

Strays

Draft One

by

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Adapted from the book by Britt Collins

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On a roadside two homeless men huddle against the rain. The older man opens a can of beer and dumps it into a half-empty bottle of cheap malt liquor. This is MICHAEL KING (47). Michael drinks greedily, then passes the bottle to his friend JOSH STINSON (27). Stinson takes a wary sip.

STINSON

Christ, that's lethal.

MICHAEL

That my friend, is a Side-walk
Slam.

Michael drunkenly wipes booze from his scraggly beard and takes the bottle back. His face is heavily lined after years of hard drinking and sleeping rough. He is a collection of scars, both literal and metaphorical. As he gets up unsteadily we see he is tall, thin, with long greying hair and we wonder, what did he look like *before*? The rain drips off his face.

MICHAEL

Let's get outta this.

STINSON

Thank God. I thought I was gonna
drown.

Stinson gets to his feet. He is grubby and unshaven but rockstar good looks hide beneath the disheveled appearance. Stinson's easy wit is tonic for Michael, who is always just moments away from another wave of depression.

STINSON

So where to?

MICHAEL

Tabor Hill. We can stay there 'til
it stops.

CUT TO:

The Tabor Hill Cafe, a dingy old-time diner opposite a busy road. The chairs and tables are tied together under the awning. Stinson collapses onto a chair.

STINSON

That's more like it.

Michael stands still.

MICHAEL

I got something.

STINSON

And Groundscore strikes again. How much this time?

MICHAEL

It's not money.

Michael crouches in front of a table. Two emerald eyes stare back at him.

MICHAEL

(reaches in)

I think it's a -

There is an angry HISS and a cat darts out.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)

- cat!

The animal scurries past the men and stops at the road. Stinson gets up and the cat jumps into the oncoming traffic.

STINSON

Oh shit!

Blinded by headlights the cat freezes. Stinson takes a few unsteady steps to the road. The sound of onrushing traffic makes him stagger backwards.

STINSON

Jeez, that's a lot of cars.

MICHAEL

For fuck's sake.

Michael doesn't want this. He wants a drink. He walks onto the road. Drivers beep their horns at him. The cat sees him coming and takes a cautious half-step back, dangerously close to the busiest lane.

MICHAEL

Come here, kitty cat. Come on.

The cat looks into Michael's eyes. The hobo and the stray share a moment. The cat runs to Michael and jumps into his arms.

MICHAEL

(surprised)

Hey, there's a good kitty.

Michael hurries off the road and walks back to the cafe.
He puts the cat down.

STINSON
Shit, that's gotta be one of its
nine lives gone.

MICHAEL
Hers. She's female.

The cat looks up at Michael. She knows he's talking about
her.

MICHAEL
(to the cat)
You nearly got us both killed,
cat.
(to Stinson)
Let's head back. This little lady
undid all my good work and now I'm
sober as a judge.

STINSON
We aren't gonna leave her here,
are we?

MICHAEL
She'll be fine. Come on.

Michael walks off. The cat watches.

Beat.

The cat scurries after him.

2

EXT. UPS PARKING BAY. EVENING (LATER)

2

Michael and Stinson walk into a small alcove behind a UPS
store. The rain has finally stopped. This secluded
corner, safe at night from prying eyes, is Michael and
Stinson's home.

MICHAEL
She still following us?

STINSON
Nah, she musta took off.

We hear a loud MEOW. The cat appears from behind a bush.

STINSON
Or not.

Michael grabs his and Stinson's moth-eaten sleeping bags that are hidden in the bushes. He takes a towel from inside one and dries himself.

STINSON

She's watching you.

Stinson strokes the cat as Michael lays out the sleeping bags, then produces a bottle of booze.

STINSON

Don't you worry about the grumpy old man. He doesn't like anybody.

Now Stinson sees a large open wound on the cat's face. One of her eyes is also swollen.

STINSON

Michael, she's hurt.

Michael's opens the bottle and takes a deep swig.

STINSON

Did you hear what I said? I said -

MICHAEL

So clean her up. First aid kit's where it always is.

Stinson grabs a red rucksack and takes out the first aid kit. He opens it and fumbles clumsily with the gauze and tape.

