

# Coppelia Revisited

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## Chapter 1

Three shadows crouched in the bushes outside the pink house, but weren't thieves. Thieves wouldn't have been so loud.

"Parker, why are you doing this?" Ryan's voice quivered while he looked at the house, which was one of the oldest in the town. Painted a light pink and blue, it sat on a hill with perfectly manicured groves and trees like a dollhouse brought to life. But in the moonless night it was just another house, and even more ominous.

"I just . . . I need to, babe. You'll understand when you see," Parker whispered in reply. She tucked her brunette hair behind her ear as she turned to her companions, "I really want you both to see her. I want you to see how beautiful she is."

Ryan, a tall and handsome boy with shaggy and dirty blond hair, took a moment before nodding.

"We're with you," Emily said, squeezing Parker's hand. She was a shade shorter than her best friend, lighter and had frizzy red hair.

An intoxicating smile blossomed on Parker's face. "Thank you. I swear this is going to be worth it."

She went to the back door with Emily and Ryan in tow, and jiggled the handle. The door swung open without a squeak or creak. The house smelled the same, somehow, and memories of a Christmas time long past flooded Parker from when she had last been here.

It was almost seven years ago, back when the owner made his home into a wonderland of toys and elves for local children and other gawkers. Back then, Parker was a gangly girl just about to enter middle school. She got separated and lost in the many roomed house and stumbled upon a door hidden behind decorations. Though scared, curiosity compelled her through the door, and changed her life forever.

On the other side, she found a hidden room and a hidden doll. A ballerina toy sat on a chair in the center of the room, a book across her lap. Her feet were propped up en pointe and her blue tutu and peasant top were trimmed with red flowers. Her hair was braided into a bun and held back by a wreath of white flowers with red tassels that fell to her shoulders. Red spots marked her cheeks. She was the most beautiful doll Parker had ever seen.

The girl walked to her, but jumped back when the toy came alive. The doll's piercing blue eyes set on Parker, and she set aside her book, standing on pointed feet and dancing around the shocked girl. Then the doll gave her hand to the girl, inviting the wobbly, unsure child to dance. And without a thought Parker took the toy's hand and they began a pas de deux through the empty room.

Time lost meaning as she and the doll danced, the toy pulling and leading the girl, until a booming voice broke the silence. "What is going on in here!?" The doll froze and fell over as if she was never more than wood. The man's lips twitched with a slightly crazy tilt. "Get out! Get out and never come back!" he shouted at Parker, who squealed and ran away in tears.

It took seven years for Parker to come back to that house. She didn't remember much besides that one room, only knowing it was upstairs. She found the wooden steps in the corner of the living room and went up.

She couldn't recognize anything in the dark, but with the help of soft night lights she saw three doors sitting on the hallway, one on the left and two on the right.

Parker checked the door closest to her and her jaw dropped open. "This is it!" She whispered. The room had changed over the years and there were many more dolls now, but the ballerina still sat in her chair and still read her book. No longer in the center of the room, the ballerina had been placed next to the window overlooking the front lawn. A set of double doors sat behind her and a plush red chair off to her right that faced the menagerie of dolls.

Parker kept her attention on the ballerina. In the years since her trip here she had come to call the doll Coppelia after the doll in the ballet of the same name. In the play the toy was so lifelike that men fell in love with her and women were jealous of her. Parker knelt next to the doll's chair. The toy looked every bit as alive and vibrant as she had seven years ago, and Parker was glad the doll had been so well taken care of.

Emily and Ryan gaped at the rest of the room while Parker adored Coppelia. Large windows overlooked the north and south lawns, and the room had a u-shaped balcony stretching above it. But what drew their attention were the dolls blithely scattered around the playroom.

Ryan went to the back corner where he found a gypsy dancer in a purple dress and a flamenco dancer with long slender legs and fiery red dress beside her. He gave attention to each, noting every perfect detail of their faces and their bodies.

Emily took a careful walk around the room. She found a large pink dollhouse in another corner, and a glass case in which stood a porcelain Victorian doll. She came back to a small display made of a few large alphabet blocks near the center of the room. She also found a thick black cord next to the blocks, almost invisible in the darkness of the room.

She pulled on the rope and something gave way, releasing a colorful jester from the ceiling, her wooden body and jingling bells throwing up a racket as she crashed to the floor. Emily yelped and jumped backwards.

The jester wobbled, and then collapsed all the way to the ground, the sound of her fall reverberated through the room. Everyone held their breath, and hoped no one in the house had heard their mess.

After moments of silence Ryan turned to the redhead. “What the hell, Emily?” Ryan hissed. “Don’t touch anything.” She glared at him and replied with a flip of her middle finger. He shook his head and turned back to the sexy gypsy doll. Parker gave her friend a reassuring smile.

The fallen jester was splayed in a bizarre way with her ass held in the air, and though the doll smiled, Emily knew she couldn’t terribly like it. The girl tried to help the doll back to a more comfortable position, but before she could touch her wooden skin, the doll picked herself up all on her own. She took a seat on a block with her arms wrapped around her knees and froze once again.

“Oh my God! She moved.” Emily took a close look at the doll’s face, just to make sure she wasn’t a person playing a prank.

“They do that,” Parker said with a strange detachment in her voice as she stared at the closed double doors behind Coppelia.

Emily returned her attention to the jester once more. The doll had a few clown marks on her face, but more interesting was her hair that was cut from thin strips of yellow cloth. She wore a green and yellow costume made from a motley tunic and vertically striped tights. Little jester booties with curly toes covered her feet, and a two pronged jester hat sat on her head. There were bells in abundance on every tassel.

Ryan stayed by the intriguing dancing dolls and rapped his knuckle on the gypsy’s wooden head. He turned back to the flamenco dancer and admired the detail of her long and slender leg partially revealed by a slit in her fiery skirt. The gypsy doll did not take kindly to Ryan’s behavior and slapped the back of his head, returning to her demure position before he could turn around.

Parker stood in front of the double doors and bit her lip. Something was calling her here. She twisted the handle and held her breath as the door opened. Parker took a few tentative steps into the room, but could see

nothing in the dark. It had no windows and the moon's silvered light couldn't reach inside, but found a light switch that flooded the room with dim yellow light. It was enough to take Parker's breath.

The closet was a dressing room for the playroom, racks covered with a hundred bright doll costumes for all occasions. She stepped up the first rack and ran her fingers along the soft fabrics, keeping an eye out for something she might like. Parker's vision crossed a glittering pink ballet tutu, and she reached for it without hesitation. The dress and corset were embellished with silver thread and had a round pancake tutu attached. Before realizing that it might be crazy, Parker began to change into the costume.

Emily kept a vigilant watch on the jester, walking around her and trying to figure how she could move her wooden body. "You probably don't want me to push you over again. I know I wouldn't." The doll kept still, and Emily finally gave in and sat down next to the doll, mimicking the doll's posture on the block beside her. She watched as Ryan grew increasingly bored with dolls and increasingly annoyed by the pain on the back of his head. Bored, he sat down in the red chair.

"I don't get it. What are we even doing here? Are we just visiting?"

Emily sighed, "You really don't get Parker, do you?"

"Of course I get. . ."

"No, you don't. You don't *understand* Parker. I knew her before she came here. She used to be this gangly, awkward girl. She had no confidence in herself, and no drive to do anything. Then she danced with that doll."

"So she says."

Emily gritted her teeth. "She danced with that doll, and just . . . everything changed. She began ballet the next month. She got into theater a year later. She blossomed into the beautiful girl with this beautiful body you so love to leer at. This room, more than anything else, turned her into who she is today."

“Yeah, but . . .” Ryan started before the creaking sound of the closet door opening broke his thought. Emily gasped and Ryan gaped. Even without moving, all the dolls in the room somehow stared at Parker.

Her old clothes had been discarded, replaced with a pink leotard with silver roses embroidered across the bodice. A pink jeweled choker circled her neck; the choker and her tutu glittered in the soft light of the playroom. Parker’s long and slender legs were clad in nearly opaque white tights and she wore gold pointe shoes. Her hair was pulled back by a wreath of tassels and flowers.

She was the splitting image of a playroom doll, and the twin to Coppelia.

## Chapter 2

“Parker, what did you get into?” Ryan asked as the pink ballerina rushed to him, gracefully and gleefully on her toes, a not very well hidden smile across her face.

She replied with a barely audible whisper in his left ear, “Play with me...owner.” Parker ran to the center of the room in ballet steps. Then she froze, her legs in a wide stance and body leaning. She stayed frozen, glittering eyes waiting for Ryan, but her boyfriend scratched his head at Parker's bizarre behavior.

“What are you doing?” He asked.

“She wants to play, dummy,” Emily said. “Doll, I want you to dance,” she commanded.

Obedient, Parker straightened and leaped in the air, stretching her thin legs to their limits, and then landed again with only a padded whisper. She hopped en point and twirled, getting her lithe body moving faster and faster. Then the moment passed and Parker returned to her dull doll posture. Her mouth twitched as she fought back a brimming smile. Her eyes glittered in Ryan's direction. Emily sighed, “Doll, go play with your owner.”

Parker hopped on her toes and danced to the red chair, dramatically falling into Ryan's lap. She wrapped her slim arms around his neck and waited with a begging quiver for him to play. “Doll, um, what's your name?”

“I don’t know. You haven’t named me yet, owner.” Parker said. She had finally managed to control her smile and now wore a blank face.

“Well. How would you like to be called Dolly?” He said. Emily rolled her eyes and turned back to the jester doll. But the green jester wasn’t there anymore, and the only hint of her existence was a black cord swaying in the open. Emily spun and frantically searched for the jester, and found a pair bright eyes peeking from behind the door to the closet. It may have been a good hiding spot, apart from her giant hat that revealed her position.

