

"There is about Maggie Estep's work a directness, a clear determination—a drive to cut through, to break through, to claw through—that is impressive."

—A.M. Homes, author of *The Mistress's Daughter*



*Alice
Fantastic*

A NOVEL BY

MAGGIE ESTEP

PRAISE FOR MAGGIE ESTEP'S NOVELS

for *Flamethrower*

“There’s lunatic fun to be had in the offbeat adventures Maggie Estep dreams up for her endearing slacker heroine, Ruby Murphy—if you happen to enjoy the kinds of places where this free spirit hangs out. In her home base of Coney Island, she lives in the shadow of the Cyclone and has a ‘downwardly mobile job’ at a museum sideshow. But Ruby’s often to be found, as she is in *Flamethrower*, at her shrink’s, where her discovery of a human leg in a fish tank leads to a quest that takes her, as all her bizarre quests do, to the racetracks and stables where she truly comes alive.”

—*New York Times Book Review*

“Maggie Estep writes like no one else. She is one of my favorite writers, and *Flamethrower* might be her best book. Do yourself a favor and read all her books now.”

—Sara Gran, author of *Saturn’s Return to New York*

for *Gargantuan*

“Maggie Estep is a writer of a thousand voices—well, a half-dozen anyway, since that’s the number of characters who share the narrative chores in *Gargantuan* and offer multiple perspectives on the strange, sad tale of Attila Johnson, an apprentice jockey with a shady past but a sweet touch with racehorses ... Although Estep can get into just about anyone’s head, including the horses who are such strong, individualized characters in this series, it’s Ruby’s singular voice and oddly detached sensibility that lend an air of danger to the storytelling.”

—*New York Times Book Review*

for *Hex*

“Maggie Estep’s debut mystery, *Hex*, is so blazingly idiosyncratic that it’s a real shock when a character actually plays by the genre rules and gets murdered ... Ruby Murphy hasn’t a clue how to conduct an investigation, [b]ut she’s such an enthusiast for life’s little oddities that the whole world looks new in her eyes, and everything that comes out of her mouth sounds fresh ... Although she shares the narrative with several of her bizarre friends and neighbors, Ruby is such a ravishing original that it’s love at first sight.”

—*New York Times Book Review*

“Ruby Murphy, the Coney Island drifter whose free spirit accounts for the ravishing originality of this idiosyncratic first mystery, falls for a perfect stranger’s sob story and goes undercover as a stablehand at Belmont Park to keep tabs on a stable groom with sexy eyes and a mysterious past.”

—*New York Times* “Notable Book” Selection

for *Diary of an Emotional Idiot*

“*Diary of an Emotional Idiot* is a coming-of-age novel, as it might be trod by steel-toed shoes and stippled by hypodermics; it’s a roman à clef featuring sex and chains, same-sex sex, sex in rehabs, and a ridiculously compulsive abuse of multiple partners; it’s a primitive, joyous mess of a cartoon book about the way some people live now, and it should infuriate nine out of ten lovers of heartfelt, carefully wrought novels about rural life. Be in on the controversy.”

—Rick Moody, author of *Right Livelihood*

for *Soft Maniacs*

“*Soft Maniacs* is a beautifully written book, simple and direct.”

—Hubert Selby, Jr., author of *Last Exit to Brooklyn*

“There is about Maggie Estep’s work a directness, a clear determination—a drive to cut through, to break through, to claw through—that is impressive.”

—A.M. Homes, author of *The Mistress’s Daughter*

“The stories in *Soft Maniacs* and the characters who inhabit them are alternately dark, funny, sad, sweet, and twisted—right up my alley.”

—Steve Buscemi, actor

for *Love Dance of the Mechanical Animals*

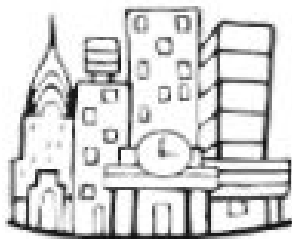
“Maggie Estep is the bastard daughter of Raymond Chandler and Anaïs Nin. Her prose is hard-boiled and sexy; she turns a good phrase and shows some leg. *Love Dance of the Mechanical Animals* is one hell of a great book!”

—Jonathan Ames, author of *The Alcohol*

ALICE FANTASTIC

ALICE FANTASTIC

by MAGGIE ESTEP



AKASHIC BOOKS
NEW YORK

This is a work of fiction. All incidents and dialogue, and all characters (with the exception of some well-known historical and public figures), are the products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Where real-life historical or public figures appear, the situations, incidents, and dialogues concerning those persons are entirely fictional and are not intended to depict actual events or to change the entirely fictional nature of this work. In all other respects, any resemblance to persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[1. ALICE](#)

[2. ELOISE](#)

[3. ALICE](#)

[4. KIMBERLY](#)

[5. ELOISE](#)

[6. ALICE](#)

[7. KIMBERLY](#)

[8. ALICE](#)

[9. ELOISE](#)

[10. KIMBERLY](#)

[11. ALICE](#)

[12. ELOISE](#)

[13. ALICE](#)

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1. ALICE

I'd been trying to get rid of the big oaf for seventeen weeks but he just kept coming around. He'd ring the bell and I'd look out the window and see him standing down there on the stoop looking like a kicked puppy. What I needed with another kicked puppy I couldn't tell you since I'd taken in a little white mutt with tan spots that my cousin Jeremy had found knocked-up and wandering a trailer park in Kentucky. Cousin Jeremy couldn't keep the dog so he called me up and somehow got me to agree to give the animal a home. After making the vet give her an abortion and a rabies shot, Jeremy found the dog a ride up from Kentucky with some freak friend of his who routinely drives between Kentucky and Queens transporting cheap cigarettes. The freak friend pulled his van up outside my building one night just before midnight and the dog came out of it reeking of cigarettes and blinking up at me, completely confused and kicked-looking. Not that I think the freak actually kicked her. But my point is, I already had a kicked puppy. What did I need with a guy looking like one?

