

A
SPONTANEOUS,
OFFBEAT
ROMANCE.

HE
+ SHE

MICHELLE WARREN



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+SHE

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For sales information please contact

mmichellewarren@gmail.com

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Editing and Formatting by:

Pam Berehulke

www.BulletproofEditing.com

Cover and Book Design by:

Michelle Preast

www.facebook.com/indiebookcovers

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WHEN LOVE IS NOT MADNESS,
IT IS NOT LOVE

Pedro Calderón de la Barca





Step Nine: Make direct amends with the people I've hurt.

That's part of AA's recovery plan, but it's easier said than done. At least, it is if the prick staring at me from the front door of his farmhouse has anything to do with it. I grip the handle and pull, releasing the Jeep's door. It creaks open as I step out into the night with determination. Before I'm five paces into the yard, the dickhead meets me chest to chest with the usual look on his face—like he wants to kill me. And the truth is, he has every right to feel that way.

"I told you she doesn't want see you," he spits out.

"I know you did." I meet his gaze, puffing up my chest like some rooster in a cockfight. I set my jaw. "But I need her to know I'm sorr—"

He presses his large hands into my shoulders and shoves me away. I fall backward and slam into my car, making a futile grab at the side mirror before I hit the ground. Sollie Winters is standing over me so fast, all I have time to do is brace myself for the impact of his steely

fist before it makes contact with my nose.

I don't fight back, since I'm desperately trying not to be a fighting person. Instead, I don't defend myself, I just lie still, allowing him to purge his anger. He owes me every strike to the jaw, every punch to the gut, every spurt of blood, and so much more. Though I didn't come here for a confrontation, I expected the less-than-warm-and-fuzzy welcome. It mirrors the two previous times I've tried to apologize to her since I learned she came home. But I needed to finish this, to finally say I'm sorry so I can get the hell out of town and move on with my life. There's nothing for me here after what I've done. I've ruined everything.

These are the words that run through my head as he pummels me one last time. He twists his fingers into my shirt, lifting my wobbling body to my feet, and shoves me back through my open car door.

"If you're not gone in five fucking seconds, I'm calling the police!" Sollie's slight Southern twang is more pronounced when he's pissed. He kicks the door shut and I sprawl across the front seat, a bruised and bloody mess. In the yellow haze of the front porch light, I see his wife run to his side, and though a frail thing, she forcefully ushers him back into the house, where their dogs are barking wildly. She looks over at me, giving me the same apologetic look she's given me before as they disappear into the house. That's when I notice a silhouette standing

inside the lit window of an upstairs room.

Ignoring his warning, I sit up in the driver's seat, grip the steering wheel, and lean forward, looking closer. She could be at that window. Right there, watching me get my head split open, painting the front yard red. If she's looking out, it might make her happy to see me this way. If I were her, I wouldn't be happy until I was dead.

When the silhouette moves across the room and disappears, I contemplate one more go of it, despite the fact that my face resembles a rotting pumpkin smashed in the road. I take a second to consider and think of my counselor, who urged me not to return for a third time for a third beating. "You've done all you can," Mrs. Mankin drilled into me at our last session. It's true, I have, everything just short of stalking the girl, but I won't allow myself to do *that*. I don't need more problems than I already have.

I slam my palm to the dashboard, fumble for my keys, shove one in the ignition and turn on my car, revving the engine. Slamming the stick shift into reverse, I peel out of the dusty driveway, swerving as I back out, barely missing the rusted mailbox before I speed away. If I don't get out of here soon, I know that dickhead will have the cops all over my ass.

SHE 2

Today was supposed to be one of the best days of my life; a day I would never forget.

Come to think of it, that last part's true. I'll never forget it for all the reasons that make you ache inside, the reasons that make you want to give up completely, the reasons that make you want to fold in on yourself like origami paper, folding in and over, making the shape smaller and smaller until you disappear into an infinitesimal dot. And because of this there's only one thing I'm completely sure of in my soul—I must leave. Right now.

The glass doors glide open and I stomp through, legs weak and stomach hollow from crying my eyes out in the back of a taxicab. I make my way to the end of a winding line of people. Cheery faces turn when they see my big white dress and absurdly long lace train out of the corner of their eyes, but just as fast as their gaze settles in my direction, ready to greet me with well wishes, it slides away with an obvious pinch of uncomfortable guilt. And honestly, I can't blame them.

“You can go ahead of me.” An older man's voice wavers

as he gestures nervously. With his shifting posture, I can tell he's trying not to look too closely, but with black mascara dripping down my cheeks, mixing with my face powder, red lipstick, and peach blush, it's clear that I'm a hot mess.

