



The  
Sicilian  
Inheritance

A N O V E L

To Piazza

## Praise for *The Sicilian Inheritance*

"*The Sicilian Inheritance* is an addictive family saga with a rich abundance of strong women, quick wit, immersive history, and page-turning suspense. What else could one want from a novel? With her wise prose, Piazza grabs us by the hand as we journey through the picturesque Italian countryside while our heart thumps in anticipation of what Sara will find next. Mined from Piazza's own family history, this novel is a lyrical elegy to the past and its influence. . . . Narrated by two powerful women who refuse to let others define them—Sara, a butcher, and Serafina, an Italian woman healer—will steal your heart and threaten to never give it back. Piazza is a master storyteller with a voice of deep wisdom, and *The Sicilian Inheritance* is don't-miss historical fiction with a dash of Mario Puzo and a hint of Nora Ephron."

—Patti Callahan Henry, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Secret Book of Flora Lea*

"I loved this epic tale of one woman's quest to learn the truth about what happened to her great-grandmother a century ago. A gripping story of motherhood, ambition, misogyny, and female power, now and then, it is also a great mystery that kept me guessing until the final pages."

—J. Courtney Sullivan, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Friends and Strangers*

"Strong women, rich history, and page-turning suspense make for a rich and satisfying read . . . In *The Sicilian Inheritance*, Jo Piazza turns her formidable talents to the dual present/past timeline of a woman who goes to Italy because of a bequest but discovers much deeper—and more dangerous—family secrets."

—Pam Jenoff, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Code Name Sapphire*

"*The Sicilian Inheritance* is a thrilling adventure throughout a beautiful landscape that tells the stories of two women who persevered despite the many factors working against them. It's enjoyable, satisfying, but also motivating. It might just inspire more underestimated women to make bold moves, defy the odds, and redefine success on their own terms."

—*Forbes*, "One of 2024's Most Anticipated Novels Is Actually a MasterClass in Leadership"

"A sweep-you-away story about three generations of women who rebel against the expected in search of their own sense of self—it feels as much a feminist adventure as a redemptive family mystery, with as much wit and humor as heart and soul. Jo Piazza gives us complex, original heroines, a rich Italian setting, and a puzzle-piece journey that keeps the pages turning. There's nothing not to love here—I was gripped and entertained from start to finish."

—Ashley Audrain, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Push* and *The Whispers*

"All of *The Sicilian Inheritance* shimmers and stuns: the gorgeous writing, the complex and fascinating history of Sicily, the immersive Italian setting, and the propulsive family mystery that had my jaw hanging open. But what leaves a mark most of all are Piazza's heroines, the unforgettable and inspiring cast of women who defy the patriarchy and the odds stacked against them and learn to live life on their own terms."

—Carola Lovering, bestselling author of *Tell Me Lies* and *Bye, Baby*

"*The Sicilian Inheritance* is the perfect travel novel! A fiercely original family saga that you need to pick up for your next flight."

—Jane Green, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Sister Stardust* and *Jemima J*

“Equal parts rich historical fiction, gripping murder mystery, and a moving exploration of identity, grief, and the long shadow of the past. With lush prose and airtight plotting, Piazza’s novel made me laugh, cry—and start planning a trip to Sicily.”

—Andrea Bartz, *New York Times* bestselling author of *We Were Never Here*

**ALSO BY JO PIAZZA**

FICTION

*The Knockoff* (with Lucy Sykes)

*Fitness Junkie* (with Lucy Sykes)

*Charlotte Walsh Likes to Win*

*We Are Not Like Them* (with Christine Pride)

*You Were Always Mine* (with Christine Pride)

NONFICTION

*How to Be Married*

*If Nuns Ruled the World*

*Celebrity Inc.*

*The  
Sicilian  
Inheritance*

A NOVEL

JO PIAZZA



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# CONTENTS

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*Cover*

*Praise for The Sicilian Inheritance*

*Also by Jo Piazza*

*Title Page*

*Copyright*

*Dedication*

*Epigraph*

Prologue

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen



[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[\*Author's Note\*](#)

[\*Acknowledgments\*](#)

[\*About the Author\*](#)

*For my dad, John Piazza, who started all of this with his  
curiosity about our family history . . .*

*And my daughters, Beatrix and Eliza, who inspired me to  
finish it.*

*All of Sicily is a dimension of the imagination.*

—LEONARDO SCIASCIA

*In Sicily, women are more dangerous than shotguns.*

—MARIO PUZO AND FRANCIS FORD COPPOLA

# PROLOGUE

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**2016**

The room was freezing. No windows, one rickety table, two metal chairs.