I didn't need him. But he'd ring the bell and I'd let him in and, even if I was wearing my dead father's filthy bathrobe and hadn't showered in five days, he'd tell me, "You look fantastic, Alice." I knew he actually meant it, that he saw something fantastic in my limp brown hair and puffy face and the zits I'd started getting suddenly at age thirty-six. It was embarrassing. The zits, the fact that I was letting a big oaf come over to nuzzle at my unbathed flesh, the little dog who'd sit at the edge of the bed watching as me and Clayton, the big oaf, went at it.

My life was a shambles.

So I vowed to end it with Clayton. I vowed it on a Tuesday at 7 a.m. after waking up with an unusual sense of clarity. I opened my eyes to find thin winter sunlight sifting in the windows of the house my dead father left me. Candy, the trailer trash dog, was sitting at the edge of the bed, politely waiting for me to wake up because that's the thing with strays, they're so grateful to have been taken in that they defer to your schedule and needs. So Candy was at the edge of the bed and sun was coming in the windows of my dead father's house on 47th Road in the borough of Queens in New York City. And I felt clear-headed. Who knows why. I just did. And I felt I needed to get my act together. Show up more frequently. Stop smoking so much. Get back to yoga and kickboxing. Stop burning through my modest profits as a modest gambler. Revitalize myself. And the first order of business was to get rid of the big oaf, Clayton. Who ever heard of a guy named Clayton who isn't ninety-seven years old anyway?

I got into the shower and scrubbed myself then shampooed my thick curtain of oily hair. I got clean clothes out of the closet instead of foraging through the huge pile in the hamper the way I'd been doing for weeks. I put on black jeans and a fuzzy green sweater. I glanced at myself in the mirror. My semi-dry hair looked okay and my facial puffiness had gone done. Even my zits weren't so visible. I looked vaguely alive.

I took my coat off the hook, put Candy's leash on, and headed out to walk her by the East River, near the condo high-rises that look over into Manhattan. My dead father loved Long Island City. He

moved here the 1970s, when it was almost entirely industrial, to shack up with some drunken harlot right after my mother broke up with him so she could take up with the rock musician who fathered my half-sister. Long after the harlot had dumped my father—all women dumped my father all the time—he'd stayed on in the neighborhood, eventually buying a tiny two-story wood frame house that he left to me, his lone child, when the cancer got him last year at age fifty-five. I like Long Island City just fine. It's quiet and there are places to buy tacos.

"Looking good, *mamí*," said some guy as Candy and I walked past the gas station.

I glowered at the guy.

As Candy sniffed and pissed and tried to eat garbage off the pavement, I smoked a few Marlboros and stared across at midtown Manhattan. It looked graceful from this distance.

The air was so cold it almost seemed clean and I started thinking on how I would rid myself of Clayton. I'd tried so many times. Had gotten him to agree not to call me anymore. But then, not two days would go by before he'd ring the bell. And I'd let him in. He'd look at me with those enormous brown eyes and tell me how great I looked. "Alice, you're fantastic," he told me so many times I started thinking of myself as Alice Fantastic, only there really wouldn't be anything fantastic about me until I got rid of Clayton.

I'd start in on the *This isn't going to work for me anymore*, Clayton refrain I had been trotting out for seventeen weeks. At which, he would look wounded and his arms would hang so long at his sides that I'd have to touch him, and once I touched him, we'd make a beeline for the bed; the sex was pretty good the way it can be with someone you are physically attracted to in spite of, or because of, lack of anything at all in common, and the sex being good would make me entertain the idea of instating Clayton on some sort of permanent basis, and I guess that was my mistake. He'd see that little idea in my eye and latch onto it and have *feelings* and his *feelings* would make him a prodigious lover and I'd become so strung out on sex chemicals I would dopily say *Sure* when he'd ask to spend the night and then again dopily say *Sure* the next morning when he'd ask if he could call me later.

But enough is enough. I don't want Clayton convincing himself we're going to be an everlasting item growing old together in a trailer park in Florida.

Right now Clayton lives in a parking lot. In his van. This I discovered when, that first night, after I picked him up in the taco place and strolled with him near the water, enjoying his simplicity and his long, loping gait, I brought him home and went down on him in the entrance hall and asked him to fuck me from behind in the kitchen and then led him to the bedroom where we lay quiet for a little while until he was hard again at which point I put on a pair of tights and asked him to rip out the crotch—after all that, just when I was thinking of a polite way of asking him to leave, he propped himself up on one elbow and told me how much he liked me. "I really like you, I mean, I *really* like you," looking at me with those eyes big as moons and, even though I just wanted to read a book and go to sleep, I didn't have the heart to kick him out.

All that night he babbled at me, telling me his woes. His mother has Alzheimer's and his father is in prison for forgery. His wife left him for a plumber and he's been fired from his job at a cabinet-making shop and is living in his van in a parking lot and showering at the Y.

"I've got to get out of Queens soon," he said.

"And go where?"

"Florida. I don't like the cold much. Gets in my bones."

