

STRAY: Chapter Six

by J.K. Hogan

Surrounded by wolves, I tear through the trees, pounding the ground as I run until my heart feels as if it might explode. And when I risk a look down, there are paws instead of feet. Four of them, bestrewn with silver fur. And I run because my blood thunders with the need to be wild. If I do not run, I eventually wither and die.

Noah awoke in an unfamiliar place. He was on a cot, with blankets heaped on top of him, and what felt like a heating pad under him. He tried to think back, to figure out how he'd managed to get here. It had been such a cold night. He'd tried to bed down in the crypt he used for stashing his equipment and few meager belongings, but the stone walls and concrete floor had amplified the cold. After only a few minutes, he felt it sinking into his bones, paralyzing his muscles, and he'd known if he fell asleep there, he'd never wake up.

So he'd gone back out into the park, hoping to find a warm place to huddle, or perhaps to hook up with a transient group for warmth. He found no one, and he ended up crashing on a bench. At least the bench was wooden and held his warmth, instead of draining it from his body like metal would have. He had still been worried, because he couldn't get warm no matter how deeply he nestled into his heavy blanket.

The last thing he remembered was the cat returning. The cat who'd watched his house all those years ago. It couldn't be the same cat, but somehow he knew it was. The cat had been warm, friendly, and the last thing Sebastian remembered were those clear blue eyes watching him. They were very similar to the black-rimmed blue eyes that were staring at him now.

He bolted upright, clutching his blanket to his chest when he realized a stranger sat in a chair beside his cot. But he wasn't a stranger, was he? No, because Noah recognized him. He was the exotic man who had saved Noah from his stalker on the day his parents disowned him. Every moment of that day was burned into his mind, so he'd never forget this guy. But what was he doing *here*?

"Who... Who are you?"

"My name is Sebastian Locke. I believe we have met before, yes?"

"I think so," Noah hedged. "I'm Noah."

"I remember." Sebastian's lips twitched, as if he wanted to smile but couldn't quite manage it.

"Um...where am I?"

"You're at a shelter we run inside Club Sanctuary. Not far from where we met."

"I know the place," Noah answered carefully. "I didn't know there was a shelter here."

"There wasn't, then. I'm a silent partner in the club. I had some of the back rooms converted for use as a shelter."

Sebastian's smooth, refined voice flowed over Noah like silk, making his toes curl. The man's lips were pure sin, and Noah couldn't take his eyes off of them. Being a young homeless gay man, more pretty than handsome, was a precarious position in Beltrane, but Noah figured he was safe enough in a shelter run out of a gay club. Because of this, he didn't try as hard to hide

his interest as he normally would. A blush stained Sebastian's pale skin when he caught Noah staring.

"And..." Noah licked his dry lips. "H-how did I get here?"

"I was cutting through the park on my way to the south side when I found you on a bench. Couldn't leave you there, you were obviously hypothermic, so I carried you back here."

"You carried me?" Noah asked stupidly. It wasn't out of the realm of possibility—Sebastian was a very big man—but Noah couldn't believe he'd slept through something like that. Then again, maybe he hadn't been sleeping. Maybe he'd been unconscious.

Another man, one with a bald head and muscles for days, scarred and tattooed, walked up behind Sebastian. Noah gasped and cowered away from him, because guys like that had never been good news for him. Sebastian glanced over his shoulder, unconcerned, before turning the full force of those icy eyes back to Noah. "That's my business partner, Shine Blackwelder," he explained, jerking his chin toward his shoulder. "He manages the club. If I'm the silent partner, I guess that makes him the loud one."

"Fuck off, Locke," said the mountain, before plopping himself right down onto the foot of Noah's cot, which creaked precariously under his weight. "This your stray from last night?" he asked, as if Noah couldn't answer for himself.

"Shine, Noah. Noah, Shine," Sebastian said, without looking away from Noah. "Contrary to his appearance and mannerisms, Shine is one of the good guys. You can trust him."

Noah swallowed hard. He couldn't imagine himself going to that guy for help, but Sebastian on the other hand... "Thank you both. For finding me, and letting me stay here."

"I've got to take care of some things in the front of the house," Shine said. He looked Noah dead in the eyes. "If you need anything... Anybody hassles you... You come let me know. Got it?"

Noah nodded. Shine's size made Noah nervous, and his tendency to loom didn't help. Eventually he left them alone, and silence descended, so stark that Noah looked back at Sebastian. Those strange blue eyes within a vaguely leonine face regarded him steadily, unblinking. Eventually, he spoke.

"I must be honest with you, Noah. I was hoping we'd meet again."

Noah's pulse spiked for a brief, euphoric moment, before his heart plummeted to his feet, because there was no way this god among men was interested in him. "Oh?"

Sebastian pursed his lips and tapped his long tapered fingers against them, his brow furrowing, and he seemed to be thinking about his words very carefully. "After...we met, I heard some things. About your parents. Noah, can you tell me why it is that you're sleeping on park benches?"