“Hey, what are you doing?” Emily said, running to the door. The jester ducked inside and hid herself again by the time Emily got to the closet. Like Parker, the sight of the cute costumes took her aback. The jester’s curly slippers and green legs hid behind the left rack, and decided to turn her attention to the other side of the room. Emily kept one eye on the costumes, staying on guard for something just her size, while also watching the jester doll. The toy didn’t take well to being ignored and snuck up close to Emily, who pretended to be more interested in a Dutch maiden’s costume than the harlequin behind her.

The jester, though, was undeterred, and she stood on Emily’s right side while also tapping on her left shoulder. The girl played along to the high school prank for the toy’s sake, feigning surprise that the clown was on her other side.

“Oh, so now you want to play.” Emily said, turning back to the toy, who happily nodded, her bells jingling. The girl held up the dress she was most interested in; a red corseted dress with shiny white sleeves and long white skirt that also included a giant red bow. “Should I dress the part?”

The jester wrinkled her wooden nose, then pulled on Emily and took her deeper into the closet, where she picked up a conical jester cap. It was snow white with red diamonds stitched onto it, and was topped off by a large red pom and bell. The jester jangled the cap in front of Emily.

“Okay. I’ll play along.” Emily took the fool’s cap and put it on her head. The Jester was quick to pull out the rest of the costume, and handed it to Emily. “All of it?” The girl asked. More nodding, more jangling. “If you insist,” she said, and she put the costume on.

Her jester tunic was shiny red and white, and followed the curve of her body nicely. It included a many-pointed collar and many bells around it. Its attached skirt was airy and cut into pointed tassels like her collar. She slipped into red and white tights with stripes that banded down her legs.

The green jester watched at her partner carefully as Emily pulled her own curly slippers on her feet. She wiggled her toes and the little bell at the end of the curly toe rang. Such a simple thing, but it made her laugh.

Emily jumped and turned to her partner. “What do you think?”

“Wonderful!” The jester cried with a clap.

“Wait . . . you can talk?”

“Sure. Can’t you?” The jester doll gave Emily a questioning look.

“Why didn’t you say anything before?”

“I didn’t have anything to say before.”

“Fair enough. I’m Emily.” She said, holding out her hand.

“My name’s Calliope. And you’re not Emily tonight. Tonight,” the jester said, “you’re Jewel, my twin sister and fellow jester.”

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Dolly’s movements were exact, stopping at perfect angles and flowing into the next step. She danced the tips of her golden shoes as if she had been programmed. She smiled and her heart burst every time her owner

commanded her to do something. Right now he asked her to stand completely still near the gypsy doll. He walked around her and stroked his fingers along her back.

Ryan took Dolly's arm a little roughly and pulled it into the air, arcing it in a ballet-like position. He was more delicate as he rubbed his hand down Dolly's leg and placed her foot en pointe, gracefully moving across her other leg. As he stood back up, he rubbed his hands along Dolly's legs and ass, up past her slender curved frame, playing with her smallish breasts. He wrapped his strong arms around Dolly and picked her up. The doll's past life as a ballerina allowed her to easily hold the position her owner had put her in.

She remained rigid as he moved her a few feet and set her down again. Ryan moved her face so she could see deep into the eyes of her owner. Dolly loved those eyes so much, but yet couldn't rid herself of the doubt that her owner had any clue how to play with her. Yet his brown eyes were so deep that the doll didn't care; she stepped up on her toes and kissed her owner. He was eager to return her love, and the doll and her owner tangled themselves in each other's arms.

In the moment of passion, Ryan's hand started to obey his more base desires. His hand crept to her hair she had pulled up so neatly. His fingers wrapped themselves up in her brunette hair, and pulled on the strands. He pulled gently, at first, and when she stayed quiet and obedient, he pulled harder. Even then, she stayed quiet. Though somewhere in his mind, Ryan knew his doll didn't like this, he twisted her brown hair, until finally. . .

"Oww!" Parker pushed Ryan away. All pretenses that she was a toy vanished and she rubbed her sore head. Her perfectly groomed hair was now ragged and tattered, and Ryan thought she was a bit hotter for it. "What were you thinking?" She asked.

"Well, I was . . . I mean, you were pretending to be a toy." Parker looked at him incredulously as she tried to straighten her hair.

"Treat. Your. Toys. Nicely." She said, slugging his shoulder between her every word. She turned around and walked over to where Coppelia was sitting. Parker sat down next to the chair, in a strangely doll sort of way,

with her legs scissoring away from each other. Ryan sat down on a stand next to the gypsy doll and the room fell into silence just like it would have been if the two weren't there at all.

Parker looked at Coppelia with weary eyes. The blue doll was so demure and pure, and completely still. Parker propped herself on her knees and laid her head on the doll's lap.

"Why won't you move, Coppelia? I came back here just for you." But the ballerina doll made no motion or sign that she was anything but wood.

A burst of energy and noise broke the peace of the room. The jester doll giggled and ran through the room, slipping and sliding on curly toed slippers. Emily, dressed in a twin costume, was right behind her, chasing after something held in the wooden toy's hand.

Ryan glared at the pair, but said nothing, leaving it up to Parker to be the scold.

"What are you doing?" Parker hissed, "I don't want to get caught here." The jesters ceased their chasing, but not their giggling.

The jester toy pointed at Emily. "She's it."

Parker turned to her best friend with a token of disbelief. "Emily, what are you doing? I count on you to be responsible."

The human jester laughed and skipped forward with an innocent grin. "Emily is responsible. But tonight, I'm Jewel. And you are . . ." She tapped Parker on the nose ". . . it."

The twin clowns laughed again and both ran from the room.

"Oh, no," Parker muttered as she followed the harlequins, not out of play, but to make sure they didn't break or wake anything. Ryan, too, jumped up, but a delicate hand held him back. The touch startled him and he turned to see the gypsy doll smiling at him with seductive lips.

"Please stay so we can play." She pulled her smooth wooden body close to his and wrapped Ryan up with her arms and legs. The gypsy started to sway and dance like fire, stepping lightly around him and keeping

her body rubbing against his. She tamed her tambourine against her hand. As she continued her dance, Ryan started to wonder who was really playing with whom.

Then her body slowed, her fiery dance dying out and her body losing its passionate energy, until she froze entirely on an unbalanced foot. The gypsy stayed in place for just a moment before succumbing to gravity. She fell to the floor with no spark of life left in her. Even her smile and bright eyes seemed to dim.

“Umm, are you OK, doll?” Ryan inspected her, but the only thing out of the ordinary was the small hole made in the center of her back. He started to look closer, but movement and a voice interrupted him.

“She just needs to be wound once more, nothing more, Senor.” The flamenco dancer stepped off her pedestal and held out her hand to be kissed. “But really, why would you? I am the better toy. And much better than the new ballerina.”

Ryan took the toy by the hand, interested to see the way she would play. The flamenco gripped his hand and pulled him so close to her body that no light could slip through. The pair stared into each other’s eyes for a long moment, and then the dancer gripped Ryan and swiftly led him down the room in a sexy tango. He had no clue how to dance, but the steps seeped into his mind in an indescribable way. Soon, he could keep pace with the doll that spent her life dancing. Once again, Ryan got the feeling that he was the one being played with. It was an unsettling feeling and Ryan grew tired of it. He pulled away from his partner and before the doll could look at him to wonder why, he commanded:

“Doll, stop. I play with you, not the other way around.” The dancer froze, and kept still apart from a growing smile. “We’re going to play make believe.” Ryan said. The sexy red dancer and her gypsy partner had sparked a dead imagination, and Ryan intended to use it.

But his plan was once again interrupted when all the dolls in the room, the flamenco and gypsy included, collectively inhaled.

Coppelia put down her book and slipped from the room.

## Chapter 3

Calliope and her newest friend Jewel stampeded down the hallway and then a flight of stairs, with every bell in their shoes and hats jingling and jangling like Christmas time. The idea that they may wake up whoever might be home never crossed their silly clown minds. They bounded through the kitchen and then the living room, using the slim moonlight to gimbal around the obstacles. Their pink pursuer never saw the footstool in her path and her chase came to a crashing end.

The jesters, however, didn't hear this and followed their heart's desire that led them to the house's basement. Calliope felt perfectly fine in the pitch darkness, which after all would make it easier to hide. But Jewel's slightly less wooden mind thought to flip the light switch and the world popped into existence in a bright shower of lights. They were in a playroom, but one that was more colorful and cheery than the one upstairs. It had multiple playsets around the walls, for dolls big and small.

It was almost like a house unto itself, with a fake kitchen, doll living room, and a fluffy bed. But the colors on the wood had all faded, part in age and part in the layer of dust covering them. Wood paneling around the walls and thick shag carpeting further revealed the age of the room.

"What is this place?" Jewel asked.

"Don't know. Never been outta tha' playroom, miself." Calliope answered, though she seemed perfectly at home at the fake sink preparing a tea set. "Is it too late for tea?" She asked, walking the cups to a round table at the heart of the room.

“Have I ever said no to you, Calliope?” Jewel said, sitting on a too-small chair across from her host.

The jester giggled, “I guess that makes me your owner.”

“How so? I just like to make you happy. I’m not a slave or anything.”

“I’m no slave, either. I’m a toy. I do whatever my owner says to make him happy; and since you never say no to me. . .”

Sitting so close to Calliope, Jewel could clearly see the wood grain running tracks through her painted face. “That’s funny; a human being owned by a doll.” Jewel’s hand fell to her leg, and nearby where she felt a long discarded pillow. She gripped the pillow in her hand and before she had a second thought, swung at her twin doll. Calliope reacted with a startled giggle and jumped out of her seat.

