

### Fe's Life Rules:

1- Never trust a man who owns a Chihuahua.

2- If the dress or the shoes don't take your breath away, they're not worth the closet space.

Everything you own must make your heart skip a beat.

3- Never complain; no matter how bad you think you have it, someone else wishes they had your problems.

5- Treat special needs kids like a treasure; they're angels sent by God to Earth to keep us in perspective.

6- Life is a baseball pitcher throwing fastballs, and when a ball hits you and knocks you down, you get to walk to first base. Good luck is nothing but bad luck plus stubbornness.

7- Never date a Latin man who still calls his mother "*Mami*"—you'll never win that contest.

Never date a lawyer—you'll never win an argument. But most importantly: Never, *never*, EVER date a *doctor*.

### Shawn's Life Rules:

1- Always expect the worst and prepare for it.

2- Critically ill patients are often kept alive by the sheer mental power of their physicians. If you stop fretting about them for just one minute, they might die.

3- No matter how good you are at your job, how much you've accomplished and how much money you have, there will always be someone who does it better, accomplishes more and makes more money—and that sucks.

4- Life is harsh and the world's a hard place. If you're offered a moment of happiness, take it without arguing. And never forget we're here to help make each other's burdens a little lighter.

5- If you're going to do something, do it right. Splurge on the best quality. Go the extra mile. Doing things with passion barely takes more effort than doing them half-heartedly, and gives much better results.

6- Even when doing something wrong, *do it right*: Breaking a diet? Drinking too much? Making out with the wrong person? Don't hold anything back. You'll feel guilty afterward, anyway; *make it a big slip, worth the guilt!*

7- We all slip and fall. The day after a fall, pick up your sorry arse and your self-beating-whip and start over.

## Chapter 1

*Even the psycho Chihuahua worked for good in the end!*

Early Saturday morning, as Fe Hernandez ran through the park, she thought about Taco. Taco was the nippy, yapping Chihuahua who had made her life difficult, relentlessly chasing her around the neighborhood for months. His owner was moving to Colorado, and Fe admitted she might almost miss the little dog. Her friends had seen the dog as evidence of Fe's chronic bad luck, but she disagreed.

Stopping for a break at the convenience store near the park, she bought the usual water bottle for herself and a bagel sandwich and apple juice for the homeless man she often saw sitting on the bench outside.

"Hi, José. Where's Jenny?" she asked, catching a whiff of urine from his clothes as she handed him the paper bag.

"She went to the pharmacy," he replied, scratching his underarm and peeking in the bag. "I wish this were donuts and beer instead, but thank you, miss." He twisted the cap open and took a sip of juice, then rubbed his graying beard. "Yeah, Jenny has some health issue now—on top of everything. She's the only person in the world with worse luck than me." He took another sip. "Why is it that some people have all the luck in the world, while others have such terrible luck?"

Fe wished she had an answer. She held onto the back of the bench as she stretched her right hamstring. "José, did I ever mention my name means faith in Spanish? Actually, some of my friends call me Faith."

Eyeing her with a frown, José deadpanned, "Only like a billion times."

"Having faith that everything happens for good is the trick to changing your attitude. And *everything* is about attitude. You can see anything as bad luck, or as good luck wrapped in clues you just have to puzzle out.

"Take this week, for example." She switched to stretch the other leg and gesticulated to emphasize her words. "On Tuesday, an elderly patient chased me through the hospital, threatening to hit me with her oxygen tank. My coworkers assumed I had bad luck—but it worked out! Thanks to that scare, my boss gave me the next day off and I went for a wonderful bike ride."

She started stretching her calves. "On that ride, my bike broke and I fell into a creek and was stranded miles away from home with a dead cell—but that worked out for good too!" She alternated to stretch the other calf. "I caught a ride in a live poultry truck. The driver took me through a different part of town where I discovered an awesome consignment store and bought the cutest dress!" She held up a hand in triumph. "And I rescued my cell by doing that trick with a hair dryer and a bag of rice!"

She extracted the cell from her fanny pack to show him. He stared at the phone blankly. "Miss,

a quarter of the screen is black.”

