



# TWISTED

BY NORSEBARD





It didn't matter to Terri as she always slept underneath the bed to protect herself from the probing eyes of the evil beings that surrounded her on a daily basis - she could hear them everywhere around her. They were always shouting, arguing, crying, screaming or fighting, most often all at once. On the rare occasions where she ventured outside in the daytime, they treated her like garbage.

She also slept down there to stay close to her collection of stuffed, dissected animals. She had hundreds of them - mostly rats of every size, but several squirrels, foxes and even the odd stray cat and dog that she had come across on her endless nocturnal treks through the dark and dangerous mean streets.

Growing up, she had wanted to become a surgeon, but her folks couldn't afford to send her to college. One thing led to another, and she soon found herself on her own, living on the mean streets with all the perils offered by such an existence. After a rough first year, she had learned to hold her own in a fight and was never bothered again. She had killed men to stay alive; she had no qualms about the fate of those who had attacked her.

Her vast collection didn't fit underneath the cast iron bed, so she had created dioramas hanging down from the ceiling; dead rats that seemed to crawl down pieces of rope that she had found here and there. Elsewhere, a fox was quarreling with an alley cat, and a mutt appeared to be sniffing a squirrel's behind.

The humming neon sign hanging just outside the window further violated the tranquility of the room by casting cones of bright blue, red and yellow lights onto the bed and the floor next to it.

Terri Brentford was also bathed by the neon lights. She stood at a filthy wash basin that had been installed next to the bed once upon a time when the tenement building had functioned as a dollar hotel. The mirror above the basin was cracked and blackened, but it was good enough for her as she washed the blood off her hands and arms with hot water - or what passed for hot water where she lived.

Behind her, a small, inanimate lump on the stained bed linen proved that she had just added to her collection. A rat that had been too good to miss. It'd had a silver streak of fur going from the top of its head and half way down its back. Terri felt it was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen.

After snapping its neck, she had scooped out everything inside it with a silver spoon she had found in an alley. Following that, she had stuffed it with kapok that she had found at an old, abandoned furniture factory a block away. To finish it off, she had sown the rat shut to make it as good as new. Cross stitch needlework was one of the few things she was really good at.

Terri looked up and brushed a few droplets of steam off the mirror. She was missing a few teeth, and her nose and brow had been permanently damaged by the creeps who had attacked her when she was younger, but her husky-green eyes still shone brightly under her mop of dirty-blond hair.

A small smile flickered across her lips as she took one of her most prized possessions, a razor-sharp scalpel. It had cost her ten rats and a squirrel, but it had been worth it. The surgical cuts she was able to perform with the instrument were so much cleaner than her previous, clumsy attempts with a regular butcher's knife that she had found in an alley.

She put the scalpel back on the bed while she put on her clothes. Hiking boots, lined jeans, a hooded sweatshirt, two fleece jackets - one of which was so long it covered her rear - and finally an olive-green US Army uniform jacket that had been so threadbare that even the Army/Navy surplus store had thrown it out. She had salvaged it and had employed her expert skills with the needle and thread to make it whole again, like she did with her rats.

Once the hood of the sweatshirt had been flipped up to cover her unruly hair, she took the scalpel and inserted it into a concealed pocket in the uniform jacket. She was ready to venture outside.

The first part of the journey was, as always, the worst. First, she needed to get out of the apartment building before the evil beings could snatch her and violate her. She crept along the wall next to her bed until she had reached the door. Inching it open, she glanced outside to see if they were waiting for her. A man and a woman argued fiercely inside an apartment near to her, but the corridor itself was deserted.

She clicked the door shut and shuffled down the hallway towards the glass double-doors that separated her from her beloved streets and alleys. She kept a firm grip on the hilt of the scalpel in the concealed pocket, but met no one to use it on.

Outside, the imminent change from October to November had brought a fierce, easterly breeze that swept through the streets and made discarded newspapers, dead leaves and candy wrappers swirl around like dervishes. The chill was numbing and Terri pulled the uniform jacket closer.

The apartment building was located on a quiet side street of one of the main boulevards. Half the street lamps had been vandalized so badly they weren't working properly. The flickering cones of orange light created large, black zones seemingly created with the sole purpose of giving violent criminals and rapists a place to conduct their evil business.

On the street, stripped-out hulks of cars resting on bricks formed a suitably depressing backdrop to the neighborhood. A few cars actually stood on wheels here and there, but even they bore the scars of the street. The voices of two people screaming curses at each other were carried on the wind, and it sounded like it was on the brink of turning violent. Somewhere in the far distance, a police siren cut through the darkness of the evening like a knife slitting a throat.

The familiar sounds of the big city coalesced into a non-stop murmur that effectively killed the chances of ever experiencing true silence. Nevertheless, the faint squeaks of the rats that ruled the dark alleys could be heard in the infrequent pauses in the murmur.

Terri relaxed and allowed a smile to crease her lips. She was home - and it promised to be a good night.

After once again pulling the jacket closer, she shuffled off down the wind-swept street in a rushed, hunched-over gait. Fifty yards or so later, she crossed the street and headed for her first stop of the evening: a dark alley that she knew always provided plenty of rats for her collection.

