

Chapter 21

Sunday's were always Vince's day off. He usually got two days off during the week and the other day depended on how busy Camilla's was. There were many times he had no choice but to work extra days because it was busy or one of his aging parents needed the rest or weren't feeling well enough. Vince didn't mind working the extra hours if required as his passion for the culinary art of creating unique edibles was not labor intensive. To Vince it was never hard labor if you loved what you are doing. If you got paid for what you loved doing, it was that much better.

This particular Sunday had the usual flow of about ten customers per hour. Sal was at the back minding the kitchen and Maria was at the front counter doing some minor cleaning and serving the customers. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary of the daily routine of running a restaurant, except this Sunday was special for Vince. He was counting down by the second for the past few days and it was agonizing as hell. This Sunday could be one of the most exciting moments of his life and he was nervous as heck. As she had agreed, this was the day Vince was to meet Samantha on a date.

The day started early and was planned by Vince to make sure it all went smoothly. And to make sure all was excellence, he needed the help of his mother. Like all good mothers looking after their kids regardless of their age, when Maria was ironing out the wrinkles from his shirt and pants, she asked what he was up to since he rarely asked for his clothes to be pressed as he no longer worked in an office.

"Vincenzo, why you need me ironing this?" asked Maria as she placed his pants on the ironing board.

Maria and Sal had now greatly improved on the language of their adopted country and speak English with Vince since his Italian is weak and can barely start or finish a conversation. They don't mind because it helps them with their own English. The only time Italian was spoken to him was when they were angry at him or called him by his legal name of Vincenzo. Either way, Vince doesn't mind being called Vincenzo by his parents, and only his parents and no one else.

"I just need it," replied Vince.

“What? You having girlfriend? You see girlfriend? She pretty like your momma?” asked Maria with a mother’s gleaming smile.

In a blink of an eye, Maria can make a conversation go south very quickly. Vince loves his mother but some topics she brings up are very cringe worthy as she would think it’s an appropriate discussion.

“Why are you asking me these questions?”

“Vincenzo, what wrong your momma asking son what he do?” asked Maria. She was more cautious with her only son and made sure he wasn’t up to no good. She didn’t want to bury another son and was basically protecting him by getting a handle on his private life.

“Whatever,” mumbled Vince.

“Vincenzo, I worry because what happen you brother, Giovanni,” said Maria.

“I know what happened to John,” said Vince not wanting to relive a dreadful past. “I’m just seeing some friends.”

Vince wanted the interrogation to end and left the room. He didn’t need a reminder of what happened to his older brother. And Maria relinquished any more intrusive questions.

Vince said he was meeting friends and didn’t mention the date because he felt uncomfortable talking to his mother about relationships. It’s not he dislikes talking to his parents. He does like to talk to them about how to bake the perfect bread or cook the perfect pasta dish, but not about his personal love life. He found it too embarrassing and weird discussing it. If he started talking to them about love and all, it might lead to a conversation with his father on how to please a woman the manly way, and his mother nodding in agreement.

It was twenty minutes before the big date and Vince was in the restaurant sitting at a small table big enough for two people, inches away from the window and right by the entrance. It was the perfect spot to see people walk into the restaurant.

Vince was wearing a simple patterned shirt that was business casual appropriate. The clothes were all perfectly pressed by Maria, as were the khakis he was wearing. His Bostonian’s were polished by himself and he didn’t spare any black shoeshine to get it looking crisp and new again. From the start of his shower to getting dressed and fixing up his hair, it took almost an hour. Even a woman would complain about the length of time he took. He was so nervous his armpits were sweating profusely, he could’ve used another shower. The sweat from his armpits, back, and chest were luckily disguised by the patterns of the

shirt. It didn't stop there. Vince had to occasionally grab a couple of napkins from the dispenser to wipe the sweat from his forehead. He read in one magazine, Steve McQueen's secret of attracting women was the scent of Eau Sauvage cologne, which he sprayed a ton of that helped disguise the smell of sweat. Despite it all, Vince still looked and smelled cool and slick.

It was now quarter after five and the date set by Samantha was for five. Vince didn't think much of it as many for casual meetings are commonly late. He thought she would walk through the door any second and then he would whisk her out without introducing her to his parents. It wasn't out of disrespect, but again, out of embarrassment. It wasn't of their poor English, but more of their behavior. If the introduction was made, his father might say something like, "Vince very handsome man like his papa, me." It may have been true twenty or so years ago but time took a toll on Vince's father Sal, who was now bald and overweight, and the difference in height quite noticeable. And to make matters excruciatingly worse, if it's possible, his mother Maria would come over and say, "Vincenzo, you make me a grandmother, okay?" Then she would get a napkin, wet one end with her tongue and start cleaning imaginary dirt off his cheek like all well intentioned mothers would do. Vince shuddered at the thought.

