



Strays

Garrett Leigh

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This is a high-adrenaline love story that takes hopeful turns.

Garrett Leigh's *Strays* is a slow-burn romance set in the heated and high-intensity world of the London restaurant scene. Nero is a skilled but emotionally closed-off chef, and he somewhat grudgingly agrees to take in—to his kitchen and his home—a beautiful, terrified, and totally untrained new apprentice, Lenny.

Urban Soul, a company that owns and runs restaurants and artisan eateries all over London, has a history both of taking in the city's wayward sons and of producing some of the hottest dining experiences from Camden to Croydon. Lenny's skills and artistic flair bring him out from under Nero's wing and into his own light, but he is still crippled by his fear and by the looming menace of his increasingly bold and dangerous stalker.

But even as steam rises between them and as Lenny starts to open up about his struggle, Nero's own mental and physical scars leave him unable to reach back. As the trust and the sexual tension build, Nero begins to come clean about his past. But it is all thrown into jeopardy when, the night before the new restaurant opening, Lenny is attacked.

Unraveling the mystery of each character's past is as titillating as their increasingly erotic encounters. And though both men are hurt, neither of them fall into the trap of masking their sensitivity with manipulation. Lenny and Nero's dynamic is addictive, but not abusive. Nero, despite his rough edges, has a surprising capacity for kindness.

Leigh's deft use of language, from back-of-the-house slang to Nero's hardened cockney vernacular to the clipped and sophisticated tones of the head restaurateur, builds settings with thoroughly believable urgency and excitement. Characterizations are powerful and irresistible.

As Nero and Lenny find their ways and their places as part of Urban Soul, this novel becomes one of healing and hope.

EMERSON M. FULLER (March/April 2017)

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