STINSON

Okay, what do I do first?

MICHAEL

(loses it)
For God's sake.

Michael takes the box.

STINSON

You're better at this sort of thing than me.

Michael walks over to the cat.

MICHAEL

Right, one more favor. After that we're done, okay?

The cat meows.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)

I'll take that as a yes.

Michael takes out a swab and gently pushes the fur back on the cat's face. The wound is long and fresh. Michael winces.

MICHAEL

What have you been getting up to,
cat?

Michael goes to work. The cat doesn't flinch. She knows what he's doing. Michael finishes and gives the cat a pat.

MICHAEL

Right, that's you done.

Michael gets up and disappears behind a bush to relieve himself. The cat sits and waits. Stinson gets into his sleeping bag.

STINSON

Hey girl, come here.

The cat ignores Stinson. Michael reappears.

MICHAEL

(to the cat)
You still here? Come on, I did my
bit. Off you go. Go catch mice or
something.

STINSON

I think she wants to get in your
sleeping bag.

MICHAEL

And I want to own a four star
restaurant. Off you go, cat.

Michael takes the bottle and drinks deeply. Then he gets into his sleeping bag. The cat moves close to him and sits.

Beat.

MICHAEL

(to the cat)
You aren't getting in my bag.

The cat brushes herself against his beard and purrs loudly.

STINSON

She likes you.

MICHAEL

I just saved her life and her face. Of course she likes me. She might like me less when she gets the bill.

(to the cat)

Go find someone else to take care of you. Go on. Shoo.

He turns away from Stinson and the cat and falls asleep.

3

EXT. UPS PARKING BAY. EARLY MORNING

3

The cat bats Michael's face with a paw. He doesn't stir. She moves in closer and licks him.

MICHAEL

Hmm...what's that?

Michael opens his eyes.

MICHAEL

Hey, get off me!

Michael pushes the cat away. The animal is not the least bit put off and happily trots over to Stinson as he wakes up. She slides under Stinson's arm and purrs.

STINSON

You're still here.

(catches Michael's scowl)

What's up with you?

MICHAEL

She licked my mouth.

STINSON

May I remind you that you eat from bins.

MICHAEL

Stinson, I'm a trained chef. Her licking my face is just gross.

Michael opens a can of Steel Reserve and swigs it.

STINSON

She was giving you a good morning kiss. Enjoy it. You aren't gonna get one from anyone else.

CUT TO:

Behind the UPS building Michael washes his face and brushes his teeth. He walks around the building where the cat is waiting.

MICHAEL

What?

The cat meows.

MICHAEL

Hungry? Then go hunt something.
We're going into town to work. Do
not be here when we get back.

The cat turns away, looking as aloof as a four legged animal can. She disappears up a tree.

MICHAEL

And that's the last we'll see of
her.

They walk off.

STINSON

I wanna keep her.

MICHAEL

Trust me Stinson, we don't need an
animal complicating our lives.

4

INT. CAFE. DAY

4

Michael plugs two mobile phones into a wall socket. This is modern day homelessness where the destitute keep tabs on each other and loved ones via social media. Outside Stinson sits cross-legged next to his begging cup and a piece of cardboard with "Spare A Little Kindness" scrawled on it.

CUT TO:

Michael walks out the cafe and hands Stinson his phone.

MICHAEL

How we doing?

Michael peers into the begging cup: just a few coins and a half-smoked cigarette butt.

STINSON

Not feeling the love today,
Groundscore.
(takes a sandwich from his pocket)
Found this behind the food truck
though.

He breaks the snack in half and hands a piece to Michael. A teenager walks past and drops a sweet wrapper into the cup.

TEENAGER

Get a job, you bums.

5

EXT. UPS PARKING BAY. EARLY MORNING

5

Michael is fast asleep, hanging half out of his sleeping bag and surrounded by beer cans. The cat plays with a scrunched-up cigarette pack in front of him. The cut on her face is healing and the swelling has lessened. Michael mutters something. The cat turns to him, places a paw on his beard and tugs it.

MICHAEL

You again?

The cat nuzzles into him briefly before returning to his beard.

MICHAEL

(laughs)

Stop that.