The green jester ran to the bed and started to get a pillow weapon of her own, but Jewel bowled her over and they fell giggling to the bed. The jesters came face to face with each other, and Calliope’s face was softer and the grain in her wood was almost imperceptible. Jewel even felt her Owner’s soft and shallow breaths on her skin, and Calliope’s once bright red circles were more like natural pink blush.

Curious, Jewel stroked her twin’s cheek, now more like flesh than wood. Calliope’s smile turned in a way her wooden face shouldn’t have allowed. “Kiss me,” she said.

Of course, Jewel couldn’t say no . . .

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Parker cradled her ankle; it and her right knee had taken the worst of her stunning fall. Her gentle massage wore the hurt down, but years of ballet training told Parker her ankle was just lying and the pain would explode once again as soon as she put her weight on it.

The ballerina laid her head against the traitorous footstool that had befallen her. The night had been so promising. But Coppelia had never danced, Emily was acting like a toy, Ryan was an idiot; and now with a

bruised knee and ankle, Parker knew she was to be caught. She had a strange feeling that it would not be good for her to be caught while wearing a doll's costume. But she wouldn't leave her best friend and boyfriend to whomever owned the house and its precious dolls, and so resigned to wait in the living room until someone found her.

Find her someone did. Parker heard the stranger's presence, quiet as it was, only a light fabric swish and soft, deliberate steps. She gasped as moonlight struck Coppelia's tutu, which sparkled blue in the moon's light. She stepped as if her movements were charted by a master choreographer; there was not a trace of mechanical timing to her precise movements and perfect rhythms.

"Coppelia . . ." Parker whispered.

A warm laugh came from the doll's throat as she knelt to Parker's side. "Come with me."

The doll took Parker's hand, and her touch banished all the pain in her body. The ballerinas got up and walked in lock step up the stairs and to another room on the second floor. Parker matched Coppelia's mechanical grace as if she, too, was a mechanical doll. The toy turned on a lamp in the dark room and while its light never touched the door, it revealed a conflicted room; partly filled with pink trinkets and worn ballet shoes and partly filled with posters of hot movie stars and musicians from a decade ago.

There were two pictures on the dresser. One was of a Ballerina putting on her shoes in legwarmers and a t-shirt in a studio. She wasn't looking at the camera, but laughing at something out of frame. The other picture was of a student with a backpack slung over her shoulder and glasses, wearing jeans and tennis shoes. They looked like two entirely different people, but Parker knew they were the same.

"My father never liked those pictures because they weren't perfect. They weren't of a demure ballerina en pointe in a perfect tutu." Coppelia slumped. "He built a perfect house, married a perfect wife, had a perfect daughter who was a perfect ballerina. He made her all these perfect toys. But when his perfect daughter tried to become a real girl . . ." The doll let her words hang in the air. ". . . he went mad."

Coppelia stood up and turned Parker around so they were both facing the mirror. It was strange the way they looked so much alike. The doll was rather like a human and Parker rather like a doll. There were even strong pink circles on her cheeks; circles she had never put on.

“What’s happening to me?”

“You’re disturbing every twine of magic in the air in this place, Parker. And if you stay, you’ll become just like me. You’ll be turned into a doll. You have to leave now, or you’ll never be able to leave.”

## Chapter 4

The playroom was silent and still as all the dolls stared at the now-empty chair where the beautiful Coppelgia had always sat. Even Ryan, who had no concept of the importance of this event, stared. His flamenco doll had disappeared and Ryan turned to find her.

The red-dressed doll was next to the fallen gypsy, taking her own key to wind up her sister toy. The gypsy was quick to shake off her sleep and stand up. She clapped excitedly.

"Oh, what a day! New toys to play with!" The Gypsy said.

"And dear, sweet Coppelgia will finally play with us," the Flamenco added.

Ryan stepped closer. "Wait, what are you two talking about? Did I miss something?"

"Coppelgia is the oldest of us; she's our owner's first doll. But she's never moved. Never danced, never obeyed Owner."

The gypsy piped up. "Except for once. She danced one time in all the years she's been a doll. But no one was here to see it."

"Owner was furious when his most beloved toy danced with a complete stranger and not with him. He yelled at Coppelgia for hours. She hasn't obeyed Owner since."

Ryan scratched his head. "Wait, but why would he keep a toy that didn't obey him?"

"Because," the Flamenco said, "Coppelgia is his daughter, and he can't bear to be rid of her." The Gypsy shrieked in excitement and hugged her fellow wind-up doll. "Oh, what joy! Four new toys in one night!"

“Four?” Ryan asked, just before something struck the back of his head, sending him into dreams.

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A stiff tin soldier stood over Ryan’s splayed out body, her metal body rigid once more. The wind-ups clapped and cheered as another figure stepped from the darkness, from a door hidden in shadow. He was an elderly man, hunched in the back. His long grey hair was tattered and his face bore maddened old wrinkles.

“Is he the cause of all this racket?” He said grumpily.

“Oh, no, owner. There are two others, both already costumed and playing.” The Gypsy said.

“And one of them is Swanhilda.”

The crazy man’s crazy eyes turned wide at the mention of his name for the young girl who had made Coppelia move all those years ago. He turned to his head soldier.

“Assemble your toys, Major. Go and find my wayward dolls and dolls-to-be.” The tin soldier saluted and snapped her fingers. Two soldiers and two more soldierettes stepped up from around the room, and all five marched out of the room with stomping tin feet.

The owner turned to the fallen man in his playroom. “Can you handle this one?” The wind-ups smiled with devilish grins. “Then make him ready for the elixir.” Owner turned and mumbled his way out of the room.

The two dolls danced to Ryan’s prostrate body and each took a hand. Together, they hauled him toward the costume closet.

“What kind of toy shall he be?”

“Well, a wind-up of course.”

“Yes, but what about his costume?”

“I don’t know. But it should be something very, very cute.”

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The jesters twined their bodies, their slender arms and legs wrapped up together. They watched, entranced, as Jewel's hand became covered in white fabric and turned into a mitten, then into wooden gloved fingers, and then back to flesh, all in the span of a minute. Similar dances of skin, cloth, and wood played across her body, and across her partner's, too.

"What is causing this?"

"Magic, I suppose." Calliope kissed a recently plush patch of her partner's neck. The fabric was cool, and she buried her nose deeper into Jewel's body. The red and white jester giggled at the tickling sensation, and the way the doll's body warmed hers. "I hope you become a softie doll, so I can cuddle you all the time."

Jewel gripped her owner's hand between hers. She was unsettled by the way it appeared more and more human. Her own hands were more consistently mittens, though still fluxed back to their normal form.

"Is this . . . will I be a toy forever?"

"Such a curious doll, aren't you?" Calliope stroked her partner's hair as it returned to its natural red color. "But no magic is permanent, and may always be undone. Enjoy yourself and be my doll, if only for now."

Jewel smiled with a cloth mask across her face. "I can be yours for the night."

Calliope ran her finger down the seam of her doll's face, a playful twinkle in her eye.

"Then, sit up." The jesters pulled their bodies up and facing each other, and sat cross legged. Jewel marveled at how far she could twist her puffy and soft legs. "We're going to play make believe; I will be the queen of toyland, and you will be my servant and jester. But we're friends." Calliope quickly added.

"But you're not dressed like a queen," Jewel said mournfully, plopping her plush leg into her owner's lap.

"It's make believe, silly clown."

“But you’re not dressed like a queen,” She said again.

Calliope smiled coyly. “You just want to visit the costume room again. Well, let’s go.” Callope jumped up and pulled her softie doll up with her. They walked, flesh hand and mitten glove twined together and swung, to the basement door.

But as they reached the door, the handle turned from the other side. It swung open and revealed a pair of stoic tin soldiers. The leader, a red shirted boy soldier, drew his long musket and pointed it toward Jewel. His backup, a blue shirted and skirted girl soldier did the same.

“Hold it right there, toys.”

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“A doll? I’m turning into a doll?” Parker watched her reflection. Her skin had a plastic shine to it. Her fingers were defined, but stuck together. Parker could pull them apart, though they always fell back together. She smiled in disbelief. “I should be scared about all of this, but I’m not.”

“Do you know why?” Coppelia asked, her arms crossed.

“Because I want to be a doll?” Parker guessed.

“No. There is magic woven into this house; into the costume you’re wearing, and the ones your friend is wearing. The longer you stay, the more you’ll want to stay.” Coppelia grabbed the pink ballerina by the shoulders, “You need to stay strong. You need to remember that you’re human.”

“But . . .” Parker said, her almost porcelain face knotted with confusion, “I’m a doll.”

Coppelia frowned. Why did she let this game go on for so long? She should have stopped Parker from going into the costume room. Should have told her that she used to be human. So many should haves, and now her father's damned magic was capturing another lost girl.

"Your name is Parker. You have friends, human friends, who are in very real danger." The blue ballerina said, looking deep into glass eyes that used to be human.

Parker's mind came back. The spells on her body reversed for the tiniest of moments, and she nodded. Coppelia knew she could fall into a daze again at any moment and brought the girl to the door. But she stopped before leaving as tin soldiers clanged outside.

---

The Gypsy and Flamenco flitted around the costume room, wildly grabbing any remotely adorable cloth to put on their new doll. It was a long established rule of the playroom that toys should never choose what they wear, and the wind-ups were proud to keep that tradition. Unfortunately, they themselves had never dressed a fellow toy before, and were at a loss for what he should wear. It wasn't until Esmeralda the Gypsy pulled out a green tunic and shorts that they knew who their new doll should be.

"Mas perfecto!" Rosalitta cried, running up to her toy sister. The flamenco dug into the rack and pulled out the remaining pieces of the costume. Together, the dolls proceeded to redress their new toy. "He is a little manly for this costume, no?"

"Nothing makeup and magic can't fix."

