

FINDING EDWARD

Save Me Series, Book 3

By Suzanne McKenna Link

Finding Edward

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First Edition

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Also By Suzanne McKenna Link

Saving Toby (Save Me Series Book 1)

Keeping Claudia (Save Me Series Book 2)

Dedicated to Angela, daughter extraordinaire ~

Our adventures in world travel began in Italy, experiencing “La dolce vita,” on a trip I will never forget. May the wonders of the world be forever yours.

The world is a book, and those who do not travel read only a page.

~ Saint Augustine of Hippo

Chapter 1

The binding of *Twentieth-Century American Art* creaked slightly as I pulled the cover open and lifted it to my nose. I closed my eyes and let the scent of the colorful lacquered pages curl in the back of my throat, reminding me of the day I'd bought the book.

"Eddie, you weirdo, stop sniffing books and get moving." Ray came out of the house with another plastic bag of my stuff to load into the back of my pickup truck.

I closed the book and dropped my head, already missing my usual Sunday morning routine. There'd be no lying around today until I moved all my stuff.

"Hey, Malik!" I called out and waved to our easy-going neighbor across the street.

"Eddie, Ray, good luck on the move. Keep in touch." Malik waved back before driving away.

"I didn't know that guy knew our names." Ray watched the exchange.

"He's only been our neighbor for, like, three years." I returned my art book to the box with the others. "Haven't you ever talked to him?"

"No. Chatting up people is your thing, not mine. You're just like Mom," my brother said.

"Am not." I spun around to enlighten him as to why, but Ray had turned his back.

His attention moved to my beat-up silver truck and the six overstuffed trash bags and boxes that filled the truck's bed.

"All you have are clothes?"

"And books." I nodded, proud of my stuff.

Ray grunted. "You're such a girl."

"Clothes maketh the man," I said, letting my brother's comment roll off of me.

On the verge of thirty, Ray still wore different combinations of the same T-shirts and jeans, day in and day out. Easy wear at a cheap price; his life's uniform, the same stuff he wore to the construction sites where we worked.

What did the entirety of my personal effects, bunched into thrifty luggage, say about me to others? It showed my appreciation for clothes. *A deep appreciation.*

It also said I had a lot of books—probably too many for a guy so into his clothes.

I followed Ray back inside the house. Our rental, a small unassuming house on the north side of town, was where Ray and I had lived most of our lives. Our mother moved out a few

years ago to live with her boyfriend, Mike. She'd packed her things and handed Ray and me the keys. The bills, too. It was an adjustment, but it worked out okay. We split the monthly cost and the chores, though Ray kept better track of the 'to-do' list than I did. I managed our social life, rounding up friends for poker nights and Ultimate Fighter viewing parties.

Today, though, Ray was moving on. My brother popped the big question to his longtime girlfriend, Amy. The two of them wanted their own place to start the next page of their story—without me cohabitating with them. I couldn't comfortably afford the rent and take care of an entire house on my own, so it was moving day, for all of us.

Inside the kitchen, the pale-brown cabinet doors hung open, their gaping mouths exposing shelf after empty shelf, all layered with years of grunge. On the battered, round kitchen table, a surface spoiled by careless boys and more recently, busy adult men, lay one of Grams' letters, this one written to Ray.

The letters punctuated Grams' recent passing a few months ago.

I braced my hands on the table and read the letter again, my breathing measured, hoping to cool the burn behind my eyes. My callused fingertip scraped the smooth paper as I traced my grandmother's perfect script. At a legal meeting to settle Grams' estate—the sale of her small house and property—we were informed she'd written three letters, one to each of us: Ray, our mother, and me.

A lingering voice from the beyond.

We'd all been awaiting the arrival of our personal letter. Ray got his first. The typewritten correspondence from Grams' lawyer came enclosed with her letter to Ray. It outlined the steps my brother had to take to get his share of the inheritance. Grams wanted him married. When he met those terms, he'd get the down payment to buy a house.

"I'll finally be able to buy a house," he'd said when we first learned.

"Grams putting on the pressure from the grave," I'd teased.

"Nobody's forcing us to get married." There had been an edge of defensiveness in his tone. "Amy and I wouldn't do it if we didn't want to."

That was a month ago. Ray and Amy were now engaged. With the inheritance imminent, the two of them were preparing to buy a small house in Center Moriches, a Long Island town, farther east of where we lived. They were planning a wedding for the following summer.

