

Chapter 1

Jace Mercer, a fourteen-year-old boy, reached into a battered old rusty mail box that had at least three coats of paint. He was tall for his age, but not intimidating. Jace had short curly brown hair complemented by tiny ears. A sharp jawline that a lot of girls thought was hot. A mouth that was always between a smile and a frown. There's something warm about him, too, not loud or showy, but steady. The type of person who remembers small details about people and makes them feel seen. He's the kind of guy who could easily slide into the background... but never does.

He pulls three things out of the mail box. A flyer from Canadian Tire, the kind you look at but always gets thrown in the trash without second thoughts. And an electricity bill, Jace hoped they would not cut it again. Stuffed in the very back of the dented box, threatening not to be seen, was a tri-fold brochure with way too many colours. On the front was big blue lettering that said, **"Townspeople of Springfield, come and Win \$ 20 million."** Jace thought it was overdone. But he and his dad, Dylan, needed money badly. As he crossed the road, Jace looked up to what had been his home for the past couple of years. There was a shabby sign that said Dylan's Repair Shop. Although it was only a few years old, it was faded and worn. There was a garage door through which Jace could see his dad bending over a car hood. Above the little mechanic shop, they lived. It smelled like oil, and the floors had an eerie creak. The windows let in the cold in the winter. But it was home.

"How was school?" Dylan asked as he straightened up, wrench in hand. A shirt covered in grease. He was about the same height as Jace, had a fuller face with a beard that was graying. His beer belly had shrunk over the four years he had been sober.

"Good," Jace replied. "Greg got a 77 on an assignment."

"Don't know if I should be happy or sad, what did you get?"

"96."

"Good."

Jace knew what he was thinking about Beth(add alot more depth or keep a secret) ; his parents had gone through school together, she had always gotten good grades in school, Dylan not so much. Seven years earlier, Jace's mother had died in a car accident. Dylan had been driving after a night of drinking when their car slid off the road and wrapped itself around a hydro pole on the edge of town. The front of the vehicle had been crushed beyond recognition. Dylan had climbed from the wreck with little more than cuts and bruises. Beth Mercer had not been so lucky. She died in the early hours of the morning before the sun ever rose.

The accident left scars that never healed. Dylan rarely spoke about that night, but Jace could see it in the way his father stared too long at empty beer bottles or went silent whenever someone mentioned his mother. Seven years had passed, yet Dylan still carried the weight of surviving when Beth had not. He had never forgiven himself, and some days Jace wasn't sure he ever would.

"Look what came in the mail," Jace said, handing the colourful flyer to his dad.

"Fight to the death against the Mafia for money," Dylan read aloud dramatically.

Jace, suddenly curious, leaned over and read. Residents of Springfield come and participate in a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

"Just a scam," said Dylan, "I heard Daniel Crowe talking about it."

Daniel Crowe was the Presbyterian pastor of the little church down the road. He had helped Dylan get over the guilt and stop drinking after the accident

"Why were you talking to him about that?" Jace asked.

"You know I do a tune-up on his car every so often, and he mentioned he got this invitation thing. Said he already mailed off a reply. To go on a game show and play the game of Mafia. Of course, you don't get murdered, only eliminated."

"This is 2030, not the Hunger Games!" Jace said. "You want to enter?"

"Wouldn't waste postage on that," Dylan said.

"We could win 20 million dollars, though," Jace said. "You could stop working."

Dylan still looked untrusting. Jace wanted to enter; he wanted to win. He had played Mafia before, but was fairly sure it was going to be mostly social.

Dylan said, "I'll think about it, it is going to be on TV."

Dylan showed how true he was to his word and threw the flyer in the trash. But Jace wanted that money.

Later that night, Jace went up to his room, opened his drawer and under some underwear pulled the flyer out. During supper, Dylan had shown how much he had thought about the game show. He had forbidden Jace to enter. Jace had told him how much they needed that money. It ended up with them yelling at each other. Jace did the dishes and had finally escaped his father's watchful glare.

On the front cover, there was not much information, just enough to get you to open it before discarding it. Dylan had not been intrigued enough to open it. On the inside cover, there was more information. Basically, a rich guy named John Rockwell wanted to give some money away, so he invented 'The Town of Secrets', which goes around to small towns and offers them to be in the show. About 15- 25 people. It was very vague on the number, Jace thought. Springfield had been chosen as the first town to be in the show. If any of the mafia survived, they split the money; if the townspeople win they split the money. Jace wondered why they just didn't just give all 20 people a million dollars and be done with it. But then the show would make no money. There were a few rules, though; you could only sign up as many people per household as the number of flyers they had. Second, once in the game, you could have no contact with the outside, watch any videos or use AI to help you win. So, pretty much, you could prepare now, but once you are in the arena, you're on your own. On the back side was what you had to fill out: name, age, phone number, address, and other details. Jace didn't really think they needed. Maybe it was a scam, entice you with money just to give all your information and sell it on the black market. Maybe he would research this John guy, see if he was legit.

