



The Color of Sorrow Isn't Blue

by Sharon K. Souza

Excerpt Courtesy of www.sharonksouza.com

One

Grief, it is said, is a sea that ebbs and flows. Comes in waves that roll over the shore, then recedes in a dizzying, lose-your-footing-in-the-sand sensation, leaving you unsettled but standing. Well, whoever said that never felt the tsunami effect, the drowning, sucking, tidal wave of grief.

I know, because I haven't come up for air in five days short of a year. A suffocating, black hole of a year, each day collapsing in on itself like sand too long unwatered. Eighty-six hundred hours; five-hundred thousand minutes; thirty-one million seconds of a smothering nightmare I can't wake up from. A long slow terror, like free-falling in the dark with no cord to pull.

I don't plan to be here for the anniversary five days from now. Not after what I saw this morning.

"I'm going to the beach house for a few days. On Thursday." I ignore the shadow that flits across David's face and clouds his eyes.

He blinks, but I know it doesn't clear up a thing. "This Thursday?"

"Yes."

"Alone?"

I push down the pang of guilt that's taken up residence in my gut this past year. "Yes."
"But I thought ..." His words drift off with a head shake and a shrug.

I know exactly what he thought. He and I would do the interview together—because we aren't the only ones watching the calendar—then we'd, what, pay a public visit to the Find Kinsey headquarters, strike a pathetic pose for the cameras, make another plea for our daughter's return, then retreat to the cave that our home has become?

No, thank you.

The last printing we did of Kinsey's "Missing" flyer is still stacked up on the brown laminated table with the pressed board showing through where the edges have chipped away—the only one left out of a room full of such tables—the stacks of flyers as high as they were five weeks ago. There are two brown metal chairs now instead of fifty, and that's one more than we need most days. The phone seldom rings, and when it does it's one more dead end, one more dagger to the heart.

I mean, really, how many times do we have to die before it's over?

But my sister, Ainsley, puts her key in the lock five mornings a week. She straightens the over-sized posters that shift every time a train goes by on the tracks across the road from the strip mall that houses the headquarters. Posters of a beautiful little girl with strawberries on her sundress and a makeshift wreath of flowers in her hair. The leaves are wilted but the daisies still hold their own. We called her our flower child, David and I, because of that picture. She kept the wreath on the entire day the photo was taken, said, "No"—her favorite word at the time—whenever I tried to remove it.

Why would I? I mean, for God's sake, so what if she slept in it?

"Babe, are you sure?" David asks.

"Sure?" I have to think back to the antecedent of his question, which, I remember now, was my pronouncement. "Yes."

I know he's planned that we'd spend the day together, mingle our pain as it were, like strange bloodmates. The truth is, I have more than enough pain of my own. And what can we say that we haven't said an infinite number of times already? How many times can we send our sighs back and forth, like a ping pong ball masquerading as conversation?

Yeah, it's exactly like free-falling in the dark.

And, oh, how I've fallen.

David doesn't try to kiss me when he leaves. The Pavlov conditioning I've subjected him to this past year has seen to that. But he does give me one more glance, a final plea with eyes I can't look into anymore, and not just because they're Kinsey's eyes—though that in itself is more than enough. They're soulful eyes, David's are. They drew me in the first time I met him, even before he had the chance to flash his famous smile or turn on the charm. They're still

soulful, but what I see in his soul is not what I used to see. Now his own sorrow brims at the edges, always there, on the verge of spilling over. He does his best to keep it in check. Still. For me. I've learned to look just past the eyes on the occasions we have something to say to one another. It's all about survival these days.

When he's gone I pick up the phone so I can transfer at least one of my lies of the morning to the truth column. You see, I've yet to procure my plans for Thursday. And beyond.

"Morning, sweet thing." My stepmother's voice is way too perky for this time of day. I catch her just as she's leaving for school, the only way to keep the conversation short.

