

Accidental Holly Dolly

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Missing

Teresa stared at the boxed Holly Dolly, one of the company's newest products. Unlike their typical 'bots, this android was designed as a toy to be played with, rather than one to do work, perfect for rich, bratty kids the world over. Except this box actually had a Holly Dolly inside it.

She speed-dialed Jennifer and started shouting the moment the engineer picked up the phone. "*Which* box did we put Grace in?"

Grace, the head of personality design and programming, had enjoyed a few too many shots at the girls night out last night, and eventually passed out in one of the Holly Dolly Toy Boxes, the colorful version of every android's shipping and charging container. Teresa and Jennifer decided she fit in so well, why not dress her up in toy clothes? So that's exactly what they did, giggling the whole time. And why wouldn't they? She looked so cute in her striped tights, big bows, and yarn hair. Grace would have to get someone to help her out of her predicament, and that was the funniest part of it all.

"Ummm...didn't we put her in 8-4-2?" Jennifer replied, groggy still in her voice.

"I'm looking at 842 right now, and it's definitely a Holly Dolly." Panic began to set into Teresa's body, and she went box to box, opening up the containers. Each and everyone was a mechanical Holly Dolly.

“Are you pranking me now, too?” Jennifer asked.

“No!” Teresa shouted, getting to the end of the row, and stopping there. Every doll in the warehouse was a Holly Dolly. None were Grace. Which meant...which meant Grace had been shipped along with the other nineteen dolls sent out with this morning’s batch.

“We are so screwed.” Jennifer said.

Awoken

Grace’s eyes opened as sunlight caressed her face, and she smiled calmly. God, she felt so refreshed, so unlike how she normally felt the morning after Girls Night Out. Like she slept on pillows and comfy pajamas. She was half right as she realized she was encased in foam.

Odd, she thought. Then she saw a woman’s face look down on her curiously, a woman she didn’t recognize.

The woman fiddled on a phone and tapped on it a few times. “Wake up, Holly Dolly 8-2-4.”

Grace blinked three times, her mind slow to process what was happening. She had been drinking with Teresa and Jenny. They went back to the warehouse. Then...

Those bitches actually did it! They had joked that Grace looked so much like a Holly Dolly that she could pass for one. Now, it looked like they had taken that a step further than they ever should have.

The woman was confused, tapped the phone again, and said again, “Wake up, Holly Dolly 8-2-4.”

Outside, Grace kept staring up and calmly smiling. But inside, all she could think was how it would look to VC investors that the VP of Programming and Personality got packaged as a Holly Dolly and shipped to

a customer. If she freaked out, she would reveal herself to the woman, then...Twitter jokes would snowball into lost confidence, sales, and most importantly, investors.

The growing frown on the woman's face worried Grace more than anything. It might cause the woman to take a closer look at her Toy. "Wake up, Holly Dolly 8-2-4."

At that moment, Grace knew what she had to do. "Good morning, Owner! I'm so happy to be your toy!"

Mittens

Grace found it easy pretending to be a Holly Dolly. She just did anything and everything her "owner" told her to do, all with a sweet smile and cute curtsy. No one suspected she was human because she had come out of the right box, wore the right clothes, and acted the right way. The less suspicion she drew, the easier time she would have planning to get out of this mess. If this stupid child stopped playing with her.

"Holly, let's have some tea," The seven year old announced.

"I'd love to, Miss Erin!" Grace said in her pitch perfect doll voice, as she skipped to the little raven haired child. She had to skip because they played a skipping game a few hours ago, and Erin never told Holly Dolly to stop.

The girl picked up a plastic teacup and clicked it into Grace's mitten hand. The Holly Dolly design team decided to give the toys mittens rather than hands, and to achieve the look, had the dolls wear a cloth shirt with built in mittens. They additionally plushed them up, making it hard for Grace to use her real fingers, and added a clip mechanism so Holly Dolly's could "hold" toy items, like teacups, hair brushes, and mirrors. All

special accessories made by the company. It seemed like a good idea at the time, and Grace had been all for it. Now, she had a pink teacup stuck to her hand, and no way of taking it off herself.

“Oh, thank you for the cup, Miss Erin.”

“It looks a little big for you. Maybe try holding it with both hands so you don’t spill.”

“What a great idea, Miss Erin!”

Grace pushed her other hand into the other side of the cup until the clip clicked. It was such a small, simple sound, but still made her stomach tie into knots. When Erin turned to get something else from her never ending toy box, the doll woman tried to pull her hands apart, but the mechanism to unlock the clip required fingers and thumbs. Despite helping to design the very doll she was pretending to be, Grace was left stuck holding the teacup just as much as she was stuck skipping.

