SAMU HABER

riva

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forever yours

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WITH TUOMAS NYHOLM

forever yours

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PROLOGUE

My hands won't stop shaking. I dial the number and lean my forehead against the metal edge of the payphone. I close my eyes and hold the receiver tightly to my ear, hearing the heaviness of my breath. The line activates. All noise fades into an invisible abyss. I feel dizzy. My heart pounds against my chest. It's looking for the same thing as I am: a way out.

Only now, as I'm waiting for the call to connect, do I realize how out of it I still am from last night. I'm not sure where we were or what we did, but I do remember that I had visitors. I didn't know them, but I understood who they were and why they were there. On a narrow side street, my back against the wall, they'd given me a message that couldn't be clearer.

Talk, and you're dead.

The images come flashing back and the panic hits again. I'm sweating. I'm shaking. I've never been so terrified, but I also know that I still haven't fully grasped how serious the situation really is. Everyone is out to get me. The good guys and the bad.

The call connects. I straighten my posture and clear my throat. I hear a familiar voice. Just as I'm about to get emotional, I realize I've only reached the voicemail.

'Hey, it's Samu. Listen… I'm in really big trouble.'

I briefly explain what's happened, sputter some incoherent apologies and hang up. The machine clunks a couple of times as the metal throat of the payphone swallows the last of my money. I've been low on funds before, but now, for the first time, I'm completely broke. I've also been disoriented many times before, but now, standing in an airport terminal, surrounded by the morning crowds of passengers, I'm completely at a loss. I have no clue whether to turn left or right. The only thing that's for certain is that I overslept and missed my original flight. That means I'm not going to arrive in Finland by the agreed time. Which means there's a warrant out for my arrest.

Juhis was picked up in broad daylight. Dozens of police. Undercover. Weeks of surveillance beforehand. An Interpol operation. Tomi got caught in Portugal the same way.

No messing around – we really were wanted guys.

Juhis was still in Valdemoro prison, waiting for his transfer to Finland. As for Tomi, I wasn't even sure which country's authorities had taken him into custody.

My eyes well up, but I choke back the tears. I can't break down here. Not in the middle of the airport. Somewhere deep down, I grasp the irony of the situation. Samu Haber, patron saint of smart-asses, bullshit artists, and con men – the guy who can get out of any difficult situation by smiling and sweet-talking – is finally facing the truth. No excuses. No exit.

I have 96 kilos of luggage, the sins of a thousand men on my shoulders and exactly one cigarette in my pocket.

I light it up and take a drag. As the smoke fills my lungs, I experience a brief moment of clarity. I see myself, my life, with focus and precision. I watch it all like a movie from a distance.

Close your eyes, Samu. Breathe.

Is this how it all ends? Before it even begins?

I wake with a jolt. My heart races as I feel someone grab my shoulder. Instinctively, I go to defend myself but realize I'm still half asleep.

I open my eyes and see a young woman's face.

Señor Haber? Are you Señor Haber?

I'm unable to speak.

I have tickets for you, Señor Haber. From Mister Ville Komppa.

I crawl out of my makeshift bed between the terminal seats and thank the woman as politely as I can. She hands me the tickets: Málaga–Madrid–London–Helsinki. A miserable route, but so what. I'm finally on my way home.

I look at the pile of luggage that I've been sleeping on. Suitcases, bags, a guitar case. Way over the baggage allowance. But at least I got enough rest to clear my head a little. And the tickets in my hand are like the keys to heaven. I manage to function reasonably well. For a moment I almost manage to be myself. I glance in the direction of the check-in desk and spot an attractive young woman on duty. I know I look like a total wreck compared to my usual, but I also know who and what I am. This isn't the first time that I've solved a problem this way. The young woman smiles shyly as she tags all my luggage, one piece at a time.

I don't really have permission to do this, but just this once, Mister Samu.

My mood lifts as I think of Finland. Of Helsinki. Why did I ever leave? Back then it seemed like the right move, but what about now? Nothing in my life seems to make sense. It's just one failure after another.

The others were right. From the get-go. I'm a loser. Which is the reason I left in the first place.

I board the plane and fall asleep immediately. When I wake up in Madrid, the cabin is already empty.

At the gate to my connecting flight, the boarding pass reader beeps three times. The same thing had happened in Málaga, but not for any other passengers. I realize what's going on. As the plane lifts off the runway, I measure my pulse: 170. More beeps again in London.

Border guards and two policemen are waiting for me at Helsinki-Vantaa airport. As they lead me to a back room, it finally sinks in that my life as I knew it is over. Whatever might come next is going to be different from anything that's happened up till now. I make myself all sorts of promises, but it becomes clearer than ever that it's too late.

