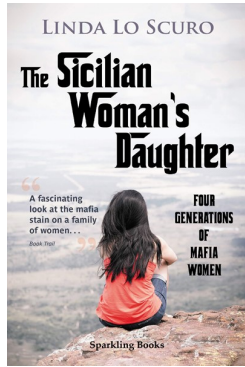


The Sicilian Woman's Daughter

Four generations of mafia women



As the daughter of Sicilian immigrants, in her teens Maria fully embraces the English way of life. But a minor incident wakes up feelings of revenge in her.

By Linda Lo Scuro

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Linda Lo Scuro lives in London. This is her first novel.

About the book

“If you loved My Brilliant Friend, The Godfather and Montalbano, you’ll love this utterly gripping novel about women in organised crime in Sicily.”

Most victims of the mafia are the Sicilians themselves. The role of women both as perpetrators and victims has been grossly overlooked. Until now.

As the daughter of Sicilian immigrants, in her teens Maria turns her back on her origins and fully embraces the English way of life. Notwithstanding her troubled and humble childhood in London, and backed up by her intelligence, beauty and sheer determination, she triumphantly works her way up to join the upper middle-class of British society. There she becomes a bastion of civility.

But a minor incident wakes up feelings of revenge in her like those lurking in Maria’s Sicilian origins. As she delves deeper into her mother’s family history a murky past unravels, drawing Maria more and more into a mire of vendetta.

Reviews

Note: On sparklingbooks.com, key headlines from these reviews appear with the reviews.

“An extraordinary and inherently riveting read from beginning to end, The Sicilian Woman’s Daughter is an original and deftly crafted novel showcasing the genuine flair for narrative storytelling by author Linda Lo Scuro (a pen name)...highly recommended for community library Contemporary General Fiction collections.” - *Midwest Book Review*

“The plot, in a nutshell: Mary/Maria has a pleasant life with a loving husband and children, from whom she has kept secret her mother’s side of her family, who are Sicilian mafia. They are thrust into her life and she becomes involved in some terrible situations, drawn further and further into dangerous territory that puts everyone she loves at risk.

“The things I loved about it: Mary’s identity is formed from drastically different parts of her life, leaving her feeling as though she fits nowhere. It’s not hard to feel that way, in this day and age, and makes for a lot of sympathy towards her character. The plot is fast, and makes for a gripping read. Though the tension grows rapidly throughout, the writing is witty and there are moments that are laugh out loud funny. Though life is extremely tough for them, there are an endless

amount of strong women in the novel, with our protagonist having a horrendous start in life. A brilliant, thrilling read about real life grit...

"The author: Linda Lo Scuro is a pseudonym, due to the sensitive nature of the story. I am so intrigued by mysteriously secret identities!

"I rate this: 5 stars.

"Worst hobby in the history of hobbies...'big-time serial tarting'." - *Sara Wingfield, UK*

"From the get-go (catchy title), *The Sicilian Woman's Daughter* delivers an exciting multi-generational story. I enjoy reading fast-paced novels steeped in cultural drama. This one fulfils my love for mysteries and intrigue.

"Linda Lo Scuro weaves the story about the daughter of Sicilian immigrants with layer upon layer of substance. Soak up the history and ride the turbulent waves of discovery as Maria learns about herself and the roles of women in the Sicilian families.

"The novel *The Sicilian Woman's Daughter* shows what it's like to wake-up to your heritage and integrate that knowledge into your present life. It's a must-read for mystery lovers." - *Carolyn Bowen, USA*

"I loved this book. The transformation of Maria was remarkable to read. Ms. Lo Scuro does a fantastic job filling in the sordid past of Maria's family and blending it in with the present day characters. Will visiting her Sicilian family turn this upper-middle class Brit into the person she has always feared she may become? Perhaps it was inevitable.

"Linda Lo Scuro is as mysterious as Maria. Because this was the first book I've read by this author, I Googled her name to find out more about her. What I found out about Linda Lo Scuro is exactly what she wants us to know. This is not her real name and she will not be giving interviews. You can follow her on social media under her pseudonym, but her real persona will not be revealed. I admire her decision as well as her determination to stay anonymous amid the clamor of writing a truly remarkable and memorable novel. I think she is as interesting as her novel, which makes this a double win in my reading world." - *Writeknit Reviews, USA*

"Maria, the protagonist of *The Sicilian Woman's Daughter*, is a retired, respectable teacher. Happy wife, mother of two daughters and Benjamin's granny. Life is gorgeous in her West London residence (or not?), by the Thames, and lovely Maria has all the time in the world to read books, drink tea, enjoy the time with her beloved husband Humps (or not?), or do whatever she wants to do, all the day long. Or not?

"Zia, the other main character, an influential, fragile looking, old woman, and Maria's aunt, will turn her niece's way of life upside down. Despite appearances, Zia is made of iron. *La famiglia* before anything else is her motto, and she proves it along with the action of the book.

"Suddenly Maria's easy life turns into a fast stream, and she hardly manages to keep the direction. Her values and beliefs are washed away and she has to face fear and anger.

"Written in the first person *The Sicilian Woman's Daughter* immerses the reader deeply and actively and it blows away the benefit of the doubt for the perpetrators, because justice, in Mafia terms, is a matter of feelings, guts and immediate reaction. The charm of reading this book is that: always, and I mean always, the reader is satisfied with the result. A gun under the bed will make the owner more confident and his/her self-esteem 1000x higher. Just saying!