"Si! Of course!" Rosalita scurried to the makeup stand and began pulling everything she could find from the table, whether Ryan would need it or not.

“Who should be the first to get to play with our toy?” Esmeralda said while stroking her fingers through Ryan’s lush curled black hair.

“You got to play with him before, hermana, so I should be able to play with him now.”

Ryan’s eyes fluttered open, just as Esmeralda turned on her sister doll.

“You!?! You got to play with him before.” Esmeralda pointed a wooden finger in Rosalita’s face. “I wound down before I got to play.”

“It is not my fault you do not keep yourself wound up, which is another reason why I should play with Peter first.”

Ryan continued to shake off his stupor, and looked at himself, shocked to see he was dressed almost entirely in green. Green hat, green tunic, and green tights. He was very quick to realize they were talking about him when they said Peter.

“You always get to play with Owner first, and longer. Peter is my doll to play with, and I won’t let you take him from me.” Esmeralda said.

Ryan propped himself up. The dolls were so busy squabbling they hadn’t even noticed him.

“Oh, hermana, you have taken my key too many times to count, after you lost yours. And how many times have you lost a shoe? Or your tambourine?” Rosalita scolded.

“I am a doll; it’s not my fault I lose my shoes. And if you thin . . .” Esmeralda stopped when she noticed the empty space where a man should be. “Where did Peter go?” She asked.

“Estupido! Now you’ve lost our new toy.”

## Chapter 5

Ryan broke out of the toy room and ran down the hall without any real clue where to go. He knew there were toy soldiers around, but couldn't fathom where they were (or where they had come from). He took a flying leap down the stairs, and felt he landed unusually softly. But he didn't take the time to think about this peculiarity as marching footsteps banged up from the basement, coming closer. Ryan froze and searched for a hiding place, but the lights throughout the house had already been turned on and there weren't any good options left.

A breeze ran across his body, coming from a nearby open window. The banging of tin boots got louder, and so did Emily's shouting. With little time, Ryan jumped through the window, flying out into the outside night . . . and landing on plush green carpeting. He gathered himself up and looked out in shock. This was impossible. He was back in the playroom, in a darkened corner he had not seen. Still trying to understand what happened, he was shocked again when the red Rosalita and purple Esmerelda came out of the dressing room.

They were giants.

Parker peeked into the hallway, now completely lit up, but currently empty. She had no clue where Emily or Ryan had gone, which would make her task all the more difficult.

"OK, no one's around. We need to move." Parker turned, dismayed to see Coppelia was sitting lifeless on the bed. The doll in the blue tutu stared at herself in the mirror, not even a smile on her face. Something was wrong; she had regressed and stopped moving again. "No no no no, you have to stay awake. That's the only way this plan will work." Parker rushed to the bed, leaving the door wide open, and shook her beautiful companion. The doll's eyes fluttered open.

"What happened?" Coppelia asked.

"You fell asleep. C'mon, we need to get your friends." Parker pulled Coppelia onto her pointe shoes and led her out of the room, without looking first, and she ran right into a distraught Esmeralda.

"Oh, Swanhilda!" She cried, "we've found you again!" She jumped up and wrapped herself around Parker, and the two tumbled over. Esmeralda continued to giggle. "Oh, what great fun we will have now that you are here to stay!"

While Parker dealt with Esmeralda, Coppelia fell backward, returning to a sitting pose on the floor, her arms up, as if holding a book.

Parker pushed the wooden doll off of her, "We're not staying, Esmeralda."

The purple gypsy doll stared at the pink ballerina with a tilted head and questioning eyes. "But . . . you can't leave. You're the only one who can bring Coppelia to life. And I really want to play!"

"I'm sorry," Parker said, "But we have to leave."

Esmeralda started to back away, shaking her head. "We? You mean . . . you can't leave with Coppelia! How could you do that to our owner!"

The ballerina started to hear the rhythmic marching of tin soldiers.

"Esmeralda, please," Parker pleaded, "could you distract the soi--"

"Guards!" The gypsy cried, "Guards, I've found Swanhilda and Coppelia!"

Parker grabbed Coppelia, but the soldier steps were coming from everywhere now, and coming closer.

---

Ryan quickly ducked and hid behind a green cotton ball tree. Esmeralda had run from the room, trying to look for him, while Rosalita inspected the playroom. She flicked on the lights, banishing the night's shadows. Ryan was blinded for a moment, and when he regained his composure, realized he was standing next to a giant pink dollhouse.

Even behind the tree, he felt exposed. Doubly so because he was in Peter Pan tights and not his normal clothes. Ryan double checked to make sure the flamenco wasn't watching, and darted around the back of the house, which had no wall, revealing the house for the playset it was. From his size, everything was normal, even though it was all fake. He climbed inside and walked around, hunched just in case someone took a more careful look.

He went into the living room and nearly jumped through the roof when he stumbled upon a doll. She wasn't like any doll Ryan had yet seen. Rather than the common wood or cloth build, this doll was made of metal. Her arms and legs were covered in a shiny tight fitting suit that was a rich copper color. She had a corset and short tutu, both fitting the copper theme, and clunky boots. Her hair had been molded into a bob cut. Her face was dead of emotion, and her legs scissored outward at sharp angles.

Ryan noticed a round button, right above where her belly button would be. He pressed it, and the doll turned to Ryan with sudden, stuttering movements, and brought her hand up to his cheek. A bell chimed from inside her.

"Push . . . it. . . again. . ." She said.

Ryan did as he was told, and all at once, the doll inhaled deeply. She stretched out on her toes, bringing her molded hands almost to the ceiling.

"Thank you, new friend." She pecked him on the cheek, then ran off with scuffling clog steps. Ryan followed right behind her, hoping she didn't alarm anyone outside. They made it to the dining room, which was adjacent to the full sized wall and next to a battery recharger. She picked up a AAA battery and handed it to Ryan.

"Would you help me?"

"Are these for you?" He asked.

"God no. These are for my boyfriend."

---

"Look, this is all just a misunderstanding," Jewel said, her light stuffed body being carried by the blue soldierette. Calliope followed the red soldier with a glum step, not opening her mouth. "I'm not a toy. Well, not really."

"You're made of cloth, ma'am." The soldierette replied calmly.

"See . . . well . . . I'm not sure how that happened." Jewel put her hand up in front of the soldierette's face. "Just watch. My hand will turn into normal flesh. . . soon. . . anytime now. . . well, maybe not now." The

group of toys reached the string that Calliope had once been strung to, and the tin soldiers tied both jesters to thick black cords.

"There has to be a wa . . ."

"Be quiet." The soldierette told Jewel, and the cloth doll shut her mouth. Calliope sat on top of an alphabet block, her sad body betraying her happy costume. *Why was she sad*, Jewel wondered. The red jester tried to stand up next to her friend, but her cloth knees wobbled and buckled. She fell gracelessly into Calliope's lap. Why had she been arguing before? The doll honestly couldn't recall. It was so hard to move, to think. To be anything but a toy on a string.

"It wasn't supposed to happen like this, Jewel. I'm so sorry." Calliope said, pulling her younger, softer sister into her body.

"Why?" Jewel whispered excitedly, reaching her mitten hand to play with her owner's wooden nose. "I'm perfectly happy just the way I am."

Calliope smiled and kissed the red jester's hand. "Because my owner is preparing a special ink, and he'll use it to mark his name on you. Then he'll be your owner, and you'll be a toy forever."

Jewel pulled herself up, sitting cross-legged across from her twin. "You say that like it's a bad thing." Calliope sighed and brushed her hands through Jewel's yarn hair.

"That's the problem, Emily." She said, for the first time using Jewel's human name, "We were playing, and when the night was over, you were supposed to go back to who you were. Do you even remember your real life?"

"Why would I want to? That's all . . . blah! But now I'm a toy! I get to have fun and wear costumes and play all day!"

"Emily, this isn't you talking; it's the spell." For the first time a hurtful frown crossed Jewel's face. "You're a person, not a doll, Emily."

Jewel shook her head slowly, her frown deepening. "But . . . I want to be a doll."

Soft slippers fell next to the jesters, and they looked together to see the old man. "Ohh, trust me, you are a doll, dear Jewel." He cooed in an old, but fatherly, voice. He pulled her up with a strong pair of weathered hands, and unhooked her from the string tied to her back. "You are my beautiful, silly doll, and I have a very dear present for you." He led her away to the big red chair where no doll was allowed to sit. A vial of ink and quill pen sat on a round table next to it.

Calliope buried her head into her knees, unable to watch. It wasn't supposed to happen like this.

## Chapter 6

"Your boyfriend?" Ryan asked the clockwork girl, feeling entirely clever about himself. "Don't you mean boy toy?"

"No, I meant what I said," she replied, her voice echoing with a slight metallic sound. They started up the dollhouse's balsa wood stairs, batteries held in their arms like kindling.

"So, what's your name? And what's the story with this house?"

"I'm Clockwork. Not very original, but I've forgotten my old one. And the house you're in is where the bad toys go when they try to escape. Lemme guess: you jumped out a window?"

"Yeah," Ryand said, distracted by her copper legs.

They got to the second floor landing and Ryan followed Clockwork to a bedroom in a corner room, the only one fully decorated. Dressed in a strong navy blue, it was clearly the room for the boy dolls. There was a large bed in the center of the room, upon which a strong looking superhero action figure laid, one leg stuck in the air, as motionless as Clockwork before Ryan activated her.

The doll put the battery down and seductively slid onto the figure, swinging her lower legs up into the air. She played with the lion symbol across his chest, and then kissed the plastic toy's neck. "Hey, sweetheart. I brought some sweet, sweet electrical juice for you, so we can play again." Clockwork got up and started to flip her boyfriend around. After a few, less than impressive tries, she turned to Ryan, "A little help?"