The other passengers are staring at me. The airport staff are staring at me. Everyone is.

They know it too.

'Stop! Right here!'

'But…'

'Just stop!' I say sharply. Too sharply. I regret my tone immediately, but I can't apologize. I just get out of the car, mumble goodbye and pull the cigarettes out of my pocket.

Tuesday. 13 November. 7.28 a.m. Minus four degrees outside. I feel even colder in my body. I suck the cigarette smoke into my lungs and blow it out in a heavy cloud. Through the haze, I see the building where they're expecting me, just the other side of a yellow-grey field. The landscape is frozen and wintry but not yet white. Somewhere under the frost-ravaged stubble, the Finnish landscape has put compassion on ice. It's like a scene from a Russian movie.

Just a week ago, I was dancing through the night in a hot Málaga nightclub, 1,000 decibels in my ears, a beautiful woman by my side.

I glance back and see the car drive away. I'm depressed and I know it, but I still have some self-respect: there's no way I'm going to let the officers of the National Bureau of Investigation see my mum dropping me off.

The walk to the building entrance seems endless. With every step I wonder what would happen if I just turned on my heel and fled Finland.

'Haber. Here for interrogation.'

The man nods and types something on his keyboard. Soon an officer shows up and calls me by name. He doesn't introduce himself. He just waves me over and presses the button to call the lift.

We're waiting. Neither of us says anything. The corridor is empty; there are no other people to be seen, no criminals, no officers.

I hear the hum of the elevator shaft. A muffled clang and the upward arrow illuminates. The doors open. Only after they've closed behind us, does the officer make eye contact and acknowledge me. He tilts his head a little and says with a neutral tone:

'You made the right decision.'

The headquarters of the National Bureau of Investigation are a bizarre place. The building can withstand an attack by a tank, but on the inside it's like a gallery. The walls, the corridors are full of art. Forgeries and originals. Stolen and found.

The officer leads me to a room where there is no art. A table, three chairs. Nothing else.

The door behind me slams shut, and I understand that the game has begun. I'm so fucking scared that my hands are trembling. I shove them into my pockets and then under my armpits, but every position feels unnatural and like it would only expose my panic. There are no mirrors in the room behind which detectives hide, clutching their coffee cups, but there is a camera on the ceiling.

I know I should assume a posture that is as neutral as possible. Forearms against the table, hands and fingers tightly crossed, my head lowered just enough so that my expressions can't be read. And then just remain motionless until someone comes in. But I can't do it. To the police I'm fresh meat ready for grilling.

My self-respect hits rock bottom. I'll screw this up too. I'm such a clown. And when all this is over, they're going to kill me.

I told the police from the start that I was willing to cooperate. I wanted to clarify my own mess, however ugly – but I wasn't going to snitch on my friends. And that was exactly the problem.

I don't know how long I'm sitting sweating in that chair before the door behind me opens. Two men walk in. They're both wearing dark suits. One of them introduces himself as Inspector Tom Laine. The other is called Harjunpää.

'Ok, Haber,' Laine begins with an almost humane voice.

Harjunpää interjects with a snort. 'You and your pals are a bunch of idiots,' he says, without the slightest hint of sympathy.

Classic tactics. From the off.

'Did you know what kind of services the company was offering its clients?'

'No, I didn't, but at some point, I started to suspect—'

'You suspected? But you continued to work for them?'

'Yes…'

'What did you suspect? And when did you start suspecting?'

'I don't remember exactly—'

'Had you already met this man by then?'

I look at the picture and don't know what to say.

'And what about this man? When did you meet him?'

I've never seen that guy before in my life. But I don't have a chance to reply before a new photo hits the table.

'What about him?'

Dangerous. I'm not going to say a word about him, come hell or high water.

Of course, the police already know everything. They're only looking for confirmation and any new evidence they can get their hands on. And even stronger leverage over me.

'Were you in Seville with this man in October? Who else was on that trip?'

'I don't remember precisely. These pictures are tough—'

'OK, forget it then. Let's start again, from the very beginning.'

Pictures off the table. Harjunpää shakes his head in frustration. Laine looks at me impassively.

'How's Anna doing? Her studies going well?'

This is the first bombshell. How the hell do they know about Anna? They weren't going to drag her into all this, were they?

The interrogation proceeds and wrecking balls come crashing in from each and every corner. From that first day, they make it absolutely clear that they know everything about my life. Sometimes they go easy on me, chat and share little anecdotes. One morning, Laine offers carrot cake baked by his wife. Then the next moment, they slam a pile of papers, pictures and documents in front of me. I have to stay on my toes.