STINSON

Looks like she's sticking around.

Michael reclaims his beard.

MICHAEL

You don't quit, do you?

CUT TO:

Michael and Stinson have their backpacks on and are ready to head into town. The cat pads up and down in front of them.

MICHAEL

We'll be back later. Maybe we'll bring you back something. Maybe.

The cat suddenly zips up his legs, claws her way up to his shoulder and onto his beat-up beige backpack.

MICHAEL

Hey, what do you think you're doing?

The cat looks like a large parrot on Michael's shoulder.

STINSON

She wants to come with us.

MICHAEL

Fine. Just don't fall off.
Unbelievable. I'm a cat carrier.

They walk.

STINSON

You know, if we're gonna keep her,
we should name her.

MICHAEL

We aren't going to keep her.

STINSON

We aren't doing a very good job of
getting rid of her.

They reach a crossing.

MICHAEL

How about Tabor? That's where we
found her.

STINSON

I like it. And maybe the cafe will
pay us for advertising.

Michael shakes his head in mock despair.

6

EXT. CAFE. DAY

6

This time it's Michael's turn to sit on the street with
the begging cup as Stinson charges phones inside. Tabor
bats the cup over.

MICHAEL

Cut it out. We need that.

WOMAN (O.S.)

Isn't she adorable?

Michael looks up to see a middle-aged woman smiling down
at the cat.

WOMAN

What's your cat's name?

MICHAEL

Her name's Tabor.

WOMAN

(sees the wound)
Ooh, what happened?

MICHAEL

We don't know. Probably a cat fight.

WOMAN

(hands Michael a twenty dollar note)
Get her something to eat. And yourself.

MICHAEL

(surprised)
I will. Thank you.

The woman gives Tabor a stroke and moves on. Michael looks at his four legged companion.

MICHAEL

All day yesterday we barely made ten dollars and you've doubled that in five minutes.

SMALL GIRL

Can I stroke your kitty?

A kid has dragged her disinterested father over to Michael and Tabor.

MICHAEL

Knock yourself out, kid.

Tabor swishes her tail and rolls over. The kid laughs. An elderly couple come to watch. Michael's eyes widen as a small crowd starts to form.

MICHAEL

(begrudging)
Beginner's luck.

Tabor laps up the attention; she's a born showgirl.

7

EXT. UPS PARKING BAY. EVENING

7

Michael, Stinson and Tabor round the corner to the parking bay. Both men have two carrier bags full of shopping. Tabor jumps off Michael's backpack and scurries to the nook behind the bushes.

MICHAEL

She knows where she's going.

The men follow the cat through the bushes where Tabor is already doing belly rolls. Stinson empties his bags onto the ground.

STINSON

Look at all this, Groundscore.
We've never got this much.

MICHAEL

(dismissive)
People are suckers for animals.

STINSON

I know. But that's good for us,
isn't it?

Michael takes a can of cat food from one of his bags. He reaches into another bag and finds a MacDonalds burger box and spoons the food into it. Tabor jumps over to him.

MICHAEL

Yes, that's good for us.

Tabor sits.

MICHAEL

(reads the label)
Rabbit, chicken and shrimp? One
thing you learn in restaurants,
some foods just don't mix.

Tabor MEOWS -- the food is taking too long.

STINSON

Your customer's waiting.

Michael puts the box down and Tabor tucks in. Michael watches her.

MICHAEL

She doesn't make a mess.

STINSON

Unlike you. You still got half
your lunch in your beard.

MICHAEL

I mean she's got manners. She's
domesticated.

STINSON

So?

MICHAEL

So she's got an owner. And they're
probably looking for her.

8

EXT. STREET. DAY

8

CLOSE on a faded, weather-beaten poster of a missing black cat.

MICHAEL (OFF)

"I lost Tabby outside the Goodwill store. If you find her, please ring my Mummy. Jenny, twelve."

We now see that Michael and Stinson are reading Missing Pet posters plastered on trees and lampposts on the edge of a park. Tabor is again on Michael's backpack.

MICHAEL

Strange.

STINSON

What?

MICHAEL

That no one's put anything up for Tabor.

(to Tabor)

Maybe I should just stick you to a tree and see if anyone wants you.