Jace pulled out his phone and texted his friends Greg and Frank Wetherly. They were twins with fire-red hair, always cracking jokes. Both of them had been friends with Jace since he started school. Jace was one of the few who could tell them apart. Frank had a chubbier face and a straight nose; he almost always speaks first and is the leader. Greg has a longer face and a mole on his neck. They had a group chat together.

Have you heard about this game show

He hoped they were game; he did not want to do this alone.

Yeah

Greg replied.

Want to go?

If he could convince his dad to go, and one of the Wetherlys could go that was a tenth of a chance one of the two families could win.

Yeah, but both of us want to go; we came up with a plan. We go to all the neighbours and get another flyer. All it says is that as many people can sign up as flyers they have. So if we find them, it is fine, right?

Jace was surprised by this, he thought maybe he could go. But maybe his dad could be entered too.

I might enter my dad, too. Why don't you also enter your parents?
Didn't think of that.

Jace wondered which of the neighbours would want to sign up. Probably not Harper Quinn, she was the bartender just down the road. Mr. and Mrs. Alridge were old. Jace hoped they would give it to him. Jace's house was on Mockingbird Lane, the entrance to the heart of Springville. Thor's shop and house were the first buildings after the fields. Past their house was a grocery store; the owners lived in the rich part of town, but he knew people were living up there now. Past the grocery store, there was the Cadwells funeral home, Nina Cadwell, the funeral director, also lived in a house in the residential section. Then after the lawns of the funeral home was the little church with the parsonage where Crowe lived. After the church there were houses built in the early 2010s. It had seemed there little towns were a preserved piece of history. They had to go to the town of Mousebrough for most anything else.

Do you want to meet up after school?

Jace listened to the swoosh as the text popped up. Sent. Jace was not worried about finding more brochures. What worried him was convincing his dad. He supposed it wouldn't hurt just to sign him up. Springfield had a population of about 1,000 people. If only twenty people could go to the game show... Jace hit the calculator on his phone. 20/1000, which meant only 2% could go. He figured only about an equator would sign up. That meant 8% of the sign-ups could go. He realized out of 25-15 people only max 5 people could win. He typed that into his phone. Only %0.5 of the town would get any money. He suddenly realized why his dad thought it was a scam. No, no it wasn't it is not a wheel you need to be smart to win. He was startled out of his thoughts by a notification on his phone.

Okay.

Jace finished his homework. He read the Invitation again. What had his dad said? Crowe had already mailed off a reply. What did that mean? Did he want to go or was he against it. He knew Crowe didn't need money, but maybe he wanted to donate it. Build the church's new building. The rules said plainly you could have no outside help in the arena. Arena. Was this a Non-blood Hunger Games? Jace thought. He would be put in a room, against his neighbours. To fight over money. It made no sense, all for entertainment. He pulled out his phone again. \$20,000,000 / 1,000. That was 20k per person. Why didn't John Richy-fellow just give them all 20k? No, that didn't matter; he needed that money. If Jace could have no help on the far side, he would need to learn all he could now.

Jace opened YouTube and planned to watch social videos over the next couple of weeks to drill himself. He searched:

How to convince someone?

Jace's new Mafia would be a lot social and convincing. He needed to learn how. But he also needed to convince his dad. Jace realized how hard that would be; his dad did not want even to let Jace sign up. The chances that Dyaln would be chosen, want to go, and actually play were very slim. Jace probably had a higher chance of being struck by lightning. As he watched the video, he descended into a cold sleep. He did not dream about having millions of dollars, but going around with a bloodied knife killing his neighbours.

Chapter 2

Jace woke his phone beside him on the bed. It took him a moment to remember the events of yesterday. He was going to win. After pulling himself out of bed, he went down to the kitchen to see what he could make for breakfast. Dylan generally woke up early to work on cars, then came in at about seven to have breakfast. Jace sometimes made an egg or toast, but most generally they just ate cereal.

At seven, Dylan came in.

"Mornin'."

"Morning, Umm.. We are almost out of milk. I guess you will have to go shopping." Jace didn't know if he should mention the contest. He didn't want to push it after last night.

"Okay."

They ended the rest of the meal in silence. Thai happened most of the time, though, so they were used to it. Jace wondered what Dylan would be like if it weren't for him.

Jace got on the bus. He sat in his usual seat near the front of the bus, and all the older grades got back.

