



Ink

and His Shadow

BETH BAXTER

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

INK AND HIS SHADOW

By Beth Baxter

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Photo Description

Two black and white photographs of men. The man on the left has dark hair, cut above the chin, and wears black. The man in the picture on the right has short dark hair, scars and tattoos.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

*See the guy on the left? He felt people close to him always ended up dead. Some said he's cursed, that he brought plague to whomever was near him. He just wanted to live alone quietly and not jeopardize anyone. But there's this group of people wanting to bring him in. They said they're trying to keep him safe, even as they eyed him suspiciously. But he felt that they're the ones who meant him harm. And that force, **whoever**—whatever—it was, was killing those people. He was the one that just wanted to protect him, to watch over him from the shadows...*

That guy on the right, with scars on his body was a perpetual dark shadow. He could be someone back from the grave, from the future or another time. But he had reasons—and means—to keep his guy safe.

I just wants some HEA for them. No BDSM please.

Sincerely,

Didi

Story Info

Genre: paranormal

Tags: twink, ghost, psychic ability, reunited, soulmates/fated, public sex, artist, curse, tattoos, on-the-run

Content Warnings: graphic violence

Word Count: 19,565

INK AND HIS SHADOW

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Chapter 1

Defenestration

The first time had been after some wicked, booming fancy dress party. Ink had been eighteen, naïve and drunk. He'd strutted home through a very bad side of town until said strut crossed the path of an antsy guy with yellow shoes, a sharp knife and shadows under his eyes. Mosquitos sucked blood from his skinny tan arms.

He staggered the stagger of being off your face on adrenaline and less legal things. His face twisted—oh shit—and Antsy was twitching, panicking, lashing out with that knife flashing, and Ink felt stupid and *hurt*.

Blood.

Ink clasped his side. Damp, warm. Felt like falling. Fell. The drizzle clouding the air was thick against his mouth, inside his lungs.

Blood!

When you're a somewhat sheltered kid, drunk and fresh from a silly party full of silly people, bleeding is a bloody shock. Ink stared at the twitchy junkie, and the particles of air that hovered between his black-and-white eyes. Crap, he looked so lost. Ink wanted to tell him it would be okay, but his mouth was full of gritted teeth. Antsy stepped forward, knife raised as Ink bled into the concrete. It was okay, though. Ink would sort this out when he found his voice—the junkie was screwy but probably not evil, plus he was sort of cute and—

A dark figure stepped out of the night. Sharkishly silent, it slipped behind the junkie and stopped, close enough to sniff his hair. It drew back a fist and punched Antsy once, right in the back of the head. The action was slow, lazy, almost experimental, but Antsy croaked anyway and stumbled away, landing flat on his arse and clutching his knife to his skinny chest, the way to solve all his problems.

A sick, shuddering gasp gripped his body, then he croaked again, feet twisting in his battered, yellow shoes, veins bulging in his neck. A slow drop of dark red poked from his left nostril, crawling down his face like a fat leech, wriggling into his mouth through the gaps in his teeth.

Junkie's shoulders hit damp concrete, and the eyes of that frightened face turned towards Ink, filled with horrible pleading as blood vessels burst like red roses, as yellow shoes pummelled the ground. A big goofy smile spread across his face at the last moment. Ink watched him die.

The dark figure stepped forward but didn't make sense. He was too tall, too thin, perfectly defined in the darkness, but somehow a part of it, so Ink was sure his frightened brain was painting pictures.

"What did you do?" He hurt everywhere.

The Shadow Man didn't speak; he just nodded. And choking on pain and what-the-fuckery, Ink's politeness kicked in, and he instinctively nodded back.

That had been the first time. Now, Ink was on his way to reaching thirteen.

It was most depressing.

Like, "Hi everyone. My name is Isaac Summer. My friends call me Ink, or they would if I didn't lock myself up in my house to stop a ghost from murdering potential friends and enemies and anyone who gives me the stink eye or whatever."

Most, *most* depressing.

So Ink got pissed and painted, and got paid for said paintings to get pissed. It numbed the pain nicely, but today Ink was trying out a new vice—a vice called Charlie Flower who was awesome. Six feet of cute, happy-go-lucky charm, slight stalker creepiness (*'I know where you live', 'oh gosh, how sweet!'*) and fantastic cybersex. Mainly, it was the cybersex Ink enjoyed; being a twenty-three-year-old shut-in had many downsides. His poor dick had gone and got itself a nun's habit, it was so fucking neglected.

Hours would pass as he spoke to Awesome Charlie, like *blah-blah-blah* while the sky grew dark, then light, then dark again. He'd notice hunger when his fingers shook, notice thirst when his head ached.

Only. Only... when you have three weeks of cybersex with one guy, you start to fall for him. And you start to wish that you weren't stuck inside your own house alone forever. You type an invite to a guy to come visit you for actual sex. You press enter. You regret everything.

Shadow fingers curled around Ink's feet, licking cold and tingly-like. He leant forward in his seat, face bluish in the glow of his humming computer screen—the only light in the room, besides the pale-grey moonlight filtering in through the window. Miserably, he ruined his eyesight.

Don't come! I didn't mean it! Honest!

CharlieFlow is offline.

I have a tiny penis! he attempted dreadfully. I have STDs. I... I smell bad.

CharlieFlow is still offline, you desperate bastard.

Shadows rolled up towards Ink's knees, tightening around his calves. He was standing in the ocean in February, dark and cold. Ink pulled up his feet and rubbed his temples. Quit panicking and plan. See, Charlie wouldn't necessarily get hurt. The Shadow Man had two rules. Sort of. Ink had figured them out over years of eating ice cream and watching bad movies, brooding over being the guy the murderous ghost chose to haunt.

One: the ghost only killed people within Ink's reach. Guy in a different room? Probably safe. So lock Charlie in the toilet and speak dirty to him and pretend it's a weird kink.

Two: all of the victims Ink had bothered to check were armed. No, Charlie, kindly leave your machete in the garden, you awesome, psycho bastard.

CharlieFlow is very much offline, now go fuck yourself and cry.

The shadows retreated to their usual position on his powder-blue sofa, a black puddle of shame amongst meticulously puffed cushions.

"Yeah, well you should feel bad."

He wouldn't let Charlie in. That... that was an answer.

The answer.

Good.

His dick didn't—*wouldn't*—like it. But it was the answer.

"Why do you have to make things so difficult?" he fired at the ghost, stalking across the room to his easel and painting wildly in black.

In response, the shadows twisted, elongated, and bloated, slowly reforming as a black-smoke person who shrugged.

Ink's skin prickled and his fingers tugged at the leather cuff strapped to his wrist; it jangled with a chain attached to a slot in the wall by the window. One time, Ink had snoozed off in front of an animal documentary and discovered the wrong way that sleepwalking with a murderous ghost by your side is awkward.

"Why couldn't I be haunted by Patrick Swayze?" he said through clenched teeth.

The Shadow Man slowly raised a smokish hand, waved it from side to side, wispy fingers parted. There was a long electric rumble, darkness shivering.

“Ugh. *Hello.*” What an idiot.

“Isaac...” The voice was a deep, cold whisper that made Ink shiver, like a brainful of puddle water.

“Chatty today.”

“Isaac!”

The Shadow Man splattered, lost form, regained it. Talking took a lot of energy; most things did for him. Every Saturday, he’d insist on channel-hopping until he found a pathetic rom-com, would sit and watch next to Ink as a black puddle. He couldn’t assume his human shape while he was hogging the TV. Killing, though... the Shadow Man killed with no effort at all.

“Isaac, please...”

The doorbell rang.

“Fuck you,” Ink said breathily, dropping his paintbrush and tightening his sleepwalker cuff. He strode towards the front door, gut bursting with a kaleidoscope of nervous butterflies. He jabbed the Shadow Man with an elbow as he passed. Said elbow went right through the guy, but that was hardly the point, was it? He was being strong, confident, in con-bloody-trol.

Ink chained the front door and opened it an inch. “Please go away, Charlie. I don’t want you here; I have herpes and I think I might be dying of it.” He coughed pathetically. “You better just go, but don’t hate me, okay?”

Strong and confident as a rock made of butter. In a microwave. Underneath the wheel of a steamroller.

“Wrong person, bud,” came a low, masculine drawl.

Ink pushed the door open an inch wider, as wide as he could make it with the chain still on.

A smile. A beautiful smile radiating right in his face. Behind the smile lived a blonde guy, lackadaisical, all in red and standing crookedly with a cardboard box on one hip.

“Got your pizza, bud.” Green eyes looked over a pair of glasses. A tongue rolled around that lazy smile.

“Oh.” Ink paused. “I didn’t order pizza, though. Thank you, go away.”

“Isaac Summer?”

“Yes, but my friends call me Ink, or they would if... well. Call me Ink.” He gestured at his fingers, black with the stuff. “I paint with it, see? I love painting, and my paintings are beautiful. I earn a lot of money for them. Do you know my work’s in the Greenblatt Gallery? You might say I’m well hung.”

It had been a long, long time since Ink had spoken to anyone alive, with his voice and such.

The pizza guy stared openly, then adjusted his glasses. “Yeah... Well, I got a pepperoni pizza here for Isaac Summer. Already paid for, so take it, bud.”

“What’s your name?” Now that the words had started, Ink couldn’t stop them. Before the ghost thing had started, he’d been friendly and liked and not all that weird. He still loved people, still loved being liked by people, he was just supremely out of practice. “You look like a Harry,” he spluttered. “I did Harry Potter once. Painted him, I mean. Not like I *did* him, I mean, he’s a fictional character, so what the fuck. You like art?”

The blonde guy kept staring. His glasses were like Harry Potter’s, and Ink was seconds away from asking him if he was magical.

Then, Pizza Guy blinked. “Sure, I’ll come see your art.”

“No, you won’t come in, I’ll bring it out. Wait—wait there.” Ink held up a finger and hurried off to collect his newest piece, Skull Shakespeare—the Bard with cockroaches in his eyes. Ink was working on his Iconic Englishmen-and-Women collection. He cracked the window open a tad to let out the smell of languishing man and retrieved the canvas, casting a quick, hateful look at the Shadow Man. The ghost was lounging, docile as a pussycat.

“I’m not going to stroke you, though,” Ink said, shaking his head.

The Shadow Man reached out, then fell into a puddle of darkness. “Isaac, please...”

Ink charged past, scowling.

Pizza Guy was still on the porch, blowing bubble gum through pink lips, the pizza box by his feet. He nodded at Ink and helped slide the canvas through the gap of the door, regarding the painting with his hand on his mouth.

“No colour,” said Pizza Guy. “Dude, there should be colour.”

“I like black.”

“No kidding.”

Ink looked down at his black clothes and trousers. His black hands. The look wasn't really deliberate, he just lived in gloomy darkness, so there was no need to make an effort. Given the ink he used tended to go everywhere, he chose whatever would get stained least.

Pizza Guy's biceps bulged as he folded his arms. “You don't get out much, do you, Isaac?”

Ink shook his head. “Hell no.”

Pizza Guy's eyes fell onto Ink's sleepwalker cuff. Ink pretended he hadn't noticed. Sleepwalker cuffs were completely ordinary things and not at all slavey.

“Hey, is everything... okay in there?”

Shit.

Ink laughed. “Oh this? This thing? I sleepwalk, so... I don't want to accidentally nap off and end up somewhere odd. Better safe than sorry, you know?”

“Oh.” Pizza Guy nodded slowly, eyebrows raised. “Would you like me to come in? With your pizza?”

Double shit.

“No!” Ink said quickly. Too quickly. Had to give an extra wide, super-happy smile to make up for it. “No, don't... Everything's fine. I'm fine.”

Pizza Guy nodded. “Bud, I get it. I understand.”

Triple shit with sprinkles. All that emphasis. Ink saw it unfurling like snakes from a bucket. Pizza Guy would go to the police for help, Pizza Guy would insist they come to check the place out, just to be kind. And the Shadow Man, in his lovely, charming way, might well kill them all.

Well, it was probably better to risk killing one guy than several.

“Wait.” Ink slid the chain free of the door, took a deep breath and opened it wide. He felt like he was flicking a baby bird out of its nest: either it would fly now or there would be brains on his carpet by midnight. “Please come in.”