I make my way to the counter as each person in line shoos me forward in quick succession.

"May I help you?" The airline agent greets me with an unsure smile.

"I really hope so." I place my handbag on the counter, unzip it, and riffle through the contents as I continue to talk. "I need a ticket for the first plane out of here."

From the edge of my vision, I see that there's a moment of pause on her end, no typing, and no rushing to help, so I look up. The woman purses her lips as if she doesn't believe me.

"Seriously, not kidding." My raccoon eyes widen with an attitude.

The agent nods with a heavy sigh, and after a moment of assessing me, her long fluorescent nails tap the keyboard. "Looks like the first flight that you can make if you hurry is San Francisco."

"Sounds great," I say but frown. The irony of this location being the first option is a slap in the face. I try not to think about the pain and present my credit card and ID.

"It's \$627 with taxes and fees," she adds, as though this will make a difference. A few years ago, it probably would have, but not on this god-awful day.

I shove the card closer. She reluctantly takes it, looking at me from over the rim of her glasses, the way she probably does when her kids give her lip.

“Any baggage?” Her gaze scans the floor behind me.

At this question, I laugh loudly and too obnoxiously, because I’m practically manic and sleep-deprived. I have so much baggage, and all I want to do is desperately leave it behind.

“I’ll take that as a no.” She raises a graying eyebrow and continues typing.

I think I’m almost done, free of Maryland, until she pops up on her tiptoes and peers over the wide counter that separates us. “But with the size of that dress, dear, you’ll need two seats.”

“Come on!” I slam the counter with my palm in a moment of frustration because I can see she’s serious, but for the love of God, I hope she’s not.

“Sorry, you’ll never fit into one seat in that thing.” She waves her arm through the air. “Unless you have something else to change into?”

“No,” I say grimly. “I don’t.” I look down at my beautiful wedding dress. It doesn’t mean what it should; it hasn’t since the moment I shimmied into the lace and silk earlier today. Instead, the stupid white cupcake represents everything I’ll never have; at least, not with the person it was meant to be with.

I glower at the thought of what I must do and take a pen

from my bag. Using it as a makeshift knife, I punch the ballpoint through the outer layer of the fancy fabric, creating a hole large enough to stick my finger through. When I find the perfect grip, I rip off the length of the dress, shredding the hell out of it with all the resentment and sadness that's boiling over inside. I grit my teeth, holding back more tears. If I break down now, again, they may not let me board the plane.

Around me, people gasp and chatter in reaction. "What's she doing? That dress must have cost a fortune," they say. In the commotion, a security guard saunters over. He stands nearby, but as far as I know, it's not illegal for a crazy girl to trash her own wedding dress in an airport.

By the time I'm done, the skirt looks more like a long, uneven tutu than anything appropriate enough to wear while walking down the aisle. Vera Wang would be horrified. I step out of the extra fabric and kick it aside with my boots. I'm happy that I had the good sense to wear them instead of those stupid heels that Bren's mom picked out for me.

"Bren." I say his name under my breath and bite my lip. The vision of his beautiful Crest smile dances behind my eyes. I used to live for that smile.

Somehow, in the wake of my obnoxious behavior, the agent stops giving me crap about the second seat and finishes printing my ticket. She hands it to me along with my ID and credit card. "Your gate's B62. You better make a run for it."



She walks into the cramped plane cabin with a huge release of breath and face red from running. I mean, I can only guess she's been running. And by the look of the mascara tracks that have dried over her rosy cheeks and her mangled wedding dress, she's running away from an important day. She doesn't look at my face when she squeezes by my seat and down the aisle, she only zones out, stepping slowly in pace with the person in front of her like a zombie.

"Poor thing," The older woman next to me leans over. She places a hand on my arm, as if she's getting ready to share gossip in a hushed tone. "She made quite a scene at the security line when they pulled her aside, but I can see how her appearance could cause concern. Looks like someone really pissed her off."

I laugh at the word *pissed* coming from this little old lady.

She gives my bruised face a once-over. "By the sight of you, you could have been the groom!" She pats me on the arm, as if she just solved the puzzle.

“No, I’m afraid not.” I rub my jaw, still raw from Sol-lie Winters’s beating last week. “If I was lucky enough to have a girl like that,” I nod in the bride’s direction, “I wouldn’t let her run away from our wedding day.”