"Good morning," Greg said.

"Morning," Jace replied. "Do your parents want to sign up for Mafia?" Jace asked.

Frank responded. "Dad is all for it; he thinks it is a way to stop working for Pierce." Logan Pierce was the wealthiest man in town. He had an assortment of rented houses, groceries, gas stations, and other things. Mr. Wetherly had red hair just like his sons. Clean-shaven, he had a warm personality. Slightly balding, he was 6ft feet tall. He wore glasses.

"Good, my dad is the opposite; he thinks it is a scam. Won't even let me sign up." Jace said.

"Well, just sign yourself up..... and, " Frank trailed off.

"If you get picked, just convince him that he can buy a 1981 Deloren Dmc-12 5 speed. Greg finished the sentence.

"That still wouldn't convince him, though. We fought last night." Jace said.

They went to the small high school in Springfield. Jace and the twins walked off the bus together. They walked toward Spring High, as everyone called it. The school had one hallway with 6 classrooms. Jace figured it was built before WWII

"Spring us forward in life," Frank muttered, pointing at the faded sign.

"Pretty sure they just lost the 'field' years ago," Greg said.

"Spring us forward in life," Jace said amusingly, "Wonder what Ms. Lock is going to be like today?" Ms. Edna Lock was their teacher. Being unlike most high schools, they have one in the morning, and the 'Add-ons' subjects in the afternoon. Ms. Lock taught them Math, English, and Geography. And in the afternoon, an assortment of teachers taught them the arts, science, tech, and P.E. Although the students called P.E. Pretend Exercising, Pain & Exhaustion, and Pointless Exercise. Ms. Lock was odd. Her enormous black rimmed glasses made her eyes look almost comically wide. Wild frizzy blonde curls framed a face that was always smiling a second too early, while restless hands danced through the air like they were conducting music no one else could hear. She had the remarkable talent of being equally

annoying and impossible to ignore, leaving everyone wondering whether she was completely mad—or understood something they didn't. Jace, Frank, and Greg stepped into class expecting the unexpected. Even then, they weren't prepared for what came next.

As they stepped into the small classroom, Jace found Ms. Lock talking animatedly to a couple of his fellow grade 9ers. The school was so small that all 22 grade 9s were in the same class. As he walked past, he caught a few words: "Killer," "Lots of," "Fun," "Practice," "Money." He could not figure out what they were talking about, killers, but fun. Nor could he or anyone else understand where the desks had gone. The chairs were all in a circle in the center of the room. It was queer, sometimes Ms. Lock gave Jace the impression she could do magic, removing all the desks, grading all their tests in a recess. Some of his classmates were standing around waiting. He saw Ralph Miller, a big boy, standing oddly beside his friend Ron. She saw Isabella Pierce standing alone, wishing she could be with the cool girls. He saw Torrin Puzzle, a dark-haired boy looking at Isabella Pierce, as if he wished he could be beside her. The bell rang. Ms. Lock's shrill voice ran out.

"Please, please take a seat. We have so very little time."

Everyone shoved and pushed around as they tried to sit close to their friends. The twins were sitting to Jace's left. Ms. Lock spoke after all was silent; it was not over a whisper.

"As many of you know," she began, letting her gaze drift slowly from one face to the next, "the odds are in our favour." She held each person's eyes for just a heartbeat, as though sharing an ancient tale beside a campfire. "And because of that, we have been granted the honoured privilege of competing in *The Mafia*."

Okay that is how far i am but i aslo did this

tasks. Blowing up a tire or changing oil. Dylan made him do these tasks while he worked on full-body repairs and engine fixes. Jace hung out with Greg and Frank on the weekends, even though Dylan still worked, Jace had off. They had been talking about the Mafia strategies, and of course, playing it. They knew it was unlikely for all of them to get in, so maybe they would have to go solo. They talked for hours about the rules, what new twists and turns the game makers would put in. And of course, they talked about what they would do if they won. Jace wanted to buy a house and save enough money so his dad would not have to work too hard. And buy him a really nice old car. Frank said he would scatter money in Times Square just to watch the chaos. They talked about being rich and having big companies. Massive luxury islands, million-dollar houses and cars. All this talk fueled them to learn more about social games. They practiced lying to each other, which was hard because they knew each other so well. It was when Jace was walking home from one of these meetings on a saturday after noon that he got the letter. Jace opened the mail box. The one with three coats of paint. And saw in it two envelopes. They looked like twins, closer in appearance than Frank and Greg. The one was addressed to

Jace Mercer

And the other to

Dyain Mercer

Jaces hear skipped, could this be? Could these in his hands be the letters? His mind was wild, surely not both of them. They probably just said, 'We are sorry to inform you, but...' No they. He

had just concluded that they were sorry to inform you ... and he ran into the garage. A look of sadness and anger crossed his face. He must have looked odd because Dylan said,

"What's up, bud?" Jace, shoving the letters in his pocket, said,

"Oh, nothing."

