

*March 2006*

"Awesome goal!" The ball soared through the air, slid into the net perfectly in the top left corner, just beyond the reach of the keeper. "Did you get it?" Nia Nelson asked her coach Giuseppe Zambrotta, who was taping the soccer match between Italy and USA with his ever-present digital camcorder. He made a habit of recording games, even the ones he coached, so later he could show his players and discuss tactics with the team. Nia loved soccer-watching and playing. Especially when the two teams were world class. She only wished she was down on the field instead of in the stands.

The Italian national versus the US national men's team were playing a friendly match at the Cotton Bowl in Dallas in preparation for the upcoming World Cup. Although the seats were cramped and the stadium outdated, somehow her soccer coach, the miracle worker, had gotten front row tickets which made the view up close and personal.

"*Si, carina*, I got Sandro's goal. Plus Luciana is recording the game off the television. We will have many hours of new Sandro videos to watch."

And that was just great with her, even as guilt twinged her for cheering for the Italians so much. Of course, she cheered for every good American play as well-especially since she was on first name basis with so many of the USA men's team members; her brother was on the team after all although he wasn't playing today due to an injury-but Sandro, the most famous Italian soccer player in the world, was her idol.

"Do you really think I'll be able to get his autograph?" Nia almost felt like a middle-school kid for asking, but she couldn't tone down her excitement at the thought that she might actually get to meet him, have him sign an autograph.

Un-middle-school-kid-like thoughts followed as she imagined his

fingers brushing against hers when he took the magazine she wanted him to sign. Sparks would fly between their hands, and he would be as mesmerized with her as she was with him. Although it was delusional, the image made her body even hotter on what was already a sunny and warm, early spring day.

She used the soccer program to fan herself. Delusional or not, it was a fun fantasy, one of about nine-thousand nine-hundred and ninety-nine fantasies she had of the very sexy and talented Sandro.

Coach Giuseppe looked a little heated himself. She fanned him as well. With his flushed cheeks and his balding head surrounded by tufts of gray hair, he looked more like an indulgent father than a bad-ass tough soccer coach.

"*Non solo* will you get his autograph, but I promise you will meet him and spend the evening with him," Giuseppe said, his bright hazel eyes twinkling.

Nia did a double take and blinked. Surely she hadn't heard right. Did he just say she'd spending the evening with— "Are you kidding me?" she asked, excitement making her loudly blurt the words.

He smiled, appearing quite satisfied with himself. "Kidding? No. No kidding."

"How can you be so sure? Do you know him from when you lived in Italy?"

Giuseppe had repeatedly shown her soccer tapes of Alessandro Crocetti over the years he'd been her coach. But he'd never once mentioned he personally knew the famous player whose style he had taught her to emulate.

"*Si*, I know him from Italy."

"Really? How come you've never said anything? How long have you known him? It must have been when he was just starting to play professionally since you've been over here for a few years. What was he like?"

Giuseppe's smile turned indulgent "So many questions, Nia. The players will be back on the field, and you will miss him because you talk so much."

"How will I miss him? You know I'll be quiet when they start playing again."

"No. I want you to go stand over there by the rail—"

"They don't want us next to the rail. The security people will make me sit down."

"Security people are at the other end of the stands taking care of rowdy fans. See that one?" Giuseppe pointed out a red-haired man with red, white and blue stripes painted on his face. Typical overzealous sports fan. "He just threw a bottle onto the field. Besides, you will not be at the rail long. Just long enough to yell something to Sandro."

The security people no longer worried Nia. "Yell something? You want me to stand by the rail and yell something at Sandro when he comes onto the field?"

"*Si.*" Giuseppe patted her head like she was a bright little girl, even though she was a college junior and had been playing on the US women's national soccer team since she was in high school. Of course, Giuseppe had known her since she was a junior in high school and had played a major role in helping her win a spot on the national team and in getting her a full soccer scholarship to the college where he coached. He had a right to his fatherly attitude.

"So what do you want me to yell?" Nia swallowed. *No Fear* ala the old Nike motto—Nike was one of her sponsors—was also her motto, but this was something altogether different. She had idolized Sandro for years; she had posters of him all over her bedroom, for heaven's sake. When she dreamed of the perfect man, she dreamed of Sandro. As a matter of fact, she dreamed of him every night.

She didn't know if she could work up the courage to actually

say something to him.

Giuseppe told her a phrase in Italian.