"*The Sicilian Woman's Daughter* is a confrontation between raw, unpolished power (men) and the sophistication of women's minds. Guess who will win in the end!" - *Manuela Iordache,*

Romania

“Vaffanculo... I love the word as much as I love this book. Talk about attitude! Sicilian women are a surprising bunch according to Linda Lo Scuro’s book “The Sicilian Woman’s Daughter”. Abused, scheming, vindictive, connected, murderous, victims and victors.

“I loved discovering the story of Maria aka Mary who came from a poor Sicilian background to recreate herself in England as a successful and wealthy teacher and wife to a high flier bank executive.

“She has just retired and with more time on her hands, she is encouraged to visit her Aunt Zia who lives in London also. Well, this little old lady is a complex web of hidden secrets and dodgy dealings. I don’t want to tell here the extent of her power within the Sicilian underworld but quite a few people are dead because of her scheming combined with her contacts. She is held in high regard and this goes along way in getting what you want in Sicily.

“Maria goes for a family trip to Sicily and is further drawn into the shady world of mafia happenings....much to her dismay and attempts to stay removed from her past. Her morals and all she has created for herself/of herself are under threat.

“I was fascinated by this story and can completely understand the fascination Linda Lo Scuro has also. The excitement of danger is enthralling.” - *Andrea Brown, New Zealand*

“This is a cracking good read and it brings to life the Sicilian family that Mary/Maria has tried to forget for over 30 years. Mary is married to Humphrey, a banker with two delightful daughters and a grandson. They live in an upmarket apartment and she has just retired from teaching in a series of prodigious schools. Despite her seemingly Englishness as the tale unfolds we learn of her connections to a family of women who are definitely Mafia and of her dreadful childhood of abuse and neglect. She has carefully created her place in society through her looks and intelligence making sure that her Sicilian family stays out of her life, that is until she reconnects with Zia her mother’s sister and through helping her she begins to expose dreadfully deeds that have occurred and are still occurring due to the women in her family. Her life is then torn apart by realising that she is just the same as her Sicilian family and she needs them to help her when the life of her immediate family is at risk.. A story that will bring alive the heat and the underbelly of life in a Mafia controlled Sicilian village.” - *Ann Gough, UK*

“I have always considered women to be the ‘power behind the throne’ (I apologize to all those Queens like Her Majesty and her husband who has to walk BEHIND her) and this book proves it to be true. It was fascinating to read about how different her lives were depending on where she was or WHO she was that day.

“This is an addictive read from page one to last and thoroughly enjoyable!

“Great book!” - *Janet Cousineau, Librarian, Canada*

“An interesting and thought provoking read this one. Mary also known as Maria has two identities - an Italian one and a British one. She now lives in London but returns to the place known as The Village, in Sicily to unpack the mysteries of her past.

“She’s living a troubled life, not feeling part of the world she’s now in - She’s known not by her name by many but as “the Sicilian woman’s daughter” and this separation of identities and anonymity is crushing to read about.

“Maria tells her story of her Sicily and the image the world has of that place - its mafia connections and how she and everyone from there is tarred with the same brush. As the story takes us on that (very fascinating) train journey across to the island, secrets start to float to the

surface, as do the bodies from the depths of the water no doubt.

“A fascinating look at the mafia stain on a family of women and what they have to do to survive, bring justice and not be a victim. There are four generations of women’s stories to immerse yourself in and this is a real treat, never too much nor too long. Sicilian words pepper the text as they would the pasta.

“An enthralling read on many levels.” - *Book Trail, UK*

“Living in London Maria (Mary) has sought to escape her Sicilian roots keeping her family history away from her English husband and her children. However a cup of tea with her Sicilian aunt results in her being drawn back to her roots, and the mafia connections.

“Maria tells her story, her memories of her mother, the visits to Sicily and family there. An enthralling glimpse into another world where grandmothers keep a gun close to hand, and it pays to be very respectful to others - who knows what mafia connections they may have. Maria has recently retired, is enjoying life in West London, and uses some of her free time to visit her aunt. In so doing she is drawn into Sicilian plots and intrigues, ranging from making a man love a woman to dealing with a violent husband. Eventually Maria takes her family to visit Sicily, and becomes embroiled in revenge and justice mafia style. Certainly exciting and riveting reading.

“The book has a list of characters and Sicilian/Italian words at the front, which I found a little daunting, but in fact I only referred to them on a couple of occasions. Although the book covers 4 generations of Maria’s family, it is very clearly written and I was never confused as to who was who. The Sicilian/Italian words used are done so in context, blend in well, and are mostly explained in the main text.

“It was a fast moving book, included plenty of surprises, and gave an insight into different way of life and family ties. The book has left me wondering how much of it is based on the reality of life in some of the regions of this island. Thought provoking!” - *Emma B Books, Austria*

“As I read this book I felt I was reading a true account of how ordinary lives can be turned upside down by family connections we try to remove ourselves (in this case the Mafia). Insightful, well written and I found the pace just right. The storyline took an interesting twist at the end which didn’t disappoint.” - *Dawn D’auvin, UK*

“...We start with Maria (Mary) presently in the UK, who feels that she is caught between two cultures – Sicilian and British – although she hasn’t been back home to her Sicilian village for over four decades. Having migrated to London as a child she now reads The Times, the Economist and the Financial Times. She has also joined the UK Conservative Party, and occasionally imitates BBC newsreaders to get a posh accent after graduating in English. She met and married Humps, an investment banker, and had two children with him. There are, however, Mafia links within Maria’s family...