Pizza Guy nodded, leaving Ink's portrait outside and taking the pizza box under his muscled arm. He was tall and slim, but powerfully built, holding

himself in a way that reeked confidence. Every movement was accidentally-on-purpose perfect, and Ink thought how much he'd like to paint that. Ink smiled nervously as he peered about. The place was part clean, co-ordinated design and part artist's hovel. Brushes and paper and ink overflowed the drawers of stylish dressers.

He scanned the place for the Shadow Man, eyes flicking from side to side.

"Dark in here," Pizza Guy said, peering around the lounge.

"It's nightttime."

"Still. Do you ever paint it?"

"What?"

"The darkness."

The Shadow Man appeared instantly in his spot on the sofa, legs crossed, arms folded. Ink jumped, covered it by coughing. Pizza Guy looked at him, confused. He couldn't see anything, of course. No one else ever could.

"Painting darkness would be sort of boring, don't you think?" Ink said, smiling though his voice wavered. His eyes fixed on the Shadow Man.

Please, please don't.

The Shadow Man didn't move.

"Do you paint him?" Pizza Guy asked, looking at Ink with his blue eyes flat. "Do you have pictures?"

Ink froze. "Sorry?"

Pizza Guy tossed off his red jacket, revealing a holster and gun. Ink backed away into the kitchen. His butt hit the kitchen sink.

"Pictures of your killer ghost man," Pizza Guy said, taking out his gun and aiming it at Ink. He took a step closer. "Do you have pictures of your ghost, Isaac?"

Ink grabbed his wrist, heart racing. "Please leave," he whispered.

The Shadow Man rose, arms swinging by his hips.

"I don't wanna hurt you, kid," Pizza Guy said.

"I don't wanna hurt you!"

"I only. Want. To help." He jerked his head at Ink's cuff. "Now, you gonna take that thing off and come with me?"

Ink shook his head as the Shadow Man stopped, right behind Pizza Guy's pretty, blonde head. A long, dark knife grew in his fist.

No. Please, no.

"You come into my house with a gun," Ink forced out, reaching behind him for a breadknife or something. Not to use, really, just to frighten the guy away. "You don't want to help me. You can't help me! Get out!"

The Shadow Man's hands crept to Pizza Guy's throat. Taking his time. Who needed to rush?

Pizza Guy frowned. "Is it here?" he asked. "Is it with us now?"

"You need to leave," Ink snapped, raking his hands through his dark hair. "Get the fuck out of here!"

Pizza Guy stood calmly. "I'm not afraid, Isaac, I know you don't want to hurt me." He reached out a hand, a tentative smile on his lips. "It's okay. I can help you. All you need to do is come—"

"It *isn't* me!"

The Shadow Man's knife slid over the skin of Pizza Guy's neck. There was no physical wound—no blood—but it didn't matter, the deed was done. The Shadow Man stood solid, cold and confident, as Pizza Guy gasped once, then fell to the floor, curling back like his spine was snapping. Reddish bubbles grew at the corners of his mouth.

And then Pizza Guy smiled.

They always bloody smiled.

Ink's eyes itched. He held a hand to his mouth and filled it up with screams, clamping down on skin with his teeth.

Dead. He'd reached thirteen.

Ink dragged his little feet to the lounge, sat on his sofa and stared into space. He didn't cry for these people anymore; it would be dead-leg numb and pointless. There was always a next victim, and fighting murderous ghosts was kinda hard.

The Shadow Man followed him, standing with his head hanging. Apologetic. He reached out, and Ink got the alarming idea he was offering a hug. Ink shifted away. The Shadow Man sat down beside him dejectedly.

“How did he know about you?”

Silence. Ink drew his knees up to his chest and cracked open a beer. His lips pressed against cool aluminium.

“How do I stop this? How do I stop you?”

Again, silence. Ink sighed and buried his head in a custard-coloured cushion, trying to force out manly sobs, like a wonder of catharsis. Nothing came out; he was all empty. He didn’t even hate the Shadow Man anymore—he was too tired, too fucked up. When he looked at his hands, he only saw the cracks in them.

“You’ll get rid of the body?”

The Shadow Man shrugged.

“Yeah, you’ll get rid of the body.”

The Shadow Man rose suddenly, edges rough like he was scratched into the air with sharpened charcoal. “Isaac!”

Ink hunched over his can and drank beer a while longer. Time streamed around his fingers.

Then he heard them. Hushed voices outside his door, rustling like the monsters under his bed.

Fuck.

And Ink was telling himself that Pizza Guy had known too much—way too much—so he hadn’t come alone, and those hushed voices would belong to armed people Ink had no desire in hell to meet. They’d have bullets that longed to nestle in his warm and fluffy brain. Shit, if they were armed, the Shadow Man would kill them all before they ever got the chance.

Ink eyed the window; it was all tight, cold air and bright stars outside. This was a first-floor flat, and the drop had to be... what? Four metres? He’d survive that. It would hurt, but whatever. And if he didn’t break his ankles from the fall, maybe he’d be able to sprint to a hotel or something, lock himself up for a few days and figure out what the hell to do. Nobody else had to get hurt.

Well, he thought as he unlocked his sleepwalker cuff and rolled his wrists loose, he had to try.

Somewhere far away, people were yelling.

Ink opened the window further. Because it was dark outside, he kidded himself the drop was small. Looked safe, right? Ink stared at the Shadow Man, close behind. A dark hand moved to his shoulder, and Ink shivered beneath it. The touch was cold but comforting; the Shadow Man was disturbingly kind. Loving, even, like the thing really cared for him in his own twisted way.

“Keep me safe,” Ink muttered, unsure what he was hoping for.

The ghost nodded, then Ink leapt forward into open air, toes curled and heart racing. His stomach turned, his eyes streamed as cold air hit him in the face. Shadows moved with him, rushing past his face, sliding across his skin, into his mouth, up his nose.

Ink breathed them in—slow, slow—and felt... calm. Strong. When he landed, he landed softly, toes nudging the pavement like playful kids. The night was crisp and he'd missed it. Cars rumbled past, dogs barked. A motorbike thundered monstrously towards him and skidded to a halt. The lithe man riding it fiddled with his helmet and shook his hair free. He smiled a dazzling white smile, brown eyes crinkled. It was a guy Ink recognised; long limbs and clear caramel skin, eyelashes to tangle round your throat and keep you from breathing. He brushed his hair back from his forehead with a slim wrist.

“Ink!” chirped Charlie. “Wanna fuck?”

Ink stared. Dumbly. Very dumbly. To his right, the Shadow Man held up his hands and staggered. Whatever he'd done to slow Ink's fall had worn him out. He dissolved into the air for a second, then was on his knees, back rising and falling with silent pants.

Charlie looked straight through the ailing Shadow Man and up at the open window of Ink's room. Guys crowded around it, aiming down with their guns. Charlie's lips pursed.

“Wanna run?”

“Yes please, Charlie.” Ink nodded keenly.

Chapter 2

Recreation

It was great to have Charlie's hard body between his knees. He'd been without touching people for so long, his skin was sensitive to it: a weird-ass superpower from months of neglect.

Charlie spoke, looking over his shoulder like men weren't aiming guns at them from Ink's front window. "Know how to ride one of these?" He pulled his visor down.

Ink had no helmet, no leathers, but he didn't care how soon his body became strawberry mousse. He cared about weird things like how sad and pathetic the Shadow Man looked right now. He was still struggling to hold shape on the pavement, like a drunk kid trying not to puke.

"Isaac?"

"I can ride a regular bike," said Ink finally.

"Well..." Charlie pulled Ink's arms around his slim waist. "Keep your eyes and mouth shut."

"Yep."

"And lean into my turns."

Charlie faced the road. Dark hair that smelt of cinnamon curled from the bottom of his helmet. Ink squidged closer. "Mm."

Charlie squeezed his hands. "And hold on tight."

Ink smiled, nervous. Big question of the day—why the heck weren't those men up there shooting?

"They're called Drifters. Secret organisation to study the supernatural," Charlie explained. "They won't want to draw attention to themselves by shooting a skinny gay boy."

How did he know? Had they been wearing a uniform or something? Ink looked up again, but couldn't make it out. Charlie claimed to know a lot of odd things. They'd met in a chat room for paranormal believers, and Charlie had

puked out conspiracy theories whenever he got the chance. Their first conversation ever had been about demons who'd hijacked the bodies of politicians and secretly ruled the country. Ink had thought 'yeah, I'd tap that'.

"Still," said Charlie, "we should probably get going."

Ink looked at the Shadow Man one last time. A dark hand reached out to him, fingers curled and grasping, but the whole arm splashed to the ground. When Charlie kicked off and the bike sped away, the Shadow Man still drowned in a miserable black puddle. Ink felt weirdly terrible about the whole situation.

Fifteen minutes later, Charlie parked the bike in the deserted carpark of this big glassy building. He pulled off his helmet and shook out his hair, fanning out a cloud of cinnamon-and-leather smell. Ink wiped away the bazillion flies that had smashed themselves to death against his cheeks, hoping Charlie hadn't spotted them. Green-smear sexy? No.

Ink folded his arms and peered up at the building. "Um."

Charlie smiled. "This is work. I gotta pick up a few things. We'll grab a coffee or something, and you can tell me why those men tried to..." He pulled an awkward little face. "You know? Kill you or whatever?"

Ink gingerly clambered off the motorbike, wiping bug juice from his fingers. "I'm dangerous," he muttered. "Um... you can't be near me, okay?"

He felt shy about this. He was an odd person, but not generally a shy one, but this little confession to Charlie Flower made his stomach wobble like a dildo on jelly.

Charlie shrugged, pulling off his leather jacket and tossing it over his shoulder. His blue T-shirt fell loosely over his lean stomach. A lanyard hung around his neck, and he twirled it around his forefinger as he walked. Ink's mind went straight to cybersex. How Charlie would flit from confident to goofy, sweet to mean. It was cocky Charlie who strode over to the hospital-like building. Shy Ink, who wasn't Ink-Ink, followed him like a puppy.

"You know, I've never been with a serial killer." Charlie's eyes narrowed, curious. He pulled off his lanyard and swiped a sensor by the glassy door, beckoning at Ink to follow. Which he did. Obedient puppy and all.

"Please don't joke about this."

Charlie grew himself an annoying smirk as they stepped into a clean, modern reception room. Giant television screens displayed the latest news reports across the wall on their left. At their right, a red-haired woman sat at a desk, typing. She looked up and smiled at Charlie, then flicked her eyes over to Ink.

“Lab four, Petra,” Charlie said.

Petra nodded and tapped something into her computer.

Charlie gave her a jaunty salute and jerked his head at Ink. “C’mon, Inky.”

Inky did. Sweatily.

Where was the Shadow Man? Still at the flat or lurking nearby, looking for someone new to kill? If he pounced on Charlie, Ink reckoned he’d probably pop a kidney out of fear. He folded his arms and tried his best to come up with a cunning plan to avoid ghost-related misdemeanours without tripping over his feet or pissing off Charlie.

“Um, hey! I need a piss!”

Perfect. Pissing. Charlie would not be pissed off (or dead), and Ink might get himself an empty bladder as a bonus prize.

Charlie linked hands with him. His palms were hot. A little rough, a little soft, like the leather of his jacket. “Inky,” he said, smiling sweetly. “Just give me a second, okay?”

And there is no escaping from a pretty boy when he holds your hand. Shit.

The corridor they entered was lined with notice boards and posters of glowing cells and molecules. Abstracts from scientific papers hung alongside photos from outings to the beach, green fields, even the rainforest. Charlie featured in a few of them, looking as cute and tall as he did right now. Ink had never actually asked what Charlie did for a living.

A woman in a lab coat rushed past with a clipboard. Ink held his breath, but she didn’t keel over dead. Obviously, she wasn’t a threat, just like Charlie. Unless the Shadow Man was just tired from killing Pizza Guy. Maybe he could only kill one person a day. Maybe he *wasn’t here*. But shit, Ink couldn’t think like that; it was like getting your cock out in a Jacuzzi full of piranhas.

Charlie turned into a room and held the door open. Ink followed, entering a bright yellow kitchen with a wooden table and a vase of daffodils. The table was stacked high with notes, and a white lab coat hung over one of the chairs.

Charlie picked this up and pulled it on over his shoulders, then locked the door behind them.