*"L'ha ucciso?"* the detective asked with an uncompromising glare.

I was lost in a fog as I blinked up at the kind-eyed older woman they'd assigned to help translate for me even though I didn't need her. I understood exactly what he'd asked: Did you kill him?

My whole body ached. At least one, maybe more, of my ribs was broken, and the pain in my abdomen throbbed hot and sharp. Fat, salty tears rolled down my cheeks. Not for him, the man up on the mountain, the one whose blood was dried on my skin and my clothes. I couldn't cry for him at all. These tears were for me. For what I was about to lose.

Would I ever see my family again? My daughter? Why had I thought coming here would solve any of my problems?

The questions were merely my brain trying to escape reality because I knew exactly what happened up there.

And so, I nodded.

# ONE

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**SARA**

***Two weeks earlier . . .***

I often tried to pinpoint the exact moment when the life I'd worked so hard for began to fall apart. Because there's always a beginning, a place where you've screwed up so badly there's no putting it back together.

It's what happens when you slice through the wrong tendon in a flank of meat. I ran a restaurant for years, but I started as a butcher, so I still think in terms of joints and muscles, the connective tissue of life. Cut the right one and you end up with a perfect steak. Cut the wrong one and the whole system breaks down. The meat falls apart in the places where you want it to stay close to the bone. Once you make that single wrong cut it's nearly impossible to keep everything else intact.

When did I make the wrong cut?

I thought about it, obsessed over it really, as I closed up my restaurant, probably for the very last time. I was so deep inside my memories that I didn't hear the knock on the door. The sound didn't register until it became an unrelenting pounding.

"Mommy, let me in. I need to come in there right now!"

Few things are more persistent than a four-year-old faced with a physical obstacle. Sophie's dad brought her over early. Jack was

always early these days, probably because he was trying to catch me doing something he disapproved of.

My body lurched toward my little girl's voice. I flung open the door and the two of us hurled ourselves at one another with a feverish intensity, colliding in a smush of skin and lips and complete and total adoration. I never realized how much I would miss this little creature until I could no longer see her whenever I wanted, until my custody of her hung in the balance.

"Who's my best girl?" I asked her.

"Meeeeee. Who's my best mamma?"

"Me?"

"You!" The part that both killed me and kept me getting out of bed every morning was that she meant it. This gorgeous, brilliant child of mine truly thought I was the best despite all recent evidence to the contrary.

Jack, my almost ex-husband, was certain I was no longer the best at anything. I could feel his bitterness as he stood behind Sophie and took in the nearly empty restaurant. The tables, chairs, and furniture I had painstakingly selected only five years earlier had been sold to a new place opening down on Passyunk Avenue. Various kitchen equipment was pushed against the walls, ready to be hauled off to the highest bidder. All that remained was our mascot, a massive plaster pink pig flying from the ceiling, its lips curled in a cheeky smile and the restaurant's name emblazoned on its flank, La Macellaia—the butcher woman.

The plaster pig was a joke at first, before he became the symbol of the place. Jack had him made for me by a local artist. Because for all the years I'd dreamed of having my own restaurant, I'd never believed it was possible. When other people told me it would happen one day I'd laugh like I didn't care if it did or didn't and say, "Sure, when pigs fly." Jack surprised me with the statue on opening night. I wondered when I went from being someone he'd design a custom

pig statue for to a person he could barely look in the eye. It happened bit by bit, and then all at once.

I looked up at him, hoping to see some of the old soft devotion, but Jack just seemed annoyed and sad. It was impossible to tell what he resented more, me or the restaurant that stole so much time from him and our marriage.

“Let’s go outside,” I suggested, not wanting to see my failure through his eyes. A small part of me still hoped La Macellaia would reopen in a new location at some point in the future, but I couldn’t see how, not with the mountain of debt we’d taken on, the skyrocketing rent, or the nasty rumors that continued to dog me. I knew I’d made so many mistakes with my restaurant. I’d poured my heart and soul into it, but also my hubris. I’d pushed us to expand and grow too fast to make my investors happy, to make them money. I took on more than I could handle, and in the process, I lost almost everything. Another part of me also hoped, on some days, that with the restaurant gone Jack and I might find a way to work things out. But that seemed more unlikely with each passing day. Our marriage had become merely a bundle of services that neither of us could fulfill well enough for the other.

Once we made it to the sidewalk Jack thrust a handful of mail at me.

“This all came to the house for you,” he said. Since we separated Jack had been living with Sophie in our sweet little brick row home, the one we bought together the year we got married. It made sense at first, since I worked most nights and could sleep in the studio over the restaurant. But once La Macellaia closed I’d have nowhere to live.