She repeated it. "*Ciao, caprino mio. . . .* What does it mean?" All the years she'd known Giuseppe, and she'd never picked up Italian. Of course, he didn't speak his native language much except when he was mad and yelling at the team, and she doubted those were words she needed to know anyway. Most likely they'd get her in trouble if she ever said them to another Italian.

"I tell you later. Here they come. Go!"

"But—"

"Sandro will know, is all that is necessary. *Vai.*"

With a push from Giuseppe, she scurried off her seat and down the aisle to stand by the rail. Taking a few steps to her right brought her even with the Italians walking onto the field. She drew a ragged breath, bolstered her courage and shouted his name, which came out higher and tighter than she'd intended. He didn't react, likely didn't hear that pathetic squeaking sound she made. So she took a deep breath and yelled his name louder, adding the Italian phrase.

He stopped dead still. Stopped on a dime, the sports announcers would say. Stopped so abruptly that she instinctively stiffened as if her body were mimicking his. Players around him chuckled while two of his teammates rubbed his curly dark brown hair. He ignored them and pivoted to face her, his gaze zeroing in on her. He walked toward her, holding her riveted with his stare. Her mind urged her to run, but her heart put a halt to that command. As shocked as she was that her idol was walking towards her, pinning her with a stare, she doubted she could have moved anyway. Security would have to lift her and carry her away.

"*Mi ha chiamato?*" he said when he drew closer.

"Huh?" She barely managed to push the word out over her heart hammering in her throat.

"I thought you called my name. Is mistake, *scusi.*" He turned

to leave.

"No, wait!" Her voice squeaked again. How absolutely embarrassing. She swallowed, dragged in a quick breath, tried again. "I did call you. I'm supposed to tell you something." She repeated the phrase.

Dark brows furrowed over his nose, his eyes narrowed. "Who tell you this? No one says this to me, not in many years."

Sheesh, what did she say? Her hands went all sweaty. She wiped them on her shorts and glanced sideways, looking for security. Now that she was talking to him, she didn't want to be dragged away. "My coach told me—"

"Coach? Who is this coach?" Sandro demanded, his English quite understandable despite his accent.

"Giuseppe—"

"Beppe? He is here?"

Man, her coach really did know Sandro. "Right over there." She pointed and turned to look, but curious onlookers had gone to their feet to stare at her with interest. She could no longer see her coach and was immediately aware that some of the more diehard soccer fans, those who followed both women's and men's soccer, were starting to recognize her.

"I can't see him now, but—"

"*Vieni qua.*"

She pivoted back to face him. "What?"

Sandro held up his hands. "Climb down, I need to finish talking to you, but I must play."

Climb down? Finish talking to her? Oh, damn, this was good.

Still, she hesitated—should she dare? How much trouble would she get into going onto the field? Another quick glance down the aisle showed the security guard still occupied with the rowdy fans. "I don't think security's gonna like this," she muttered to herself. In a quick impulsive move, before she had time to chicken out, she slung a leg over the rail. No way would she miss

this chance.

It was a long drop, over eight feet. She turned around and dangled by her hands, her chest brushing the concrete wall in front of her. Sandro took hold of her, his strong hands easily spanning her waist, easing her to the ground.

Totally off balance from his touch, as much as the risk she took, she quickly stepped away and turned to face him. What was she supposed to say to her hero? A man she practically worshipped in her dreams. "M . . . Maybe I should introduce myself. My name—"

"Go get 'em, Nia!" someone called out from the crowd, interrupting her pitiful attempt at small talk. Cheers and hand clapping followed from the section that watched her climb over the rail.

She turned to wave to her fans.

Sandro moved beside her. "*Ha anche le i tifosi?*"

*Tifosi*. She had heard that word before when she played in Italy; it meant fans. He was smiling when he asked it, so perhaps he was joking, not knowing who she was? Of course, she was more well known in the USA than internationally, like he was. "Fans? A few," she admitted.

He frowned, obviously puzzled.

Two of his teammates came up to him and started speaking in Italian, pointing to the field. "*Si, si. Va bene,*" he answered.

"I must play. You come sit here, out of way of coach." He took her arm right below the short sleeves of her t-shirt and led her toward the Italian bench. His warm fingers branded her bare skin, sending heat searing through her body. Every bit as good as she imagined.

Call her a school girl, but she decided she would never wash her arm again.

The referees passed by them. One of them recognized her. "Hey, Nia." They stopped as a group.

"Hey, Mr. Bankston. How's it going?" She held out a hand.