"Yeah. Florida," I said. I'd been there. To Gulfstream Park, Calder Race Course, and Tampa Bay Downs. I didn't tell him that though. I just said, *Yeah, Florida*, like I wasn't opposed to Florida, though why I would let him think I have any fondness for Florida, this leading him to possibly

speculate that I'd want to go live there with him, I don't know. I suppose I wanted to be kind to him.

"Just a trailer is fine. I like trailers," Clayton said.

"Right," I said. And then I feigned sleep.

That was seventeen weeks ago. And I still haven't gotten rid of him.

Candy and I walked for the better part of an hour before heading home, passing back by the gas station where the moron felt the need to repeat, "Looking good, *mami*." I actually stopped walking, stared at him, and tried to think of words to explain exactly how repulsive it is to be called *mami* because I just hear it as *mommy*, which makes me picture the guy having sex with his own mother who is doubtless a matronly woman with endless folds of ancient flesh and cobwebs between her legs, but I couldn't find the words, and the guy was starting to grin, possibly thinking I was actually turned on by him, so I kept walking.

Once back inside my place, I gave Candy the leftovers from my previous night's dinner and sat down at the kitchen table with my computer, my Daily Racing Form, and my notebooks. I got to work on the next day's races at Aqueduct. No matter how much I planned to change my life in the coming weeks, I still had to work. It wasn't much of a card, even for a Wednesday in February, so I figured I wouldn't be pushing much money through the windows. But I would watch. I would take notes. I would listen. I would enjoy my work. I always do. No matter how bad a losing streak I might endure, no matter how many times common sense tried to dictate that I find stable employment and a life devoid of risk-generated heart arrhythmias. I am a gambler.

Several hours passed and I felt stirrings of hunger and glanced inside my fridge. Some lifeless lettuce, a few ounces of orange juice, and one egg. I considered boiling the egg, as there are days when there's nothing I love more than a hardboiled egg, but I decided this wasn't one of those days. I would have to go to the taco place for takeout. I attached Candy's leash to her collar and threw my coat on and was heading to the door when the phone rang. I picked it up.

"Hi, Alice," came Clayton's low voice.

I groaned.

"What's the matter? You in pain?"

"Sort of."

"What do you mean? What hurts? I'll be right there."

"No, no, Clayton, don't. My pain is that you won't take no for an answer."

"No about what?"

"No about our continuing on like this."

There was silence.

"Where are you?" I asked.

"In the parking lot."

"Ah," I said. "Clayton, I know you think you're a nice guy but there's nothing nice about coming around when I've repeatedly asked you not to. It's borderline stalking."

More silence.

"I need my peace and quiet."

More silence. Then, after several minutes: "You don't like the way I touch you anymore?"

"There's more to life than touching."

"Uh," said Clayton. "I wouldn't know since you won't ever let me do anything with you other than come over and fuck you."

Clayton had never said *fuck* before. Clayton had been raised in some sort of religious household.

"My life is nothing, Clayton, I go to the racetrack. I make my bets and take my notes and chain-

smoke to keep from vomiting out of fear. I talk to some of the other horse-players. I go home and cook dinner or I go to the taco place. I walk my dog. That's it. There's nothing to my life, Clayton, nothing to see."

"So let me come with you."

"Come with me where?"

"To the racetrack."

"I'm asking you to never call me again and get out of my life. Why would I want to take you to the racetrack?"

"Just let me see a little piece of your life. I deserve it. Think of it as alimony."

I couldn't see why I should do anything for him. But I agreed anyway. At least it got him off the phone.

I took Candy with me to the taco place. Came home and ate my dinner, giving half to the dog.

I'd told Clayton to meet me the next morning at 11:00 and we'd take the subway. He offered to drive but I didn't trust that monstrous van of his not to break down en route. He rang the bell and I came downstairs to find him looking full of hope. Like seeing each other in daylight hours meant marriage and babies were imminent. Not that he'd asked for anything like that but he was that kind of guy, the kind of guy I seem to attract all too often, the want-to-snuggle-up-and-breed kind of guy. There are allegedly millions of women out there looking for these guys so I'm not sure why they all come knocking on my door. I guess they like a challenge. That's why they're men.

"Hi, Alice," he beamed, "you look fantastic."

"Thanks," I said. I *had* pulled myself together, was wearing a tight black knee-length skirt and a soft black sweater that showed some shoulder—if I ever took my coat off, which I wasn't planning to do as I figured any glimpse of my flesh might give Clayton ideas.

"I'm just doing this cause you asked," I said as we started walking to the G train, "but you have to realize this is my job and you can't interfere or ask a lot of questions." I was staring straight forward so I didn't have to see any indications of hurt in his eyes because this was one of his ruses, the hurt look, the kicked-puppy look, and I was damn well sick of it.

"Right," said Clayton.

We went down into the station and waited forever as one invariably does for the G train and all the while Clayton stared at me so hard I was pretty sure he would turn me to stone.

Eventually, the train came and got us to the Hoyt-Schermerhorn stop in Brooklyn where we switched to the far more efficient A train. I felt relief at being on my way to Aqueduct. Not many people truly love Aqueduct, but I do. Belmont is gorgeous and spacious and Saratoga is grand if you can stand the crowds, but I love Aqueduct. Aqueduct is where you see down-on-their-luck trainers slumping on benches, degenerates, droolcases, and drunks swapping tips, and a few seasoned pro gamblers stoically going about their business. My kind of place.