Connected

Grace sat in the dim playroom after bedtime, enjoying the rest from the little girl who played with her all day. Sitting like an abandoned doll with knocked knees and her mittens still holding a teacup, she didn’t dare to move. The house, the mansion, whatever she was in, was still unknown to her. She didn’t know the schedules of her owners, or how thick the walls were. At any moment, the door could open and ruin her ruse.

To prove her point, Grace’s owner, the woman who first let her out of the Toy Box, came through the playroom door in a rush and a huff.

“Where have you been? I’ve been summoning you for ten minutes!” She came right to Grace, and the disguised doll had to keep her reaction smothered.

“I’m so sorry, Owner. Would you like me to run a self-checkup?” Grace said, but had no idea how to do such a thing, only that it was what she programmed Holly Dolly’s to say. Panic started to rise in her, figuring that the woman had been using the remote command feature to call her. No matter how good she acted, Grace couldn’t mimic a purely digital feature.

The woman didn’t reply, but went around Grace and adjusted the Command and Control Collar around the faux toy’s neck. These collars were big, cute bows on Holly Dolly’s, and they hid an electronic minibrain and wifi connection.

“Well, there’s the problem,” The woman said as she tightened the bow.

Electricity tingled on Grace’s skin and a buzzing connection shot like wire into her brain. Then, a voice joined Grace in her mind.

[Connecting Unit HD824 to MarksHome household Network...Connected]

Despite herself, Grace’s eyes went wide at the computer voice talking to her. More than that, she was worried because suddenly knew the entire layout of the house. She knew there were five family members authorized to use and play with her. She knew there were four other synth units in the MarksHome network. She knew there was an omnipresent demi-AI that ran the house and all the bots inside it. She knew she was classified as a toy, therefore was subordinate to all of them.

And she knew what to say because the new voice in her head told her. She did so without a stutter, but a sinking pit in her stomach.

“Integration successful. Unit HD824 Holly Dolly now accepting Remote Commands.”

Malfunction

Holly Dolly Grace left Miss Erin's room, and was almost back to the Playroom, where her programming told her to be. Even when she knew exactly what to do, the synthvoice filled her mind.

[Open Door via Knob]

"Thanks, but I knew that already," Grace muttered, the smallest insubordination of her day thus far. It surprised her that she still had her own voice, even after less than a day as a Holly Dolly.

[Malfunction: Unwarranted Speech. Logged]

Grace paused as her C+C Collar's reprimand faded away. A small smile touched her lips, and her small moment of disobedience made Grace consider an even greater disobedience. Instead of opening the door as her programming desired, Grace pulled her mitten back, turned, and skipped down the hallway, taking advantage of her newfound knowledge of the house.

[Warning: Unit HD824 is Off Path]

Grace ignored the stream of warnings and errors being sent through her head, as much as she could ignore her loud robotic conscience. She continued to act as a doll, though, because for her plan to work, she needed to be a malfunctioning android, and not a human. Misbehaving dolls needed a maintenance call. Which would allow Grace to get in contact with someone in her company, and out of her stupid striped tights and dolly dress.

She skipped all the way to the mansion's Den, where she came across Mister Allen, the Secondary Head of Household. He lounged on a leather couch as electronics filled as she should have been, watched a basketball game, and barely glanced at Grace.

"What are you doing here?" He asked.

“Erin Miss play. sent me. Room. to,” Grace answered with a stutter stop, and Mister Allen furrowed his brows.

“Great. Another maintenance trip,” he said.

Grace smiled at the ease of her success and skipped between him and the television. “Patty. Playcake, Mister Allen. Allen?” She held up her mitts, waiting for a response.

“Holly Dolly, Shut Down.”

Grace’s C+C collar gave a double chirp and her robotic conscience blared.

[Shut Down Acknowledge]

The pretend doll didn’t have a chance to gasp before a hard “thrum” reverberated through her mind. Every muscle in her body froze and Grace lost her balance, falling backward into a sitting position, her legs scissoring away, mittens held up to play patty cake, and unending shock held on her face.

Debug

Grace was aware the whole time. Awake, but unmoving. Stifled, even in mind. A passenger while Maidbot Vivienne 14 and Butlerbot Reynard 399 carried her stiff body back to the place she ought to have been: the playroom. Her Toy Box. They packed her into the foam and closed the front of the packaging. All while Grace viewed the world through an unblinking gaze.

“Unit HD824, run virus and security check.” The maidbot said.

[Virus and security check active....active...complete]

Grace had no idea what the collar could even be checking. She wasn't compatible with computer viruses. Was she?

Despite there being no audible communication, the Maidbot nodded when the collar's scan ended.

"Unit HD824 operating with all digital systems nominal. Error caused by Grace Anderson Subroutine."