“Yes! And the other three quarters are okay! Isn’t that great?” Beaming, she returned the phone to her fanny pack. “But now I need to lose a few pounds to fit into the dress I bought at the consignment store.” She lifted a finger. “Yes, the price was too good to pass up even if it was a little tight. I’ll see you later, José!”

She took off again.

As she re-entered the jogging path, Fe impressed herself with her improved endurance. Even her joints seemed more flexible.

And she owed it all to Taco, the psycho Chihuahua! If she hadn’t spent months running away from him, she would’ve never gotten so much training.

*See? Even what seems like senseless bad luck will always bring something good in the long run.* Fe’s good mood that morning felt unshakable.

Circus music played in her fanny pack. Fe’s heart dropped, recognizing her ex’s ringtone; her stomach twisted in a knot and her palms turned icy and sweaty at once.

*No, please, not him again! Not today. Not ever!*

She stopped running. With fingers made clumsy by anxiety she slid her hand into the fanny pack and shut the phone off.

Seconds later, it rang again.

And again.

*Caramba!*

After shutting off the phone once more, she sent a FaceTime request to her friend Joy. A few rings later, Joy answered, a quarter of her face blackened by Fe’s busted screen.

Behind Joy, Fe could glimpse the beach, and half a dozen children playing at the shore. “Good morning, sweetie! Are you on your way?”

“He’s calling me again!”

Joy blinked. “Who?”

“Him. Bozo the Clown.” Even three years after their divorce, Fe couldn’t get herself to say his name easily.

A sound of disapproval came from just off-camera, and the face of Hope, Joy’s sister, entered the broken screen. “Just don’t answer.”

“I have to answer eventually, he’s the father of my kids. He deserves some respect for that, doesn’t he?”

“No!” Hope argued. “That idiot has earned no one’s respect. He’s lucky you haven’t put him in

jail for the money he owes you.”

Slowly, Fe walked down the road. “You know he’ll catch up with his child support payments sooner or later. He’s just doing this to scare me—*again*.” Dropping onto the next park bench, Fe groaned. “Why did he have to call? I was in such a good mood! This is such a beautiful morning and my run was going so well!”

“Then turn off your phone! Block him! Never answer and he’ll get the message!” Hope replied.

“You know how it works,” Joy added. “Every relationship is a dance. If you change the steps the other person will either pick up the pace or stop dancing.” The psychiatrist and thinker of the group, Joy always had some pearl of wisdom to share.

Fe picked an oleander flower from a nearby bush. “I feel sorry for him,” she confessed, fiddling with the flower. “His ego never recovered when I left him.”

“You dumped him for good reasons,” Hope intervened. “So stop feeling sorry for him and send him to hell. Let him keep his stupid child support. No money is worth the stress he puts you through.”

*Unless your credit cards are about to explode.* Fe wished she could shove Bozo’s child support money down any of his body holes. But even with two jobs and her mother’s and grandmother’s occasional babysitting gigs, supporting their five-person household was a struggle. Especially when *Abuela* insisted on feeding half the neighborhood.

“It’s all my fault. I should’ve never married him.” Fe stopped and palmed herself on the forehead. “What am I saying? Of course it all ended up being for good! If I hadn’t married him I wouldn’t have Diego and Gabriela!”

The broken screen showed the flash of pity in her friends’ faces, before they gathered themselves to cover it. *Oh yes, they think Gabriela is not an asset but a burden. If they only knew.*

Joy recovered first. “Fe, stop blaming yourself for marrying him. It’s not your fault the man is a narcissist.”

Fe felt a knot in her throat. “He wasn’t always like that, you know. Medicine changed him. He saw too many patients die and stopped caring about anything but himself. All doctors are a mess like that.” Jerking, Fe cringed apologetically and forced a smile at the screen. “*Except for you, Joy, of course.*” She cleared her throat. “Anyway, everything is going to be better when my new business venture goes through. Once I take over Rainbows Child Services I’ll make more money and Bozo won’t be able to control me anymore.”

An even bigger flash of worry crossed her friends’ faces.

*The girls don’t trust my skills as a businesswoman, but I can’t blame them. I don’t exactly have a sparkling record for good decision-making.*

Joy tucked a long, brunette lock behind her ear. “Sweetie, forget about Bozo and go enjoy the rest of your run. You need a break.”