Thirty minutes later, the train sighed into the stop at Aqueduct and we got off. It was me and Clayton, a bunch of hunched middle-aged white men, a few slightly younger Rasta guys, and one well-dressed man who was an owner or wanted to pretend to be one.

"Oh, it's nice," Clayton lied as we emerged from the little tunnel under the train tracks.

The structure looks like the set for a 1970s zombie movie, with its faded pastels tinged with that ubiquitous New York City gray and airplanes headed for JFK flying so low you're sure they're going to land on a horse.

"We'll go up to the restaurant, have some omelets," I told Clayton once we were inside the

clubhouse. “The coffee sucks but the omelets are fine.”

“Okay,” said Clayton.

We rode the escalator to the top and, at the big glass doors to the Equestrian Restaurant, Manny, the maître d’, greeted me and gave us a table with a great view of the finish line.

Then Clayton started in with the questions. He’d never been a big question guy, wasn’t a very verbal guy period, but suddenly he wanted to know the history of Aqueduct and my history with Aqueduct and what else I’d ever done for a living and what my family thought of my being a professional gambler, etc.

“I told you, I have to work. No twenty questions. Here’s a Racing Form,” I said, handing him the extra copy I’d printed out, “now study that and let me think.”

The poor guy stared at the Form but obviously had no idea how to read it. Sometimes I forget that people don’t know these things. It seems like I always knew, what with coming here when I was a kid when Cousin Jeremy still lived in Queens and babysat me on days when my father was off on a construction job. I’d been betting since the age of nine and had been reasonably crafty about money management and risk-taking since day one. I had turned a profit that first day when Jeremy had placed bets for me, and though I’d had plenty of painful streaks since, the vertiginous highs still outnumbered the lows. I scraped by. I’d briefly had a job as a substitute high school teacher after graduating from Hunter College but I found it achingly dull. So I gambled. Not many people last more than a few years doing it for a living but I have. Mostly because the thought of doing anything else is unbearable. I would feel like a citizen.

I was just about to take pity on Clayton and show him how to read the Form when Arthur appeared and sat down at one of the extra chairs at our table.

“You see this piece of shit Pletcher’s running in the fifth race?” Arthur wanted to know. Arthur, who weighs 125 pounds tops, isn’t one for pleasantries. He had no interest in being introduced to Clayton and probably hadn’t even noticed I was with someone. He just wanted confirmation that the Todd Pletcher—trained colt in the fifth race was a piece of shit in spite of having cost 2.4 million at the Keeneland yearling sale.

“Yeah,” I said, nodding gravely. “He’ll be 1-9.”

“He’s a flea,” said Arthur.

“Yeah. Well. I wouldn’t throw him out on a Pick 6 ticket.”

“I’m throwing him out.”

“Okay,” I said.

“He hasn’t faced shit and he’s never gone two turns. And there’s that nice little horse of Nick’s that’s a closer.”

“Right,” I said.

“I’m using Nick’s horse. Singling him.”

“I wouldn’t throw out the Pletcher horse.”

“Fuck him,” said Arthur, getting up and storming off to the other end of the place where I saw him take a seat with some guys from the Daily Racing Form.

“Friend of yours?” asked Clayton.

I nodded. “Arthur. He’s a good guy.”

“He is?”

“Sure.”

I could tell Clayton wanted to go somewhere with that one. Wanted to ask why I thought some strange little guy who just sat down and started cursing out horses was a good guy. Another reason

Clayton had to be gotten rid of.

~~One of the waiters came and took our omelet order. Since I'd mapped out most of my bets, I took ten minutes to give Clayton a cursory introduction to reading horses' past performances. I was leaning in close, my finger tracing one of the horse's running lines, when Clayton kissed my ear.~~

"I love you, Alice," he said.

"Jesus, Clayton. What the fuck?"

He looked like a kicked puppy.

"I brought you here because I thought it'd be a nice way to spend our last day together but, fuck me, why do you have to get ridiculous?" I asked.

"I don't want it to end. You're all I've got."

"You don't have me."

"What do you mean?"

"Clayton, there's no future. *No más*," I said.

"No who?"

"*No más*," I repeated. "No more. Spanish."

"Are you Spanish?"

"No, Clayton, I'm not Spanish. Shit, will you let me fucking work?"

"Everything okay over here?"

I looked up and saw Vito looming over the table. Vito is a stocky, hairy man who is some kind of low-level mob or mob wannabe who owns a few cheap horses. He fancies himself a gifted horseplayer but is, I'm sure, one of the many who flat out lies about his profits.

"Everything's fine," I said, scowling at Vito. Much as Clayton was pissing me off, it wasn't any of Vito's business. But that's the thing with these Vito-type guys at the track, what with my being a presentable woman under the age of eighty, a real rarity at Aqueduct—these guys get all protective over me. It might have been vaguely heartwarming if Vito wasn't so smarmy.

Vito furrowed his monobrow. He was sweating profusely even though it was cool inside the restaurant.

"I'm Vito," he said, aggressively extending his hand to Clayton, "and you are ... ?"

"Clayton," said my soon-to-be-ex-paramour, tentatively shaking Vito's pudgy, oily paw.

"We all look out for Alice around here," Vito said.

Go fuck yourself, Vito, I thought, but didn't say. There might be a time when I needed Vito for something.

"Oh," said Clayton, confused, "that's good. I look out for her too."

Vito narrowed his already small eyes, looked from me to Clayton and back, then turned on his heels.

"See ya, Vito," I said as the tub of a man headed out of the restaurant, presumably going down to the paddock-viewing area to volubly express his opinions about the contestants in the first race.

