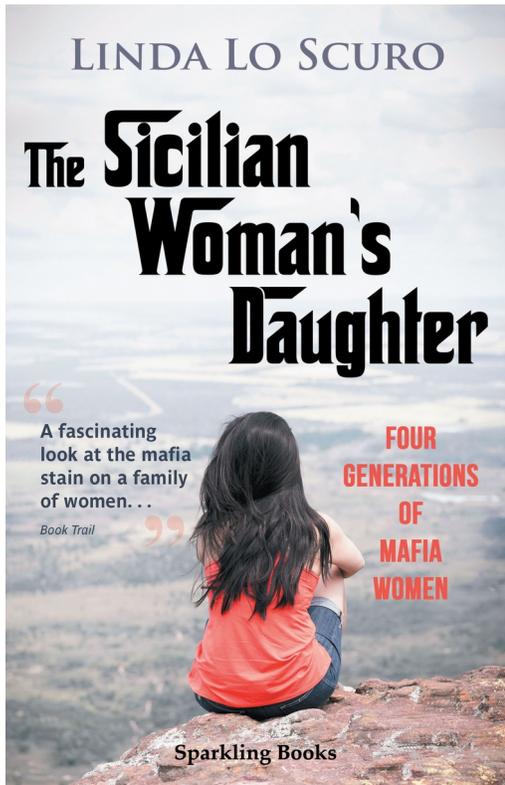


The Sicilian Woman's Daughter

Linda Lo Scuro



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**.

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Prologue

Rumour had it that Ziuzza, 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 Ziuzza'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. Ziuzza 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 homemade 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 Ziuzza 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

Ziuzza'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, Rocco's bloodied paws were posted to her in a box, she, like her dog, came to a violent end. Ziuzza 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 Ziuzza 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, Ziuzza 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 Ziuzza'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 ...

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