"Why were you running?"

"Just trying not to get rusty," Jace said. But Dyaln knew he was lying and wanted to have some fun.

"Girls chasing you again?"

"Ha ha, Dad."

Jace then opened the door to the house and went in. Sprinting up the stairs to his bedroom above the shop, he flung himself into the chair. Taking the crumpled letters out. He ripped his letter. The first thing he saw was the plane ticket. Plane ticket, why would John Rocky guy send him a plane ticket? Wait, that meant Jace unfolded the letter

To: Mr. J. Mercer

From: The Office of John D. Rockwell, Owner of The Oil Company

Dear Mr. Mercer,

After careful consideration, we are pleased to inform you that you have been selected as a contestant for **The Mafia** 1 of 17. We have identified you, your father, the Wethelys and another household. As individuals who have successfully uncovered the loophole. Such insight is exceptionally rare, and it has earned each of you an invitation to compete. Please note that this invitation and all information contained within it are **strictly confidential**. At this time, you have only been informed of a small number of your fellow contestants. The identities of the remaining participants will remain undisclosed until the competition begins.

You are required to arrive at the **Toronto airport** on **July 14, 2030**, at **6:00 p.m.** Detailed instructions regarding your arrival location are enclosed. You may bring any personal belongings necessary for an absence of up to **30 days**. All luggage and personal items will be thoroughly inspected before entry. Any object deemed capable of providing an unfair advantage in the competition will be confiscated.

Enclosed you will find the official rules, travel instructions, and additional information regarding your participation.

We look forward to welcoming you to **The Mafia**.

Sincerely, **Trill Amberpath**

Host, *The Mafia*

Jace was so surprised he nearly fell out of his chair. He and his dad, along with all the Wetherlys, had been chosen. But why. Jace read it through again. "*Individuals who have successfully uncovered the loophole.*" Was that the loophole of getting multiple people in a house? Jace opened the letter to his father. How was he supposed to tell his dad this? Jace leaped up and went outside. He ran back to the Wetherlys; they only lived about a four-minute walk into the residential part of town. He burst in. He never knocked. He found Greg and Frank in the basement.

"Have you looked in your mail box?" Jace asked. The look on his face gave it away.

"Did you get a letter?" Greg said excitedly.

"Yes," Jace said, "I am going and my dad, you and your whole family too, of course, we're not supposed to tell anyone. Apartnetly we are so smart because we found the 'taking flyer from your neighbours loophole,' it did say though one other family had figured it out, don't know who."

Greg and Frank were so surprised, Jace realized he had piled everything on too quickly; he would be shocked too if he found out his mom, dad, and brother had a chance to win 20 million dollars.

"We'd better check our mail!" Frank said.

They hurried up the stairs and nearly sprinted down the driveway. Jace won. He flung the door open. The mailbox was a little nicer than his. Surely enough, there were 4 letters addressed to:

Frank Wetherly

Greg Wetherly

Holly Wetherly

Aaron Wetherly

"Glory be," Frank said in a austruck voice. "When do we leave?"

"July 14."

Jace did the math in his head: $2 + 4 = 6$ people he wanted to win. That was $\frac{1}{4}$. He said out loud.

"There's a quarter percent chance one of our family will win."

"More than that, bud," Greg said. "We've been training, we have a better chance, me and Frank have won almost every Among Us game we've played in the last week."

"Yeah, I guess we have a better chance, except my dad," Jace said in a sombre voice.

"You still haven't told him?" Frank asked as a transport truck drove by.

"No."

"I mean, maybe once he sees the acceptance letter, he'll brighten up about it." Frank said.

"We should get our dad to tell him about it. He is gung-ho on the whole thing," Greg said.

"Yeah, and then..." Frank trailed off.

Mr. Wetherly's Nissan was pulling up on the highway.

"We should get out of the way," Greg said, finishing Frank's sentence.

As they stepped aside, Mr. Wetherly's car drove into the driveway. He slowed, rolled down the window and asked.

"What are you doing hanging out by the mail box?"

Greg handed him the letter. Mr. Wetherly took it, frowning at the strange envelope. He unfolded the paper. As his eyes moved down the page, his smile widened. His eyebrows climbed. Halfway down the page, his jaw dropped.

"You've got to be kidding me."

He blinked, read the letter again, then looked from Frank to Greg to Jace as if making sure they were real.