

Providence

By

Patricia Thorpe

“What do I do now?” Sage lifted her head and stared at me. Her right eye was already swelling shut, blood oozed from a cut on her forehead. The bruise around her neck was darkening from purple to black.

We used to be mirror images of each other, but then she’d met William and her face slowly altered, her cheekbones flattened, her chin rounded, her broken teeth filed shorter than nature intended.

I pushed the sweaty hair away from my sister’s forehead and said, “*We* call the police.”

“No!” she pushed my hands away, her eyes wild with fear. “I can’t go to prison, Sadie, I can’t!”

“You won’t go to prison. Just look at you!”

“They’ll put me away,” she insisted. “Look what happened to Beth Korman!”

Beth Korman had been the top news story for weeks. The 29-year-old had been hospitalized six times, had her ribs broken four, her jaw twice and her wrist a whopping five times. When Tom Korman lifted his hand to her two days after she’d been released from her latest stay in Mercy General, she’d finally had enough and fought back with a meat cleaver. Despite the medical records and a boatload of evidence, the jury didn’t buy her story of abuse. Or maybe they did and decided it didn’t matter. It took them less than an hour to find her guilty of premeditated murder. It took the judge less than five minutes to sentence her to life without the possibility of parole.

I've been told there was a time when abused women could fight back and not be convicted of a crime, but those years were long past. The political landscape, as my mother would have said in her dry no-nonsense tone, had changed.

Sage lowered her face into her hands and began to cry again. I put my arm around my twin and she sagged against me.

We were huddled on the living room floor of her gorgeous beach house. I could hear the waves slamming into the rocks, breaking on the enormous stones that make up this part of the coast. The sound was a hypnotic *szszszszszszsz* that paused and repeated. Paused and repeated. I looked out of the floor-to-ceiling glass doors that lined the back wall, but while I could hear it, I could barely make out the sea. The moon was a slice of bright in the bruise of night.

I looked at the lovely blonde hardwood, the soft hues of the pillows on the leather couch, the fantastically lit bookcases that surrounded the stone fireplace. I looked everywhere before looking at him.

William was sprawled in front of the fireplace, his body squared in fours by the shadows of the window mullions.

Blood pooled around his head. He was bare-chested, his arms flung out to the sides. Striped pajama pants covered his bottom half and I was thankful I didn't have to see that part of him at least. My arm tightened around Sage.

"Tell me again what happened."

It's such an old story. One I'd heard far too often. How the fight started over something small but his rage escalated until it reached the smashing crescendo. Something inside of her broke and she hit him with a lamp. The lamp was next to his head, lying on its side, the heavy silver base dented from where it connected with his temple.

One look at the lamp and William's head told me my sister hadn't swung just once. That alone could convict her.

Sage lifted her head, looked at me hopefully. "Maybe we could wrap him up in the rug, throw him into the ocean."

"Wrap him in the rug?" I repeated. "Oh Sage, that's so cliché."

Her eyes locked on mine and in that same instant, we laughed. Yes, there was a bit of hysteria in it, but the laugh managed to clear my head.

It's important for you to know that the house was hers, not his. So many people think women stay because of some kind of twisted greed. Like a beating is a fair trade-off for living the good life. *Well, he gave her a Mercedes*, people whispered about Beth Korman. Like that made what he did to her okay, like she owed him the right to pummel her senseless.

My sister is a world-renowned pianist. When we were young, people couldn't tell us apart, but that was only within the cells that formed our face, our bodies. When it came to talent, all of those genes went to Sage. And I mean all of them. She was brilliant. Except when it came to William. For a long time, she kept what was happening in their relationship hidden from me. But I saw one too many bruises and pushed. She finally broke down and her tale sounded like a confession, which enraged me, though I kept that to myself.

I asked her more times than I can count why she stayed. Most of the time, her answer was the simple standard, 'you wouldn't understand', but once she said, "Its gotten too deep." When I asked what she meant, she looked up at me, a bruise on her cheek yellowing, and said, "I'm sunk in too deep to leave."