It by turns baffled and terrified Noah that people were having conversations about him, enough to draw the attention of someone like Sebastian. "Are...are you an...Enforcer?" Sebastian didn't look like a member of the Citizen Militia—lovingly referred to as Enforcers—and they had precious little presence in the city these days anyway, but Noah couldn't find any other reason for Sebastian to be questioning him about his parents.

Sebastian had the nerve to chuckle. "Gods, no. But I am someone who likes to keep abreast of what goes on in Beltrane, especially the more untoward practices. Will you tell me what happened to you?"

"My parents joined a cult," Noah blurted before he could stop himself. He was still exhausted, weakened from the brush with hypothermia, and all he wanted was to unload his burden for a brief moment. And something about Sebastian just seemed to compel his obedience,

so Noah told him everything he knew about the Church of the New Hope, and his parents leaving him for the commune. Sebastian was quiet, staying perfectly still aside from his fingernails scraping along the materials of his slacks.

“Did you have any idea you were adopted?” he asked once Noah’s words had tapered off.

“No. So you think that’s what they meant?”

Sebastian dipped his chin in acquiescence. “Yes, I do. I’m assuming you don’t have any idea who your birth parents could be.”

Noah shook his head, his mind growing more muzzled with every second that passed. Thinking became a herculean effort, so he just stared at Sebastian instead. The man was saying something, but Noah was too weary to follow.

Sebastian’s face was long and angular, with cheekbones so high and sharp, they could’ve been chiseled from marble. His lips were full and looked as soft as a woman’s, not that Noah had any particular interest in women’s lips. It was just a scientific observation. One of Sebastian’s more striking features was his peculiar eyes. They were so clear and blue, they reminded Noah of one of those arctic sled-dogs, but his thick, black lashes seemed out of place on one so pale.

Then there was the hair. The silken fall of white-blond, almost silver plainly fascinated Noah. He’d never seen hair that long on a man. It should’ve looked feminine, but somehow, it was exactly the opposite. It made him look like a *man*. A warrior. Before he realized what he was doing, Noah shot a hand out and hooked a lock of that hair with his index finger.

Noah sensed Sebastian’s entire body freeze next to him, as he allowed the satiny ribbon of hair glide along his skin, before dropping his hand back down to his lap. He knew he must be blushing to the roots of his hair, and he couldn’t meet Sebastian’s eyes. “Sorry,” he mumbled.

“You don’t ever have to apologize for touching me, Noah,” his deep voice rumbled. “I’d be perfectly happy for you to do it whenever you want.”

Noah choked on a gasp, and Sebastian’s chuckle sent a shiver down his spine. But then he heaved a sigh that sounded full of regret. “Thank you for sharing your story with me. Could you look at me for a moment?”

He could’ve asked Noah for his last breath in that low, rich timbre, and he would’ve been hard pressed not to give it to him. Helpless, Noah looked into that crystalline gaze, twin icebergs that seemed to bore into him. His already hazy mind clouded even further, his eyelids grew heavy, but he couldn’t look away. He felt warm. Alive. Safe. He was so relaxed, he barely even remembered where he was. *Who* he was.

Noah had almost drifted off to sleep when another man entered the room. This man was dark-haired, even paler than... Than...who? He was so slender that he almost looked frail. Almost, because he also effused danger from every pore. People seemed to cower away from him as he walked with deceptive placidity. A snake in the grass, a cobra coiled and waiting for the opportunity to strike.

The newcomer headed straight toward the stranger who’d been at Noah’s bedside—whose name seemed to disappear into the ether before Noah’s mind could grasp it back, and the struggle to do so left him with a blinding headache. The man with long hair had risen, and was moving to intercept this new visitor. Murmured voices drifted closer, a heated conversation between the long-haired man and the waifish one who set off all kinds of alarm bells inside Noah’s head. The dark-haired man gestured in Noah’s direction, his black eyes regarded Noah, that insidious gaze sliding over his body like an unwanted touch.

A disturbing feeling, some inner since of foreboding, scraped along his bones, propelling his heart to pump blood to his extremities. As the blond man crowded the stranger farther away from him, short of breath, with a heart full of inexplicable fear, Noah ran for his life.

The Bazaar was held on the ruins of an ancient amusement park, a relic from before the last two purges. Rows of tables lined the potholed blacktop, surrounded by rusted skeletons of rides from that bygone era, with weeds and kudzu overtaking the fringes. Here was where the ne'er-do-wells, the poverty-stricken, the downtrodden, the not-quite-working class of Beltrane came to peddle their wares and services. Here was the dark side of Beltranean commerce.

The amusement park was condemned, reclaimed by the city, but mostly reclaimed by nature herself, so participating in the Bazaar was free. One only needed to have his own table to sell his goods, no taxes were charged, profits were all cash-in-hand. Noah didn't have a table, but he'd found some plastic delivery crates behind a recently-vacated convenience store, and dragged them out to the Bazaar. He threw his ugly wool blanket over them as a makeshift tablecloth, and the jury-rigged set-up became his stopgap storefront. On the dingy cloth, he spread out his electronics: copies of patented devices cobbled together with spare parts, archaic gadgets reverse engineered into modern day functionality, neoteric mechanisms of his own design that he hadn't the capital to manufacture.