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As Terri exited the alley with four dead rats around her neck on a piece of string, she came face to face with a family of four who had been out trick or treating. The family - who were all dressed like zombies - clearly had no idea where they were or how they could get back to their own, safe little world.

Terri stared wide-eyed at the crying kids, the upset mother and the angry father. They were speaking to her, asking her where So-and-so Street was, but they were speaking so fast she couldn't pick up individual words. Feeling threatened, her hand crept up towards the hilt of the scalpel while her eyes darted over the grotesque zombie-makeup all four people wore.

She stared at them with wide, frightened eyes until they slowly backed away from her, perhaps understanding they shouldn't have spoken to her. When she was alone, she set off in a jog further down the dark street to get away from the evil beings. The frantic jog made the dead rats on the string jump about in a *danse macabre*, but she held them down with her hands.

The encounter had left her winded and spooked, but at the next stop on her to-do list, she leaned against a brick wall to catch her breath. The alley she had reached was pitch black and reeked of human waste, but she slid along the wall until she was protected by the shadows. She could hear rats squeaking further into the alley, and she quickly drew the scalpel. The instrument of death glinted dangerously in the meager light, showing that it was ready to end a life.

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With another pair of dead rats around her neck, Terri looked at the gloominess that surrounded her. The only break in the cold, bleak despondency was the golden light that shone onto the sidewalk from the windows of a brightly lit donut shop that she knew was open all night.

The shop was another seventy yards down the street, so she set off in a shuffle that brought her to the only place she ever went where Death didn't rule the roost. The donut shop was warm and inviting, and better still, the night waitress had taken a liking to her, so whenever she showed up, she was sure to get a donut or two.

Once Terri reached the shop that didn't see any business at all despite it being Halloween, she opened her uniform jacket and stuffed the dead rats inside it. She knew if she ever forgot to do that, she would never be allowed back inside so she always made sure to keep her new pets well out of the way.

She shuffled over to the storefront window and peeked inside. Although not a large shop, the look of Donuts-4-U fulfilled the image she had in her mind of how such an establishment should look. The linoleum floor was laid out in a green-and-white checkered pattern, the walls were

held in cream and decorated with photos and postcards from all over the world that had been sent back by satisfied customers, the fan in the ceiling rotated slowly even in wintertime, and the squeaky clean glass counters and shelves abounded with donuts of all colors and sizes.

The night waitress - a matronly black woman in her late fifties who wore a cream dress and warm, fuzzy slippers - sat at a table lost in a crossword puzzle when Terri stepped in, but she soon rose and shuffled behind the counter with a smile on her face. "Hi, Terri. Cold night tonight, huh?" she said as she found the tongs.

Terri nodded while her eyes darted around the donut shop to make sure it hadn't been invaded by the evil beings since the last time she had been there. Everything looked calm, so she took a probing step closer to the counter. "Cold," she said in a voice that cracked from lack of use. "Like death. Winter's coming. Soon."

To illustrate her point - and to keep the dead rats from falling out - she held her arms around her uniform jacket.

"It sure is," the waitress said and used the tongs to take a donut with strawberry jam that she put into a paper bag. "It won't be long before we need to get the big kettle with the hot cocoa going again... and the Christmas waffles. Remember those?"

Terri licked her lips while she nodded at the waitress' words. The warm Christmas waffles with blackcurrant jam and a sprinkling of confectioners' sugar had been a big hit the previous December. She dared to look up at the older woman while the paper bag was folded neatly, but she soon looked back down.

"Terri," the waitress said as she handed the paper bag to her customer, "you have to promise me that if it gets too cold at night, you come down here, okay? I don't want to see you wander around in freezing temperatures. Remember how bad last winter was?"

Terri nodded vigorously as she took the paper bag. "I will. Thank you. Bye," she said and hurriedly reached for the door. As she did so, her jacket slipped open, but she managed to catch the dead rats before they could slip off the string.

The waitress hadn't noticed anything and offered the younger woman a small wave. "That's great. Bye, Terri!" she said and shuffled back to her crossword puzzle.

Once Terri was outside with her free donut, she went out of sight and pulled the rats clear of her jacket. All six dangled lifelessly in the little nooses that she had made with great care. She had hoped for more than six, but the tally wasn't too bad considering the chill in the air.

A brief smile flashed across her lips as she hurried along the sidewalk. She tore open the paper bag and stuffed the strawberry jam donut into her face like it was her first nourishment of the day, which it in fact was.

Rushing past the alley where she had killed the last two rats, she came to a dead stop when she realized a young, twenty-something woman in a dark uniform with red highlights was being threatened by an ugly brute of a man.

The man held a knife to the woman's chest, but it appeared she didn't have any money to give him. In the struggle, her uniform jacket had been torn open to reveal a red shirt. Terri stopped and stared. Her nose sniffed the air like the rats she kept for company, and she took a sliding step closer to the action. Her right foot bumped into a loose brick, and she bent down to pick it up. It was nearly too heavy for her, but she slid ever closer to the arguing people.