I leaned against the counter and looked at Ray. My brother had gotten his act together. He'd lost that painful childhood stutter that made him the butt of jokes and an easy target for bullies in school. Because he was four years older, Ray never liked being shorter and thinner than me. Height couldn't be changed, but after years of manual labor, he'd put on some weight, and his once scrawny chest and arms had thickened. My brother wore his hard-won confidence like a dimpled coat of hardened marine varnish. No one messed with him anymore.

Toby Faye, his best friend, had helped him survive those years. Toby gave him a job when he'd really needed one. In fact, he'd given both of us jobs. Ray worked hard at everything he did, including his job and winning Amy over. The efforts were paying off. He'd moved up the ranks at work and won the woman. Kind, sweet Amy had seen something in my brother no one else saw. The new house wasn't much to look at, but still, Ray was about to be a homeowner. I never saw that coming. Guys like us were renters, not property owners. I was happy for him, happy for them both.

"Wonder what my letter will say." I scratched the back of my head.

"Mom said she got her letter yesterday." Ray turned away and began packing dishes into a box.

"Funny, she didn't mention it to me." I grabbed a roll of packing tape on the counter and began to close and seal a few of the boxes of kitchenware.

"She was weirdly closemouthed about it." Ray pushed another box at me.

Our mother, a serial oversharer, had no qualms about texting her boys at any hour. Day or night, she messaged us about unimportant things. Photos of her manicured nails, the dog playing with a new squeaky toy, a question about an actor or entertainer that she could easily Google herself. Not telling me about the letter seemed odd.

"Why would that be?" I asked. "I won't have any problem doing whatever Grams wants me to."

"You say that now." My brother pegged me with a wicked grin. "But you both have to do what Grams asks, otherwise neither of you will get a dime."

"Whatever. I just hope the change of address doesn't screw up the delivery of my letter." My hands shook as I finished taping another box and pushed it aside. Stressing over the letter made little sense. I didn't have a reason to worry. I didn't have a girlfriend, and now, not even a home. What could Grams ask of me?

Dishes clinked as Ray kept packing.

“If it gets forwarded to me, I’ll let you know,” he said.

I left the kitchen and went down the narrow hallway to my childhood bedroom. Somehow it looked smaller without all my crap. I smiled, thinking about how many coats of paint it would take the landlord to cover the deep-velvet purple walls and the many characters I’d painted on them.

On center stage, a life-sized Conan the Barbarian dominated the room. The behemoth held a menacing sword over his head, ready for a throw-down. Over the one window that looked out on the small yard, a lean, muscular Spiderman swung in from the corner to join the scene. Low, under the window, the iconic Mario hopped a spotted mushroom. His brother, Luigi, toddled behind him.

Next to the door, I’d painted a trippy mosaic of colors, years in the making. I’d added new colors after each birthday and holiday when I had money from my grandparents to buy new tubes of paint. I remembered those times as a teenager, standing before the rack of paints in the craft store, the assortment of colors like candy. Reds, greens, blues in every tint and shade of the color wheel. Cadmium red, burnt umber, raw sienna, hooker’s green, yellow oxide. Even the non-colors, white and black, had many shades.

I remembered how my palms itched because I’d wanted them all. But I’d always had to settle for only one or two.

I took out my phone, snapped a few shots of my walls for posterity, and grabbed the last bag. A trash bag of dried up dreams filled with old tubes of paint, brittle paintbrushes, sketchbooks with yellowed pages, and several near-finished canvases. Bulky with squared edges that threatened to poke through the plastic, the bag was heavier than all the others. I dropped it off at the curb for waste pickup, refusing to look back.

Bayport, the next town over, was my new zip code. Toby and Claudia had offered me a fixed-up basement apartment in their big blue Dutch colonial. I would now call my boss and his wife landlord. I liked the area. Every house had trees, green lawns, and edged driveways instead of dirt and broken-down cars like my old neighborhood.

Claudia’s sleek, all-electric blue Tesla glistened in the doublewide driveway. After the birth of their second kid, the family had gone green. The basement apartment’s entrance was on the side of the house. I parked my truck and crossed the black asphalt, warm from the late summer

sun. I balanced a box of books under one arm and grabbed two trash bags of clothes from the back of the truck. Just as I reached the gate, Claudia called from the front door.

“Hey, come in this way. It’ll be easier,” she said.

