

Mafia Encounter

1. SICILY

My friends would be doing math at this time of the day, but I wasn't because I was in Italy. Sicily, to be exact. We were driving along a four-lane highway where almost every car was speeding. Dad was biting his bottom lip, because he was concentrating hard.

Charlie had stuck his head outside the car window to record crazy drivers, so he could show his friends when he got home. Cars whizzed past us so fast it felt like we weren't moving. And the crazy drivers seemed to think no matter what they did, everyone else would get out of their way.

Mom stopped reading her murder mystery and stared out the front window at Mount Etna. Even though it was March, the top of it was covered in snow. Mom loved mountains. That was why we were in Sicily, because she'd always wanted to see Mount Etna.

Charlie sat back, put his phone down and leaned across the back seat of the car. Nudging me, he whispered, "I bet you we're related to Mr Mafia."

"Who?" I hated when Charlie did that. When he says something as though I should know what he's talking about, but I don't know, so I've got to ask him what he means and then I sound dumb and he sounds smart.

"A mafia boss; an old guy who wears a black suit and black sunglasses and who has bodyguards. He'd live in an enormous house and be driven around in a big black car, and if anyone does the wrong thing to his family, they'd better watch out." Charlie gave me that smug look he gives when he's showing off how much he knows.

I nodded as though I knew exactly what he meant. And I sort of did. There were mafia guys at home. They were bad; I knew that. A bit bad was okay, but I wouldn't want to be related to anyone real bad.

Not that I believed Charlie. Mom wouldn't have brought us to Sicily if we were related to a mafia boss. I didn't think she would, anyway.

"It makes sense," whispered Charlie. "That's why we've started this holiday in Sicily. To meet Mr Mafia and the rest of the family."

I swallowed. Real casual, I asked, "Mom, are you related to a mafia boss?"

She took her eyes off Mount Etna to turn round and glare at me. Then she glared at Charlie as if to say, Don't scare your younger brother!

He fiddled with his phone. "It seemed a reasonable deduction since we've come to Italy to meet your relatives and Sicily is the first place we've come to."

"We've come to Italy for a holiday, not just to meet my relatives. And most Sicilians aren't in the mafia."

I nodded as though she'd convinced me. When she turned round to the front, Charlie and me looked at each other. We each knew what the other was thinking. She was lying. We could tell because she didn't look into our eyes. That meant one thing. Her relatives lived in Sicily. Did that mean her grandfather or uncle or someone was Mr Mafia? Maybe; maybe not.

Suddenly Tom Tom, our satellite navigator, got real excited. In his robotic-newsreader voice, he said, "Bear right, then go through the roundabout, second exit, then go straight ahead for two hundred metres, stay in the right lane, then turn right."

"WHAT?" yelled Dad. "That can't be right!"

Charlie sniggered and Mom quickly opened her book and began to read. I stated the obvious: "Tom Tom is always right." We'd been using him for less than a week and it was already like he was part of the family. He loved disagreeing with Dad.

Dad shook his head.

"Wow," yelled Charlie, "check out the Ferrari!"

I turned round to see a bright yellow Ferrari flash past us. A second later a car horn let out a long, loud, scary sound. Then brakes screeched. Dad, who had been following Tom Tom's instructions, yelled out something I'm not allowed to say before he did a massive swerve. Charlie and me got flung sideways. A moment later we realized we'd nearly been hit by a car coming toward us.

For a minute nobody said anything. I reckon it was still sinking in that some crazy Italian driver had nearly killed us.

Charlie patted his phone. "Got the whole thing on video. Absolute proof all Italians are crazy."

Mom turned round and gave Charlie one of her looks. "That was one bad driver. Don't generalize."

Charlie nodded to her and then nudged me. "Yeah, and all Italians are saints too. Lucky we're half-Italian."

"Do you really think we're related to a mafia boss?"

"It'd be cool." He lowered his voice and added, "Except I read on the internet there's two mafia families in Sicily who are killing each other. One family reckons the other family is invading its territory."

"What?"

"Shh," whispered Charlie, but it was too late because Mom had already turned round.

“That’s enough,” she said, looking from me to Charlie and back to me. “I don’t want to hear another word about the mafia or my relatives. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Mom,” we answered like a pair of robots.

When she turned her back to us again, we glanced at each other. We must be related to Mr Mafia!

Suddenly I felt sick. It all made sense. Why Mom never mentioned exactly where her relatives lived or what they did. She was ashamed of them. She probably hadn’t wanted to bring us here. I bet they ordered her to because the big mafia boss wanted to meet Charlie and me.

Maybe our whole lives were about to change. Maybe we’d be expected to leave school and learn the business. Far out, I didn’t even know what they did. A cold shiver went up my spine. All of a sudden I didn’t want to be in Italy; I wanted to be home.