Together, the two easily flipped Lionheart so that they could see his back and the hollowed out battery compartment. They quickly replaced the action figures' batteries.

Clockwork's hand played its way up to a small button on the action figure's neck. When she pressed it, his eyes flashed and a speaker roared. Ryan ducked nervously, but didn't hear any giant's steps coming his way. The superhero pulled himself up, then pulled Clockwork into a great hug, her feet dangling off the floor.

"You're the best, honey. I knew you could do it." He kissed the bronze doll on the lips for a long minute and then put the copper toy back down.

"I had help." She motioned to Ryan, "This is Peter Pan. Peter, this is my boyfriend, Lionheart."

"I prefer to think of myself as Robin Hood." Ryan said, looking down at his green tights.

"Keep reaching for the stars." The giant, well muscled toy said, slapping Ryan's shoulder, almost sending him out the open back of the dollhouse.

"OK. I have to ask: is there any way out of this place?"

"The thing is, the only door out of this place is locked on the other side. You would have to get some toy out there to unlock the door."

"And none of those dolls are stupid enough to let us out." Clockwork said, with an odd look of pride about that fact. Ryan looked down glumly before looking out the window. Across the way, in an out of the way corner, he saw Rosalita.

---

Jewel sat happily, as her owner gently took her leg and held up his quill. He touched the pen on the back of her leg, a few inches below her knee. And then he wrote, the black ink turning to black thread along

Jewel's cloth skin. And she was perfectly happy, thinking to herself of being played with, thinking of an owner pulling her strings to send her wild body in whatever direction they wanted, and she giggled.

Curiously, her mind wafted back to the first time she met Parker, at six years old. The other girl had been hiding behind a tree, watching everyone in the playground from a safe distance. Jewel knew she was supposed to run over to the trees and make a new friend, but her owner wouldn't let her. Instead, Parker and the grove of trees washed away in a black ink.

Then Jewel sat in front of a cake, lungs full of air. Her family and Parker waited with baited breath for Jewel to blow the candles out. But her owner wouldn't let her, and the party, too, was washed away by slimy black ink.

She sat on the swing on her front porch. The rain drenched her clothes, and wind ran through her hair. But Jewel smiled despite the storm as she looked into her boyfriend's eyes. They were supposed to kiss. But the rain turned to ink and washed him away.

Memory after memory went away, her whole life before this house lost to an ocean of ink, leaving only her beautiful night with Calliope. Her owner finished his task and let go of Jewel. She smiled at him, but wanted not to. He smiled back, but not as honestly as before.

"May I play?" Jewel asked, hoping for some temporary joy.

"No. Not tonight, my toy, for there are many things more important in this house than you." He motioned with his hand and Jewel's strings were cut. She fell limp to the floor, not even able to see her friend Calliope. But this is what she had wanted, right?

Ryan ran out to a balcony that overlooked the playroom and began jumping, flailing his tiny arms toward the beautiful red Rosalita. She stood in the corner, perfectly still, her leg once again teasing the slit in her dress. She didn't look very happy, until Ryan caught her attention. She glanced around, but all the other toys were uncaring, and Esmeralda had vanished.

Rosalita ran over to the dollhouse all too quickly, and bent down to look at Ryan. Her face was larger than his entire body, and he backed away. Clockwork and Lionheart were deeper in the house, but watched this meeting with baited breath.

"Oh, I see you've been a naughty doll, Peter. It looks like you tried to escape." Rosalita said, her voice quiet and wary of attracting too much attention from soldierettes. She tried to poke Ryan with a wooden finger, but he backed away.

"Well, I didn't really like being turned into a toy. And I'd rather be Robin Hood."

Rosalita giggled, "Toys don't get to choose who they will be."

"Anyway, um, is there any way you could get me out of here and big again?"

"Now why would I want that? You're a perfect little doll right now." Every time the giant toy called him a doll, Ryan felt just a bit more feminine. He didn't know if that was his imagination, or actual magic.

"I'll be your toy, and I promise never to play with Esmeralda again."

Rosalita gasped. "Find the closet underneath the stairs. That's the door out. I'll go unlock it." The dancer quickly ran out of the room.

Ryan ran back into the house and found the two other toys. "She's going to do it." He said. Clockwork looked at him and immediately burst into laughter. Lionheart was a bit more noble, but his mouth twitched with a smile.

“What’s so funny?” Ryan asked.

“Turn around,” Clockwork said, taking him by the shoulders and twisting him to face a dresser mirror. Unfortunately, the green toy looking back was a girl. Curly blonde hair fell from beneath her cap, and she had a decent bust for a toy her size, as well as well defined hips. Her shirt and shorts had combined into a tunic and belt, and her green tights sparkled. She had even grown a set of translucent wings.

“I don’t get it.” She said, crossing her arms across her breasts, trying to hide them a little. “How did this happen?”

The tin doll waved her hand. “It happens to many of the boys who get transformed.”

“You have to be a real man to be a boy-toy.” Lionheart said, puffing his own chest out. Clockwork grinned and slid her arm up her boyfriend’s plastic body, the rest of her body following. She wrapped herself around him and buried her face into his. She sighed in relief, until the button on her stomach thunked and activated.

“Oh no,” she said, her arms suddenly and mechanically thrown over her head. She jumped and started to dance uncontrollably. It was Tinkerbell’s turn to laugh.

---

The old doctor stepped over Jewel’s cloth leg and surveyed his playroom. It had never been lit up like it was right now. Not just the lights all around illuminating the room, but all the dolls looked at him with brighter eyes. They waited and yearned for the beautiful Coppelia to return and bring with her the doll who could bring her to life.

But the room was in a slight bit of disrepair. There was dust on the furniture and the mantle. The blinds were mostly closed and hung limp with little beauty, save the lone shade by Coppelia's window. Even his pretty toys had lost their luster in the years since they became perfect.

So Doctor Coppelius reached down to his chairside table and rang a small silver bell. At once, a brilliant porcelain maid stepped up to him, feather duster in hand.

"I need you to start cleaning this place as quickly as possible. It must look like a palace for when Coppelia arrives."

"Of course, owner." Aimee curtsied politely and was away, her delicate little body sweeping the dust away. The doctor then began to go to each of his pretty toys and give them a simple task to clean. He told his sweet Penny Cottontail to sweep, and she happily hopped off to find a broom. He opened the glass case that surrounded the porcelain Victoria and told her to open all the windows so the night air could sweeten the room. She gingerly curtsied and went on her way.

He came to his White Queen, draped in a gorgeous roman toga. She sat thoughtfully at a chess table. The stately Black King opposed her, at ease in his throne. Copellius told these star crossed lovers to find and set his tea table. They nodded and walked away, lightly holding hands. Then he came to his sweet clown Calliope. She was bound up tightly in a ball, the one toy in the room not happy on this special night.

"Sweet doll, why are you sad?" the doctor lightly lifted his doll's chin.

"You took Emily away. She was my present for being such a good toy, and now she is gone."

"Who is Emily, dear?"

Calliope pointed with a shaking hand to the jester lying limp on the floor.

"Why, that is Jewel, your long lost sister. Do you not remember her? Do you not remember all the games you played? All the plays you made?" The jester shook her head, and the little bells on her ears jingled.

"Then remember them." Calliope blinked and her frown vanished as if it had never crossed her face. Her eyes twinkled once again when she looked at her owner.

"Oh, you found my sister!" Calliope cried, wrapping herself around her owner.

"Yes I did," the doctor said with a laugh.

"And Coppelia has come to life!"

"Yes she did!"

"What must I do for you?" The marionette touched noses with her wizened puppeteer.

"Get your sister and prepare the best play you have ever made."

With practiced ease, Calliope slipped her rope and ran to her sister. Doctor Coppelius stood up on creaking knees. He paused for a moment and caught his breath and calmed his heart that was beating too fast. All his dolls were at work, all but for the quarreling Esmerelda and Rosalita. He wondered what they were up to.

## Chapter 7

Esmeralda smiled with childlike wonder at Parker, dressed in her pink tutu. The guards were coming fast, and Parker tried to close and bolt the door. Her plan was foiled by Esmerelda's small wooden foot in the way. With little choice or hope, Parker grabbed the gypsy and pulled her inside. She slammed the door shut and used her body to bar the door. Soldiers pounded against the wood, but Parker could withstand their blows for the time being.

Esmeralda propped herself up on the floor, smiling coyly toward Parker. "How long do you think you will last against toy soldiers? You're practically a toy yourself."

"I am not." She shuddered against the charging toys.

"Why, look at the joints in your elbow. Look at your perfectly white skin. Look at your bright cheeks. You're a doll faster than almost any other toy in that room. Aside from myself, obviously."

"We will shoot!" The soldiers said from the other side.

"Uh, oh. You're in trouble now." Esmeralda laughed gleefully, and then looked up longingly at Coppelia. "Once we're all back in the playroom . . ." her voice trailed off.

The soldiers pounded the door once again. The gypsy took a closer look at the blue ballerina toy. Parker grabbed the door handle.

Esmerelda's jaw dropped and turned back to the ballerina, "You're . . ."

With no choice, Parker threw open the door. Three pop gun bangs sounded. Coppelia didn't flinch as a pellet hit her. A second pellet struck Esmerelda, and the gears inside her body locked into place, leaving her eyes wide and jaw open. The last pellet hit Parker, who fell to the ground as if she was just another doll.

---

Clockwork whimpered, but nonetheless continued to dance. She was surprisingly agile in her oversized boots and mechanical movements. The steam driven doll tried to fight off her brilliant tin smile, but to no luck. Tinkerbelle felt for the toy and the way she was locked inside a body she didn't control. But she still laughed, shaking glittering dust off her body. The slippers on her feet grew pom poms as her transformation was still ongoing.

