



Defending Irene

KRISTIN
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For Calvin, Sara, and Gretchen

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1

Calcio (CAL-cho) Soccer

I should have known something was wrong when the woman's eyes moved quickly past me to my five-year-old brother, Max. The wrinkles around her eyes deepened as she smiled and ruffled his hair. "So, you want to enroll yourself in soccer?" she asked.

Max bounced on his toes and nodded.

The woman turned to my mother and handed her a white piece of paper. "His group finished five minutes ago, but they'll meet again tomorrow."

From the way Mom's lips twitched, I could tell she wanted to say something but couldn't find the words. I stepped forward.

"We're also here to enroll *me* on your girls' team," I announced.

The woman blinked. "There isn't one."

What she actually said—I suppose I should mention—was "*Non c'è*," which in Italian means about the same thing. If this conversation had taken place back in the States, in English, my mother probably would have launched into a speech on equal opportunity for girls. But now we were in Merano, a

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small city in the Italian Alps, so all she could do was stand there and look horrified.

And to tell you the truth, even though I am almost fluent in Italian, that's about all I could do, too.

The woman studied me for a moment, from my tight, businesslike French braids down to my black cleats. "How long have you played soccer, *cara*?"

"Eight years," I replied.

"And what grade do you frequent?"

"The second year of middle school."

"One moment, please. I must speak with someone." She nodded and walked briskly around the corner of the yellow stucco clubhouse.

I stared after her in disbelief. "When Dad and I made a search on Yahoo Italia, there were lots of girls' teams," I said to Mom.

"Near Milan and Turin, maybe," Mom said. "This isn't the big city, Irene. Here in Merano, things might be a little more—conservative."

Mom could read, write, and understand Italian. But sometimes, especially when the conversation took an unexpected turn, she couldn't always speak it very well. She says it's much harder to pull a word up out of your brain than to hear it spoken or to read it on a page.

I wouldn't know. My dad's first words to me were "*Ciao, bimba. Come stai?*" Hi, baby girl. How are you? And from that moment on, he had spoken to me almost exclusively in Italian. Somehow, a baby can easily separate languages into different boxes. It's a lot harder for grown-ups.

"Don't worry," Mom said. "You'll play. I'll make that clear to whoever's in charge."

Calcio: Soccer

“But Mom, if the teams here are all boys...”

“That never stopped you back home,” Mom reminded me.

“Yeah, but that was just around the neighborhood. Half those guys don’t play competitively. What if...” I bit my lip.

“Yes?” Mom prompted.

I rubbed my palms against my shorts. “What if I can’t keep up?”

“You will, honey,” Mom assured me. “But maybe you’ll have to work even harder this season. It’ll be good for you.”

Sure, I thought. Just like having a cavity filled.

A man wearing dark blue pants and a white polo shirt rounded the corner. “*Buona sera*,” he said, greeting us. He must have overheard us talking because he switched to English. “I am the manager, Giacomo Corona. You are Americans, no?”

“Yes,” my mother said.

“Signora Martelli tells me your daughter wants to play at *calcio* with us?”

“Yes.”

He smiled. “We are glad. And she speaks a little Italian?”

“She speaks a lot of Italian,” Mom said. “My husband was born in Milan, er, Milano.”

“Ah. *Molto bene*. Very good. I must tell you that there are no other girls of her age in our program, but we are happy she is here. Very happy.” He turned to me. “What is your name?”

“Irene Benenati.”

Unlike every coach I’d ever had in America, he did not ask me to repeat my first name, “ee-RAY-nay.” There’s no such thing as a silent *e* in Italian.

“A pleasure, Irene. You meet with your squad at four o’clock, Monday and Thursday. September to November and

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March to May. Six months, yes? It is a hundred euro to the year. That is not too much?” He glanced at my mother.

The corners of her mouth turned down. She was probably trying not to smile. The outrageous fee she’d had to pay for my select team last winter was more than four times that.

“No. It is not too much at all,” Mom said and reached for her purse.

Signor Corona waved his hand. “No, no. Not today. Next week.”

Next week? For all his smiles and pleasure at meeting me, maybe he was hoping that I wouldn’t be around next week—that if they didn’t take our money it would be easier to get rid of the girl. But no, a smiling Signora Martelli appeared a few seconds later. She was carrying a white T-shirt, navy blue shorts, matching sweats, and an official backpack. I took the pile she handed me, fighting the urge to shove it back at her and make a terrified break for the parking lot. Did I really want to do this?

“Her team already begins five minutes ago,” Signor Corona said, pointing in the direction of the soccer field.

My fingers tightened around the clothing. “Five minutes ago?” I asked, switching to Italian.

“Sì,” Signora Martelli said. “You can change clothes in the bathroom around the corner. Take a left and then another left. I will tell the *mister* that you are here.”

Late to practice on my first day? My new coach, or the *mister* as they called him here, would not be impressed.

My hands shook as I locked myself into the bathroom. I changed into my uniform, trying to tell myself there was no reason to be nervous.

No reason at all, a voice inside me mocked. After all, these

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boys only practiced six months out of the year from first grade on up. They only watched soccer on TV every chance they got. Soccer was only Italy's national pastime, its national passion.

I leaned heavily on the sink, my fingers clutching its porcelain sides. I rocked back and forth with my eyes closed. What could I do?

Dad had passed his passion for soccer along to me. I loved it. I loved the sound and feel of the ball exploding off my foot for a shot on goal. And I certainly didn't want to fall behind in my training during my family's yearlong stay in Italy. But to go from being one of the top players on the squad to the last substitute lingering on the bench... How could I stand it?

A fist thudded against the door.

"Die, Irene! Die!"