

## STRAY: Chapter Four

by J.K. Hogan

Noah let himself inside the house, and turned to look through the peephole to see if he'd been followed. He couldn't believe he'd let his guard down like that. Beltrane was a harsh city, and he was a young, pretty seventeen year old with parents who barely gave enough of a shit to make sure he was still breathing. He was constantly being targeted by criminals, degenerates, and pedophiles who thought he was younger than he really was, so he knew better than to stop paying attention to his surroundings even for a second.

But there was no sign of the creepy stalker, or the peculiar man with the long blond hair who'd run him off. In fact, the only thing out of place was the very large, white cat that sat on its haunches on the sidewalk across the street, staring straight ahead as if it were watching Noah's house. It was big for a domesticated cat—he thought it was probably one of those big-boned breeds like a Maine Coon or something—not that Noah knew much of anything about cats.

It was odd to see a stray cat out and about. Decades before Noah was born, a disease called hypertoxicosis had ravaged the world's population, much like the bubonic plague had centuries before. And like the black death had spread by fleas on rats, hypertoxicosis—or the leeching, as it had been called due to the rapid exsanguination from every pore—had been traced back to a certain few breeds of domestic cat. Since cross-breeding was rampant and uncontrolled among strays, there'd been no way to tell which cats carried the leeching gene, so there had been mass extermination of non-purebred and stray cats. The disease had been almost completely eradicated, but most people still wouldn't touch a cat with a ten foot pole, and many people would still kill them on site. Not Noah though. He liked them. And he knew exactly what it felt like to be stuck in a world that didn't want him.

Even from such a distance, Noah could see the feline's big blue eyes blinking at him, as if it somehow knew he was watching. Satisfied that there was no movement out on the street apart from the cat, Noah turned away from the door. The foyer was dark, but then again, his parents had never bothered leaving a light on for him before, so he had no idea why he'd thought they'd start now.

That wasn't exactly right. When he was little, they'd doted on him like something precious. They'd been good parents, saying and doing all the right things. His mom had been a stay-at-home caregiver for a while, and she'd been great at it, thinking up fun projects for them to work on and taking him places. But slowly, little by little, they had changed. Their eyes faded, and the love in them dissolved until they treated him like nothing but a roommate, or a pet they'd brought home and realized they were stuck with.

When Noah really thought hard about it, he always believed that the tipping point had been when they joined that church. Not that it was like any church Noah had ever seen. They had a building a few streets over, but the *real* action happened at a facility on fifty acres of former farmland outside the Beltrane city limits. Noah had no idea what happened out there—he wouldn't attend, which drove an even deeper wedge between himself and his parents—but it sounded just like every description of a cult he'd ever heard of. Like, textbook.

Church of the New Hope was what they called themselves. The “worship leaders” had been trying to get his parents to move out to the main facility for a while now, but they'd held out this long because Noah refused, and he was their responsibility. But he wondered how long that would last. He was already an adult under the laws of the land, age being a mere formality

these days, and in a few months, he would be an adult in the eyes of the almost-nonexistent official law.

Shaking his head, Noah shrugged off his backpack and dragged it by the strap as he walked into the living room. In there, only a single lamp was lit. He dropped his bag with a gasp when he realized his parents were sitting in the dim room, rigid and silent.

“*Fuck!* You guys scared the shit outta me.”

“Language, boy,” Bob Cowan said in a voice so devoid of emotion, it sucked all the air out of the room.

Anxiety sparking nerves all over his body, Noah’s gaze flickered to their feet, where sat two matching suitcases. He licked his lips and made eye contact with his mother. “What’s going on? Mom...” he prompted when she didn’t answer immediately.

When she looked at him, eyes wide and unblinking, she looked *through* him.

“Dad?”

Noah’s father turned dark eyes on him, the color so like his own. “We’re leaving.”

It was like a bullet to the heart, the way those words punched through Noah, all the more devastating for their dispassion. “You’re going to that commune, aren’t you? The one with the church?”

“Yes,” Emmy Cowan answered, finally making true eye contact. “We are. It’s time.”

“I won’t go with you,” Noah blurted, his voice raising an octave when he had a sudden image of them forcing him into a car and driving him out to some cult.