Lionheart didn't smile, but ducked beneath a tin arm just in time to kiss Clockwork for an extra long beat of time. Clockwork stopped fighting her smile and continued her dance. The large superhero reached next to the dresser and pulled out a red gun half the size of Tinkerbelle.

"That doll is going to be at the door soon; we need to move, hot legs," the superhero said, slapping Tinkerbelle's ass on his way from the room.

The fairy jumped at his giant hand in places it shouldn't be. "You two have relaxed rules about touching, don't you?" She said as they went down the stairs, Lionheart trodding down in front, Tinkerbelle skipping behind. They reached the landing just as the doorknob started to turn. Tinkerbelle skipped ahead while Lionheart stayed just a touch out of sight.

The door opened to reveal the ravishing Rosalita.

"Oh, Peter!" She paused at Tinkerbelle's wings and breasts. "Oh, what happened to you?"

"I had a teensey change." The fairy giggled, forgetting herself. Rosalita cooed and started to come inside, but stopped herself suddenly. "You haven't seen a mean tin girl and a scary superhero, have you?"

"I saw them," she laughed, "but they couldn't move!"

"Oh, good." The dancer said, stepping inside.

"Well, until I turned them on." Tinkerbell said cheekily. The flamenco dancer didn't have time to look surprised before Lionheart's gun lit up and roared. The key in her back stopped turning and she froze.

The superhero clodded up to the frozen dancer while Tinkerbell rubbed her head. "I'm so lightheaded." She laughed, "And I can't stop acting like a pixie!"

"That's the spells working on you, working to transform you. It's fun for a bit, until you remember that you're a person."

"Oh." Tinkerbell didn't care what he had to say, preferring instead to skip around Rosalita and pretend to fly like a real fairy. The big key came from the toy's back and she grabbed it, pulling with all her pixie might. The key slid out and Tinkerbell went falling backwards through the door. She landed on her butt in the real living room, sending fairydust everywhere. On the other side of the door, she had become properly human sized once again, though perhaps a bit shorter than she had been when she was still Ryan and not Tinkerbell.

"Good thinking, Tink." Lionheart picked up the flamenco and set her down in a darkened corner of the dollhouse where she couldn't be seen by glass or human eyes.

BANG! The house shuddered. The pixie looked upstairs toward the source of the noise. BANG! Again the walls shook. Being curious, the fairy jumped up on her green slippers and started to skip to the big staircase. A third BANG!, the loudest she had heard, slowed her down, and she crept closer to the landing. Tinkerbell realized that tiny bells chimed inside her body every time she moved. A tin hand grabbed Tinkerbell's arm just as she peaked around the staircase.

Clockwork pulled the slightly shrunken pixie back. "Not that way, little bug."

"Oh! I'm so happy to see you again. We can play games together now."

Clockwork replied with a pinch on the pixie's arm.

"OW!" Tinkerbell said, a cry muffled by a timely BANG! upstairs. The fairy frowned at her even more girlish body. "Oh, come on!" Her voice was light and sweet, but at least she was acting normally again. For now. "How'd you get here so fast?" She asked.

The steam girl shrugged. "The dance didn't last too long. I'm just glad I didn't fall out of the house or something."

Lionheart closed the closet door and joined the pair. "I missed you." Lionheart said, embracing his steam powered girl. He was careful not to trigger her button a second time.

"Enough with the chit-chat." Tinkerbell crossed her arms. "I'd like to stop being a girl fairy doll."

---

Calliope slid into Jewel's soft body and stared into her sister's plastic eyes. "Hey! Owner needs us to get to playin."

"We're the best at playing, aren't we?"

"Yup. Now, c'mon." Calliope didn't wait for her sister to get her doll legs beneath her, just grabbing a soft wrist and pulling her across the room to the closet of wondrous costumes. Jewel was content to be dragged away, just another rag toy.

The room they left was filled by the bustle of a dozen toys. But the costume room was quiet, and the jesters sat down in the center of the room, as always facing each other.

“So, what kinda play are we going to make? I don’t care, really, but I would like to wear a pretty costume.”

“You’re already wearing a pretty costume, Emily.” Calliope was sad and quiet, which made her sister doll very confused.

“Who’s Emily?”

Calliope bopped the jester on her small nose. “You’re Emily. But, it’s a secret. You can’t tell a soul, not even our owner.”

Jewel’s mouth opened wide. “Oh, I have a secret identity! What is my other self like?”

“I only know the important things. Like, Emily loves Parker more than any other person in the world. She loves Parker even more than you love me. Parker says she’s very responsible, but I think Emily likes to cause more mischief than her friend realizes. Emily is also curious about pretty things like me.”

“I can be curious. Like a cat. Oh, I could be a kitty for the play!” Jewel stumbled to one of the racks of costumes, while Calliope sighed and went to the corner of the closet where the props for the toys were kept. Perhaps she could still save Emily.

---

Parker stared at the roof while two soldierettes in short skirts and thick white tights and a soldier in a red jacket and sharp white pants stood over her. The ballerina’s right leg stabbed into the air, not responding to her commands. The soldiers bent down, each grabbing Parker, and heaved her into the air. They took her unmoving body down the hall and back into the playroom.

The room was entirely different now that it was lit up. The soldiers lowered her again and straightened her leg, which clicked with noises as it moved into place. They squared her shoulders and put her arms down along her body. The ballerina stood at rigid attention when the old doctor walked into view.

He had been worrying over the frozen Esmerelda with a peasant rag doll with flowers along her skirt and a bunny girl with a top hat and tuxedo. “Oh, blast.” He said, “She won’t start up without her key.” He stamped his foot a few times before his gaze turned to Parker. “Oh, my beautiful Swanhilda!” He came forward with his arms and smile wide. “I am so happy to see you.” He laughed a little as he came closer. “But why are you standing like a soldier? You should stand as a ballerina.”

Parker’s body betrayed her, her arms moving up and over her head, one clicking step at a time. Her heels clicked together and toes pointed out in first position. She tried to struggle against her own body, but whatever wheels turned inside her didn’t let her move. But her eyes widened in fright.

“So perfect.” He said, admiring his lithe toy. “Come, Mary found this for you. I have longed to display a doll here for ages, but have yet to do so.” Parker stepped en pointe and followed the old man – her owner – to a large display box with pretty gold trimming. The lid was open to reveal a shining mirror on the back and a turntable inside. She hopped up onto her place. Her owner breathed in deeply.

“You are mine now, sweet Swanhilda, now and forever.”

## Chapter 8

Tinkerbelle, Clockwork, and Lionheart waited at the bottom of the staircase for the march of tin feet to stop.

“Where are we going?” The pixie whispered. The cool night air blew across her legs and sent little shivers through her short body. She liked the sensation, as it kept her mind from falling back into the spell’s trap.

“There’s a closet in Dr. Coppelius’ room that has all the magic artifacts he uses to transform people into dolls and control his toys. We’re going to bust them all up.”

Tinkerbelle gripped Lionheart’s arm. “Wait, could that make us stuck like this? I like my body and all, but I’d rather be looking at it than being in it.”

“It’s a possibility,” Clockwork said. She took careful steps and started to go up the stairs. “But if we do it right, it won’t be a problem.”

“Hang on, babe.” Lionheart took a giant step to the front and crouched, his gun glowing. “You girls stay behind me.” The dolls kept a watchful eye, but all of the other toys were cooped inside the playroom, readying to play. The superhero pushed open the door to their owner’s room, scanning the area with his gun before stepping inside. They let the hall light filter in to see their way to the closet before closing the door again.

Tinkerbelle thoughtfully turned on a bedside lamp that cast a touch of light while Clockwork slid open the closet doors. The closet wasn't big at all, only large enough to fit a dresser and small table, both of which were covered by a dozen magic talismans in total.

"So pretty. Can I play with them?" Tinkerbelle cooed, bouncing on her toes.

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Calliope sorted through the racks of clothes, but her thoughts kept going back to the red headed girl who came into the room earlier tonight; the red headed girl whose curiosity drove her to play with the jester toy. Whose playfulness let that same jester dress her up.

Now her fellow jester was busy digging through the opposite rack of clothes. There was something missing about her. She was too simple. Calliope had seen all the little aspects of Emily that made her who she was, and Jewel lacked most of them. She just wanted to play and didn't have the inquisitiveness or the responsibility of Emily. Jewel could only play pretend, and Calliope wanted a doll with a real personality.

The other toy waved her pretty cloth fingers at Calliope. "I can't take my costume off." She pulled at her pointed collar and her skin was pulled with it. "I can't be a curious kitty."

Calliope was about to reply when the door burst open. Mary came tumbling into the room, rag legs over raghead. But her tumbling body couldn't be stopped and she jumped up. "You must come quickly! They found Coppelia! And Swanhilda!" She didn't wait for a reply and rushed back out of the room. The jesters looked at each other excitedly, Jewel more so.

"What shall we do for the play, though?" The red jester asked.

Calliope smiled. "I have an idea." She ran to the back and pushed a big box to the center of the room. It was brightly colored and had a big handle on the side.

"Oooh, what's that?" Jewel asked.

"Do you know what a Jack in the Box is?" Calliope replied, lifting the lid on the box. "You'll be Jack."

Jewel smiled and skipped to the box, and her jester twin helped her inside. "First, I put the toy inside the box." She closed the lid on her smiling partner. "Then, I get Emily to come back out." Calliope wiped a strand of cloth hair from her face. "Somehow."

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Parker closed her eyes and tried not to think about her owner's creepy stare. Her owner; the words popped into her mind as if they had always been there. She realized that she had long stopped thinking of herself as a person and started thinking of herself as a doll. That revelation broke through the spells woven into her body and her doll body wobbled. She started to fall to the ground, but an old body caught her.