Mixed in with the overdue bills and junk was the letter I’d been waiting for, a brown envelope scrawled in my aunt Rosie’s perfect penmanship, gorgeous cursive that only ancient nuns could beat into you.

I didn't want to open it because the second I did, my aunt Rosie's death would be as real as the end of my business and my career. I knew that the letter contained the last words she never got to tell me in person because I was too busy working to go see her one last time. Yet another regret.

Jack cleared his throat the way he did when he was about to say something I wouldn't like. "I hate the idea of Sophie going to your aunt's funeral. She's too little to learn about death."

"Sorry it bothers you. But please be reasonable, Jack. Sophie adored Aunt Rosie as much as I did." I swallowed my irritation and managed a contrite smile. "And all her cousins will be there. It won't be creepy and morbid. Rosie wanted more of a party than a formal church funeral. It'll be fun for Soph."

"A fun funeral? Who throws a party when they die? Your whole family is nuts. Rosie was nuts." His annoyance had nothing to do with the funeral. He was pissed because he was supposed to leave for vacation with his parents and I was making him wait until Sunday night, after the funeral.

"We've gotta get going, sweetie." I said this to Sophie, but really I was saying it to Jack to let him know our conversation was over. "We've got a two-hour drive up to Scranton and Carla is on her way to get us."

"To visit Aunt Rosie?" Sophie jumped up and down and clapped her hands.

"In a way, my love."

"See, she's too young for this, dammit," Jack said.

"Let me handle it," I said with all the conviction I could muster.

He sighed and shoved his hands in his pockets. "You know I loved her too. Rosie."

"Even though she was nuts?" I asked.

He shot me a regretful smile.

"Especially because of that," he mumbled.

It used to be one of the reasons he loved me too.



---

It was true that my aunt Rosie didn't want a funeral, but man, that woman could throw a party, even from beyond the grave. She'd made it very clear that she wanted all of her "people," all three of the boys she raised and their families, all the staff at the school where she was the principal for half her life, and pretty much anyone else in town who wasn't "gonna be a crybaby" about her death, to get drunk at her favorite pub to celebrate her.

I wore a bright red jumpsuit that had been sitting in the back of my closet for the better part of a decade with the tags still on. I couldn't afford anything new. I'd applied for and been approved for seven credit cards over the past three years. Six of those cards were currently maxed out. The jumpsuit was too tight and too low-cut, but I knew Aunt Rosie would have loved it.

The bar was loud and rowdy. I hadn't seen my cousins and the rest of my extended family in a couple of years, but folding myself into their comforting melee felt like sinking into a warm bath. There were hours of toasts and storytelling. Aunt Pat baked a massive cake with a picture on it of Rosie at her seventieth birthday wearing a T-shirt that read *SEXY AT SEVENTY*. There was Aunt Rosie trivia and eventually Dolly Parton karaoke.

My sister, Carla, and I eased our way around Aunt Arlene, who was in the midst of a stunning rendition of "Islands in the Stream" on the karaoke machine with my mom and Arlene's daughter, Little Arlene.

Mom was really belting it out. She shimmied with Sophie on her shoulders. I wanted to grab my daughter, spin around with her, and hold tight to her spindly little body. I knew the next month of vacation with her other grandparents would do my daughter some good. I also knew Jack's mother would use the time to determine if I'd somehow caused Sophie irreparable damage with my recent

personal miseries. Sophie has always been more resilient than me, but I still worried about her. Since I had to file for bankruptcy I could hardly drag myself out of bed except to handle the logistics of shutting La Macellaia down. There was a hell of a lot of grief involved in losing something you built from scratch, in losing the future you expected to have. I often drank too much at night to fall asleep and mainlined coffee all day to stay awake. Even when I was with my daughter, I wasn't always really there.

I tugged on Sophie's naked big toe and kissed her foot. She'd thrown her shoes somewhere in the corner during an earlier dancing session.

"Who's paying for this?" I asked Carla as we walked across the room, balancing two trays of shots to bring to our dad and uncles.

"I think Rose stashed some cash away," Carla replied. "She knew this day was coming."

At ninety-one it was always coming. Rosie had been fading for a year at least. The last time I'd seen her, a few months ago, she'd hardly gotten out of bed except to make the two of us a pair of strong old-fashionedes and to light the living room fire with a single match.