“The writing is superb throughout and I see Linda Lo Scuro progressing to great success.” - *Phil Rowan, UK*

“The story was pleasing and easy to follow. When I started the book I read all the characters and thought I would lose a lot trying to keep everyone together to get to the end of the book, not so. It was written in just such a way that it was easy to follow all the players.

“Maria grew up in England and Sicily with a mother who was very mean to her. Her mother would hit and beat her.

“Peppina was the reason that Maria was forced into an arranged marriage. She also hit and kicked Maria so badly that Maria lost a kidney. Maria never told anyone about this but kept it bottled up

inside her.

“The story tells of all the things that the mafia had done in Sicily and brought over to London when another of Maria’s aunts moved there. Her name was Zia! She at least helped Maria to get through her life!

“The story was very interesting and very easy to follow. I would recommend it to all my family and friends.” - *Mary Weimer, USA*

“When I saw the list of characters at the front I thought I would never be able to remember the names or follow. But once I got into it, it was brilliant. I loved the Sicilian translations.” - *Pamela Lewis, UK*

“An exciting plot, great characterisation and an unexpected ending all add up to a thoroughly enjoyable read.” - *Millie Thom, UK*

“OUTSTANDING. This book makes very interesting reading and a lot of research has gone into it. I also like Linda’s writing style, and the plot flowed. I have awarded this book 5 deserving stars.” - *Haley Norton, UK*

“Family ties can be strong. The Sicilian Woman’s Daughter shows how four generations of mafia women both protect and destroy. Maria, the protagonist, is a daughter of Sicilian immigrants to the British society. Where Maria herself seems to prefer settling in the UK and marries a local, her mother and grandma still pull. Illustrated in very Italian English, pull. Returning to The Village on Sicily is accompanied by three funerals and no wedding in sight. Women acting as perpetrators and victims of domestic violence, brutal murders, money laundering, alcohol and drug abuse, and adultery.

“No matter how many rosaries you say, how faithful you are, there are always excuses to take revenge if that suits you well. Female sophistication and guns, poison, and network connections do the trick. The plot’s convincing and rich in local flavors.” - *Henk-Jan van der Klis, Netherlands*

“A very interesting and thought provoking book. This book is full of cultural drama, which I really enjoyed.

“This book is about a woman who has been living with two identities. One as Mary who lives in London with her English family and the other as an Italian, a life that she has been trying to keep secret from her English family for over 30 years. (Don’t want to give anymore away)

“The book is well written and flows consistently through to the end. This makes the book easy to read. It is written in the first person which makes you feel as if it’s a true account of Mary/Maria’s experiences rather than the story being fictional. While reading this book you can tell that Linda Lo Scuro has researched the topics covered in the book thoroughly.

“I really liked how Linda has given a list of characters at the beginning of the book. When I first saw the list I thought, how am I going to remember all these characters, but as I started reading I didn’t have any trouble. Also, at the beginning there is a list of Sicilian /Italian words and definitions. I thought this was a great idea, also now I know a few basic words in Sicilian/Italian.

“An interesting ending as I wasn’t expecting it to end the way it did.

“Definitely worth reading.” - *Manisha Natha, UK*

“Firstly, I wanted to get my hands on this because of the research. The Sicilian mafia, the Italian roots of someone who’s grown up in London. Bam! Perfect match.

“But then the story starts flowing and is easy to follow and you find yourself carrying a lot more than you’d expected.

“I mean what do I know about what it feels to grow up surrounded by the mafia?

“Actually...

“While teaching English in Rome, I had a few students with stories that blew my mind. So, of course, seeing this synopsis I plunged right in. I can’t say how genuine it is, but it sure reads well. Like a truly good book. Not like your typical commercial thriller about what most people assume is mafia from the movies.

“That was exactly what I wanted. And that’s exactly what I got.

“I would love to read other works by Linda Lo Scuro.” - *Julie Parks, UK*

“I really enjoyed Linda Lo Scuro style of writing it was like peeking into Maria’s diary sometimes others it felt as intimate as having a conversation with Maria about her life. What an interesting life!

“Lo Scuro has Maria take you on a wonderful journey from London to Sicily & back... She finds her way out and begins her new life having her own a family and career, detaching herself from her family in Sicily and her roots. But just like they said in the Godfather “Just when I thought I was out they pull me back in.”

“I love how Lo Scuro wrote from multiple women’s perspectives about revenge, the way she built up the layers of multiple characters was quite fun to read. She even managed a couple of plot twists that I didn’t see coming in the storyline.

“I will warn you when reading this book visits to Zia’s house will make you hungry for some good Italian home cooking & baking. Best to read this book with a side of good cannoli to snack on!

“I am looking forward to reading more by Lo Scuro she writes very interesting strong female characters in this book. This was definitely a satisfying read from start to finish!” - *Marianne Peluso, USA*

“I went into this book without knowing anything about it and I was pleasantly surprised at how much I enjoyed this book. The book grabbed me and I couldn’t put it down!” - *Robin Ruiz, USA*

“Very intriguing good read. Mary or Maria, as she has double identities, is a great heroine. Thought provoking.” - *Aggie Barnes, USA*

“The book drew me in from the first page until the last. Thanks for the advanced copy :-). I’ll definitely be looking out for more to come from this author!” - *Tara Jill, USA*

“I started reading this book without knowing what to expect and I was pleasantly surprised at how much I enjoyed this book.