“Don’t want people to burst in,” he explained.

“Oh. So. You’re a scientist, then?”

“Sort of.” Charlie perched on one of the wooden chairs, knees up by his chin. He peered at Ink, tapping his fingers on his shins. “So what’s your deal?”

“You wanna know why people were after me?” Ink was twitchy; it was a huge secret. Sort of spikey to get out.

Charlie smiled placidly, and Ink was seized with the need to entertain him. Spikiness and eager-to-please fought wars inside his skull. Eager Ink won.

“People die near me,” Ink muttered as Charlie bounced off of his chair and put a kettle on. He set out chipped teacups, always looking at Ink, just over his shoulder. Any second now, he’d burst out laughing.

“How many?” Charlie asked.

“Twelve. No, thirteen.”

Charlie nodded like this was no surprise. Ink wasn’t sure if he liked that reaction or not. Certainly, he hadn’t expected it. He glanced at the locked door.

“I don’t want them to die...” And those words were only spoken to fill the silence or maybe to stop Charlie breaking it. “They just—”

“This the ghost you told me about online?” Charlie asked. “The one that haunts you?”

“Oh...” Ink flushed; he’d forgotten about that (although he’d left out the murder details back then, of course). The things you say to impress a guy... “Don’t be silly. Who believes in ghosts? I’m sure it’s all in my head. A coincidence. People just die sometimes. So what if I’ve been around to see it a few times?”

“Thirteen *coincidences*.” Charlie held out a teacup. “Sugar?”

Ink shook his head.

“Tell me how they die,” Charlie said.

“Why?”

“It interests me.”

“*Why?*”

Charlie lowered his eyes. Suddenly, Ink felt very sick and very alone. He looked over his shoulder, almost hoping to see the Shadow Man—someone he was used to, you know, someone familiar. But it was just him and Charlie in the little yellow world, and Ink was disappointed.

“Is he with us now?” Charlie asked, stirring tea, teaspoon tinkling. “Does he want to kill me? Will he try?”

Heartbeats hammered inside Ink. His stomach turned, thick with sloshing puke. “You should be scared, or—or laughing at me.”

“I’ve died before,” Charlie said quickly. “I’m not scared of dying.”

Warm ceramic pressed against Ink’s fingers. He looked at the swirling tea, then up at Charlie’s chocolate-coloured eyes. Pretty dark eyelashes. Kind pink smile.

“Who are you?”

“Charlie Flower. I’ve never lied to you, Inky.”

Ink frowned. What was the difference between lying and concealing the truth? “Did you send those men at my house to get me?”

“Not me. But the people I work for did. The people who are going to help you through this.”

“One died.” There was a lump in Ink’s throat the size of a potato.

“Which sucks.” But Charlie didn’t flinch. “But it wasn’t your fault. He knew how to behave; he knew not to threaten you.”

Ink shivered. He was fucked up, but Charlie was fucked sideways, frontways, up the bottom. Too focused to even give a shit about a dead colleague. Ink licked his lips. “You’re one of those people you told me about. A Drifter.”

Charlie nodded. “We research the paranormal. It’s wholly interesting shit. And I’ve had my eyes on you, Inky, for quite a while.”

“So... when we were talking online...” Talking. Because that’s what they’d been doing. “Cyber... talking, you were *researching* me?”

“Yes,” Charlie said. “But I did have fun fucking your sentences.”

That was it, then. The truth. All the lovely cybersex with lovely Charlie and a dangerous pizza guy situation had been set up to get Ink here. The pizza guy kissed earthworms now. It was sick.

And where the hell was the Shadow Man?

No. Shut up! ‘Better the devil you know’ was all well and good, except when said devil was a seven-foot murderous ghost.

“People die near you,” Charlie said brusquely. “You think no one noticed? Would’ve taken you sooner, but we only recently got the funding. Believe it or not, it’s a bitch to pay for this stuff.” He kept drinking tea, looking serene with his long fringe in his eyes and his right arm dangling by his side in the sleeve of his pristine white lab coat.

“Are you going to put me down?” Ink asked.

Charlie’s forehead wrinkled. He reached out and ruffled Ink’s hair. “The people I work for are in research, Isaac. We want to help you.”

Ink raised his eyebrows. “You’ve kidnapped me, then, haven’t you?”

He looked at the kitchen door. Charlie had the key, but he could definitely wrestle it off of him, and definitely run.

Charlie snorted. “We’ll make you normal. It’s what you want, right? So stay with us for a bit, and if you don’t like it, you can leave at any time?”

He tossed a key at Ink who was suddenly quite embarrassed for assuming the worst. Still, he wrapped his fingers around the metal, held it tightly.

“To be fair,” Charlie said. “It would be a dick act to leave. You have killed thirteen people, after all.”

“My ghost did.”

“Who believes in ghosts?” Charlie smirked and stood up, walking to a skinny side door Ink hadn’t noticed. He drew his lab coat tight around his ribs. “Come on.” And Ink followed.

Charlie switched on a light and stepped into the room, arms out. Bars covered the window, the walls were padded, little cameras hid in corners and nooks. One, two, three... And Charlie stood in the middle of it all, smiling like he was in heaven.

Bars on the freaking windows?

But then, this room probably hadn't been built for him, had it? Probably, the bars were for some previous occupant. One of those demons Charlie claimed to believe in.

Charlie walked with his hands on his hips. "Art stuff." He nudged an easel and a set of paints. "Television. PlayStation. All your home comforts, Ink, anything you'd want."

Ink sniffed. The art stuff was pretty decent. "How long do I need to stay?"

"Few days?" Charlie shrugged.

"And will it hurt?"

Charlie laughed. "If it does, you can sue my arse off and ruin all the months of campaigning I've done to get this funded."

"Well," said Ink, sitting on a cushy pink sofa. "If it won't hurt, I guess I could stay here a few days."

Charlie beamed.

"But I hate the way you got me here."

Charlie kept on beaming. Ink kicked off his shoes, stared at his socks, chewed on his fingers. Everything was happening too fucking fast.

"Why don't you tell me about him?" Charlie asked, sitting on the floor in front of him and crossing his long legs. "Your Shadow Man? Do you remember when he first appeared?"

Ink sipped his tea slowly. He supposed there wasn't any harm in sharing this information. "I nearly drowned when I was fourteen. After that, I saw shadows in corners. He didn't kill until four years later. Took me a while to even connect the two."

He ran his fingers over the thin, white scar on his shoulder. It still tingled sometimes when the Shadow Man was close. It made him feel resentfully protected.

"Oh yes, the junkie," said Charlie.

"How the hell do you know about *him*?" The junkie hadn't been a secret, exactly—when you're stabbed in an alley, and the stabber drops dead, you tell your friends. Only in Ink's stories, the junkie 'must have had a heart attack or something'.

“Spoke to him.” Charlie’s smile stretched. “He recovered. And apparently having the Shadow Man inside him felt wonderful.”

Ink’s jaw dropped. “Excuse me?”

“I bet you asked for your curse,” Charlie said, balancing his chin on his wrist. “People do strange things when they’re near death. You might not even remember it.”

“I would remember that.”

Charlie raised his eyebrows in an obvious display of ‘I know better than you so shut the hell up’. “Perhaps we can lure him out,” he said.

“Why the hell would you want to lure him out?”

Charlie drained his teacup. “How are we meant to catch him if we can’t find him?”

He seemed genuinely interested in any answer Ink had to give. When Ink gave none, he stood and stretched his shoulders. “For what it’s worth, Inky, I feel sorry for you.”

And on that happy note, Charlie Flower skipped out of the room, red-socked ankles twisting merrily away.

Ink was alone for four hours. He painted, he played videogames, he tested the little yellow door (and, yeah, it opened and closed, as doors do).

Yeah, for a shut-in, Ink really wasn’t too great at being alone. But, of course, he’d always had the Shadow Man. Apparently he liked that—the shape of him on his sofa, his occasional one-word replies.

“Oh hi, Shadow Man. How has your morning been?”

“Isaac.”

“Would you like a slice of cake, Shadow Man? I made Battenberg?”

“Isaac.”

“Would you please leave the room while I’m wanking, Shadow Man?”

“Isaac!”

Real heart-warming, intellectually-stimulating stuff like that. It would be fine if the ghost was gone forever, so Ink could get on with living his life, but there was darkness beneath his skin. He knew the Shadow Man would be back

when it suited him. So Ink painted a lot of bright-red paintings, jaw stiff and brow furrowed.

Fucking jealous, wasn't he? Jealous his ghost might be having fun murdering in front of other young men.

And then he thought of the Shadow Man struggling on the pavement. Those shape-melting fits of his never lasted more than a couple of minutes—but maybe Ink had pissed him off by leaving him there.

So what? This was all Ink's fault? You'd think a heartless murderer would be less judgemental. Dick.

The door opened, and Ink jumped, half expecting the Shadow Man to step through it. No joy; it was a tall man with wispy red hair. He wore jeans and a tatty shirt, sweaty at the armpits. He held a knife. Ink held a paintbrush.

The man lurched forward, long body bent and eyes wide. Ink stumbled back, suddenly very aware that he was not a secret ninja and had no idea how to fight.

He crashed back into the squidgy wall and took a deep breath. Gulped. "Wh-who are you?"

The redhead frowned, leapt forward and stabbed. Ink didn't even move, and chilling, awful pain burst in his chest. Things were too quick, too scary, very *wrong*.

He slumped to his knees, hot blood oozing through his fingers. Lungs tightened around a scream, only he couldn't breathe, couldn't force it out.

Fuck, *fuck*. Ink fell to his side, eyes on the ankles of the strange redhead. His mouth twisted, and his tongue sat in cold spit. He wanted to snarl or swear or something, but nothing happened. Besides the not being able to breathe thing, he was just too scared. It was the junkie all over again, but his mind went back further. He was fourteen and drowning, a mouth full of water, lungs that struggled and collapsed as the world grew darker, darker, dead. Sometimes he still couldn't believe he'd made it. Back in Lake Windermere, he'd accepted death. Then light had burnt his eyes, and life had been freaking beautiful.

The Shadow Man had been with him since. And although the thing killed like Ink ate chocolate, there was a link to beautiful life in him too. Something pretty and sweet that Ink had tried for so long to understand, but it did nothing

for him now as he lay in a yellow room, with a man and a knife and a hole in his chest, drowning again.

Ink clutched at the riverbank... dirt... yellow floor, the world was shifting, seeping through his fingers. He kicked out, but his sodden clothes dragged him deeper, down, down, down.

Things were perfectly cold and perfectly quiet. Ink sat at the bottom of a lake with his arms around his knees, letting the darkness hide him.

Strong arms wrapped around his chest. His fingers twitched.

Breathe.

A shot rang out in the dark, and Ink opened his mouth, filling his lungs with rotten water that tasted of algae and frog shit.

Charlie stood over the bloodied corpse of the redhead, moving a shotgun from one hand to the other. His expression was dull, his lips pouted. Feet twisted in loafers spritzed with blood, yellow socks folded over just beneath the ankle. The redhead's face was... not a face anymore, it was the popcorn kernel after the microwave—a twisted, blasted-out skull, a mess of hot, stinking pinks and reds. There was nothing recognisable about it that said this was a human who had been a baby, kid, teenager, adult.

“Bit excessive,” Ink muttered.

“Killing quickly’s the only way I kill anything at all.” Charlie’s brown eyes flicked to Ink, narrowed when they saw him seeing. God, he looked awful—not quite redhead awful, but those eyes were red with blood, and his lips were chapped and bluish. His brown skin had even found a way to look pallid. “It’s not you, then,” he said, his voice weak, as sickly as he looked. “You’re not the one that kills them. You’re not cursed. What *are* you?”

Ink touched his own chest. Hadn’t...?

His shirt was stiff with dried blood, and there was a hole in it, just below his right nipple. The skin beneath was tender, but intact. When he coughed into his hand, a pattern of blood and mucus splattered into his palm: a miniature world of yellow continents and red seas.

“How...”

Charlie looked back at the dead guy on the floor. And apparently he was not in the mood to explain what the hell just happened. But Ink knew. The redhead was part of Charlie's expert plan to lure out the Shadow Man. Ink was numb. Maybe horrified.

"You said I wouldn't get hurt," he muttered.