Underneath the ruined makeup, it’s easy to see that the girl is beautiful. Thick hair, pouty peach lips, and the gentle curve of her body, a fullness that suggests she’s still young, probably early twenties. Unable to look away, I watch as she makes her way to the last row. She ends up sitting in the center seat between two hefty men. With her petite frame, she’s lost in a cavern between them, but as she sits she does something unexpected. Despite her obviously shitty day, she looks to each neighbor with a genuine smile.

I’m immediately in awe of this. I wish I were that optimistic on my bad days. There have been so many of them. And just because the moment is so pure, I wish I had my Canon to take a photograph of the authentic smile from the train-wreck bride. I’m half-tempted to jump up and retrieve it from the overhead bin, but when I look back to her, the simple moment is lost. She’s resting her head back with her eyes shut.

I turn forward, trying to return my thoughts to what they should focus on: my upcoming interview. A new job in San Francisco could be my new beginning. And if I’m not nervous enough, in my head I continually reel through answers to possible questions that they may ask. I can’t

help myself; I've never wanted a job so badly in my life. Never wanted to escape so much. Maybe the bride and I have that in common.

When the plane takes off, the lady next to me settles into a crossword puzzle. I think she finishes exactly two questions before she falls asleep, head drifting to my shoulder, and then proceeds to snore lightly in my ear for the duration of the flight. I allow it, but only because she reminds me of my late grandmother.

Now, that woman was a saint. At least I know she would have forgiven me when my parents and sisters couldn't. Sure, she would have bashed me upside the head, made me recite Hail Marys until my tongue fell out, and forced me into rehab before I completely ruined my life, but even with her tough love, she would have never disowned me. As horrible as everything turned out, she would have never held me responsible for Beth's death. If only Grandma were still here, things might be different. If only Beth were here, things *would* be different. But neither is, which breaks my heart, so I'm leaving everyone I love behind.



Five hours later, the plane lands. I make my way through the airport, retrieve my bag, and then head to the people mover, which transports me to the car rentals. Moving with the large crowd, I walk inside and stand in the Reliable Car Rental line.

That's when I see the train-wreck bride again. She's in front of me. Somehow she's beaten me here, despite being in the back of the plane, and then I notice a possible answer to how. She has no luggage, just a purse strapped across her chest. The tutu of her dress is uneven and cut shorter in the back, showing her shapely legs. As I'm admiring them, she moves ahead as soon as the clerk waves her forward.

Their conversation starts and I try not to listen, but it's nearly impossible with the girl's voice rising slightly with each new sentence. I lift my gaze from browsing my annoying Facebook feed of friends' babies dressed like sunflowers, pets with handwritten signs proclaiming, "I pooped in Daddy's shoe," and lots of food pics—especially bacon. When I do, I see her leaning all the way over the counter to pull a silvery bendable microphone away from the clerk and to her mouth. She taps the head three times before speaking and it buzzes loudly.

"Attention, attention, all rental car businesses." The sweet impish voice carries through the large room over the intercom, and every traveler or car rental employee stops speaking, their heads turning in her direction.

"Great, thanks," she continues awkwardly. "Anyone here have something cooler to rent me than a mommy sedan or kidnap minivan? Maybe something vintage and cute?" She looks around, waiting for an answer.

I quirk a smile. She's insanely adorable or insanely insane; I'm not sure which. Either way I'm intrigued and un-

able to look away.

To my surprise—and probably everyone else’s—a man at the end of the room waves for her attention. I squint to see the sign above him that reads, CLASSIC AUTO RENTALS. “Awesome. Thanks, everyone.” When she pushes the mic back over the counter toward the clerk, it screeches. She turns to leave the line as if she’d just done something normal, completely oblivious to the fact that everyone in the room is still staring at her.

When she passes me, our eyes meet for a millisecond. They’re emerald green and sparkling with determination. Her full lips smile again like she did on the plane, sans dripping makeup, but this time her smile is special because it’s solely for me—it’s gleaming, punctuated with a deep-set scar shaped like a long hook on the line of her jaw.

The girl struts away, tutu and hair bouncing with each step, reminding me of a well-worn porcelain baby doll with spidering cracks over her face and legs. Someone loved her too much, or worse, perhaps abused her.

For her sake, I hope it was the former.

SHE 4

When I slide into the driver's seat of the restored Italian Fiat convertible, I smile. One hand grips the steering wheel while the other slides the key in the ignition. I turn the car on and realize it's been far too long since I was alone and driving myself anywhere. Feeling the car rumble beneath me is my second victory. The first was having the courage to leave.

I look over each shoulder and back out of the parking spot. When I put the car in drive and jam my foot down on the accelerator, I promise myself one thing: This is my new beginning and I won't look into my past with hate any longer, only try to remember the happiness I found there, so I can find it again. It's a stretch of optimism, but in this new place I'm feeling hopeful.

