

## STRAY: Chapter One

by J.K. Hogan

*“Tell me, my young friend, have you ever heard of the Midnight Sentinel? No? Don’t worry, I am not surprised. If we’ve done our job correctly, you wouldn’t have.*

*“What would you say, little mouse, if I told you that nightmares are real? That all of the stories you’ve heard of things that go bump in the night are true? All things that howl, prowl, bite, and kill—from vampires to werewolves, from wendigos to witches, monsters to demons. Would you believe me? Would you take care?”*

*“Your face tells me that you don’t, and you wouldn’t. That is why the Midnight Sentinel exists. Though religion is such an archaic notion conceived of by primitive humans...things like Heaven and Hell, God and the Devil... but I can assure you, dear boy, that there is a Hell—and we are living in it.”*

~ Sebastian Locke, said to Ethan, a go-go boy giving him a lap dance

*Same old shit, different day.* That was the thought Sebastian Locke had as he walked down a darkened alley in the Lilliputian city of Beltrane. He’d found himself heading to Club Sanctuary for the third night in a row, because he had nothing goddamn else to do. Estranged from his old-money-rich family and harboring a life-destroying secret, Sebastian drifted along the fringes of life, constantly at loose ends.

It was why he took such risks, like walking alone in the deserted alley. It was why he had no fear when the trio of thugs in hoodies approached him slowly, posturing like chained male dogs when someone invaded their territory. Maybe it was his waist-length white-blond hair and pale blue eyes. Perhaps it was the innate arrogance that came from being born into aristocracy, or maybe it was his utter inability to give any fucks about them, but something about Sebastian seemed to instantly provoke these humans into violence.

And Sebastian welcomed it. Watching for the moment they realized the mistake they’d made was the only thing that made him feel alive. Besides, it wasn’t like they could kill him. His hackles rose when the thick-necked one on the left advanced on him. He was shorter than Sebastian by half a foot at least, but obviously being a meathead, he had twice the bulk.

“Look, Joe. This one’s pretty as a woman.”

Sebastian raised his chin a fraction. *Joe*, the guy in the middle, a mean-looking creature with a neck tattoo and a scar that bisected his brow and slashed across the bridge of his nose, stepped right up in Sebastian’s space. He scowled, his low brow shading his glittering, beady eyes. “Fuckin’ homos. Why don’t you freaks stay the hell out of our city?” He gave Sebastian’s shoulder a shove, so he was forced to take a step back.

Sebastian allowed it. This was just foreplay. “If you don’t want to see any ‘homos,’ perhaps you shouldn’t do your lurking around the corner from a predominately-gay club.” He gave an unconcerned shrug of one shoulder. “Just a suggestion, *Joe*.”

Sebastian could feel the man’s anger rolling off of him in waves. It vibrated the very air, stirring the hair on his arms and neck, making his skin twitch with anticipation. He relished that anger. It was life.

Joe lunged forward and wrapped a meaty hand around Sebastian's slender neck, squeezing just enough to hurt a human, but not Sebastian. "I can think of something better to do with that pretty mouth than flappin' it at me." He used that grip to back Sebastian up against a brick wall.

Sebastian grinned, wide and feral. The man's eyes popped, no doubt when he spotted Sebastian's long, sharp upper cuspids. He didn't leave Joe any time to recover from that shock. Clamping down on the man's soft inner elbow, Sebastian dislodged the hold. Moving faster than most human eyes could track, he reversed their positions so that now *he* was the one with his hand around Joe's neck. Only Sebastian lifted him up off the ground so he was hanging by that grip alone, his feet twitching and dangling a few inches above the ground.

Joe's cronies hovered just out of punching range, not quite ready to take on the surprisingly capable victim, so Joe was on his own. And then Sebastian saw it. The moment he'd been waiting for. The moment when his gagging would-be attacker clocked his preternatural strength, and added it together with the sharp canines and the way Sebastian's pupils dilated into slits rather than pinholes. Joe didn't know what he was looking at, but he knew it wasn't anything human.

"*What are you?*" he choked, trembling.

Sebastian could smell the man's sweat, his fear. It offended his senses. "'There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio...'" he said. Joe's bug-eyed rictus of horror told Sebastian that he didn't understand the reference. "More's the pity," he said with a snap of his teeth.

He pulled Joe forward by his neck, then slammed him back against the wall so that his head bounced against the brick, emitting a dull thud, but not a crack. Killing a human was punishable by death. Sebastian released his grip on Joe's neck, and allowed him to slip to the cracked concrete below, puddling in a diaphoretic lump of flesh at Sebastian's feet.

Without a second glance, Sebastian turned, just in time to see the cronies beating feet around the corner, clearly realizing they were out-manned. The adrenaline was already leaching from his blood, the emptiness seeping back in its place. Reaching into his pocket for an elastic, Sebastian tied his mass of hair into a loose knot at the base of his skull. The long veil of white-blond attracted too much of the wrong kind of attention. Not that he couldn't handle it, he just couldn't be bothered.

As he rounded the corner of the squat, red brick building that housed Sanctuary, Sebastian glimpsed of a group of homeless huddling together for warmth, next to the bus stop across the street. Beltrane was an affluent city for its modest size, but there were always bodies to step on along the path to prosperity. Every couple of centuries, the herd was culled by disease or political unrest. While mankind clawed its way back from the brink time and again, supernatural beings like Sebastian simply endured.

On his way into the club, Sebastian studied the cluster of street urchins, many of whom were far too young to come to such a fate. One of them made eye contact with him, but he didn't look away or cower from him the way humans typically did. He raised his chin, almost defiantly, and stared Sebastian down until *he* was the one to turn away. Something about the boy had seemed familiar, but in an interminable life, faces blended into one another, and memories evaporated like morning dew.