"You were meant to kill him! And anyway—" Charlie jabbed at Ink's chest with a fingernail. "You. Are. Not. Hurt." The fingernail bled, snapped off and ended up on the floor. Charlie watched it, then glared at Ink because it was clearly all his fault. "I've got a touch of the flu. Sorry," he said, very stiff.

"Fuck you," Ink said, his voice far away, almost out of reach. "The Shadow Man's not here."

Brown eyes twisted away, and Charlie stalked off towards the door, shotgun over one shoulder. "He'll be back though?"

Ink shrugged. "I think so—"

"When?"

"No idea." Ink moved his hands over his chest again. The floor rocked beneath him, and he felt lost, overwhelmed. Tears sprang to his eyes. "How am I even alive? Fuck!"

Charlie snapped, "You don't think that once we research something, we learn how to make use of it? You're alive right now because we spent months developing a serum to promote tissue healing. At this moment, your right tit is worth more than what I make in a year."

Something about those words disturbed him—the making use of stuff part, not the implying he had tits part. "Whatever use would you get from studying my curse?"

But the answer was obvious. The Shadow Man was a disobedient weapon. Why not use him to develop a weapon that could actually be used?

"That's not very ethical, Charlie."

"He was a convict anyway."

"I mean the weapon development."

"I'm not into that." Charlie looked at the dead redhead then back at Ink again with his bloody corneas. He raked a hand through his hair—hair that actually came out in clumps. "Whatever. I'm fucking tired of this."

“You’re very strange.”

Charlie frowned and exited the yellow room, leaving Ink and the corpse to get cosy.

For the longest time, Ink sat and wondered if he were dreaming. Then he thought ‘fuck wondering’, rushed to the door and pushed it open.

It swung. He stepped through. Nice.

But he ended up in the same little yellow room he’d started in.

Again and again, over and over, circles turning on circles turning on circles. Running through door after door until his lungs burnt and his body shook. Trembles led to full-on shakes, so he had to sit on the floor and force himself to breathe slowly. Steady.

Supernatural research. Yes. He just had to learn this place couldn’t be trusted. He’d been through worse than this before, and he was strong enough, fucked up enough, to get through this. He turned his eyes to the dead corpse and bit his lip.

Chapter 3

Liberation

For the next few days, strangers would pop in to bring him food and make awkward conversation. No Shadow Man, though, and Ink was missing him. Problem was he was too good at liking people. They didn't need to be cute or kind, they just needed to be there. And then, well, not there.

Charlie played stranger too; Ink didn't see him again until the middle of the fifth night. He rushed in with his black hair sticking up on one side and his face unshaven, still looking sick, but not half as bad as after the redhead incident.

"Get up." Charlie thudded onto the bed as Ink shivered and disentangled himself from the sheets. Last night had been full of drowning and duvet covers.

Ink pulled on a red sweater and blue jeans—the Drifters had bought him a whole assortment of unexciting outfits—and eyed Charlie askance. "You won't try to kill me again, will you?"

Charlie looked hurt. "Do you think I'm so inefficient? I learn from my mistakes, Inky." He bounced up from the bed, stretched and yawned, slender arms reaching for the sky. "Come!"

And when Charlie opened the yellow door, it worked perfectly, making Ink doubt his own brain.

They went to a dark room—one of those police station, one-way mirror jobbies—because no self-respecting research institute is complete without one. Charlie pressed his nose up against the glass.

"There." He turned to Ink and pointed at the person behind the mirror. "I found him at your flat. What do you think?"

Ink didn't think. It was just a guy hunched over a table, well-muscled arms pinned behind his back. He nursed a black eye, a split lip and a confused expression on his dark-featured face. Just a guy.

He looked up and caught Ink's eyes.

"He can't see us, can he?"

"In this business, you learn not to expect anything."

Ink held the guy's gaze for a few more seconds.

“Let’s talk to him.” Charlie straightened his lab coat and hooked his arm around Ink’s, leading the way.

“I swear, if he kills me, Charlie, I’ll poke your bloody eyes out.”

Charlie laughed. “He’s cuffed and sedated.”

“Not gonna help me if he breathes fire or some shit.”

Still, he followed Charlie into the other room, if only because he was interested to find out who the guy was. Maybe a burglar? A hot and sexy burglar with big muscles and blue eyes?

Blue eyes that turned puppy-dog as soon as they latched onto Ink. A big, goofy smile burst forth, curled up more on the right and decidedly cute. It made the stranger look five years younger—more chirpy student than sexy burglar—but then he tamed it and frowned.

“Come here,” Blue Eyes drawled, voice low and rumbling with a northern twinge, most authoritative. “Please?” he added, ruining that authority completely.

Charlie nudged him forward. Ink stumbled.

“Closer?”

Another flash of a wonky, accidental smile. It was a bit weird, all these lips and teeth and eyes from a complete stranger, but Ink supposed the guy was drugged-up, so he was bound to be weird. At least he was too goo-goo to be dangerous.

Probably.

Yeah, as Blue Eyes wriggled in his chair, he looked more likely to hug Ink than hurt him, like a big dog tugging at a lead. His chair rattled against the floor. He leant forward, rocked back, and crashed, bashing the back of his head on the concrete.

Ink jumped and sprang forward, reaching for his shoulders. He looked down at those fluttering blue eyes. Was he breathing? Ink sort of knew CPR. He’d seen movies, at least. Mouth to mouth. Eh, he had a nice mouth.

“Isaac?” the stranger croaked. “Hello.”

Conscious. Breathing. Thank God. Ink smiled in relief, and the stranger’s cheeks creased too as Ink stroked him like a rabbit, trying not to think about the fact that the man somehow *knew his bloody name*.

“Good—that’s right, that’s right... and what the hell were you thinking...”

In reply, Blue Eyes lifted his face and planted a big, hot kiss, right on Ink’s mouth.

There were some kisses Ink knew he’d remember forever. His first, with a friend’s sister, had too much tongue and too little boy. Lucas from year thirteen gave kisses that made you tingle all over—*all* over. Clive, his first boyfriend, had once kissed him with a mouthful of mashed potato and stuck a sausage in his ear.

The blue-eyed stranger’s kiss was sudden: a taste of hot roughness, a scratch of lips against lips. A tongue that turned ice cold and fell off and slid down Ink’s throat, so he had to turn away and cough up black smoke.

“The... fuck?” Ink gasped, hands falling through the syrupy thickness of disintegrating shoulder blades. Shadow tendrils stroked at his lips, then sprang away into the air.

An arm slammed against Ink’s throat, and Charlie held him close, pressing something sharp and cold against his neck. All that was left of the blue-eyed man was a white T-shirt, jeans and underwear, empty shoes.

“Don’t move,” Charlie hissed, hard and tense against him. “If you try anything, I’ll slice you.”

Ink held his breath as shadows crawled from every corner of the room and spiralled up into legs and hips, like excitable, happy little snakes.

The Shadow Man was back.

“Let me go,” Ink begged. “You need to let me go or he’ll get you. Please? I really, *really* can’t control him. You need to believe that!”

Charlie squeezed him harder for a second, then softened, stepped away. “I get the impression that you don’t want my help anymore.”

“You’re going to use the Shadow Man to develop a weapon!”

He grimaced. “No.”

Lying. Ink bit his lip and turned away; shadow hands gripped his wrists, and the ghost himself stood close. There was an unfamiliar thickness to him now—caused by the sedatives maybe?—usually Ink could see all the way through him when he tried.

“Inky,” Charlie said, all singsong. “I *can* save you from him.”

Ink didn't want to hear it. And he didn't want to think about the guy at the table with the sweet, crooked smile. He just wanted to get back to someplace he knew.

Take me somewhere safe.

He followed the grip on his wrists, eyes half-closed, mouth half-open. Past labs and common rooms and kitchens. He panicked about getting trapped here forever, then soothed himself. No. He'd been here before. He knew the way. So did the Shadow Man.

When he stepped out into the atrium of the building, gorgeous relief swept over him.

But he wasn't alone. The place smelt of people and gunpowder. The Shadow Man stepped away and split out in all directions, forming miniature copies of himself.

That was new. Well, shit.

Four masked people sprinted into the room, and the Shadow Men took them instantly. All fell in unison, all died quickly. Three people followed. Ink turned to see a man with a gun, drowning in shadows behind him.

Fourteen, fifteen, sixteen...

He clasped his face and kept walking.

He ended up in a crappy little bed-and-breakfast hours from the lab. Not quite sure how many hours exactly, but his feet hurt, and there was a hot bowl of spaghetti in his hands, and there was a man on the bed beside him, not talking.

"So..."

Ink was suddenly aware of how very tall and built the guy was. How he had scars and tattoos, cuts and bruises. How he was very, very naked.

Because, yes. Shadows do not turn into clothes. Not like they do strange, blue-eyed men with crooked smiles.

"So you're a person," Ink finally observed. Pat on the head.

The man gestured towards his neck, pressing fingers into a pinprick spot of blood.

“Because of the sedative Charlie gave you?”

“I felt really weird, but I’m better now. I’m sorry if I scared you.”

“With the bashing your head on the floor thing?”

Blue Eyes looks pained. “I meant the…” He touched his mouth briefly, then turned away. “It was really rude; I should have asked.”

Asking to kiss someone while cuffed up in an interrogation room? The idea was somehow stranger than the dissolving tongue.

“How’s your head?”

Blue Eyes touched his scalp and winced. Ink moved his fingers to check too, but the stranger jerked away. Not a fan of physical contact? Yeah, Ink would not have guessed with the whole kissing thing.

“I’ll turn if you touch me,” the guy said. “I don’t want to turn; being here is amazing.”

Amazing? Ink checked out the décor. There was dust on the plastic flowers and pubes on the sheets. Amazing.

“So… What’s your name? Where’d you come from?”

A long sigh escaped the Shadow Man’s lips. “I’m Daniel. I live on your sofa.”

Ink laughed. The Shadow Man looked confused.

“I just figured, you know, you’d have a scarier name than *Daniel*.”

Daniel tilted his head, peering at Ink’s chest. He moved his fingers towards the buttons of his jumper, pausing for just a second as if asking permission. Ink pulled the jumper off, interested in what would happen.

Fingers traced over the place Ink was stabbed, not actually touching the skin but near enough for Ink to feel the warmth of them. Curious, he leant forward, but those fingers turned to smoke the second he touched them.

Daniel brought them to his face, brow furrowed as his fingers reformed. “You were hurt,” he said. “I tried to get to you, but I wasn’t fast enough. Then I didn’t know where you were.” He looked at Ink, leaning close and smelling of ashes. “You’re okay?”

“Yup. Turns out I don’t need you to kill everyone to be okay, Daniel.”

“Yes, but it helps.” So he was completely deadpan about the whole murdering multiple people thing, huh? Like swatting flies. It made Ink curious, more than anything.

“Are you a demon?”

“Ghost,” Daniel said.

Ink moved to the edge of the bed. Ghosts were interesting. What if Daniel was a Roman or something? A Roman with a Jewish name and a Northern accent. “So when did you die? Do you *remember* dying?”

Daniel drew a hand across his stubble. “I didn’t die. I was cursed.”

“Oh. So curses create ghosts, huh?”

Daniel’s look was blank. Because yeah, obviously. But it was nice to look at his incredulity; blue eyes were always nice to look at. And given those pretty blue eyes, Ink tried his best to eat his spaghetti with delicacy and grace.

“So... about the whole mass murder thing?”

The Shadow Man twisted his fingers in the sheets. “I do it to protect you, Isaac. I’m not a monster.”

“Yeah.” Ink slurped tomato sauce. “Well, good job *protecting*. Say, have you noticed how completely fucked I am?”

Yeah, he was well aware of how his personality tipped. Avid curiosity, pettiness, a pinch of abject horror. He wasn’t numb to the murders, not really, but Ink could flush them away in his head whenever he wanted to. Daniel had done that to him, maybe broken something inside him forever.

Right then, he didn’t even mind. It was like pressing his nose against a window and watching some other weirdo springing about his life. He was relatively content; Daniel was weird and pretty, plus he had spaghetti.

Colour bloomed in Daniel’s cheeks. “They *kill* you.”

“I don’t feel dead.”