Recklessly, I merge onto Interstate 101, driving north with the convertible top down. After twenty minutes, the boxy skyline of San Francisco appears from the undulating hills that make the city famous. It's as beautiful as I've dreamed about, and as lovely as every photo I've ever seen.

In a last-minute decision met with honking horns and swerving cars, I dart off the highway exit and merge into the chaos of downtown. I didn't expect to want to find a place in the city; I was thinking a road trip was in order. But now that I'm here, I can't resist the idea of seeing San Francisco up close. I cruise and cross many city streets before I see an orange-and-yellow retro neon sign for a hotel opposite the Chinatown Gate, and I quickly maneuver through heavy traffic to pull into the valet lane.

A boy opens my door and says, "Welcome to the Briton Hotel." Despite my appearance, when I halfway expect him to ask me to leave, he hands me a valet ticket instead. The doorman greets me with a wave, and a manager meets me inside. "Checking in today, miss?" No one pays any attention to the way I look. It's a relief because though I wasn't self-conscious when I started this journey, I have been ever since we landed.

"Yes," I say with a nod.

I follow the manager to the counter, where he asks, "May I have the name on the reservation?"

"I don't have a reservation."

"No problem, we do have a few rooms left. How many nights will you be staying with us, and how many in your party?"

I shuffle my feet uncomfortably for a moment. "Just me." I pause at the realization that I'm alone, traveling for the first time and without Bren. I feel myself going to

that dark place, just thinking about it. We dreamed about coming to San Francisco—it was one of the top travel destinations on our list—and now that I’m finally here, it’s under the worst circumstances.

The man clears his throat, and I erase the picture of Bren’s handsome face from my head and respond, trying to take control of my emotions. “I’d like a king bed, non smoking, with a view, for three nights, please.”

“We have just the room.”

“Perfect.” I place my credit card and ID on the counter.

“Great.” He takes the card and continues checking me in. “There’s a pool on the roof, and we serve complimentary cookies in the lobby at five every evening. We also have complimentary bicycles.” He gestures to a pair of beach cruisers sitting by the front door. “Your room is 616.” He hands me the room key card.

“May we help you with your luggage?” he asks.

I accept the hotel key and my credit card, then step backward. “No thanks, I left all my baggage behind.” He gives me a curious look, but I leave before he can question this and quickly jump into the elevator.

On the sixth floor, my room is large. The top half of the room’s walls are wallpapered with pages from famous novels. The lower half is painted a muted apple green. Immediately I walk to the windows and open the blinds, checking my view of the Chinatown Gate. I turn to the bed with a brightly lacquered yellow headboard, and col-

lapse on the mattress.

At home in Baltimore, it would be after dinnertime. And if things had played out the way they were supposed to today, I'd be married by now, eating Chesapeake stuffed chicken at my glittering reception at the Belvedere Hotel, drinking bubbling champagne and break-dancing with the one I love to bad wedding reception music that glorifies chickens.

But here it's barely one o'clock, and all I can focus on is the emptiness in my soul. Depression, anger, regret, guilt—any combination of words you choose to describe my life adds up to the endless tragedy that is now my reality. My stomach rumbles, and I cross my arms over my chest and turn on my side, squeezing my body into a fetal position, crying quiet tears into my pillow.

There are so many things running through my head, a jumbled mess that pushes me farther away from reality. Feeling the shakes rise up through my body like a wave ready to consume me, I quickly reach for my purse, unzip it, and dump the contents on the bed in front of my face. I don't focus on the mess I've just created; it's impossible with the clear rust-colored pill bottle rolling in my direction. It's my necessary bottle of evil. I hate that I am chained to it, but everything inside it will save me. It contains a cocktail of pills to cure my anxiety, insomnia, and other things that led me here. I swipe up the bottle and sit up, unscrew the top like a junkie, and race to the

bathroom for a glass of water. By the time I get there, I'm a jittery mess, aching for the release the pills bring.

Somehow the white pills can make all the pain go away, which is an impressive feat considering the size of my problems compared to the size of the pill. Barely able to stand, I swallow one, shut my eyes, and step away from the sink until my back hits the wall. When I open them again, the bathroom mirror reflects my image—a fragmented, stressed-out mess of a girl in a shredded wedding dress who can't get her crap together. She's hit rock bottom, and all she desperately wants to do is climb out of this hole and be happy again.

I make my way back to the bed, crawl under the covers, and cry until the drug kicks in. When it does, I fall asleep for the first time in days.



