

Trapped

Peacefully, the crisp, white snowflakes tumbled towards the earth, atop of the sleepy Barcelona suburb, blown by a blustery wind, which whistled through the labyrinth of dark alleys and huddled houses. Alma tried her best to dart and dodge in between each flake, causing her to bounce all over the cobbled path. Her pale pink gilet was the colour of her rosy cheeks and her small button nose, which had been exposed to the chilly weather for just a few minutes too long. Rested on her head, sat a grey bobble hat – warm and snug. This young girl had not a care in the world as her arms waved about playfully as she continued to skip through the cascading snow.

As Alma continued down the tight alleyway, she all of a sudden skidded to a halt as her eyes were drawn towards a wall. The wall was illustrated with the names of boys and girls; each carefully scribed in white chalk – some large, some small, some straight, some crooked. As she stood at the wall, staring at each and every signature, Alma's face curved into a smile and she picked up the little stump of chalk that rested on the stone floor below the wall. "How did this get here?" she muttered under her breath, with delight. And before she knew it, she had etched her sweet name, 'Alma', on the grey canvas. Alma took a deep breath and gazed up at her name adoringly, dropping the chalk back on to the floor.

But, at that moment, an eerie metallic creak pierced the silence of the winter's day. Alma no longer felt alone and was suddenly compelled to turn around...

There it stood. The doll. Not just any doll, no. Alma loved dolls. But this doll...this doll was something very different. It was an identical image of herself: the pale pink gilet, the rosy cheeks, the small button nose, and the grey bobble hat sat upon its head. It stood proudly behind a dusty window in an old run-down shop, of which Alma was sure had been empty just a few minutes earlier. Alma felt a frosty chill shoot down her spine, yet this chill had nothing to do with the cold weather. Alma's feet were pulled towards the window, where the doll had just appeared, by an undeniable urge to find out why this doll was there, staring down at her with its still, shiny eyes.

Alma took in every inch of the identical doll's body and face; her eyes wide and her mouth forged open. She looked down at her own clothes once more, in disbelief, taking her eyes off the doll for just a split second, but when she looked back up towards the window once again, the doll was gone...

Frantically, Alma pressed her face up against the grubby window, desperately searching for another glance of the doll. *Where did it go?* she wondered, her heart pounding violently inside her chest. After just seconds of searching, Alma spotted the doll, stood on the table. *But how did it move?*

Without a second thought, Alma – anxious and confused – tugged at the bronze door handle, desperate to unlock it so that she could investigate this strange doll more closely. After many failed attempts, the door remained locked and with a large exhale, she let go. Just at that moment, the door creaked open with ease as though it had not been locked at all! *I am sure it had been locked!* thought Alma, bemused. Despite her bewilderment, Alma pushed the door fully open and began to amble cautiously into the shop.

All around her, in each and every corner of the tight room, high and low, were shelves lined with dolls – some large, some small, some smiling, some frowning, dolls of little boys, and dolls of little girls. And right there in the centre of the room, stood Alma's doll. Alma stretched her hand out to take the doll, but as she did, she suddenly tripped and knocked over a tiny figurine, dressed all in black, that must have been circling the floor on a tiny wind-up bicycle. She knelt down to pick the small doll up and returned it to its original position, and as she did, its mechanisms caused it to drive straight into the shop door and slam it shut. This made Alma smile. *What an interesting shop!*

Remembering why she had entered, Alma sprung back up from the floor to try to take the doll, only to find that it had disappeared...again. Alma gasped and began to search the shelves frantically with her eyes. *How is this doll moving?* she speculated, as she was sure that she was alone. Alma searched the floor. She searched the walls. She spun and spun and searched all around. Until suddenly, she saw it – right at the top of the highest shelf.

Alma felt a wave of relief surge through her body. She could not explain what was happening, but knew that she just *had* to have that doll. Climbing on the nearest obstacle in front of her (an old, withered sofa), Alma began to reach up towards the doll, tearing her mitten off with her teeth as she did so to give herself more grip. She stretched and she stretched, standing tall on her tiptoes, gripping on to the shelf below with her other hand, causing other dolls to tragically tumble down on to the floor.

Nearly...oh...not quite...

Finally, her finger touched the tip of the identical doll's small button nose, when...

WHOOOOOSH!

Alma felt her entire body melt away, as though devoured by an unknown black abyss. Each one of her limbs bent and curled and snapped and shrank. It was a feeling like no other – indescribably painful and completely out of her control.

Then, silence. Still.

Alma knew that she was still alive. However, as she wrestled with her eyes to drag them open, she found herself gazing down from the top shelf of the dolls' shop through a pair of still, shiny eyes. All she could hear was her muffled, desperate breaths. She could not move. She could not speak. She could not even scream.

She was trapped.

The young girl, with not a care in the world, was no longer a girl. She was a doll...