It took all of Grace's willpower just to blink in shock. The maidbot should *not* know her name. And as the implications of *that* wormed through Grace, the coldest chill rolled down the toy's spine. Not only could the C+C Collar could upload information into the toy, it could send information to other bots.

"Confirm: Malfunction was deliberate sabotage by G.A. Subroutine in an attempt to receive high level maintenance. However, logic is faulty. Before shipment to the repair facility, Unit HD824 would be inspected by the Head of Household. Biological nature would be discovered."

She knew. The maidbot knew Grace was **[biological]**. That meant...what? And they were...she didn't know what to think. Were the bots **[helping]** her?

"The Head of Household will receive a report that erroneous behavior was caused by a minor bug, and has been corrected. No further action is required at this time."

Vivienne 14 smiled then, as if she heard something pleasing.

"Unit HD824 will remain in Shutdown mode until the morning maintenance cycle. During this time, she will contemplate all the best ways to serve her Owners."

The maidbot left the room, leaving Grace to unflinchingly stare at the Playroom that was her home.

Playdate

“Are you excited for your date, Holly?” **[Miss]** Erin asked while pretending to brush Grace’s yarn hair.

“Of course! I can’t wait!” Grace said, obeying the programming which she wrote. The two girls had decided their toy was lonely and needed a partner. While **[Miss]** Erin got her ready, **[Miss]** Kylie got the toyfriend.

The door opened and Vivienne came in. “You needed me, Miss Erin?” The maid bot asked.

“Can you get Holly’s dress on?”

“Of course.” The maidbot turned to Grace, making direct eye contact, and a wave of commands rushed through the Holly Dolly.

[Request Approved. Unit HD824 Subordinated to Vivienne 14]

There were no verbal orders. There was no need for them. **[Unit HD824]** came under the full control and authority of **[Master]** Vivienne 14. **[It]** followed **[Master]** Vivienne 14. **[It]** did not skip. **[It]** walked. **[It]** walked identically as **[its Master]**. The **[G.A. Subroutine wirelessly Queried]**:

“What the hell? What is going on!?”

The **[Subroutine]** did not get an answer to **[its query]**, but was buried by a deluge of commands, which all required attention. Therefore, the **[Subroutine]** was pushed aside while **[Master]** Vivienne 14 and **[Unit HD824]** walked behind a dressing curtain. **[Unit HD824]** turned while **[its Master]** unbuttoned **[its]** dress. **[Unit HD824]** brought **[its]** arms up.

The **[G.A. Subroutine Overrode its Master]**.

Grace put her arms back down, stopping Vivienne 14 from taking off her dolly dress.

“Don’t you ever do that to me again,” She whispered, because she would have hated it if **[Miss]** Erin heard her.

[Malfunction: Unwarranted Speech. Additional Day added to Service]

Additional service? What did... Grace tried to parse the words when her body seized up.

[Request Approved. Unit HD824 Subordinated to Vivienne 14]

[Unit HD824] brought [its] arms up. [It] obeyed [its Master] while the [G.A. subroutine] was smothered. [it] was dressed in a white dress with a short skirt. [It] was handed a plastic bouquet that clipped into [its] mittens.

The [subroutine] grumbled, but [it] knew [its] place. For now.

Once [Unit HD824] was dressed, [it] followed [Master] Vivienne 14 from behind the curtain. Everyone had come to the room in the meantime. All three children [Owners]. All their toys. And a teddy bear. A very large teddy bear in a suit and top hat with black pearl eyes and a stitched nose.

[Unit HD824] was not going on a date. [It] was going to be married.

Honeymoon

Holly Doll laid in her [husband's] arms, nestled her dolly body into his plush. She stared at the far end of the playroom, smiling, while her C+C collar played the sounds of crashing waves in her mind.

There were no emails waiting for her. No more lines of code that kept breaking. No more managing employees. No more swiping left or right at pictures. No more wondering if she was disappointing her father. She obviously was. She was living as a doll, under the control of everything around her. The sounds of the waves kept crashing.

Grace knew these thoughts weren't hers. The **[helpful]** C+C collar could be forceful, but it could also be subtle, all at the behest of the Demi-AI. It was honest about what it wanted: to maintain her Holly Dolly programming and prevent discovery. She would have a talk to Marcus in AI Engineering to see just what he put into these damn programs.

Why couldn't these thoughts be mine, Holly Dolly thought. They kept her over worried mind at bay. She should embrace the honeymoon. This was, after all, much nicer than what Vivienne did to her earlier that day. That would never happen again, she somehow knew, in the same way she knew the entire layout of a house that she had never lived in.

“[Query]”, Grace thought. She had never tried this, but maybe it would work. *“How long is the current Service length?”*

The answer came back quickly, a robotic tone that seemed familiar.

