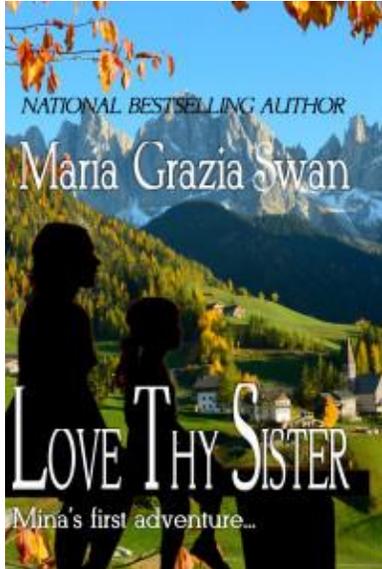


# *The First Book in the Mina Calvi Adventure Series*

## PROLOGUE



Crawling away from the pain. She had to get up from the floor. Her mouth foamed. She felt like her chest was exploding.

"One big explosion, followed by a smaller one. Just as pleasurable but not as powerful," the man had said last night in the bonding anonymity of the dark motel room, his voice an oily whisper.

What was that smell? Maybe decaying food the other girls left behind. She concentrated on the noises from below. A door slammed somewhere in the building. She didn't care who saw her, she needed help.

Air, she had to get some air. She grasped the front of her smock until it ripped. Her long black hair fell over her breasts.

"One big explosion...."

Was it last night or just a few hours ago?

Footsteps on the stairs, measured steps, getting louder. Her head jerked up. The thumping grew louder, quicker. No, it was her own heartbeat. Now her whole body was one pounding muscle. Her skin could no longer contain it.

She struggled to stand, wobbled on her stiletto heels. Last night. The music, the writhing bodies...

Her ankle gave way. She lurched for the top of the stairs, grabbed the handrail. Her foot tore free, and she pitched down the stairwell.

That noise again. Her heart, she thought, as the bridge of her nose cracked on the edge of the concrete step. Strange, no pain, no resistance.

Her body slowed as it tumbled down, thoughts fled past her, faces of strangers lying in sheeted battlefields.

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Tumbling, remembering, whipping the last with the first, *mi querido*. She inhaled the smell of her blood and the dust from the concrete. No longer would she wage nocturnal wars to keep morning dreams alive. Nor would she hide in the musty darkness, waiting for a secret rendezvous.

Her fingers relaxed, letting go. The marks impressed by her fingernails looked like tiny half moons on her colorless palms.

Blood slowly soaked the black mane covering her once-pretty face.

All was quiet now around the low mound on the landing.

Quiet and dark, yet the stillness had no threat. And the only possession she left behind was the red shoe at the top of the stairs.

## CHAPTER 1

November 1989

Six years. *Dio mio*. Six years since her parents' deaths.

From under thick brown bangs, Mina stared at a blank spot on the wall. A calendar used to hang there. A pretty calendar with pictures of flowers. Not just flowers, flora. *Si* that was the word, flora from various regions of the United States of America. Her mother had a calendar like that, with flowers, or flora, from Italian regions.

Mina tried to focus, remembering the kind of flowers. Memories came hurling back, gnawing at her soul. She shook her head to rid herself of the disturbance, then went back to stare at the wall. Whatever happened to her mother's calendar? She knew what had happened to her mother; she lay next to her father, below thick quarry slabs.

Mina closed her eyes, clearly picturing in her mind's eye the flowers from her mother's calendar, yet not her mother's face. It wasn't the first time, either. She would try to recall the smile, the color of her eyes, the tenderness of her hand holding hers. Time after time, she could only recapture her mother's image as she appeared in the framed photograph on the night table.

The calendar would be six years old now, hardly useful. A tear sneaked from her eyes, landed on her hand. Mina glimpsed at the round, wet spot, and then quickly wiped it against her jeans. She was barely sixteen with little knowledge of English when she arrived in Southern California.

If they could see me now—they who? She hadn't kept in touch with any of her friends back home. Sort of a blessing really. She was almost twenty-three and although older, as the saying goes, she wasn't much wiser. Had she changed? Her fingernails were as stubby as ever, her hair the same shoulder length. Okay, her jeans were genuine Levi's, the kind hard to find in Italy. She still wore the same size clothes, five junior, on top too, disgusting. According to her sister Paola, maybe her brain kept pace with her body, stayed junior, that is.