The unshaven brute who wore a messy ensemble of filthy clothes finally noticed they had an interested spectator, and he spun around and pointed the knife at Terri. "Wotcha lookin' at, ya ugly runt? Get outta my face!" he growled in a deep, coarse voice.

Terri chose to get into his face instead. With a groan, she threw the heavy brick at his head and watched it fly in a perfect parabolic arc towards the man. The attacker was too slow in reacting and was hit squarely on the temple - his knees buckled and he went down like a sack of lead.

The woman in the black and red uniform screamed and ran away from the fallen man. She hurried over to Terri and was about to pull her into a hug when she caught a glimpse of the dead rats that hung around her rescuer's neck. Clutching her head, the woman screamed again and seemed to sway like a reed in a breeze.

Without warning, the woman fainted and fell down on the alley's filthy asphalt.

"Oh..." Terri croaked as she stepped closer to the fainted woman. Kneeling down next to her, she had no clue what to do, so she simply stared at the uniform. After a short while, she noticed a sown-on patch with two words printed in an elegant font. "Sal... va... tion... Army," she mumbled, tracing the letters with an index finger.

The young woman had a wholesome, clean-cut appearance with short, dark-brown hair, neatly plucked eyebrows and a pair of dimples on her cheeks. Her chin was strong, but presently somewhat slack.

"She is pretty... I wanna play with her," Terri whispered, running her fingers across the fainted woman's brow. A quick glance at the man she had clobbered proved he wouldn't be getting up in a hurry. Another glance behind her convinced her she was the only one there.

A larger smile than usual spread over Terri's lips as she grabbed hold of the fainted woman's arms and subsequently her torso. Grunting, she got the woman from the Salvation Army over her shoulder in a fireman's carry - then she staggered to her feet with her precious cargo of six dead rats and one living human being.

It took Terri a few seconds to get her legs to obey her commands, but she was soon on her way home with the largest prize she had ever found in any alley anywhere.

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Sometime later, the brunette from the Salvation Army came to with a gasp that only grew deeper when she realized she was in some kind of apartment instead of a filthy, smelly alley in the roughest part of the city.

Instinctively, she grabbed hold of the chair she was sitting on and bared her teeth in a frightened grimace. Moving with the speed of a striking snake, she looked left, then right, then behind her in an attempt to find out where she was. "Help..." she croaked, and help was indeed close by.

Terri stepped away from the curtain at the toilet. She was carrying a small plastic bowl that she had filled with water from the toilet bowl - unlike the brown, foul-smelling liquid that came out of the faucet at the wash basin, the water in the toilet was cool and clean. She came to a temporary stop at the sight of the attractive brunette, but she ducked her head and eventually continued forward.

The brunette spun around again and pinned Terri to the spot with a fiery glare. "Who the hell are you? And why have you brought me here?" she said hoarsely, still holding onto the chair.

"Terri... everyone calls me Twisted. You were bleeding. You fell- fainted and fell. Hit your head. You were bleeding from your head," Terri mumbled, dipping a sponge into the bowl. When the brunette narrowed her pale-brown eyes in a clear example of not believing a word she had been told, Terri moved her hand up to touch her own forehead to illustrate where the brunette had received an angry red scrape.

The younger woman reached up as well and found her fingers coated in a sticky, crimson substance. "Oh... I'm... I'm Peggy. Peggy Morris. Thank you for helping me. Where am I?"

"You're welcome, Peggy," Terri mumbled and stepped closer with the bowl and the sponge. She kept her eyes firmly glued to the stained carpet so she wouldn't have to look the younger woman in the eye for any length of time out of fear of being rejected. "In my apartment. Third floor. Near the big street."

"Oh... okay. They call you twisted? How rude... goodness me, that's so rude and insensitive. They shouldn't call you that."

Terri shrugged. "I am twisted," she mumbled, but it never reached her visitor's ears.

Peggy furrowed her brow and looked down at her ruined uniform jacket. Two of the brass buttons had gone missing, and the top buttonhole had been torn apart. Although her shirt hadn't been harmed, the look on her face proved her mind had gone on a wholly unpleasant journey to the land of What If. "Thank you for... for rescuing me before. That... that evil man wanted to... to..."

Terri shook her head as she squeezed the sponge to make the excess water drip down into the bowl. "Do you want to... or... should I?" she said, holding up the sponge.

"Oh, I can do that myself, thank you," Peggy said and reached for the sponge.

Terri let go of the sponge and the bowl with an awkward jerk that sent a small wave splashing over the edge. She took a step back and watched wide-eyed as Peggy dabbed her forehead with the sponge.

The drops of water running down into the younger woman's eyebrow and further onto her cheek reminded Terri of blood seeping from an open wound. In the semi-darkness, the water seemed dark and dangerous. She stared at it, thinking of the countless times she had dissected her alley pets. Then again, the brunette was an alley pet, wasn't she?

Terri's fingers crept closer to the hilt of the scalpel that she still had in the concealed pocket. Her pulse quickened, her breathing intensified, and her eyes darted over the many spots on the pretty woman that would be so much fun to explore.

She had kept the naked light bulb in the ceiling turned off in order to keep her visitor happy and content - if Peggy caught wind of her dioramas, she would freak - but her favorite pastime required light, and plenty of it.