“This book is about a woman who has been living with two identities. On one hand she is Mary who lives in London with her English family, on the other she is Maria the daughter of Sicilian immigrants who come to England and it’s a side to life that she has been trying to keep secret from her English family for over 30 years but becoming hard to hide from the past.

“The book is well written and flows consistently through to the end it is written in first person which makes you feel as if it’s a true account of Mary/Maria’s experiences rather than the story

being fictional. Well done to the author on producing an excellent read.” - *S Ballinger, UK*

“Refreshingly original, emotive and with a number of unique facets to the story, this is a highly accomplished debut novel. I particularly liked the fact that the line between fact and fiction was beautifully blurred with the two sides rubbing along seamlessly. It has you questioning throughout whether a particular event actually did occur in real-life or whether it’s a figment of the author’s imagination. Either way, it makes for a very interesting read. Written under a pen name, and having released very few biographical details about herself, Lo Scuro has said that when writing *The Sicilian Woman’s Daughter* that she wished to remain detached from the link her family have had to the mafia which could’ve led to upset and repercussions within her family circle. I guess this also answers the question of why her profile picture on Twitter is only an avatar/cartoon. This for me makes the book even more interesting and intriguing than it already was!

“You can tell that the author knows what she is talking about regarding the mafioso women in this story and the impact this had on their lives, everything about it feels authentic. It is sad but also obvious to me that this secrecy regarding the author’s name is essential, but spare a thought for her because, as she has mentioned in interviews, if the book is successful there would be no glory for her due to the anonymity - so this has both negative and positive aspects to it. She continues by saying that she would not have written it had she needed to disclose her identity, so a big shout out to the publisher for allowing this. A fascinating book, immediately engaging and thought-provoking from first page to last, with an intriguing backstory, Highly recommended.” - *Lou of Readers Retreat, UK*

“We’ve seen the mafia movies and been fascinated by them, but now, fans of the genre are in for a real treat: seeing this world through the eyes of its women. The protagonist, Mary, is complex. She’s engaging and likeable, but underneath the layers lurks a troubled upbringing. She’s Sicilian and living in England now with her adoring and charming husband. Readers will love him.

“The present and the past intermingle to draw readers into a world painted brilliantly with sensory details. We discover Mary and have the pleasure of hearing about a fascinating group of colorful characters. The cultural details draw a more complete picture and create understanding. But we also are reminded that there are more sides to the cultural story, of course.

“Mary has a good life with her professional husband, but when she visits her aunt Zia, she gets drawn into helping her help others...but not in the typical way. Mary ends up seemingly out of her comfort zone running interference for Zia, but while performing certain actions, Mary draws deeply of her Sicilian heritage and then remembers where her family came from and what they were capable of. She does help others, but at times, this includes teaching people lessons. Readers wonder, will Mary cross a certain line eventually? Will things escalate and change this good woman into something else?

“There are the stereotypical violent men in this book who bully women. But do the women have a voice? Is there anything they can do? Scuro’s female characters use their strength and their power and show a side to the whole mafia picture that isn’t often shown. The women do surprising things, making for gripping story.

“There is a quote in the book by the female lead that sums up the struggle: “[The abuse]...when you’re an adult, it leaves you with a painful black hole inside; and you’re forever trying not to go to that dark center, moving around the perimeters and trying not to get swallowed up by it” (168-169).#

Publishers note: page 147 in editions printed from summer 2023 onwards

“Mary ends up doing things one wouldn’t have thought her capable of. Does this change the way a reader will view her? At any rate, Mary brings up profound ideas such as what anyone is

capable of given exposure to the right people and circumstances. There are surprises in this book and lots of food for thought. It is a worthwhile read.” - *Long and Short Reviews*

“The Sicilian Woman’s Daughter is an engrossing novel with menace accompanying every character, as we weave through a precarious story of lives entwined with the Mafia. There is a simmering threat and unrelenting revelation about abuse and violence, that clings to a people steeped in the DNA of the Sicilian Mafia. “You no know a thing. In England accident happen, in Sicily accident organised.”

“Mary (Maria) left Sicily as a young girl with her mother and father, returning only on short trips until she started University. Her early life was marred by physical abuse from her mother and her aunt Peppina, leaving her permanently physically damaged. Today Mary is a wealthy, refined, Englishwoman, happily married to Humps (Humphrey), with 2 daughters and a Grandson, and she has recently retired from teaching. The only connection Mary retained with her Sicilian background was with her facetious cousin Susi, at a similar age and as close as sisters. One day Mary gets a call from Susi asking her to meet with her mother, Zia (Mary’s other aunt). Zia was kind to Maria growing up and had immigrated to England shortly after Mary’s family, however, Mary hasn’t seen her aunt Zia since those early days, and she gives in to the request to meet. One quick meeting and she can go back to her normal life. Yeah Right! When they meet Zia pleads: “Yes, you come back tomorrow. You keep promise for Zia. I have friend. She have problem, she need you help.”

““We’re catapulted into this community, and through no fault of our own, we take the consequences. We try to figure out how to confront the dark side of life from childhood and through our teens when we don’t have the instruments to deal with it. And when you’re an adult, it leaves you with a painful black hole inside; and you’re forever trying not to go to that dark centre, moving around the perimeters and trying not to get swallowed up by it.”