The days go by. In through the armoured door at 7 a.m., out again at 5 p.m. At times, a merciless barrage of grilling, at others we chat about this and that. In my mind, I keep repeating my two rules: Keep things as succinct as possible. Don't give them any information they don't ask for. But it's not enough. I am way too inexperienced, and the detectives are way too capable. On top of that, their information turns out to be incredibly thorough. All the while, day by day, Laine and Harjunpää move their case forward. Steadily and deliberately, layer by layer. They make it very clear that there is no point in any deception or tricky manoeuvres. They play audio recordings back to me: phone calls, conversations, meetings. They show photographs, from up close and from a distance. Documents. Some of it is hardcore, from the heart of the operation. I can't help but wonder how the NBI got their hands on it. Some days, I'm completely drenched with sweat from trying to get through the interrogation without lying. On the other hand, I know exactly what's in store for anyone who snitches. By the time I get home every night, I'm completely exhausted. But the worst is yet to come.

One morning they finally show me the picture that I had been most afraid to see.

PART ONE

1983

I grasp Sanna's hand tightly through her winter mittens and try to keep a straight posture. I have to look strong, but above all, the grip of my hand has to feel strong. It's cold and we are both shivering, but as long as my hand stays steady enough, Sanna will know that everything is alright.

The swirling wind whips the dry snow in our faces. Like every other week, we're stood waiting in the car park outside the supermarket in Espoo. I'm holding Sanna with one hand and an ice hockey stick in the other, with the rucksack that Mum had packed for the weekend on my shoulders. Beside me, on the ice- and snow-covered asphalt, there's an ice hockey bag full of equipment. It's bigger than I am.

Sanna is five. She doesn't say anything. I don't know if that's a good or bad sign, but just to be sure I clasp her hand a bit tighter. *Samu is here. Everything is fine, even though it's a bit cold now.*

It's only been a few months since the divorce. Mum and Dad don't really like to see each other.

The wind is howling.

We just have to wait a little longer.

I am seven and I don't know much about anything, but I do understand that I am now responsible for Sanna. Compared to me, she's just a kid. She doesn't play on any sports team yet. I'm a defender on the district ice hockey team. I go to primary school in Viherlaakso. I can read and write. And I also have to take care of my sister.

When Mum and Dad split up, we became inseparable, Sanna and I. All our quarrels and scraps became a thing of the past. At least that's what I thought – and it was usually me, after all, who let the situation escalate. I was the firstborn and my parents' favourite. When Sanna was born, I still wanted all the attention. From everyone. And I did my best to make sure I would get it.

I was two years old and Sanna just a baby when I asked my mum if we could kick my sister in the head together.

Sanna is too young to talk about her feelings, but I'm aware of mine. Our parents' divorce is really tough for me. Suddenly so many things are up in the air. Almost everything. Who takes care of this? Who is responsible for that? Who does this, who gets that, who decides?

My greatest concern is my dad. He's an engineering graduate of German-Finnish descent, and such a man simply doesn't allow his emotions to show. But even as a little boy I had sensed that under the surface there was a sensitive soul.

After the divorce, I often asked my mum how my dad was doing. Almost daily I wondered if the three of us should cook and bring him something to eat and make sure that he was okay.

Dad's departure also meant that there was no longer a man in the house. That bothered me immensely, but I wasn't able or courageous enough to say it aloud. All the things that Dad used to do… Someone had to take care of that stuff from now on. Mum, myself and Sanna – it was obvious who the responsibilities would fall to. Someone always had to be awake, because who knew what could happen and when.

I suppose that was just human. Especially considering my nature. I am hardly the only child to find themselves in that situation. Besides, as a little kid, I had always been watching my dad and grandfather build, repair and make things. They erected houses and cabins from the ground up. They fixed all kinds of things. There was always something in the works and then finished. Dad's educational background steered the action in a certain direction. Which is maybe why power sockets became such a big deal for me.

I will never forget that. To me, they symbolized everything that Dad was good at – absolutely marvellous things. It's ages ago now, but I still remember how Dad was connecting a lamp and warned me not to touch it because it had electricity inside and that can be dangerous.

And if something bad happens then Dad gets broken, he said.

I understood then that electricity was really important but also that one must be very careful with it. I didn't want Dad to get broken.

And then Dad was gone. One afternoon I found myself alone at home, looking at a power socket with a screwdriver in my hand, thinking that I would soon have to repair this dangerous device in its plastic shell. It was my job to know how to do this, so that Mum and Sanna could be safe.

Some time had passed since the divorce, and in many ways the situation had become less turbulent, but inside I was a mess. One night I finally curled up on my mother's lap and started to cry.