Daniel opened his mouth, then jumped as his entire left arm turned to smoke. He screwed up his face, and Ink watched bones materialise from nothing. A circulatory system reached out fronds and grew. Thick muscles developed, then skin. He winced. “I should find some alcohol. My form holds better when my brain’s less focussed. And this is good. I’m enjoying this.”

Ink spluttered. “You’re *enjoying*... this *amazing* experience.”

“Yes. I’ve wanted to talk to you properly for most of my life, Isaac. I love this.”

The Shadow Man had this miserable broody face on him that did not say ‘love’ at all. Ink frowned and reached out to push Daniel’s cheeks up into a super-happy smile. Those cheeks dissolved into shadows as soon as he touched them, but Ink didn’t give a shit, and the Shadow Man’s face reappeared, a glower in place.

“It’s what you do when you enjoy someone’s company.” Ink let the spaghetti hang down his throat as he noshed it.

“Hm.”

But Daniel’s half smile reappeared briefly as he got to his feet, striding across the room with his muscular thighs and arse on full display. Like his arms, his legs were licked with black tattoos, twisting and turning into all kinds of hidden places. He headed to the little minibar, squatted and grabbed a bottle of whisky. He tipped it at Ink and downed a couple of glugs with a long, satisfied sigh.

“How does a ghost get tattoos? Did you have them before or what?”

Daniel perched on top of the minibar, crossing his legs. He regarded Ink thoughtfully, cock sitting pretty against his thigh. “I only turn to shadow when I’m near you. I’ve narrowed the range to seven hundred metres. Less when I’ve been drinking. Or sedated.” He raised his bottle and scratched his neck. “But I get older too. I’m not dead.”

Ink slurped another forkful of spaghetti. “So how did it happen? How were you cursed?”

“I asked to be able to save you a long time ago. I did, but they made me a monster for it.”

“At Lake Windermere? When I drowned?”

Daniel nodded.

“Fuckbrain.” Ink chucked spaghetti at Daniel who shot back on the minibar, knees at his chest. “Why the hell would you care if I live or die? You don’t know me.”

The Shadow Man lowered his eyes and stood up, dick swinging. He wiped at the spaghetti sauce on his chest, holding up his stained fingers. “When I’m shadow, I see things a different way. I see possibilities, futures. I see you dying,

Ink, over and over. Saving you is all I can think of, and I can't stop myself. It's like as soon as I think of killing, I do it. I've no control."

Ink stretched out on the bed, looking at the cobwebby ceiling, mostly to avoid looking at Daniel's delightful dick. "Then you've gotta stop saving me. Sorted."

Daniel laughed and drank more whisky, wiped his mouth. He had a nice, silly laugh that was full of ups and downs and unrestrained happiness. "You're naïve."

Ink frowned. "Fuck you. I don't fret about the things other people might, but that doesn't mean I don't consider them. Yeah, I realise that I might die if you leave me. I just don't give a shit about it."

"I like that." Daniel looked off wistfully into the distance, and Ink longed to drag his fingernails down that hard chest, fuck up those tattoos a bit. He hopped off the bed and staggered forward, trying his best to valiantly loom over the man by the minibar, and still eat his spaghetti. Daniel gazed down at him and like a dog might watch a fly. "You're upset?" asked the Shadow Man, confused again.

Not really. He supposed he was spirited. Arguing with a ghost. Apt.

"Just, I'd rather die living the way I want than lock myself away, worrying all the damn time about who's going to croak instead. I'm going to lift this curse. You're going to help me." Ink stood sternly with one hand on his hips. His eyes moved to Daniel's perfectly defined chest (and how exactly did he get time to look like that in between all the killing and annoying Ink as he loved so very much to do). He'd be great to paint. Ink sort of wanted to drop everything and do it right now and then maybe make out with him for shits and giggles. "Ugh, just put some bloody clothes on, will you?"

Daniel looked down at himself, bemused. "But I'm always naked when I'm with you. You make me feel very comfortable, Isaac."

"I'm not comfortable. I'm distracted."

"Oh." Daniel put the whiskey down and carefully put his hands over his cock, covering it up. There. Dressed. "They were Drifters, by the way," he said. "The people I killed. Except that first boy."

"He didn't die."

Daniel wasn't fazed. "That makes sense. He must've told someone what happened, so the Drifters have been coming to hurt you ever since. I knew it

was my fault.” He glanced at Ink’s chest. “So it really is my responsibility to save you. I would like to keep killing.”

“Would you, indeed?” He was close to laughing; Daniel was honest and ridiculous and had no goddamn idea how to speak to other people. “Well, I’ll get rid of you on my own if I have to. You can’t even touch me, so what are you gonna do to stop me, hey?”

He could probably kill a shitload of innocent people to stop him, but... well... he’d address that problem when he came to it.

“Do you have a plan?” asked Daniel, voice stiff and low.

“Yes. But I’m not sharing it.”

Daniel’s brooding face became even broodier. Well, fuck him. Ink walked out of the room, looking at Daniel over his shoulder, daring him to follow.

So keeping Daniel from turning into a murderous ghost meant getting his brain fuzzed. The easiest way to do that was to keep him drinking. Letting a guy drink on his own was just mean.

Ink’s secret master plan was this:

One: Get Daniel speaking as much as possible because information was power. And talking to him was pleasant in its own way, like squeezing a massive spot.

Two: Get Daniel back to where this all started. Miles and miles away at Lake Windermere, he reckoned. Whatever had cursed him there could maybe take it back, right?

Three: Don’t die.

Ink arranged to meet up with someone with a truck who could get them to the Lake District. He brought a couple of bags of essentials for him and his murderous ghost friend—chocolate biscuits, beer and hummus. Daniel finally put some clothes on. Ink had taken great pleasure in picking a Scratch and Sniff T-shirt covered in raspberries and a bright red pair of shorts. Daniel actually wore them well, the tit.

“Which is why you suck, Danny Boy,” Ink said, narrowing his eyes over a beer.

“Ghosts don’t suck, Isaac. We’re air. We blow.” A lame joke. Ha. Daniel smiled his awfully heart-breaking, crooked smile. So proud.

The illustrious truck driver turned out to be a young woman with yellow curls who kept twirling them around her fingers whenever she looked at Daniel. And, with women, Daniel did actually have some sort of charisma. He joked about the seedy little pub they'd met in, and about Ink for choosing it; he talked her price down by thirty percent; he even made up a romantic story about how he was a bodyguard hired by Ink to help him escape some bastard ex-boyfriend or other. Daniel smiled at Ink whenever the girl wasn't looking like he was actually being useful instead of just being an insufferable flirt.

When had he even been with girls anyway? It was such a weird thought—the Shadow Man having this whole life Ink didn't even know about. What *did* he do for a living? Did he have family? A girlfriend? A boyfriend?

And did he know how much Ink would have loved to have any of those things? How he hadn't seen his own parents in over a year and hadn't had sex in longer. He finished his drink as quickly as possible.

The 'truck' turned out to be a pink van. Daniel rubbed shoulders with the little yellow-haired driver through the pub carpark, Ink skulking behind on his own. Back in the day, he would have been the one making conversation and telling jokes. Now, he found he didn't care about impressing anyone. There was no point hiding his annoyance at Daniel and the driver girl, and so what if he drank too much and bit his nails in public?

His phone buzzed.

So, how's it going with your Shadow Man?

Ink breathed through his teeth as the driver told them all about the *super important* shipment of toilets or whatever she had to transport up north.

"Sounds like a shitty job," said Daniel, and the girl tittered wildly. Bloody hell.

Are you tracking my phone, Charlie?

Ink was seconds away from pulling his SIM card out and smashing it. Should have done it already, probably.

No. I'm just following you.

Ink held his breath and looked over both shoulders. Then he stumbled back into the bar and caught sight of Charlie instantly, sitting at a table with a glass of something purple, face shadowed by the white hood of his jumper.

Another buzz in his pocket.

Made you look.

Ink waved. Shy, very shy.

I have more suppressors to stop him turning to smoke. Would you like them? He won't be solid much longer...

Across the room, Charlie crossed his legs and smiled politely at a waitress balancing a tray of tiny drinks on one hand.

If you want one, you should come and talk to me.

Charlie put his phone on the table, spun it beneath his forefinger, spin spin. Then he stood up, caught it, pocketed it like a pistol. When Charlie strolled over, Ink knew he should walk away, but part of him was curious. Charlie was odd, so very odd, so what was his game?

And then the guy was opposite him, standing close with his hands in his pockets. The hem of his jumper brushed Ink's jeans.

"You want the suppressor."

Ink didn't reply. A suppressor would be good, yeah, but he hardly believed Charlie actually had one, and if he did, he wouldn't just hand it over.

Charlie leant forward and pressed his lips against Ink's—a sudden rush of heat at his mouth, the taste of rotten peaches. And it wasn't fair because Ink hardly ever got kissed these days, and it should have felt lovely, not unsettling, not *weird*. Warm fingers pried at his hand, pressing in a little plastic syringe of something.

"Why?"

"Just let me know if it works, okay?" He smiled kindly and pressed Ink's fingers closed. "They might chase you. You know that right."

"Why are you—?"

"Just let me know if it works," he said again. "Okay, Inky?"

Ink nodded—"Okay"—and ran like an idiot.

Chapter 4

Copulation

Ink sat and stared at the syringe in his hand, rolling it back and forth across his palm. Daniel shifted in interest, nudging Ink with his foot, poking his dick as it wasn't too roomy in back-of-van-land.

"Medicine?" asked the Shadow Man.

"Charlie says it's a suppressor." But why did it matter what Charlie said? He was, after all, a raging liar. "Even if it's poison, it's a useful thing to have, right?"

Daniel's mouth opened, and the left half of his face disappeared with a pop. There were seven awkward seconds in which he tried to speak, but couldn't navigate a mouth and tongue that were half flesh, half smoke. Ink popped Bubble Wrap.

"You talked to Charlie," Daniel said finally, pressing shape back into his cheeks with his fingertips.

"Yes." Ink felt embarrassed and didn't like it. More Bubble Wrap had to be popped. "He was at that bar. I guess he tracked my mobile or something? But... I dunno. He seemed *helpful*."

Daniel picked up the syringe and inspected it, holding it so close to his face he had to squint. Ink turned his phone off and plucked out his sim card. "Maybe he found us by *scrying*? Is that real? Does that work?"

Daniel rubbed a hand through his hair. "I'm not sure. I've only ever stalked you the old-fashioned way. As a ghost made of shadows. You know."

Daniel swung the syringe between the tip of his thumb and forefinger, then jabbed it into his arm, thrusting down the plunger.

Shit!

Ink jerked to slap the thing away, but the needle was already out, the syringe empty.

"If that kills you...!"

The Shadow Man shrugged. "We'll find out, won't we? And if we're going to get rid of my curse, I need to help while I can."

He wasn't meant to just use it. Ink had been expecting at least five minutes of careful deliberation. Maybe even a healthy dose of angsting when he'd look into Danny's eyes and squeeze his hand into smoke. *It's okay, Murder-Ghost, I'm right here with you.*

"Shit!" said Ink, again. Out loud this time. He watched Daniel closely for signs of death and doom, pressing a hand against his forehead. Ish. He had to avoid actual pressing, but the thought was there.

Daniel's eyes moved upwards, and his mouth crinkled a little at the edges. "Does work out for your grand plan though; if this is poison. I die, you get rid of me..." he trailed off.

"Just shut up, Shadow Man," Ink said. Daniel's trickling smile broke banks, and Ink had to lean down and grab Daniel's arm to get away from it. He made a great show of checking the injection site.

Then he prodded Daniel's arm once. Twice. It was pretty hard. Ink prodded again.

"Suppressor's working..." he said tentatively. "Right?" And he squeezed Daniel's arm this time, holding tight, just to make sure. Yeah, touching Daniel felt pretty great. "We wouldn't normally be able to do this, would we?"

Daniel said nothing, but his cheeks were pink.

"You've gone an odd colour," Ink observed.

Daniel mumbled something and pulled his arm away. Ink looked at the palm of his hand and wondered if it had maybe been sweaty and gross or something.

"You're shy," Ink realised, amused. "Aww! Poor flower!"

Daniel attempted to retreat into his T-shirt like a sexy, pink tortoise.