“We know. You don’t believe the way we do,” Emmy replied with a wealth of censure in her voice.

“We’ve signed the house over to the New Hope,” Bob said. “You can continue living here until they come to claim it for whatever they plan to do with it, but there’s no telling how long that will be so you might want to start thinking about going out on your own—sooner rather than later.”

“Wait, what?”

“They might let you take your proficiencies early, so you can start working.”

“Wait, *what?* You’d do this? Just leave me, abandon your...child?”

“You’re not our child,” Emmy whispered.

Noah stared at their impassive faces, hoping he’d see something that would make their words make sense. “I don’t understand what that means.”

Bob narrowed his eyes. “It has become obvious that you do not belong with us. We’ve realized the truth—with the help of the church. It became painfully obvious with the way you resisted the Light.”

“T-The truth? Which is w-what?”

“You’re a *monster*,” Emmy hissed.

Noah gasped and reeled away from the two strangers, parents who were not his parents. He took a step back, then another. His mind whirled with a hundred different thoughts that wouldn’t quite coalesce, because those blank, shadowy faces were etching themselves into his grey matter. He’d remember them for the rest of his life.

When spots swam in his vision, Noah realized he’d stopped breathing. He tried to take a deep breath, but only managed a strangled wheeze. He took one step back, then another, and another, until he felt the doorframe with his fingertips. All but falling through the door, once he was back in the foyer, he turned and scrambled up the creaky staircase to the second floor.

Skidding around two corners at top speed, he burst into his room and slammed the door shut behind him.

Backing up against the decrepit wood, Noah slid down until his bottom hit the floor, where he curled up in a ball, wrapped his arms around his head, and bawled until he couldn't speak and could barely breathe.

The musty smell of the mildewing carpet invaded his senses, choking the breath from his lungs. He couldn't move.

*You're not our child.*

What did that mean? Maybe they were disowning him. Maybe he was adopted.

Noah guessed it didn't really matter because they were leaving him. He heard footsteps downstairs. Doors opening and closing. Sounds of objects being moved around, dragged. The final sound of the heavy front door slamming shut. And then he knew.

He was alone.

Noah needed to breathe. He tried to stand up, to open the window, but he couldn't force his extremities to cooperate. He'd heard of this, sometime while studying for his proficiencies, this thing that happened to a person who was traumatized. *Hysterical paralysis*, they'd called it.

He couldn't move his legs, but he had partial control over his arms, so he crawled. Gasping for air, he dragged himself across the room, over the moldering carpet, until he reached his workbench that was situated in front of the window. Noah's muscles trembled as he hauled himself onto it, sending tools and mechanical parts raining to the floor. With a gasp and a groan, he forced up the sash, dragged his body over the sill, and tumbled out onto the rusted fire escape.

Crisp night air filled his lungs. The mist of light rain settled on his skin like dew on a spider web. Finally, Noah could breathe. And move. But he didn't. He lay there on the fire escape, staring up at the swirling gray nimbus above him. *Breathe. Just breathe.*

Noah heard a noise to his left. Barely a whisper. Weary, like moving through molasses, he turned his head and saw the cat. The big white cat that had been staring at his house was padding along the metal railing, impossibly balanced on a surface no more than two inches in width. It blinked at him, waiting.

"You're a big fella, aren't you? Surely you belong to somebody or you probably wouldn't have survived this long, so why are you following me around?" Noah rolled to his side, the cold from the corrugated metal fire escape seeping through his clothes to his skin, and faced the cat. "Don't you have a home? A family? I don't. Not anymore." His voice broke on the last syllable, and dissolved into a sob.

The cat leapt off the railing, landing on silent feet beside Noah. It crouched into a sphinx position and watched him. Unblinking. Still.

Noah sniffled, then rubbed his face with the sleeve of his pullover. "I can stay in this house at least. Until they come and take it."

The cat remained, so Noah kept talking, saying everything and nothing. "My parents left to join some religious commune. Church of the New Hope. I think it's a cult, but they don't much care what I think. They said I wasn't their child. They said I'm a monster..." His breath hitched. His lips trembled.