I can't do man jobs, Mum. I can't fix power sockets. I don't know what to do with them. I can't repair things. I'm not able to do all the things that Dad used to do for us. I'm only eight.

Back then I didn't fully understand my feelings, but now I can clearly see why I reacted like that and how my world view had been shaped. Dad had everything in order. He always knew what to do and what the next project was. It was clear to me that he was smarter than average. Years later, he helped me prepare for my maths exams in secondary school. The arithmetic exercises were so ridiculously easy for him that I was almost embarrassed by my own limited abilities.

Until the divorce we lived a pretty ordinary life. Dad was a civil servant, with regular hours from eight to four. Mum had almost completed her studies at the School of Economics and ended up handling business for an import company named Työväline. The only thing I remember about that place is that a man died after a tractor drove over his head. I found that seriously exciting. In my mum's company, people get killed!

Our family wasn't very big. Mum, Grandma and Grandpa on the one side, and on Dad's side just a few Habers: one uncle and two grandparents. Grandpa was cut from a different cloth than Dad. He was not the slightest bit interested in maths, but he was musical. He played accordion, worked in the post office all his life and enjoyed a drink or two. He was like a younger version of Olavi Virta, the Finnish tango singer. Grandpa was a prankster and always told funny jokes. Among other adventures, he'd once won second place in the Miss Punkaharju beauty contest.

A reliable character. That's how I remember Grandpa. I identified with him strongly, in a different way than I did with Dad. With Grandpa, I was always singing or up to some kind of mischief. Quite a few of my friends' parents didn't like their kids taking a ride with us. The Habers' old banger was always swerving from lane to lane, radio turned up full blast, everyone caterwauling some song or other in unison. There wasn't time to pay attention to road markings.

Back then, music was not a central part of my life. My number one passion was sports. Ice hockey and football – particularly ice hockey. Ever since I was very little, I wanted to play and reach great heights with ice hockey.

What exactly I dreamt of was a bit unclear, but I started my quest for success in 1983 with the Karakallion Pallo ice hockey team. First, I learned how to lean on the stick, and then step by step I learned how to skate. It was outdoors, with my beanie tucked under my helmet and thick layers of thermal underwear chafing beneath the protective gear. The technical underwear revolution was still some decades away.

What was nice about ice hockey is that it became my shared thing with Mum. I got to play, and Mum had something to occupy herself with after the divorce. For a while, she was something of a team captain and treasurer. I, for my part, found a new circle of hockey friends and became the coolest guy in my class. The others thought it was pretty hardcore to play ice hockey.

I played. A lot. In fact, I didn't do anything else. Every day after school, I went straight out onto the ice. I'd take a quick break to cram some food in my mouth, and then head straight back out. We played as long as the lights stayed on. When they went out, we sat in the snow for a while, waited for our eyes to adjust to the darkness and then got back to the game. If nothing else could be distinguished from the surroundings, we played with a yellow tennis ball. The newer and cleaner the ball, the better we could see it.

The best times of my life were away games with the team. And I don't mean big coach trips across Finland, but rather the most ordinary away games against EPS

in Espoonlahti, just a few kilometres away. The parents would carpool to cover the short ride. It was far from the golden age of expeditions, but nonetheless those days had real charm. Even if the changing room was an unheated hut on the edge of the rink, the atmosphere inside was awesome. Just the thought of us being on an *away game* gave me butterflies in my stomach.

The dynamics of the match always made a big impression on me, too. I didn't know how the others felt, but I certainly assumed they took it all as seriously as I did. The best moment was always when we walked out towards the rink before the match began. *It's about to begin. The great battle. Victory and defeat.* The entire emotional spectrum of sports squeezed into a little boy.

The pressure of the game days I could take, but the penalties I found hard to deal with.

I still remember the match when Grandma came to watch. It was her first time seeing us play. We were facing off against EPS. A regional classic. High stakes.

The match started under normal circumstances, but then it happened.

I was the only one on defence when the opposing team attacked, two on one. Somehow, I reeled in the heat of the moment, my skate left the ice and one of the opponents fell. It was a sheer accident, but that didn't stop the referee from giving me a penalty.

I still remember how I felt as I skated over to the penalty bench to endure my sentence. All those spectators, by which I mean around 18, and among them my grandma. At her first hockey match. And now her Samu's sitting out with a penalty. I sat motionless on the wooden bench, my head hung low and sniffling into my helmet. I was so ashamed.

Later during the same match, I scored a nice goal, but even that was no consolation. Nothing could erase the fact that I had gotten a penalty in front of Grandma. The same Grandma that had always stressed that I should be a good boy.

A few years later, things became more complicated. We had grown up to be real ice hockey juniors and friends started to show up in the stands. And girls from the ringette team.