Sissy is the epitome of a morning person. I don't happen to find that in her favor. And I wouldn't think anything of her greeting, except that she doesn't have caller ID. Yet she's right more often than not, and that's just plain spooky. Unless, of course, that's how she answers the phone, regardless, which I would not put past her.

"Hey," I say, the best I can do at the moment. "I'd like to use the beach house for a few days."

"Why, of course, baby. I told your daddy this very morning that you and Davy should get away. And what better place?"

Sissy thinks she's a steel magnolia. And trust me, she would be, if she came from the south. But the South Bay is as southern as my stepmother gets. San Jose to be exact, forty-five miles from San Francisco. Born and bred.

She's a superlative, Sissy is, the consummate everything. But if someone had to fill the gap our fleeing mother left all those years ago, well, it could have been worse.

"I meant me, Sissy."

She doesn't answer right away. "Just you?"

I can almost see her begin to slide her diamond S along the silver chain at her neck, back and forth like a tiny tram. It makes a whisper of a sawing sound I don't need to hear to experience, because I've heard it a million times if I've heard it once. She's already worn through one clasp, and is well on her way to another. Lucky the pendant fell into the cleavage of her bra and not down a storm drain, or toilet, or some other irretrievable place. The crease between her professionally perfect eyebrows deepens. I can see that too.

"Yes."

"Well, baby ..."

"I just need to get away, Sissy. Me, by myself. I don't want to be here come Sunday."

"No, no. Of course you don't. And of course, the beach house is all yours."

The beach house is not a beach house at all. It's a twenty-foot trailer on a cracked slab in Half Moon Bay, that comfortably sleeps four—if you don't mind touching. And that's what I mean about Sissy. She turns a sow's ear into a silk purse every single time. But it is on the

beach. I'll give her that.

I thank her then hang up. No use giving her any more opportunity to decode the tone or content of my words, because Sheila "Sissy" Vanderpool is the 007 of stepmoms when it comes to that. She can see straight through to the truth better than anyone I ever knew.

How Ainsley got Sissy's skills without the benefit of her DNA is a mystery all its own. But she did. I don't even count to ten before the phone rings—not anywhere near enough time for Sissy to have called my sister.

"Bristol?"

"Ainsley. Hey." If there's one person I try to muster enthusiasm for on a regular basis, it's Ainsley. But I haven't yet buoyed from the bomb I dropped on David this morning, and the proof is there in my voice.

"How's it going?"

There's enough of a question within the question that I'm convinced she's talked to someone. Had to have been David.

"It's going," I say.

Gone is more like it, but I don't want to give Ainsley more to worry about. She deserves a break. She's carried well beyond her share of worry these past three hundred sixty days, continuing to pull yeoman's duty, by herself for the most part, at the Find Kinsey headquarters long after all the other volunteers returned to their safe and insulated worlds, and when I knew one more desperate minute there would push me over the edge I've been so precariously balanced on. But I've been on that edge long enough now that I no longer fear the plunge. In fact, I welcome it.

Before we go any further I hear a hitch on the line and know it's Ainsley's call waiting that's kicked in. "You want to get that?"

"No, no, that's okay. I'll call them back."

Them would be Sissy. I'd bet the rest of what I possess on it. But that's not saying much, since the rest of what I possess doesn't mean much of anything to me now.

"About this weekend." Ainsley handpicks every word for the idea she's about to present. Ainsley, the diplomatic one. "I think we should get out of town, all of us. Avoid the phone, the media, go to the cabin, and just ... be together. Forecast says there may even be snow." Her voice crackles with hope. "What do you think?"

The cabin, in South Lake Tahoe, belongs to Grady's brother Colin. Grady, my brother-in-law. It's big enough to sleep all of us and more. Unlike the beach house, which would never do. Eight is not four, and never could be when you're talking about places to sleep.

"I'm going to the beach house. On Thursday." This has become my mantra.

"Listen, I just dropped the boys off. Can I come by for a quick cup of coffee? Better yet, how about I hit the drive-thru and grab a couple of mochas and maybe a muffin?"