Shaking his head at his own bathos, Sebastian strolled past the doorman at Sanctuary without so much as a glance. No one stood in his way.

Inside, the air throbbed with music, and bodies writhed in every corner, on every surface. Sebastian took in a deep breath of sweat and pheromone, enjoying the feeling of his constant

pain, his near-total dissatisfaction with life, bleeding away. Here he could be nothing and no one. Here, he wasn't a son or a brother. Here, he wasn't a prince, responsible for the future of a species. Here, he wasn't expected to find a mate and plant sons in her womb, when he was repulsed by the mere idea of touching a woman in prurience. Here, he could find hard, willing hands and strong backs. Here, within these walls, he didn't have to be careful.

Sebastian bypassed the bar—alcohol had little effect on him anyway—and strode onto the dance floor with singular purpose. There, he joined the slick, undulating wave of male flesh, and he was immediately wrapped up in it. Hands were on his hips, his shoulders, freeing his hair from its tie. He raised his arms and allowed his hoodie to be pulled off, uncaring where it landed, because now there was nothing between him and their skin but his thin undershirt.

As always, the boys were fascinated by his hair. They ran eager fingers through it, wrapped it around fists, used it to pull him into messy kisses. He allowed it all, because fighting and fucking were the only ways he ever *felt* anything—anything at all, besides anger and loneliness—and dancing was often the prelude to the latter.

Against his usual nature, Sebastian let them paw at him as he watched the dancers on their raised platforms. When one caught his eye, he raised a brow and cocked his head toward the back room. It was difficult to extricate himself from the spidery arms of the revelers, but Sebastian eventually made it to the door that led to the members-only suites. When he looked back at the dance floor, his dancer's platform was vacated.

Sebastian was reclining on an upholstered chaise in a velvet-draped back room when the boy—man, really—let himself in. He was young, yes, but would be over eighteen. Sebastian had made sure there would be no underage boys when he'd invested capital into the club. He was a silent benefactor, with no interest in running a business, but he made sure the boys were thoroughly vetted, because he'd be no party to pedophilia.

The young man before him was short of stature and slender, but with carefully-honed musculature. He had brown hair and dark eyes, exactly Sebastian's type. He beckoned him closer with a single finger. "What is your name?"

"Ethan," he replied in a thick Rothkian accent.

*Ah, a mountain-child then.* A Felis cast-off. Since the Feliscindae had to cross-breed with humans to reproduce, approximately five percent of offspring ended up with completely human DNA, and hundreds of years of science had yet to explain the phenomenon. The only thing that was certain was that the Feliscindae were not a self-sustaining species. The gets were usually given to human adoptive families to be raised among their own kid, most having no memory at all of their true biology, though they seemed to retain the accent and mannerisms of the mountain-folk. This practice was necessary to keep secret the things that must remain so.

"Come here, Ethan."

The boy obeyed, dropping into an elegant kneel at Sebastian's feet. He was clearly a practiced professional, but fresh enough that he still blushed furiously at the attention. Or maybe he just enjoyed the view as Sebastian pulled off his shirt, baring his chest.

"What would you like, sir?" Ethan asked in his pleasant brogue.

"Dance for me," Sebastian answered, nodding his head toward the sound system to his right.

Ethan rose to his feet and studied the readout on the data-deck, until he said, "number five-eighty-seven."

As he returned to Sebastian, something slow and sultry began pouring from the hidden speakers throughout the room. Ethan stopped a couple of feet from the chaise and started

swinging his hips to the ululating beat. He ran his hands all over his own body, grazing over the skimpy shorts that were his only clothing. His moves were suggestive, broadcasting his willingness to do whatever Sebastian wanted, and leaving little to the imagination as he cupped his groin and thumbed his peaked nipples.

Sebastian's body responded in kind, his manhood swelling and tenting his trousers, but it was nothing but a conditioned physical response, an expression of a biological need. The absolute truth was that Sebastian was dead inside. As dead as any vampire, though he still had a beating heart within his chest.

Ethan climbed into Sebastian's lap, straddling his thighs. He swirled his hips in an imitation of sex, moves carefully designed to entice. He ground down on Sebastian's hardness, leaving no doubt that his body was Sebastian's for the taking.

Ethan's face was flushed, his eyes dilated; it was clear he was on something, which wasn't unusual for club dancers. He was riding the wave of whatever the club-drug-du-jour was—eiki, probably. His judgement wasn't impaired at the moment, but it was likely that Ethan wouldn't remember this encounter the next day. That was just how Sebastian liked it—he'd wipe the kid's memory afterwards anyway, so he could let go and not worry about spilling secrets.

Ethan gripped Sebastian's shoulders, arched his spine, and let his head fall back as he undulated. Sebastian slid his hands up the other man's rangy chest and further, wrapping his fingers loosely around Ethan's throat. The pulse beneath his fingers hammered out a staccato rhythm as Ethan flushed hotter.

"What would you like, sir?" he repeated.

"What would I like?" Sebastian paused to really think. "I'd like someone to *surprise me*. I've had many men over many years, Ethan. There's no surprising me anymore."

Ethan's pretty face puckered into a frown that looked out of place on his cherubic features. This boy should only flush with pleasure or glow with happiness—though Sebastian was not a man who could make such things happen. He wasn't even a man at all.

"Many years?" Ethan asked breathlessly.

"Millennia," Sebastian answered truthfully, with an exhausted roll of his eyes, and he watched as confusion furrowed Ethan's brow. "But enough of that melancholia, little mouse. Lend me your mouth."