“Linda Lo Scuro does a remarkable job of portraying the ‘nature vs nurture’ dilemma that Mary faces and while she is a cultured English woman when we first meet her, she knows her wider family circle live amongst a relentless, unforgiving and ruthless culture. How much of that ‘nature’ element will come to the fore when she agrees to return to Sicily with her own family, to resolve a wider family matter? While the writing is excellent, the incidents described, the tension built, and the character interactions, all have a feel of authenticity.

Through the first half of the novel it lacked a bit of pace, but when Mary and her family decide to go to Sicily the pace picks up and the plot is darkly entertaining. I really like the characterisation of Mary, as she has this deeper, calculated and revengeful side that has been hidden, even from her own family. No-one is to be taken for granted in this novel and surprises are sprung at unlikely times keeping the reader fascinated until the end.” - *Peter Donnelly, The Reading Desk*

“A very good story and one that I am sure some people can relate to. Mary (Marie) is the focus of the story and after being retired for some time she has decided to spend some time with an Aunt of hers. They live in England having emigrated from Sicily and Marie really only has this Aunt left as a family having married an English banker. While being around her Aunt she is noticing that her Aunt is like some of the older women of the village that she grew up in. The Aunt speaks a lot of what happens in the family stays in the family, what is said in the family stays in the family. For me, this was the way I was raised coming from an Italian and the family from Southern Italy so a lot of what happens in this story reminds me of some of my relatives, male and female. The story really takes off when the family takes a trip back to Sicily and to the village where she grew up. I found this to be a very good read that once I started I wanted to finish and the story grabs you all the way to the end. There are enough twists and turns even in the family to make any story interesting. The characters are all good and the storyline is easy to follow. For me, this was a very good book.” - *Pat Lorelli, Reviewer, USA*

“I wanted to read this because of the research. The Sicilian mafia, the Italian roots of someone

who's grown up in London. Awesome.

"The story starts flowing and is easy to follow and you find yourself thinking more than you'd expected.

"I mean what do I know about what it feels to grow up surrounded by the mafia. Not like your typical commercial thriller about what most people assume is mafia from the movies." - *Amiee Teal, Reviewer, USA*

"The Michael Corleone quote from Godfather III "Just when I thought I was out, they pull me back in" sums up this book perfectly. An interesting read highlighting how different cultures are, or are they?

"Sometimes it's the person you think you know best you actually know least." - *Ann Jones, Reviewer, UK*

"The Sicilian Woman's Daughter by Linda Lo Scuro is a very gripping book with a well-written plot and a beautiful cast of strong characters. This book was a very quick read and had a lot more to offer to its reader than one can imagine. This book is very culturally rich and it was great to get a detailed glimpse into the family of mobs and also witnessing the repercussions of belonging to such a family.

"I enjoyed reading this book from start to end, mainly because the writing was good and had a very easy flow to it. The plot-progression was good and so was the pacing and tension and they all complimented and went along the story very well.

"I'd recommend this book to all crime and suspense readers who enjoy reading culturally rich books." - *Heena Rathore Pardeshi, Editor, Writer and Reviewer, The Reading Bud, USA*

"I enjoyed this book about a woman coming to terms with her heritage and its place in her world today. I found the story to be compelling and well written. I will definitely recommend this book to others." - *Mary Nickell, Reviewer, USA*

"A thoroughly good read with very interesting characters, particularly the female ones, which gives an excellent insight to the current state of the mafia at ground level in Sicily. It is hard to credit that the mafia still operates in local communities there and can still make people 'disappear' if considered necessary.

"In particular the development of the lead character from a fairly normal middle class English woman to a murderess was dealt with such that the transition seemed almost inevitable and acceptable despite being a surprise.

"The movement of the main characters between England and Sicily added an interesting dimension to the novel which rendered it not only exciting and relatively fast moving but also very informative." - *Allan Blackley, Educator, UK*

"An intriguing story of how you can try to escape your family roots, but sometimes those ties are too strong. The author introduces us to independent women tied together through brutality, heritage, blood and secrets.

"A really interesting read." - *Sarah Burton, Reviewer, UK*

"A great book which I felt was as true an account as you will get about how the Mafia can affect everyone who is involved with them even if they do not want to be. Lives have a very different meaning and whilst family connections are strong they can't escape it even if they want to.

“I would thoroughly recommend.” - *Terry Burgin, Reviewer, UK*

“I enjoyed reading this book immensely. Even though it’s fiction it gave you an insight into what might happen in this sort of family. Plus, you learn great words in Sicilian!” - *Doris Vandruff*

“This was an interesting book...many will truly enjoy this read.” - *Rebecca Hill, USA*

Excerpt

Prologue

Rumour had it that Ziuza, my grandmother’s sister, on my mother’s side, carried a gun in her apron pocket – both at home and when she went out. She wore her apron back-to-front, resulting in the pocket being propped up against her belly. She kept her right hand poised there, between her dress and apron as if she had bellyache. I had noticed this suspicious behaviour when on holiday in Sicily with my family when I was twelve. At that stage, never could I have imagined that she was concealing a gun, while she stood there in my grandmother’s kitchen watching me have breakfast. I never saw her sitting down. She brought us thick fresh milk, containing a cow’s hair or two, in the early mornings and often stayed to chat.

She had a dog, Rocco, white and brown, which she tied to a wooden stake in my grandmother’s stable downstairs. It was a lively animal, snapping at whoever passed it, jumping and yapping. The mules, the rightful inhabitants of the stable, were out in the campagna with my grandfather from the break of dawn each day.