It was now quarter to six, and all the time from behind the counter, Maria watched Vince and couldn't take it anymore. She went over to him with a slice of pizza and a can of cola and placed it on the table where he was sitting.

"Vincenzo, how long you waiting friends?" asked a concerned Maria.

"Soon," Vince replied.

"Okay. You eating this," said Maria as she wedged the slice closer to him.

"I'm not hungry."

"Mangia! Mangia!" said Maria furiously in her mother tongue as she pushed the plate of pizza even closer to him.

Vince didn't say a word and walked out the restaurant. A somber look on his face, he casually strolled down the sidewalk without a predetermined destination. Vince realized after nearly an hour of waiting, he had been stood up by Samantha. He didn't want to believe she was the type of person who would break a promise or jerk a guy around. He thought perhaps she was just late, maybe caught up on the

subway or couldn't make up her mind what to wear or an emergency came up. Vince wasn't being naive as anyone would have thought the answer she had given was a definite yes. He wasn't mad at her, but was rather sad of the situation. He wondered if he came on to her too strong or if she was only being nice to let him down gently. Vince tried hard to remember if it was something he had said that made her change her mind. He concentrated and couldn't recall anything he did or said that was inappropriate. Vince would never know because he never saw Samantha again to ask why she never came on the day that would have been so special to him.

Samantha not holding up to her part of the deal wasn't because she was a rude bitch who got off on getting a guy's hope up and beating it down with an ugly stick. It was her insecurity and one couldn't blame her for it. She thought she could, but couldn't get over what had happened with her previous boyfriend.

It was a year prior when Samantha was in a relationship to a fellow by the name of David. He was from an upper class family and his father was a prominent defense lawyer in the community. David had followed in his father's footsteps and recently passed the bar exam, ready to begin a brilliant career. With the help of pulling some strings by his father, he was offered a position at a prestigious law firm. The beginning of success started the beginning of coke, and it wasn't the type you drank but the type you snorted. It may have been the cockiness of a young punk making too much money who didn't know how to invest or save it properly. The drug abuse was a highly guarded secret from Samantha but she wasn't stupid. She noticed how erratic his behavior changed without a moment's notice. David would snap at her for the smallest and most insignificant reasons. She knew something wasn't right, yet never asked thinking the high pressure of being a lawyer brought out the vulgarity. And one night it had all changed permanently for the worse when she arrived at his place for dinner. Before her arrival, David had snorted enough coke to elevate his behavior to the lowest level possible. When they were having a glass of wine on the sofa before dinner, he started talking about work.

"I swear the prosecutor bitch dresses like a slut to get on the judges side," said David. "Bitches like that deserve to get it good."

"David!" exclaims Samantha shocked at his behavior. "Why would you say something like that?"

"What?" questioned David as if he said nothing wrong.

“Just don’t talk like that, please.”

“Like what?! What the fuck are you talking about?!” snapped David.

“I think I should leave,” said Samantha feeling uneasy about the whole conversation and made her way towards the door.

David got up from the sofa and followed her. “Hey, I’m sorry.”

Samantha started to open the door and looked at David. “We’ll talk another time. Okay?” She started to walk out the door and her path was suddenly blocked by David.

“I said I’m sorry! What the fuck is your problem, bitch?!” screamed David right in her face.

He then grabbed her by the arm, pulled her back, slammed the door shut, dragged her to the sofa, and threw her on it. All the time Samantha was terrified but did not scream or struggle to get free of his grip. He unzipped his pants and forced himself on top of her putting his hand up her dress. All the time she was trying to get him off, which was a difficult task with him being nearly twice the size against her small frame.

“David! Stop it! Please!” pleaded Samantha.

David being the cold hearted bastard he was, and still is, disregarded her plea and did what he pleased. He continued the uninvited fornication while all the time Samantha cried and begged him to stop. It stopped after five minutes and to Samantha it seemed like hours of degrading torture. After the horrific ordeal, David just got up and went to the bedroom to unwind. It was when she made a break for it.