I awake a few hours later, feeling better than expected. Popping the white pill doesn't make the bad go away, it just makes me not care about what's happened. In theory, it's a great thing until you want to feel again, which I do, and not just the pain. I love the medications for what they do, but hate them for what they steal from me. I know I should be taking them regularly, but I don't want to anymore. More than anything, I want to free myself from them and everything they represent.

Looking to my nightstand, I find a plate of chocolates.

Were they here before? Does it matter? Hunger pangs hit me again, and I lift the plate and settle it on my stomach. ENJOY THESE COMPLIMENTARY SWEETS. SIGNED, THE BRITON. I read the card sitting next to them and then throw it aside.

I take a bite of the first piece of chocolate. When my stomach twists painfully, I realize I can't remember the last time I've eaten. It hasn't mattered until now. I'll give myself ten minutes to lie here and relax, because the next thing I have to do on this adventure is to find a way out of this funk and some new clothes.

When I leave my hotel, I don't head straight for the department stores. Instead, I cross the street, walking through the Chinatown Gate. It's more enticing and mysterious, and when I enter the neighborhood, I'm visually overloaded by the pagoda architecture, the foreign signage, and the festive red lanterns that weave overhead from one side of the road to the other.

I zigzag in and out of several shops, buying useless imported goodies: a pair of satin embroidered slippers, beaded bracelets, a change purse, and a large pack of Twizzlers. Any other time, I wouldn't have allowed myself these things because I was doing the right thing, being responsible and saving for my future.

Fuck the future. The only thing these two years have taught me is to live in the moment. You can't plan for the future. You can't plan anything with life conspiring

against you every day. You can only live one minute at a time.

One shop sells what I deem as real clothing, and I try on two pairs of jeans, several T-shirts boasting their love or loss of their heart in San Francisco, along with several other necessities. I try each item on, then hand the mangled wedding dress to the Chinese shop owner from around the makeshift dressing room curtain, and ask her to trash it. I never want to see that thing again.

She complies without comment, then meets me at the cash register. There, I can't resist a pack of women's days-of-the-week underpants and some mini-size travel toiletries. Everything I buy fits into a backpack that I pull from another display.

Once I've paid, I leave the shop and wander across the city. After a long stroll, I make it to the beach to see the Golden Gate Bridge. It's what I've walked all this way for, maybe even what I've traveled all this way for. Who knows why I ended up in San Fran, of all places, but I'm here for some reason. Maybe I'll find what I need to pick up the shattered pieces of my life and mind, and move on.

It's late in the day, and I seat myself on a jagged concrete block to eat a round of sourdough bread I picked up in a cute bakery along the way. With the sun blazing golden in the distance, turning the bridge into a caramel-colored silhouette, the water lapping over the rocks, and seagulls gliding with the breeze that rustles my hair, I

feel hope. Real hope. I just have to remember that everything that's gone so wrong is inside the stagnant bubble I currently live in. Outside, beyond the clear iridescent orb, the rest of the world makes sense. People are happy, laughing, and in love. I can hope that one day I will have those things, too. As long as I just focus on each moment and what really matters, I know that life can be beautiful again.



After my interview, which I may or may not have blown, I make my way to a nearby park in Little Italy. I felt confident meeting the partners and presenting my portfolio, but when they asked why I wanted to move cross-country to San Francisco, I froze, remembering everything I'm running from. I managed to push past my blunder and speak passionately about the work, but I'm sure they saw the resentment of leaving home in my eyes. Sometimes my past feels like it's stamped on my face for everyone to see.

Though I'm wearing a suit, I collapse on a dirty bench in a park near a large white chapel. The weather is perfect, the sky's a clear blue, and several people lay out, soaking up the sunshine, despite the fact that it's eleven thirty on a workday. All I can think about is that I don't want to go home to Baltimore. I need to find a way to stay, but with no job, the cost of living in San Francisco is prohibitive unless I join the hippie commune at Haight and Ashbury and dedicate my life to street singing and smoking recreationally.

Thinking the possibility might be a doable option, I pull at my tie, loosening it from my neck. That's when the cars waiting at a red light on the nearby street blow their horns. My eyes find the reason and I'm really sorry when they do. At least twenty completely naked dudes riding bicycles circle the park. First they parade their nudity on main roads, weaving around cars, around the square, and then they circle the paths inside the park for an unfortunate closer view. Only in this city of hippies would people clap and wave them on like heroes.

Though I'm trying hard to ignore them, I find myself focused on only one person, all the way in the back of the group, the only girl brave enough to ride with them: the train-wreck bride, wearing only her bra and lime-green panties. I'd recognize her wild dark hair anywhere.