A tight silver bun stood proudly on Ziuza’s head. Her frowning face always deadly serious. Fierce, even. An overly tanned and wrinkled face. Skin as thick as cows’ hide. Contrastingly, her eyes were of the sharpest blue – squinting as she stared, as if viewing me through thick fog. I was scared of her. Truly scared. And all the other women were frightened, too. You could tell by the way they spoke to her, gently and smiling. Careful not to upset her, always agreeing with her opinions. They toadied up to her well and proper. An inch away from grovelling.

And, I found out the rumours about the gun were true. Ziuza would come and bake bread and cakes at my grandmother’s house because of the enormous stone oven in the garden. I helped carry wood to keep the flames alive. Did my bit. One day the sisters made some Sicilian cakes called *cuddureddi*, meaning ‘little ropes’. They rolled the dough with their bare hands, into thick round lengths in the semblance of snakes. Using a sharp knife, they then sliced the snake-shape in half, longways, spread the lower half of the butchered snake with home-made fig jam. They put the snake together again, slashed it into chunks. Then the chunks were dealt with one-by-one and manipulated into little-ropes by pinching them forcefully into shape with their nimble fingers.

As Ziuza bent over to wipe her mouth on the corner of her pinafore, I caught a glimpse of her gun. I was sitting at the table sprinkling the first trayful of *cuddureddi* with sugar. No doubt about it. It was there in Ziuza’s big inside pocket of her pinafore. While I was looking at the bulge, she caught me out. We exchanged glances, then our eyes locked. She narrowed her hooded eyelids into slits and crunched up her face. I blinked a few times, then looked around for some more wood to replenish the oven, grabbed a few logs and vanished into the garden.

After she received a sickening threat and Rocco’s bloodied paws were posted to her in a box, she, like her dog, came to a violent end. Ziuza was shot in her back, in broad daylight, by someone riding by on a Vespa. People with line of sight, from their windows to the body, hurried to close their shutters. Nobody saw who it was. Nobody heard the gunshots, though the road was a main artery from one end of The Village to the other. And nobody called a doctor. It would be taking sides. Which you certainly didn’t want to do. Added to that was the fact that Ziuza at that

moment was on the losing side. She was left to bleed to death in the road like an animal. It wasn't until the dustcart came round that they removed her body because it couldn't get by. But nobody commented, it was as if they were removing a big piece of rubbish. It was nothing to them. But instead of throwing it away, they took the body to her home. Nobody was in. So they brought it to my grandmother's house instead.

This was the lowest point in our family's history. With time, though, Ziuza managed to triumph through her son, Old Cushi, who began the escalation. And, later, her grandson, Young Cushi, completed it by becoming the undisputed boss of our village, of the region, and beyond. But the transition was not easy. A bloody feud ensued. Lives were lost on both sides. Some might know who Ziuza's enemies were. I didn't get an inkling. Most of the information I came across was from listening to what the grown-ups in our family were saying. And they never mentioned her rivals by name. Some faceless entity fighting for control of the area.

This is just one of the episodes I remember from our holidays in Sicily. There are many more. Every three years, I went to Sicily with my parents. Those I remember were when I was nine, twelve, fifteen and eighteen. The last time we went my mother was ill and we travelled by plane. All the other times we travelled by train because poverty accompanied us wherever we went. I think we had some kind of subsidy from the Italian Consulate in the UK for the train fare. It was a three-day-two-night expedition. I remember setting out from Victoria Station carrying three days' supply of food and wine with us. Especially stuck in my mind was the food: lasagne, roast chicken, cheese, loaves of bread. We'd have plates, cutlery, glasses, and an assortment of towels with us. At every transfer all this baggage had to be carried on to the next stage. No wheels on cases in those days. Then we'd get the ferry from Dover to Calais, and so began the first long stretch through France, Switzerland, until we finally pulled into Milan Station. Where our connection to Sicily was after a seven-hour wait.

We used to sleep on the waiting-room benches, though it was daytime, until someone complained about the space we were taking up. The Italian northerners had a great disdain for southern Italians. They saw us as muck, rolled their eyes at us, insulted us openly calling us "terroni", meaning "those who haven't evolved from the soil." Even though I was young, I noticed it, and felt like a second category being – a child of a minor god. There was the civilised world and then there was us. My parents didn't answer back. And it was probably the time when I came closest to feeling sorry for them. For us.

The journey all the way down to the tip of Italy – the toe of the boot – was excruciating. The heat in the train unbearable. When there was water in the stinking toilets, we gave ourselves a cursory wipe with flannels. Sometimes we used water in bottles. Every time we stopped at a station, my father would ask people on the platforms to fill our bottles. Then came the crossing of the Strait of Messina. At Villa San Giovanni, the train was broken into fragments of three coaches and loaded into the dark belly of the ferry. My mother wouldn't leave the train for fear of thieves taking our miserable belongings, until the ferry left mainland Italy. While my father and I went up on the deck to take in the view. But we had orders to go back down to the train as soon as the ferry left. Then I'd go up again with my mother. She became emotional when Sicily was well in sight. She would become ecstatic. Talk to any passengers who'd listen to her. Some totally ignored her. She'd wave to people on passing ferries. Laughing and, surprisingly, being nice to me.

