

Colby-in-the-Box

By: EL_Refresho

The lights of the mall were still dimmed and the store gates shuttered for the night. Colby barely made a sound as she paced along the brown tile concourse. Her fingers tacked as she texted her boyfriend, wondering where he was and why he was taking so long to pick her up. She looked out the large glass doors and smiled at the sight - however early - of puffy white flakes falling to the ground. Nothing was sticking, but the night was still young.

Colby paced deeper into the mall, further away from the doors that didn't help keep the cold away, and back toward the new toy store in the last stages of construction. The plaster walls were down and she could look inside the two story keystone store. Plush red carpeting and rich brown wood panels made a regal impression on her. A number of decorations were already up, including a wooden marionette parachuting from a skylight, a snowflake ballerina on a gold music box filled with pearls of rubber balls. A few other decorations were only half finished, such as an inviting tuffet for Miss Muffet's muffet, a castle turret for a princess, and a box for a jack.

She smiled at the store, still it up in the closed mall, and eagerly awaited to tour the aisles. Something tapped her shoulder and Colby jumped and shrieked at the simple touch. Then she rolled her eyes at herself and turned around to come face to face with a cheery woman behind her. She had bright red lips and perfect pink circles on her cheeks. Her hair was in golden ringlets and topped with a bonnet, and her dress a checkered affair

with a maiden's apron. She smiled lightly at Colby and politely informed her that she was in her way.

Confused, but willing to help, Colby moved and watched the woman walk into - and then through, with not a special effect in sight, the glass window into the store. Completely calm, she sat on the tuffet and picked up her curds and whey. Colby narrowed her eyes and pushed her nose against the glass. The woman somehow didn't seem the same, and now looked more soft as if she were made from cloth.

Ka-THUNK! Colby jumped again and turned to the sudden noise. The Jackless box had fallen from its seat and now laid like a drunkard on the red carpet, its springy tongue sloshing from its mouth. And as she watched, the tongue started to move. It coiled and sprang in just the right way that the box was righted. It looked at Colby in an impossible and unmistakable way. Her eyes were wide when it started to hork, the top of the box curving inside itself, and then violently coughed, sending a ball of white goo right at Colby.

She yelped and backed away from the window, falling over in the process. Like the doll earlier, the goo sailed right through the window in an impossible manner and landed directly on her left foot. The goo was shockingly cold and her instincts pushed her away, sliding her body across the ground. She stopped feeling the cold, but was more startled to discover the goo had morphed her shoe into an overstuffed blue slipper in the shape of a sneaker. Colby grabbed it with both hands and tried to yank the slipper off, but stopped after she heard the metallic stretching of a spring. She wondered at the sound, and then saw that something had happened to her lower left leg: just above the slipper she saw her skin had turned to a tan cloth. She gingerly pulled her toe and turned it. She heard the spring again, becoming more and more tense as she twisted her toes until they actually faced straight toward her body.

Colby let go and screamed at the sight of her foot springing back and forth several times. There was a spring inside her body. KA-THUNK. The girl looked up and into the store again. The Box had flipped again and now showed its top to Colby. KA-THUNK. KA-THUNK. It rolled over twice more and was close to the window. It looked at Colby. The lid popped up twice in rapid succession.

"JA-CK," It said.

Colby's eyes became dinner plates and she twisted around and started to run. But her fleeing turned more to a hobble with her one strong leg and one spring foot. The mall's exit seemed so far away now, and the snowy world beyond was a fantasy. KA-THUNK. KA-THUNK. KA-THUNK. The horrible sounds were just farther away, and Colby glanced over her shoulder. The horrible, wretched box was drawing itself in for another attack.

The girl ran faster, and just about the time she thought her pursuer was to attack, pushed from the center of the concourse to one of the closed up stores on the edge. But she still cried and stumbled, her right elbow feeling the freezing cold of the spit. Her spring foot gave way and Colby twisted to the floor. The box never stopped, and it was all she could do to pedal backwards, just missing the rolling box. It went right through the window of the clothing store and ran into a full metal rack. It KA-THUNKED to the side and knocked over a second. Like a car trying to back out of a too-small spot, the box was stuck rolling and rolling to get back into the open.

Colby, for the first time in seeming days, relaxed and got back onto her feet. There was something wrong with her shoulder. She could move her hand, and her elbow just fine. But her shoulder wouldn't budge at all. She looked and gasped. Her arm was stuck out at an angle, moving lightly as if . . . as if there were a spring holding it up.

"Oh God." Colby's arm was mostly tan cloth. She let it hang there for now, knowing the wretched box would escape soon, and hobble forward once more. Less than twenty feet to go. Snow was beginning to stick on the grass. Colby started to laugh. She couldn't help it. Somehow she had beaten the box.

KA-THUNK. KA-THUNK. KA-THUNK. KA-THUNK. KA-THUNK. KA-THUNK. The noises were faster and louder than they had ever been. It rammed her just as she touched the lever to leave, and once more Colby fell to the hard floor. The push-lever doors seemed so far away now. The Box looked at her.

"My Jack."

After all this, it was that comment that snapped the springs in the girl's head, "My name isn't Jack!" She shouted, pushing herself up for one last, desperate escape. The box let her push the door open with her left arm and body. It let her squeeze her springy right arm through the gap. It almost let the door close before it lashed out its spring tongue.

Colby suddenly stopped. Her left foot; the one that had changed first; was caught. She pulled as hard as she could, and heard a coil tensing. And then her strength gave out. She flung back through the door and right into the mouth of the Box. The lid slammed shut, leaving Colby's last memory of seeing a blue Sedan roll to a stop right outside the mall's exit.

There was no room to move. No room to fight. She pushed up as hard as she could, but she didn't even know if she was pushing on the right side. Colby gasped as she felt the freezing white goo touch her skin. The feeling passed quickly as it moved around her body, turning it into something that was not hers. She never felt dizzy as her Box rolled over and over and over, bringing her one step closer to her fate. In less than a minute, it stopped.

Colby was despondent in her Box. It was all dark and dreary. And then she started to tense up. A music box started to play a familiar song. Something about a mulberry bush, and a monkey, and even a weasel. Oh, she thought they were having such fun. And then Pop! The lid flipped open and Colby sprang out of her box, surprising an unsuspecting world. Her arms flew up and over her head, and her right leg was pulled up, her toe near the knee of her opposite leg, pointing down. Something shook in each of her hands. And though Colby didn't want to smile, that's all her face would let her do.

She saw a mysterious shiny plate across the room, and it showed a delightful thing: A Box just like hers, with a doll popping out of it. The toy had blue sneaker slippers and a short blue skirt. She had a white and blue top with a great big "C" on it, and her arms went up into the air, blue pom-poms attached to each. The doll was

smiling brightly, and Colby smiled back.

Somewhere inside the doll, just behind the mask of cloth, Colby struggled to break loose. She felt as though she were covered by springs, each working to counteract her struggling. Every minute or so she heard the malformed voice of her Box.

"My Colby."