



Lying on Sunday

by Sharon K. Souza

Excerpt courtesy of www.sharonksouza.com

One

The Chiffons were singing “One Fine Day” on the golden oldies XM Radio station. And it was. One of those rare August days when a front moves into the valley, knocking the temperature down a good twenty degrees with a chime-rattling breeze, a gift from the ocean two hours west. This blustery hullabaloo in the heavens offered a respite from the hundred-plus days so typical of August in Granite Bay, a town on Folsom Lake, northeast of Sacramento at the base of the Sierra foothills. It was summer without the sizzle. The colors all primary.

The windows and doors were open throughout the house, the air conditioner off for the first time in two months, and I was baking a chocolate cheesecake for Becca’s birthday. Our baby was eighteen and leaving for college. But I put that thought right out of my mind every chance I got. I still had ten glorious days in which to enjoy my full quiver, small though it was.

Bailey, our firstborn, had made the same trek a year before, paving the way for her sister. The more adventurous of our girls hands down, Bailey left without a single backward glance though she did call home for money and advice on a regular basis. Money from me, the easy touch; advice from her father, the wise one. And she came home every holiday and vacation. That had more to do with Tim McGuire than anything, but I liked to think the tie that binds hadn’t completely unraveled yet.

Becca was more timid about that first real independent step. College she faced with excitement, but leaving home brought trepidation. If Cal Poly hadn’t been nearly six hours away, she’d have forgone dorm life and commuted, a fact that left Bailey absolutely speechless. A mama’s girl, she’d taunt, but that wasn’t the truth. Becca was and always had been the wink in her daddy’s eye—well, once Trey got over the shock that I was pregnant a second time in a year. But by her first birthday she’d charmed her way into his heart. I mean, who could resist those dimples and a face the shape of a perfect valentine?

Our girls are as different as oranges and figs. Both sweet in their own way, but Bailey definitely has a tartness to her that Becca doesn't have. And a boldness that terrifies me. From the time she could talk, I've never known what would come out of her mouth, only that it would probably embarrass or stupefy. Like the time years ago when Trey's best friend, Adam, came for a Saturday barbecue with the latest pearl in a long string of purely sensual date choices. Trey barely had the burgers flipped when Bailey, three, looked at the young woman in her Daisy Mae shorts and kerchief halter and said, "What's a bimbo?" I thought it humorous myself, but Trey, out of whose mouth the original quote had come, turned pomegranate red while Adam went chasing after his date.

We had plenty of leftovers that night.

My girls amaze me, and for the longest time all I could think was that they were fortunate to have dipped in Trey's gene pool a bit longer than mine.

I've had cause to reconsider.

Anyway, Trey had been in Dallas for the week, like he was for five days every six weeks, and, as always, I felt as liberated as a size-eight foot slipping out of a size-seven shoe. But I can handle only so much freedom before I crave routine, so I was ready for the normalcy his return always brought. Besides, it was Becca's birthday and I couldn't wait to show him the laptop we'd gotten her.

Mother and Dad were coming at five, right when the girls got in from their summer jobs as baristas at Starbucks. That would give Trey and me a few minutes alone before everyone arrived, assuming his plane was on time and traffic from the airport wasn't too heavy. But this was Friday, and that was a lot to hope for.

Mother and Dad, now in their late sixties, still live in the house I grew up in on the *established* side of Fair Oaks, a Sacramento suburb. The houses there are ranch style, which popped up all over town in the sixties, and have on average a half-acre of backyard sprawling under trees as old as me.

In contrast, our home on Wexford Circle sits on one acre and is chock-full of all the latest amenities. Granite kitchen, marble bathrooms with the finest in Jacuzzi tubs, six bedrooms, seven baths, four fireplaces, media room with wall-to-wall screen and eight theater seats, continuous heat flow underneath the floors, central vac. Extravagant built-in barbecue and nature pool. And from the upstairs sitting room, a perfect view of the lake. Believe me, that upped the price of the lot.

Mother has talked for a decade about selling their rancher to downsize, particularly the yard. Lately, Dad has begun to do some repairs and I know it's only a matter of time. A swell of panic starts in the pit of my stomach whenever I think about someone else's pictures hanging on our walls. So I do my best not to think about it. All that borrowing trouble and stuff. But if I had my way I'd snatch it up in a minute and leave the high life to those more suited to it.