"Just because I'm gay doesn't mean I'll jump you. As you must know, I barely jump anyone ever. I'm too distracted by the monster watching me every night in the dark." Ink was smiling, he could feel it. One of those, 'I'm in a bar and you're cute and you don't know it yet but I'm about to have you' smiles. He hadn't smiled like that in a while. He didn't even know why he was doing it now.

Daniel's cheeks darkened further. "I don't watch," he muttered. "I..."

"Lurk?"

"Yes. But politely."

Ink shook his head. “You lurk like a pervert,” he insisted. Relishing, perversely, this odd power he’d discovered. The ghost of a thousand murders was shy.

“I don’t follow you to the toilet!” he protested.

“You can’t open doors,” Ink countered.

Daniel started to answer, but then Ink’s phone buzzed and whatever it was turned to smoke in his throat. Ink checked the screen.

Is the suppressor working?

Then, half a second later—*Well, is it?*

Ink breathed through his teeth, positive he’d turned the thing off. Wincing slightly—it was a very expensive phone—he dropped it on the floor, and crushed it beneath his heel. When the glass screen crunched, it felt like he was sandpapering his teeth clean.

Daniel raised an eyebrow.

“Charlie,” Ink explained. “Hey, Danny. I don’t think I ever said thanks for—for what you did. What you do. I—I don’t like it, but I should thank you anyway. I figure humanity is a pretty valuable thing to lose.”

Daniel’s face had cracked apart with a wonky smile. “I was fifteen. It seemed a good idea at the time.”

Ink kneaded his forehead. “You really did fuck yourself over, didn’t you?”

Big hands spread wide, and Daniel tilted his head. “Sure. But if I went back to that day, I’d probably do it again.”

All the pent-up frustration inside Ink was withering. Here was a guy who had actually saved his life for no reason whatsoever. That was sort of amazing of him, even if it had led to unfortunate consequences. Corpses and not getting laid for a thousand years and such. Ink wondered if Danny knew how long it took for a dick to pack its ball bags and give up completely. He would have asked, but Daniel wasn’t paying attention—he was swiping his fingers all over a tablet computer he’d got from somewhere. Took him five seconds to realise Ink was staring, and then he turned a gorgeous shade of cerise.

“Christie—the driver—she leant me this. Wanna watch?”

He tilted the screen, showing the opening of some romantic comedy, completely straight-faced about the whole thing. Yeah, the Shadow Man loved

his crappy movies about Generic Heterosexual White Female and Generic Heterosexual White Male.

“Eww.” But Ink slid up anyway, leaning his head on Daniel’s shoulder, just because he could. “I hate when you hog the TV.”

But he didn’t hate it. Not really. Usually, it was the only glimpse of the Shadow Man’s personality he ever got. He needed more. Now. Because if he was going to spend his night in the back of some van with a handsome murderer, he needed to know more about him than his first name and the size of his cock. A little bit more, anyway.

Daniel was twenty-four. No wife or kids. He’d worked in security for the past couple of years and a series of odd jobs before that. Waiter, cashier, laser tag instructor. He loved romantic comedies and tattoos, and hated the fact that he couldn’t travel, given the artist he’d sworn to protect never left his bloody flat.

God, and he really did love those shitty movies, didn’t he? The truck swung to a stop shortly after the four hundredth time Generic Heterosexual White Female was swept off her feet by Generic Heterosexual White Male. Daniel was nattering on about how much he wanted to visit that island in *Mamma Mia*, super expressive, so his fingers would brush past Ink’s arms every so often, and Daniel would pull away with an apologetic smile, though he was totally doing it on purpose. Ink figured it was the luxury of doing something that was always impossible before. And he was a little chuffed at feeling hot skin against his again too.

Like, every second, he craved a little more closeness. He wasn’t even sure if he liked Daniel, or if it was just the human contact he craved and ached for—if anyone would do.

“We should go on a date,” Ink mused. “Now we’re here. If that suppressor’s working right.”

Daniel turned scarlet. “Well, I suppose we could maybe find—find somewhere to eat, or—or—”

He froze, maybe in a shyness-induced brain fart, God bless his heart. Ink smiled and reached out to jab or tickle or pinch, but Daniel put a finger on his lips.

Then Ink heard it. Talking. Outside the truck. What?

He shifted closer to Daniel whose hands rushed to his pockets. No weapons there, though.

“Probably nothing,” he whispered.

“Probably... nothing?” Ink tried.

But the driver’s voice chipped in a couple of seconds later, and Ink got a faceful of hard arse as Daniel positioned his limbs and body to shelter him better from ‘probably nothing’. A large, warm hand rushed up to Ink’s mouth, pausing for just a second before clamping down over it.

Daniel’s body twisted, muscles hard and tight. Some of the left side of his head vanished again, but the change was incomplete—there was his skull, a few half-formed muscles still attached. And then muscle and hair and skin returned, and Daniel turned, eyes wide and worried.

“I can’t do it,” he whispered. “That suppressor. I knew I shouldn’t...”

So he was actually trying to become shadow now? Shit, he was shaking like a half-drowned puppy dog.

“You’ve always been so safe,” Daniel said. “Now I wonder if they might catch you and tear your face off!”

Finger by finger, Ink pried away the hand on his mouth. “The Drifters want you, not me.”

“Then you’re disposable.”

“Well... then they’ll just... shoot me maybe. Probably not in the face.”

Daniel nodded, looking comforted, but his breath was loud and panicked. They both were. “Stay behind me. When the door opens, we go.”

Ink nodded.

Metal on metal, right at the door. The scrape of a key being inserted and turned. Sweat prickled on Ink’s forehead. Daniel crouched lower, ready to spring.

The truck door swung open, moonlight slanting in. Silhouette people. Probably Drifters, probably after them, staring and ready for the smallish artist and his Shadow Man friend.

Slowly, Ink raised his shaking hands—‘oh, hi guys, check out my winning surrender’—but Daniel shot out of the truck, throwing his arms down and corkscrewing his fist into the face of the nearest figure.

The crunch sent Ink to a strange place of in-between where the noise was exploding popcorn, and he felt dumb for never having hit a guy. Daniel would have blood on his skin, blood on his shoes, blood on his big, rough hands with warm pink fingers. He should... probably be helping. Or something.

Ink gathered his guts from about the place and stumbled out, jumping into the darkness with fingers full of blood and his mouth full of spit.

Movement. Ink took a while to figure it all out, given it was black blurs against a blackish sky, but his eyes soon fixed on the blur in shorts that was Daniel as he rammed his forehead into the face of a bearded Drifter. His lips were drawn back over his white teeth, his face a gorgeous picture of hate. Watching him fight was a little like watching open heart surgery. Morbidly fascinating, and somehow beautiful in all its awful precision. Limbs pistoned and shot out, his whole weight behind each punch, every kick. A spray of scarlet.

Another punch to the Drifter's mouth burst lips against teeth, and those teeth twisted back with a crack. The Drifter's head cranked back, eyes closed, and another fist drove into his stomach, hitting it with a smack of meat on meat. Winded, the Drifter fell to the ground, spitting out teeth in a miserable, red puddle.

Colours. Black and white and red. Daniel with his blue eyes hidden in murk. Ink captured the image in his head, so he could paint it later. Violence could be so pretty when it wasn't him getting violenced on.

The remaining Drifters—five of them—stared at the mad, beautiful shape of Daniel. Ink's personal monster. Who quickly downed a second one with a kick to the head. Another fired a pistol, and Daniel's body vanished for just a second, letting the bullet fire straight through his right arm and embed itself in the van behind. He looked back at Ink, eyes fierce, and reached out a hand.

Oh, yes.

When the door opens, we go.

As in, don't stand around staring, thinking of how nice the scene will look when you draw it.

Ink grabbed the offered hand, but instead of being dragged along by Daniel, he found himself hoisted onto the guy's back, clinging around his neck for dear life.

“If he dies, my powers go,” Daniel barked at the Drifters, before slamming his feet to the ground and launching into a frantic run.

Ink’s neck jerked back as Daniel’s shot forward. It was worse than the fucking motorbike. When Daniel ran, it was like getting carted along on the back of a train. Ink didn’t even bother to tell him that he did actually have his own legs and could use them himself because Daniel zoomed, racehorse-esque, down the country road. Then he veered off into the forest, clutching Ink tight, leaping over rivers, ducking under branches, skidding over slippery rocks. The Drifters kept chase, shooting and yelling in an attempt to scare them. A shot whistled past Ink’s ear. Ink screamed, but Daniel didn’t even flinch.

It soon became too dark to see anything besides the trees about to slap them, and the stars and moon cracked apart by the forest canopy. Ink focused on the sound of Daniel’s breathing that was a constant, reassuring steadiness—fuck, he was strong. And beneath those breaths was the crackle of his feet against leaf litter. Beyond that, the forest, a low buzz and chatter of animals, leaves, running water. In any other situation, Ink would probably have been nervous, but the darkness was a blanket, and he felt so safe with Daniel beneath it.

They ran like that for ten minutes, twenty, Ink couldn’t tell. And maybe the Drifters were gone. Maybe Daniel had outrun them or maybe they’d just grown bored and turned away. Either way, it made him feel lighter, better. He squinted through the dark and smiled. Lights. Danny slowed as soon as they saw them will-o’-wisp through the trees. And soon the lights became a large white building with a few cars parked outside it. A sign on the door was shaped like a daisy, and Ink somehow knew that door would creak. He felt the name of the place scratching at the back of his skull.

“This hotel? I’ve been here before, I think.”

“We’ll be safe here,” said Daniel, checking under plant pots until he found a key. He pulled the sweat-soaked rim of his T-shirt away from his stomach to wipe his forehead. Ink goggled at the revealed muscles, the beautiful lines of his stomach painted black and white by light and tattoos. Then Daniel was looking at him, brows knitted and hair tousled. “You okay?”

“Hmm? I’m utterly perfect, Shadow Man.”

Daniel frowned. “Are you sure?”

“Absolutely!”

Daniel unlocked the door, strolling into the glassy hotel foyer. He rang the bell at reception a few times, then leant against the desk, picking dried blood from his knuckles. Ink was close enough to feel all the heat radiating off him, but he edged a bit closer still.

“No one home,” said Daniel.

Ink reached out slowly, then pounced. A hug. Ink’s hugs were expert and warm and tight. Perfectly perfected from days of hugging himself in the cold. Daniel’s heartbeat was strong, fast. “That was pretty cool of you, you know?” And then he kissed Daniel’s rough cheek and pulled away.

Daniel took half a step away, looking so adorably surprised.

“Sorry,” Ink said, breaking eye contact and running his fingers over his scalp. “I’m tired and emotional and shit.”

Damn. He’d read the signs wrong; he shouldn’t have assumed. Who knew if Daniel even liked boys?

Ink yawned very widely and turned away. Tired. Emotional.

Warm.

Hands on his shoulders, pulling him close. A face against his. Hot lips, sharp teeth, tongue.

He saw Daniel’s blue eyes in microscopic detail. Saw himself in them, saw them blinking. He reached out for Daniel’s sweat-sodden shirt, lifted it over his shoulders, kisses all mouth, all tongue, tingling as Daniel’s hot, bare torso rocked against his T-shirt.

“Shadow Man!” Ink started, half a laugh in his voice. Was he really doing this?

Daniel snatched his words away with another kiss, then yanked off Ink’s jumper and just stood there, staring. Every part of Daniel was perfect, but Ink was sort of weird looking, skinny and pale and gawky. He’d never really had trouble getting laid though, lots of people dug that sickly vampire look.

Daniel hoisted him up onto the hotel desk, splayed his legs and kissed him so hard Ink had to fill his lungs deep with air before another brutal kiss took him over.

“Are there—are there bedrooms here?” Ink gulped.

“It’s a hotel.”

“I want to go to bed.”

Daniel slunk away with his hands in his pockets, slouched over slightly like a moody teenager. “It is pretty late.”

Doofus. “I’m not tired, Daniel,” Ink said significantly. Then, because the Shadow Man was clearly a slow little fucker, Ink pulled out a condom and a packet of lube. Despite the being a shut-in thing, Ink liked to live optimistically.

“Oh,” said Daniel, touching his mouth, looking half-fascinated, half-afraid.

“What—you a virgin?”

Daniel pulled a face.