Reassembled together again, the train would crawl at a tortoise's pace along the Sicilian one-track countryside railway, under the sweltering heat. Even peasants who were travelling within Sicily moved compartment when they got a whiff of us. Another event that excited my mother was when the train stopped at a level crossing. A man got out of his van, brought a crate of lemons to our train and started selling them to the passengers hanging out of the windows. My mother bought a big bag full and gave me one to suck saying it would quench my thirst. Another

man came along selling white straw handbags with fringes, and she bought me one.

By the time we reached The Village our bags of food stank to high heaven and so did we.

PART I

London, 2017

ONE

Sunday 20th August

It all begins quite innocently enough.

“I just got an email from our landlord asking us to remove our bikes from the garage,” Humps says, as we are having dinner. He’s in his stay-at-home clothes today – a Tattersall shirt worn loose over his jeans and rolled up at the sleeves, frayed at the collar from countless washes. I still find him attractive, even in his rumpled look and with his receding salt-and-pepper hair.

“Why?” I ask.

“Apparently, someone pointed out, at the Annual General Meeting, that our bikes are taking up precious space, have cobwebs on them, and that we hardly use them.”

“Look, darling, you know they’re snobs here. They just don’t want our old bikes next to their latest generation, shiny contraptions.”

We have lived in the Riverside View Residence in West London for four years. I’ve never felt comfortable here with the attitudes against foreigners of some of our neighbours. That irked me. But the proximity to the Thames with a spacious balcony within a stone’s throw of the river, where I can sit sipping tea and reading, helps me overlook their behaviour towards me, especially when Humps is not around.

“What are we going to do?” I say to my husband, “You do realise that there’ll be friction, if we don’t comply, don’t you? Shall we remove them?”

“Never!”, he says firmly, over his salmon en croûte. “Mary, as you know, mine is a memento of my Oxford University days. I’ve had that bike for over forty years, and there’s no way I’m getting rid of it – it stays where it is! What’s more our sky-high rent gives us the right to keep as many bikes as we want in that bike-store. One resident has six!”

So Humphrey said ‘no.’ Emphatically.

“Well, I’m getting rid of mine because it’s so old,” I say. “There’s a charity, I’ve heard, that does up old bikes and sends them out to Africa. They can have mine, and I don’t think Clara will want hers now she’s moved to central London. She should have taken her bike with her, anyway.”

“Even if we get rid of your two bikes, it won’t free up any space because all three are leaning next to each other against the wall,” Humps says.

“Well, I’m giving mine to the charity. Make a child happy. I’ll phone Clara and ask what she wants to do with hers.”

I had my left kidney taken out when I was young due to a violent kicking. My doctor suggested that I give up cycling in traffic so as not to endanger my other kidney. No motorbikes or skiing either. “Look after it,” he said, “if I damage one of my kidneys it wouldn’t be as serious, but for you it’s a different kettle of fish...” I only cycled in parks and on towpaths after that.

I phone our daughter in the evening, ask if I can give hers away. “Yes,” she says, “no way do I want to cycle in London traffic, I’d rather take the tube. Less hassle. Anyway, it’d only get pinched.” There have been some nasty accidents involving buses and lorries lately, cyclists have been killed in their prime. It is a relief to me that she wants to do away with hers, too. She tells me a little about her job. How her boss at the interior design studio exploits her, charging exorbitant prices to clients and giving her a miserly salary. She reckons she’s the flair behind the studio’s success.

Right, I have to grab the bull by its horns, or the bicycles by their handlebars, and sort this out. Humps is busy with his high-powered job as a senior banker managing the bank’s own account investments. He still also manages a few important clients’ portfolios. I have more time. I’ve worked part-time since we got married, then I gave up work altogether when we moved to Riverside – we don’t need the money. I taught English. Whether to kids in comprehensives, smart public schools, or adult education. It feels as if, over the years, I have taught the whole of London and her husband. I have given enough, and it is time to think about myself.

The next day, I phone the charity. “Yes,” says the bright young voice on the other end of the line. “We’ve got a man and van. We can send him round to collect the bikes, if you want.”

“That would be great.”

Down I go to the bike-store. Our bikes are a sorry sight – huddled together in the corner against the white wall. I need to clean up the two bikes before handing them over. Separate the three, brush away the cobwebs, and give them good soapy water and sponge treatment. I remove the black saddlebag from mine. A keepsake. Cycling back home after shopping with my saddlebag full and, at times, a carrier bag on each handlebar, down the Thames towpath has been one of the pleasures in my life. Riding under the green canopy with sunlight filtering through it. Or the gentle drizzle falling on me rewarded by a hot cup of tea and cake when I got home. Proud not to be polluting the air and getting exercise at the same time. I can always buy a new bike.

Anyway, one bike is staying, two are going. End of story.

Not so.

TWO

Monday 21st August

My cousin Susi phones me out of the blue. Susi is the only relative I’ve kept in touch with, and that is only every now and then. When some major incident takes place in her life – whether good or bad – she contacts me. Her mother is my mother’s sister. When Susi’s parents emigrated to London from Sicily, they lived with us until they could afford a deposit on a house. This meant that she slept in the single bedroom with me, in a single bed. So, essentially, we are like sisters in that we spent a lot of time together as children. Then her family bought a house across the road from ours. So we could still play together. But, they moved again. This time quite a long way out, to another part of London. I missed Susi so much after that. I also missed Susi’s mum, she was kind to me. Eventually, Susi and I developed different characters and, as a consequence, we now don’t have much in common except for the strong affection that binds us.

“Hi, Mary!”

“Susi, how are you?”

“Pete and me have just broken up.”

“How many times has that happened now?”