Samantha is a very sensitive individual who does not like any type of verbal or physical confrontation as it’s not in her nature. As for David, he thrives on it. He’s more of a coward than a fighter and has goons doing the fighting for him if he knows he can’t win the battle. If someone pissed him off, he would pit a fight against the individual by getting another person to instigate a fight with that person. If that didn’t work, he would pay off a goon to do the fighting for him. He once used that tactic at a bar. It happened when he was trying to pick up a woman and everything was going great until another guy started talking to her while he was at the washroom. That pissed off David. He then looked around the bar for the biggest and ugliest looking thug, placed a hundred dollar bill to his face and told him it’s his if he punched out the guy trying to pick up *his* girl. The brainless thug obliged as they rarely decline fast money. David had been doing this since grade school except the hundred dollar bills at the time were a couple chocolate bars.

He's very cowardly and very smart to have someone fight on his behalf. He likes to see people more miserable than himself because it makes him feel far better.

The next day, after raping her, David tried to call her to apologize. He knew how to influence people to side with him - a trait required to being a successful lawyer. He knew how she thought and will use it against her to his own advantage. David also knew she was very receptive and forgiving to emotional people. And when he calls her, he will start crying, make up lies about having too much to drink and how the stress at work was unbearable, playing a huge part in his misbehavior. He had the script all in his mind set to go, but when he called, there was no answer. He tried a few more times and again no answer. He tried again the next day, and this time there was no ring tone and a message saying the number was out of service. David's only mistake was underestimating Samantha who was capable of being her own person. He thought of her as an unintelligent person doing his every request, following his every command, and never thought of her to leave his side. He believed if anyone was to end the relationship, it would be him. Samantha wasn't confrontational but did not mean she wasn't mentally strong. She didn't need anyone but herself to survive. Two days after the horrific incident, Samantha packed her bags and moved out of her apartment to start a new life somewhere else. It's what fighters do.

Samantha hasn't dated since the incident and was skeptical. She almost did with Vince but just couldn't muster up enough courage. She rarely trusted guys no matter how sweet they may seem, because it was how David was when they first met. She gave him trust and he gave her rape. Who could blame her? Maybe if she wasn't a kind and trustworthy person it may never have happened. Or if she pulled off a Lorena Bobbitt to teach him a little lesson. Regardless, she got Vince all wrong. Vince wasn't the type who would treat the opposite sex that way. He was more of a classic gentleman back then. However, Vince wasn't a total wuss at that point of his life either. If a guy was in his face about some junk and wanted to fight, he would give it to them good by knocking out a few teeth. If Samantha had met Vince on the day she was supposed to, and told him about what her former boyfriend did to her, he would probably go out of his way to find him, kick the shit out of him, drag him by the hair to where she was, and then make him apologize to her. And after all that, he would kick him in the nuts

like a football as a reminder to what he did was not nice. But in the end, Samantha will never know the real gentleman hidden in the young Vince. Maybe as time passes, she may let her guard down a little and start dating again.

A few months after being stood up by Samantha, Vince's life continued to spiral downward. It was another tragic turn of events for the Bizarro clan when Sal unexpectedly passed away. It was perhaps the best way to go if one was to go - peacefully in his sleep and dreaming of all things good and beautiful being led by a white light into the abyss of paradise. Sal still had a few years to go before officially hitting the retirement mark but his life was taken away before its time. It shouldn't have been a surprise to anyone. His lifestyle was carefree with no regrets, no guilt, a diet of high carbs and fats, and an exercise routine next to nil. His state of mind was always in stress mode worrying about the business. His life was mostly work and little of a good night's rest. It was the perfect combination for a permanent departure.

Sal may have been the cornerstone of the family, but Maria was the foundation. She was the matriarch who ran the family. It may have seemed like Sal had a say on any decision big or small, but Maria had heavy influence on the final decision. The matriarch could no longer lead as she was greatly devastated from Sal's death and would never be the same again. He was her first and only love. They stood side by side in times of good or bad, happy or sad, and regardless of the differences and countless arguments they had in the past, they were life partners forever. Maria had Sal, the one confidant who was always there for the most part of her life, then having been suddenly taken away was very traumatic. Her behavior changed as she was less engaged by her surroundings and had an impassive look on her face missing a soul. She was physically and mentally deteriorating. On the most part, she stayed in bed upstairs in their apartment and no longer helped at the restaurant. Sometimes she would come downstairs to the restaurant which was physically encouraged by Vince, meaning he would have to literally, and gently, grab her by the arms and help her down the stairs. He didn't want her to be a vegetable in bed all day, every day. He tried anything to get her out of the strut. It was now Vince's turn to take care of his mother and he made sure she ate three meals a day. Most of the time she nibbled a small helping but Vince wouldn't have any of it and forced her to eat at least half of what was on the plate. It seemed

Vince was getting a taste of his own medicine because when he was a child and into his young adulthood, Maria would always complain about him not eating enough or not engaging in physical activity. She would always scream at him to go outside and get some fresh air when he locked himself in the bedroom for hours on end studying or reading books and magazines. Thinking about the role reversal would put a grin on his face.

