

Alma

The bells of the Sacre Coeur rang in the distance of the 6th arrondissement of Paris. Six loud 'bongs' echoed across the near empty city. It was early in the morning and a fine dusting of snow coated the streets. Snow had been falling for days keeping most of the residents of the city indoors, creating huge drifts across the whole region.

Strangely, one street remained relatively snow free – just some small drifts along the edges of the street. As the last bell tolled, the light flakes danced and whirled slowly downwards from the leaden sky, landing silently on the hard, frosty ground. An eerie silence filled the air.

Through the landscape of the cities' snowy alleyways and narrow streets, skipped a little girl. She loved adventures and, when she had seen the easing of the snow that morning, couldn't wait to explore. As she trotted through the streets, the snow crunched softly under her shoes and her breath bloomed, making clouds of translucent white which disappeared into nothingness around her. After the tolling of the bells, the soft crunch of her shows was the only sounds which could be heard.

She stumbled across the alley quite by accident, following a strange swirling flurry of snow. She stopped at the head of the alley and saw something strange – pavement. It had been days since she'd seen anything on the ground except snow.

She entered the alley without a care in the world, barely noticing the slight change in temperature. While hop-scotching her way down the empty passageway, she caught sight of a wall covered with names in varying styles of handwriting. Different names – some vivid and brand new looking and other's faded as if they'd been written many years before.

Impulsively grabbing a piece of chalk, she signed her own name with a small, triumphant flourish: 'Alma.' As Alma stepped back to admire her work, an icy shiver tingled down her spine and she frowned in pensive thought. Turning slowly, she looked at the shop window opposite. A doll stood proudly in the centre; a doll she hadn't noticed just a moment before.

Alma approached. Eyes widening, she gazed up at the doll which resembled a little girl - very much like herself! Alma's mouth gaped open as she took in the pink body warmer; the sky-blue hat; the boyish, khaki trousers; the wispy blonde hair. She glanced down at her own attire and gave a small smile of recognition. She was thrilled to have found a doll so perfectly suited to her! Eagerly, she looked up again. But the doll had vanished!

Dismayed, Alma peered through the window. Her small hand, clothed in a puffy mitten, rubbed at the frost obscuring her view into the shop. She pressed her nose against the cold glass and squinted into the shop's dark interior. Yes! There it was - now standing defiantly on a round table in the middle of the room.

Without a second's thought, Alma skipped to the door and pulled at the handle. The door didn't budge. Alma scowled. She tried the handle again. Still no movement. Frustrated, she stomped off. However, before leaving, she vented her anger by throwing a snowball at the window. Turning on her heel, she was ready to embark upon a new adventure when, from behind her, she heard a creak. Turning, Alma saw

the door now invitingly ajar. She approached, a smile of glee spreading across her face.

The shop was dark and smelt musty. The air felt thick with a sense of anticipation and the silence hung over the statuesque residents like a shroud. Alma was filled with excitement as she entered. The whole shop was filled from floor to ceiling with the most beautiful dolls! They were stood in corners and perched on shelves. Every single one was unique. Alma marveled at what she beheld. She had never noticed this little shop, nor the alleyway in which it was located before, and was so happy to have discovered such a treasure trove of fine dolls.

There were fancy dolls, dressed in lace and silks; dolls with teddy bears in their arms; dolls ready for the rain, the sun or the snow; dolls holding musical instruments; there was even a doll on a bicycle! In fact Alma, keen to get straight to *her* doll, tripped and set him off by accident and he wheeled wildly around in a circle of desperation, before crashing into the door repeatedly as though trying to escape.

She chortled at this; he was just a doll after all...although he did have a very realistic expression of determination on his face. In fact, all of the dolls had realistic expressions, and they seemed to follow Alma around the room with their glassy, empty eyes. She was unperturbed. An intrepid young girl, she shook off any feelings of unease and looked once again to the spot where she had seen *her* doll. It had gone again! In disbelief, Alma turned around, searching the dark corners and high shelves with her wide, sapphire-blue eyes.

Just as the familiar feeling of impatience was returning to her, Alma suddenly caught a glimpse of the soft, pink body warmer - her doll had moved and was now standing calmly on a shelf just out of her reach. Relieved and delighted, impulsive and determined, Alma approached the shelf. It was crowded with other dolls. Some looked a bit like Alma, whilst others were old fashioned and wore pinafores and held parasols. But they all looked like children. Alma was mesmerized by this and decided that she must hold her 'replica'.

As though bound by a spell, she reached up. She clenched one mitten in her teeth and tore it from her hand decisively. She stood on tiptoes. She stretched every part of her body, straining to touch the doll's face. Her muscles ached with the effort and her fingers tingled with longing. Closer and closer she got until she was just a hairs breadth away.

As her hand brushed against the doll's smooth, porcelain face, Alma felt a rush of blood course through her veins. Her ears were suddenly filled with a whooshing sound and she was thrown violently backwards - but she didn't land! Instead, she tumbled and somersaulted through a dark abyss. Unable to scream, her chest tightened. She gasped as images of dolls surrounded her. She could hear the piercing wails of children, an accompaniment to the heavy beat of her heart. Spiraling out of control, Alma's mind raced but she was unable to grasp any meaning from what was happening.

And then: quiet. Stillness. A stillness so great and stifling that Alma could now hear the blood rushing in her ears and her breath slowing to a steady rhythm. Her limbs were frozen, she was rooted to the spot. She managed to swivel her eyes from side

to side and took in the shop from where she now stood. From where she now stood on the high shelf where her doll had previously been.

The wall opposite the shop outside was filled with far more names of children than Alma had noticed previously. All in different handwriting. All unique. Alma's own, clear and defiant, in the middle. As she took this in, another doll rose to stand coaxingly in the centre of the window display.

The snow outside whirled downwards in soft flurries as the shop settled in to wait for its next 'customer'.