"I'm almost a man now. I take my proficiencies in a few weeks. In the eyes of practically everyone, I'm adult enough to survive, except I have nothing. No money, no job, only a temporary roof over my head. The only income I have is from the electronics I build. I can sometimes sell them to people who can't afford the store-bought kind. Sometimes being the

operative word. And you know what else? I'm lying in the rain, pouring out my life story at the feet of a stray cat. Gods, what a mess I am."

The cat inched closer, crawling with its belly to the floor, approaching cautiously. It obviously decided that Noah posed no threat, because it curled up in the hollow of his stomach, its tail wrapping around its body and face until it was nothing but a furry white ball. Grateful for the warmth of life that penetrated his numbness, Noah drifted off to sleep. It wouldn't be the last time he slept outside in the rain.

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Weeks later, Noah had abandoned his room upstairs, for the heat of the fireplace on the main level. The central heating had cut off shortly after his parents left, since nobody paid the bill, and the electricity soon followed. It was still a roof, he often told himself when the weather was particularly foul. He was occasionally able to get firewood that people dropped off at the agri-dump, but mostly he burned pieces of furniture or his parents' books, things that would never get used again.

Noah's mother had been a gardener and a canner, so he'd had quite a bit of preserved food. That was something that had probably saved his life. He treated himself to a real meal whenever he was able to sell some of his electronics, but he mostly existed on canned vegetables, fruit preserves, and dried meats. It would have to do, because until he passed his proficiencies, he wasn't legally employable.

He was soldering a circuit chip when the pounding started—heavy fist-falls on the door—and he knew what it meant. The church had come to claim the house. Whether they had plans to rent it out for profit, or to tear it down, he had no clue, but he knew they wouldn't let him squat there. And something told Noah he shouldn't be there when they came in.

Turning off his portable torch, he let it cool while he stuffed his tools, safety gear, loose parts, and a few unfinished projects into a wide leather duffel. The torch went in last, and he prayed it was cool enough to not burn a hole in the bag.

The knock came again, louder this time, more insistent.

Noah looped the shoulder strap over his head, across his body, and hefted the bag. He dashed up the stairs as fast as his load allowed. He'd taken to keeping his backpack stuffed full of clothes and the few trinkets he couldn't live without, in case he needed to make a quick exit. His instinct proved correct. After setting the duffel down long enough to shoulder the backpack, he picked it up again, grunting at the weight of it. He'd have to find somewhere safe to stash his gear, and then find somewhere safe to stay the night.

The loud crash from downstairs echoed through the house just as Noah was stuffing his bags through his bedroom window. They'd kicked the door in—they'd had to, because Noah had scraped together enough money to change the lock. He couldn't say why he felt it was so important that the church people didn't find him in the house—maybe they'd try to have him arrested for squatting, or worse, try to force him to come with them to their creepy commune. Noah wasn't sticking around to find out.

His dirty sneakers thudded on the fire escape as he jumped down from his window. He could hear the faceless intruders rummaging around inside the house as he hoisted his bags on his shoulders and descended the rusty stairs. It was dark, as dark as it had been the night that terrifying man had stalked him. Noah vowed to be more aware of his surroundings as he plunged into the emptiness, intent on finding a place to spend the night.

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*Sometimes when I'm in a dream, I know I'm in a dream. From the moment I fall asleep, I dream, straight through until I wake up again. Every night I die a thousand deaths.*

*Tonight I am me, but someone else. A boy of about ten, with a halo of golden curls. I only know because I catch a glimpse of myself in a store window as I walk down the sidewalk. My pale skin is flushed pink from the whipping wind. It is day, but the streets are shadowy. I sense a presence nearby but I see no one else on the block.*

*I turn a corner, head down an alley, and stop short. A girl appears before me. Older than me, but not by much. Her hair is dark as midnight, her skin, pale as the moon. I'm intrigued by her, so when she turns to leave, I follow. She leads me around another corner, on another darkened city block. I follow her until I lose my bearings and my surroundings no longer look familiar.*

*Suddenly she stops, then turns to face me. She smiles, the moonlight glinting off her teeth. She crowds me against the crumbling brick of the side of a building. I think she's going to kiss me and I am paralyzed. But instead, she sinks her teeth into my neck, and my mind goes blank, my thoughts like quicksand as she sucks the life out of me.*