Swanhilda opened her eyes and met her owner's deep blue gaze. His smile was so soft and comforting. He brushed a hand across his doll's pale wooden skin and started to put her back on her display.

"Please, give me a moment." The doll said, softly holding onto her owner's hand.

"A moment for what?"

Swanhilda glanced at Coppelia, now sitting once again at her window. "A moment before you turn me into a toy. I need to tell you something."

Her owner shook his head and began to pose his doll.

"Please. I will be your perfect toy forever. Could you give me this one last minute? Please?" After a second's deliberation, Swanhilda's owner let her go.

"What do you need to say?" His toy sighed and sat down on her sweet music box pedestal, her knees knocked together and feet awkwardly pointed inwards. Her hands fell together and made a wooden clack, telling her and everyone else she was nearly a full doll. "Why can't I be real?" She asked.

"Eh?"

"I wanted friends. I wanted hobbies, and I wanted a life. But you - your spells wouldn't let me. They made me your perfect little girl."

"I don't understand? I never put a . . . Nevermind, that's enough out of you, Swanhilda." The old doctor motioned for his toy to stand up, but the toy didn't move.

"I'm not Swanhilda. And I'm not Parker, either, Dad." The pink dressed doll stood up and looked the doctor in his eye. "How can you not see? I know we look alike, but I would hope you could recognize your own daughter."

The old man was taken aback for a moment. His dear Coppelia was still at the window, but standing now, her hands resting nervously on her tutu. Her eyes kept darting between Swanhilda and him. He noticed her nose was smaller and chin more square. Her hair, too, carried a bit of red in it. The old man's eyes softened and he brushed his hand across his daughter's cheek. "C - Coppelia?"

The doll struck his hand away. "My name is Sarah."

It took a moment of utter stillness before the old doctor reacted. His face contorted to rage and he grabbed his sweet doll by her hair.

## Chapter 9

Tinkerbelle was feeling woozy and lightheaded again. She stood behind Clockwork and Lionheart, wobbling around on girly legs. She giggled. "Being a fairy is fun." Her wings suddenly started flapping rapidly.

"We're losing her again." The large toy said, but he kept looking over the magic talismans.

"I'll take care of it, honey." Clockwork said, turning around to the pixie, surprised that the toy had shrunk almost a foot in the past minutes. She was propped on her tippy toes, and glitter fell from her body as she moved. The pixie watched her body, fascinated by its plastic form. The tin doll bent down and put her hands between her knees. "Tinkerbelle, dear, what's the matter?"

"I'm a toy." She shook her hand rapidly, wondering if it was her real hand. "Do I have an owner?"

"Oh. You've reached that stage. You're really taking to this doll thing, aren't you?"

The pixie shook her head, "What do you mean?"

Clockwork walked to the bed and sat down on its edge. "Come here." The pixie skipped over and flopped beside her. "The mind control spells work through several stages. First, you become enchanted with this place and the costumes and toys. Then, you want to be one of those pretty toys. You get this desire to be played with and owned. And when you are played with . . ." Clockwork's lips twitched, ". . . it's the greatest feeling in the world. You come back time after time and ask . . . beg, really, to be played with. And then you lose yourself to the doll."

“If you’re unlucky, you forget ever being a person and you play and have fun every day. If you’re lucky, though, someone will come to rescue you.” Lionheart smiled softly to his tin toy. “If that happens, you fight against the spells put on you and wish day after day that you were human again.”

“Well that doesn’t sound lucky at all. That sounds just the opposite.” Tinkerbelle put her hand on Clockwork’s shoulder.

“It’s both.” She admitted. “Look, just stay right here. Play freeze, and don’t move at all. Can you do that?”

The pixie nodded, and the tin doll walked back to the dresser and talismans. “What have you figured out?” The superhero shook his head.

“Nothing. We really need the old man to show us how this stuff works.”

“Yeah, like that’s ever going to happen.” Clockwork took a closer look at the talismans and their arrangement. Each talisman was a small object of some kind. One was a dollhouse door; another was a blue ragdoll dress, and yet another was a green toy soldier. About a dozen, they were laid out along the lines of a pentagram, and each was surrounded by a small metal bracelet. Small runes were inscribed onto the dresser on the inner edge of each of these bracelets.

Most of these runes were dark and dormant, but the runes for the center talisman glowed. This talisman was a pink ballerina statue, which sat on top of a faded Polaroid picture.

“Coppelia.” Lionheart whispered, and Clockwork nodded. “What does it mean, though?”

“The old man once said that magic is born by strong emotions. Hate, anger, lust, love. The stronger the emotion the more powerful the spell.” Clockwork entwined her hand with his as she talked, “This house and everything in it – us, the dolls, and the house – is for Coppelia.”

Lionheart pointed to the statue. “Coppelia at the center.” He motioned to the closest talismans to her – a brush, a dress, and a stuffed heart – “the dolls for her to play with.” Beyond those, he pointed to talismans

farthest from the center – a door, a soldier, a key, a marionette handle, a vial of ink, a plastic missile, a battery, and a small dresser.

“Things to control the dolls.” Clockwork said. She sighed a metallic sigh. “Maybe if we start with the outer ring we could break up all the security measures. I have a feeling those are going to be more trouble.”

“Oh, hey, Mr. Bear, how are you?” Tinkerbell said from behind them. Clockwork and Lionheart spun. There, in the gloom of the bedroom, a stuffed bear twice as wide and taller than either of them loomed from the shadows, menacing despite its soft, rounded ears and stitched smile. His head scraped against the ceiling, and even though he was made of stuffing he was large enough to easily handle the tin toy and her plastic boyfriend.

“Oh, Crap,” Lionheart said.

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Calliope was horrified. Everyone was horrified as they watched their kind and gentle owner grab Coppelia’s hair. She had switched dresses with Parker and was dressed in pink and silver. Why she had switched Calliope didn’t know. Perhaps it was to be part of a plan that broke apart too quickly. Or perhaps this was the plan. She didn’t know – she only knew that the wizened old man had taken his hand in violence against his most beloved toy and only surviving family. And that frightened her stiff.

Parker stood by the window, a near perfect imitation of Coppelia in her blue dress. She was surprised, too, as her legs tensed. And then on pointe slippers she ran toward the scene at the heart of the room. The guards by the door raised their muskets toward the charging doll. For the first time in years, Calliope felt the lub and dub of a heart in her chest. The room slowed down.

The jester doll bent down and gripped the edges of the alphabet block in front of her. “Stay down!” She yelled to her beautiful friend inside. With all her might Calliope started to push the box on its wheels. It glided across the floor easily. Parker got out of the way just in time and the jester let go of the block, sending it careening into the male soldier and knocking him over.

Calliope slid across the floor. The female soldier pointed her musket toward her, and the toy gun popped. Calliope lost control of her wooden body and she collapsed. The lubs and the dubs in her chest stopped.

Parker – the real Parker – came running to Coppelia’s aid. The toy wasn’t fighting with her father who shook her like the doll she was. Seven years of ballet training and fitness counted for something as Parker lowered her shoulder into the old man. Her body, though light, carried a surprising amount of muscle. The old man was caught off guard and both were sent sprawling across the floor.

The younger Parker was quicker to her feet and ran back to Coppelia. She wasn’t worse for the wear – only her hair roughed up and out of place. She looked for places to run, but five severe looking soldiers and soldierettes advanced on her, guns drawn. She stayed on the ground next to Coppelia. Emily stood inside an alphabet block in a clown costume. She kept looking between Parker and the pink jester doll that was now lying pale on the floor.

“Run,” Parker said to her. Emily shook her head. “Please,” Parker said. Emily shook her head again. She wasn’t leaving her friends behind.

“You.” He growled at Parker. “You put these thoughts in my daughter’s head. You turned her against me. You could have been a pretty, perfect doll to laugh and dance up here for all eternity.” He pointed a finger at Parker, “but now you’re going to spend the rest of your very long life at the pit of a landfill.”

“Maybe.” Parker said, “but so will you.”

“Eh?” The man said, then Parker pointed to his sinister hand that had taken hold of Coppelia. He recoiled and he made a terrible sound from his wrinkled mouth. His hand was made of rotting wood. He pulled up the sleeve of his nightgown, revealing his entire arm made in the same fashion, from wood cracked and blackened. It was a spell he had long ago cast. A spell cast, and long ago forgotten about, to protect his dolls.

He stumbled back and kept his arm as far from his body as he could. The old man started running for the door, but Emily stood in his way, a stern look on her painted face and musket in her hand.

“I don’t have time for you, toy!” He shouted. “Guards, shoot her!” He stepped out of the way and five toy guns trained on Emily. And then, as if by some divine timing, the toy soldiers started to shake, rocking back and forth on their feet, and they were getting smaller by the second. Their hats stayed the same size, strangely, and they were soon covered up by the tall black shako hats. Or at least four of them were.

The fifth one, one of the blue jacketed soldierettes with a taller plume on her hat and more medals on her breast stayed the same height, but her wooden skin melted away. She dropped the gun and ripped the hat from her head, hurtling it across the room. She then fell to the ground and crawled backwards until she hit the far wall. Her frightened eyes never took their gaze from the hat she used to wear.

“Oh, crap.” The old man said.

## Chapter 10

Clockwork turned back to the dresser, but was dumbfounded at what to do. What on that table could possibly have brought that damn bear to life? “Can you keep him away from me for a minute?” She realized though that was silly to ask. Lionheart’s gun flashed to life, and then flashed again. But the bear wasn’t fazed. The action figure tossed the gun and rushed toward the giant teddy. The speaker in his plastic roared. His impact against the stuffed bear caught it off guard and it stumbled back.

Tinkerbelle shook out of her stupor and jumped on an arm as large as her doll body. The bear moved back a few feet. “I am the king of the Jungle!” Lionheart’s speaker said. He pushed again, all parts of his plastic body moving together. But the bear didn’t give an inch this time.