And other girls.

I was thrilled. My imagination had always worked flawlessly, and I didn't find it difficult to picture Essi and her friend sitting among the spectators, waiting for me, while I was still in the locker room listening to the coach. Or rather, the others were listening. I was thinking of Essi. And Tumppi. He was there today, too. Ruddy Tumppi. Such a cool guy. I wouldn't want to screw up in front of him.

I remember many matches where just as the referee was dropping the puck onto the ice, I stood there on the blue line glancing feverishly around to see who was among the spectators.

The First Step

It's dark. I can't see anything, but I can smell it from the other side of the room. It's a familiar smell. I've known it for as long as I can remember, but this time it has nothing to do with my dad's work. This electricity smells different. Dense. Penetrating. More intense. And this time I know that I can master it.

I fumble towards the night light. I'm in an unfamiliar house and can't locate the light switch right away. When I find it, there's a gentle click, and then, suddenly, lit up before me is the beautiful white text on the front panel of the black box.

Marshall.

A black and white Charvel lies next to it. A classic.

If someone touched me now, they'd get an electric shock. I've never been so smitten by anything. When Mikko – I mean my good friend Mikko who had moved to Jyväskylä a year ago and who I'd finally come to visit – had let me touch the guitar earlier that day and later even try it out, it was like my head was going to explode. Anyone who has ever had the same experience knows the feeling exactly. Not that passing thrill of a ten-year-old with his new Lego set on Christmas Eve, but the real Big Bang.

I hadn't processed a word of what Mikko was saying when he showed me the guitar and told me about all the effects. I just stood there with the Charvel hanging over my shoulder on its leather strap, swooning alternately at the guitar itself and what seemed to be the at least five-metre-tall Marshall speaker.

I was blown away. Every lobe of my brain twisted into a new position, but above all my heart was on fire. I had always liked music, but I had never thought about playing an instrument. And my God, these sounds. I couldn't play to save my life, but no matter which string I touched, it sent a new blood type flowing through my veins. In my head hollered a single sentence:

Hell yeah, HERE we go!

After a long day, I lay down on the guest bed at Mikko's family's in Halssilanmäki in Jyväskylä and smelled the scents of the elements through the dark. Among millions of fantasy images, I wondered what the girls at school thought of Mikko. The dude from Helsinki with an electric guitar. What a hot proposition. He had to be. The most badass guy in town for sure, even in a backwater place like Jyväskylä. Who else here could compare? I was pretty jealous.

When I got home, I immediately told Mum my idea about an electric guitar. That we absolutely had to get one. But my ammo was low, and my knowledge was lean – I couldn't even say where to buy a guitar, and I couldn't rationally explain my

intense desire to have one. How could a kid describe the changes that one weekend had brought about in his soul, the shift of his inner tectonic plates at the glowing apparition of the guitar?

I tried my best anyway. And lo and behold – sometimes life is up for surprises. Sometimes Mum is too.

It turned out that my mum had a friend when she was young. Many friends, of course, but in this case, we were talking about Olli. Olli 'Quickhand' Ojala, to be precise. A steel-string guitar player who nowadays lived on the outskirts of Espoo, in Mankkaa.

Samu, let's go visit Olli. He's got a lot of guitars.

Ok, Mum, I'm good to walk there – just so long as we can go right away.

We went by car. The whole drive, I listened to Mum's stories of her youth. By the time we arrived, she'd lapsed into the foggy times of her adolescence. Back when Olli played the Shadows to her and the toaster was one of the world's technological miracles.

When Olli opened the door to his garage, it was like Jyväskylä all over again but spiked with an extra kilo of amphetamines.

Stratocasters from the Sixties were hanging on the walls. There were speakers. Amps. Drums. Stage lights. If Mikko's flat had smelt like the electricity wafting from the Marshall, here it smelt like rock 'n' roll and international showbiz.

Master Ojala was quite pumped to impress the youngster, and his mother, who was once the hottest chick in the neighbourhood.

Nonchalantly, Olli grabbed a Strat, plugged it into the amp, turned up and started firing away. He played a song and a little solo as well.

My hero rankings were immediately rearranged. In first place was now Olli 'Quickhand' Ojala from Mankkaa.

At the end of the evening we made a deal. The only way I would leave this place without a guitar and amp was in a hearse. Luckily, Mum understood and in her rock music rapture negotiated a good deal for a 30-watt Roland amp with distortion and reverb. There was quite a choice of guitars, but for some reason I ended up with a smaller than usual model, a Qwest electric guitar. It was a good instrument, but a decision based on a false premise that backfired later.