I changed route and climbed the set of wide wooden steps to the front porch. The box of books under my arm slipped, making a sonic boom as it hit the ground. The contents spilled out. With a grunt of annoyance, I dropped the bags of clothes and crouched down to re-box the books.

“Hang on, let me give you a hand.” She squatted, belly between her knees, scooped up a few hardcovers and shuffled through the titles. “Lots and lots of books about art.”

“I got them.” I took the titles from her. “I might not come from the right side of the tracks, but I’m not about to let you help me move my shit in your condition.”

“My condition?” She stood, hands rested on hips. “I’m pregnant, not incapacitated.”

“You look like you swallowed a basketball.” It looked uncomfortable. I kept that to myself. “Toby would kick my butt into next week if I let you so much as lift a finger.”

Claudia held the door for me. I headed toward the back of the house, stopping before I reached the basement steps. In the big, bright family room, colorful images flashed across the television. In front of the large screen, Claudia and Toby’s two daughters were dancing and singing along to a cheesy, saccharine tune, toys scattered around their little feet.

Grinning, I stopped to watch them.

“Can I join this party?”

They met my question with two ear-piercing screeches.

“Uncle Eddie’s here!” Five-year-old Julianne, fair like her father, jumped up and wrapped herself around my right leg.

“Weddi’s here!” Two seconds behind her, Beatrix, almost three, whose darker-toned skin and hair favored her mother’s Mediterranean heritage, curled her chubby short arms around my left leg.

My heart ballooned in my chest. The girls, blue-eyed, freckled and adorable, were miniature angels made in the images of two of my favorite people.

“Girls, Uncle Eddie is busy.” Claudia leaned a hip against the back of the couch. “Maybe later, if you ask nicely, he can come back and read you a bedtime story.”

“Oh, quit it. They’re fine.” I set my stuff on the floor and dropped onto the family’s large sectional couch. “I always have time for my favorite girls.”

Beatrix handed me a tiny pink plastic hairbrush and a Barbie doll with a pouf of tangled, frizzy hair. I smiled and attempted to tame the ratty mess while Claudia carried on a stream of mostly one-side conversation from behind me. Beatrix curled into my side. Her older sister sat next to me, opened a kiddie book and read aloud.

This was an awesome house with the coolest family. I appreciated that Toby and Claudia insisted the girls call me uncle, but they weren’t related to me. After our mother, though, they were the closest thing to family that Ray and I had.

Claudia slid into an overstuffed upholstered chair across from the couch, unhampered by her protruding belly.

“I guess I’ll have to acquire a taste for obnoxiously upbeat music.” I motioned to the television.

“Stick around here long enough, it grows on you. You’ll find yourself singing along.” She chuckled. “Then, you’ll join the dance party. I suggest you don’t fight it. It’s inevitable.”

“I’m down with that. You know I like to dance.” I smiled. “In fact, I got an itch to get out dancing. You got a pretty neighbor or anyone I can take out?”

“Oh no, I’m done playing matchmaker.” She shook her head. “You didn’t like anyone I fixed you up with in the past. You’re too picky.”

“Because they didn’t meet my criteria.”

“And that is?”

“They have to be like you. You are the perfect woman.”

“Having you around the house will do wonders for my ego.” She laughed, as I knew she would. “It’s a good thing Toby and I are secure in our relationship.”

“Yeah, he totally doesn’t view me as a threat otherwise he wouldn’t let me move in here with you. And since you’re taken, I need a girl who’s got her sh—” I caught myself and lifted a hand to stroke the dark brown ringlets on the back of Beatrix’s little head. “I’d like a girl—no, a woman—with a certain level of maturity.”

“*Rightttt.*” Claudia dragged the word out, holding back a smile. “Because you’ve got all your *stuff* together.”

My face warmed with her assessment. A mere day-laborer working under her husband's leadership, and now, her family's basement tenant—I didn't have bragging rights.

"That's about to change." I gave Barbie back to Beatrix and stood to retrieve my stuff. "I'm expecting a sizeable influx of cash from the sale of my grandmother's house."

"What will you do with your part of the inheritance?" She draped her hands across the lump of her abdomen.

I readjusted the box under my arm and looked around.

Toby's upbringing, while not the same as mine, had crossovers. We'd both faced hardships earlier in life. No dad in the picture to usher us through those formidable years; money was always in limited supply.