A few races passed. I made a nice little score on a mare shipping in from Philadelphia Park. She was trained by an obscure woman trainer, ridden by some obscure apprentice jockey, and had only ever raced at Philadelphia Park, so in spite of a nice batch of past performances, she was being ignored on the tote board and went off at 14-1. I had \$200 on her to win and wheeled her on top of all the logical horses in an exacta. I made out nicely and that put me slightly at ease and reduced some of the Clayton-induced aggravation that had gotten so severe I hadn't been able to eat my omelet and had started fantasizing about asking Vito to take Clayton out. Not *Take Him Out* take him out, I didn't want the guy dead or anything, but just put a scare into him. Only that would have entailed asking a

favor of Vito and I had no interest in establishing that kind of dynamic with that kind of guy.

The fifth race came and I watched with interest to see how the colt Arthur liked fared. The Todd Pletcher—trained colt Arthur hated, who did in fact go off at 1-9, broke alertly from the six hole and tucked nicely just off the pace that was being set by a longshot with early speed. Gang of Seven, the horse Arthur liked, was at the back of the pack, biding his time. With a quarter of a mile to go, Gang of Seven started making his move four wide, picking off his opponents until he was within spitting distance of the Pletcher horse. Gang of Seven and the Pletcher trainee dueled to the wire and they appeared to get their noses there at the same time.

“Too close to call!” the track announcer exclaimed.

A few minutes later, the photo was posted and the Pletcher horse had beat Big Arthur’s horse by whisker. “I’m a fucking idiot!” I heard Arthur cry out from four tables away. I saw him get up and storm out of the restaurant, presumably to go to the back patio to chain-smoke and make phone calls to twenty of his closest horseplaying friends proclaiming his own idiocy.

“Guy’s got a problem,” Clayton said.

“No he doesn’t,” I replied. While it was true that Arthur had a little trouble with anger management, he was, at heart, a very decent human being.

I got up and walked away, leaving Clayton to stare after me with those dinner plate—sized eyes.

I went down to the paddock, hoping that Clayton wouldn’t follow me. I saw Vito there, staring out the big glass window, his huge belly pressing against it. Searching for a spot as far away as possible from Vito, I craned my neck just to check that Clayton hadn’t followed me. He had. I saw him lumbering around near the betting windows, looking left and right. He’d find me at any minute. And then I’d never get rid of him. Another seventeen weeks would follow.

I needed to give him a clear message, so I did something a little crazy.

“Vito,” I said, coming up behind him.

“Huh?” He turned around.

“Favor?” I asked.

His tiny black eyes glittered.

“Anything, baby,” he purred.

I already regretted what I was doing.

“Can you scare that guy I was sitting with? Just make him a little nervous? Make him go home?”

Vito’s tiny eyes got bigger, like someone had just dangled a bleeding hunk of meat in front of him.

“You serious?” He stood closer to me.

I had a moment’s hesitation. Then thought of Clayton’s love pronouncements.

“Yeah,” I said.

“Sure. Where is he?”

I glanced back but didn’t see Clayton.

“Somewhere around here, let’s look.”

Vito followed at my side. We looked all around the betting windows of the ground floor, but no Clayton. Then I glanced outside and saw him standing near an empty bench, hunched and cold and lost-looking under the dovegray sky.

“There,” I said.

“You got it, baby.”

Without another word, Vito marched outside. I saw him accost Clayton. I saw Clayton tilt his head left and right like a confused dog would. I thought of Candy. Later this afternoon I’d go home to her

and just maybe, thanks to Vito, I wouldn't have to worry about the big oaf turning up with his big eyes and his inane declarations. Candy and I would have some peace and quiet.

Now Clayton and Vito had come back inside and were walking together. They passed not far from where I was standing. Where was Vito taking him? I'd figured on his just saying a few choice words to Clayton and that would be that. But Vito seemed to be taking him somewhere.

I followed them at a slight distance. They went down the escalator and out the front door. Vito was only wearing a thin button-down shirt but he didn't seem to register the bite of the February air. Clayton pulled his coat up around his ears.

They headed over to the subway platform. I saw Clayton take out his MetroCard and go through the turnstile. Then he handed his card back to Vito who went through after him.

What the fuck?

I stopped walking and stayed where I was in the middle of the ramp leading to the turnstiles. The two men were about a hundred yards in front of me but they had their backs to me. There wasn't anyone else on the platform.

They started raising their voices. I couldn't hear what was being said. There was wind and a big airplane with its belly low against the sky.

Then the sound of an oncoming train and a blur of movement.

A body falling down into the tracks just as the train came. I braced myself for the screeching of brakes. There wasn't any. The train charged into the station. The doors opened then closed. No one got on or off. The train pulled away. There was just one guy left standing on the platform. He was looking down at the tracks.

My fingers were numb and I was getting a headache.

I slowly walked up the platform. Found my Metro-Card in my coat. Slid it in and went through the turnstile. I walked to the edge and looked down at the tracks. There was an arm separated from the rest of the body. Blood pouring out the shoulder. The head twisted at an angle you never saw in life. I wasn't sure how the train conductor had failed to notice. The MTA has been very proud of its new One-Person Train Operation system that requires just one human to operate the entire train. Maybe that's not enough to keep an eye out for falling bodies.

I felt nauseous. I started to black out and then he steadied me, putting his hand at the small of my back

"He was talking about you," said Clayton, staring down at Vito's big mangled body, "said you were going to blow him in exchange for him getting rid of me. He was just trying to upset me but it was disrespectful of you. I just wanted to scare him but I pushed him too hard and he fell onto the tracks." Clayton spoke so calmly. "He was talking shit about you, Alice," he added, raising his voice a little.