“This is the third and final time.”

“You know you’ll take him back.” “No, I won’t, not this time. I’ve had enough.”

Pete has been spicing up his boring married life by having an on-and-off affair with Susi. She doesn’t see that. I’ve told her as much, many times before.

“How’s work?” I ask.

“Shit environment,” she says. “Things are not good, some people have been laid off and there’s this threat of redundancy hanging over us.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. I do hope you’ll be alright. Anyway, Susi, you’re so enterprising, I’m sure you’ll soon find something else even if it came to the worst.”

“Mary, my mum’s been asking about you. She says she really wants to see you. You know how close she was to your mum. My mum’s fond of you as well. Try to make an old woman happy, why don’t you?”

“Well... I’ll think about it, Susi.” She was emotionally blackmailing me. The call was probably instigated by Zia, Susi’s mother.

“How’s your retirement going, then? Enjoying being a lady of leisure, are you?”

“I am, actually. It’s nice to have all that time on my hands,” I say, “there’re so many things I want to do and books to read.”

“Yeah, but if you want a tip from me, don’t get bogged down with all that reading. Try getting out of the house. Why don’t you try volunteer work?” Susi says.

“Could do. Yes, I’ve always felt passionate about defending battered women and mistreated kids. It’s got to have something to do with our childhood, you know?”

“Yeah, tell me about it,” she says.

“We weren’t dealt the best cards in life, were we?”

“You can say that again. I’ve got an even better idea. Why don’t you get yourself a lover? That’ll pep your life up.”

“Really, Susi. I’m still in love with my Humps.”

“Yeah, but it must be all pretty routine in the sex department by now. You need variety. The spice of life,” she says. She wasn’t altogether wrong in that respect.

“Maybe,” I joke. We laugh. She knows it’ll never happen. “Susi. I need to go out now. I’ll phone you some time soon, promise.”

“Right, but you promise you’ll go and see my mum. Please, Mary.”

“OK, Susi, I promise. Bye for now.”

And I keep promises.

Wandering round a cycle shop, I am looking for ideas about how to vamp up Humps’s bike. But, every bit of it needs changing, and then it wouldn’t be his bike any more. So I end up buying a snazzy silver and black cover. You’d think there is a Harley-Davidson standing under that. To my surprise, when I go back to the bike-store I notice, on the wall, someone has drawn a big hand

giving Humps's bike the finger. And, under it, they have written: "ARSEHOLE." It must have been the person who asked our landlord to tell us to remove the bikes. Who is that? No idea.

If we'd been owners of the flat we live in, we would have known exactly what is going on. We decided not to buy the flat. Instead, we bought a lovely chocolate-box cottage near the sea in Dorset, and a chalet in Cortina d'Ampezzo. When Humps finally decides to retire, we can go and spend our days by the seaside or in the Italian Dolomites. Both of which we love.

While cooking I keep churning the incident round in my mind. How dare someone call Humps an arsehole? No respect. I always taught my students the importance of respect. Respect for their parents, teachers, classmates and for the elderly. At the end of one school day, I once left school with some girls, and asked them to show respect to two old ladies by letting them get on the bus before us, even though they had arrived after us. I am so respectful that I even show respect to those I don't respect at all.

I need to find out who it is. And when I find out, what will I do? Will it be an eye-for-an-eye? Forgiveness? 'For they know not what they do'? Can revenge appease anger? Or, does it make matters worse? I have always found forgiving difficult. No doubt, revenge is time-consuming, requires effort, planning, and guts. And I chafe against the Catholic Church for forgiving sinners so easily. Just kneel down, tell the priest your sins, get a gentle rebuke, a few Hail Mary's, and off you go.

Now, I have a feeling deep in the pit of my stomach, a ball of anger which won't go away. Is this what my Sicilian ancestors felt when they couldn't get justice? Shamefully exploited by land barons. Powerless, helpless victims. Whole families, including children, working all day for a pittance, bending down low to the land under the blazing sun. Not even being able to feed themselves properly. Families living in one room, without electricity or running water. Revolting against their masters who were colluding with the State. And there is no sense of State when you have an empty stomach. In those conditions the only resort for justice was to take it into your own hands. Let's not leave it for heaven to sort out. Let's get it seen to down here. That was the attitude most Sicilian land workers developed.

The Romans captured Sicily and made it their own. Created a system called latifondo, a feudal system, whereby peasants rented land from the owners, or from a sub-lessor. That system survived well into the 1950s. The mafia emerged from the latifondo. The landowner's men paid thugs to keep the peasants from revolting; to punish those workers who dared to complain. But workers also sought to rise above their station and either co-operated with their very exploiters, or organised groups among themselves to threaten their own. Thus they could acquire a better piece of land or demand a percentage from their fellow-peasants. A savage survival of the fittest ensued post World War II. Rome couldn't cope, or didn't want to cope, with Sicily any more. The island went its own way.

When they grew up, hordes of those peasant children, amongst them my mother and father, emigrated, taking with them the pitiful image of their long-suffering parents. And they also took with them their sense of the violent climate they had grown up in.

My father arrived in England with a broken pair of shoes and a big cardboard box tied up with rope. Without a word of English. When he had saved enough money for the wedding, and train tickets for them to come back, he went to Sicily and married my mother. I still have a couple of black and white photos of their wedding. She is wearing her best Sunday dress. They couldn't afford a wedding dress. And their wedding reception was in the courtyard of my grandparents' house.