STINSON

You know what probably happened.

MICHAEL

What?

STINSON

(whispers)

The owner probably died.

MICHAEL

Great. Then we really are stuck with you.

Michael rubs Tabor's neck. She play bites his finger.

9

INT. SHOP. DAY

9

Michael watches a shop worker finish the lettering on a red heart-shaped metal identity tag.

CUT TO:

Outside the shop. Stinson holds Tabor as Michael comes out. In one hand he has a long leash. He attaches it to Tabor's collar.

STINSON
She won't like it.

MICHAEL
Tough.
(to Tabor)
And this is in case you get lost
again.

Michael attaches the tag to Tabor's collar. The tag reads
"LC Tabor".

STINSON
What's LC?

MICHAEL
Love cat.

STINSON
You big softie. I knew you liked
her.

MICHAEL
She uses me like a perch. I use
her to bring in the punters. It's
a purely business relationship.
(rubs her chin)
Isn't it, girl?

Stinson puts Tabor on the ground. The cat looks at the
leash and bites it. Michael moves his hand to stop her.

MICHAEL
Hey, stop! You have no idea how
much this stuff cost me. That's
money I should be drinking.

The cat stops.

STINSON
It's crazy. I swear to God she
understands you.

MICHAEL
(to Tabor)
Right then, lead the way.

Tabor struts off and the men follow. She claws and bites
the leash a few times before she finally accepts the
strange new feeling.

Mid November. Michael, Stinson and Tabor lay around a
small fire. Stinson is out cold and Michael is drunk.

Empty cans are everywhere. Michael takes some street slam from a bottle. Tabor knocks a half-full can over as if in disgust.

MICHAEL
(slurred)
Hey, don't do that.

Michael grabs the can and drinks the dregs from it.

MICHAEL
There. Now play with it.

He throws the can to Tabor and returns to his bottle. The cat sits and watches him.

MICHAEL
(defensive)
What? Stop being so damn
judgmental, cat. You think it's
easy sleeping out here?

Tabor meows.

MICHAEL
What is it now?

The cat claws at the sleeping bag.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)
You want in? Jesus, anything else?
(unzips his sleeping bag)
Come on then. We can keep each
other warm.

Tabor buries herself into Michael's chest. Michael zips the bag up.

MICHAEL
No snoring, farting or clawing,
okay?

Tabor purrs.

MICHAEL
I'll take that as a "yes".

11 EXT. UPS PARKING BAY. EARLY MORNING

11

Michael snores over the birdsongs. Tabor stands close by with a bird in her mouth. It twitches. Tabor drops the bird on Michael's face.

MICHAEL
Ugh! Christ! Get it off!

The bird scrambles into the undergrowth.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)

Tabor, what the hell was that for?

Stinson rubs his eyes.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)

She just dropped a live bird on my face.

Stinson laughs.

STINSON

Your cat's a genius, Groundscore.

Tabor turns away and licks her paw.

MICHAEL

Why's that?

Stinson picks up a can and raises it to Michael.

STINSON

That must've been your present.
She knows it's your birthday.

12

EXT. CEMETERY. DAY

12

It's early afternoon on a brutally cold day. Michael is celebrating his 48th birthday with a group of friends. They huddled in a circle under ponderosa pines, listening to country music and passing around a bottle.

Michael lets Tabor off her leash. She slinks in and out of the weeds at the base of the mossy graves.

CRAZY JOE (late 40s), a small, whippet-thin man, with short, dirty-blond hair, spills beer over his trousers. WHIP KID (22) and his girlfriend JANE (19), a cute indie couple, laugh.

WHIP KID

So how come you're still in
Portland, Michael? You normally
gone by now.

MICHAEL

Because of that little madam.
(points to Tabor)
She messed up my plans.

STINSON

Don't listen to him. We hit gold
when she hooked up with us.

(MORE)

STINSON (CONT'D)

You wouldn't believe the attention we get now.

CRAZY JOE

Maybe I should borrow her. Been slim pickings round my neck of the woods.

MICHAEL

Funny you should mention that. It's too cold for her here. I'm doing my usual and heading down to Cali. I was wondering if any of you losers would take her over winter.