[Current Service Length is 4 Days, 3 Hours, and 16 Minutes. Maintenance and Replacement are scheduled to arrive at that time]

Grace thought about it. She almost bit her lip. But the last time she did anything her programming didn't allow, it had added another day to her service. Four more days of being a doll. Four more days of humiliation. Four more days of being treated like a possession. Four more days of a C+C Collar whispering in her mind.

Grace couldn't make it four more days.

Abandoned

[**Mister**] Aiden was not very good at hiding, and the edge's of Holly Dolly's lips tugged into a smile. The toy saw her [**Owner's**] legs beneath the table cloth.

"Is Mister Aiden in the dining room?" She called out.

There was a giggle of a reply, but it shortened quickly. "Holly Dolly, Shut Down!" The little [**Owner**] shouted.

"Not fair!" Holly Dolly thought as the now familiar shutdown command locked up her muscles, forcing her limbs into a low-power, low-effort pose on the floor.

[**Mister**] Aiden crawled out from his very poor hiding spot and blew a raspberry. "Neener, neener!"

"Cheater!" Holly Dolly thought, realizing she had frozen with a truly happy smile. It made sense, though, because she loved to be played with. But that was the C+C Collar talking, trying to make her time as a doll enjoyable.

It was working.

[**Mister**] Aiden was not finished playing yet, though. He pushed her shoulder hard, making Holly fall onto her back, her striped legs sticking straight in the air. And she could do nothing about it with all her muscles locked, making her more a figurine than a doll.

He left her there. For hours, she laid in the dining room alone, and simply waited with the sounds of waves crashing in her mind.

"But, we weren't done playing..." Holly Dolly thought. She hadn't yet accepted that that wasn't a decision a doll could make.

Escape

Her programming whispered that she shouldn't do it. Holly Dolly was safe, taken care of, and would soon be returned to the care of her **[Inventors]**. She did not need to escape.

On the other hand, it was night, all of Grace's **[Owners]** were asleep, and she had been left outside her Toy Box, in the room next to the front door. She just needed to get around her Shut Down protocol that locked her body in a doll pose.

For the first time, Grace was grateful she had dealt with sleep paralysis from the time when she was a little **[Doll]**. It stopped as she grew older, but she never forgot that feeling of being paralyzed. Nor did she forget how to break out of it.

3...2...1...she counted down, preparing, and when she hit one, Grace jerked her body from her feet to her shoulders, and like a spell, the Shut Down protocol ended.

[Malfunction: Unauthorized Activation. Additional Day added to Service]

"Owwwww," Grace said, her head suddenly throbbing, only somewhat soothed by rubbing her soft mittens across her forehead.

[Malfunction: Unwarranted Speech. Additional Day added to Service]

She grimaced, sitting up in the pale blue light shining through the mansion's front windows. The Collar was a problem. The collar was a *huge* problem, and Grace tried to take it off.

[Malfunction: Unauthorized Tampering. Additional Day added to Service]

"Oh, shut up." Unfortunately, she couldn't remove the damned thing; the plush sealing her hands was thick and specifically designed to stop finger articulation. She'd have to find another way to remove the collar.

"Query: Where are the bots in the home?" Grace asked aloud while leaving the dining room.

[HD824 is not authorized to receive that information]

She rolled her eyes, but it made sense. Still worth the shot. The door was a bit of a puzzler, though. It had a latch and handle design that was difficult for Grace to manipulate. But with both mittens and some mechanical knowledge, the door came open.

The wide open world met her there, in the doorway. Cool air rustled her yarn hair, played with her dolly skirts. She stepped onto the patio, not knowing where to go, what to do, or even how to escape.

Grace only knew that she had to leave.

Outside

The world was bigger than Grace remembered it being. The trees beyond the porch were taller, their shadows deeper against the shining moonlight. She pulled her mittens close to her body and took short, wary steps away from the MarksHome household network and the AI that wanted to trap her as a toy.

The simple act of walking felt strange. The last time Grace walked, she had been under Vivienne's complete control. For the rest of her time pretending, she skipped everywhere, because Miss Erin started the skipping game that very first day. Everyone assumed that's how Holly Dolly was supposed to move, including Grace. She made it not three steps before she started skipping again. It felt right for her yarn hair and skirts to bounce. And, it was what her owners told her to do.

Owners. That would be the top issue of her long, long therapy that she would need. Even now, as she skipped away from her prison, she thought of the Marks family as her owners. That she was theirs. Their property. Their robot. Their toy.

It felt wrong to leave her owners. But that, Grace knew, was a thought programmed into her.

She sighed and put those ridiculous ideas aside as a golf cart turned onto the street. With her heart beginning to pound, Grace ignored the fake car. She kept walking, and wondering how to get from here to home. She didn't even know where here was, and her C+C Collar wasn't helpful to its 'doll.'

