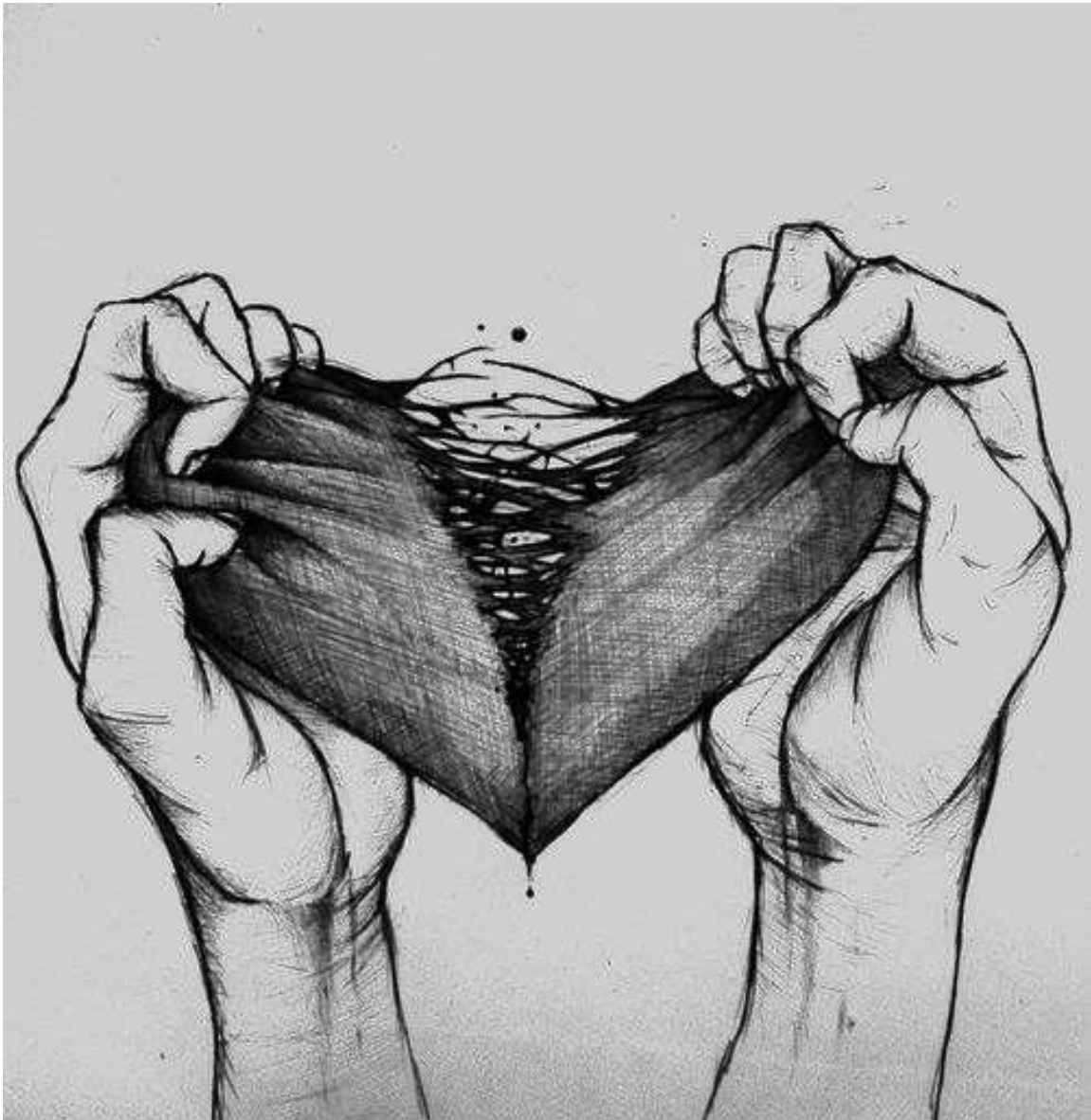


The Best of Us



S. Viersen

D. Mulder

Dedicated to Sem, the Man that was, is and always will be the
best of *me*.

***“The only way to deal with an unfree world
is to become so absolutely free
that your very existence
is an Act of Rebellion”***

-Albert Camus

“To know oneself, one should assert oneself”

It was cold outside as Father Winter coughed up his dying breath and covered leaves and grass alike with a sugary frosting, but Sam did not care. Cuddled up between the sheets it was warm and cosy and there didn't really seem to be any reason to get up. Sam, a twenty-five-year-old with short, chestnut-brown hair, had already decided that no work would be done this day.

Opening his eyes, he glanced at the alarm clock. Nine-thirty, it read, in bright crimson letters. “Alright, maybe I *should* get up,” Sam thought. It would be a waste to spend all that free time in bed. He groaned, yawned and then forced his arms to push the warm blankets away. “Shit,” he softly said, “it’s fucking freezing.” Not only that, but his head also seemed reluctant to leave the pillow. Too soft. Too comfortable. “Alright,” Sam said aloud, “stop being a pussy and get up. You can do this.” He groaned again and lifted his upper body. “See,” he thought, “no big deal.”

Next step: actually standing up. Here we go. He stood up and glanced over his shoulder to his bed with a look of slight yearning. Then he stumbled into the living room, where he folded out his Styrofoam mat and did some yoga, before his body inevitably started to yearn for breakfast.

“Tea,” his mind said. Sam stood up, walked towards the stove and put the kettle on. “Food,” his mind said. Sam reached for the fruit bowl only to discover, with great annoyance, that it was empty. “Food,” his mind kept insisting. With a sigh, Sam reached for the cupboard and pulled out a box of cereal. Nearly empty, but enough. Sam opened the refrigerator and grabbed the milk. Holding the carton over his bowl, two measly drops oozed out.

“Whatever,” his mind said, “eat it dry.” Sam did as he was told.

Spooning it into his mouth a stumbled towards the couch and slumped into it. He stared around the apartment. “I should really clean this place up today,” he thought. There were books and pieces of clothing lying everywhere. The dinner-table was covered with papers, printing materials and camera lenses and you couldn't even see the turntable as it was built in by records and tablature. Even the sofa was not safe from littering as it seemed that Sam's roommate had once again failed to put his guitar on its stand and instead just laid it down where he passed first.

“Speaking of the devil,” Sam thought as the door of the apartment opened and the tired and ruffled-looking shape of a man stumbled in. He was more dragging than carrying his guitar-case and sure enough he more or less dropped it before slumping down next to Sam. “Good morning, Max” Sam said, sounding chipper already. “Is it,” Max groaned in reply. Sam shrugged and sniffed before making a face.

“You reek,” he said.

“Yeah,” Max replied. “I had a few drinks after the gig.”

