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STICKS AND STONES

Written by **Jo Jakeman**

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JO JAKEMAN

STICKS and STONES



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ONE

The day of Phillip's funeral

I expected to feel free, unburdened, but when the curtains close around Phillip Rochester's satin-lined coffin, all I feel is indigestion.

Naomi perches on the front row, shifting uncomfortably as the congregation whispers at her back. There are creases under her eyes where cried-out mascara threads its way through the cracked veneer. I wonder what she's crying for because, after all he's done, I am certain that it is not for *him*.

The vicar talked of a man who bore so little resemblance to the Phillip I knew, that I almost shed a tear. It is a time for lies and cover-ups, not truthful observations.

I twist my wedding band with my left thumb. No engagement ring. '*Too flashy, Immie. You're not that kind of girl.*' Five hundred and forty-eight days have passed since Phillip left me. I know I should take the ring off, but no amount of soap can free me from the snare. Years of marital misuse have thickened my hands, my waist and my heart.

I am sitting five rows back, in the seat closest to the wall, as befits the ex-wife. Though, in reality, am I his widow? We didn't finalise the divorce. The paperwork is still on the

sideboard along with the unpaid bills and the condolence cards. Fancy that. Me. A widow.

Some might say I shouldn't be here at all. Friends from my old life try not to stare at me but they can't help themselves. When our eyes bump into each other there is a timid acknowledgement, an apology of sorts, before a gosh-look-at-the time glance at wrists and a scurrying for the chapel door. Nobody called when Phillip traded me in. They went with him into his new life along with the Bruce Springsteen CDs and the coffee machine.

Mother sits by my side alternately tutting and sighing, unsure whether to be angry or sad. She promised not to speak during the service and, though the effort is nearly crippling her, she has kept her word. Her eyes burn holes into my temples. I know that her nostrils will be flaring like they always do when she is displeased. Mother tends to convey more through her eyes than her mouth, and I regret not telling her to keep those shut too.

We disagreed on whether Alistair should attend his father's funeral. She says that, at six years old, he is too young. I say that he should be here to say goodbye, to keep up the pretence that Phillip will be missed. Mother won. Some battles aren't worth fighting. We wrote notes attached to helium balloons instead. Up, up and away. Bye-bye, Daddy. Rot in hell, Phillip.

There are simple flowers at the front of the crematorium and Pachelbel's Canon is piped in from an invisible source. Everything has been carefully orchestrated to whitewash the darkness of death and disinfect the walls against the smell of decay. A palate-cleanser, if you like, between death and the wake. Naomi has booked the

function room at the Old Bell, but I won't go in case the sherry loosens my lips and I smile a smile that shouldn't be seen at a funeral.

As the mournful parade passes us by, we file out of our rows with the order of service in hand. Phillip's photograph on the front is a grotesque grinning spectre. It was taken before he was promoted to CID. A decade ago at least. I used to think he looked so handsome in that uniform.

Mother stands in line to pay her respects to Naomi. It will be a brief conversation as high opinion is in short supply. My best friend, Rachel, is talking to DC Chris Miller with a red shawl fastened about her shoulders. She refused to wear black. As she rightly pointed out, black is a sign of respect. Both she and Chris held Phillip in the same regard. I'd hoped it would be Chris leading the inquest into Phillip's death, but they've brought in someone from further afield. Neutral.

I'm aware of Ruby behind me, though I am careful not to make eye contact with her. She is wearing a diaphanous frock of fresh-bruise purple, the most sombre outfit she owns. It's the first time I've seen her wearing shoes. Usually barefoot, sometimes in flimsy flip-flops, it's anyone's guess whether this is a nod to conformity or she has simply come equipped to dance on Phillip's grave. She sits in the back row, as far away from the coffin as she can get, and commensurate with her ex-*ex*-wife status. The first Mrs Rochester, the woman that Naomi and I have been measured against, holds an icy-white tissue under her nose, a pomander against the contagion of grief.

I stand and edge my way past the eye-dabbers and the head-shakers until I feel the sun on my face and smell the

freshly mown grass. I squint against the sudden glare and a treacherous tear escapes my eye.

A stranger touches his cold hand to my elbow in a shared moment of I-know-how-it-feels, but how could he? There are only three of us here – Naomi, Ruby and I – who realise how satisfying it feels to know that Phillip Rochester got the death he deserved.