Peggy took off her uniform jacket to survey the damage. She grimaced at the sight of the ruined buttonhole and the two missing brass buttons. "Aw, look at this... I can't believe he ruined my uniform! And I lost my cap, too!" she mumbled, toying with the torn buttonhole.

"I can help. I can do needlework. I love to do needlework. I'm good at it," Terri mumbled, shifting her weight from one foot to the other while she looked down at the carpet.

"Terri, it's okay to look at me," Peggy said in a warm voice.

Terri did as told and slowly raised her head to look into the brunette's eyes. Almond-shaped, they were a pleasant shade of brown with a sprinkling of green flakes and spots that went well with the freckles that only stood out when she smiled. Terri smiled back but didn't dare look at her visitor for too long. She rapidly looked back down at the carpet and shuffled over to a rickety table underneath a window where she kept her needlework.

"Oh, Terri... never mind," Peggy said and folded her jacket. "I don't have the buttons so I have to get new ones before I can mend it. Thanks, anyway."

Terri came to a dead stop and looked back over her shoulder. Her eyes roamed over her visitor's features and down to the slender hands that held the ruined jacket. Peggy had very nice hands with long, sophisticated fingers. Terri clenched her own fists and cringed at her short, stubby digits. Just one more thing she didn't have that other women had in abundance. "Are you a soldier?" she said as she turned back around.

"Yes, I'm a soldier for Our Lord. I'm in the Salvation Army," Peggy said with a smile as she toyed with the ruined buttonhole. "With the onset of the chilly season, my unit commander

decided that we should maintain an active presence in the neighborhood and seek out those who needed our help. I guess it happened the other way 'round."

Terri briefly smiled back but it never went far. She nodded and shuffled away from the table with her needlework, wondering who the mysterious lord was Peggy had spoken of. She certainly had no lord watching over her or guiding her life - and if she had, the lord had guided her to a pit of evil. "Glad to help. I'm your friend," she said, pressing her stubby fingers to her stomach so they wouldn't be so conspicuous.

"That's nice, Terri," Peggy said but suddenly furrowed her brow and cocked her head like she had remembered something about dead rats on a string around her rescuer's neck. She glanced around the semi-dark apartment and caught a glimpse of an odd-looking diorama in the far corner that looked like four rats going down a piece of rope.

Clutching her jacket hard, Peggy rose from the rickety chair and pushed it back with her calves. Her eyes grew wider as she took in all the grotesque sights of the apartment. There were dead animals everywhere: hanging down from the ceiling, posing on the sparse furniture, filling cardboard and plastic boxes on the floor, and even on top of the bed.

"Would you like some red water? Some sweet water?" Terri said, but she knew by the look in Peggy's eyes that it was a lost cause. She wouldn't get to have fun with her alley pet tonight.

Peggy shrieked and gave the older woman such a hard shove to make her go away that she pushed her onto the carpet. In two rapid heartbeats, Peggy was at the door and yanked the handle down and towards her, but the door wouldn't budge no matter what she did. Shrieking, she realized it had been locked. She worked the old-fashioned lock with frantic gestures, but her slender fingers were trembling so badly she could hardly get them to work.

On the carpet, Terri moved over onto her rear and watched the scene unfold with large, sad eyes. Her mouth formed words that never came past her lips as she massaged the stubby fingers she had landed on in her ungraceful belly-flop. Her nose worked overtime as she tried to sniff in as much of Peggy's delightful scent as she could before it was too late.

Peggy had finally managed to get the door unlocked. As she pulled it open, the cone of light from the single bulb in the corridor illuminated many of the horrors in the apartment, including the cowering, pitiful figure on the floor. "You're sick! No wonder they call you twisted!" Peggy cried. "I'm gonna call the cops and the social services! They're gonna lock you up and throw away the key, you psycho creep!"

She spun around and made to leave, but a shadow from the outside fell upon the carpet before she had time to open the door fully. The shadow manifested itself in the shape of the unshaven thug that Terri had eliminated with the brick in the alley.

The thug roared in triumph over having found the right spot on only his third try. Using his shoulder, he crashed the door open and forced his way into the apartment wielding an ugly, snub-

nosed revolver. While he slammed the door shut with the heel of his boot, he used his free hand to grab hold of the woman in the dark clothes and throw her onto the floor next to the other one.

"Look who's back!" he bellowed, cocking the hammer on the revolver. "Guess who's gonna have some fun tonight!?"

"Pl- please don't hurt us!" Peggy croaked, but her plea didn't have much effect on their attacker who simply grunted and slid over to the wall just inside the door.

Growling, the man hit the light switch. "Why the hell is it so dark in he-"

The rest of the sentence got stuck in his throat as the harsh light cast by the naked bulb in the ceiling revealed the full extent of Terri's collection of stuffed alley pets. He glanced around at the scores of dead animals with an increasingly horrified expression on his face. "Goddamn, this is... this is... what the hell is going on here?!"

Peggy was too busy hyperventilating to speak, but Terri clenched her fists and shot their attacker a look of pure disgust. "They're my pets! My pets... you're no friend. Leave!"