"Well," I said, "that wasn't very nice of him, was it?"

Clayton smiled.

He really wasn't a bad-looking guy.

2. ELOISE

The phone woke me.

“Yeah?” I said, after reaching blindly toward the nightstand, knocking the lamp off, and finally grabbing the phone.

“Eloise Hunter?”

“Yes?” It sounded like very bad news.

It was.

Indio, my lover, a Brazilian trapeze instructor, had plunged to his death while scrambling up the side of the Queensboro Bridge.

His family had been contacted in Brazil but could not come up. They had given the medical examiner my name. Would I identify the body?

“The body,” I said.

“Yes,” said the voice. “If you could.”

Could I?

I said I would.

I hung the phone up. Looked at the clock. It was just after 8 a.m. I picked the bedside lamp off the floor. I went into the bathroom. I banged my shin into the toilet. I tried to vomit but could not. I threw water on my face. I looked around the bathroom. The tiny, blue-tiled bathroom of my tiny apartment on Riverside Drive and 101st Street. I don't know what I was looking for. There was nothing to find.

Indio and I had broken up. Seven times. He wanted to be around me constantly. I wanted to be around him occasionally. I didn't love him but he was always there. Now he was a body that needed identifying.

He had told me about it. How he was going to practice, in the middle of the night, an illegal stunt he planned to do later in daylight, for a few dozen invited friends. Swinging from one part to another of the Queensboro Bridge. When he'd told me about this plan, I had just shrugged. It wasn't any stranger or more dangerous than other stunts he had performed. At least, I hadn't thought so.

I went into my small kitchen. My cat, Hammie, was on the counter, clamoring for breakfast. I fed her then knelt down and ran my hand over the gray fur on her spine. I hunkered over her and sniffed at the back of her neck, taking in the soothing creature smell there.

I stared around at my little kitchen. I got the can of Café Bustelo out from the cupboard. Scooped some into a filter and started the coffee brewing. I watched the thick brown liquid drip down into the glass carafe.

It was long done brewing by the time I was able to make my body move in order to pour myself a cup.

I went to sit at the edge of my bed. I picked up my book. A Harry Crews novel I was just starting. I'd planned to have a lazy morning, reading in bed. I tried to read a sentence but it blurred.

As I sipped my coffee, I watched Hammie bathing her- self. I pictured Indio's beautiful body.

I took my pajamas off and stood naked, staring into my closet.

~~My bad leg, which had been shattered when I'd fallen in a manhole three years earlier, was aching.~~

I didn't have to wait long. A woman in a white coat brought me to a window. I looked through and saw Indio on a stretcher. Only his head was visible, the rest covered in a sheet. His face looked fine. There was some bruising on the right side but he just looked tired. Like he was napping after a nasty spill and would wake up, thrilled to find me there.

I truly expected him to sit up, bang on the glass, and maybe ask me, in his singsongy voice, if I'd like to go have an adventure.

"Yes," I said. "That's him."

I wondered what the rest of him looked like. The parts covered by the sheet. I'd been told he'd broken his spine. But it didn't show on his face.

"Goodbye," I said to him through the glass. The woman standing next to me, some sort of morgue worker, said nothing.

I walked out into the cool spring morning. Traffic was bustling up First Avenue. The sky was a pale blue.

I came home and sat heavily on the bed that took up most of the small living area. Hammie rubbed his gray head against my calves. I stared at my boots. They were sexy, knee-high boots. Indio had loved them.

As I sat considering whether or not to go back to bed, the doorbell rang. I went to the window to look down and saw my mother standing on my stoop with a massive brown pit bull at her side.

"Mom," I called down through the window. "What is it?"

My mother lives a hundred miles north of New York City, in Woodstock, where she has a little wooden house and two acres on which she keeps rescued dogs that she tries to find homes for. Whenever she encounters a dog she doesn't have room for, she turns up on my doorstep, unannounced, expecting me to foster the dog in question.

"I have a present for you, sweetheart." My mother was craning her neck and her still-youngish face looked exuberant, like a little kid who has just played a prank on her elders.

"Indio is dead," I said.

"What?" My mother screwed her face up.

"Indio fell off a bridge and died."

As my mother struggled with this information, one of my downstairs neighbors, Jeff, opened his window and looked up at me.

"Eloise, you're not taking that monstrous dog into your apartment. It will kill you and eat your flesh."

"Yes, Jeff, I know," I said.

Jeff likes to think about things like my being devoured by wild dogs. Maybe this is why I find him attractive.

"Just come on up, Mom," I said. I pulled my head back out of the window and hit the buzzer, opening the down-stairs door.

"You're not serious about Indio," my mother said as she came into my apartment, gently tugging on the massive brown dog's leash. The pit bull seemed hesitant to cross my threshold. Looked timid from my mother to me and, after much encouragement, finally came in.

"Yes. He's dead. I had to identify his body," I said without emotion.

"Oh Eloise." My mother dropped the beast's leash and threw her arms around me. I felt myself

stiffen.

~~My mother gave up on trying to get me to surrender to the hug and sat down on the bed. The pit bull looked around nervously, waiting for a cue from Mom, who patted the bed, indicating the dog should jump up there.~~

“Mom, I don’t even like dogs.”

“Eloise, tell me about Indio,” my mother said, willfully ignoring my statement. “How did this happen, when did you find out?”