I'm lucky to still have Mother and Dad, no matter where they live. Shawlie Bryson, my best friend since second grade, was ten when her father left and thirty-something when her mother died. A late-life child, Shawlie has no siblings. That she knows of.

Shawlie and I have been on the wrong side of forty for half a year now. She's been married twice, and as Shawlie would say, "You'd think there was a fifty-fifty chance that one of the lechers would not have graduated from the same school of morals and ethics as my father. But no." And so she enjoys her singleness and swears she'll not marry again until she needs someone to pluck her chin hairs.

Like that would ever happen.

Shawlie is not just beautiful. She's Michelle Pfeiffer, one-in-a-million beautiful, where every right gene fell into place, like the tumblers of a combination lock. Click. Click. Click. And the real beauty is that she doesn't flaunt it. I've always thought she could have been my daughters' mother because they're beauties too. Except that Shawlie dislikes—and that's shining a positive light on the picture—my husband, Robert Andrew Torrington the Third. Trey to everyone. RAT to Shawlie—always in caps—but only in my presence. To his face she calls him Rob, the word marvelously extended and spoken like an indictment. They make it a rule to avoid one another whenever possible. Hence, Shawlie dropped Becca's present off the night before. She wasn't coming for dinner.

I planned taco salad for Becca's birthday, her request, along with fresh cantaloupe from the fruit stand on the south edge of town. And, of course, a bowl of strawberries because they would only be in season a few more days. But I didn't have to start any of that until the afternoon. I reached over and turned up the volume on the radio. I love The Chiffons. And The Supremes, the Shirelles, The Dixie Cups, all those girl bands from way back when. It doesn't matter that most of them had hits before I was even born. I grew up listening to them on the oldies station with my dad while he worked in the garage or when he'd drive me to school. We were karaoke before karaoke was cool, Dad and me.

I like the newer oldies too. The ones from my own generation: U2, Phil Collins, Bon Jovi. And I like how satellite radio lets me choose which decade I want to listen to. Today it was the sixties. And, yes, it was one fine day. Right up to the time the phone rang.

"Abigail Torrington?"

"Yes, that's me." Inwardly I groaned. It sounded like one of those survey calls that takes half a day. When would I learn to check caller ID before I picked up? I could hear Bailey saying those very words in my mind. "But I'm sorry, I don't have time—"

"This is the nursing supervisor at Sharp Memorial Hospital in San Diego, California."

"Nurse— Hosp— San Di—" I sputtered like a hot steam iron, all the while trying to figure out what this call had to do with me.

"Is this Mrs. Torrington?" The voice was rife with authority and brought me to attention.

"Yes," I said, then said it again because the first yes came out a whisper.

"Mrs. Robert Torrington?" The emphasis was on Robert.

I dropped onto the bar stool where I conduct much of my casual phone conversations with Shawlie and others, flipping through recipe books and jotting down grocery lists as we chat. All the mundane things that I love so well. But this was no casual call.

"Yes," I said again. Now my heart was beating like those base tones you hear coming from vehicles with windows too dark to see through.

"Mrs. Torrington, your husband was brought into our emergency room early this morning. In cardiac arrest. We were unable to revive him. I'm very sorry."

I cocked my head like a sparrow, trying to think who would find this type of joke funny. Trey? Cardiac arrest? *San Diego*? "I really think you might have the wrong Mrs. Torrington. My husband, *Trey*, is in Dallas. Well"—I glanced at the clock on the microwave—"on his way home from. Before long."

There was a pause on the other end of the line and I could hear the shuffling of papers. "Robert Andrew Torrington, date of birth 5-11-58? Social Security 563—"

A little whimper worked its way out of my throat as fear began to constrict my torso. "You ... you're sure?"

"Mrs. Torrington, I'm very, very sorry." There was a pause. "There are several mortuaries we work with in your county. If you would select one from the list someone will contact you to make arrangements to bring Mr. Torrington home."

"Mortu—" The timer went off on my cheesecake. "It's Becca's birthday."

"Mrs. Torrington, I'll call back in a few minutes. Give you some time to ... I'm very sorry."