"Your pets?" the man said hoarsely while his teeth were slowly bared in a grimace. "What kind of twisted freak are you? Keep dead animals as pets..."

"My pets!" Terri shouted, spooking not only herself but her two companions as well from the unrestrained anger and harshness in her voice.

Peggy began to sob, but the attacker would have nothing of it. "Shut up! Get up on the chair... and siddown! Not you, rat-girl... Goddamn, you make me sick," he said and shuffled closer to the two women. "I came here to get even and to get some action, but you... Goddamn, you make me wanna puke just from lookin' at your face! And the stench! It stinks like a Goddamn fish factory in here... don't you ever wash yourself, you ugly little runt?"

While the thug insulted her, Terri's eyes zoomed in on the blood on the side of the man's head where she had thumped him with the brick. He was in the early stages of a nasty bump and a multi-colored shiner, but it was the sight of the blood glistening in the harsh light that made her lips crease into a faint smile.

From her position on the floor, she could reach under the bed where she kept all her equipment needed to dissect her alley pets. She had a bottle of curare in there that she had bought from a man who didn't know what it was. A mere drop of the toxin was enough to paralyze a rat. A man would need more, much more.

If she could reach the tiny bottle, she and Peggy would have no more trouble with the evil thug. If she could reach the bottle and pour some of the contents onto the man's wound, she would have something to play with for days even if her new friend Peggy would leave.

Then Peggy ruined everything by letting out a howl and jumping up from the chair.

"Please! Please don't hurt me!" the woman from the Salvation Army said, clutching her hands in front of her like in prayer. "Please let me go... I won't... I promise I won't tell anyone! Please... take her! Take her and let me go!"

The attacker scrunched up his face into a mask of disgust at the offer, and he swung around to point the snub-nosed revolver at the younger woman. "Take her? That ugly, stinking little runt there? Goddamn, woman, what the hell kind of necrophile do you think I am?"

"But..."

"Siddown! Siddown and shut the hell up! I'm thinking!" he barked as he shoved Peggy back down onto the chair.

Down on the floor, Terri once again tried to inch her hand across the carpet to get a grip on the handle of the plastic briefcase where she kept her equipment. She had nearly made it all the way there when their attacker noticed that something was wrong.

"Get away from there, runt! Wotcha got down there? A gun? You got a gun down there, dontcha?" he barked, grabbing hold of Terri's collar to yank her away from the bed.

Terri cursed inwardly. Her stubby fingers had only been two inches away from the plastic handle. If she'd had Peggy's long, slender digits, she would have had it. She would have had the suitcase, and she would have had the bottle of curare.

"Move your ugly ass over to the wash basin!" the attacker barked. "Move your ass over there and watch a hard man at work!"

That piece of unwanted news made Peggy cry out in terror and jump up from the chair. Crying and sobbing, she grabbed hold of his filthy jacket with one hand while she pounded on his chest with the other. "Don't you dare! Don't you dare lay a finger on me, you piece of trash! Let me go! Let me go and take the psycho there!"

"Don't you ever shut up?! Shut up, you crazy broad! I'll show you a good time!" the attacker barked, shoving the hysterical Peggy back down onto the chair. As he did so, her wrist bumped into the drum of the cheap revolver.

The hair-trigger was pulled even without the man's finger doing anything. The weapon discharged with a bang that sounded like a thunderclap in the small apartment. Burning hot lead exited the muzzle and flew between the two people for a fraction of a second before it drilled into Peggy Morris' forehead immediately above the bridge of her nose.

At such close range, the slug created untold destruction inside her head despite the small caliber. When it reached the back wall of her skull, it broke through and exited the cavity with a sound akin to a breadstick being snapped in two.

Large sections of Peggy's skull were torn loose and sailed through the air with her short, dark-brown hair still attached. The flying hair was closely followed by a strong shower of red blood, white bone fragments and large, gray chunks of her brain.

One sizable chunk of brain in particular flew out of the gaping wound on a direct collision course with the filthy window pane behind the woman it had come from. It hit the pane of glass with a *schlopp* before it slithered down to rest on the windowsill.

A strange calm filled the apartment. Peggy slouched on the chair, staring at the ceiling with vacant eyes. Her head was leaned back so blood and chunks of brain continued to seep from the horrific wound. Upon her moment of death, she had released her bladder, and the warm, smelly urine ran down her pant leg and onto the already stained carpet.

The attacker just stood there with the smoking gun, looking like he couldn't believe what had just happened.

Terri rolled her eyes and shook her head over and over. Taking full advantage of the confusion, she reached across the floor and took the plastic suitcase with her equipment. "Wotcha do that for? Now I can't play with her!" she said hoarsely, looking at the pile of brains that had gathered on the floor.

"You Goddamn psycho!" the attacker said as he staggered away from the dead woman. He trembled like he was going into shock when he realized that not only had he just booked himself a one-way ticket to the electric chair by killing a woman, he'd had a witness, too. "No... no... no, I'm screwed! And if I'm screwed, you're screwed!" the man cried, taking a step closer to Terri with the snub-nosed revolver pointed ahead of him.