I kissed the top of her head. "Do you still have the rolling duffel I gave to William?"

God, I hated to even say his name.

She looked up at me again. “Yes.”

“Go get it.” When Sage rose, she winced and put a hand to the small of her back. I bit the inside of my cheek, instinctively knowing that she’d taken a few blows to the kidneys before picking up a lamp. Sage went down the hallway toward the bedroom, appearing a minute later with the long leather bag I’d given to my sister’s boyfriend a hundred years ago, back before I knew what a bastard he really was.

Sage rolled the bag to me and I noticed she didn’t look at the body sprawled on the rug in front of the mantel.

“What are we going to do?” she asked again and I was glad this time she’d used ‘we’ instead of I.

“I have an idea,” I said. “Where’s the best place to hide a body?” Sage looked at me blankly. I took her hand. Squeezed it. “How about on top of another one?”

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Sage argued at first, but when I showed her a recent obituary of a man, Albert LaChance, who’d been buried that day, she said, “If we bury William in Albert LaChance’s grave, someone will know!”

“No, they won’t,” I said firmly.

“What if someone close to him dies and wants to be buried in the same plot? When they dig the grave, they’ll find William’s body.”

“Not going to happen,” I said promptly. “Read the obit again. Albert LaChance was an elderly single man with no children. The likelihood of some distant relative being buried in his grave is slim to none. It’s the perfect place, Sage. Providence.”

I used the word on purpose, because it’s one our mother used all the time. Sometimes she meant wisdom, but more often, she meant fate. The utterance had the desired effect. Sage’s mouth tightened into a thin line and she nodded.

We managed to get William into the duffle bag, but it was tight. The real struggle came in trying to zip the bag up. We were both sweating by the time we were done. When I pulled on the rolling duffle, the wheels made a protesting squeal and I had a momentary sense of panic, sure that the wheels would collapse, but then they straightened out and I was able to get the bag out to the garage.

Sage started the Cadillac SUV with a beep of her key and the lights blinked as the engine engaged. I rolled the duffle to the back, lifted the hatch, and we hoisted the bag inside.

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We’ve all heard the phrase “six feet under,” but that depth is a myth. Most bodies are buried four feet underground. Doesn’t sound like a lot, does it? It is literally a ton of dirt. 2.68 tons to be exact. The first eighteen inches were easy. The soil was loose and we were able to move it fairly quickly. We tag-teamed the spade; fifteen minutes each.

Sage was in the hole, now up to her calves. I stood on the edge, breathing heavy, sweat pouring down my back. I couldn’t seem to catch my breath. I put my head back, took big gulps of the cold night air. That sliver of a moon was still just a speck in the black sky, but it gleamed like polished bone. I looked around, scanning every inch of black landscape. The wind whipped

the trees, bent them to new shapes. I searched for lights, for movement, for sound. For someone watching us.

The duffle bag was next to me and the zipper shimmered in the scant moonlight. I know it was my imagination, but for a second, I thought I saw the bag move. Not a big movement, mind you, just a little jerk, a slight bulge on the left side. Like an elbow bumping the inside fabric. I stared at the bag, my heart banging against my ribs, but it didn't move again.

"I'll take over," I whispered. Sage looked up, her face streaked with dirt and sweat. Even in the darkness, even with all that dirt on her face, I could see the marks left by William's fists.

Never again, I thought.

I took the shovel from her and took her place. Put my back into it, as my father would have said.

"Sadie," I could hear the panic in her whisper. I looked up and my breathing stopped when I saw the sheer terror on her face. "Do you hear it?"

I listened, hard. No sound, save the wind. "What?" I whispered back.

"I hear something... it sounds like someone is coming."