“With who?”

Max shrugged. “Friends,” he yawned.

“You don't have any friends.”

“I have friends.”

Sam snorted. Each time Max said: "I have friends," it was with the same enthusiasm as some people say: "I have a tumour" or "oh no, all hope is lost. We're all going to die." Max didn't have any friends, didn't want any friends and would be content to spend the rest of his life in peaceful solitude, as long as that solitude did include Sam, who Max seemed to regard as a kindred spirit. The feeling was more than mutual. Despite an age-difference of four years, the two had grown up together and had always remained close. So close in fact, that it made some people uncomfortable.

Even the other members of the band Max was in were little more than acquaintances to him, although he was good at faking friendliness if he had to. Sam often got the impression that if everyone in the world would suddenly die, Max would only be upset for a day or two and only because there would be no-one around to make him doughnuts anymore.

"Anyway," Sam continued, "I get drunk just from the fumes. Seriously bro..."

"Alright, alright. I'll get a shower...just chill."

"I'm as calm as a Hindu Cow," Sam informed him, his eyes closed in mock benevolence, "I'm just saying."

Max shrugged. "Whatever."

"Anyway, if you want to shower, you're going to have to wait."

And with that Sam pulled himself up, left the bowl on the coffee-table and proceeded to the bathroom.

Taking off his t-shirt and boxer-shorts Sam turned on the shower and waited for the water to go warm before stepping in. As he did so, he could just see his own body in the tall mirror on the inside of the door. He flexed a bicep and smirked. "I'm really getting there," he thought. All those push-ups and crunches and God knows what else have not been for nothing.

But as he towelled himself dry in front of the same mirror, his eyes inadvertently settled on the two feminine lumps on his chest, which he was always so careful not to touch and for a second he frowned. He quickly dried them too as to not linger on them for too long and threw the towel on the floor, along with his slight disgust. These kinds of emotions never stayed with Sam for long. They had grown too familiar.

"Hey," Max's voice called out, "are we out of food?"

"Yeah," Sam called back.

"That sucks..."

"Yeah, well, if someone had done groceries like I asked..." Sam trailed off.

"Yeah, yeah. Whatever. Let's go somewhere."

"Sure," Sam replied. "But don't you wanna sleep, or something?"

Max peeped his head into the bathroom. Sam quickly covered himself with his towel, even though it was nothing Max hadn't seen before, but he was just a second too slow and Max grinned and winked at him. "I'll sleep when I'm dead," he smiled. "Besides, I need food. Something greasy."

"Well, I'm not going anywhere with you looking like that," Sam said.

"Then get your tiny arse out of here so I can go and clean up."

Sam flipped him the finger, which Max responded in kind before disappearing with another grin. Sam sighed, gave his breasts one final look of disappointment and got ready to get dressed.

Two hours later the two of them sat at a Pret, Max looking slightly better after a shower and a change of clothes, and although he still looked tired and hungover, he didn't reek anymore and had regained some of his charm.

"So, how was the gig," Sam asked as he unwrapped his muffin. Max shrugged. "It was alright," he replied. "Audience seemed excited enough."

"How late were you guys done, then?"

"What are you, my mum?"

"I'm just curious why you came home so late...or early, really."

"I already told you: I've had some drinks."

Sam chuffed. "You drink too much," he said.

"Alright, mum."

"Yeah, fuck you too."

But Sam didn't mean it. They rarely argued and only used profanity to each other as a joke more than anything else.

"Anyway, there's another gig tonight, so I won't be home for supper," Max informed him between bites. He was wolfing his fried eggs down as if someone had told him they didn't make them anymore.

Sam shrugged. "That's okay. I need to swing by my parents, anyway. Maybe I'll eat there."

Max raised an eyebrow. "You're going to your parents," he brought out.

"Yeah. Why?"

"You hate your parents."

"I don't hate them. I just..."

"Yeah?"

"I just don't have to see them as much, is all."

"Right, because they're assholes."

"They're not assholes! Stop saying that."

"Well, they are."

"No, they're not. Besides, like your parents were anything great."

Max shrugged. "My parents are dead," he said matter-of-factly.

Sam scowled at this, but didn't press the matter. Not now the day had started so good and could very well stay that way. Instead he muttered a "whatever," and emptied his tea.

"Alright," Max said, shoving his empty plaid away from him, "I'm done."

"Good, 'cause no chicken in the world could lay them faster than the way you eat them,"

Sam grinned. "Poor chickens," he added.

"They won't stay miserable for long," Max replied, "I intend to eat all of them. Muhahaha," he mockingly laughed, his hands raised at the ceiling. Sam shook his head amused. "You're crazy," he said.

"Baby, you don't know the half of it. I'm a fucking psycho."

"Well, mister psycho, are you actually going to do something today, or are you just gonna hang around the apartment again, getting stoned and playing video-games?"

"For your information," Max said with his finger up like he was making a point, "I have a very, very busy schedule planned today."

"What? With your mattress?"

"No, you dick, I have a job-interview today."

"A job interview?" Sam raised both his eyebrows in unbelief. "today? While you're hungover?"

"Why not?"

"Pff, good luck with that."

"Why, thank you, kind sir," Max said and he stood up. "So I'm off to buy a new shirt. Catch ya on the flip side."

"Yeah, I'll just pay then, shall I," Sam shouted after him, but Max ignored him and walked out on the streets.

Sam sighed, picked up the tab and paid, before following Max outside who had already gone. As he did, his phone went off and Sam picked it up. It was agent, mister Morris. Morris had the unbecoming habit of calling himself Sam's boss, even though Sam didn't have a boss. He worked for himself.

"Sam," Morris said, by way of "good morning", "you up yet?"

"Always," Sam replied.

"Good, I have an assignment for you, if you're interested." He seemed rather excited.

"Shoot," Sam said.

"You do models, right?"

"I'd prefer not to, as you well know."

"Yeah, but this one's special."

Sam sighed. "I do landscapes, Morris. Animals. Flowers. Architecture."

"Yeah, yeah," Morris said again, "but you've done models before."

"On occasion," Sam admitted.

"Splendid. Word on the street is that there's a new girl in town. Real up-and-comer."

"So," Sam asked, already bored by the idea. "Ask Josh. He's the model-expert."

"Josh is in New York," Morris said. "Come on, Sam, don't make me beg. This could be really good for the agency, you know. If we reel her in, we're golden."

"You mean: you're golden," Sam thought, but said nothing.

Morris seemed to take this silence as a reason to do what he said he wouldn't.

"Please," he said. "Pretty please with sugar on top?"

Sam sighed. "I don't like models, Morris. They're skanky and thin and they always criticize your work. Like it's your fault they have a crooked nose or no tits. No, thank you."

