

## Silent Sal

By Michael Danese

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The smell of freshly cut flowers was thick in the air that rainy summer morning. The heat and humidity in the church made the aroma even more pungent. The church was standing room only and the sounds of muffled cries and whimpers were heard from every corner.

When Pastor Edward Larson ended his touching message, he turned his portly body to the left and said, “Now please welcome our dear Samantha’s brother, Sal DeMarco, who would like to say a few words. Sal . . .”

Sal climbed the two steps of the podium and stood behind the lectern. He took a second to observe the large crowd that had turned out to honor his sister.

“First, thank you Pastor Larson, for your kind and comforting words, and thanks to you all for coming. Sam would be so very touched. As you can imagine, it’s very hard to lose a sibling. It’s even harder to lose a twin. And extremely devastating when it’s by her own hand.”

A loud cry was heard from the back of the church. Then another.

Sal acknowledged the cries with an agreeing nod. “Just looking around this room, it’s obvious that Sam was loved and will be deeply missed. I feel like I lost a part of my body. To say we were close would be an understatement. We used to joke that if one of us cut a finger, the other would bleed. If she bumped her head, I would get a headache.”

He dropped his head momentarily as his emotions swelled. “I won’t take any more of your time, but I’m looking forward to meeting you and talking to you at the luncheon at DeStefano’s. It was her favorite restaurant. The information is on the back of the program.”

Sal was tall, with wavy blonde hair. He recently celebrated his 42<sup>nd</sup> birthday with his sister. Although he was quite fit, he was never an athlete, at least when it came to team sports. He was a lifelong runner, mainly because he would rather be alone. Samantha was a striking beauty - tall, blonde and very thin. She was often compared to Grace Kelly. She was also a runner, and they grew up running together.

They had what many would consider a privileged upbringing. Their father was a pediatrician, and their mother was a journalist. They had a spacious beach house, vacationed in Europe, and owned horses. They both attended private schools and colleges.

When they were growing up Samantha was a social butterfly, always in school clubs and traveling in a large group of friends, while Sal would rather be alone. He almost never spoke until he was 13 or so. His parents were anxious to find out what was wrong with him. He had several therapists and counselors, and they, of course, tried to label him, saying he was on the Autism spectrum, had mild Asperger’s, or had low self-esteem. The truth was that he was silent by choice. He was highly intelligent and would rather listen than speak. He developed a sense of heightened awareness and possessed enhanced analytical skills. Sal became an attorney and worked in the district attorney’s office downtown.

An hour or so later, a large crowd was at the bar of DeStefano’s. Several groups of Samantha’s friends were gabbing, some about Sal.

Barbara, a neighbor, said to Ellen, “Sam talked about Sal all the time. Apparently, he was an odd kid, and they all called him Silent Sal, on account that he never talked, except to Sam. The resemblance is amazing, isn’t it?”

“I’ll say!” said Ellen. “Two gorgeous people. Together they look like a Ralph Lauren Polo magazine advertisement. I wonder if he’s single?”

“He *is*,” answered Barbara. “Sam was always trying to fix him up with people, and things would be good for a while, but she said he just wasn’t able to make a commitment and the women quickly moved on.”

“Well, he hasn’t met *me* yet!” said Ellen as she straightened her hair and shook her hips.

“Have at it, my friend!” laughed Barbara.

At the bar Lisa, a short woman with close cropped hair, was wiping a tear. She said to Nancy, a taller, older woman in a business suit who hugged her, “I just can’t believe that she’s gone. She was the heart of our office. Her patients are devastated, like us all. She was just so depressed and listless since her accident.”

“I know, I know,” said Nancy. “We did all that we could with visits and calls, but she seemed to be adrift.”

“Did we? Did we do *all* that we could?” said Lisa, “I just think I missed something.”

“You can’t blame yourself. You can’t let guilt eat at you,” said Nancy.

Dr. Rick Adams, another colleague of Samantha, said to his assistant, Janice, “Sam spoke a lot about her brother. She was so proud of him. Apparently, he worked with detectives as a type of ‘consulting detective,’ on some difficult cases.”

“You mean like Sherlock Holmes or something?” asked Janice.

“Exactly,” said Rick. “He had the same type of deductive reasoning skills that helped him piece together a crime scene.”

“That’s fascinating,” said Janice.

“Right. She said that one time the police had five suspects in a rape and murder case. They all could have done it. Each suspect had proximity, motive, criminal records, and no alibies. They lined them all up and Sal carefully examined each one. When he was done, he grabbed the fourth guy in the line and pulled him forward saying, ‘here’s your killer’.”

“How did he know?” asked Janice.