Playing the guitar was just as awesome as I had hoped. Of course, I didn't yet have a clue what I was doing, but on the other hand, my bedroom at Mum's was in the attic, which made for a pretty special atmosphere. With the unique acoustics up there, any sound that I got out of the instrument sounded, to my ears, fantastic.

I learned a few power chords as fast as I could and invited my hockey buddies over. Saku, Ville and Mika. The captain, the vice captain and the best scorer on our team. The most important players. Especially Saku, an A-grade student and all-round perfect guy who all the girls fancied.

The reaction was exactly as I had expected. Their jaws hit the floor. Eyes as big as teacups. The whites of their eyes glowing in the dim attic like comets.

You're pretty badass, Haber.

I still lived in a child's world, but I will never forget those moments in my attic. Me, the guitar and a couple of simple chord progressions. That was all I needed. At that moment I was a hero. The expressions on the faces of my friends were my first musical success.

That night is when it all began, but around the same time there was another thrilling development in my little boy life.

In autumn 1986 I was in my fourth year in primary school. I was ten years old and was beginning to get interested in girls. In my class there was one particularly special girl. Minna. Super popular. Practically all the boys had a crush on her.

Once Minna invited me over to her place to watch a video of a Swedish band that had played on the music show *Hittimittari* the night before. Others were also invited, so the circumstances were not ideal, but I did get to sit next to Minna on the sofa. Her sister Jonna put the VHS cassette into the player and pressed play on the remote control.

The first song was 'The Final Countdown' by Europe. Obviously, this was the band that I had come to watch. The guys waving on the TV screen seemed to be having a blast, but I was more inspired by Minna and her wonderful hair.

Some Finnish artist came on next.

The third song was 'You Give Love a Bad Name' by Bon Jovi. Everything around me vanished. Including Minna. Hypnotized, I stared at Bon Jovi:

That's it. That's how you do it.

The song was brilliant. The band was brilliant. Their playing was outstanding and the showmanship was just as impressive. Not necessarily the most rock-credible guys in the world, but they were having so much fun. Just watch the video. They're all laughing. They're all messing around. They're all young and beautiful with tight pants and wild hair, on their way to the top of the world. It was fantastic.

From that moment on, the video to 'You Give Love a Bad Name' was my template. That was how I was going to do it one day.

The next step was music lessons. At that point the smaller size of my Qwest guitar still appeared to be a strength: I (that is my mum) couldn't afford a guitar case, so I carried the instrument across town with the body inside my jacket and the neck poking out, covered in a bright yellow plastic bag.

I took bus number 248 from Viherlaakso to Helsinki Central. Then the metro to Sörnäinen. Then a short walk to Pengerkatu street. There, in his first-floor flat, Ilkka Rantamäki received his students. Back in the Eighties, life in the inner city of Helsinki was like a different planet compared to the suburb of Espoo. I was even a little

bit scared at Rantamäki's. Alone in a stranger's house. Weird smells, weird furniture. And a sex shop on the ground floor of the building, which made me feel even more uncomfortable: what did they actually sell in sex shops? And how was I supposed to have the courage to play guitar in this kind of set-up?

We started our first session in the kitchen. I don't know why. Eventually we moved from there to the living room. The flat was a bohemian ensemble, light wood floors and all a bit chaotic, but compared to Rantamäki himself, quite modest. The master was a legendary jazz or blues or fusion guitar player. An extraordinarily good musician. Long hair, boots. Chain smoker. Something of a von Hertzen Brothers of his time: a little bit indie but spiced up with ruffled shirts and skinny jeans. Plus nail polish and maybe a hint of make-up – but I wouldn't swear under oath.

Basically, Rantamäki was a character ripped directly from a rock star poster. A cool guy who you could totally imagine appealing to a young kid with musician dreams.

But for some reason I didn't admire Rantamäki at all. We simply weren't on the same wavelength.

Maybe it was because I found his lessons lousy. He had zero talent as a teacher and was, in my view, just a little bit too blown away by his own talents. So, there we sat, grinding through some tired scales, over and over again.

I could have learned all the patterns easily, but I didn't want to. I wanted to play, not to tinker. In between all the nonsense, I kept trying to bring in some of my own stuff, but that wasn't okay with Rantamäki. Instead, we studied arpeggios. That means playing all the notes of one chord one by one in a way that – man, I can't even bring myself to write about it. Theoretical stuff like arpeggios was of such little interest to me, that I really don't have anything to say about them at all.

After every lesson, the maestro gave me a pile of sheet music, notes and tables. Homework. I stared at them in the gloom of my attic, thinking there was no damn way I was going to continue with this idiotic nonsense at home.