"Aw, come on, Sam. I need this."

Sam said nothing.

"I'll pay you upfront. Promise," Morris tried.

"How much?"

"Name it."

Sam thought. His apartment could use a new couch. This one had burn marks on it and stains that were hard to identify. He still had to do groceries for the entire week and the chance that Max would do them were slim. He was always out of money. And his birthday was coming up. Sam would love to give him a new bass. The black acoustic one they had seen in Knightsbridge. Max had really seemed to like it.

"Alright," Sam finally said, "three thou"

"What, pounds? Are you crazy?"

"No, cents," Sam bit. "Yes, pounds, of course. And I want it upfront, like you said."

For a moment, there was nothing but silence coming from the other end. Then: "two," Morris tried.

"Three," Sam stood his ground.

“Two and a half?”

“Do you have some other prodigy photographer that I should know about?”

“Two and seventy-five,” Morris asked more carefully, knowing full well he didn’t.

Sam bit his bottom lip, then said: “fine. But I want it transferred today.”

“But...”

“Today, Morris.”

“Fine.” Morris sounded defeated and angry because of it. “I’ll sent you the specifics by mail.”

Sure enough, when Sam started his laptop and opened his e-mail, Morris had already delivered. There were no pictures of the model in question, not even an awkward selfie, just a time and a date for Sam to be at the studio and a name for the model.

Sam had started to work for the Morris Agency about three years ago now, quickly climbing up the ranks by, indeed, being quite amazing at his job. Sam couldn’t even remember when he started with wanting to be a photographer. He just knew he had loved doing it from the moment he first held a camera in his hands and he hadn’t stopped since.

After his site was discovered by some mediocre agent, four years earlier, the request to tie himself to a specific agency had started to pour in quick. Sam had only signed a contract with Morris because he paid the most. Other than that, the small, gaunt man was (in Max’s words) a disgusting excuse for a human being. And Max may have had a point. Morris often made very crude remarks towards Sam’s sexuality and certain life choices.

But he never took it too far. He knew Sam was worth every penny he paid him and could just as easily run off with another agency, never to be seen again.

Sam looked at the name again. Sara O’Brian. “Probably Irish,” Sam thought and started Facebook. There were no less than three Sara O’Brian’s living in the vicinity who all could be models if they wanted to. One of them was, indeed, of Irish descend, but Sam thought her an unlikely candidate. Sure, she was pretty, but to call her an “up-and-comer” was stretching it. Then there was another one, but she was too young. The Morris Agency did not accept anyone under the age of eighteen, so this particular Sara would have to wait another two years. The last one was by far the most beautiful of the three. She looked Antillean, or at least half so, with a lot of curls and a very pretty smile.

According to her page she was eighteen years old, studied history and dreamed of world-peace. That last piece made Sam snort in cynicism. “World peace,” he muttered, “not in a million years, sweetie.”

If he and Max were anything to go by it was more likely that the two of them would butcher the world together in a sudden rage-fit than that there would ever be something like “world peace.”

Sam was known to have a temper at times, although he was usually quite merry and inquisitive. He even came off as a bit shy, until one got to know him and accidentally triggered him off. As for Max, he was just a sociopath and a cold-hearted bastard at that. Albeit a somewhat idiotic one whose main sin it was that he just didn’t care. About anything. Ever.

Sam stared at the last Sara again. She was really pretty. Sam bit his bottom lip and took a quick glance at the clock. He didn’t have to be at his parents’ house for another three hours. He closed Facebook and opened a new page. If he was going to do this, he was going to do this right. It was time for another lens.

As he added several items to his digital shopping-cart to enhance his camera with, he struggled to reset his binder. This one had already stretched out too much. His natural shapes were starting to show. He should get a new one soon. He counted in his head. Two-hundred and seventy-six days, he calculated. It still seemed so far away, even though he was now closer than he had ever been before.

But until then it was still binders and eyebrow make-up. Sam sighed and turned his laptop off, suddenly feeling a bit down.

He grabbed his phone and texted Max. "Where r u," he typed. A moment of silence.

"Kensington," came the reply.

"U done yet?"

"Y?"

"Im bored!" Sam always left as much punctuations in his typing as he could.

Another moment of silence. Then a picture appeared of Max with a sad frown. This made Sam laugh a bit and he send a picture of himself grinning joylessly.

"Give me a minute and I'll make you smile," Max texted back.

Sam send him a sly looking face and put his phone down. He had been right. Today could still be a good day.

“You cannot create experience. You must undergo it.”

When he was a child, Max had been small and skinny. Now he was an adult, he was still small and skinny, albeit slightly more lean. At the moment, all he wore were a robe and boxer-shorts and Sam glinted at Max’s heavily tattooed skin, so tightly wrapped over his bones and muscles.

It was with a little annoyance that Sam watched Max roll a joint and light it inside the house. Sam hated the smell of marijuana, but he knew better than pulling Max out of his “creative zone”, as he called it. He always smoked when he was writing and could get cranky if the privilege was denied to him.

Max took a drag, looking like he was struggling with a particularly difficult mathematical problem, picked up his pen, combed his long, dark hair backwards with his fingers and wrote something down. Then he picked up his bass guitar, tried something and added something else on the paper. Sam watched the process unfold feeling a slight twitch of awe. Tablature was Greek to him and even though he knew Max was no Joe Bonamassa, he was still impressed with what Max could do...on a good day.

Sam turned back to his own work, which is to say: he was cleaning the lenses of his camera, made some adjustments on his laptop’s photoshop programs and checked and double checked if everything was as it was supposed to be. Then something hit him. He gave the table a once over and shuffled some papers around. Then he looked under the table. “Shit,” he muttered. And then, without looking: “eh...Max.”

“What,” Max replied absent-minded.

“Have you seen my tilt-shift?”

“Your what now?”

“My tilt-shift. It’s a lens.” Sam held his camera up, hoping it would inspire some understanding to Max as to what he was talking about. But Max merely stared. “What does it look like,” he asked.

“Ehm, like a lens,” Sam answered, slightly annoyed.

“Oh, right.”

Max looked to his left. Then to his right. “Nah, it ain’t here,” he muttered.

“You barely looked.”

“I looked just fine.”

“You didn’t even leave the couch.”

“Jesus, bro, what do you want from me?”

Sam clicked his tongue, said: “whatever,” and strode to his room to continue his search. Max shrugged and played something. Then he started to sing:

“I met a girl. She’s just like me.

Oh, pretty girl, as pretty can be.

Hey, little girl, you beautiful thing.

Don’t you know how you make my heart sing...”