“He noticed some very faint traces of red clay on his sneaker, the same red clay that was in the flower bed under the window where he broke into the victim’s house. He also spotted two very small scratches, almost invisible to the naked eye, on his right side, just under his collar. Sal knew that the victim was left-handed, and since she was strangled from the front, she likely fought back. And since she had long nails, she probably caught the attacker someplace.”

“That’s incredible! But didn’t they find DNA or something under her nails?” said Janice.

“No, they didn’t. I guess it isn’t always like on Law and Order. The guy eventually admitted it. And wait until I tell you this *other* story...” Rick began.

“Save that, he’s coming over now,” said Janice as she reached out her hand. “Hi Sal, I’m Janice, and this is Rick. We both worked closely with Sam. I’m so very sorry for your loss.”

“Hi Sal, me too. She was a gem. We are all devastated,” said Rick.

“Thank you both. I appreciate that. Do you think I could talk to you both, and maybe some others from the office sometime? Maybe next week? I really just want to get a better idea of what she was going through these past few months,” said Sal.

“Of course, absolutely,” said Rick.

Sal made his way down the bar to where Barbara and Ellen were having their drinks refreshed. They both made their condolences, and Sal couldn’t help but notice Ellen staring into his eyes. He also asked if he could follow up with them, and of course, they agreed.

Sal then finally caught up with Sam’s husband, Peter, who was with his son, Mark, Sam’s stepson. Although they saw each other in the church, they really didn’t have a chance to talk.

Peter was about the same height as Sal. He had dark hair, with one of those “always looks like he needs a shave” beards, He was muscular and full of self-confidence. He’s an anesthetist and met Sam at the hospital. They had been married for about nine years.

Mark was 19. He was almost as tall as his dad and had a scruffy look about him. He was wearing jeans and a flannel shirt, which made him stand out amongst all of the dark suits. Sam always liked Mark, she thought of him as a “project” that needed special attention. She always said that they had a good relationship and that she saw potential in him. She seemed to care more for him than his dad, who was always wrapped up in his career. Mark worked at a hardware store managed by a friend of Peter. Sal never really interacted with Mark. He was usually out when he visited, which wasn’t as much as he would have liked, especially now. Mark didn’t speak to many people at the funeral or lunch. Sal knew he was very introverted. He kept close to his dad the whole time, nodding when appropriate as people tried to console them.

Sal extended his hand. Peter pulled him close and hugged him. “This just isn’t real,” said Peter.

“I know,” said Sal.

“She was truly an amazing woman. We connected on such a deep level,” said Peter. “She was just so depressed since her accident, but I thought she was getting better.”

Sal’s mind flashed back to the accident. He was so upset to hear that Sam fell down the steps carrying a laundry basket. He feared the worst. It turned out that she had suffered a severe concussion, a broken leg, and shattered her shoulder. He was relieved when he heard that she would survive, but he knew the recovery journey would be a long one. She went on disability from her job as a physician’s assistant and concentrated on her rehabilitation.

Sal was shocked by her death, and still is. He spoke with her a few days before she died. She *did* seem depressed and listless, but certainly not to the point of throwing in the towel. She talked about getting back to work, cases she had ideas about, plans she had, even a vacation when her physical therapy ended. She was looking forward to that, and said it seemed like her rehab had been going on forever. He also questioned her method – rat poison is a very unpleasant death. He thought that she would be more the sleeping pill OD type. Then he cursed himself for even thinking about that.

Sal, being direct, said, “Peter, please tell me more about Sam’s depression.”

“Well,” Peter began, “Not working really weighed heavy on her, she spent too much time alone in her room and she always seemed tired. I told her that I thought that she slept too much, but she said she couldn’t help it.”

“Was she on painkillers?” asked Sal.

“For the first few days, but, you know her, she refused to take them after that. She said they clouded her mind, so she flushed them.”

“Yeah, that sounds like her,” said Sal.

Peter continued, “I asked two psychiatrist friends about treating her, but she refused.”

Sal asked for their names and Peter reluctantly gave them. Peter was genuinely in mourning. At least that is the way it seemed to Sal. Sal looked for the “tells” of him faking it. Peter looked down a lot and only really spoke when spoken to. The same with Mark. Both were upset and adrift.

“Listen, I know that a lot of people want to talk to you. I’ll call you soon,” said Sal.

Peter hugged him again and whispered, “Thanks.”

Sal found comfort in talking to Sam’s friends. Many had questions about her.

“What was she like as a kid?”

“Did you hang out together in school?”

“Did you approve of her boyfriends?”

The more Sal listened to Sam’s friends and colleagues, the more he thought her a vital, vibrant person. They were all shocked that she took her own life, with poison no less. It all seemed so very unlike her.