Toby had turned a pathetic existence into gold, through his work and investments. Together with Claudia, they'd built an epic life.

I could do that, too.

His trajectory would be my blueprint. I'd simply do what he did. Grams' money would speed up the process.

"I'll buy some investment property and put my future in order," I said with confidence.

"That's great." Claudia gave me an approving nod. "Oh, speaking of which, you got a FedEx delivery earlier. I signed for it and left it on the counter downstairs."

A cold sensation crept down my spine. Grams' letter had found me.

"Better get my stuff unloaded before it gets dark. Catch up with you later," I said.

A set of carpeted steps at the back of the den led to the door of my new subterranean dwelling. The apartment had one primary room divided into two areas by a raised counter. On one side, a narrow galley kitchen, on the other, a double bed, a TV, and a second-hand love seat. I slid the box of books onto the counter where a large flat mail envelope lay addressed to me.

I ignored it while I unloaded my stuff from the truck. Ignored it while I tucked my outrageous amount of clothes into the small chest of drawers and lined up my shoes in an even smaller closet. Ignored it as I organized my toiletries in the tiny bathroom.

With nothing left pressing for my attention, I picked up the letter.

Feeling too confined in the apartment, I used my exterior entry to go outside. I popped up the cement steps, two at a time, dropped onto one of the family's lounge chairs on the back deck and tore open the mailer. It contained a cover letter and a plain white legal-sized envelope.

The letter, from the law offices of Richard J. Morris, was the exact duplicate of the one I'd seen at Ray's. A few lines of legal jargon on the pristine, weighted paper informed me that inside the enclosed envelope was a personal letter written to me, part of the will and testament of Anita Marion Davies, now deceased.

I pressed the envelope to my chest and closed my eyes against the sun. Grams had loved both Ray and me, but she and I? We had a special bond.

My grandmother had started my art book collection.

In my first year of high school, when my grades took a nosedive, my grandmother stepped in. My mother's mother took me to a bookstore, stuck a crisp twenty-dollar note in my hand, and told me to pick something out. I could keep the change she promised, further vowing a repeat performance the following month, with a few small conditions: that I read the book I picked, and then tell her about it.

That day, I'd chosen *Twentieth-Century American Art* because of Andy Warhol's iconic painting of Marilyn Monroe on the cover. Besides, the ratio of glossy pages of art seemed higher than the pages of text.

I was still late to school every morning, but never late for our book discussions.

Over the last year, her health had begun to fail. She grew weaker as the months slid by. I visited often; saw the decline. I'd sat with her in those final days, holding her cool wrinkled hands, so small and frail between my much larger ones. I thanked her for helping me get through my school years, for buying me art books, and for always being that one person who listened when I needed to talk.

I was at her side when she slipped out of this world.

I felt her loss every day since, but this letter, this last letter, written to me, frightened me for a reason I couldn't express. I'd told her stuff I'd told no one about—my dreams, my fears. I'd been honest with her, more honest than I'd been with anyone. Ever.

Unable to sit, I pushed to my feet. I paced the width of the deck twice before I opened the envelope.

My Dearest Eddie,

As I write this letter, the last words you'll have from me, my heart is full of love and memories of our time together. When you were small, I loved buying you books and finger paints, seeing that sparkle in your eye as you leafed through the pages or drew me another

masterpiece for my refrigerator door. You had a natural eagerness to learn, to absorb. On a recent visit, I noticed your eyes still light up when you talk about new projects. You're creative. You always have been.

Over the last year, through our weekly talks, you expressed some of your greatest setbacks and disappointments. One of those disappointments was how you wasted your high school years not applying yourself, because maybe then, you would have gotten into art school and be doing what you once dreamed about.

You grew up without a male role model, and a mother who had herself spurned school. You had no encouragement to excel. By no fault of your own, you landed where most would have expected.

You also spoke candidly about having a father who abandoned your family. How his refusal to know you left you questioning what you'd done wrong.

Your words pained me, Eddie, because this is not your story.

As a widow on a pension, I only have my house to leave my one daughter and two grandsons. I hired Mr. Morris, an estate planner, to set up a disbursement account to handle the proceeds from the sale of my house. The money will be divided among the three of you: Ray, you, and your mother.