He trailed off and wrote something down again. "Is that for your new album," Sam asked as he re-entered the living room. "Maybe," Max shrugged. "It's not exactly finished or anything."

"Well, keep at it," Sam said. "Anyway, I gotta go. You're eating here tonight?"

"I guess."

"Good, then you can do groceries."

"Sure. You're coming to my gig tonight?"

"Sure."

And Sam grinned at him, packed his belongings and left.

Outside it was raining and Sam pulled his collar up. He hailed a cab, but it drove by, apparently oblivious to young men who wanted to get out of the cold. Not wanting to carry all his expensive equipment down into the tube, he tried again, with a little more success this time. "Fleet Street," Sam said as he stepped in the back of the cab. The cabbie nodded somewhat incoherently and started to drive.

"Where to," he asked.

"Fleet street," Sam repeated.

"Right."

Sam checked his bag again. As he did, he got the distinct feeling the cabbie was staring at him through the rear-view mirror. Sam stared back, but the cabbie didn't look away. "The road is over there," Sam said after a couple of seconds, pointing with his chin.

"Aye, I know," the cabbie replied, but he didn't stop staring.

"Is there a problem," Sam asked. The cabbie shook his head. "I'm trying to figure something out," he said.

"What's that?"

"Well," the cabbie said after some hesitation, "don't get this the wrong way, but...you don't really look like a bloke."

"I am, though," Sam replied.

"Yeah, but..."

"But what?"

"You don't have any facial hair."

Sam nodded. "That's right," he said, "I don't."

"And you look sort of..."

"Yes?"

"Feminine," the cabbie decided.

Sam sighed. "It's complicated," he said.

The cabbie nodded. Then he said: "You're one of them trans-people, aren't ya." It wasn't a question.

Sam decide to be honest. "That's right," he replied.

"Not that that's a problem," the cabbie was quick to add. "I was just wondering, is all."

Sam shrugged. "Okay," he merely said.

They fell silent.

"Why, though?" The cabbie's question seemed to come out of nowhere after their few moments of silence and took Sam slightly aback. "Does it matter," he asked.

"It's just that I don't see the point," said the cabbie. "If you're a bird, right, then why change that to being a bloke?"

Sam said nothing. He knew better than to grace such remarks with a response. "Just drive," he muttered.

But the cabbie's curiosity seemed tenacious. "So why," he insisted.

"Why what?"

"Why wanna be a bloke," the cabbie asked again.

Sam shrugged again. "It's not really something you choose," he said after a while. "It's just something that is."

"I don't get that," the cabbie said. "I mean, you're either a bloke, or you're not. Right?"

Sam stared out the window, wondering if he really should engage this discussion with a stranger. After a while he said: "I am a man. I just don't have the right parts."

"Oh," the cabbie said. "So, what are you packin' than?"

Sam vaguely wondered what it was that made people just blur out these kinds of questions. It wasn't like he asked other people if *their* genitals coincided with *their* genders. Yet, for some reason, a lot of people seemed to think it was perfectly okay to make such remarks to a transgender. Like he had: "free Q&A" tattooed on his forehead, or something.

"I don't think it's any of your business what I keep in my trousers," he eventually said. He could already feel his temper rising and he struggled to keep his voice calm. The cabbie shrugged. "Whatever," he said. "Anyway, we're here. That'll be five ten."

Sam handed him the money. "Wha', no tip," the cabbie said.

"No," Sam replied and stepped out.

It was still a small walk to the studio, but Sam didn't mind. He just pulled his collar further up and trotted on. As he arrived at the front door, it already opened and a familiar face came out. "Hey, Quinn," Sam said. "Sam," Quinn, a thirty-something photographer with blond hair and a moustache, nodded his welcome. "You alright, bro?"

Sam nodded. It always made him feel good when people referred to him as "bro" or "dude".

"I'm fine," he smiled. "You?"

"Been better," Quinn said. "These fucking models, mate... They drive me mental."

"I hear ya," Sam replied. "Not particularly looking forward to it, myself."

Quinn nodded in understanding. "But hey," he said, "it's a job, am I right?"

"A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do," Sam jokingly agreed.

"And speaking of man," Quinn suddenly said, "when are you going to bring that musician boy of yours along again?"

"Why," Sam asked, not sure he wanted to know the answer.

"Brother, would I like to make him sing," Quinn whispered. He had a far-away look in his eye.

"Okay, first of all: eww," Sam said and he pointed at Quinn, "and second of all: Max is my best friend. You hurt him and I'll kick you in the nuts." He was only half joking.

"Just kidding, darling," Quinn said and he winked. "You know me."

"Yeah, that's why I said." They both laughed. "Well, anyway," Quinn said, "better get back inside. Morris is cranky enough as it is."

Sam nodded, dreading what was inside waiting for him and followed Quinn through the double door and into the hallway. As they entered the gallery Morris was waiting for them, along with a couple of people some of which Sam knew, others who he didn't.

There was Phil, the light-guy, Anna, never far from her mugs of weak tea, Jones, the make-up-guy (although he preferred the title of "artist") and two more women. One middle-aged and austere, the other young and pretty. Sam guessed that must be Sara.

"Ah, Sam, wonderful," Morris said as he walked towards him with his hand stretched out, which Sam shook. "Glad you could make it."

"Sure," Sam said, disinterested, but Morris didn't seem to notice. He took Sam by the shoulder and guided him towards the two women. "Sam," Morris said, somewhat pompously, "this is Mrs. Haggler..."

"A pleasure," Sam said and they shook hands.

"...And this fine specimen is Sara."

"Hi," Sam said and he extended his hand, but Sara didn't take it. She stared somewhat timidly at Sam's chin, avoiding eye-contact at all costs, and muttered a soft "Hi," before looking at Mrs. Haggler as if waiting for instructions. Sam noticed that her eyes were very vividly green.

"Right," Morris said loudly and he clapped his hands together and rubbed them. "Now that the gang's all here, let's get started, shall we? Mrs. Haggler, if you'd follow me?"

And he walked off to the make-up table, followed by Haggler and Sara. Sam dropped his bag where he stood, crouched down and started to unload. "So, what do you think," Quinn asked Sam in a whisper. "She's cute, right?"

Sam shrugged. "I'd do her," he whispered back.

"What," Quinn asked with a grin.

"What?"

"Did you say something?"

"No."

They both suppressed the urge to giggle. "Seriously, though," Quinn whispered, "look at her." Sam did and at the exact same moment, Sara looked over her shoulder and for a second their eyes met. Something inexplicitly jumped up in Sam's belly, but it was gone before Sam had the time to even register it. "Yeah," Sam muttered, "she is a looker, I'll give you that."