The other three referees recognized her then, and she exchanged greetings and handshakes with them, too. Not one of them asked why she was on the sideline, heading for the Italian bench, but she saw the question in their eyes.

"*Anche loro?* You know them, too?" Sandro asked.

"Sort of."

He tilted his head and stared at her. "I think somehow I should know you. You are familiar, but I have never met you . . ."

She had played in a televised soccer match in Italy against the Italian women's team. She shouldn't expect him to recognize her, yet still, her heart sank.

Someone yelled his name from the field. "I must play now."

He surprised her with a kiss on her mouth. "For luck, *pecorina*," he said before he turned and jogged onto the soccer pitch.

"Oh, damn." She sat down hard, grateful she landed on the bench. She fingered her lips as if she'd never felt them before. She hadn't expected a kiss. Had she imagined it? Only in her most private dreams had she explored any intimacies with him, never expecting to have a chance to meet him. Yet here she sat, waiting on him. And he had kissed her. He had really freaking kissed her.

And called her "*pecorina*". She had no clue what it meant, but it sounded nice.

Holy freaking cannoli. The world had suddenly gone magical where dreams do come true.

The Italian players on the bench eyed her suspiciously, but one came to sit beside her. He said something to her in Italian.

"Sorry." She shrugged. "No Italian."

He switched to English then. "You are friend of Sandro's?"

"Just met him," she admitted, her brain still struggling to process all that had happened inside of seconds. "My coach knows him, told me to yell something in Italian to him—sheesh, that got

Sandro's attention. What'd I say?"

He told her.

"Goat boy?" Inwardly, she cringed. Surely not.

"Was name for him when he was young boy. Because of his curly long hair," he explained. "Like Angora goat."

Now, the same curly hair was pulled back in his trademark ponytail. Omigosh, she called him a goat. Her cheeks heated. It was a wonder Sandro hadn't thrown something at her. What was Giuseppe thinking? Yet, here she sat, she reminded herself. He knew something.

The Italian patted her leg in a kind gesture, obviously sensing her distress. "Is okay, because he say you are *pecorina*. A little sheep."

A chuckle escaped, and she shook her head. A little sheep? And she thought he'd called her something special.

During the game, she chatted with the Italian player, whose name was Francesco. The Americans nearly scored, and she jumped up to cheer. Francesco tugged her back down.

"Sorry," she said with a self-conscious shrug. "Forgot whose bench I was on."

An Italian player was taken down in a hard tackle. At the break in play, Sandro took the opportunity to trot to the touchline. And Nia took the opportunity to admire him in his royal blue jersey and white soccer shorts from this close. The white shorts emphasized his tan, ripping-with-muscles legs. She didn't have long to ogle, though, because Sandro yelled instructions to Francesco who interpreted for her.

"He wants you to take him water bottle."

Okay, then. Maybe a little high-handed relegating her to water-girl status, but she wasn't going to quibble at the chance to be next to him again. Nia grabbed a water bottle from a basket full of bottles and ran to Sandro, feeling as if she were in an alternate dimension the whole thing was so unreal.



Sandro took a drink, squirted some water on his head. She watched every droplet that ran over his face, down his neck—she had a vivid mental image of her tongue following the drop of water—

"*Come ti chiami?* What is your name?"

She jerked her gaze away from his neck and self-consciously cleared her throat. "Nia. Nia Nelson."

"I know you now," he said. "You play for American women. I saw you score against our women's team. Pretty goal. *Favoloso!*"

She couldn't stop a proud, satisfied smile, a little flutter in her heart. "Giuseppe says I play like you."

"*Si, e vero.* Is true. We play alike." He nodded and handed her the water bottle. "Now I will score goal for you." Once again, he pulled her close for a brief hard kiss on her mouth.

She barely had a chance to register the kiss or the feel of his hard body pressed against hers before she was left to stare after him again. Her hand not holding the water bottle went to her lips. Oh, man. What the hell was happening here? Whatever it was, she liked it.

"You gotta move, Nia. You're too close to the line," the referee's assistant warned her since she was practically standing on the pitch, and in his line of view.

She blinked. "Oh. Sorry." Still dazed, she walked back to the bench.

Francesco reached for the water bottle. "I will place it back. . ." he pointed toward the basket.

"No." She snatched it away and then smiled dreamily. "I want to hold it."

He grinned back at her, and said, "*Che bestia, l' amore,*" as she sat down.

*L' Amore.* Love. Oh, yeah, baby, she was in love.