Surely that was an enormous spider stalking along the bottom of the window? Of course it couldn’t possibly be real. But imagine the fun he could have

with it.

He raced across the road

“Ugh! Gross!” Chris’s voice said from behind. “You won’t find something for Mum here. Grundy’s is a better bet.”

But Will hardly heard his cousin. He pressed his nose to the multi-paned window. Yes, there was the huge tarantula waving threatening legs at him. And he could almost hear the snarling of the leopard, no bigger than a cat, as it crouched as though about to spring. And that snake swaying to and fro and baring two fangs: back home where snakes were banned he could create havoc with that among the customs officials as well as his schoolmates. And what about the vulture with its beady, rolling eyes and vicious snapping beak? And he could almost hear the girls screaming at sight of that monstrous snail oozing slime everywhere as it waved its antennae at him. Not to mention all those other oversized insects. Just look at that wasp. What a sting! It wasn’t difficult to imagine it couldn’t wait to get at him.

Yes. He could really make the kids back home scream with any of these— especially the girls. Girls screamed so much better than boys.

That was when he realised that with the exception of the lights around the window the shop was in darkness. But the door was open. He made for it.

Chris grabbed his arm. “No! Come away. It’s horrible.”

Will shook him off. “Scaredy-cat! I always knew you were a coward.”

“I’m not! It’s just—” Chris stopped on a shriek as a shadowy figure darkened the doorway.

“Do come in, boys,” said a cracked, high-pitched voice. “I’ve got just the thing for you.”

“N-no thanks. We—we were just looking,” Will heard Chris stammer even as he entered the shop.

From the folds of a long shawl Will saw an incredibly thin arm, ending in a wrinkled, skeletal hand, shoot out. Wiry fingers that looked as though they could hurt gripped Chris’s arm. “You’ll want to keep your friend company, surely? He’s going to need it.”

And the old woman cackled in a way that made Will's skin crawl. The door slammed behind them and the coloured lights around the window went out. The darkness seemed to last forever. Fear started to knot up Will's stomach.

“Hey! What's happened to the lights?”

“Just a moment, dearie. Don't be so impatient.” The cracked old voice sounded right at Will's elbow and was followed by another of the crone's cackles. Hastily Will stepped back. Something brushed against him and he let out a gasp in spite of himself. Then light returned.

Will found himself staring past an oil lamp at the ugliest old crone he'd ever seen. Aside from being toothless, she looked severely malnourished and dehydrated as well. But the worst thing was that her bright black eyes gave the impression of being able to see past his into the workings of his mind.

“This way, dearies.” It was now Will's turn to feel the vice-like grip as she pulled him to the shop's back quarters. “You're after my toys, aren't you? You were going to steal them, weren't you? I'll show you what happens

to thieves—and big boys who frighten girls and little boys.”

Next moment she opened a door that shrieked on rusty hinges. Will found himself staring into a huge black hole. She gave him a shove. He hurtled headfirst down a flight of steps.

Will stirred. He was aching all over. When he opened his eyes he found himself lying on a dusty concrete floor. A naked light bulb swung just above his head. Something plucked at his sleeve.

“Chris?” With some difficulty Will turned his head.

“*Yah!*” His scream rang in ear-shattering echoes around him. He jerked away. For it wasn’t Chris but a hairy spider leg. But it wasn’t the tarantula he’d seen in the window. Or at least if it was it had swelled tremendously, its legs being at least as thick as his. *It’s only a nightmare*, he told himself. *The laws of physics don’t allow spiders to grow so big.*

“That’s what you think!” cackled a voice seeming to come from everywhere.

Will scrambled to his feet the better to escape the creature. But it

grabbed his leg. At the same time he bumped into something at head height. A furious buzz filled the air. He barely saw the monstrous wasp before its sting came down into his cheek. The pain was incredible. Will screamed.

Somehow he kicked the spider's legs away and ran—only to tread on something that reared up in his face. He hardly had time to see the snake's fangs before they sank into him. Next moment, as Will felt himself become dizzy, the vulture flapped its wings into his face, cackling like the old crone. Even as he fell he saw it flutter to a high perch, from where it watched, clacking its beak in anticipation.

When next he was aware of anything he felt as though he'd been coated in slime. That was when he realised the snail was busy chomping through his clothes. Snip! Snip! Why did it sound like his mother's dress-making scissors? Would it eat him as well? Surely snails were strictly vegetarian?

“Oh, yes indeed, dearie,” cackled the old woman's voice. “But leopards aren't!”

Will heard the creature's snarl almost in the same instant that it sprang. Frantically he brought his hands up to protect his throat. It plunged its teeth into his shoulder and pain fountained through him. Just before he tumbled into unconsciousness with the force of the pain, the vulture flapped down and settled on his chest. Its weight seemed to drive the very air from lungs that hurt too much to allow him to refill them. Its beady eyes were the last thing he remembered.

"Chris? Chris?" Will heard himself mumbling as he opened his eyes. Oh, no! It wasn't a nightmare, he thought in despair as he realised he still hurt all over. Since his head was too sore to move he swivelled his eyes around. But instead of the dirty cellar he expected, he saw clean white surroundings—clearly a hospital. "Chris?" With the pain in his face he had trouble getting the name out.

"I'm here." Next moment Chris's face swam into focus. "Oh, Will, we thought you were going to die! The doctors were operating for hours. Your cheekbone is smashed, so's your collar bone. And you've got bro-

ken ribs as well as a broken leg. Why did you run right in front of that car?”

It took all Will’s strength to focus on his cousin’s anxious face. “Car?”

“Yes, the one used by the robbers of old Mrs Grundy’s new shop. They must have had it waiting at the back of the shop. After it knocked you down I took its number and went into the shop to ring the police and the ambulance—only to find old Mrs Grundy on the floor with her head bashed in. She’s still unconscious. It seems she got hold of some extremely rare and valuable Victorian clockwork toys. Most of them don’t work properly, but there’s one that does and it’s worth a small fortune. Young Mr and Mrs Grundy set her up in the shop and they’ve given us a thousand pounds for saving her life and helping to catch the thieves. When you get better we’ll have the time of our lives shopping in London.”

But Will hardly took in Chris’s gabbled explanation: he’d seen another figure looming up behind Chris. “Mum?”

Even as his mother’s hand closed over his and Will tried to keep his weary eyes open, he felt the blanket of darkness return to engulf him.

The hand holding his changed to hard fingers that gripped like a vice. Helpless to resist their pull, Will stumbled in the wake of the dark, shawled figure.

“You surely didn’t think you were getting away that easily did you, dearie?” the dreaded voice cackled. “You haven’t met all the other creatures yet—or discovered what *they* could do to you.”

Seconds later he heard the shriek of rusty hinges again. He saw the great black hole. She didn’t have to push him this time. Helplessly he tumbled through. Her voice came to him from a great distance.

“And there’s your shopping spree to look forward to. Imagine what you can buy here for a thousand pounds!”