I gave her the facts.

“I don’t like dogs, Mom,” I reiterated when I’d finished telling her about Indio. “I appreciate what you do to save them but I’m tired of taking dogs in.”

“Eloise, you’re shut down. You’ve just experienced something incredibly painful. You need to talk about it.”

My mother’s face was so earnest. So lovely. Her olive skin clear and free of wrinkles. Her wild, curly black hair flying all around. At fifty-three, she is twenty-four years older than me but could pass for my older sister. She has led an unconventional life and it has agreed with her.

“Oh, Mom,” I said. “I can’t talk about it. Do you want some coffee?”

“Yes, please.”

I trudged over to the kitchen area where Hammie was perched on the counter, looking extremely upset about the presence of a dog.

“Did you tell Alice?” my mother called out.

“This just happened this morning.”

“I wish you two were closer,” my mother said.

“It’s not a lack of closeness. I haven’t had time to call my sister. I literally just got back from the morgue when you turned up on my doorstep with a pit bull.” I motioned at the beast tentatively wagging its tail.

“Having experienced death today, surely you can understand why I could not leave Turbo to die. She was scheduled for the gas chamber tomorrow.”

“Mom, you’re guilt tripping me when my lover has just died?”

“I’m sorry.” My mother actually hung her head.

It took forty-five minutes to convince my mother I was all right and get her to leave me in peace. Of course, I had to agree to foster Turbo. And now, Turbo and I were staring at each other. I hadn’t wanted to admit it in front of my mother, but I thought that this solid brown dog with a shady past might help keep the ghosts at bay.

“Hello, Turbo,” I said as I sat at the kitchen table, sipping another cup of coffee. She tilted her big square head and appeared to smile. She couldn’t have actually known her name since it had just been assigned to her at the shelter. She was simply responding to the sound of my voice. She seemed to like me, but then again, she would have probably liked anyone who showed her kindness.

A week after Indio’s death, I tried getting back to work. Not that I have to work. I’m rich, or at least rich by my standards, having gone from dirt poor to 1.2 million just about overnight when I fell in the manhole, crushed my pelvis, stayed in a coma for two weeks, and came out of it to find an ambulance chaser lawyer with a comb-over sitting vigil at my bedside. It was a big case for him, actually winning and getting all that money out of the city. And, as I mourned the fact that the city I love had literally tried to devour me by sucking me down into its entrails and crushing my pelvis, the doctors and surgeons pieced me back together. I can walk, but I have a hitch in my step from one leg being shorter

than the other. And I'm extremely wary of movable *things* in the streets and sidewalks.

~~But as a result of that money, I don't have to work. Yet I do. I've had my own small business since~~ the age of sixteen when I started making unconventional stuffed animals. Mythical beasts with enormous heads, tiny bodies, and long, snaking tails. Sometimes they have the heads of dogs and the bodies of rats. Other times they are part giraffe. Still others are entirely unrecognizable except as things I've seen in my dreams. I love my beasts and it's a heartbreak each time I finish one and have to put it into the closet where I store all the finished animals that I'll eventually distribute to the toy stores that carry my work. Now that I have money, I could just hoard them all until I've spent every last dime. But that wouldn't be right either. I make my beasts so they can go out into the world.

I had just started making drawings for a giant cockroach with a dog's head. But my heart wasn't it. In fact, I wasn't sure I had a heart. Since Indio's death, I had felt nothing other than swells of affection for Turbo, whose sweetness and willingness were hard to ignore.

"Do you want to walk?" I asked Turbo.

Her language skills were improving. She now understood "Walk," "Food," "No Kitty," and "Sit." "Walk" was her favorite. She got up off her dog bed, spun around in two quick circles, then sat and grinned up at me, exposing her pink gums and the tip of her tongue.

Turbo bounded down the stairs and out onto the sidewalk. She trotted proudly at my side. The first week she'd been with me, she'd alternated between pulling wildly and stopping dead in her tracks, staring all around at this world that by turns amazed and frightened her. Now she had some confidence. She was a dog who believed in something.

We walked then walked some more. Turbo was enthusiastic about each new block, each garbage can that needed sniffing, each person or dog we passed, most of them ignoring her grinning face and wagging tail, some going so far as to cross the street. I liked this about her. That she looked like a monster but was filled with love for everything.

We wandered all the way to Central Park and, since Turbo was still full of beans, we entered. Darkness was falling, the budding trees throwing shadows, but it's not like I was worried with the powerful brown beast at my side. I doubted she would actually attack someone coming after me, but her looks alone would give any would-be thugs pause.

We had ambled all the way down to the boathouse and were following a nice, well-lit path, when somehow tripped over a tree root, went sprawling, and landed face first.

I wanted to wail. I'm ridiculously accident-prone but I hadn't actually banged into anything or fallen off a sidewalk in well over a week and thought maybe this was due to the death of Indio, that this was a big enough dose of emotional pain to ward off any physical stumbles.

As I lay there, feeling my face stinging and my lip throbbing, Turbo put her muzzle next to my mouth and tried to lick the blood pouring out of my lip.

I gently pushed her back.

"That looks awful," a voice said.

I glanced up to find a lanky, fair-haired guy standing there. As I blinked up at him, he squatted down and reached over to touch my face. I stared at him, transfixed. Turbo looked from the guy to me and back, waiting for a signal in case I needed protection.

"It's okay, Turbo," I said, though I wasn't sure that it was.

"You're going to need stitches. Your lip is bleeding. Here."