He got up and pointed his camera at Quinn. "Smile," he said. Quinn grinned and Sam took a picture, then looked at the screen on his camera. "Perfect," he said. "Alright, let's get to it." They walked to the far wall where a white screen was pulled up and Sam placed his camera on a tripod. He then looked at Sara who got a small nudge in the back from Mrs. Haggler and then trotted shyly towards the screen. "Okay," Sam said, "Quinn, music!"

"What do you want to hear," Quinn asked.

"Let's start with a little Manson and we'll see where we go from there," Sam replied, staring through his camera. Quinn nodded and fiddled with the radio. "What's going on," Mrs. Haggler asked Morris, who shrugged. "Sam needs his music," he simply said.

Indeed, the drums started to roll, the bass started to pound and Sam nodded his head accordingly. "You ready," he asked Sara. She nodded. "Alright, give it your best."

And with that Sam started vigorously to shoot. First from the tripod, then lifting it up and taking different angles. At first it was just that. He soundlessly mouthed the lyrics of "Beautiful People," and alternating between taking pictures and looking at the result on his display. But suddenly, a change came over Sara. As Sam looked through his camera he suddenly realised that the shy and quiet girl had gone. As she started to toss her hair around, moving smoothly into different poses, it was almost as if she was dancing. Sam stared at her with awe. She really was quite beautiful. And the way she moved... Suddenly Sam just couldn't get enough. It was as if the studio, no, the whole world, suddenly disappeared and it was just the two of them. Alone in the void. Locked in some bizarre dance. Sam barely

registered the music anymore. Or Quinn. Or anyone. Time had stopped and there was nothing else.

Then Morris clapped his hands and the moment was gone. Sam looked up somewhat dazed.

"The fuck just happened," Sam thought, trying to shake it off.

"Alright," Morris said, "let's see what you got."

"Already," Sam asked. "I just started."

"Well, half an hour is more than enough of footage, don't you think?"

"Ehm...sure," Sam replied, thinking: "has it really been half an hour?"

He gave his camera to Quinn who hooked it up to a laptop. "Where were you," he whispered. "You looked kinda out of it."

"Fuck if I know," Sam muttered back.

They all walked over to the laptop and Quinn rifled through the pictures. "There, what did I tell you," Morris said triumphantly. "Is he good or is he good?"

"Very nice," Mrs. Haggler agreed. "I especially like this one."

"Very choice," Quinn agreed. "Veeery choice."

They all seemed to agree. All safe for Sam. Sara was standing right next to him and Sam could smell her perfume. For some reason, it made his hands sweaty. "Alright, dear," Mrs. Haggler said, "let's change your outfit and we'll continue. "Sure," Sara replied, who seemed much more open now.

They walked off, leaving Sam and Quinn alone. "Good shooting, so far," Quinn said. "I can't wait to see the rest." Sam nodded somewhat absentminded and returned to the tripod with his camera. "We'll see," he simply said.

The rest of the day became sort of a blur. They kept having Sara changing outfits and make-up and Sam did the best he could, not wanting to disappoint. A little too conscious of what had transpired had made him nervous and perhaps because of this, the moment did not return. But for the first time he didn't mind shooting models. Sara seemed perfectly fine with anything Morris or Haggler told her to do or wear and she didn't complaint once. Nonetheless Sam had decided to concentrate more on the music than anything else, and with Quinn as his DJ, little went wrong.

Before long, five hours had past and Sam was relieved to hear Morris say: "okay, I think this will do. Good work, everyone. Mrs. Haggler, if you would accompany me to my office?"

"Wait here, Sara dear," Mrs. Haggler said and she followed Morris out of the gallery.

The girl nodded and stared at Sam, who put his camera down and handed it to Quinn. "Sam was it right," Sara asked and Sam looked up. It was the first thing she had said since her muttered "Hi".

"That's right," Sam said.

"I really like your work," Sara softly said.

"Eh...thanks."

"Especially on animals. You really know how to catch them in action."

Sam shrugged. "I...eh...thanks."

"You said that," Sara giggled and Sam felt that twitch again. He searched for something to say, but Mrs. Haggler poked her head through the door and beat him to it.

"Sara, dear, could you come over for a second," she called. Sara nodded and walked over, leaving Sam staring at her. Quinn looked at Sam, then at Sara's backside, then at Sam again.

"Well...someone's in love," he mused.

"Hey, Quinn."

"Yeah?"

"Shut the fuck up."

Quinn grinned and handed Sam his camera back. "Here," he said. "Shut this up."

"Yeah, yeah. Just upload those damn pictures, will you."

"I'll have them on your cloud in an hour, or so," Quinn assured him. "Dinner, tonight?"

"No, I can't," Sam replied and he started to pack. "Max asked me to come to his show."

"Cool! Can I come?"

"Promise you won't harass him?"

"I make no such promise."

"Then no."

They both laughed and Sam held his fist up. Quinn bumped it with his own, then said: "well, see ya tomorrow then."

"Yeah, see ya."

Sam shouldered his bag and walked out the door. He hailed a cab and muttered his address. The cabbie started driving. He was saying something, but Sam didn't listen. He just stared out the window and tried not to think how green Sara's eyes were.

**“Don’t walk in front of me... I may not follow
Don’t walk behind me... I may not lead
Walk beside me... just be my friend”**

Samantha didn’t like the man. He was big and fat and he smelled of cigars. She tried to tell her mum, but mum was talking to the man. Then she tried her da’. “Hush,” Samantha’s father said when she pulled his sleeve. “We’re talking to the nice gentleman.”

“But daddy...”

“No, not now, honey. Go play outside or something.”

“Not too far,” her mother added.

Samantha sighed and went outside with her bike. The orange flag on the back rustled softly. Samantha already decided she didn’t like it here. She didn’t understand why they had to leave Brighton. Brighton had a beach and a park. All this place had were boring old buildings.

She stepped on her bike and looked to her left. Then to her right. Just as mum and dad had told her to do, before she crossed the street. Then she noticed the boy. He was small and skinny and he had very dark hair. Samantha decided to go and talk to him. “Hello,” she said as she came closer. “I’m Samantha. Who are you?”

The boy, who had been crouching on the pavement, looked up. Samantha noticed he had a black eye. “I’m Max,” said the boy.

“How old are you,” Samantha asked him. “I’m four and a half!” And she swelled with pride as she said it.

“I’m eight,” Max replied. The thought alone seemed to depress him.

“Do you live here too?”

“Yeah, over there.” And he pointed at the house next to the one Samantha just walked out of.

“Hey, then we’re going to be neighbours,” Samantha said.

Max shrugged. “Cool,” he muttered.