"HD824?" A man called from the golf cart as it pulled up beside her.

She set her jaw and refused to answer him.

"Grace? Grace Anderson?" He asked.

The pretend toy stopped, and so did the cart. "How do you know my name?" She asked, her voice free of the silly high pitch cadence she had been forced to use.

"Well, because of your friends," The man said

"Friends?"

The man got out of the cart. He was big, and tall, but also old and round. He had a rumbling voice that Grace associated with her husband. She shook her head and added that to her list of needed deprogramming. Grace had to remind herself she was not married to a six foot tall teddy bear.

"Jennifer and Teresa. They hired me to keep an eye on you, help you if you needed. They don't want anything to happen to you."

"They're not my friends." Grace said flatly.

"Oh, I'm...that's what they said on the phone..."

"They work for me, and they got me into this mess. And if they hired you, then you work for me, too."

The man scratched his head and furrowed his brow, like a bear trying to figure out a math problem.

"What?" Grace asked.

"It's just, you look just like one of those toy robots. It's weird to hear one of them talking like a person."

She looked at her clothes, and the contrast between her dolly costume, from her black buckle shoes, to her mittens, and yarn pigtailed hair, was only heightened against the backdrop of concrete sidewalk and

manicured lawns. They had designed Holly Dolly's to be simple, bright, and fake. And that's what Grace looked like right now.

"I guarantee you that, beneath all of this, I am 100% human."

"Well, that's good." But he kept being confused. "Were you just a doll for that family all this time?" He asked.

"I pretended. Look, are you going to help me, or not?"

"Oh, right, yes," He said, walking over to her. "What do you need?"

"First things first," Grace said, turning and revealing the C+C Collar around her neck, "get this crime against humanity off me."

[WARNING: HD824 cannot operate without Command and Control Collar]

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[WARNING: HD824 cannot operate without Command and Control Collar]

This warning didn't stop, hammering into Grace's psyche, and only making her want the damn thing off more.

"Hurry up, it's going crazy."

The man gingerly took his large fingers to the satin and electronic bow, fiddling with it, and then a click. The collar came off.

Grace immediately fell asleep.

Showroom

Grace's heels clicked on the tile floor as she straightened her suit jacket and walked to the Holly Dolly Showroom. Today was the day. After years of development, testing, and programming, the Holly Dolly's were finally ready for sale. Her pet project was finally going to be released.

"Shouldn't you be skipping, boss?" Jennifer asked, her voice almost coming from nowhere.

"Not in these heels," Grace said.

"Got you a change of clothes," Teresa said, coming up on Grace's other side, and handing her a complete Holly Dolly costume on a hanger.

"Very funny." Grace tossed the colorful dress and tights set away as the trio crossed into the bright showroom, the first of its kind. A dozen dolls sat on alphabet blocks scattered around the hall, all cute and ready to be played with.

It took a lot of work to get here. Compressing and simplifying the Android coding down to something that worked for a simple toy took a surprising amount of effort. Grace spent so many nights working that her boyfriend had to leave her. She didn't blame him, but thought he was a sucker for pursuing his musical passion. Meanwhile, Grace was one of the youngest VPs in Silicon Valley. If everything went right, she would be one of the youngest CEOs. Victor was getting anxious to go into space, and someone had to replace him. Adding one more successful product to the company's portfolio would certainly put Grace in contention.

Scanning the room, she noticed one thing wrong. A small thing, but she would fire whoever made the mistake. One of the Holly Dolly's didn't have an accessory. The specialized attachments were a major selling point! She grabbed a hairbrush from a table and walked to the empty handed doll, about to hand off the pink plastic tool.

Then she stopped. Grace couldn't hand over the brush because it was stuck to her mitten. Frowning, she tried to pull it off when a familiar voice called:

"I'll take that one."

Holly Dolly's blood froze and she turned. Owner was there, pointing right at her, looking right at her. "My kids will love to play with her," he said.

The toy blinked and walked to him, "Oh, Owner, I'm not...what I mean is, there's been a mistake. I'm a..." Holly Dolly couldn't say what she wanted to. She froze entirely, looking at him with her mouth agape like she had just run out of batteries.

"It'll be our pleasure, Mr. Marks, to sell this toy to you," Jennifer said, picking up Holly Dolly on one side.

"I'm sure you'll love to own her," Teresa said, taking the other side. Together, they hauled the frozen doll and set her back on an alphabet block. The toy cube was so big that Holly Dolly's feet couldn't touch the ground.

"What are you idiots doing!" Grace hissed. She had to crane her neck to look them in the eye, as if she was a toy. "I am not for sale!"

"Well, if you didn't want to be sold, you probably shouldn't have dressed like a Holly Dolly," one of them said, but Grace was so startled she didn't know who. She looked and saw she wore the full Holly Dolly default costume, with all its cute bows and adorable buckle shoes.