The stranger produced a handkerchief from a pocket. A genuine handkerchief. I hadn't seen one since my Grandpa Edgar had died in 1987.

"You have a handkerchief?" I asked as I held said handkerchief to my lip, soaking it with blood.

“A gentleman always has a handkerchief,” he replied. “What happened to you?”

“I tripped on a branch. I’m very clumsy,” I said. “And unlucky. My half-sister earns a living as a professional gambler. She got all the luck in our family. My mother and I are clumsy losers.” I was babbling, as I often do right after an accident. The day I came to after my manhole coma, they couldn’t shut me up.

“Oh?” the guy tilted his head.

He was big and attractive. Or maybe I was just dazed and susceptible.

“Can I help you to the hospital?” he asked.

“I’d prefer not to.”

“Prefer not to what?”

“Prefer not to go to the hospital. They’re all crazy.”

“Hospitals or the medical profession?”

“Both,” I said.

He smiled. He was missing a front tooth. It was incongruous. He was well-dressed, apparently solvent and healthy, yet missing a front tooth. I stared at the space in his mouth as he helped me to my feet.

“As much as it may pain you to put yourself at the mercy of the medical profession, I do believe you should let me take you to the emergency room. My car is right on Fifth Avenue. I’ll run you down to NYU Medical Center. It’s arguably less offensive than other ERs.”

I nodded dumbly, tugged on Turbo’s leash, and followed the man with the missing tooth to his car.

He helped me usher Turbo into the backseat where she plopped down, pleased at our adventure’s unusual turn.

“I’m Billy, by the way,” he said as he simultaneously maneuvered the car into traffic and gave me another handkerchief, this one plucked from the glove compartment of his Saab.

“Eloise,” I said.

“Nice to meet you.”

Billy kept Turbo entertained outside the hospital the entire two and a half hours it took for me to get taken care of. As I got my lip numbed then sewn up by a young and enthusiastic resident, I thought of Billy. It made no sense. I am not impulsive with men. That’s my sister Alice’s department. I prefer getting to know them, building up tension, making sure the attraction is solid and that the individual question is not married or mentally ill.

When I finally emerged from the ER, I found Billy and Turbo standing out front. Turbo was gazing up at him, obviously communicating something. Billy in turn was looking at Turbo as if she were the most beautiful creature on the face of the earth.

“She’s an incredible dog,” he said.

“Yes,” I agreed, coming closer. I looked up at him with what I hoped was less obvious longing than Turbo’s. I stood on tiptoes and kissed his mouth.

He was surprised at first. He pulled back fractionally, then returned the kiss, trying to be gentle on my injured lip, wrapping me in his long arms, crushing me to him as if he’d been waiting for me for years.

“This is unusual,” he said, when he pulled back from me.

“What is?”

“This affinity I feel for you.”

“Do you usually dislike people?”

“Mostly, yes.”

“Oh,” I said. “Well, that’s sad.”

“How can you possibly say that?”

“Isn’t life more interesting when you can look forward to chance affinities?”

“I hadn’t considered that,” he answered. “Can I take you home with me?”

“Yes. Please.”

We put Turbo in the backseat then got into his car, driving to his place way down on the Lower East Side where, Billy told me, he’s been living since the days when boys with sawed-off shotguns stood on the corners guarding the street drug trade.

“I used to get knifed and mugged a few times a month back in the day,” Billy said, in that wistful way people in their forties speak of New York as a very different place, a place where anything was permitted and the rich were confined Uptown.

Billy’s apartment was on the top floor of an old four-story building that had once been some sort of factory. The apartment was airy with high ceilings, old rusted steel beams, and a wall of windows.

“Is your dog a cat chaser? I have cats,” Billy said.

“No, she’s fine with my cat. How many cats do you have?”

“Three,” he said, “but I guess they’re all hiding.”

Three? I thought. But before I could thoroughly examine the red flags raised by the fact of multiple cats, Billy threw me down on the bed. He pinned my arms back and stared at me so deeply I thought he was going to paint my portrait. I was surprised by his intensity. Then surrendered to it in a way I couldn’t remember surrendering before.

He explored every inch of my body with his large hands and his soft mouth. He penetrated me with his fingers and then his very thick cock. I had a fleeting thought of condoms and with it AIDS, herpes, gonorrhea, and syphilis, but some part of my mind whispered, *Don’t worry, Eloise, let it go.* And I did.

“Do you run dog fights?” Billy asked at some point, maybe 4 a.m., after we had exhausted each other and were laying in the darkness, flat on our backs, shoulders touching.

“What?”

“Turbo’s ears are cropped.”

“Do I look like I run dog fights?”

“Yes,” he said, putting his hand between my legs.

“She was that way when my mom rescued her. Someone probably tried to get her to fight but she’s about the least aggressive dog I’ve ever met.”

“Are you a paratrooper?” he asked then.

“Where’d you get that one?”

“The hitch in your giddyup. The scars on your thighs. I thought you’d jumped from a plane and landed awkwardly.”

“Oh,” I said. “No. No plane jumping. Though I flew one once when I was eighteen.”

“And the hitch will remain a mystery?”

“Yes,” I said for reasons I failed to understand. I usually love telling all about the manhole crushing my pelvis and, if I trust and like the person, I even hint at the money the city gave me in exchange for swallowing me. But I didn’t want to discuss such things with Billy.

I fell back to sleep, my head in the crook of Billy’s neck, and woke as dawn was breaking through the wall of windows. Turbo was licking my face.

“You need to go out?” I asked the brown dog.

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