I sigh. I'm going to get exactly what I deserve for my lies and other bad behavior. "Sure."

The boys are Ainsley's ten-year-old twin sons, Sam and Eli, identical only so far as their epidermis. Beyond that, they're as different as my world before and after Kinsey. Sam's the mischievous one, the prankster, the entertainer. You know him by the energy that bursts out of him like sunspots, as impossible to hold back as a sneeze. Eli's the—well, I call him Braveheart, for more reasons than I could cite. Not that Sam isn't good; he is, and I love him as much as it's possible to love. But Sam will succeed by the wit with which he's been gifted; Eli by his character. They're not bookends, these two. Rather they're the yin and yang of brotherdom.

Jaclyn comes next in my parade of callers, and right on time. She and Ainsley couldn't have spaced their calls more perfectly if they'd tried. I had no clue such a network existed between my stepmom, sister and best friend. But now I see they're worker bees in a common hive, with me—Queen Bee apparent—coddled and insulated, and not even knowing it.

Till now.

It comes as news, because Sissy Vanderpool and Jaclyn Papier meld as well as fire and water. Get them together and there's a whole lot of steam. Don't ask me why. It just is and always has been. But they've buried the hatchet—hopefully not in each other's back—for the sake of my, what? Sanity? If so, they're too late. By a light year.

"Bristol. Hey, girl."

"I'm going to the beach house. On Thursday." I'd be nicer but I'm put off by the falsetto of Jac's voice. She's trying much too hard to be blasé and we both know it.

"Well, some of us were talking—"

"Some of us?"

"—about going to the cabin for a few days."

"Uh huh. Some of us who?" I already know, of course, but there's something satisfying in hearing her squirm.

"Well, let's see. Ainsley. And, um, Sheila." Not Sassy—which is what she's called my stepmother for years instead of Sissy—but Sheila. And even at that she garbles the name as best she can so I might somehow miss it. "They say there could be—"

"Snow." I say it with her.

"Exactly." The falsetto continues. "So what do you think?"

What do I think? "I think things are desperate if you and Sissy are willing to hole up in a snowed-in A-frame for a dangerously long weekend just to babysit me."

"Bristol, come on." Her voice is her own once again. "No one wants to babysit you."

"Uh huh. I'm going to the beach house. On Thursday." I don't tell her the rest—meaning the fact that I'm not coming back—because I'm still trying to fool even me.

"Well, since I've already cleared my calendar, how about if I come along?"

"And where will we put David?" It's mean to yank her chain like this, yes, but it's the new me. The not-so-improved model.

She stammers, so out of character for Jac, who usually has it so together. "David's going?"

I hear the hope and surprise in her voice. "Since you've obviously talked to Ainsley and"—I can hardly believe this—"Sissy, you know I'm going by myself."

"Then why—"

"Jac, I need to be alone for this. I don't mean to hurt anyone, but that's how I want it."

Even as I say the part about not hurting anyone, I know it's not true. Because right now, David, the one I'm hurting most, is not even on my radar. I should feel awful about that. I really should.

"I'd stay out of your way, an invisible sidekick. I'd just be there if you wanted someone to talk to."

"Besides myself?"

Jac's silent a little too long.

"Kidding," I say. But I'm not. "Anyway, if you came with me, what would Loren do for Valentine's Day? You don't want to let him get away, do you?" It takes all the energy I can muster to sound as upbeat as I do.

"Daryn." Her voice takes a dip. "And he'd understand."

"About being alone on Valentine's Day? Not likely. We all know guys like the romance of it even more than we do." By romance I really mean sex, but Jac isn't the kind to dabble. Not till she's rightfully occupying a honeymoon suite on a tropical isle somewhere. Which is why a woman as beautiful as Jaclyn can't seem to hang onto a man.

The question she leaves unasked—the one about David being alone, and we're not just talking about Valentine's Day here—is a testament of her devotion to me. There was a time I'd say I deserved her friendship, but I've not pulled my weight for some time now. Three hundred sixty days to be exact.