The door of Max’s house opened and a woman popped out. Like Max she was dark haired and skinny and she wore a robe that, at one point, may have been purple, but now it was faded and covered in stains. She looked scary to Samantha. “Maxwell,” the woman screeched in a coarse voice. “Maxwell Harkin, get your bloody arse in here right now!” Max sighed. “I’m coming, ma” he yelled back and he stood up and started to walk away. “Bye,” Samantha said and she waved. “Bye,” Max replied. The door shut behind him with a bang.

Sam’s breathing was starting to become more intense. His knuckles turned white as his fists clutched the railing of the bed, making the wood creak underneath his fingers. He could feel it building up. Starting in the pit of his stomach, spreading over his body. His muscles tensed up. “Oh god,” he said. “Oh fuck!”

Max made some sort of grunting noise and hissed through bare teeth. Sam knew he was experiencing something similar. Then it happened. Sam’s eyes shut open as his whole body radiated adrenaline. Max growled and pushed so hard, the bed knocked over the nightstand, sending the empty wine-bottle on top of it flying and crashing on the floor. Sam’s fingers let go of the bedpost and grabbed Max’ back, clawing it open.

Then it was gone. They fell down, panting heavily, and Max rolled onto his back. "That," he sighed, while pointing at the ceiling, "was epic." Sam nodded, but couldn't speak. He was still trying to catch his breath. "I concur," he was finally able to say after a few moments. Max snorted and sat upright. "I think we both needed that," he said.

Nodding, Sam looked at the broken bottle on the floor. "Careful where you stand," he panted. "I'll go get a broom," Max replied and he got out of bed. Sam stayed where he was, staring at the ceiling. The wine was starting to wear off, but Sam didn't mind. Max had been right. They did both needed that, after a day like this. The wine, also, had been a good idea. It seemed only natural that it had led to this. It wasn't the first time it had happened and Sam knew it wouldn't be the last time either. He may live as a man now, but there was a time when he was still a girl. It had started then. And seeing how they knew each other for so long, both had needs and each of them had the corresponding parts, it wasn't as strange as one might think. Regardless, Sam needed some alcohol to loosen up first. Part of him still felt uncomfortable taking his clothes off and reveal a feminine body, even in front of Max. Or perhaps because it was him.

With a sigh and a groan, Sam sat upright, looked around hazily and then stepped out of bed. As he walked into the living room, he could see Max standing on the balcony, still naked, smoking a cigarette. Sam walked up to him and hugged him from behind. "I thought you were getting a broom," he whispered in Max' ear. "Yeah, well, I wanted to smoke first." He exhaled and turned around. "But now that you're here, round two?"

Sam grinned, but shook his head. "I'm tired," he said, "I'm gonna go to bed. My bed," he added smiling at Max' crooked grin.

"Sure," Max said and he gave Sam a kiss on the forehead. "Sleep well."

"You too."

Sam started to walk away. "Hey, Sam," Max called to him.

"Yeah," Sam asked turning around.

"You know I love you, right?"

"Yeah. I love you too." He meant it.

Sam had long ago decided you can't be friends for over twenty years, watch each other grow up, go through rough times together, always having each other's backs and not genuinely love each other for it. Even Max, who on all accounts had little to no emotions, could not deny what he really felt for Sam. Maybe even more than Sam knew, although he could see it sometimes. Max would have this look on his face. This very particular look. And Sam had never seen him stare like that at anyone else. Not even past girlfriends (and, at two occasions, boyfriends). It was a look he reserved for Sam only, making Sam feel all the more special because of it.

As he stepped into bed and closed his eyes, Sam tried to think back to when they first kissed. He knew when it was, but he didn't seem able to recall the feelings or even the setting. For some reason, something else kept popping in front of his mind's eye. A young Antillean girl, dancing in front of his camera. Sam shook his head and tried again, but it was no use. All he could see were the sensual motions. The curves of her body. Something stirred in Sam's lower abdomen. "Shit," he muttered.

The next day. Sam woke up with a splitting headache and a parched mouth. He got up, feeling as groggy as a bear coming out of hibernation, and slouched into the living room. There was a note on the coffee-table. "*At the studio,*" it read, "*Pizza tonight? M.*"

Sam crumbled it up and set down on the couch. He knew he should be doing yoga, but his body didn't seem up for it. To make it worse, he noticed his phone was still lying on the table and going uncharged through the night, it had now gone empty. Annoyed, Sam forced his body to stand up, walk all the way back to his bedroom, grab the charger and walk back. As he plugged his phone in, it immediately came back to life, revealing Sam had one missed call and two text-messages. The call had been from Morris, but he was just going to have to wait until the rest of Sam's hungover brain would flip on. The text-messages were from someone Sam hadn't talked to in a while, had no desire to talk to, yet felt obliged to be polite and answer. They were from a man called Michael.

Five years ago, while still dressing as a girl and putting on make-up, despite the fact he knew deep down he didn't want to anymore, Sam had been in a relationship with a co-worker from a part-time job he had acquired to pay the bills. His pictures did not yet make enough money to that end, and Sam had actually sort of enjoyed the job. The only problem was that he was already sort of struggling with his gender, wanting to be a boy, knowing the world still saw him as a girl. It was in this time that Sam had met Richard.

Richard, who was called "Dicky" by his friends, was one of those pumped-up, macho, wannabe alfa-males and when they first met Sam had hated him for precisely that reason. Richard took any excuse he could find to bare his chiselled chest, or flex his muscles, or both, and his attitude was the exact opposite of what Sam was attracted to.

But if Richard succeeded in one thing, it was that he made Sam feel more like a woman with his basking manliness and despite his struggles, or maybe because of them, it was exactly what Sam needed at the time. It had taken him somewhat by surprise that he actually fell in love with Richard, made stronger when Sam decided to keep it from Max. Max had met Richard only once before that, but already had decided he didn't like "that cat," as he called it. Sam had gotten the impression that maybe Max was jealous, although that would be somewhat hypocritical, seeing how he spent his nights. Either way, the secrecy added to the tension.

Eventually, during a party at Richard's favourite pub, he had kissed Sam and the two had slept together, and from that point on they had started a rocky relationship that lasted well over two years, despite Richard's constant need to prove himself, which he mainly did by cheating and more muscle-flexing. This had cost some great friction between him and Max, who had constantly warned Sam that it was all going to end in tears. Sam hadn't listened, but of course it did. Richard, wanting a "real" woman, decided he wanted no part of Sam's transformation, even though he had been supportive when Sam first came out of the transgender closet. "I just can't cope with you anymore," he had said and left to shag some girl he had met online ten minutes earlier. This hadn't sat well with Max, but Sam never learned what happened after Max had stormed out of the door.