On her approach I stare, shocked that I've seen her again. Our eyes meet and I smile. It's a simple gesture, but this time it wins me something unexpected. She slows her bike, steers in my direction, and rolls to a stop when she reaches me.

"Hi," she says, greeting me like we know each other.

"Hi." I pause to watch her struggle with her bike, which is much too large for her. "Every time I see you, you're wearing something unexpected."

"How many times have you seen me?" The girl dismounts her bike and rests it on its side. She's completely comfortable with her near nudity, and she has reason to

be. Every milky curve on her body is perfection.

“Three times.”

“Three times!” She leans away to dig into her backpack, and I see her panties have WEDNESDAY printed on the ass. This girl makes me smile, which is a welcome change from all the drama I’ve been dealing with.

“Yes, but I think I like this outfit better,” I admit as I shamelessly ogle her while she’s not looking. That’s when I notice the long scar on the inside of her leg, winding its way from her knee and up her thigh.

She turns and seems to notice, then shrugs quickly into a tank top.

“But I think you have on the wrong panties.” I point to her perfectly curved ass.

She looks over her shoulder and lifts her butt, looking for proof. “The lame package of undies I bought had two Hump Days and no Mondays. Go figure.” She shimmies into a pair of cutoff jeans, buttons them, and sits beside me with her legs bent beneath her. “You look familiar. Have we met?”

“We haven’t. I’m—”

“Wait. Don’t tell me your name.” She cuts me off by pressing a finger over my lips. “Tell me the name you always wished was yours.”

My eyes widen at this, and I watch her slowly remove her finger from my mouth, as if she moved it away too quickly, my real name might accidentally slip out. She’s

definitely insanely insane, and I pause for moment, considering if I really want this conversation to move forward. Who asks for a fake name? I twist uncomfortably, letting my gaze roam around the park, hoping someone might come to rescue me—the naked bike riders? No, I think I'm on my own on this one. So I do what I'm best at, I deflect. "Well, tell me the name you always wanted for yourself."

"That's easy. Shea. At least, that's what I pick this week. Next week, it could be different." She resettles, bringing a knee to her chest. "So, what about you?" She tilts her head.

"Well . . ." I look up and think hard of how to answer, because she's taking this seriously. Though I'm far out of my comfort zone, I answer for no other reason than I'm curious to see where this will go. "I was always fond of the name Hewitt. Spelled h-e-w-i-t-t."

"Like the computer?" She laughs.

"Yeah, I guess so. But what's your real name?"

"Just call me Shea, and I'll call you Hew. You look like a Hew."

"What brings you to San Francisco, Shea?" The question falls out before I realize that this may be dangerous territory. Of course, I'm assuming she traveled here since I saw her on the plane, but I should consider she might actually live here.

Shea drops her chin to her knee, seeming to consider

her words carefully. “Let’s just say I’m here on a mission of personal development. You?” She takes a pack of Twizzlers out of her bag and offers one to me. I shake my head. “Sorta the same. I’m here for a job interview.” I gesture to my suit.

“How’d it go?” She takes a bite of her candy.

“Honestly, I’m not sure. It could go either way.”

“Let me guess what you do for a living.” She looks me over, analyzing every detail, as though the angle of my cheek or the pattern on my tie will give her the proper answer. “You’re wearing a suit, so you’re definitely a business kind of guy, but . . .” She pulls at my collar and her delicate fingers brush against my neck, causing an unexpected rush of heat to spread over my chest that makes me shift in my seat. “You have a tattoo peeking out from under your shirt, and your hair, well, it’s kinda . . .” Her words drift off.

“Kinda what?”

“No, no, it’s cute—big.” She laughs. “And all hipster, it’s just kinda . . .” She makes a wavy gesture with her Twizzler and says, “So you’re an artsy business guy, which means you’re an architect or something.”

I stiffen, my brain momentarily freezing, unable to speak from absolute shock. This girl, someone I’ve never met before and who is this weird, guessed correctly. I wrangle my best poker face, which includes holding my breath behind a stiff mask.

“Or something,” I manage to respond, and try to pull myself together. “That’s an interesting observation. But if you don’t want to know my real name, you probably don’t want to know if you’re right about my job.”

Shea gives me a dazzling smile. “I’m pretty sure I’m right. I’m like one of those people at a carnival who can guess your birthday, weight, and height, but I also specialize in guessing jobs.”

“So you’re a psychic fortune-telling carny?” I laugh.