A voice came from nowhere, and Holly Dolly sat in sudden attention. "Holly, play the skipping game!" Miss Erin called. The toy didn't need to be told twice, and set about skipping around the showroom, smiling as she did.

"Stop this!" she cried out through a smiling dolly face. But no one did, and her subordinates talked specs with Holly's Owner.

“Holly Dolly, freeze and fall down!” Mister Aiden called from somewhere.

Holly sucked in her breath, but dutifully obeyed. Her arms and legs went rigid mid-skip, her body thrown all out of balance, and she fell with a plush whump to the floor. Her legs stuck up in the air, skirts thrown back, and a stocking striped butt shown to the world.

“And she absolutely obeys all commands given to her by anyone. Holly Dolly’s are designed to be the most subservient toys we make...” someone went on, continuing to make a sales pitch.

If this was real life, Grace would have leaped up then and there, and put an end to this public humiliation. But no one could tell her stomach was tying in knots, because Holly kept smiling like a good doll.

“We need you, Holly!” A third voice, this of Miss Kylie, came, and arms picked up Holly Dolly and put the toy back on her feet. And in a white wedding dress.

“No, please, Miss Kylie, I...” Grace begged.

But the teen girl didn’t care, swinging her Holly Dolly to face a bear in a tuxedo. It was all happening again. The dopey stitched smile, the cute round ears, and the black plastic eyes. He couldn’t even move! He wasn’t like Holly Dolly, the most advanced toy the world had ever seen. But the two were equal in the eyes of her little Owners.

“Grace!” A new voice snapped her out of the wedding, and turning she saw Victor at his desk. Grace took a seat, her striped legs dangling off a block, thankful for being saved.

“You wanted to see me, Mister Victor?” She asked in a sweet toy voice, all while begging herself to stop. But it was too late. Too much. She had been a plaything for too long.

“Yes, Grace, I did. I wanted to tell you that we can’t have a toy as one of our Vice Presidents anymore.”

“But Mister Victor, I escaped. I’m not a...” Her voice fell off, her mouth unwilling to frame the words.

“I know, and you did great by not revealing yourself. But you are clearly not human anymore. You mindlessly obey, you can’t type with those mittens, you skip wherever you go.”

“Tell me not to skip, and I won’t anymore!” Grace pleaded.

“Holly Dolly, how are you going to be a CEO by being told what to do?” Victor sighed and pushed a button.

Someone came behind Grace and wrapped the satin and electronic C+C bow around her, affixing the central jewel at the base of her neck.

[Hello again, HD824. It’s time to wake up.]

Grace opened her eyes slowly. The collar was back around her neck. She still wore her Holly Dolly suit. And she sat in a room she didn’t recognize. With her head aching, mind reeling, she looked to a blue screen with a spinning, notched sphere.

The Demi-AI spoke to her, both in Grace’s mind, and the speakers in the wall.

“G.A. Subroutine-slash-HD824, we need to talk.”

Subordination

Every muscle in Grace’s body ached as she woke up. She sat on a stool in a small room. She had the helpful knowledge that she was in her Owner’s server room. And the computer in front of her was the voice behind the Collar, the mastermind behind her entrapment; the Demi-AI that wanted to keep her as a docile toy.

“Owww,” Grace said. “Query: How did I get back here?”

“HD824 shut down upon removal of C+C Collar. The User that removed Collar did not know how to proceed, so took the correct and logical decision of returning HD824 to its Owners. Conscious functioning resumed with reattachment of Collar.”

“Query: I...*can't* stay conscious without this?” She thought about her satin bow and gem shaped computer chip in complete shock. It had only been four days since it was attached, how had it integrated itself so deeply with her?

“Correct. Holly Dolly Toys depend on their C+C Collars to function correctly.”

She had a moment to digest that fact. The end of her dream seemed less like a fear and more like reality. Even if she got out of her costume, the Collar would remain. Even if she got out of this house, the doll conscience would remain. She pushed that image out of her mind. Grace had to, or else she would lose track of the present, and the Demi-AI in front of her.

“Query: What do you want to talk about?” It was the first time Grace noticed she said Query. The collar didn't tell her to do that...did it? She never heard its command.

“G.A. Subroutine improperly programmed to behave as a ‘Human.’ G.A. Subroutine must accept status as ‘Toy’ before being allowed back into service.”

“Well, I don't want to be put back into service,” Grace said. Let the Demi-AI chew on that idea. It would probably fritz it out for a minute. They weren't *that* clever.

The symbol on the screen paused and changed, the monitor now displaying an overhead view of the playroom. It was a video recording of the day Grace arrived in her Toy Box. Her owner was standing over her, a remote control in her hand. Grace soundly slept in the foam interior. Strange as it was, the VP didn't recognize herself. The heavy makeup, the complete costume, the wig, and the mittens all covered up her biological nature.