Terri didn't even have time to twitch before the man had aimed the gun at her face and had pulled the hair-trigger.

The weapon discharged again with a loud bang. A cloud of gunsmoke and plenty of sparks flew from the muzzle in a clear sign that something had gone wrong - instead of firing, the cheap, ugly revolver had blown up in the attacker's hand.

As the cloud of smoke dissipated, Terri stared wide-eyed at the man's bloody stump. He had lost three fingers, and the slug had gone backwards and had carved a bloody trail up his arm before it had dug itself into his throat.

White as a sheet, the attacker gagged on the wave of blood that threatened to drown him. He clutched his bloody stump as he took a staggering step back. Unable to use his throat properly, he couldn't scream, only gurgle grotesquely. Eventually, he fell down onto his knees where he shot Terri a dark, accusing glare like it was all her fault.

Terri calmly opened her plastic suitcase and found the small bottle containing the potent toxin. After coating one of her knives in the clear liquid, she shuffled over to her attacker and smeared the toxin onto the bleeding wound at his throat.

The reaction came instantly. As the poison spread through his veins, he lost the use of his body parts one by one; his muscles relaxed which caused him to sway and to lose his grip on his stump. His lungs were next, causing his face to lose all color and become waxen. Five seconds later, the curare reached his heart which came to a lazy halt. His eyes rolled back in his head and he fell backwards, dead as a doornail before his head had thumped into the carpet.

"Bad boy," Terri said and knelt down next to the attacker. After making sure he was dead, she wiped off the coated knife on the man's jacket and got to her feet to search for a few missing items.

It didn't take her long to find what she was looking for. The man's thumb, index finger and middle finger had been severed at the root and were lying in pools of blood next to each other. They were turned in three different directions like a family who couldn't agree on where to go. She picked up the man's thumb and rolled it between her own fingers.

"Smelly," she said and let go of the severed digit. A moment later, she reconsidered and picked up all three fingers. Holding them in the palm of her hand, she shuffled over to the other side of the bed where she knelt down. She reached in under the cast iron frame and pulled out a hard suitcase that carried a colorful sticker from Sunnyvale Resort, Florida.

The lid of the suitcase was quickly opened to reveal her most prized collection: the eyes, heads and claws of the many alley pets she'd had over the years. She hadn't had an opportunity to store human fingers before so she was unsure how long they would be able to stay fresh. Grunting, she put the man's severed fingers into the box that already held a dozen claws that she had surgically removed from rats. "Fits him fine. He was a nasty rat. Evil," Terri said and broke out in a screeching snicker.

Once she had pushed the hard suitcase back under the bed, she leaned back on her thighs and looked at the two dead bodies that littered her apartment. Nobody had reacted to the shots, but that wasn't unusual. Even as she thought that, she could hear the usual people around her arguing in their usual way. She was surprised the evil people lurking outside her apartment hadn't been snared in by the gunshots, but she was happy for the rare reprieve.

She snorted and got to her feet while she glanced at the dead people. A creepy cough from the murdered Peggy prompted Terri to go over to her to investigate, but it had only been her frame shifting as the muscles were no longer able to support the bones.

Peggy's jaw hung slack as she stared at the ceiling with her dead, glassy eyes. Terri closed the mouth with her fingers - unfortunately, it fell down as soon as she let go. She once again closed it with her fingers, but it fell down at once. "Big tease," she said, caressing Peggy's jawline with an index finger. She left the mouth open since Peggy apparently didn't feel like keeping it closed.

Snickering, Terri shuffled back to the man who had attacked them. He too was staring at the ceiling, though unlike Peggy, the whites were in full view. "Don't wanna play with you... don't like to play with boys," Terri said and nudged the man's head with the tip of her boot. The head lolled over to the other side causing a blood clot to dissipate and run down his neck.

"You're evil. You called me ugly and smelly... look at you now," Terri said and gave the man a fair-sized kick in the ribs that made his body shift to the left.

Terri shook her head and clutched her hands to her chest. Leaning over, she appeared to shimmy back and forth for a little while until she shuffled over to the other side of the room and pulled aside the curtain that blocked the view to the toilet bowl. There, she unbuttoned her lined jeans and pushed them down. Her panties quickly followed, and she placed her bare cheeks directly onto the icy porcelain bowl. "Don't mind me," she said with a wave at the dead people, "I need to make poop now, but I promise it won't be long."

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After taking care of business, she shuffled over to the wash basin and washed her hands like her mother had told her that all nice girls should. She dried her hands by wiping her neck, brow and cheeks like her life experience had told her all practical girls did. While she did so, she glanced in the blackened mirror above the wash basin.

Her new alley pets were still lying on the bed where she had left them when she had returned to her apartment with Peggy over her shoulder. It was tempting, very tempting, to begin her favorite part of the process, namely slicing open the rats and scooping out their innards with the silver spoon. Sighing, she realized she had more pressing matters to attend to first.

Shifting to her left, she craned her neck and caught a glimpse of Peggy's corpse that was obviously still slouching on the chair where she had died. The blood and brains that had seeped from the gaping wound in the back of her head had finally stopped, although it was hard to tell if the blood had begun to clot or if she was merely fresh out of brains.