"What'll you do?" she asks.

"Listen to the waves. Pretend things are different than they are." I've gone too far with that, so before she can say one sympathetic word I say goodbye.

I've added the morning mugs to the dishwasher along with a dab of soap and turned on the machine, when Ainsley wrestles her way through the back door, cup holder in one hand, pastry sack in the other. She sets both on the kitchen bar, then gives me a hug. Her cheek touches mine, and I hear the kiss that doesn't quite make contact.

"Spice," she says, referring to the muffin. My favorite, not hers. She tolerates spice, but lemon blueberry makes her smile. I sigh again. She pulls a knife out of the drawer, and puts the halves on the two plates I set out. I slip onto the stool across from the one she's scooted onto. "Thanks for letting me barge in."

Barge? Ainsley Marie Vanderpool O'Neal has never barged, not once in her whole life. Now me? I barge, I push, I stomp, I bully. Talk about yin.

At least I used to.

"Decaf," she says, reading the markings on the cup, and hands it to me.

I hate decaf, but I take it anyway, as I have for three hundred sixty days, and lust after the real thing in Ainsley's cup. What we do for love. Or maybe peace. My family, who are rightly convinced that I don't need anything else to stimulate body, soul or spirit, are protecting me from myself. I sigh again, and promise myself it's the last sigh till Ainsley's in her car, backing out of the drive. Then I can sigh my way to oblivion if I want to.

I know I should bring up the subject for which she came and make this as easy for her as I can, but these days I lack the energy to confront even Ainsley, as mild and undemanding as she is. As it turns out, David's the only one I can still dig my heel into. I break off a piece of muffin, and wait. I'm buying time and we both know it.

"So, Bristol, what do you think about all of us going to the cabin? Sweetie?"

What do I think? Besides the fact that they not only colluded on this whole thing, but they scripted it too? I think of the last time we were at the cabin, twelve, no eleven days before Kinsey disappeared. I see the little pallet I made for her to sleep on, beside the bed David and I shared; see the pink jacket she wore, with the white fur around the hood tied up tight around her face to keep her warm in the snow. See the pink of her cheeks. The pink of her nose. Too much pink.

The mocha is too cool and too sweet, but I drink as if my life depends on it, even though my stomach wants to throw up what I've already swallowed. I think for a moment I just might let it, but then I pull in enough air to settle things down.

Ainsley reaches across the counter and touches my free hand. "I know this is a hard week for you." Her gray eyes glisten and threaten to spill over with the compassion she harbors. "We all want to do what we can to get you and Davy through it."

Through it? Am I the only one who has seen the news this morning?

I ease my hand from beneath hers. I can't muster so much as the hint of a tear as I turn away, though there are so many inside I slosh when I walk. I know it's the drugs they have me on, the antidepressants meant to quell every ounce of feeling inside. For my own good, they say. To get me through. I'd tuck it in my cheek and spit it out when no one is looking, dramatically, like in the movies, if I thought I could handle the fallout. But fear is the one

emotion it hasn't annihilated.

As it is, I've been taking half as many as they think I have for a couple of weeks now, enough to keep the darkness at bay, but not enough to make me feel more dead than I already do. With the new refill David just picked up for me I have a nice little stockpile going. What accidental foresight, because the thought of going to sleep and never having to wake to this nightmare again is so compelling, so comforting.

I inch the cup out of my immediate space with the back of my hand, across a grout-line in the tile. There. Off limits, I tell myself, and pretend there's a barrier I can't reach through. I'll dump the rest when Ainsley's gone. When the barrier dissolves.

"I'm going to the beach house. On Thursday." I nod as if that settles it. But I know it doesn't. I know that Ainsley, the peacemaker, is here to do battle.

"Well, but sweetie, it would be so much better for us not to be alone."

I catch the *us* of her argument, but of course she means me. Not even David. Just me.