

# The 3rd Book in the Mina Calvi Adventure Series

## Chapter 1

Veneto-Italy. Summer 1992



The stench of death permeated the air.

Morning rain didn't wash it away. Afternoon sun didn't singe it away. It hovered, unaffected by the chirping of birds, the scurrying of spooked lizards or the skittering of pebbles under Mina's sandals. She stopped by the open grave and watched the burly man inside, digging.

Sweat put a shine on his bald head. When he looked up and saw Mina, he rested the shovel against the dirt wall, waved away the flies buzzing around his furrowed brow and squinted. "*Giorno.*" He wiped his face with the back of his gloved hand, exposing the wet spot under his arm.

"*Buongiorno.*"

Ten years had brought little change to the way they buried their dead in her small hometown.

"How come it smells so bad?" she asked.

"We have to exhume bodies before their time. It used to be twenty-five years. Now it's eighteen or even fifteen, depending on the needs. This one here just wasn't ready to come out, but I have to make room for the next burial. We're out of space." He shrugged, shielding his eyes from the sun while talking to her. "Visiting someone?" His gaze settled on the potted plant of white cyclamens in her hands.

"My family's crypt. Haven't been around in years." She glanced toward the row of vaulted porticos running the length of the cemetery. "Calvi." The sorrow she'd fought since morning caught in her throat.

“Oh, *l’americana*.” The gravedigger straightened and moved closer to the dirt wall marking the tomb’s edge. He was taller than she first thought. His body odor mingled with the nauseating sweetness of the decayed earth and nearly overwhelmed Mina. She lifted the cyclamens to her nostrils to neutralize the smell then stepped back, away from the empty hole. *L’americana*? Did he have her confused with Paola? Mina doubted she ever met this man before today, and besides, she was barely sixteen when she left for the United States. He looked to be in his forties. Could he have been one of Paola’s schoolmates?

A polite wave then she turned and headed up the path leading to the arched vaults and her family underground burial chamber. The Calvis weren’t her parents. However, no one in Italy knew about that, and she intended to keep it that way. No need to rewrite her birth story now that everyone involved had died. Neatly marked graves lined row after row all the way to the steps leading to the portico housing the crypts.

This graveyard was different from most American cemeteries where grass covered the grounds, and the markers were simple and unassuming, creating the illusion of a green, peaceful meadow. Italians had an opposite type of relation with their dead. Individual grave borders were brick, granite, or wood. Unique and massive headstones told the story of the dear departed with statuaries, lamps and flowers. Lots of flowers. It was all meant to announce to the world that this was one beloved soul. During the spring and summer months, most flowers were fresh, elaborate creations with gold-lettered endearments on gaudy ribbons woven between ferns, blossoms and even balloons. Mina glanced at her modest plant. Cyclamens were her grandmother’s favorite, a token of the Dolomites, the mountains surrounding the valley. Mina wanted to focus on her destination, but she couldn’t get her mind off the persistent smell of decay or shake the disturbing feeling the gravedigger watched her every move.

A few people walked around the place, all women, changing water in the vases, pulling weeds from the tombs. Only buzzing bees disturbed the silence until Mina’s feet landed on the thick slabs of granite forming the floors of the arched corridors. The coffins were below ground inside neatly organized drawers. In essence, the floor she walked on was the crypt ceiling. Each family-owned crypt was architecturally defined by the two arches on either side. A massive iron ring centered on a square block of granite where a manually operated crane would hook and lift the cellar-like opening to lower a new coffin.

Her open toed sandals clicked against the stone, and the echo resonated in the domed arcade. As a child, Mina dreaded walking on those slabs because they weren't sealed together, only cut to link into each other like giant pieces of a puzzle. The first time she witnessed the lowering of a coffin, she had nightmares for weeks. After that, she refused to visit the cemetery for a long time, afraid the stones would slide off, and she would fall below among the rotting bodies. Even all grown up with the place bathed in midday sun, Mina carried the memory of distant fear inside her.

None of that mattered when she reached the Calvi crypt and her grandmother's forever-sealed smile welcomed her. She hardly remembered the rest of the people whose photos looked out from the oval ceramic frames, and that included her step-grandfather. A fancy wrought iron lamp cast a faint reflection on a dried up fern placed in the center of the back marble wall where names and pictures were posted. Mina went to remove the dried-up plant, stopped and ran her fingers over her *nonna's* framed smile. It felt cool to the touch, unlike Mina's tears landing on the back of her wrist.

The ache she subdued in the middle of her chest for so long rose within her, and her tears turned to sobs. It was okay to cry. It was okay to mourn. Paola's picture should be next to *Nonna*, even if her mother was buried far away in America.

Mina eventually grew comfortable alone in the hallowed place, no longer sorry for herself. She replaced the dead fern with her cyclamens. Her fingers touched her forehead to make the sign of the cross, a built-in Catholic ritual she never shed. *Ave Maria, gratia plena*. She concentrated, trying to remember the prayer her grandmother taught her.

A hand touched her shoulder.