"A real woman makes a good drink and lights her own fires, Sara," she always reminded me. She told me lots of brilliant things over the years. I wish I'd written them all down. As Rosie and I had sipped our drinks, she said, "This is how I want you to remember me. A sexy, well-seasoned dame drinking her whiskey and getting ready to tell you a filthy joke."

"That's how I want to remember you too," I agreed, and begged for the joke. Toward the end she wanted me to come one more time. It was urgent, she told me. There was something we had to discuss. But I was never able to make the trip.

Carla squinted out at the scene in front of us. "I think Dad and the boys must be paying for some of it." I'd actually assumed my sister had thrown some cash in the kitty. Of all the cousins she was

the big success story, at least in terms of how much money she made. She was the youngest partner in a fancy Philly law firm, the mother of gorgeous twin boys with a beautiful, brilliant wife, and they owned a fancy town house off Rittenhouse Square. Carla had earned her success, but it was also due to Rosie paying part of her college and law school tuitions.

Rosie was my great-aunt, my dad's aunt, but she raised him and his two brothers when his parents, Santo and Lorenza, died in a car crash when Dad was a kid. So many boys, all of them little assholes, she used to say with complete and utter devotion. She'd never married, though she had a string of loyal and usually much younger boyfriends. I'd always assumed she was sick of living with men after raising three of them.

"The bar is probably covering some of it," Carla added. "They all loved her."

"Everyone did," I agreed, and swallowed one of the shots. The fiery liquid tickled my throat and warmed my insides.

Uncle Mario raised a half-empty glass and shouted an old Sicilian saying Rosie taught all of us.

*Cu picca parrau mai si pintiu.*

Those who speak little never have regrets. Ironic since Rosie rarely shut up.

Even though she came to the United States as the baby of four siblings, it was Aunt Rosie who kept the family legends alive. She told and retold the coming-to-America story of our great-grandfather Giovanni, Gio to his friends. The first American of the family, the one who worked himself to the bone in Sicily's sulfur mines and then bravely came to the new country to labor in a toilet factory in Queens. He slept in the attic of a funeral home in Astoria owned by other Sicilians for more than ten years.

"Slept up there in a coffin like a goddamn vampire, Sara. Now he was a man," Rosie had told me more than once.

Eventually, Giovanni saved enough money from the factory to bring his children to America and they moved from New York City to the Pocono Mountains, where they'd been told there was a fortune to be made in the coal mines. Someone promised him Scranton was exactly like Sicily, but with snow and coal instead of sun and sulfur. That someone had clearly lied, or perhaps they hadn't been to either Scranton or Sicily. Then the story turned tragic. Giovanni's wife, Serafina, never made the trip. The kids apparently traveled across the ocean first while Serafina stayed behind to sell the family land, but she was killed by the flu before she could join them. In the memories of the family she left behind Serafina grew more pious and devoted with each year that passed. She essentially became the Madonna. Sainly, pure, a loving mother and a martyr who had selflessly raised the children in Sicily while Giovanni built a future for them in America. Once they made it to Scranton, Gio and his sons toiled in the coal mines and then saved enough to open a small auto body shop that flourished until my uncle Mario lost it in a high-stakes poker game in the early nineties.

My father named me after his grandmother Serafina, a name that sounds like an angel or old movie star. But for all of my life no one has ever called me anything but Sara, and my mom, whose parents were a mix of Polish, Irish, and German, distinctly not Italian American, insisted on spelling my nickname in the more American way, probably to get back at my dad for his various marital shortcomings.

The drinks disappeared the second I dropped them on the table. My dad and his brothers didn't even take a break from telling their favorite Aunt Rosie stories to down the shots.

*Remember the time she dyed the pond behind the school green for Saint Paddy's Day.*

*The time she stole a tractor to drive in the Founder's Day parade.*

*When she went skinny-dipping with the mayor and got caught by his wife.*

I tousled Dad's hair and kissed him on his bald spot. He smelled like booze and the Ivory soap he had been using as shampoo, conditioner, and body wash for the better part of six decades.

He was properly sloshed. Rosie's death was hitting him hard. He was the youngest of the trio of brothers when his parents died. He had a heart tattoo on his left biceps, the kind that usually read MOM, except his read ROSIE.

"Don't stay up too late," I whispered to Dad before slipping away to finally read Rosie's letter to me. I'd put it off long enough.

I nodded to the bartender Jimmy and pointed to my uncles, making a little slashing motion across my throat in the hopes Jimmy would cut them off, and then snuck out the back door, searching for the gap in the chain-link fence that would lead me to Rosie's backyard.