Sal made some mental notes on the friends and colleagues that he wanted to follow up with and asked a few for their contact info.

Several of her friends, mainly the women, also tried to comfort Peter, and some expressed their “too soon” interest in him while attempting to console him.

Early the next day Sal questioned the detective that caught the case. It was Pat O’Brien, a friend whom he had worked with before. He trusted Pat. He was a dedicated professional with many years of experience. Pat concluded that it was a suicide. Peter found her on the floor in the kitchen when he came home from work at around 5:30. He called 911 right away. He also found a note on the kitchen table that said, “I’m sorry,” and it was Sam’s handwriting. Sal asked to see it and Pat said he would get it from evidence and make a copy for him.

Mark got home around 6:30 after his dad called and told him the news. The house was still abuzz with police and forensics.

Pat questioned them both, together and separately. Both said it was a typical day. Pat asked them to describe the day. Peter said that he got up at 6:00 then he went to the gym in the basement and worked out for 30 minutes. He showered and dressed. He had breakfast. He made a sandwich, ham on rye, for his lunch and, as was his tradition, he also made the same sandwich for Sam’s lunch. He wrapped it and put it in the refrigerator.

He left for work at 8:15 and was in his office by 9:00 when he had his first patient.

He said that, since the accident, Sam usually slept until 9:30 or so, and typically had tea and toast for breakfast.

Mark said he was out late the night before and slept until about 10. He took a quick shower and when he came downstairs, Sam was sitting in her chair in the living room and reading the paper. She was still in her robe. Mark said Sam was the same as usual. He ate some cereal and left for work by 10:45 to begin his 11:00 shift.

Pat said that they both seemed deeply upset.

Sal then contacted the doctors that Peter mentioned. Peter indeed spoke to them about her depression stemming from the recent death of Sal and Sam's beloved father and her accident. They both agreed to speak with her, even followed up with Peter, but he said she refused.

He spoke with a few friends and colleagues. They were concerned too. Yes, she seemed depressed, but none mentioned anything to indicate that she was unhappy to the point of suicide.

A few days later, Sal was ready to test his hypothesis. He contacted Peter and said he wanted to bring dinner and talk more about his sister.

Peter agreed, but felt uncomfortable. It just felt weird to him. Mark said he didn't want any part of it, but Peter said that Sal insisted that he needed to see both of them together.

Sal brought a selection of large hoagies, all cut in half, and a few orders of fries.

Before he entered, he set the phone in his pocket to "record."

"Turkey, ham or Italian?" Sal asked.

Peter picked ham while Mark chose Italian. Sal handed them each a half.

"I was hoping for turkey myself!" said Sal.

As they ate, Sal asked questions. "What is your favorite memory of Sam?"

Peter said, "Her smile."

Mark said, "Her meatloaf!"

"Yes to both," said Sal. "The meatloaf was our mom's recipe, and I'm not surprised that you loved it. Do you remember anything from the time before the end that may have signaled a problem?"

"Sorry, Sal," said Peter, getting agitated, "We answered all of those types of questions when the police were here. The answer is still no. Nothing, nada, no sign or signal."

"I'm sorry, Peter, I know the wound is still fresh. For me too," said Sal. "The truth is, I'm just not thoroughly convinced that it was a suicide..."

"What! Are you suggesting that she was murdered?" snapped Peter.

"Calm down, Peter, I didn't mention murder, did I? We'll get to the truth soon enough," said Sal.

"In situations like this, when I'm at a crossroads, I go back to what Arthur Conan Doyle wrote, 'Once you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth'."

"Huh?" snorted Mark.

“There’s just too much just doesn’t add up for me,” said Sal. “It’s just that the accident was only two weeks after we buried our father, and when Sam found out about the size of the inheritance,” he continued.

“I’m not sure how that’s even relevant!” said Peter.

“Having the money and controlling it are two different things,” said Sal.

“That’s just preposterous!” Peter protested.

“Is it? I know she spoke of making huge charitable donations and you wanted to build a house at the beach, and you two argued about it, a lot,” said Sal.

“Sure, we argued, but come on! It’s not worth killing for!” said Peter.

“And you, Mark, you’ve been awfully quiet,” said Sal.

“Hey, I’m hardly ever here. If they were fighting, it’s between them,” said Mark.

“And that note. That is way too brief and vague for Sam. If that was her last communication, she would have said more, *lots* more,” said Sal.

“This is insulting and ridiculous,” said Mark as he stood and headed for the door. “I’m outta here. I’m heading to Joanie’s.”