The practical solution finder of the group, Hope intervened. “We’ll send a taxi to pick up your kids, your mom and your grandma, so you don’t have to get there early to drive them. Then you join us here at the beach house whenever you’re done. That a-hole doesn’t deserve to ruin your morning.”

“Yes!” added Joy. “Super-Dad Tom is here. Ella and Ray are here. We have plenty of hands to babysit Diego and Gabriela. It will even be a break for your mom and *Abuela*.”

Fe was so thankful for her girlfriends. “Thank you, girls. You’re the best.”

After disconnecting the call, Fe closed her eyes and moved her phone to her chest. She was so lucky to have so many wonderful women in her life. *Abuela*, *Mami*, Joy, Hope, her boss Marla ... Even frozen-faced Allison-the-man-hater, their new friend. She had all the love and support a woman could need.

The circus music played again and Fe sighed, reading the words “*El Desgraciado*”—Despicable Wretch—on the caller ID. Feeling much stronger after her chat with the girls, she declined the call once more and texted, “*Email only, please.*” Then, she searched for the number in her contacts and selected Block Number. After briefly hovering over the option to confirm, she pressed Yes.

A surge of euphoria beyond what she anticipated rose in Fe’s chest. Returning the phone to her fanny pack she picked up the pace and took off jogging again. Ecstatic, she felt the cool breeze of the early morning blow across her face, and relished the sight of the cloudless sky. She pumped her arms in the air and hooted. Life was beautiful.

Feeling an urge to climb something in celebration, she headed away from the jogging path and toward the causeway over the Indian River. Maybe Taco’s owner moving away was another sign that a new era in her life had begun! Her luck *was* changing for the best! Everything would be okay!

As she jogged toward the causeway, she heard someone yell, “WATCH OUT! MOVE OUT OF THE WAY!”

Even as her body kept jogging, her mind froze as she caught a glimpse of a green blur heading in her direction, about to crash into her. A bicycle rider seemed to have lost control of his bike and sped down the causeway, on the pedestrian’s path.

She jumped to the left to avoid him. Except the crazy biker must’ve had the same idea, because he followed her.

The rider tried to adjust his trajectory, but he crashed into a large rock instead.

And then, in slow motion, he propelled into the air and straight for her, about to tackle her.

*Oh, shoot.*

## Chapter 2

*Thirty minutes earlier.*

Years of working with the sickest of the sick—the patients in the Intensive Care Unit—had taught Dr. Shawn McDevitt to always expect the worst. But he'd learned that lesson long before that. Shawn's first taste of bad luck happened only hours after his birth, when a well-intentioned nurse spelled his name S-H-A-W-N on his birth certificate instead of S-E-A-N. For the thirty-five years since, he'd been the joke of his traditional Irish family. But somehow no one ever made an effort to change it. Being Irish-Catholic meant accepting some pain as part of normal life.

Yes, deep inside, underneath his lighthearted façade, Shawn was convinced that he had bad luck. Very rarely did he find a moment of true, sheer pure bliss when he considered himself fortunate.

And today was one of those rare days, as he rode his bike.

*Why don't I do this more often?* Shawn asked himself for the hundredth time as he pedaled his bike along the tree-lined trail. Spanish moss hanging from the trees lent the path a nostalgic feeling. As he sprinted, the morning wind blew on his face, cooling the burn generated by the physical effort.

Ultra-light carbon-fiber road bike. Black helmet. Wrap around glasses. Kelly-green jersey. Black bike shorts. Fingerless gloves. Expensive cleats ... Yes, the initial investment had been hefty—Shawn believed in doing things right. But now, the sticker-shock long gone, there were few sources of joy in the world as cheap and accessible to him as riding.

Right now he didn't care that his day had started with an anonymous hate letter in his mailbox, and a threatening voicemail from FirstHealth's lawyer.

Shawn brought his bike to a stop at the end of the street leading to the beach—the meeting point. His friend Jay, a better rider in much better shape, had arrived ahead of him. Knowing Jay, he'd probably pedaled to Key Largo and back in the time it took Shawn to go around the park's trail.

Shawn grabbed the bottle from the holder on his bike and took a long sip, then splashed the last of the water against his face.