Clockwork furiously searched around the pentagram for something – anything – that might represent the bear. She kept flicking to the plush heart near the center, but that didn’t feel right.

“The dresser!” Lionheart cried. “He wants to get to the dresser!”

The bear shoved the white toy backwards almost to Clockwork’s clunky feet.

Her mechanical eyes found the small dresser talisman on the ring of the pentagram. The runes and bracelet were glowing hot now.

Tinkerbelle jumped on the beast’s plush back and put her hands over its eyes. “Can’t see! Can’t see!” She cried, giggling. That didn’t stop the bear from taking large steps on small legs toward the dresser. But it was too

late; Clockwork grabbed the dresser talisman and threw it across the room. The glowing runes started to dim. Lionheart got back up and shoved the bear back again, and this time the great plush teddy toppled over.

The room was silent for a moment until Tinkerbelle started crawling from beneath the giant bear. "Ow." She murmured. Lionheart, protector of all things, lifted the bear's great head and helped the four foot tall fairy escape. "That was fun!"

Crashing sounds came from the other room. "Something's happening," Clockwork said. The talismans on the table continued to glow. "Babe, should I keep the guns working or not?" The ring around the plastic missile was glowing, as was the ring around the green army man.

Lionheart roared, "I don't need no gun." Clockwork nodded and tossed the missile and toy soldier from their setting. Both rings cooled and became dormant.

"That's all I'm doing for right now. I don't know what's going to happen with the others and I don't want to screw something up."

"Good plan," the action figure said, "I think there are some dolls in there that need rescuing."

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Emily was stock still, using her body and the alphabet block to keep her former owner in the playroom. She glanced down at Calliope, hoping beyond measure that something hadn't gone very wrong. She could feel the magic in the room; so much was happening and would continue to happen and spells old and new coursed through the room like the roiling ocean. The dolls in the room started crowding around Parker and Coppelia, who were both standing.

"Jewel, let me go. Something very dangerous is happening right now and I want to put everything right." The old man said.

Something in the tone of his voice broke through Emily's mental armor. She looked at Calliope and a tear broke free of her eye. "Put her right first." She pointed to the fallen jester.

He dismissed the demand with a wave. "She's a toy, a plaything, just like you, and my bullets can't kill."

"And you have a wooden arm." Emily spat through gritted teeth. "Something isn't right, so fix her."

Parker ran past the old, beaten man and came to Emily's side.

The old man did as he was told and knelt down to Calliope. He touched her pale face, expecting to feel wood but instead feeling skin, though her hand and arm were still wooden. His mind reeled; he started to think. Did she wear white makeup, or not? This was a possibility he never considered.

A pair of golden pointe shoes stepped into view and Coppelia – his daughter Sarah – knelt down on the other side of the doll.

"There is still time, I think, for her to be fixed." The old man looked from the pale jester at his knees to his beautiful daughter across from him to his cracked wooden arm. He gingerly flexed a finger and his joints cracked and snapped.

"I never wanted – I never meant any harm." He brought his wooden hand over Calliope's body and thought about how he could possibly help her. The answer came to him. He placed his good hand on Calliope's heart. He had been in a similar situation a long time ago when he looked down on a perfect ballerina with sadness and love. She hadn't been dying then, but he feared he would lose her just the same.

Truthfully, he didn't know if he could muster those same emotions or channel those same powers into this doll. The old man chanted something beneath his breath; an old spell he remembered syllable by syllable. There was a small light that appeared between his hand and the jester. He watched, mesmerized as the doll's flesh turned to wood and back to flesh again, her body dancing across the line between human and doll.

The battle in his own body was much more one sided; his cracked wooden form continued to grow and overtake his person. But he never wavered his thoughts from saving his broken doll and never took his hand away until her eyes opened and she breathed in deeply.

He saw that and fell back. He knew that it was done. That the inevitable was here. The old man placed his arms across his belly and stared at the ceiling, never shedding a tear. Dolls began to crowd around him. His daughter came to his side and she placed her own hand over his heart.

“I don’t –“ she said, a touch of sadness in her voice, “I don’t know if I can save you.”

Dr. Coppelius patted her hand with his good one. “You don’t have to.” He smiled kindly. “All stories end eventually.” The doctor squeezed his daughter’s hand and closed his eyes.

Quiet descended over the playroom. Every toy and doll stood watching their former owner breathe for the last time. The rotting wood that had overtaken him gave way to a healthier, stronger wood. Even though the old man was gone, the magic he wrought into this place was not.

Emily was still a rag toy, her new friend Calliope laying in her soft lap, and Emily stroking the jester’s hair. Nearby, a trio of dolls stood by the door, a steampunk toy made from tin, a large and muscular action figure and a green fairy with a strangely familiar face. The fairy caught her glance and shifted a little behind the large action figure.

“Ryan?” She asked quietly. The tin toy smirked and pushed the fairy out into the open. Tinker Ryan blushed and crossed her arms over her girlish breasts.

“We, uh,” his voice was sweet and melodic, “really need to find a way to break the spell on this place.” Parker smiled and came to the fairy. She then bent down and kissed her boyfriend on the mouth.

“It’s a shame I won’t be able to play with you a bit.”

The fairy blushed, but said nothing.

The action figure cleared his throat. “We think we’ve deciphered most of the spells that transformed us. Biff, bam, boom, and we’re back to normal. We’ve already taken care of the guns and the soldiers.”

The soldierette who had thrown off her hat looked up from her sulking, “That was you? You were the one who broke the spell?” She stood up quickly and stared at him with her mouth agape.

“Uh, yeah.” Lionheart said. The soldierette jumped up and kissed him deeply, her arms wrapped around his thick neck. Clockwork cleared her throat at that,, causing her partner to quickly, though gently, push the soldierette away.

“I was actually the one who broke the talisman and undid the spell.” Clockwork said, a little smile on her tin face. The soldierette paused for a moment and put out her hand. “What? No kiss for me?”

Parker turned to Clockwork, “Do you think we can break the spell and be normal before sunrise?”

“No problemo. All I did with the other spells was to just break the magic circle around them. Everything happened quickly.”

A voice spoke up behind them. “You may find the central spell to our transformations more difficult to break.” Coppelgia said. “You see, the spell only works one way, by turning humans into toys. Into wood, plastic, or cloth. If you break the spell you would simply stay as you are now, not change back.”

Clockwork’s shoulders slumped, “So how do we . . .? We’re stuck?”

Coppelgia smiled, “I never said that. You see, spells have a limited range of influence. My father always wanted his dolls to stay here, not only to protect us, but also to keep us under his control.”

“Are you saying all we need to do is leave the house and we’re human again?”

“Except if we try to leave we get miniaturized and put into that dollhouse.” The soldierette pointed to the pink house in the back corner of the playroom.

Clockwork bounced, “It’s a good thing we know how to break that spell.” The small group of dolls started to walk to Dr. Coppelius’ room, except for Tinkerbell, who stopped.

“We may want to get Rosalita out of the dollhouse before we break any more spells.” She said.

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Dawn was coming up and over the hill around the pink house and all the dolls were standing on the front porch. They were nervous but excited. Their story was finally coming to a close. Parker and Coppelia had switched clothes once again. Though she, Emily, and Ryan all had their real clothes here, they stayed in costume out of solidarity with the other toys. Well, and that Ryan could no longer fit in his clothes.

It was strange that none of the toys had yet to move away from the house. Perhaps they had more fond memories here than they had thought. Or maybe it was just peer pressure that kept them from moving. Clockwork rolled her eyes and hopped over the railing instead of fighting others to walk down the steps to the immaculate front yard. Lionheart, as always, was right next to her.

Each toy looked at their hands expectantly, but nothing happened. “I think we just need to get further away.” They walked down the gentle slope of the front yard, almost to the sidewalk. Parker could imagine their worry. But they stopped there, and Lionheart flexed his hand, then pulled the yellow glove off with a whoop. Clockwork pulled a tin colored cowl off her head to reveal long cherry blonde hair. She cried with delight and jumped onto her partner. He rubbed his hand over her face and body, feeling her with skin for the first time in years.

The dolls on the porch clapped or cried before walking down the steps or jumping over the railing to join the pair. A few, including Ryan, ran to the edge of the property and watched as their bodies returned to flesh and bone quickly.

A few hesitated. Coppelgia never moved an inch, and Calliope made it just past the steps before stopping, and Emily stopped beside her. Parker stayed on the porch as well, though more so to say goodbye to Coppelgia in private than any desire to be a doll.

“What’s the matter?” Emily asked Calliope.

“It’s just I don’t have much of a life out there. I was . . . never going to do well as a person. For every bad moment I had here I had five good ones. I don’t even have a family to go back to.” The bright, happy jester hung her head.

“You don’t have to leave,” Coppelgia said quickly, watching this nearby, “If you don’t want to. There are plenty of rooms to fill in this house, and I would enjoy the company.”

“You’re staying?” Parker asked, “But, won’t you stay a doll?”

Coppelgia - Sarah - smiled sweetly at Parker, “This is the only house I’ve ever lived in.”

Calliope took a tentative step up the steps. Emily took a step alongside her. “I can be your owner,” The redhead rag toy said.

Calliope smiled brightly, “We can take turns.”

Parker hugged Emily as she came back up the steps, “Don’t think this is going to get you out of being my best friend.” The rag jester laughed.

Parker turned to Sarah and started to say something, but her mind failed her. “Thank you.” She eked out, “For a magical night.”

“Anytime.”

Parker walked down the steps and toward her now male again boyfriend, now dressed as the much more manly Robin Hood.

“Parker,” Sarah said, clearing her throat and talking loud enough for all the dolls to hear, “you can visit anytime.”