In the first place, I was interested in the emotional content of songs. In melodies. All the fine-tuned vibrations that could not be written in notes. And most important of all: what the song unleashed in my heart. I also wanted to sing. It was never my dream to be a guitar legend. If Rantamäki had let me play a few real riffs and stoked my enthusiasm, he might have been my greatest inspiration to this day.

I went to my guitar lessons on Pengerkatu maybe ten times before I switched to another teacher. Later, Rantamäki became a rural artist somewhere in Central Finland.

I, meanwhile, lived out my artist life in the attic. I played through the night, with no particular purpose or goal. Just to play. In the mornings I overslept for school; in fact, I didn't even try to wake up on time. Second on my list of priorities was eating, because without food it's tough to stay fit for playing.

I did go to school at least twice a week. For band business. I played a little Guns N' Roses with my friends Seppo and Polle in the religious education classroom. Of course, I was already writing my own songs as well – I had started composing as soon as I learned two chords – but those songs were never introduced to Seppo and Polle.

After the Rantamäki fiasco, my mum started looking for a new teacher and found one in Karakallio. For those who don't know Espoo, let's just say, if the porn shop block of Helsinki was New York, Karakallio is Emerson County, population 137.

But this time it was a perfect fit. The teacher's name was Gyan Dookie. A guy inclined to country music, with a mixing deck in his home office. Impressive. Dookie pushed all the right buttons at our very first meeting. His method was thrilling – as he played chord progressions, he asked me to build a melody over the top. I did as he told me. No arpeggios or finger pattern exercises. I took everything I knew and played it on top of his laid-back accompaniment, and eventually Dookie said:

That's great, Samu. You've really got this.

I almost burst into tears. Gyan, who obviously was a skilled musician, played, and I jammed along the very best I could. I just let it burn. Sound after sound, with feeling and without thinking. Now he plays like this ... I could try that ... oh, well, not quite, but close, don't think, just play, play...

It was wonderful.

We jammed for a while, and then Dookie said straight up that he thought I had talent. When I got home, I still couldn't stop thinking about that one single phrase.

He said that I had talent.

What does such a moment mean to a young man trying to find his way in the world? Is there anything more important to say to a shy dreamer hiding behind his too-small guitar? Whether or not it's true. Support. Encouragement. Gyan was not the kind of coach who said that I was too soft for this game. No penalties, no bans, no negativity.

I might as well have moved in with Gyan. I waited anxiously for the lessons and practiced for them with a totally new energy. This was the first phase on my path as a musician. I was driven forward not only by the general desire to play something but also by a sincere, even fierce, urge to practice.

Gyan's tuition was always inspiring:

Maybe add a little bit of this, Samu. How does that sound? And now twice the speed, does that work? You could try slowing it down here – do you like that? Or just experiment a bit, with no tempo at all.

From Gyan I got constant feedback and, above all, challenge.

It's going great, Samu, but how could it be even better? How?

He taught me to think about music in a creative way and not just copy something I'd heard before.

Let's break all the rules and experiment with what sounds cool. What the hell does it matter how the stems and heads and flags look like on the staff?

Every single time I took something new home with me. I felt like I was always learning more about music, but I also advanced technically. And above all, I absolutely loved playing guitar. Under the attentive and sensitive guidance of Gyan Dookie, I learned to *feel* music.

I played like a maniac. I played all the time. Better and better.

In 1989, our ice hockey team EKS went on a trip to Canada. To Toronto. Basically the birthplace of ice hockey and the epicentre of the sport. Things got off to a promising start: Mika and I won 260 Finnish markka at the poker machine in the airport. I was convinced that the Esso Challenge Cup would become the most awesome experience of my life. Regardless of how the games went.

As it happened, we got our asses whipped 0–16 by our Canadian rivals in the first game.

On the shirts of our opponents was the legendary Maple Leaf logo, which downright freaked me out. Against these young players, we were snotty-nosed infants. The difference was so massive that it had nothing to do with humiliation. The contrast was just too extreme; neither side could have really enjoyed it.

On this *Journey of a Lifetime*, we also played other matches. With the exception of one, we lost every game with a similar thrashing. But the trip was great anyway, simply incredible. We spent almost a month in North America and experienced an indescribably deep sense of solidarity – we shy Finnish boys trying our luck on the American continent. It was baby steps, but hey, we were there. All of us in our identical tracksuits, all of us part of the same team.

My heart still spills over whenever I think back to those days. Us little dudes in Canada. In the evenings, the pale, flax-haired boys from Espoo tiptoed down the hallway to secretly buy light beer from the hotel vending machines. On our own, we hardly dared to set foot outside the building, but back then an unsupervised walk in the car park was like discovering a new planet. In my memory at least, we were brave little guys who kept cool and stood our ground under any circumstances.