I climbed out of the hole, stood next to my sister. She clutched my sleeve. I searched the darkness, eyes burning, ears straining for the slightest change. For a moment, I thought I heard something very faint. It could have been a voice, it could have been someone's radio playing through an open window. I was dimly aware of my heartbeat, thudding thudding thudding in my ears. Every fiber in my being screamed for me to run, but I stood stock still. A twig snapped behind us; I whirled around, saw a shape slink through the trees.

“It’s a cat,” Sage said. She sagged against me and I automatically put my arm around her, relief draining the adrenaline. I took a deep shaking breath, gave my sister a quick squeeze and climbed back into the pit.

It took us about four hours to dig the grave. By the time we were done, we were barely able to lift the shovel above shin height. We stood on the edge, peering into the hole. The brass plaque engraved with Albert LaChance’s name was barely visible. We looked at the hole, then at each other, and without a word, unzipped the bag.

William’s flesh was the color of lavender. Without talking about who was going to do what, I rolled his body out of the bag and pushed him into the grave. He landed with a heavy thud, his body sprawled sideways on top of the polished coffin.

Sage licked her lips. “We should push him to the side,” she said.

I climbed into the hole and grabbed his arm, rolled him onto his side. I tried to jam him into the space between the top of the coffin and the grave’s wall. The corpse fit halfway and then stopped. I kicked his body, forcing it deeper into the gap. I kicked again, and then I couldn’t stop. Something came over me and I just kicked and kicked and kicked, only dimly aware of Sage’s panicked whisper, “Stop it Sadie! Stop it!” But there was no stopping it and the body of sister’s abuser was finally wedged into the earth.

I looked up. Sage’s hair was covered in clumps of dirt. Her skin was streaked with it. Behind her was a faint glow, a glimmer of shadow on the horizon.

“We have to hurry,” I said as she helped me from the hole.

Filling the hole back in was a lot easier than digging it out.

By the time the sky was edging from black soot to ash, we were done.

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We showered and then I helped Sage to bed. As she slid between the covers, her tee shirt lifted and I saw the bruise covering her right side. It went from hip to chest. I stared at it, wishing I'd given the son of a bitch one more kick.

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The cemetery looked different in the daylight.

It was the oldest cemetery in Everton, dating back to the late 1600's. An intricate wrought iron fence surrounded the land and I wondered what its purpose was: had it been built to protect the living or the dead?

Victorian houses lined the street across from the Oaklawn Cemetery. They were striking places, complete with turrets, wide porches and white gingerbread. They were beautifully painted, too, mostly blues and greens, as befitting an old New England coastal town.

I drove slowly through the stone archway. Leaves crunched under the tires. The oldest markers leaned into the shrubbery surrounding them. Others had bent forward, a formal bow. The words etched into the slate faces were barely legible.

"What if there are cameras?" Sage had asked me last night as we drove the eight miles to the graveyard.

"There aren't any," I said immediately. "Do you honestly think that this town would pay to have cameras installed in a cemetery? Why on earth would they do that when they're still fighting over whether or not to buy a new police cruiser?"

Sage hadn't answered but the tight lines around her mouth eased a little. My explanation sounded right last night, but in the weak light of a cold dawn, panic started to nibble at my edges and I knew I had to be sure.

I looked at the trees as the car inched its way over the gravel road. The day was all wind and cold sunshine. No trail cameras to be seen. My shoulders relaxed.

The graveyard that housed the dead of Everton was neatly divided into squares. I drove through the old section, up a short hill, and parked under a maple that was just starting to shed its scarlet leaves.

I sat in my car and looked at where we'd laid William to "rest." I studied it critically. Flowers in urns covered the bare dirt. Ribbons bearing the words "Uncle," and "Rest in Peace" fluttered in the morning breeze. We'd been careful to put the flowers for Albert LaChance back exactly as we'd found them, placing them in the same pattern they'd been in.

No one will know, I tried to convince myself. No one will ever know.