Terri twiddled her stubby fingers a few times before clenching her fists and turning back to the dead man who was taking up far too much space in the middle of the floor. Peggy would have to come later. "First... Mister evil. You so ugly... remember? Ugly runt? You so ugly now," she said as she knelt down next to him and wrapped her arms around his torso.

The blood from his wounds smeared all over her hands and clothes as she pulled him upright. With an almighty effort, she got him over her shoulder in a fireman's carry; then she clambered to her feet and staggered over to the door.

Once there, Terri put her ear against the inside of the door to hear if any of the evil people who were watching outside were near. The movement made the man's head clunk against the doorjamb, but she took a half-step back so she wouldn't alert the minions of evil that undoubtedly lurked in the vicinity.

Everything was clear so she unlocked the door and stepped outside into the hallway. The light bulb that had spooked Peggy so badly by illuminating the many dioramas inside the apartment cast a bleak light onto the faded carpet, the walls and the dead body with the ungainly hole in the forehead.

The hallway was a study in despair. Once upon a time, the walls had been coffee and cream, but now they were piss yellow and puke green, permanently stained by the copious amounts of bodily fluids that were poured over them on a regular basis. Graffiti adorned every last inch of the corridor and the stairwell, except where someone had put up political posters calling for a revolution.

Terri closed the apartment door behind her and moved out into the center of the hallway. The familiar sounds of people arguing violently reached her ears, and she knew she would be safe. It was only when the sounds of arguing weren't there that trouble found her.

The stairwell beckoned, and Terri took a staggering step forward. The corpse on her shoulder was heavy and dug into her flesh, but she took a deep breath to clear her mind and to find the strength needed to drag it upstairs.

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Three floors further up, Terri used her left knee to open the fire exit to the roof. The flat, dark roof greeted her with the familiar scents of exhaust from the streets below, rotten wood from the rain-soaked support beams and plenty of urine from the many stray cats and stray people who used it as a public toilet.

The chilly breeze was even stronger six floors above the street, and Terri broke out in a shiver as she stepped out onto the roof.

With her heel, she shoved the doorstep - a sandbag - over to the fire exit to prevent it from slamming shut. The corpse on her shoulder had begun to annoy her, and she could hardly wait to get rid of it.

She sighed and staggered across the roof. The added weight made the floorboards creak and groan, but she was only at risk of falling once when she nearly slipped in an unsighted pool of pigeon droppings.

Finally reaching her destination, she dropped the body like a sack of potatoes. It fell to the ground face-first, breaking the man's nose with an audible crunch. Terri wasn't bothered in the least by such trivialities. Instead, she panted hard and pressed a hand to her aching back to try to stretch out the kinks she had gained on her way up the stairs.

With every kink worked out, she opened the lid of the large storage box that kept the deck chairs and the rest of the season furniture. It offered plenty of room for a corpse, almost regardless of the size. In a squeeze, two could fit just fine.

She smiled as she once again grabbed hold of the man. This time, she had to manhandle him over her hip and into the box, but she took a deep breath and clenched every muscle she had in her upper body. Little by little, the corpse was shoved closer to the edge until it finally cleared the hurdle and fell into the storage box with a rattling *phlum!*

"Ha. Over and done with," Terri said and brushed off her bloodied hands.

The magnificent night-time sky was too good to pass over, so she shuffled up to the edge of the roof and looked at the vast number of stars high above. Like she had done a million times throughout her life, she reached out to grab one. As always, she was sorely disappointed when her palm was empty instead of holding the tiny light she so dearly wished would be there.

Smiling wistfully, Terri still clenched her bloody fist and pretended to move the star into her jeans pocket. She could feel it offer her warmth and strength at once, and she took that as a sign that Peggy was ready to play with her.

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Downstairs in the apartment, Terri shuffled over to Peggy's corpse and wrapped her arms around her visitor's torso. Peggy was far lighter - and nimbler, even in death - than the man had been, so it didn't take Terri long to ease the woman down onto the carpet and stretch out her legs so the body was flat on its back.

"You wanna play? You wanna play with me, Peggy?" Terri said, covering her mouth with her bloody hands in case Peggy answered in the negative.

The corpse didn't say anything, but Terri took that as a yes. Whooping, she grabbed the bowl she had used on Peggy's abrasion earlier and hurried over to the toilet bowl. She dipped the bowl into the bowl and flushed to get it filled. While she was there, she washed her bloody hands clean.

Back at Peggy's side, Terri knelt down and placed the bowl on the carpet before she began to unbutton the red uniform shirt with meticulous, careful gestures.

Since most of the back of Peggy's skull was on the floor behind the chair, her head was held in a crooked angle that made her jaw gape wide open and her dead eyes stare straight up at the dioramas in the ceiling that had caused her so much grief.

"Hmmm," Terri said, taking a break from the unbuttoning to rub her chin. The crooked angle of Peggy's head was just too crooked, even for her, so she shuffled down to the other end of her visitor and began to unlace her shoes.

Grinning in triumph, Terri stuck both shoes in under the gaping wound in Peggy's head to enable her to look at what Terri was doing to the buttons. "Better. Now you can see," she said and ran an index finger tenderly across Peggy's jaw.