It's hard for me to overstate what ice hockey meant to me. It was at least half of the story of my life up to that point. Playing ice hockey and being a part of that team was the biggest factor in forming my sense of self. Many circumstances, starting with my parents' divorce, had an influence, but being one of the two first line defenders on our team left a major impression. I was a top player. Trusted by the others. It was a good feeling.

Over the years, I fell to the second line. Then to the third.

It was really tough to see what was happening.

Also on an emotional level the game no longer gave me what I wanted. I was feeling more pressure rather than gaining experience. As my position dwindled, so did my motivation. By the end, I was the seventh defender.

I vividly remember the moment when our coach Hannu Saintula made it clear to me that I was too soft a player. Saintula's main message was that a defender's head had to be torn off every once in a while – a classic ice hockey cliché. It was absurd. We were only 14, but the matches were more vicious each time. It gradually became clear that the sport did not suit me anymore. Or that I did not suit the sport anymore.

In Toronto, all the players on our team bought new ice skates. I bought two pairs of Levi's, a CD player and Alice Cooper's album *Trash*.

When we got back home, I made my decision. I went to the sports park in Laaksolahti to hand over the gear owned by the club: socks, jerseys and tracksuit bottoms. I saw the team preparing to start practice. Everyone wearing their EKS joggers that I, as of this moment, no longer had the right to wear. I would have loved to talk with the guys, to say goodbye or at least say something, but it somehow didn't happen. After all, I'd abandoned them and betrayed their trust. I was on the penalty bench for good now.

I walked back toward home with tears in my eyes. I didn't look back, but I recognized the noise behind me. Deep, dark rumbling. The practice had begun with tyre runs.

Giving up ice hockey was the most fateful decision of my life up to that point. It wasn't a mistake – I knew what I was doing, just as I knew what I didn't want to do. But the thought of life without ice hockey felt horrible. I was afraid to lose the only thing that brought rhythm and structure to my weeks. The schedule of a young ice hockey player was simple, and one stuck to it without exceptions: food, going to training, returning from training, food, sleep. A game on Thursday and on Saturday. The programme couldn't be more consistent.

The thought of giving up ice hockey scared me, but I was even more afraid that I would lose all my old friends. We wouldn't be the same gang anymore. The girls at school wouldn't glance at me giggling from across the hallway. They wouldn't send me any more notes in class asking when the next game was. No away games. No light beer from the vending machines.

All my fears came true. A new life began that had no meaning at all. The connections to old friends faded away awfully fast.

Weeks went by. Months. A year. I didn't do anything reasonable – except I kept playing the guitar. Besides that, the only ray of light in my life was my new little brother. Santtu has been dear to me ever since he was born. It was awesome to play with him when he was a baby, but when he was about two years old we discovered

the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, and then there was no turning back. We played Ninja Turtles all the time. I was cast as Shredder, the bad guy, and Santtu, of course, played the good guys.

Besides that, I didn't do anything, didn't know anyone, didn't go anywhere. I was totally disinterested in school. I wandered aimlessly from one day to the next to the next. I woke up when I happened to wake up – at eight in the morning or in the afternoon. I went to school when I mustered the strength. No one intervened, because despite the almost complete neglect of my schoolwork I always managed to stack up Bs and Cs. I don't know how that was possible.

I was 15. In the end the situation became so bad that my mum sent me to therapy.

Only now do I see how lost I was and how aimless my actions seemed – and actually were. Mum must have been really worried.

Being sent to a psychiatrist was a real wake-up call for me: now I really had to get my shit together, or I would find myself in some serious difficulties. I had to resolve the situation without a long series of therapy sessions, without the 'crazy' label and ideally without Mum getting involved.

I reckoned my only way out was to charm the doctor and get her on my side. But I had no arguments to support my case, no vision of what was going to come, no explanation for my action, no questions and no answers. Something was haunting me and keeping me awake at night, but I was not at all interested in speaking about it with outsiders. I also didn't want to talk about how afraid I was that I wasn't good enough for anyone. Not for Dad, not for Mum, not for my friends at school. I was afraid to be alone without anyone to help me carry the load of the world.

I decided to explain to the doctor lady that this was about my mother putting too much pressure on me. I slowly nibbled the cookies that were offered and described in colourful detail how much I needed room to breathe. Time for self-realization. Time to be the Samu that I had to be and so on.

I went to the sessions a few times. The result was the doctor encouraged my mum to give me space to be more creative.

Nevertheless, going to therapy had an undeniable impact on me. I wanted my freedom, but I also knew that, despite my drifting, there was something inside me that needed to be addressed. Something that wanted to come out.