As I think about the legacy I leave behind, I've decided it must be about more than money. To get your inheritance, I request that each of you meet one requirement; something I believe whole-heartedly will make you see life through another set of eyes. Ray needed an incentive to make an honest woman out of that lovely young lady. I gave him one. Yours and your mother's requirements are tied together. When she fulfills what I ask of her, you will understand why.

I want you to go to Positano, Italy. I made arrangements to cover your airfare and hotel stay. When you return home, you will receive tuition money for the school of your choice. Whether it is a technical program or art school is up to you. Mr. Morris will take care of the details when the time comes.

To understand why, I have made your mother's requirement to share a truth with you, a secret I have kept for her.

I wish I had more time on Earth to see you through this. I promise to whisper in your ear, to remind you to have faith, to be brave and carry on, that you will find the right path, the one that fulfills you.

If I didn't tell you then, I'll say it now—let your past regrets go. Go forward with intent. You can change your future just by taking a step in a new direction.

Always in my heart,

Grandma

P.S. Please take Mary to Italy with you.

I blinked several times and lowered the letter.

Positano, Italy? I didn't know where that was or why Grams decided I needed to go. In all our talks, I had never mentioned that I wanted to go to Italy.

Mom had a secret—one Grams had required her to share with me.

Required.

Somehow, mom's requirement would explain mine. Such a cryptic letter. I had a premonition that my oversharing with Grams was about to bite me in the ass. I bit my lip until it bled, punishing myself for bringing Grams down with my disappointments.

The next step meant checking in with my mother. I texted her to make sure she was home before heading over.

For the past six years, Mom shared a simple, one-story house with her boyfriend in Holbrook, ten minutes north of my new digs. Mike was a motorhead with a Harley, an enormous truck and an even bigger attitude. We weren't buddies, but that was okay. He'd stuck around, unlike our quote, unquote Dad, Tom Rudack, whose whereabouts were currently unknown.

Mom answered the door wearing her usual jeans, leather vest and boots, rocking the aged-biker-chick look. She left me to let myself in, saying nothing as I closed the door behind me. She stood, arms crossed, as I pulled the letter from my back pocket.

"I got Grams' letter. She said you're supposed to tell me something."

I might've overlooked her slight, wilting hesitation had it not been for the hiss that followed.

"Sit." She gestured to the couch. "I'll grab us something to drink."

Mom disappeared into the kitchen. The letter shook in my hand. A growing hunch told me that whatever my mother's truth was, it would affect our relationship. I sat down on the well-worn blue microfiber couch, next to Whiskey, Mike's pit bull mix, curled up, asleep. I absently reached over to pet her, attempting to rein in my runaway worries.

My mother came out with two shot glasses and a bottle of bourbon. She poured some liquor in each glass and put one in front of me on the coffee table. She downed hers before taking a seat on the couch next to me.

My stomach curled at the thought of mixing bourbon with my upset stomach.

“For some strange reason, Grams wants me to go to Italy. She said you had a secret to share, something that could explain why.”

My mother fidgeted silently, hands in her lap. I braced myself.

“Tom Rudack is *not* your father.”

I stared at the boring beige rug under my feet. I didn’t know what I expected her to say, but it wasn’t *that*.

I wrangled my bottom lip between my teeth and winced from the bruising I’d given it earlier.

“Stop biting your lip,” she said.

“Are you saying the man you were married to is not Ray’s and my father?” I raised my eyes to her face.

Chin lifted with an air of defiance I didn’t quite understand, she watched me, her brown eyes partially hidden behind long bangs, unnaturally dark for her age.

“He’s Ray’s father. Not yours.”

I let out a noisy breath and shook my head. “Then who... who is my father?”

“He’s a man from the garden center where I used to work. An Italian who came here on a work visa. He worked a year and went back to Italy.”

My real father was *Italian*?

“He didn’t know anyone,” Mom rambled on, a rise in her voice. “I was just being nice, at first, but I was lonely. After Ray was born, some nights Tom didn’t bother coming home. He’d sleep off his hangover with some tramp he’d met in a bar. He wasn’t much of a father to Ray.”

“He was around when I was little.” The glass of bourbon called to me. My stomach no less riotous, but oh, how I wanted it. “I remember him.”

“I never told him about the affair.” She lowered her eyes. “Grandma said from Day One I should’ve never married Tom. I couldn’t have her gloating. I tried to make it work.”

“How can you be sure he isn’t my father? Did you do a paternity test?”