“For this week, maybe I am.” She stands. “You hungry? Wanna get lunch?”

SHE 6

Hew offers me an uncomfortable lopsided grin when I ask him to lunch. I can see the answer *no* in his dark eyes already. Can I blame him? After all, I know there's a good chance he's seen me in my Bridezilla dress, and now half-naked in my special days-of-the-week underpants, while bike riding through the city with a pack of raisin-wrinkled, seventy-plus-year-old hippie nudists.

"I promise, I'm not crazy," I add to make the outing more enticing.

He gives me an appraising look. "Isn't that what crazy people say to convince someone they aren't?"

"Of course, I mean, I've been told I am, but I'm no crazier than anyone else in this town." I point across the park to the naked bike riders, who have settled on the grass to picnic with their bobs and jiggles laid out in the sun for all to see.

"Are we joining them for lunch?" He tilts his head in their direction.

"Only if you want to." I laugh at his expression. The poor guy looks severely pained. "Actually, I've heard

there's a great Italian grocery up on Columbus Avenue." I pick up my bike by the handlebars, waiting for an answer.

"But you don't even know me."

"We're all strangers until we meet. Right? Besides, you said you've seen me three times, and I know I've seen you at least once, though I don't remember where. I think that's destiny telling us we need to have lunch." I say it matter-of-factly in hopes this train of thought makes sense.

After a moment of long consideration, he finally says, "Well, when you say it like that, then how can I refuse destiny?"

"Good call, 'cause she can be a real bitch. Trust me."

Hew joins my side as I push my bike across the park. He unknits his necktie, neatly rolls it up and slips it into his jacket, and then unbuttons the top of his shirt, allowing an inch more of his tattoo to show. It's monochromatic and geometric, and I'm more than a little tempted to reach over and touch it the way people touch pregnant women's bellies. But I don't, for fear it would send him running in the other direction.

As we walk, I'm fascinated by the way his dark hair bounces, yet somehow manages to remain perfectly styled. His profile is strong, masculine, and distinctive with a knot in the ridge of his nose, reminding me of a Roman bust. He could be Italian with his tanned complexion.

“Do you always ask strange men to lunch?” He removes his jacket and folds it over his arm, then looks to me with his dark eyes full of expression.

“Only the cute ones.” I look up and bat my lashes playfully.

“So this is a pickup?” His lips form another lopsided grin, this one more confident.

“No!” I say too quickly, and immediately feel the hot blush rising in my cheeks. He’s cute, hot even. There’s absolutely no argument there. “I’m mean, no.” I gnaw at my lip because it’s true, and hope I didn’t give him the wrong idea. “Is that okay? I’m sorry, the truth is that I’m alone and you seem to be alone. Are you alone because you gave me that vibe?”

“The aloneness vibe?” He looks to me in mock horror.

A quick pop of a genuine laugh escapes my lips. It’s a nice change from all the days I’ve spent crying. “Sorry.”

“I guess I must since I am, in fact, alone. I thought I’d enjoy the city for a few days after my interview, maybe drive through some of the neighborhoods, see where I might want to live if I get the job. But the truth is that I don’t know anyone here.”

“Well, now you know me.”

We reach the bottom of the first hill that leads to the heart of the Little Italy neighborhood, and Hew offers to push my bike.

“So, what is it you really do for a living, Shea?”

“Right now?”

“Yes, right now. Your job?”

“Well, according to you I’m a fortune-telling carny,” I proclaim.

“Is knowing your job not allowed in the rules?”

“There’s only one rule, no real names.” Keeping things at this level will allow me to have a nice time without getting close. All I need right now is a friend. Even though I’m wishing I didn’t choose someone quite so good-looking, because if I’m being honest with myself, a friend is all I can handle.

“It’s a strange rule.”

“We’re just hanging out and having fun, no attachments, no e-mails or texts after whatever this is is over.” I roll my hand in the air.

“That’s two rules then, and that statement implies that we’ve started a ‘whatever this is.’” Hew flashes me a boyish grin.

“We have. We’re friends.” I skip into the store marked Sabatino Brothers Deli, leaving him to lock up my bike.



Lunch is delightfully vague. Shea manages to charm me, despite the fact that she tells me practically nothing concrete about herself. Most of the stories she relays, I'm not sure are true.