Beat.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)

Crazy?

CRAZY JOE

I'm bunking up with my sister over Christmas, Groundscore. She hates cats.

MICHAEL

(to Whip Kid and Jane)
What about you guys?

WHIP KID

No can do, daddy-o. We're heading to Jane's folks for Christmas and they disapprove of like, well kinda everything.

JANE

Plus mum's got a cat allergy.

MICHAEL

Christ. I thought you'd all jump at the chance. I can't drag her all the way to California with me.

On cue Tabor pops her head up from the grass.

WHIP KID

Why don't you put her in the pound?

MICHAEL

And let them put her down because of a clerical error. No way.

Beat.

STINSON

Then you don't have a choice. You gotta take her.

WHIP KID

We're heading the same way so we can keep you company for a bit. Help you keep an eye on her at least.

MICHAEL

I guess I'm taking a cat to California then.

CRAZY JOE

How you gonna travel? First class or coach?

MICHAEL

I don't know. You can't sneak a chatterbox like her on the train without drugging her, and I'm not doing that. I guess we'll hitchhike.

STINSON

That's a helluva long way to hitch, Michael.

Beat.

Michael smiles, surprised at the unexpected promise of adventure. Tabor comes over and nuzzles him.

MICHAEL

It's not that far, is it girl?
We'll show this bunch of losers.
Who needs 'em anyway?

(picks up the cat)

Taking you down south will be a compulsion of the heart.

13

EXT. HOUSE. DAY

13

RON BUSS (EARLY 50's) a short, stocky man, walks up the steps of an isolated house that backs onto woodland. Ron is highly strung, a talker, a music lover with a flair for the dramatic. The only thing Ron loves more than his music are his cats. One of which, MATA, is missing.

Ron rings the doorbell. A glamorous woman in her mid fifties opens the door holding a cat in her arms. This is the neighborhood CAT LADY.

RON

Hi there, sorry to bother you. I'm
Ron Buss.

CAT LADY

Hello.

Ron glimpses the room full of cats behind the woman, all
lounging alluringly across sofas and bookshelves.

CAT LADY

How can I help you, Ron Buss?

RON

Oh, sorry. My cat Mata, she's
white with tabby markings and kohl-
lined eyes.

Ron hands her a lost cat flyer.

CAT LADY

Your cat's gone missing.

RON

Exactly. I'm beside myself with
worry.

CAT LADY

(looks at the flyer)
Poor little mite. I'm sorry. I've
not seen her.

RON

You're sure? I was kind of pinning
all my hopes on you.

CAT LADY

I do the rounds at night looking
for strays. I'll take your picture
with me.

RON

Thank you.

Ron descends the stairs and walks down the path.

CAT LADY

(shouts)
The streets are a dumping ground
for animals! I've seen the worst
of humanity! Don't give up on your
cat, Ron Buss.

Ron bursts into tears.

CUT TO:

Ron in his car. He dries his eyes, puts some Jonny Cash on and drives. Ron turns a corner and drives past Michael and Stinson's UPS PARKING BAY.

14

EXT. STREET. DAY

14

Ron parks his car in the road bordering the yard of his bungalow. He gets out and walks to his back porch. He sits and his other cat CRETO hops out the catflap in the backdoor.

RON

Hey, boy.

Ron looks at the two bowls of cat food on the porch, one empty, one full.

RON (CONT'D)

When your sister finally does
decide to deign us with her
presence she better have brought
us presents, eh?

Creto lies down and hides his face in his paws.

RON (CONT'D)

I know. I miss her too.

Ron's neighbour JACK (25) walks into his backyard. Jack is a hulking, tattooed ex-wrestler with a hair-trigger temper, neo-nazi convictions and a perverse dislike of Ron. Ron watches as Jack check his bins.

RON (CONT'D)

I gotta ask him.

Creto meows nervously.

RON (CONT'D)

It'll be fine.

(shouts)

Hey Jack, hold up a minute!

Ron hurries over to Jack's yard. Jack turns and looks at Ron with brooding menace. He towers over Ron.

RON (CONT'D)

Hey, Jack. I was just wondering,
my cat's gone missing again.

JACK

So?