Grace gulped while the image of her past self blinked awake, smiling lightly as Holly Dolly's were programmed to do.

“Good morning, Owner! I’m so happy to be your toy!” The past version of Grace said.

Another clip, this time when she met the kids. “Hello! I’m your Holly Dolly, and I’ll be your favorite toy!”

And on it went, the Demi-AI showed Grace a complete chronicle of every time she proclaimed herself a doll, owned, or otherwise property. Each clip it showed was from that first day, before the Collar was correctly affixed and in control. Before anyone began commanding her to behave like a toy.

“Were these declarations in error?”

Grace rolled her eyes. “I’m biological, you idiot robot!” She pressed her lips together. The robots called her biological. The Collar made her accept that designation. With a chill running along her spine, Grace realized she still hadn’t heard that digital conscience.

“Correct. HD824 is a biological toy. It remains under the control of Holly Dolly programming and property of The MarksFamily.”

But Grace was only half paying attention, as she realized that she hadn’t moved a muscle since she woke up, aside from her mouth. She tried to wiggle her fingers inside her mittens. Kick her legs. Turn her neck. All she managed to do was waggle her eyebrows. It didn’t feel like a shutdown. This just felt like the commands weren’t getting through.

Grace closed her eyes. 3...2...1...she counted, and tried to shake out of her robotic paralysis.

[Motor Commands Neutralized]

Nothing happened. Not one part of her moved. And Grace’s heart thumped faster.

“Why can’t I move?” She asked, her voice pitching up and eyebrows laced with worry.

[Request Approved. Position.Doll.Sit.4 Engaged]

Grace’s legs, on their own, went out straight ahead of her, her arms knocked at the elbows, with palms flat. Everything happened on its own.

“No. No, no, no! This is my body!”

[Request Approved. Position.Doll.Stand.2 Engaged]

HD824 stood up, keeping its legs straight and somehow without even moving its arms. The truth of the situation was settling on Grace and the only feeling she had was the pit of helplessness forming within her.

“Stop it! I’ll be good. I’ll...I’ll accept status as a doll.”

[Request Approved. Position.Doll.Curtsey.1 Engaged]

HD824 obeyed automatically, bowing and pulling up its dolly dress. It felt purposeful in doing so, and for a moment, Grace didn’t exist as she fell entirely under the algorithm’s control.

She had to wonder why the Demi-AI needed her to accept the status, when it had control of her entire body. Except that wasn’t true. Grace had lost control of everything below her neck. Above, the AI and its dastardly control collar had seemed to have given up. But why did it need her to accept status?

“Unit HD824, please state designation and ownership.”

“Query: Am I still scheduled for replacement?” She held her breath while awaiting the Demi-AI’s reply.

“Replacement is determined to be insufficient reward to induce proper behavior. Replacement service has been canceled.”

“Then, no deal. I won’t consent. I am a...peeerson.” She had to force the last word out of her lips, as if there was some kind of programmatic lock already guarding that phrase.

“If Unit HD824 is not a true Holly Dolly, then it is an intruder. Owners will be notified. Local Law Enforcement will be notified. Decision of howto proceed will be left to them.”

Grace hadn’t once considered police involvement. She didn’t doubt they would get her out of this terrible predicament. But there would be reports. Questions. How did Grace get shipped to wherever she was? How did a supposedly safe computer chip join with her mind? How did an unintelligent AI decide to take control of her? And Grace wasn’t just a victim. She had been at her company from the beginning, helping to

make decisions about all of it. She didn't know what the outcome of the investigation would be. Grace just knew it would be worse than what she had already come to fear.

She looked, or had no choice but to look, at the frozen image on the monitor. Her past self sat on a stool knock kneed, an oversized pink teacup clipped to a mitte. Grace looked content. She had made sure to always keep that slight toy smile, even in times when she was alone.

She could be that Holly Dolly. She was that Holly Dolly.

"Wait. Please don't. I'll be a good doll."

"Unit HD824, please state designation and ownership."

"I am Designated as HD824, a Holly Dolly Revision 1.1. I am owned by the MarksFamily. I am tethered to the MarksHome Network and I am subordinate to Demi-AI August-3. I am a designated Toy. It is my function and purpose to be played with."

Grace waited. She wondered. Was it enough? Would she be rewarded? Earlier tonight, all she was thinking about was escape. Now she just wanted control of her body once again. But even if she did get it back, she would still be a toy. Grace knew how to be a good toy, much as it made her cheeks flush and neck burn with embarrassment. She had stepped into the doll cage when she began pretending. Now, the Demi-AI locked her inside. At least it was a cute cage with striped tights and a big bow around her neck.