Either way, Sam never heard from Richard again, but there was someone who seemed desperate to stay in touch and that person was Michael. Michael was a cousin and friend of Richard's, and Sam had met him several times. But he had never liked him. He didn't like the way Michael had looked at him. He hadn't liked the sometimes crude remarks about women. Sam had been surprised to learn Michael was married, but not surprised when his wife had filed for divorce. It had seemed like an inevitable thing to happen.

How exactly Michael had gotten Sam's number was something he had never been able to figure out, but ever since he and Richard had broken up, Michael had started to text him every once in a while, mostly asking for a meet-up. Sam had always declined, not wanting to see anyone even remotely related to "Dicky", but did feel the obligation to sometimes reply Michael's texts. It was this that made him read what Michael had to say this time.

"Hey," the first one read.

And the second:

"Watcha doing, haha"

"Nothing," Sam texted back. *"Im hungover."*

"lol. What did u do?"

"Just drank a lotta wine."

"Yeah, that should do it, haha."

Sam cringed. He'd never understand Michael's obsessive need to either start or end every sentence he texted with "haha" or "lol". "What are you, sixteen," Sam muttered under his breath and put his phone down. Immediately it started to vibrate again. With a loud sigh, Sam picked up his phone again and stared at the screen. Michael again. *"Wanna meet up later?"*

"Cant. Work." Sam texted back, then flung his phone to the far corner of the couch and got up.

He took a long shower, drank some tea, stared out of the window for several minutes, drank more tea. He was already starting to feel better. He wondered what Max felt like right now. Sam doubted if Max even got hangovers anymore. Probably not. Not with his life-style. Sam remembered one particular night when he and Richard had just started dating and Max, trying his best to get to know his best friend's new boyfriend, had taken them to O'Leary's, Max' favourite pub. On the cab-ride over, Richard had been constantly boasting how well he could hold his liquor and how he drank even the largest men under the table. Then again, boasting is what he did best, in retrospect.

Max had said nothing. He clearly disliked Richard with every inch of his scrawny body, but, for Sam's sake, had done his damnest to hide it. When they had arrived Max immediately ordered two double whiskey's and a white wine for Sam and told the bartender to "keep 'm coming." Three rounds later and Richard could barely stand, while Max still downed them like lemonade and ordered a fourth with the sober face of someone ordering tea.

"Sure you wanna do that, Dicky," Sam had asked as Richard accepted the refilled glass handed to him. "Yeah, maybe you should sit this one out...Dick," Max concurred with a grin. Back then, the tone of his voice had angered Sam, but thinking back it was a nicely put insult and Sam smiled at the thought of it. "Don' tell me wha...what to do," Richard had drunkenly replied, before he keeled over. Max had never laughed so hard before.

Sam chuckled at the memory and finished his tea. Then it was time to call Morris back. It seemed that Michael had once again texted, this time a frowny face, but rather than replying, Sam went straight for the phonebook and called Morris.

“Good morning, Morris Agency, this is Cynthia speaking,” a female voice on the other side said.

“Cynthia, hi, this is Sam. Morris called?”

“Oh hey, Sam. Yeah, he did. I’ll put you through.”

There was a beep and Sam listened to some boring elevator music for about thirty seconds before there was a second beep. “Morris,” Morris voice sounded dull. “Morris, it’s Sam. Waddup?”

“Sam, great! Listen. I talked to Mrs. Haggler earlier and she is ab-so-lutely in love with your work. She wants you to do a follow-up.” Sam cringed. “Fuck,” he thought, before saying more politely: “Jeez, Morris, I don’t know...”

“Ah, c’mon! It was great, wasn’t it? You have to admit it went over perfectly.”

“Yeah, it did,” Sam admitted hesitantly. Sara had, indeed, been a pleasure to work with. Not at all like all the other models Sam had shot. Still, it just wasn’t his thing.

“Morris...,” he started, then stopped, wondering what he was going to say. No? Maybe? Sam didn’t know.

“Sam,” Morris said and there was some urgency in his voice, “listen. Listen! Do you hear that?”

“Hear what?”

“The sound of all the money we’re going to make with this. “Sam,” they say, “Sam, let us live in your bank-account, Sam. Sam please!” Can you hear that?”

“...”

“Can you?”

“Are you on coke?” It was a genuine question.

“Never this early in the morning, luv,” Morris replied and he giggled unseemly.

“Right,” Sam muttered. “Well...I’ll have to think about it.”

“About what? The giant cash-fall?”

“I just don’t like shooting models.”

“She’ll be naked.”

Sam fell quiet. Partly because of the strange remark, partly because of the feeling that remark inspired. Sam vaguely wondered if the heater had turned itself on. “She’ll be what,” Sam asked.

“Naked,” Morris repeated. “Well, most of her, anyway.”

“And why, in God’s good name, would I care about that?” He tried to act cool about it, but Sam didn’t particularly felt cool at the moment.

“Because I do,” Morris replied.

“Morris, you’re like...sixty years older than she is.”

“More like thirty.”

“Yeah...well...it’s still gross.”

“Whatever, just do it. Please...?”

“Oh, alright,” Sam sighed. “When?”

“Friday,” Morris said, “and Sam...”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you,” he whispered.

“Eew,” Sam said and hung up.

The rest of the day was spent doing nothing. Sam hung around the house, occasionally cleaning something up, more often lying on the couch reading and listening to music. Michael texted at least three more times during this, but Sam ignored him.

Around five-ish, the front door opened and Max came in, a guitar-case strapped around his shoulder and two pizza-boxes in his hands. "Hey," he said and he put the boxes down and gave Sam an unexpected kiss on the cheek. "What was that for," Sam asked, but Max just shrugged. "You hungry," he asked. "I've got eggplant and double mozzarella for you. Sardine Special pour moi."

"Nice," Sam smiled. "I'm famished, now that you mention it."

In his back-pocket, Sam's phone went off again.

"Your arse is vibrating," Max remarked.

"Yeah, it's probably Michael again."

"What the fuck does *he* want?"

Sam shrugged. "Who cares," he said. "Let's eat."

"So, how was your day," Max asked with a mouth full of pizza. "I have done absolutely nothing," Sam replied with a bit of pride. "How was practice?"

"We didn't," Max said, "look." And he opened the front of his guitar-case and pulled out a cd. "Oh, nice," Sam called out. "You guys finished the album?"

"Well, not exactly. Some of these songs still need a little editing. But it's mostly finished, yeah."

"Well, let's hear it!"

"Not now," Max said. "I've heard enough music for one day."

"Fair enough," Sam shrugged, "I'll listen to it on work then. That is, if I can take it with me Friday."

"Sure," Max said. "It's yours anyway."

"Wow, really?"