Huddled in the faded Naugahyde chair, absently studying the reception room of her sister's software company, Mina hated life in general and this place in particular. Such a depressing sight! Drab walls and second-hand office furniture. Paola described West Coast Software's decor as 'Spartan but functional.' *Spartan?* To Mina, the word brought images of glistening bodies, athletic prowess of glorious heroes from the past. Sort of a "Mount Olympus Male Sampler." *Not* some beat-up furniture from the pages of the local *Penny Saver*.

How could anyone *function* in such a depressing environment? *Like a bee in a silk flower shop*. But no one asked her, the younger sister, about decorating ideas. Ideas, the one thing she had *abbondanza* of. And dreams, yes, dreams, too.

What she hated most about the place was the silence, the dead silence of this office on weekends. It reminded her of other silences, other places. Old terrors crept up her spine; she instinctively turned to look behind her. No watching eyes, no threatening stares, only silence.

The phone rang and Mina nearly fell off the receptionist's chair. She stared at the red light blinking on the switchboard. It was Michael Davies' line. On a Saturday? It had to be Paola.

Mina picked up the phone. "Hello?"

"Who the hell is this?"

She recognized Michael's voice.

"It's me, your favorite sister-in-law."

"You mean my only sister-in-law. Why the hell are you answering the phone? Where is Paola?" He pronounced it *Paula*.

Mispronouncing your spouse's name should be grounds for divorce, Mina thought, as if anyone cared about her opinion.

"Home in bed. It's her back, as usual. She sent me to get some papers."

"From my office?"

She sensed fear in his voice. *Why?* "I'm not in your office. Never mind. When are you coming back?"

"Tonight. I don't need a ride. Tell Paola."

"You tell her." *Why was she being so nasty to him?* "Do you have a cold?" His voice did sound raspy.

"What do you expect? It's another goddamn November in goddamn Chicago." He hung up without a good-bye.

What a jerk. Mina didn't understand how her sister could still love him. They hardly talked any more. The less Paola talked, the more Michael cursed. Was there a common denominator? And why was Michael flying to the windy city so often? On business or pleasure? That would explain why he didn't want to be picked up at LAX. Husband-stealing Rachel Fernandez probably went to Chicago with him.

What time was it anyway? A hideous clock hung on the gray wall, its electronic buzz, like a nest of wasps, set her on edge. Twelve-thirty. How long had she been daydreaming?

Her sister must be furious by now. Mina could almost hear Paola's perfectly manicured nails tapping away on the nightstand, one tap for each minute she'd been gone.

Her growling stomach reminded her of the missed breakfast, and now a postponed lunch, just to run errands for her sister. Better get going. She swiveled in the chair. Let's see, Paola said the folder was in her in-box, on the file cabinet behind the desk.

Something glittered on top of the white folder. A chocolate-covered cherry in gold foil, Paola's favorite candy. Mina's, too. Michael must have put it there before he left for Chicago. One of their stupid love rituals, maybe the only one left. To hell with Paola, Michael, and their love games. Her mouth watering, she stripped the wrapper off the candy and lifted the mound of dark chocolate to her lips.

Somewhere in the warehouse, a door slammed. She jumped and the motion sent her chair wheeling. It hit the full wastebasket, which toppled and spilled everything under the desk.

"*Maledizione!*" Six years in America and she still responded in Italian to every unexpected event. Mina put down the chocolate and crawled under the desk to pick up the trash. Good thing Paola couldn't see her scrunched under the desk collecting garbage. Definitely not ladylike behavior.

Sounds came from the direction of the warehouse, sharp little noises, like high heels tapping on a tile floor. The sound reminded her of a late, late-night TV movie--sinister footsteps right before an ax murderer surprised the naive heroine.

Mina ordered her heart to stop the impromptu *tarantella*. How stupid. It was probably Elena, coming to clean the office like she did every Saturday. Someone entered the reception area.

"Hey, Elena? It's me, Mina. I'm under the desk."

No answer, no more footsteps. Only silence. But in the few inches between the desk's modesty panel and the floor she could see a pair of pointed red patent pumps.