She tells me she's painted on the Seine River in Paris like a real artist, rode on a Mardi Gras float in New Orleans, which she may or may not have done topless. But I'm going with topless; I enjoy the visual. She sang karaoke with my favorite football player in a dive bar in Baltimore, even though she admits she can't sing, and only knows what football teams she likes based on the colors of their "outfits." Her favorite movie is a toss-up between *9 to 5* with Dolly Parton and *Xanadu* with Olivia Newton-John, but she's leaning toward *Xanadu* because she loves to roller skate. And she's even taught art to underprivileged kids. Despite my pointed questioning on each topic, which she answers convincingly, but also with a wink, she swears it's all true. Even if it's not, it doesn't matter, because I realize I'm having a great time. We manage to talk about everything useless and nothing specific.

I, however, do tell her the truth, but also with a wink so it's not clear if I'm telling the truth either. It seems we're playing a game—to one-up each other with awesomeness. And when I ramble off the highlight reel of my life, the scenes actually make me appear like a semi-interesting person. Of course I leave out the most recent events that landed me in rehab and jail. But it could have been a lot worse without my great lawyer, time served, good behavior, and an unwavering sense of remorse.

“In my sophomore year in college,” I say, “I traveled to Brazil to install solar panels on the rooftops of this little village in the Andes.”

“Shut up!” Shea slaps the tabletop with excitement.

“No, really.” I lean in and push my empty plate away. “I have to admit that I agreed to do it as a cheap way to see South America, but volunteering my time and having the opportunity to improve an entire community's quality of life was incredibly rewarding.” I leave out the fact that I dropped out my senior year and didn't get my architecture degree until this past summer.

“So you're the really nice-guy type.” She leans back and crosses her arms. “I don't think I'm that good. I wish I was a better person and did stuff like that.”

I want to say, “No, I'm not the good-guy type, I'm the type that doesn't even deserve to be having lunch with a nice girl like you.” Instead, I push all those thoughts away. My guilt has been torturing me for long enough.

I'm trying to start fresh here. I deserve a fresh start. Everyone does; even me. "You've taught art to kids. What's not good about that?"

As she shrugs uncomfortably and turns her face away from me, I ask myself if maybe that was a lie. In her skittering gaze, I find scars as deep as the ones on her face and leg. Why can't she be her real self for an honest conversation, tell me her true name or anything else factual about herself? What the hell happened to her back in Maryland?

Shea picks up a paper straw wrapper and winds it into curling spirals as she talks about a shopping trip she took through Chinatown yesterday. I find myself comparing her to my ex-girlfriend, Cara. They're nothing alike. Shea is carefree, magnetic, and seems so hopeful despite whatever she's left behind. Cara, well, she's shallow and reckless, and part of the reason things ended up the way they did. Since she was my sister Beth's best friend, Cara and Beth were immersed in the party world, and like a love-struck idiot who wanted to date Cara, I willingly followed the two of them, tagging along like a little brother.

After a few hours, and in the middle of a conversation about the many uses of the candies Pop Rocks and Mentos in science experiments, which she seems to be an expert on, Shea abruptly stands. "I'm not sure about you, but I've got a raging case of flat ass from sitting so long." She shakes her legs and stretches.

“Why do you think I keep shifting around? My toes have fallen asleep at least ten times since we’ve been here.”

“I guess that means we should walk.” She pulls me to my feet and her hair brushes my arms. Leaning on her, I can smell her flowery shampoo. Something in the scent activates my senses, makes my palms sweaty and turns me on.

On wobbly legs, she drags me out of the market and then faces me. “It’s been fun. Thanks for keeping me company today.” She shrugs into the straps of her backpack and begins walking backward.

“That’s it? You’re leaving?” I raise my hands in shock, trying to move with her, wanting more time.

“Maybe I’ll see you around.” She smiles brightly and keeps walking.

“Can I get your number?”

“Remember the rules,” she shouts, then spins and marches away.

Like an idiot, I say nothing and watch her leave. Apparently she was serious about the “rules” but I never thought she was. I thought—shit. I don’t know what the hell I thought.

Why the hell do I want to see her again? I shouldn’t. Obviously she has issues; she’s the train-wreck bride, and who knows what she’s left in Maryland. And no normal person would play this weird-ass no-name game.

But in this moment, it's definitely not my brain I'm thinking with as I watch her strut away. I look past all the irritating questions, the strange and grandiose stories, and I smile, because I'm imagining the word *Wednesday* bouncing back and forth on her undies as she sways her perfect little ass.

God, she's so fucking crazy cute.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michelle Warren didn't travel the road to writer immediately, first she spent over a decade as a professional illustrator and designer. Her artistic creativity combined with her love of science fiction, paranormal, and fantasy led her to write her first YA fantasy novel, *Wander Dust*. Michelle loves reading and traveling to places that inspire her to create. She resides in downtown Chicago.

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