“No, honey bear. I just know.” She put a hand on my leg, and her eyes met mine. “I see him in you, in the darker tone in your skin and hair, your lean build.”

Annoyed, I pushed her hand away. “Well, who is he? Did I ever meet him?”

“His name was Giovanni Lo Duca. He left the country before I realized I was pregnant. This was before we could go online and find someone as we can now.” She glanced down at her hands, twisting her fingers together. “I never got to tell him about you.”

“What am I supposed to do with this information?” I stared hard at her. “Does Grams expect me to go to Italy to *find* him?”

“I think so.” My mother shrugged. “I looked him up on the computer a few years ago. He lives in Positano, on the Amalfi Coast. At least I think it was him. You kids are so much better with that online stuff.”

Now, I reached for the bourbon—the bottle, not the glass. Mom went silent as I twisted the cap off and raised it to my mouth. The sharp smell made me wince—I preferred beer to hard liquor but forced myself to take a big gulp. I capped the bottle and stood, digging into my jeans’ pocket for my truck keys.

“Where are you going?” My mother followed me to the door.

“Suddenly you care?” I snapped.

“Honey bear—” She reached for my arm.

“Don’t touch me.” I ripped my arm away from her.

She lost her balance and fell backward into the door. I opened my mouth to apologize when the door handle turned. I grabbed her arm and yanked her out of the way.

The door swung open. Mom’s boyfriend, Mike, appeared on the other side of it.

“What the fuck is going on?” His large frame filled the doorway, his bare muscled arms damp with perspiration. “What d’you do to your mother?”

“Nothing,” I said.

His eyes combed my mother’s face, wet with tears, her eyes red and makeup-ringed. His bottom lip disappeared, curling inwards.

“Don’t look like nothing, Eddie. You mouthing off to her?”

“What do you care, Mike?” Venom filled my mouth, inducing my rattlesnake strike. “You’re just another guy in a *long* list of guys that my mother slept with.”

Mike was fast for a big guy; I'll give him that. I never saw his fist before it struck me solidly, right in the middle of my face. The force of it sent me backward, but somehow I managed to hold on to the bottle of bourbon. With a hand on my nose, I stood on wobbly legs and pushed past the two of them. Mom yelled—at me, at him—who knows. I didn't stick around to find out.

Chapter 2

I gripped my truck's steering wheel and stomped on the gas pedal, headed home to ice my throbbing face. The engine responded with a shudder, taking its sweet time to build to a speed that matched my mood.

Outside of my new digs, I threw the truck into park and reached over to the passenger seat for the bottle I'd pinched from my mother.

She owed it to me.

I slunk through the shadows of the moonlit backyard and reached over the fence, fumbling with the catch on the gate until it opened. Each step down to the basement made pain rattle in my head. I opened the door with my new key but left the lights off, afraid the brightness would make my head hurt more.

Overhead, the floor creaked with moving footsteps, the faint murmurs of talking, and the television in the background—Toby, Claudia, and their kids. But the only company I wanted was that shiny bottle of bourbon. My mother's shocking confession meant my good-for-nothing dad, Tom Rudack, wasn't my dad. Being Tom's son never got me anything, but I'd carried that asshole's last name all of my 26 years. Somehow, having a stranger for a father seemed worse than having a deadbeat dad. A trapdoor had opened beneath my feet and everything I knew about myself was tumbling, free-falling through it.

I braced myself and took a big gulp. The bite of the bourbon's intense earthy flavor struck the back of my throat with a blaze of heat. It made me gag a bit, but that didn't stop me from drinking more. It didn't take long for me to see the benefits of drinking the hard stuff. It was more merciful than beer, so much faster at dulling the thoughts that spun like a sadistic carousel in my head.

I took another pull from the bottle and had a sudden urge to lie down. I snatched up my grandmother's letter and bumped my way through my new, one-room living space. Unaccustomed to the layout, especially in the dark, the left toe of my sneaker caught the leg of the bed. In my alcohol-induced fog, I fell gracelessly, catching my chin on the low table before I hit the carpeted cement floor. The pile of books I had on the table toppled,

fanning out around me. Pain exploded throughout my face and ripped a loud swear from my mouth.

The door at the top of the steps squeaked and light poured down into my dungeon darkness. I sat in a ring of books, dizzy. The hand I swiped under my chin came away wet.

“Dude, you down there?” Toby called down the steps.