“Bike riding is so therapeutic!” he exclaimed, throwing the empty bottle in the trash. “Why is it that I always find a reason not to do it?” Shawn signaled Jay to follow him into the nearby convenience store.

Dragging his bike behind him, Jay snorted. “Tell me about it! I practically have to twist your arm each time!” He used a mocking tone of voice. “I have to start rounds early. I have records to complete.”

As he used the U-lock to secure his bike, Shawn's brain returned his most recent guilt-ridden

reason to postpone riding. *I have to find paternal feelings for Aidan.*

Six foot five, muscular Jay made five foot ten Shawn feel small as he saw their reflection in the store windows. “Seriously. How can you look half-decent, let alone this good, when you haven’t been in a gym in ages?” Jay asked once in, handing Shawn a cold water bottle from the fridge.

“It’s all diet control. Whipping myself with discipline is second nature to me, thanks to my father and medical school.” Shawn headed for the protein bars.

Snickering, Jay gave him a once-over. “Says the man who had the cheesecake and the key-lime pie for dessert last night.”

Shawn sent his friend his most charming smile. “Letting the pendulum swing from time to time is part of a balanced program of neurotic discipline.”

As they left the store, Shawn noticed two homeless people, a man and a woman, sitting on a nearby bench. His eyes went to the thin, middle-aged lady, with brittle blond hair and sallow skin. But none of that was what caught his attention. As the lady reached for a cigarette, he studied her shaky hands, her protruding eyes, and a bulge on her neck.

“Excuse me, miss.” Shawn approached her. “Have you been having palpitations, weight loss, insomnia and jitters?”

The woman whipped her head up to gape at him, her leathery smoker’s forehead crinkled in surprise.

Her companion shot Shawn a defiant glare. “Hey, rich boy. If you’re not here to give us money, leave us alone.”

“Wait, José.” The woman shushed him, and then turned to Shawn. “Yes! How do you know?”

He reached for the money belt under his jersey and extracted a hand sanitizer wipe. Rubbing his hands clean, he answered, “I’m a doctor. Can I check something on your neck real quick?”

The woman nodded and he felt her neck, then took her wrist and felt her pulse.

“I suspect you have something called Graves’ disease. It’s a condition that makes your thyroid overactive.” Shawn reached for a pen and a Post-it in his money belt. “Do you have a primary care doctor?”

Raising her eyebrows, the woman tilted her head. “Hottie, do I look like I have health insurance?”

“Then write your name here, and your date of birth and what pharmacy you use.” He handed her the paper. “I need to call in a medication to slow down your heart rate in the meantime. It’s an old generic, so it should be cheap.” She shot him a look and he searched in his money belt for a bill. “Here, this should cover it.” He scribbled something on another Post-it, then added, “Monday, call my office

and ask for my office manager, Crystal. Tell her I want you to have these tests and it's on me. I'm not an endocrinologist, but I can run things by a friend."

Glancing at him with mistrust, the woman hesitated before exchanging papers. Then, her eyebrows relaxed. "Thank you. I'm Jenny."

The man next to her, who until now had been eyeing Shawn warily, took a step forward, scratching under his arm. "So ... you're a doctor. That means you're rich. How about giving me some money too?"

Shawn studied the Hispanic man for the first time, and smirked. The salt-and-pepper beard and shaggy hair didn't trick him. The man was barely older than him. "You seem pretty strong and healthy. How about I give you a job instead?"

The man looked at him as if he'd just said a cussword. Mumbling unintelligible words he clasped the woman's arm and led her away.

Shawn returned to his bike while making a phone call, leaving the woman's pharmacy a voicemail with the prescription instructions.

As Shawn worked on unlocking his bike, Jay said, "I'm torn. A part of me wants to kiss you—"

"I will punch you if you ever dare to kiss me—again." Shawn interrupted. "You have plenty of women around, eager to kiss you."

"Then I'll go for option two and slap you instead." Throwing his hands up, Jay huffed. "For goodness sake, Shawn. Can you stop diagnosing people for *one hour*?"

Dragging his bike, Shawn shook his head. "I can't. Diagnoses find me. It's my blessing and my curse."

"Man, you've gone through a lot this past year. You need to start unwinding."