We'd come up with a pretty good cover story. It would be a while before anyone would miss the son of a bitch. He wasn't on speaking terms with his family (no surprise there) and was on the brink of being let go at work. He was also involved with another woman, a blonde who lived in the next state. Our story would be that William told Sage he was going on a business trip. He left and she never heard from him again. There would be text messages to support the story and then his phone would go silent. *It will be okay, I told myself. It will.*

Movement fluttered just outside my range of vision and I turned my head. An old woman was lugging a green plastic watering can. She walked slowly to the water spigot at the edge of the grass. I watched her fill the bucket and she leaned to the right as she tried to lift it. She struggled, then used both hands to try to lift the jug. No go.

Without thinking about it, I got out of the car.

She must have heard the door close because she lifted her head and looked directly at me. A smile broke out on her wrinkled face and she waved a greeting. She wore a blue and yellow

flowered dress and a heavy cream-colored sweater. The sweater looked handmade. On her feet were those thick-soled black shoes old women are so fond of. Truth to tell, she looked like she stepped from the pages of an Agatha Christie novel, all plump-bodied, curly white hair gone wispy, rosy-cheeked and twinkly-eyed.

“Let me help,” I said as I approached her.

Her smile grew wider.

“Oh, my dear, I’d be so grateful!”

I lifted the bucket and for the first time noticed the blisters on my hands. Funny, I hadn’t felt them, but as soon as my palm closed around that plastic handle, those blisters sprang to life. I winced as I followed the old woman’s back to a small grave marked with a pink stone.

Beautiful blue hydrangeas were planted on either side of the granite. The old woman said, “Please, if you don’t mind, dear?” Dutifully, I watered the bushes. While I did, she chattered.

“It’s a lovely day, isn’t it? These Indian summer days are wonderful, aren’t they? Somehow I enjoy these days more than early spring. There’s something special about a warm day in October.”

She put her hands to the small of her back and stretched. I thought I could hear the bones in her spine grind. She saw my look and said, “Sciatica. It’s plagued me since 1964.”

Straightening up, she touched the top of the stone. Her touch was gentle.

“This is my son Henry’s grave.”

I looked at the words etched into the surface.

Henry Conroy

Born October 17, 1962 Died April 5, 1964

My heart still aches in sadness, and secret tears still flow, what it meant to lose you,
no one will ever know.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

Her eyes were on the name cut into the pink marble. “He was a dear little thing,” she said wistfully. “I often wonder what he would have done with his life. Ah, well.” She looked up at me then and I wasn’t surprised to see tears brimming in the faded blue eyes.

“I live right over there,” she gestured at the row of Victorian houses. I glanced that way and she said, “The blue one. On the left.”

It was a lovely place and I told her so.

“I’ve lived in it all my life,” she said. “I was born there and after we got married, Warren and I decided to take care of Mama. So. In. We. Moved.” She laughed and I smiled along with her. “Mama died before Henry was born. Pity. She would have loved that tyke.” She stuck out a hand molded by arthritis. “Josephine Conroy,” she said. “Josie.”

“Sadie Lorden.”

“Well, Sadie, I am pleased to make your acquaintance and I appreciate your help with that dreadful bucket. Most of the time, I only fill it a bit and take several trips, but this old back is bothering me today so I thought I’d try filling it all at once. That’s one thing about getting old. You sometimes forget how *feeble* the body gets.”

“It’s no trouble,” I said.

“Who are you visiting today?” her bright eyes were on mine and then I corrected myself. Not bright. Shrewd.

“Oh,” I said quickly, and I hope, smoothly, “No one. I’m in town visiting my sister and was just driving by. I find old cemeteries fascinating. Peaceful.” It was like all of a sudden there was something in the air, like pollen, that made my nose tingle and the back of my throat itch.

“Peaceful is the perfect word,” she said. “I thought you looked familiar. Is your sister Sage?”

“Yes.” I smiled but the twinges of alarm were growing.