Ink tiptoed up to him, planting a hand on the growing lump inside those stupid red shorts. He kissed Daniel slowly, backing him up towards the elevator. And fingers moved across his chest, up his neck, winding in his hair. Ink couldn’t help leaning forward, kissing, touching. Every part of him wanted every part of Daniel—God, it had been so long.

When Ink had been younger, he’d spread himself around. And because he’d been a sickly vampire, good at talking nonsense, impulsive and unafraid to make a fool of himself, he’d ended up with some pretty fantastic experiences. On the night of the unfortunate incident with the stab-happy junkie, he’d enjoyed a particularly steamy threesome with Harry and Curtis from his art history class. They’d all just gotten drunk and fallen into it accidentally, and it had been beautiful and organic and full of tasty cocks.

Shit, Ink missed sex.

The elevator doors opened, and Daniel stepped back into it, looking so lost and beautiful. He scratched his arm and stared as Ink sprinted towards him, stumbling out of his trousers, standing opposite Daniel in just his purple underwear.

Because Daniel was perfect and precise and possibly virginal, and Ink was the scruffy mess who wanted to fuck him. Where did they go from here?

Elevator walls.

Daniel pushed him into one, kissing his mouth and his neck, sliding a hand down his underwear and blushing ferociously. Ink laughed and pulled down Daniel’s zipper as the doors swished closed, manoeuvring out his swollen dick. He opened the condom wrapper with his teeth and rolled the rubber expertly down over Daniel’s fattening dick, slipping on some lube and butting his chin against the Shadow Man’s stubble for more warm kisses.

He took Daniel's hand, smeared lube on two of his fingers, and grinned as the elevator door closed. "You know what to do, right?"

He did, and those hot fingers made their way to Ink's hole, Daniel smiling a crooked, dirty smile as he pushed them in. Ink was tight, but it was only a little uncomfortable, and he quickly grew used to having something down there, massaging inside him. He moaned and smiled and slapped his hand against the lift buttons, lighting every floor. Pushing Daniel's arms away, Ink climbed out of his underwear and wrapped his legs around Daniel's waist, shoving himself straight down onto his hard cock, grinning like a maniac. Fuck foreplay and fooling around; it wasn't what either of them wanted.

Daniel's eyes were wide, surprised, but Ink slapped a slutty kiss on his mouth before he could say anything.

The lift stopped at a floor, and the doors swished open. Ink's dick twitched at the thought of being caught with Daniel hard inside him, and he moaned as loudly and erotically as he could. Daniel stared at him like some exotic creature.

"You're real."

Ink paused at that. There was something shockingly genuine about Daniel, and his words hit harder than they maybe should have. Then he clenched down on Daniel's dick because he'd been brought up as a polite boy who always said thank you.

"Fuck me?" he asked.

And Daniel did, fast and hard, balls slapping arse. It was exactly how Ink wanted it—the deep burn inside him nurtured by the relentless pumping and heat of Daniel's hard body. The lift doors opened and closed again, but Ink barely noticed.

"Fuck me all the way to bed."

He licked Daniel's ear and groaned as Daniel's hands cupped his butt, pulling him up and adjusting position slightly so that every thrust struck Ink's prostate with expert precision. Ink squealed, unprepared for such an assault but falling right into it, letting Daniel take control. Gorgeous, perfect, merciless sex. Fuck, it was exactly what he needed. How the hell did Daniel know... exactly...!

"Fuck!"

Ink was hot, liquid, ready to drop, but Daniel kept him still, back pressed against the cold metal of the lift wall, until Ink's movements were an uncontrolled mess of kisses and squeezes. All he could do was taste and smell and hold on for dear life and hope he could walk tomorrow.

Daniel was not a virgin.

The lift doors opened again, and Daniel carried Ink into the corridor, stopping just a few steps down and falling to the floor with Ink's knees around his waist, slamming into him hard. God, the soft skin of Daniel's stomach felt fantastic against his dick. Hot and sweaty and torturously gentle. Ink was ready to pop at any second, and the sight of Daniel too horny to even make it all the way to a bedroom, pushed him to the edge.

"Oh fuck," Ink said, rolling his head back. All he could manage was swears right now.

Daniel looked down at him with shadows outlining his eyes, grabbing Ink by the cock and jerking him off frantically as he ground their bodies together. Shadows moved from Daniel's right hand to curl and tighten around the shaft of Ink's dick to join in with the merciless groping. They were cold and tingly and damn fucking good.

The orgasm hit hard and sudden, setting Ink off on a trail of shivers and moans, clenching around Daniel's dick and digging his feet into his hard butt, writhing against him. Daniel grinned and barked in happy surprise, falling against Ink and panting, hips twitching.

Everything was warm and right.

Ink stroked his hair, found little shadows winding around his fingers and crawling up his forearms.

"Fuck, I needed that." He regarded the solemn, handsome face above him. "You did too, huh?"

Daniel's eyes didn't move from his. "Since we first met."

"Creep."

Daniel shrugged. Filled with the happy afterglow of good sex, Ink got up on his elbows and peered around the hall they'd ended up in, bright and blue and decorated with daisy pictures. There was something so bloody familiar about it.

"I really have been here before, haven't I?"

The Shadow Man frowned, opened his mouth slightly.

And then there were the sounds of footsteps, and an angry dark-haired woman stood over them with one hand on her hip and another wrapped around a meat cleaver.

“Drifter?” Ink gasped instinctively, but no, the answer was far more obvious.

“What the hell are you doing in my hotel?” the woman asked, eyes flicking from Ink to Daniel and very much staying on the Shadow Man.

“Cuddling?” Ink tried dumbly, sliding Daniel out of himself, subtle as a razorblade.

But she wasn’t listening. With her eyes on Daniel, her face was glue white. She leant against the wall, mouth moving hopelessly in an attempt to find words as she clasped a hand to her chest.

“Danny?” she said finally. “Oh God, Danny, is that really you? You finally came home?”

Daniel screwed his face up and turned slowly to face the woman, trying to cover Ink’s dick with one hand and his own with the other. It didn’t really work; Danny’s hands were big, but his cock was bigger.

“Hi, Mum,” he said, voice the low, rumbling growl of a dying grizzly bear. “How’s tricks?”

Chapter 5

Immolation

Danny's mum claimed to be disgusted, smiling as she scolded him, all odd and emotional. There were pieces of her grinding together, and Ink knew they'd fall apart eventually. Soon, actually; she would be gone in five, four, three, two, one...

A single choke, a cascade of fat tears. Red-faced, she bent over double and held her mouth as she trembled. Daniel watched over his knees, looking like his brain was about to sweetly vaporise. Ink covered his dick.

"They're just tattoos, Mum," Daniel said, pained.

She froze, stared, and laughed loudly through all those shining tears. The sound wobbled down the hall as she fanned her face. "Sorry, sorry. It's just been so long. And you're so *big!*"

Daniel's skin tone would probably retain a little strawberry for the rest of his life. "Mum!"

"Oh Christ, Danny, that's not what I meant. Just—just look at you. Where did my little boy go?"

This question was about as loaded as a five-thousand-ton cargo ship. "I just... I need to get dressed now, Mum."

"There's stuff in the closet." She gestured to her right and waited.

"Mum, please?"

She jumped. "Oh! You want me to... Okay. I'll go... fix some supper." She stepped away. Stopped. Looked back over her shoulder. "It's just good to see you, Danny."

"I know. I've missed you too."

Daniel removed his sticky condom when her back turned again. He threw an exasperated look at Ink, then grew a weird smile with downturned edges as he watched her go. After a few seconds, he got up and grabbed a hotel dressing gown and slippers from the closet and a set for Ink too. He handed Ink his and squatted close by with a groan, resting his forearms on his knees and scratching at his chin stubble.

Ink prodded his shoulder.

Daniel sighed, a big sad balloon. “Isaac, you have been here before. My family owns this place. I used to work in the kitchen.” He spoke into his patella, avoiding all eye contact.

“Oh...” Ink tried to think back, to remember a pretty little kitchen boy with blue eyes and tumbling brown hair. He came up blank. But then, adult Daniel was shy; kid Daniel was probably an adorable little mouse who hid. Ink sort of wanted to step back in time and pounce on him.

“I got a crush—it’s embarrassing. Every morning you’d go out to swim beneath the moon, and I’d watch.” He picked fluff off his slippers, rolled it between his fingers. “In hindsight, I wonder if I ever really liked you at all. Maybe it was just the demon controlling me somehow like it knew I’d make that deal for your life if anything happened to you.” He shrugged. “Sort of depressing. Anyway. It happened. You got dragged under the water somehow, and I took you to shore, but you died. So I had to save you. Again.” Daniel spread his hands wide, frowning as the tip of one finger turned to shadow and curled away into the air. His hand clenched, and he swore under his breath. “We don’t have long. If you actually have a plan to get rid of me, you’ll have to do it soon.”

Ink folded his arms. “It’s not about getting rid of you.”

“You hate seeing people die. Who wouldn’t?”

Ink lowered his head. “Actually, if this were about me, I think I’d keep you. I believe you when you say you save me. I always thought I was trapped, but it’s the opposite, isn’t it? With you, I’m free.”

Daniel leant over to him, nudging shoulders, like that meant a lot.

“You’re trapped,” Ink said, and his voice was troubled because he’d thought about this wrong too. “You’re forced to protect me forever; you kill against your will, over and over again. It’s not right.”

Daniel inhaled slowly. “It gives me purpose.”

“It’s not right,” Ink repeated.

It got silent, and when Danny spoke again, his voice was small. “They’ll be able to cut me and kill me. I won’t be able to save you. I’ll just be normal.”

“Yeah...” Tentatively, Ink ran his fingers across Daniel’s pretty pink knuckles, then slipped those fingers in between his. “You’ll be living, Danny.”

Daniel kept staring as his other hand shimmered and twisted in the air. He chuckled. “Funny, that was all I wanted for you, too.”

Ink didn’t have a reply to that, so he stood and tightened his dressing gown and offered Daniel a hand. “Come on,” he said. “Let’s fix this.”

Lake Windermere was as beautiful as Ink remembered: a huge expanse of dark, flat water that you just wanted to throw stones at. The stars and moon rippled around the toe of his trainer, and an arm slipped around his waist as Daniel sidled up to him. Though Daniel’s hand hovered lovingly by Ink’s hip, the rest of his posture was stiff and held words and actions Ink would never see in the bright white light cast by his torch.

“I wish we could have talked before,” Ink muttered. “You should have emailed me or something.”

“You hated me.”

Ink sighed. “I never hated you. Well. Maybe I did a bit. But hate is... something.” He stood for a while, just looking at the lake and the sky, trying his best to lock every detail away in his head—the way the moon looked kind of dusty, just around the edges, and the perfect movement of the water beneath the teasing wind. He gripped Daniel’s arm, but it instantly turned to shadows. “You okay, Shadow Man?”

“No.” He chewed his thumb. “Isaac, if I never see you again, I want you to know that I care about you.”

“Care?” Ink snorted. “You love me.”

Daniel moved his face close, stared into his eyes. “It’s important, Isaac. Tiny things can mean a great deal to people.”

“Is that why you love me? Because I’m a tiny thing?”

Daniel smiled nervously. “These past few hours have meant the world to me.”

Ink giggled. Accepting compliments always made Ink giggle. But Daniel was being so fucking honest again that he stopped pretty pronto. Yes, the Shadow Man had loved him for years. Definitely. It was nice to finally think it. And although Ink wasn’t quite there yet, it was okay. Part of the fun was in the journey.

“It was good to meet you too, Shadow Man. Good to put a face to the murder techniques. We’ll both be fine, though. Quit worrying.” He clapped a hand on Daniel’s shoulder. Said shoulder instantly disappeared. Odd and half-formed, like an unfinished painting, Daniel sighed and let the rest of himself go.

Gone. The suppressor had run out. Ink looked back at the lake and tried not to feel alone or nervous and failed spectacularly at both.

The cool touch of the Shadow Man drifted past his shoulder.

“Isaac.”

Ink nodded. He could do this. He had to do this. Time to meet a demon, kid.

So he pulled off his shoes and socks, closed his eyes and stepped into cold, black water that swished around his knees. Particles of mud spun invisible spirals between his toes. The Shadow Man stood on the bank behind him, his long, dark figure strange and intimidating and oh so very kind.

Ink stepped forward, holding his breath, and waited for the world to tip.