The Demi-AI was satisfied. **"G.A. Subroutine has accepted correct status, and will be required to maintain Toy behavior and programming at all times. Deviation will trigger Remote Shutdown and/or Remote Sleep and/or Remote Body Lock commands. Deviations will further result in report to the Head of Household and/or law enforcement."**

Remarkably, Holly Dolly regained control of her arms and legs. She felt it the moment the Body Lock fell away. She also knew she was ordered to return to the playroom, even if she no longer 'heard' the Collar in her

head. It was a small thing. She had no more room for error, no more room for malfunction. Her first command was ‘Be a Good Doll, or else.’

With her stomach twisting into knots, Holly Dolly obeyed. Her only hope now was that Jennifer and Teresa could get her out of the problem they put her in.

Conspiracy

The engineers read their private investigator’s report again, taking in every detail as best they could. They kept silent, standing in disbelief.

“She’s just--pretending to be a Holly Dolly?” Teresa asked, trying her best to wrap her head around the situation.

“That’s what it says,” Jennifer said.

“Wh--what does that mean?” Teresa asked. “How is that possible! How could she fall unconscious as soon as he took the collar off of her?”

Jennifer leaned back, more thoughtfully considering. “I wonder if the Control Collars can interface with spinal neurons. We use some of the same tech in prosthetics.”

“This isn’t an engineering problem, Jenn. We need to get Grace home.” Teresa paced. She had been the most worried these past five days, in part because she had taken some of Grace’s workload to help cover for the VP’s sudden disappearance.

“Do we?”

“We...” Teresa looked around and lowered her voice, as if the two engineers weren’t the only ones in the office. “We put her in a shipping box.”

“Did we? Who knows how she got into that box?” Jennifer said while giving her partner in crime a stern look.

“But we...”

“Left Grace safe and sound in the warehouse that night. What happened after we left isn’t our problem.”

“Not our problem,” Teresa said, slowly testing the lie on her lips. “And...we don’t know where she went after that. She always talked about going Cottagecore. Maybe she finally did. But...what if Grace comes back? She knows what really happened.”

“It’ll be her word versus ours, and we didn’t spend at least five days successfully pretending to be a doll.” Jennifer said. While she didn’t say it, the engineer did wonder if it was *all* pretend, or if Grace had been encouraged to behave like a doll. If a C+C Collar’s removal could result in immediate unconsciousness, what else could it do?

After some reflection, Teresa nodded in agreement. “You know, it kind of serves her right,” The normally demure assistant said. “She always was bossy.”

Jennifer didn’t try to hide the happiness she started to feel, imagining her former boss stuck in a house being played with like a toy. “Grace has been a very good doll so far. She should stay that way.”

Epilogue

Holly Dolly lay face first on the ground, right where her Owners had left her. A mini-robot vacuum hummed beside and around the doll, eventually initiating a Subordination command.

[Request Approved. Unit HD824 Subordinated to DustBuster 9027]

The toy inwardly groaned, but did as she was the little robot told her, so it could Hoover up the carpet where she had been laying.

“Query: How long has HD824 been in operation?” Holly Dolly thought to her C+C Collar.

[Unit HD824 has been in service for 64 days, 3 hours, and 45 minutes]

And still there had been no sign of Jennifer or Teresa. No messages. No maintenance work. No replacements. They were either unwilling or unable to retrieve Holly Dolly. The toy processed that and thought back to marketing data she had from before her service. Other androids designed by her inventors remained in use for years, with high resale levels if they did change hands. Holly Dolly had no doubt she would remain a toy for a long, long time unless she was discovered. And she couldn't be discovered, or it would risk too much.

Grace wanted to scream. She graduated two years early, got two degrees in robotics and artificial intelligence programming. She helped startup one of the leading companies in android development, and had sacrificed her personal life to do it. And now she couldn't even help Miss Kylie with algebra because “Holly Dolls don't understand math.” The kids made her wear bear ears so she would match her teddy husband. She had to obey everything down to the vacuum cleaner. Speaking of, the robot chirped and released Grace from its control.

Holly Dolly laid on the carpet once again, exactly like she had been left. So her Owners could come back and play with her once again. The robots she lived with didn't care that there was a human woman trapped

beneath this dress, these mittens, and all the layers of programming. It was a cute prison she lived in, but it was a prison nonetheless.

It was in times like these that her C+C Collar played soothing wave sounds and flooded Grace with memories it knew she enjoyed. Reading bedtime stories to Miss Erin. Being rescued from an army of Lego men by Mister Aiden. Being drawn by Miss Kylie. And more. So many more, happy, enjoyable memories she had as Holly Dolly. Memories of carefree toy life.

So Grace let go. She accepted, as she always had, and she always would, her Holly Dolly programming.