“Yes.” I tried to get up. Pain leaped up to my face, sending a white, blinding haze over my sight. “Holy shitsters.”

Something was very wrong.

“You all right? Claudia said she heard something crash.”

“I fell, and I... um, I think I might need some help.”

Toby switched on the light and his footsteps fell in a steady beat down the stairs.

“What the fuck happened?” Offering me a hand, my friend pulled me to my feet.

“Took a header on the table.” I moved my jaw, testing it out.

Toby handed me a bunch of paper towels to wipe the blood off my face. I tucked the letter in my back pocket and followed him upstairs. The girls were in the family room watching an animated movie, their little heads leaning against Claudia’s sizeable baby belly.

“Oh goodness, Uncle Eddie!” Julianne shouted, comically slapping her hands to the sides of her face. “What happened to you?”

“Oh, goodneff un-Weddie! Wha-appened you?” Beatrix parroted her big sister. Both of the girls’ big blue eyes targeted me.

“I’m fine. Don’t you worry about Uncle Eddie.” I winked at them.

“Julianne, I need you to watch Beatrix while Mommy and Daddy talk to Uncle Eddie.” Claudia hoisted herself off the couch and waddled toward me. After she tugged me into the kitchen, she flipped on the bright overhead lights and gently probed my chin with her fingertips.

“Oww.” I flinched. “That hurts.”

“Looks like your chin will need a few stitches. Why is your nose swollen, too?” She shook her head. “That must have been some spectacular fall for you to hit both areas of your face at one time.”

“Oh, the nose happened earlier. Got punched.”

“You need to get an X-ray. It could be broken.” Claudia pressed her lips together, her eyes catching Toby’s. “I’ll make a couple of ice packs, one for your nose, one for your chin, and then Toby can take you to the emergency room.”

The door yawned open. A young woman with a lab coat over indigo-colored scrubs came into the hospital exam room.

“Hello, I’m Doctor Barnes.” She shook both of our hands, her eyes and smile lingered in Toby’s direction before she turned her attention to me. “No surprise. Your X-ray shows a broken nose. It will heal by itself with little discomfort. You’ll have discoloration and bruising around the eyes for a couple of weeks until it heals. I’ll send in a PA to put a few stitches in your chin. Keep it clean and go easy for a couple of weeks.”

She made a few notes on my chart and, after one last peek at Toby, almost walked into the door. With a girlish giggle, she left the room.

Not seeming to notice the doctor’s behavior, Toby put his hands on his hips and stared at the wall. I armored myself with stylish threads and haircuts, but Toby kept it simple. Like Ray, he was mostly a jeans and t-shirt guy. Despite the simplicity, he had a presence in any room.

I did okay with girls, especially with those five years and under, but I’d give my left arm to have a mature woman react to me like that.

“A broken nose and stitches. Boy, when you do it, you do it up good.” Toby shook his head and crossed his arms. “Who’s this guy that punched you? Do I need to give him a tune-up?”

“No.” My face warmed. A tempting thought. I’d seen him mess up a few guys back in the day, but what an ass I’d look like if I sent Toby to fight my battles. “It was Mike.”

“Whoa, that’s awkward.” His brows knitted together. “Did you slug him back?”

“You know that’s not my style.” I shrugged. The analgesic they had given me was taking the edge off the pain. “I’m more of a lover than a fighter.”

“Yeah, yeah.” He tried to hold back a grin. “What did your mom say when this went down?”

I picked up the pen the doctor left behind and began doodling in the margins of my medical paperwork. “Well, I imagine she felt bad.”

“How come she didn’t take you to the hospital?” He pressed.

I stared down at the series of intersecting lines and concentric circles I’d drawn, considering my answer when the door banged open.

“Hello!” The physician’s assistant, a Hispanic guy in hospital scrubs, entered the room. He set a steel medical cart next to my chair. Atop the cart lay a tray of surgical supplies: a curved needle for the sutures, gauze, and a long, scary needle. He talked while he numbed my chin with a series of quick injections. I trained my eyes on his shirt, trying not to think about what he was doing. His scrubs were blue, a deeper shade than the doctor’s scrubs. Cobalt, I decided.

“By the way, I need a couple of weeks off,” I said, my lips and tongue growing thicker and more sluggish with each passing second.

“Weeks? Not possible. It’s the end of the season. The beach houses need to be closed up and winterized,” he said.