A rustle ran through the bushes behind me and I paused, my skin tingling, feeling eyes on my back, but there was only silence. The sensation remained as I let myself into my aunt's dark house and banged my hip on her dining room table. Rosie left her epitaph there, the one she'd been writing and rewriting herself for the past twenty years.

*The Body of Rosie M.  
Lies Right Beneath This Stem  
A Tough Old Broad  
Those Who Knew Her Were Awed  
She Really Was Quite a Gem*

My great-aunt loved a fucking limerick. I could see her scratching out the final version on this rickety old table, maybe right after she penned me that letter.

The house murmured as I lit a fire in the old woodburning stove with a single match just like she taught me. The place was haunted for sure. Rosie's father, Giovanni, died in the bedroom upstairs at

age ninety-three. Rosie's brother Vin too. Rosie was with them now, but I hoped her spirit could escape this house and travel around the world. She'd always wanted to see the pyramids, the Eiffel Tower, the Great Wall of China, but after coming to America she'd never left the States. Even after she got each of her nephews out of her house, she kept inheriting their kids for long stints at a time. Someone was always handing off a wayward teenager who needed an Aunt Rosie-style kick in the ass or whose parents needed a break. My sister and I had lived with her for six whole summers and I moved in for my entire freshman year of high school. Plus, her work at the school never really ended. She was the vice principal, then the principal for four decades. The school never had a guidance counselor, so the kids went to Rosie with all their drama. She exuded a vibe that let you know *Oh yeah, I see you and I'm here for all your crap*. Even after she retired, she substituted just because she loved it. She also loved the slots and blackjack and frankly her gambling often got the best of her. All of that meant there was never any time or extra cash for Rosie's international adventures until all the nieces and nephews were grown and it was impossible for her to make it to the casino on her own.

That was when she started planning a big trip to Sicily for just the two of us. But then I was busy opening the restaurant and then I had Sophie and then the restaurant started doing really well so how could I leave? I promised over and over again that we would go. By the time she got sick my restaurant was bleeding money, and the trip never happened. Remembering all the times I put her off hit me like a punch in the gut.

I fixed myself a sobering cup of tea in one of the hundred mugs littering my aunt's kitchen cabinets. Whenever any of us went on a trip she insisted we bring her back a mug. I once asked her what the hell we would do with all of them when she died, half joking, and she'd replied with all seriousness, "You take your favorites and then leave the rest of them on strangers' stoops as a surprise gift. Who

wouldn't want to wake up to a THE POCONOS IS FOR LOVERS mug on their porch? Talk about making someone's day."

I sipped from the NOBODY DOES IT LIKE NIAGARA cup that Uncle Mario picked up a few summers ago and opened the letter.

Rosie wrote that she already missed me, that I was the daughter she never thought she wanted, that her only regret was not seeing everything I would one day accomplish. I was blubbering by the time I got to the tough love. She told me I needed to get my shit together. I never should have let my dream die, I could have asked her for help. (*With what money, Rosie?*) Irritation and love seeped into every sentence she wrote.

She waited until the end for the surprise. *Surprises are the best thing in life and there are too few of them*, Rosie used to insist.

*I've got a plan for you, gioia mia. You trusted me your whole life. I need you to trust me now.*

*I'm sending you to Sicily. You and I should have made the trip there together a long time ago. Now don't go feeling sorry and blaming yourself. I'm not mad at you. Life got in the way . . . but we're not gonna let death hold us back.*

*You're going to take my ashes to Caltabellessa. I want you to know the town where I was born. You're lost, my love, and you need to get back to your roots. But I also need you to do something for me. If I had tried to explain it, you would have thought I was nuts, but I'm sorry I didn't try, so here it goes . . .*

*I'm enclosing a deed in this letter, a deed for what I believe is a small plot of land that belonged to our family in Sicily before they came to America. The owner is listed as my mother, Serafina Forte. It's been mine for a long, long time and I always told myself that when I retired, when I had the money to fly off to Sicily, I'd go back to our land. I'd hoped I would be able to do that trip with you, but time ran out. And to be*

*honest, I was a little scared of digging up the past. But I've gotten sentimental in my old age, and I think we need to know our family history. That's what people do when they're close to death. They try to learn more about the people they're gonna meet on the other side.*

*So here we are, my love. This is my last wish from the great beyond. Spooky, eh? I need you to go back to Caltabellessa. It's all taken care of. The hotel is booked for a week, the plane ticket is bought and it's nonrefundable. No more excuses. I want you to investigate whether this paper is worth anything and if it is, I want you to take all of the money you can make from it and rebuild your life. Reopen your restaurant and take care of your girl. I'm sending you on an adventure, my love. Don't you dare waste it.*