The Bazaar had only just opened, so he had a few minutes before customers started slinking in. They often had shoppers from Beltrane's Nouveau Elite—those whose families and legacies had weathered the previous purge and fared well after, making them into the new "high society." They always came cloaked and camouflaged, sometimes even masked, for gods forbid any of the other elitists see them rub elbows with the tatty gen-pop.

As Noah squinted through his magnifying spectacles that he'd made out of two jeweler's loupes, heavy gage wire, and some excellent soldering, he tinkered with a holo-deck—a hard drive with a completely holographic user interface. It was busy-work, just tweaking and tightening, so his mind wandered back to the night he'd been brought to that shelter. It had only been a year since then—a year of hard living, near freezing, and just barely scraping by—but he barely remembered anything. Because it was such a yawning void in his memory, it *bothered* him, so he picked at it, agitating it, hoping to dislodge some new information.

He remembered the club, but then, he'd known of Sanctuary from before that night. Being a gay kid in a sometimes-unfriendly city, you tended to know where the safe places were. Beyond that, the memory was hazy. He knew they were operating a shelter out of one of the back rooms, and he vaguely recalled seeing the inside of it, and talking to people—someone who's fuzzy, faceless memory gave his stomach a fluttery feeling, and another who's dark, blurred silhouette filled him with dread.

"What's good, Cuz?" Tom Childress said as he slithered like an oil slick behind Noah's improvised booth, to stand behind his rusted chair.

His hands came down on Noah's shoulders, kneading casually while Noah's skin crawled. Tom was his cousin, at least as far as it could be proven, so Noah figured he was mostly harmless. But still, he was sleazy as all hell. Even though Noah knew Tom didn't give two shits about his inventory, he answered him anyway.

"I've got a couple of new com-link transmitters, and this holo-deck I'm working on. The rest is the same stuff you saw last Tuesday."

A man was approaching, perusing the tables with intense stares and measured steps, but he didn't seem to be interested in any particular item. He wore a hooded cloak and a replica of an ancient Venetian plague mask that should have been terrifying, but Noah was not afraid. While keeping half of his attention on the shopper, he tuned back into what Tom was saying.

"Have you given anymore thought to my offer?"

"Your offer...of staying in your drug-slum apartment? I don't think that's a very good idea. I'm taking my level two proficiencies in a couple of weeks, then I think I'll have a good shot at getting a job at the new nano-chip manufacturing plant that opened up last summer. If they found out I was living with a drug dealer..."

Tom sifted his fingers through Noah's scruffy hair until Noah slapped his hand away. "Who says they would find out? My customers certainly aren't telling."

The caped man moved closer, to an adjacent booth, one offered a promise of the best forgeries in Beltrane. Noah pretended not to notice him.

"I guess I could give it a shot for a couple of nights. I was run out of the park twice this week. The Citizen Militia has really been cracking down on transients lately. I think the Enforcers get a commission for every camp they bust up."

Tom clucked his tongue and shook his head like a nattering housewife. "Living on the streets when you have *family* willing to put you up."

Even though it was nice to know he wasn't completely alone, the way Tom said "family" made Noah's hair stand on end.

The shopper stopped in front of Noah's table, running elegant fingers over the delicate electronics. "Impressive work," he murmured, in a soft voice with a light, lilting accent.

"Thank you. I do what I can with what I've got." Noah let the unspoken censure, the *why are you here when you can afford the real thing* implication, rest silent between them.

"You obviously are very skilled in technology," the man said from behind the white beaked mask. "I myself am mostly tech-illiterate. Can you fix things?" His inquiry was the kind designed to seem innocuous, but it Noah sensed that this man did not ask unnecessary questions.

"What do you mean?"

"You know, com-chips, transmitters...dedicated data-banks, holo-projectors, that sort of thing?"

Noah gave him a dubious look. "Well, yeah. Do you think I'd be able to build stuff like this if I couldn't?"

The man's lips quirked, just below where the mask ended. "Cheeky."

Noah wanted to press him further, hear him speak some more, but Tom interrupted.

"Are you going to buy anything, or did you just come to *chat*?"

"Thomas! Christ. Go away." With a roll of his eyes, Tom slinked away, as Noah turned back to the man. "I'm sorry. He's my cousin, so I can't exactly drown him in the bathtub, but he's not affiliated with my business. *Was* there something you needed?"

A breeze came whipping through the rollercoaster graveyard, rippling the man's cloak. A long lock of blond hair fell over his shoulder and across his chest. Noah's fingers itched to touch it, a thought that sent him backing away from the wool covered crates so fast that he tipped his chair over. The man looked at him quizzically—at least, Noah thought he did, though large parts of his face were covered by the mask.

"Sorry, I—the wind startled me." It sounded lame. *I wouldn't believe me.*

The shopper waved it off with a flap of his hand. "Think nothing of it. There isn't anything I need today, but there might be work for you at my friend's place of business. He slid a

business card across the improvised table toward Noah, and after a tip of an invisible hat, turned on his heel and walked away.

Minutes later, with a shaking hand, Noah picked up the card and flipped it over to read the engraved text: *Club Sanctuary*.