“I got several weeks of unused vacation time. I need two weeks to take care of some stuff.”

“What stuff?” he asked, but the physician’s assistant lifted my chin to begin the stitches.

“I have to travel to get the money my grandmoffa leff me,” I tried to respond. “I’ll haff a pocket full of ‘old, hard cash to inffest when I gef back. I want in on the next inffestment house.”

Out of the corner of my eye, Toby paced the length of the exam room, scratching the back of his head. “If you need the time, you have to take it immediately. It’s the only time we can afford to be a man down. Ray and I will need you back the first week of October to wrap up the rental season. And, if you’re serious about investing, I have my eye on some property.”

* * *

Toby and I got back to the house late. He headed inside. I sat outside on their front stoop looking over my calendar app.

The beginning of September was a peaceful time over on Fire Island, but my least favorite time of the year. The place emptied out. Vacationers on Fire Island kept things interesting. Toby needed me back by the earlier part of October, which was fair. Empty rentals allowed the crew to be more productive with repairs and improvements. For me, though, the narrow timeline meant I would only have four weeks to plan a trip to Italy, go find my father, and come back.

I sighed, staring up at the sky. Was it possible? Did I even want to find this Giovanni Lo Duca guy?

Behind me, the storm door whined on its hinges.

“Hey,” Claudia called out to me. “Get your butt in here.”

I climbed the steps. “I didn’t wake you, did I?”

“No, I was up. The little guy is active tonight.” She rubbed her stomach through her cotton T-shirt dress and shuffled away, leaving me to shut the door.

“I’m glad you’re up. I kind of wanted to talk to you,” I said.

“Sure. I’ll make us tea.” Claudia led the way into the large homey kitchen and turned on the light.

A pleasant trace of lemon cleaner hit my nose. She plugged in the electric teapot, flipped the switch, and set up two mugs with tea bags. I settled onto a wooden stool at the countertop. One of the best things about moving into Toby and Claudia’s basement apartment was having Claudia there to help me figure things out.

“Are you okay? Toby told me Mike hit you.”

“I’m fine.” I pressed my eyes shut, squeezing away the smack of emotions brought on by her concern. “Mike got in the middle of an argument between my mother and me.”

“Seems so unlike Mike. What were you arguing about?”

“What my grandmother wrote in her letter.” I pulled Grams’ letter from my pocket and laid the crinkled pages on the countertop between us. “Turns out, my mother kept a pretty hefty secret from me.”

After Claudia finished reading the letter, I filled her in on the bomb my mother dropped on me.

“Wow. Are you okay?” She reached across the counter to touch my forearm.

“On the surface, I’m still me.” I scrubbed an impatient hand over my cheek. My knuckles brushed against the bandage on my chin. “But it sort of changes things.”

“How could it not?” She glanced back down at the letter and pointed at my grandmother’s postscript note. “Who’s this Mary?”

“The Virgin Mary.” I chuckled, instantly regretting it as a zing of pain raced up my jaw. “My grandmother gave me a plastic statue when I was younger. She believed it kept me safe.”

“Looks like you and Mary are going to Italy,” she said, sounding resolute. “And when you get back, you’ll pick out an art school.”

“Not doing the school thing. Grams probably remembered me yapping about being an artist as a kid.” I waved a hand. That ship sailed long ago. “I’m using that money to buy a rental property with Toby.”

“Okay, so you get an all-expenses-paid trip to Italy and when you get back, money. What’s the downside to this?” she asked.

“The biological father thing. It doesn’t say I’m required to search for him, but do you think I should?”

“Sounds as if that was your grandmother’s intention.” She placed a hand on the letter.

“I don’t know this man. He isn’t even aware that I exist.” I glanced down at my mug of tea. “Say I find him, and that’s a big ‘if,’ what happens then? The guy lives in Italy. He probably has a family.”

Along with two spongy discarded tea bags on a dish, a beat of silence sat between us.

“I can’t say what will happen. Maybe the trip will spur a relationship with this man? At the very least, you’ll get a trip to Europe. Toby and I flew to Italy for two weeks on our honeymoon. It’s magnificent.” She rested her chin on her hand, a look of contentment softened her face. “I loved every moment.”

Her expression buoyed me.

“If I’m going, I need to get to moving on this right away. The boss man needs me back by October. Think you can help me plan the trip?”

She covered my hand with hers. “Are you kidding? Of course.”