Vince was also greatly affected by his father's death and was more emotionally defunct on the outside. It's not in his nature to show his feelings fearing it might make him look weak. And just like his brother's death, he kept it to himself. It wasn't anybody's business but his own and had chosen to move along with existence than stop and dwell on the specifics. And there had to be a strong one to continue the family legacy.

His mother no longer able to work, Vince had a full workload running the restaurant. Added to the coping of the loss of his father and trying to look after his mother, it was one of the most challenging moments of his life. He desperately needed help. His world gone uncontrollably bonkers, Vince totally forgot about being stood up by Samantha a few months back. To put it in perspective, it was a drop in the bucket compared to what he was currently going through. Funds were tight and he had no choice but to hire a couple of employees. He hired one to look after his mother and another to help in the restaurant.

A middle-aged Italian woman was hired to look after his mother so there wasn't any miscommunications between them. The caretaker's name was Angela, who was somewhat on the heavy and short side. She worked on average of five to six days per week, a few hours here and there scattered throughout the day. Her responsibilities were to feed, bath, and try to get Maria physically involved as much as possible like going out on walks. The job wasn't wholly intensive for Angela as Maria wasn't too difficult to deal with. Maria found comfort in Angela when she chatted away in a soothing and friendly way. She would often ask Maria questions and answer them herself if there wasn't any from her. Most of the time the dialogue was by herself and on good days Maria would be willing to say a few words. The wage wasn't the greatest and paid under the table in cash. Angela didn't care for the pay and was happy to have a job to keep herself busy.

The other help, a young college student, worked part-time mostly on evenings and weekends when Camilla's was most active. Her name

was Meagan and was at the brink of turning twenty years of age. Her dental braces didn't affect her attractiveness with the wonderful and trusting smile she had. The trust portion may have been why Vince hired her after interviewing about a dozen applicants, a few high school, and most of them being college students. With his personal life and running the family business on his own, he really needed someone he can rely on and Meagan was that person. She was a great multitasker who can handle customers quite well and was very pleasant. She may have also aided in the restaurant getting many regulars, whether it be they liked her hospitable service or was looking for a date. One time, a masculine female with a boyish haircut, a good chance done by a barber, wearing a flannel plaid shirt and baggy jeans, tried to get her phone number. Meagan, being polite and professional, told her she was already in a relationship and thanked her for the offer instead of laughing at her. Meagan did tell the truth of her being in a relationship. His name was Rick. When Rick spoke, it was sometimes a struggle to hear what he was saying from his soft voice. It may be due to lack of confidence and shyness. The question might be, how does a guy like that snag the likes of Meagan? The answer is simple. In their case, it was Meagan who did all the work and snagged him. She started off by asking him if he wanted to go out for a coffee, and after that told him about this cool Greek joint with the tastiest souvlaki. Rick never suspected it to be a date. To him it was a couple of friends hanging out. After half a dozen hangouts, he relaxed a bit around Meagan. The first kiss with her was a whole new experience, perhaps more awkward for him. Meagan's attraction to Rick was he was the opposite of the cocky egotistic jerks she so much loathed.

On Rick's professional side, it was almost a year ago he received his bachelor's degree in business. His grades were good enough to get him a half decent job but at the time the only offer was a mailroom clerk position at a financial institution in Manhattan. It may have been due to the job market or his ambition, still it was better than nothing.