"Yeah," Max said and he smiled. "Hope you like it."

"I'm sure I will." And he grinned back.

Later on, they watched a movie. It was a bad one, but it was gory and Max seemed to like it. He kept resitting himself on the couch excitedly every time there was more blood on the screen. When the film was over Sam started to yawn. "Well, I'm going to bed," he said.

"Already? Don't you wanna watch another one?"

"Not tonight. I'm tired."

Max shrugged. "Okay," he said. "Sleep tight."

"Yeah, you too."

"I love you," Max muttered.

Sam, who had already started to walk towards his bedroom, stopped dead in his tracks and turned around. "What did you say," he asked.

"Nothing," Max replied and put on another film.

“It’s not paintings I like, it’s your paintings”

The guitar started to play its strain. The drums added a beat. Sam’s head started bobbing along. Then the bass came in, adding melody to the beat and foundation to the song of the six-strings. Then Zach de la Rocha’s shrill, boyish voice started to fire words through the sound boxes and Sam let loose his camera firing off shot after shot. Dave the drummer and Stephen the guitarist went down on one knee, shaking their hair. Bastian, lead guitarist and self-proclaimed reincarnation of Mozart, lifted his most prized instrument high above his head like a caveman would a rock, seconds before crushing a cave-lion’s skull. In the middle of all of this, Max just stood there. He looked away and lit a cigarette, seemingly oblivious to his bandmates or, indeed, the camera.

Sam zoomed in on his face, just as Max’s eyes looked straight in its direction. Dave did a handstand. Bastian brought his guitar down, like he was about to smash it. Stephen jumped up and flashed his, rather chiselled, chest. Max stared at him with a look of utter disdain and exhaled, sending a cloud of smoke out of his nostrils. “That’s good! That’s really good,” Sam kept saying. He was trying to spurt them on in doing more crazy stuff, but Max seemed uncompliant. Then again, being uncompliant was his trademark. “Max, hold your bass up,” Sam shouted over the music. Max shrugged, but made no intention to actually pick up his instrument. Sam glared at him, one eyebrow raised, and with a sigh Max did as he was told. He lifted it up with one hand by the neck, his other still clutching the cigarette, and looked at as if he didn’t know quite what it was or what one should do with it. Behind him, Bastian shouldered his own, looking sideways from the camera with a look on his face as if he expected a gust of wind to dramatically blow his hair back. Unfortunately for him they were indoors and his hair remained where it was, sleek and thin around his head. “There, that’s perfect,” Sam said. “One more!”

Dave and Stephen stared at each other, looking as if not only they had never met before, but like they were both uncertain what it was they were looking at. Bastian didn’t move, save for a slight tilt of his face upwards. Max stared annoyed at the floor, his cigarette in the corner of his mouth, smoke circling around his face. When Sam made the photo, he knew they had just struck gold. This would be a perfect album-cover. “Okay,” he said, “Quinn, cut the music.” Quinn flipped a switch and it all went quiet. “That was good, lads. That was really good,” Sam told the band. “Yeah, it felt good,” Dave said. Stephen nodded vigorously his agreement. “Did you get my good side,” Bastian inquired. “You’re asking the impossible,” Max muttered, but only Sam seemed to have heard.

“Alright, mates,” Quinn told the band, “we’re gonna need a few minutes to rifle through this. If you’d all wait outside.” There was a collection of “sure guv”-s and “will do”-s and Bastian packed his guitar and led the way. Only Max stayed behind.

Sam went to the laptop and plugged his camera in. “You know,” he heard Quinn say to Max, “if Morris finds out you’ve been smoking in here, he’s going to be mighty pissed.” “Morris can eat a dick,” Sam absentmindedly said, while he stared at the screen. “So, what are you gonna call it,” Quinn asked Max, desperate to change the subject. “There’s still some dispute on that,” Max replied. “Bastian wants to call it: “The Art of Suicide, part two”, like it’s a sequel to our last album or something. But that’s just stupid. I mean, how many times can you kill yourself, you know.” Quinn nodded.

"I opted for: "Shallow Grave", but only Stephen seemed to like it." "Hmm," Quinn mused, stroking his moustache. "In stores now: Sons of Camus with...Shallow Grave..." And he waved his hands through the air as if the title would magically appear. "It actually has a ring to it," he said.

"Cheers," Max replied and he pulled another cigarette out of the breast-pocket of his flannel shirt, but Sam gave him a warning look and with a sigh he put it away. "Here," Sam said, pointing at the screen, "this one."

"You sure," Max asked.

"Yeah. I'll give it a bit of a black and white filter, enhance the smoke a bit. Should look pretty cool."

Max nodded. "Alright," he said. "I'll go tell 'm. Cheers, bro." And he gave Sam a pat on the back. "Quinn," he said, "always a pleasure."

"Likewise," Quinn replied and they shook hands. Then Max left. Quinn watched him go. "Did he lose weight," he asked Sam.

"I hope not. Anymore and he'll disappear."

"He's not...ehm..."

"He's not what?"

"Well...you know..." Quinn looked away embarrassed.

"Not what?"

"..."

"Quinn, what?"

Quinn sighed and muttered, almost guiltily: "he's not on smack, is he?"

This made Sam laugh. "Smack," he repeated, "who are you? Scarface?"

"I'm serious! He's really thin."

"Quinn," Sam said and he put a hand on Quinn's shoulder, "trust me. If Max was on heroin, I'd know. Besides, he's seen its effect up close, remember? No way he'd go down that road himself."

"I know, but still..."

Sam shrugged. "He just needs a sandwich," he insured Quinn. "Now do me a favour and grab some deodorant, or something. We need to get that smell out before Morris comes here."

Quinn nodded and walked away, leaving Sam to file the pictures he just took and reset the stage. Then he took an apple from his backpack and looked around to see if he hadn't forgotten anything, before taking a big bite out of it.

Then Morris came in. He looked at the stage, nodded his improvement and then walked towards Sam, but he stopped halfway and sniffed. Sam's heart skipped a beat, but he played it cool, doing what he always did in these kind of situations: just munching his apple and looking bored. "Did someone smoke in here," Morris asked. Sam shrugged. "Not me," he said with his mouth full. "I don't smoke."

Morris let out a doubtful "hmm" and continued his inspection. "Well, it looks like we're all ready to go here. Shall I bring them in?"

"Sure. Go nuts."

Morris nodded, sniffed again and walked away, only to return two seconds later with an entourage. Last to come in were Sara, who wore a bathrobe for some reason, and Mrs. Haggler. The agent steered Sara towards the make-up table, but not before Sara gave Sam a quick stare and Sam's stomach did a backflip. He once again tried to play it cool, but he got