The continuous beeping sounded through a fog and I rose from the bar stool. Without recall after the fact, I went through the motions, quieting the timer, placing the cheesecake on a cooling rack, turning off the oven. Then returned to my position on the stool. Looked at the notes I'd jotted: *Rob And Torr. 5-11-58. Card arr.*

That's when the uppercut came, knocking the wind right out of me. I gasped, but the most sickening feeling I'd ever had kept my lungs from opening to receive the breath. My vision began to recede as sparklers crackled inside my head. I was going down, not with a thud, but sinking as if I were melting from the feet up. I didn't faint but came as close to an out-of-body experience a soul can undergo without actually achieving that phenomenon. I was a spectator, watching myself come unglued. My mouth worked like a guppy. I need to breathe, breathe, bre—

My lungs opened up, reviving me with oxygen, sending a sharp pain to my brain. And my heart. "Trey." It's all I could say. All I could think. Trey. He wasn't coming home.

And it was Becca's birthday.

Was this some kind of cosmic *Candid Camera*? I looked around suddenly, as if everyone would jump out of hiding and yell, "Surprise!" "Gotcha." "Gotcha good."

I climbed back up to my stool, a furious trembling in my arms and legs. Caller ID gave me the number and I dialed it.

"Sharp Memorial Hospital. How may I direct your call?"

It wasn't a joke. I blinked away more firecrackers, forced myself not to hyperventilate, and squeaked into the phone, "I ... I need ... someone from ... they said my husband died."

Perkiness gave way to professionalism. "Let me connect you with our nursing supervisor. One moment."

"Ms. Waters," she announced. It was the same official voice I'd heard before. "Hello?"

"It's Abigail Torrington."

"Oh. Yes. Mrs. Torrington."

"I just wanted— Then it's— He's really—?" Sputter, sputter, sputter.

"Would you like to discuss the"—her pause was practiced—"arrangements?"

"Can you tell me? What happened?"

"Certainly." I heard the shuffle of papers again. "He was brought into emergency at 5:18 this morning. In cardiac arrest."

"That means his heart wasn't beating?"

"Correct."

"But, but, he's in Dallas."

The silence on the other end of the line said otherwise.

"He is. Supposed to be." I felt myself turn gray. Felt all the blood drop to my toes. "Who brought? Was anyone—?"

"He came by ambulance. Let me see. Unattended."

"Alone?"

"It would seem."

"From where?"

"The ambulance company would have that information. Dr. Stillman was the attending ER physician. I assure you he did everything he could."

Stillman. Everything. I wrote every major word she spoke in my own form of shorthand. I would need it. To tell the others.

"I see there was one inquiry made by a person who arrived shortly after the ambulance, but—" Ms. Waters paused a little too long. "She didn't leave a name. We assumed, well, she wasn't there when Dr. Stillman went out to speak with her."

I swallowed a sob. "Her?"

"Mrs. Torrington, is there someone you can call? A friend, a minister?"

"Call?" Of course! I said goodbye, then went to the numbers stored in my phone, starting from the bottom and working up. When I came to Trey I engaged the number for his cell phone, my heart pounding out a savage beat. The call went immediately to voice mail.

"Well, of course. He's on an airplane. All phones off." Right? *Right?*

She has his date of birth. And his Social Security number.

But he's on a plane. Coming home.

A millennium might have passed in the moments that followed. As if time and tide had come to a screeching halt at last. For Trey. My Trey. I couldn't stop the tears. I soaked everything in sight, then soaked it all again. But a niggling thought kept poking itself into my consciousness, like a prairie dog popping up in the desert, here, there, everywhere. *San Diego. San Diego. San Diego.*

I knew he had no business dealings there, and that fact generated the tiniest bit of hope in my heart. Impossible though it seemed, this had to be a mistake. I calmed myself, blew my nose, and reached for the phone. It took only a minute or so until I was connected to American Airlines.

"No, I don't have the flight number." His travel had become so routine over the years he no longer worried about giving me an itinerary. He left on Monday, spent the week at corporate headquarters, came home on Friday. Every six weeks. "He's a passenger on the flight from Dallas that arrives in Sacramento somewhere around three this afternoon." I gripped a pencil, waiting to write down the information that would make this nightmare go away. "Robert A. Torrington. Double-r-i-n— Yes. Torrington."

Suddenly it wasn't so cool. I flipped on the ceiling fan and waited for the man on the other end of the phone to put an end to the madness. "Yes, from Dallas. He's a reg— Are you sure?" I was trembling again and trying not to let it sound in my voice. "Is ... is there another flight?"

He said it would take only a few moments to run Trey's name through their computer. And he was right. It didn't take long to confirm that Robert A. Torrington was a passenger on American Airlines flight number 1282. From San Diego. Direct to Sacramento. At one that afternoon.