Shawn pushed his bike through the parking lot. "I won't be able to unwind again until the police solve the mystery of Tara's death and I clear my name."

As they walked back to Shawn's car, Jay asked, "Speaking of which, do you want to go out to Orlando this weekend, before I return to Atlanta? We should get you a rebound woman to get you over your last rebound woman."

"Please don't remind me of Gina." Shawn winced. "I still avoid the lab at the hospital, always afraid I'll run into her and she'll make another scene in the hallway."

Jay tapped his index finger on Shawn's forehead. "Earth to Shawn. Never get involved with a woman who works where you work."

*Lesson learned.* He pushed Jay's hand away. "Single women are scarce in this town of elderly retirees. And Dr. Jones has scared the bejesus out of me about online dating. He says those websites are

full of gold diggers. He met his last ex-wife there.”

The medical staff was going through an epidemic of divorces. Every physician in the hospital currently seemed to be talking about lawyers, custody-sharing and child-support.

Except for him. When Tara died, at least she'd saved Shawn from that destiny.

They arrived at the parking lot; Jay said goodbye with a fist bump and jumped back on his bike to keep riding—the man was unstoppable.

Shawn hesitated before stowing his own bike in his SUV. He still had time to shower before meeting up with his friend Richard, but the moment he'd get home, Betty would jump on him with a list of complaints about Aidan's behavior. The nanny was going crazy locked in the house with a three-year-old.

He needed to hold onto this feeling of relaxation a little longer. He jumped back on his bike and pedaled away.

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Shawn zoomed down the park's bougainvillea-lined path, heading toward the causeway. Racing thoughts filled his mind at the same speed. That was why he loved bike riding. While sprinting, his brain turned sharper, and the problems previously haunting him unraveled in front of him in a new perspective.

In flat Fort Sunshine, Florida, the causeway over the Indian River was the tallest hill he could challenge himself with. In low gear, his legs moved so fast they burned; yet the climb was slow. Just like the last several months of his life: So much work, so little progress.

He saw all the pieces of his life laid out. His legal battle with FirstHealth, as he'd left them to start a solo practice as a pulmonary specialist. His second job as an intensivist for the hospital. The exhausting task of trying to bond with three-year-old Aidan—this miniature portrait of himself determined to punish him for their separation. Tara's ongoing murder investigation. And of course, the drama of breaking up with Gina. Two months after the breakup, his body seriously felt the sex deprivation.

*Yup, this bike ride is the closest I've gotten to panting, heart-racing action in a while.* As he pedaled uphill, the heat built up in his body. When he thought he couldn't sustain the climb anymore, he arrived at the peak.

Breathless, he stopped at the top of the causeway and turned around to face east, taking in the view of the peaceful Indian River waters and a distant hint of the ocean. After savoring it for a minute, he adjusted his helmet and his gloves, shifted to a higher gear and positioned his foot back on the pedal.

And then, he let go.

As the bike rushed downhill on the causeway, the strong wind in his face, feeling like flying, he smiled. No effort, no struggle. At that moment, enjoying the cruise down, he felt the closest to freedom and happiness he'd ever felt.

But then he noticed an elderly man pushing his walker down the bike path instead of using the pedestrian lane. *Only in Fort Sunshine!*

Adrenaline kicked in and he pressed the hand brakes until he heard them squeak, but gravity was winning. A truck approached on his left. Narrowly avoiding the crash with the old man, he swiftly moved to the right, into the pedestrian lane.

But the path wasn't empty.

Blinded by the sun, he squinted at the blurred figure of a jogger in his way, getting closer.

"Watch out! Move out of the way!" he yelled.

He quickly moved his bike to the right. At the same time the jogger moved to her left, getting back in line with him. The crash was unavoidable.

The world switched into slow motion. In a flash his sharp brain created a plan to minimize injuries for him and the jogger. Crash against something. Jump off the bike. Fall to the right of the path, so the grass off the sidewalk could buffer the impact.

Steering toward a rock, he used the inertia of the crash to jump, but it was too late. He flew forward and tackled the jogger into the hedge on the side of the road. Their tangled bodies rolled off the bushes and downhill on the grassy ground, before coming to a stop.