

The voice on the mysterious message sounded slightly shaky, as though the caller was elderly. It was short. Unfinished.

“Your father was a stand-up guy. I’m counting on you to be the same. I need your help.”

Then silence. The call disconnected.

Mack Peters played it again, and tried to figure out who the caller might be. He detected a hint of a slight accent, maybe midwestern, but he couldn’t be sure.

He stood there barefoot in the sunlit kitchen of his Old Malibu Road house, and stared at his phone as though it might yield more information. A hissing sound from the forgotten espresso machine behind him broke the silence. When he came in from the beach earlier that morning, he had leaned his still wet surfboard against the back deck railing. He saw that it had stopped dripping now. He gazed at the gentle surf in the ocean beyond. Flat. No killer waves.

The voice on the cryptic message sounded vaguely familiar. He wondered if it was a voice from the past. Maybe. *But who?*

Recognition was slow to come. Then, in a flash, he recognized that voice—Sal Mangino—the one person on Earth he ever expected to hear from. It was like a gut punch. The last time he saw Sal, it was at his father’s house so many years ago. He pictured the man wearing a sharp suit, sharper eyes, and he spoke in tones that made it seem like the walls were always listening.

It was the same voice on the phone, but now it trembled like something had broken.

He tried to call Sal back, but the number was dead. Burner phone. Old-school.

Even though Mack hadn’t heard that voice in over sixteen years, it was a shock to hear it sounding like it did on the message. Frail. Almost begging. Not the Sal he remembered.

He leaned his elbows on the cool kitchen island counter and replayed the sound in his head. Sal’s voice used to cut through a room like piano wire—tight, sharp, with an edge that sounded dangerous. But this frail plea for help? This was something else.

And it brought everything back.

The late nights at his father’s house. Closed doors. Sal’s distinctive laugh echoing through the hallway. His mother’s reluctance to welcome Sal into their house at first, and the strange affection she developed for him later. He pictured the way his father—Beverly Hills Police Chief Martin Peters—used to walk Sal out with his hand placed on the man’s shoulder, almost as though they were old Army buddies or something. But Mack knew better.

Back in the late ’80s Sal Mangino had been second-in-command to the Chicago Outfit’s Las Vegas operation. A dangerous guy with a string of murders and robberies to his credit, who later became the boss. But when he was at the Peters house he was charming in his own way, told jokes and had a fierce loyalty to Mack’s father. It was hard to picture him as a killer.

Mack wasn't sure how they met. Martin never talked about it. But, the twist was, the mobster had also become, somehow, a confidential informant. A ghost who whispered to the badge.

Mack thought about the first time he saw Sal sitting in their living room, sipping Scotch like he owned the place. Mack had just made rookie on the LAPD. His father had introduced them with a look that cautioned, "Do not ask questions. I'll explain later."

That night, Martin pulled him aside.

"Son, this is really important. Pretty much a matter of life and death. You never saw him. You never met him. Not ever. Understood?"

Mack understood. After Martin told his son as much of the story as he wanted him to know, Mack also knew if the Vegas mob had any clue about Sal's relationship with his father, it could spell death for all of them. So he kept that secret. Even after his father was gunned down a few years later in a drive-by that was never solved, he never revealed that either of them knew Sal. There was no Las Vegas connection to Martin Peter's slaughter, so there was no reason to bring it up.

He'd even kept the secret through his breakdown after his mother died a year later. He kept it when he quit the force and through the years that followed. Even when an insane gamble made him a millionaire, and through every mystery he solved as a civilian afterwards. He had liked being a cop, but after Martin's violent murder he knew he couldn't do it anymore. Still, sometimes the old itch came back and wouldn't let go. Like when he helped solve a horrible crime in Watson Falls, Washington, or a string of murders last year.

Now with Sal back in his life was it going to happen again? The old mobster sounded scared.

Mack stood up and still barefoot walked into his garage. He unlocked a tall steel cabinet against the back wall.

He took out a black Pelican case, untouched for years.

He cracked it open.

Inside was a 45 Colt Defender. Two loaded mags. And a thick manila file folder marked with a Sharpie in his father's familiar handwriting:

Mangino

He paused, hands hovering. After his father was murdered Mack searched his home office for anything that should be safeguarded or could be dangerous. When he saw that folder he thought of his father's cautions. He took it to protect Sal, put it under lock for safekeeping, but had never opened it.

Don't do it.

Mack pulled the folder free, but left the gun and mags. He closed the cabinet slowly. Clicked the lock.

When he was back in the house, he took the file into his office and locked it in his safe, to be looked at after he spoke to Sal. Something told him to look out at the street. A flash of movement caught his eye.

Black SUV. Parked half a block down across the street. Tinted windows. No visible plates. He didn't remember it being there an hour ago.

He told himself it was probably nothing. He was being paranoid. Mack was about to leave the room when his phone buzzed again.

Unknown number. No voicemail this time. Just a text.

"Vegas. I'll text you where to go. Don't bring anyone."

The message disappeared five seconds after he read it.