Nothing happened.

Ink took another step. Kicked the water, splashed.

“Hello? Is anyone there? Hello!”

Nothing but birds and bats and the distant splosh of fish somewhere.

He tightened his fists. Not good. Because this was his grand plan. Go into the lake. Bargain with a demon. Live happily ever after. It... maybe wasn’t the best plan in the world, but it was a plan, so he was sort of proud. Or would have been, had it bloody *worked*.

So now what?

He traipsed forward, thinking of Daniel’s eyes and pretty smile and how they’d been snatched away from him by a curse he barely understood. Crooked smiles were pretty damn glorious to look at, and how the hell would he paint Danny now? Big, black ghosts were *dark* and *mysterious* and all, but Ink was past that stage of his career and was going for twisted realism now—plus, *poor fucking Daniel*.

The water reached his hips and felt sorta right like he might disappear into it like salt if he could only relax. He tried his best, reaching out to the world and to nature, calling out with all his little soul.

Please.

“You really think it’s so easy to lift a curse?”

Ink let out a breath and turned to see Charlie, perched on a little rowboat floating a couple of metres away along the bank, a shotgun on his lap. The Shadow Man stood next to him, cool as a shadow-flavoured cucumber. Getting cosy with the enemy, Danny? Thanks for that.

“Are you the demon?” he asked.

Charlie chuckled. “Sacrifice a virgin for me and we’ll see what happens, shall we?” He patted the boat. “Get in.”

Ink waded over and clambered in, wobbling about embarrassingly before shoving his butt down and shivering. The Shadow Man slipped in beside him, and Charlie sat opposite, damn happy. He started to row, looking odd in the moonlight—it made his skin glow and his eyes sink. His gun was very unappealing. Ink stared.

“I’m not a demon,” Charlie said.

“But you’re here.” And the demon was meant to be here, and the demon was meant to help Daniel, and everything was meant to be okay.

“Yes. What took *you* so long?”

“Getting attacked by your Drifters.”

Charlie sighed. “They’re not my Drifters; I’m their Charlie. Guess what, though? They don’t know I’m here...” He put a finger on his lips in a pathetic attempt to look cheeky.

“Well, you could’ve warned us about them.”

“I did call... Never got through, though. Funny.”

Ink swallowed. The death of his phone still hurt. Charlie rowed, the long smooth strokes moving them quickly out into the lake. There was something so peaceful about the place, about being surrounded by something so much bigger and older than himself, even despite the evil bastard who made the Shadow Man bristle. Still, Charlie wasn’t dying which at least meant he had no plans to kill Ink.

“Why are you here?” Ink asked. “What are we doing?”

Charlie’s lips pressed together. “I want to meet it.”

Ink looked at him blankly. “You want to meet a demon?”

“I have problems I wish to discuss with it. Show me your hand.”

Ink reached forward, and Charlie peered very closely. The soft breath from his nostrils tickled Ink’s fingers, and then Charlie opened his mouth.

A bite. Fuck. It actually crunched. Ink yelled and pulled away, staring—who *bit people*? But there was no wound, no sign he had ever been hurt at all. Then Charlie snapped forward again and—

And then there was a fucking needle in Ink’s fucking arm.

“For the pain,” Charlie explained with a shrug, pulling it out and smiling.

An odd floatiness started that Ink tried to ignore. Funny, frisky, floatiness... And his finger was so... okay. How was that? And how was it that he’d survived getting stabbed by the popcorn-headed ginger in the lab?

And was that blood coming out of Charlie’s eyes?

“I fix people,” Charlie explained. “It’s my own curse.”

“You’re cursed too?”

“Well, Daniel’s certainly not the only one. See, once upon a time I asked to live. A selfish request which left me with a selfless punishment. Whenever I’m near someone wounded, I have to fix them. Look what it does to me...” He gestured at his face—the right eye was now completely red. Looked funny. Ink laughed. “Have you worked out how to summon your demon?”

Ink felt dizzy now, and his arms and legs weren’t working right. “No. I—I thought if—if I came here, I’d know. What was that you gave me?”

“It doesn’t matter. To lift a curse, you have to give back what you took. So what did your Shadow Man take? What do you have to give back? Giving back what I took—my life—would kill me. What about you?”

Ink looked at the sad, dark shape of the Shadow Man. “About—about the same. I’d need to drown.”

“So it’s time to do that, I suppose.”

Ink tightened his hands, only his fingers didn’t tighten right, everything was floppy, nothing worked. “No. I’ll figure out some other way...”

“I want my problem sorted now,” Charlie said, smiling blandly. And the more bored he looked, the more dangerous he seemed. Ink felt like he needed to be more fun and interesting and exciting, and that was wrong, distracting.

“Your problem isn’t my... problem.”

“My problem is *everything to do with you*.” Charlie was scowling now, and Ink didn’t like it any better than that smile. “It’s your fault I’m like this. You and your Shadow Man. I never wanted to kill you—I was never *going* to kill anyone! But your fucking ghost knocked me out with a single punch. Because of what, Ink? Do you know what my life has been like since? Do you know how people treat a guy who can heal just by *being there*? I have been exploited nearly every day for the last five years, and it is *all* because of *you*!”

Ink wriggled back in the boat. He didn’t understand. But somehow he did. Yellow shoes. Pretty cheekbones. Mosquito bites. “You were that junkie,” he said in a small voice. Then he frowned. “You’re not innocent. *You* attacked *me*.”

“I was off my face and *scared*,” said Charlie. “I didn’t deserve to die for it. I would have got help. I would have saved you.”

“No...” It was hard to speak. His tongue was being lazy, and there was too much spit. “He only kills people who’ll—”

“No!” Charlie crawled forward in the boat, shotgun on his back. Behind him, the Shadow Man lurked, breathing down his neck, watching. Waiting. “He can’t know the future, Inky. Maybe he knows possible futures, but he doesn’t know them all!”

Ink was at the edge of the little boat now, his arms and legs too floppy, his neck lolling. He was afraid now, only there was no reason to be—the Shadow Man was here. “What did you...? You can’t... You can’t kill me...”

“I will see that demon,” Charlie snapped. And then he shot at the bottom of the boat.

Ink screamed as an awful collection of stray pellets and splinters embedded themselves into his right leg. Even now, though, those wounds were healing. Charlie spluttered blood and smiled at him with decaying, wobbly teeth and bleeding eyes.

The Shadow Man did nothing. Maybe he couldn’t even tell what was happening. Charlie wasn’t going to kill Ink; the lake was, and how could the Shadow Man kill Lake Windermere?

Fuck.

And then the boat began to sink, and Ink fell, and his muscles were too weak and relaxed to grab or kick or swim. The Shadow Man stood upon the

surface of the water, his outline blurred with panic. He reached down with hands made of smoke. Ink couldn't try to grab them.

Fuck, it was *cold*.

Cold and quiet as bones. He filled the silence with screams until water filled his mouth and he could only gurgle. Then the lake closed in above his head, and even gurgles were beyond him. Soft shadow arms brushed his face, shadow limbs closed pointlessly around his shoulders. It was too dark to see them, maybe Danny wasn't even here. Maybe no one was reaching out to help him.

So cold...

It was too big, too hopeless. There was no light to see how far he'd fallen, no warmth to remind his heart to beat and his brain to hope. Horror sunk into his body. Everything was painful, nothing was good. Ink, who loved life, would die alone at the bottom of a lake he'd once thought beautiful. All he'd see would be black, and his body would rock and spasm with pain and panic.

Everything was over. And he tried to think of Danny, but the chill made his crooked smile straight, his eyes black, his kindness insincere. Ink sobbed inwards, filling his lungs with dirty water, even as shadow fingers tightened around his shoulders, as shadow lips pressed against his.

"Even if I can't save you," Danny said—was it Danny? "I'll be right here with you. I love you, Isaac."

And that was good. Ink smiled. Warm arms held him tight beneath the water—arms he knew would have tattoos if it were only light enough to see them. That was it, then. He had to be dying because Daniel was alive. And that made him smile again, at the end of it all.

"Isaac!"

Light.

Ink cuddled up to his imaginary Daniel and waited to go. It didn't hurt anymore, at least.

"Fuck!"

Noise.

Daniel sounded worried. Didn't he know he was going to live now, happily ever after?

“Ink!”

Choking. Pain. Light. Noise. Fear.

Ink’s mouth was chilled pond water, his lungs were heaving bags of pain. He flopped to his side and clenched his stomach and choked and puked and screamed. “Danny?”

A hand gripped his shoulder. “I’m here. I’m... really here.”

And he was. Most corporeal and pretty, face white and sweaty, lips pale. He panted hard, perfectly in time with the *thump-thump* of Ink’s heart. So panicked and so beautiful. Which reminded Ink—he still needed to paint the guy. Preferably naked. With his fingers.

“I died again,” Ink guessed. “How long was I out?”

“You died for... minutes. I don’t know. I was just pumping your chest and hoping and—and...” He looked like he was about to cry.

“But you—you’re feeling okay? You’re not feeling... you know... And did you meet the demon?”

“I didn’t meet anyone. And I don’t know what happened to Charlie. Just... suddenly I was solid, and you were dead. But you’re not anymore.”

Charlie. Ink thought about what he’d said, about Daniel not being able to see every future. Perhaps some of the people the Shadow Man had killed would have never hurt Ink. Perhaps it was better to keep such information to himself.

Daniel swallowed and his chest heaved. His mantelpiece-blue eyes were shattered, like they were still at a scene a few seconds ago, when Ink had been dying. He leant forward, kissing Ink gently, lips soft and tongue warm. His mouth tasted salty. Ink’s was bloody. Pretty thank-you kisses. Thank you for being here, thank you for living.

Thank you for living.

Ink wrapped his floppy arms around Daniel’s neck. He was too weak to pull him close, but Danny did that for him, his hair damp and sweaty beneath Ink’s fingers. And he was *solid*. Permanent. *Here*.

“They’ll still chase us,” Daniel whispered into his hair, and somehow even that, even his voice was solid too. “Well, me. Just me. I’ll claim the power’s mine. You don’t have to be involved, I can handle myself.”

Ink kissed Daniel on his rough cheek, leaving a bit of drool behind—his body still wasn't working right. The Shadow Man was so sweet and open and genuine. Spending every moment with him sounded gorgeous right now.

Which made what he had to do next hurt even worse.

He had to let Daniel go.

“No,” Ink said.

Daniel blinked, suddenly bright red, blushing to the neck.

“You’ve spent so long with me, Danny, worrying about me, you don’t know anything else. You need to live. It’s for your own good.”

Daniel’s lips twitched around words he couldn’t decide on. But Ink was right; Danny had a mother he’d barely seen, a world he hadn’t explored. Ink didn’t want to break Danny’s heart, but maybe he needed to let him go, cut ties completely.

“How about lunch, then?” Danny asked, finally.

Ink twitched. “I don’t think you’re understanding me, I’m leaving you.”

“For my own good, I heard that. So lunch?”

Ink hadn’t expected anything brazen from a shy guy. “Lunch?” he repeated, stupidly.

“It’s what people do when they meet someone they like, isn’t it?” Daniel quirked an eyebrow. “Are you saying yes?”

“I... uh...”

Daniel pulled him close in one smooth motion. “Ink, I *do* want to live my own life and I will, but no one says that I have to do that alone. I don’t *want* to do it alone.” His voice cracked. “I *just* got you back.”

“I was only dead for a couple of minutes,” Ink said, but his will was crumbling.

“Remember what I said about tiny things?”

Fuck.

Fuck letting him go. Danny was a big boy; he could make his own ‘let’s do awful things for the greater good’ type decisions. And after all, Ink had done his part. He’d let the thing he sort of loved go. And it had refused. So, really, that was even better than it coming back.

“Fine. One date. And then you live your life.”

“No, and then we have sex.”

Ink grinned. Actually, that did sound like a better plan. They kissed and then drew apart to hobble back up the embankment hand in hand, step in step.

“Say, since I’ve already met your mum, do I have to be introduced to her again?” Ink wondered.

“Shit!” Daniel swore. “I forgot about Mum!”

The End

Author Bio

Beth Baxter lives deep inside a onesie, somewhere in the UK. Occasionally, she can be found wandering around the wild, eating Chinese food and writing about weird boys who talk too much.

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