When Meagan worked late, Rick would escort her home. It was quite a distance to travel to Camilla's to meet Meagan but he didn't mind, as it was a piece of mind knowing she would get home safely. During the weekends, if Meagan wasn't too tired, they would take their time getting home and stop to get a late night meal or catch a midnight movie. Every time Rick came early to pick up Meagan, Vince would chat with him and offer him something to eat while Meagan would

prepare to close shop. They had similar interests and would talk about how some stocks and commodities were performing. They loved talking about the better known stocks that can be volatile and commodities of oil and gold and what unforeseen catastrophe could make the price jump or fall. They both hated talking about bonds and T-bills. The low risk made it quite dull and less exciting to invest. They agreed it was more for the person who likes to save their money in a bank account and get that extra percentage or two of interest. They also had the same sentiment about most employees working in the financial industry as being a bunch of lowlifes stabbing each other in the back just to get a measly promotion. Rick confided he wanted to get out of the industry and get into something else. Vince retorted it would be a cold day in hell before he even thought about going back in the industry. Vince told him being a crime lord would be more reputable and far less stressful than going back into the cesspool full of rats called the financial industry. They both laughed and little did Vince know the joke he made was to be his destiny.

Meagan worked at Camilla's for nearly two years and Vince didn't have one problem with her. But all good things must come to an end. It was when she graduated college and found a job more compatible to her education as an executive assistant in a fashion magazine. Before Meagan left, she gave Vince a good month of notice. Vince was not one to hold back another's endeavor and grateful for the advanced notice as it gave him time to look for her replacement. There were no other help as good as Meagan. She may have cared about doing a good job. As for the ones after her, they didn't much care for the job and only did it for the paycheck. Most of the helps he hired were university students like Meagan, and most were not up to par with the job even though the requirements were basic. Vince fired a couple of employees for reasons of chronic lateness to poor customer service.

The last time Vince heard of Meagan and Rick, they were still together and engaged. Rick went back to school and got another degree in English literature. He was working as a freelance writer and writing a fictional novel based on events in the financial industry. Meagan moved on to a more popular magazine and had her braces removed. Their young life seemed to be moving along nicely.

Vince desperately needed good help, so he told Angela about his situation and asked her if she could help until he finds a suitable replacement. Luckily for him, she was more than happy to help. Vince

knew she already had her hands full looking after his mother and was more than grateful. He couldn't pay her more than he was already paying her, so he offered her free meals and suggested to move in the empty third bedroom. This worked out great for her since the extra hours put in wasn't much more than the time spent commuting every day. It was a blessing in disguise for both Angela and Vince.

At the time, Angela was a widow with two grown kids who had a family of their own living outside of New York State. The younger of the two boys lived in New Jersey working for the city in the sanitation department. He had a toddler and the wife was working part-time in a department store to pitch in with the expenditures. The wife didn't have to work since his pay was good enough to cover the costs of living in a less expensive region of New Jersey. The younger son wanted his mother Angela to move in with them but she preferred to stay with her cousin in Harlem, the same neighborhood where she raised her kids before they left the nest. The eldest son lived in Dallas, married to a Texas native, and had two young kids in grade school. He had a steady career in the oil fields and rarely had the time to visit her. His wife who hated the colder northeast and everything about it, may be the real reason why the older son rarely visited her. As for the younger son, he tried to visit her as much as possible but work and trying to raise a young family made it difficult. If there's any compensation, she talked to them on the phone at least once a week, and for Angela if that's the best, she'll take it.

Angela moved in with her younger cousin in another part of Harlem a number of years back when her kids moved out. Her cousin was married to a construction worker and had two young children which Angela shared the bedroom with. The situation was tight with five people living in a two bedroom apartment. Her cousin and her husband never complained as Angela tried to contribute what she can by cooking and cleaning and looking after the kids when they were at work. When they heard the news Angela was moving out, they were both happy and sad. Happy they would have more space and sad there was no one to cook, clean, and look after the kids. They were delighted for her, and if she ever needed anything, she can always give them a call since they were practically down the street.

The arrangement with Angela worked out fine for a few more years until Vince's mother passed away. It was a sad day for Vince. At least he didn't have to see her in a deteriorating cognitive state any longer.

When Maria died, Vince wasn't as devastated as when his father or John died. He could have been more prepared for her fate, or he was now more mature handling these situations. As for Angela, her duties as a caretaker ended but her help at the restaurant continued. Vince never hired Meagan's replacement since Angela urged him not to waste resources on help when she can do it. It made sense to Vince. After Maria's death, Vince was closer to Angela and was now like a surrogate mother to him.

Currently, Angela still works at Camilla's, albeit at a slower pace, and have gone to a status of being more of a fixture like the antiquated tables and chairs that have four layers of paint. She may have aged some but can still do the job even if it's at a leisurely rate. As they say, it's hard to find good help these days.