Once the shirt was open and pulled off Peggy's shoulders, Terri went to work on the pants. They were soaked with urine, but it didn't bother her. From her years of tinkering with dead alley pets, she was used to getting all sorts of fluids onto her stubby fingers.

Although the pants tore a few seams when Terri yanked them free of Peggy's rear, they were soon off and the last hindrance had been removed - now Terri could freely admire the woman

before her. She trailed her fingers across Peggy's midsection and marveled at the smoothness of the skin. "Oh..." Terri breathed reverently, "my first friend. You are so pretty. Do you want to play with me?"

The corpse continued to stare at the ceiling without offering much in the way of a comment, but it didn't deter Terri. Scooting back up to Peggy's broken head, she took the sponge from the bowl and soaked it in the cold water. With great care, she let the sponge slide over the black entry hole that sat low on Peggy's forehead.

Once the powder burns and the splattering of blood had been washed clean from the edges of the hole, Terri took Peggy by the nose to lift her head off the floor and the shoes that she had used as a pillow. Like before, she took the sponge and began to wash the exit wound and the blood-soaked hair with great care, although the missing sections of the skull made it difficult for her.

Several times, the sponge disappeared into the brain cavity, but Terri snickered and rummaged around for it until she found it. "I must say... you play hard to get," she whispered when the remains of the soft brain tissue once again absorbed the sponge. "I think I like that in a friend."

The cleaning process was finally over and done with, and Terri lowered Peggy's head onto the shoes. Leaning back on her thighs, she squeezed the sponge dry and wiped her hands on her jeans. She suddenly realized the black hole in Peggy's forehead stood out too much. "No... not look good. You need a... an... oh..."

She looked around to find something that could improve the look. Her eyes fell on the small table she had next to the bed. She hardly used it, but she remembered that she had something in the drawer that could make Peggy look good again.

Smiling, Terri clambered to her feet and shuffled over there. It didn't take her long to find a roll of stickers that she had salvaged from an alley somewhere. The stickers were round and had a yellow background and white text that said *Keep Smilin!*

Terri did indeed keep smiling as she shuffled back to the corpse, peeled off the first sticker from the roll and placed it neatly across the black entry hole. "Oh... now you are pretty. Yes. So pretty. Peggy... do you wanna play slumber party?"

The corpse seemed reluctant to answer - the parted lips were inanimate and the vacant eyes continued to stare at the ceiling.

"I dearly want to play with you," Terri whispered as she clutched her hands to her bosom. Smiling, she reached down and grabbed hold of Peggy's bare legs. It took a lot of effort and a string of increasingly throaty grunts to get the corpse turned around so the head was now pointed at the bed and the feet at the door, but she managed to get everything sorted eventually.

Moving up her half-nude visitor, she put her legs on either side of Peggy's body and her hands under the armpits so she could *schlep* her new friend across the carpet and over to the bed.

It wasn't an easy task as she had to carry all that dead weight, but she felt that Peggy worked with her by not resisting too much apart from the occasions where the jagged edges of the gaping wound in the back of the head got stuck on the holes in the carpet.

Peggy was finally at the edge of the bed. Terri let out a breath of relief and massaged her hands as she knelt down next to her new friend who didn't offer much in the way of comments. "Now... this is where I sleep," she said and pointed in under the bed. "In there... with my alley pets. And now you... my first best friend. We only have a short distance to go. Just a little bit more."

The corpse didn't seem to have any objections.

Terri smiled and began to move one body part at a time in under the bed. A leg, an arm, a good shove to get the butt and the torso to follow, then the other leg and the other arm. She needed to do it all over again to make room for herself, so she did - with a smile on her face.

When the half-nude Peggy was finally in place under the bed, Terri got up and undressed in a hurry. She quickly brushed her teeth with her index finger so she wouldn't have bad breath for her first slumber party with her new, best friend. Standing in her underwear, she performed an excited little shimmy to get some of the nervousness to leave her.

The naked light bulb in the ceiling was quickly taken care of, and Terri was back at the cast iron bed in no time. She knelt down on the stained carpet and slid in under the frame like she did every night.

There, she snuggled up closely with her new friend and her old collection of alley pets. With Peggy there, Terri didn't have much room underneath the bed, but she turned over onto her right side so she could feel Peggy's tender, cold skin all the way down. Wrapping an arm around the corpse's midsection, she reached up to place a small kiss on Peggy's parted lips.

"You smell so good. My first friend... my first slumber party!" Terri whispered, adding another smooch for good measure. "Tomorrow, we'll have fun. I'll show you how to dissect rats... Peggy, you're my best friend and I want to keep you forever. And I have just the right tools for the task. You see, I have a bottle of embalming fluid that I... no... that's for tomorrow. Let's get some sleep. Nighty-night!"

The corpse didn't object to the promises and suggestions, and Terri took that as a good sign. Smiling, she snuggled down next to her new friend and decided to get the most out of the situation while it was there. There would be plenty of time for sleeping later. First, she wanted to play with Peggy's long, slender fingers...

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**THE END.**

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