“Your sister is just the sweetest soul! And so talented! Why, when she plays, I am moved to tears.”

“You’ve heard her play then?”

“Oh my yes! Whenever she is performing around here, I make sure to buy a ticket. We are fortunate souls indeed to have Sage Lorden living in our little town.”

“And Mr. Conroy?” I asked, trying to switch the subject. “What does he do?”

The old woman gave me a wisp of a smile. “Warren left us back in ’64. Haven’t heard a word about him since.”

There was something in the old woman’s tone that brought me up short. “I’m sorry—” I started, but she cut me off.

“Good riddance to him,” she said. “After Henry died, I realized how much better off I would be without that man. Warren was rotten to the core.”

I didn’t have an answer to that. Our shadows stretched across the grass like they’d been cut from gray construction paper.

“Well,” I said, “I should be on my way. Sage will be up by now and—”

Her laugh was the tinkling kind. She put a hand on my arm. “Oh my dear. We both know Sage won’t be up yet.” Her eyes locked on mine. “Especially after a busy night.”

I’ve read the phrases “blood tingled,” and “all the oxygen left the body,” but I’d never experienced either of those things. I did then. I stared at the old woman and she patted my arm, still holding my stare. It was like I couldn’t pull my eyes away.

“I wasn’t able to make last evening’s concert, but my friend AnnMarie told me it was almost other-worldly.” The old woman patted my arm. “I would imagine playing for three hours in a concert hall would be absolutely exhausting! Sage had a busy night indeed.” She smiled at me again, but there was something in it, something with teeth. “I had a busy night myself! This darn sciatica keeps me up, it’s a plague, honestly. I couldn’t sleep so I thought, why I know, I’ll organize my crochet basket. I’ve got the arthritis, but I can still crochet on my good days. I love to make baby blankets and I give most of them to the children’s home in Gloucester. But do you know, last night, I could not find my favorite needle? I’ve had that crochet hook since the 1960’s. I went to bed, but then something woke me up. I looked out the window and saw a light over here, but thought it was just the moon playing tricks. I knew sleep would never come – when I’m up, I am up! -- so I decided to look for my crochet hook. That darn thing fits my hand like its’ been molded to my fingers. I went through that whole house, searching in every drawer. I was about to lose my mind, I’ll tell you!” her hand tightened on my cold forearm arm. “And then just as I was about to give up, I thought, *Josie, go through that basket one more time.* And. There. It. Was.” That tinkling, merry laugh came again. “Hidden right there with the other hooks!”

I didn’t answer and she took her gnarled hand off my arm. Patting the gravestone again, she said, “Sometimes the best place to hide something is on top of something else. Don’t you agree?”

That tingly feeling coalesced into something cold and hard. *She knows*, I thought, and those two words chased each other, over and over, clanging in my brain.

The old woman pulled a pair of clippers from the pocket of her sweater and started clipping at the bushes that adorned her son’s grave. “I come here every day to visit my boy,” she said, “and when the time comes, I’ll have my ashes sprinkled right here.”

“You won’t be buried with him?” the words came from a mouth that had gone numb.

Clip. Clip. Clip. She glanced up at me, those shrewd eyes on mine again.

“Oh my dear,” she said, “It’s much more prudent for me to be cremated.”

And my suspicion turned to certainty.

Warren Conroy never left Everton.

His wife put the clippers back in her pocket. “I’m so glad I found that old hook,” she said. “Some things are just not meant to be found. Wouldn’t you agree, dear?”

My mouth was dry and my throat itched. I could feel my heart picking up speed. Still, I managed to smile. “Absolutely,” I said. “Providence.”

She laughed and clapped her hands in delight. “That’s it! Providence.”

As she walked away, I wondered if I’d ever see her again, but in the next instant, knew I would. Every time I came to the Oaklawn Cemetery to check on Albert LaChance’s grave, I’d see Josephine Conroy visiting her son Henry. And the secret buried with him.

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