“Sit down, Mark!” Sal said with attitude. “I’ve figured out a foolproof way to learn the truth. You see, before I came in, I laced your sandwiches with poison, at least half of each, so I could be sure to give you a choice. It’s pretty-slow acting, but will eventually cause a painful death, just like Sam’s.”

“Are you crazy! Mark, call 911, this is nuts!” said Peter.

As Mark pulled out his phone, Sal said, “If you make that call it’s certain death for both of you. However, if I learn the whole truth in the next 15 minutes or so, I’ll share the antidote with you both and you will live. You will throw up a lot, but you will survive.”

Sal pulled a small bottle from his pocket and glanced at his watch. “14 minutes now. You will need to talk fast to get this.”

“Sal, you’re outta control. You’ll go to prison for this!” pleaded Peter.

“13 minutes,” Sal said calmly.

“Dad, do something! This freak is a lunatic!” said Mark.

“Just about 12 minutes now before I dump this in the sink,” said Sal.

Mark starts to cry. “It was me,” he whispered.

“Son!” shrieked Peter.

“Say what now?” said Sal.

“I did it. I did everything, Dad had no idea,” sobbed Mark.

Peter punched his son squarely in the jaw and went to throw another punch when Sal pulled him off and threw him into a chair.

“Let the kid talk. Time is running out,” said Sal.

“I wanted that beach house, and a car, she was just going to waste all of that money saving whales and stray dogs,” said Mark as he started to get nasty.

“I put a broom handle across the top of the stairs when I knew she was coming with the laundry, but she somehow survived the fall. Then when she came home from the hospital, I started to put Xanax into the sandwiches that you made for her each day. I upped the amount a little each day. So, there it is, now give me that bottle!” barked Mark.

“Not yet, I have more questions,” said Sal. “Tell me about the note.”

“So stupid. I was on the phone arguing with Joanie, and Sam started talking to me, she didn’t see me on the phone. I pointed to the phone, and she wrote ‘I’m sorry’ and signed it. I think she was trying to be funny. I just saved the note.”

“I had my money on you all along. I asked myself who has the most to gain? Who has the most to lose from Sam’s death?” said Sal. “Sure, Peter, you would get the money, but lose the woman that you loved. Mark was obvious, he gets to help spend the money and, as usual with psychopaths, he has no concern about anyone else, yes, including his father. Plus, there’s no way that Peter would use rat poison to kill his wife, or anyone else. He would use something much more elegant, something quick and painless. Yes, the guy that works in the hardware store would choose strychnine.”

“Now give me that bottle!” said Mark, lunging at Sal.

“Not quite yet,” said Sal as he sidestepped Mark. “Why now?”

“Simple. I was out of Xanax, and the guy that I was getting it from couldn’t get it for a while. Plus, I was tired of her moping around,” said Mark. “Now give it to me!” he said as jumped on Sal and he put his arm behind his neck and started to choke him.

In a flash, Sal took a step towards Mark’s bent arm around his neck, then shot his elbow sharply into Mark’s solar plexus. He then slammed his closed fist into Mark’s testicles, then powered his elbow straight up and caught Mark under his chin. Mark flew back and slammed his head on the corner of the granite countertop. Blood gushed and Mark fell to the floor.

A frantic Peter tried to help his son as Sal called 911.

Peter cradled his son and at some point, motioned to Sal to give him the bottle with the antidote.

Sal said sheepishly, “Sorry, I was bluffing, there was no poison. This isn’t how I expected this to go. I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry too,” said Peter. “I know that you loved her very much, and we both lost her. Because of money. Is there anything as sad as that?”

The paramedics and police arrived at the same time. Mark was still alive when they loaded him into the ambulance, but he lost his fight on the way to the hospital.

Pat O’Brien remarked that he was disappointed to return to the same house for another dead body. Sal briefly filled Pat in on the details.

“I understand why you did what you did, but that doesn’t make it right. Not by a long shot. You shoulda come to me. We coulda worked this out,” said Detective O’Brien.

“Pat, you’re right. I agree. And I did consider it, I *strongly* considered it. But I had no proof, and I couldn’t think of any other way to resolve it. I’m sorry that Mark died. Very sorry. But he did attack me, and he had that rage. Plus, not that it matters, but I recorded everything,” said Sal.

As time passed, Sal and Peter kept in touch, because of their common bond with Sam. But that eventually faded. Sal reverted to silence for a while and had trouble coping with the loss of his beloved sister. He eventually threw himself into his work and whenever he felt challenged or anxious, he thought of Sam’s smile, and it pulled him through.

Then Detective O’Brien invited him to consult on a particularly grisly and baffling murder. Sal perked up – the game was afoot!

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