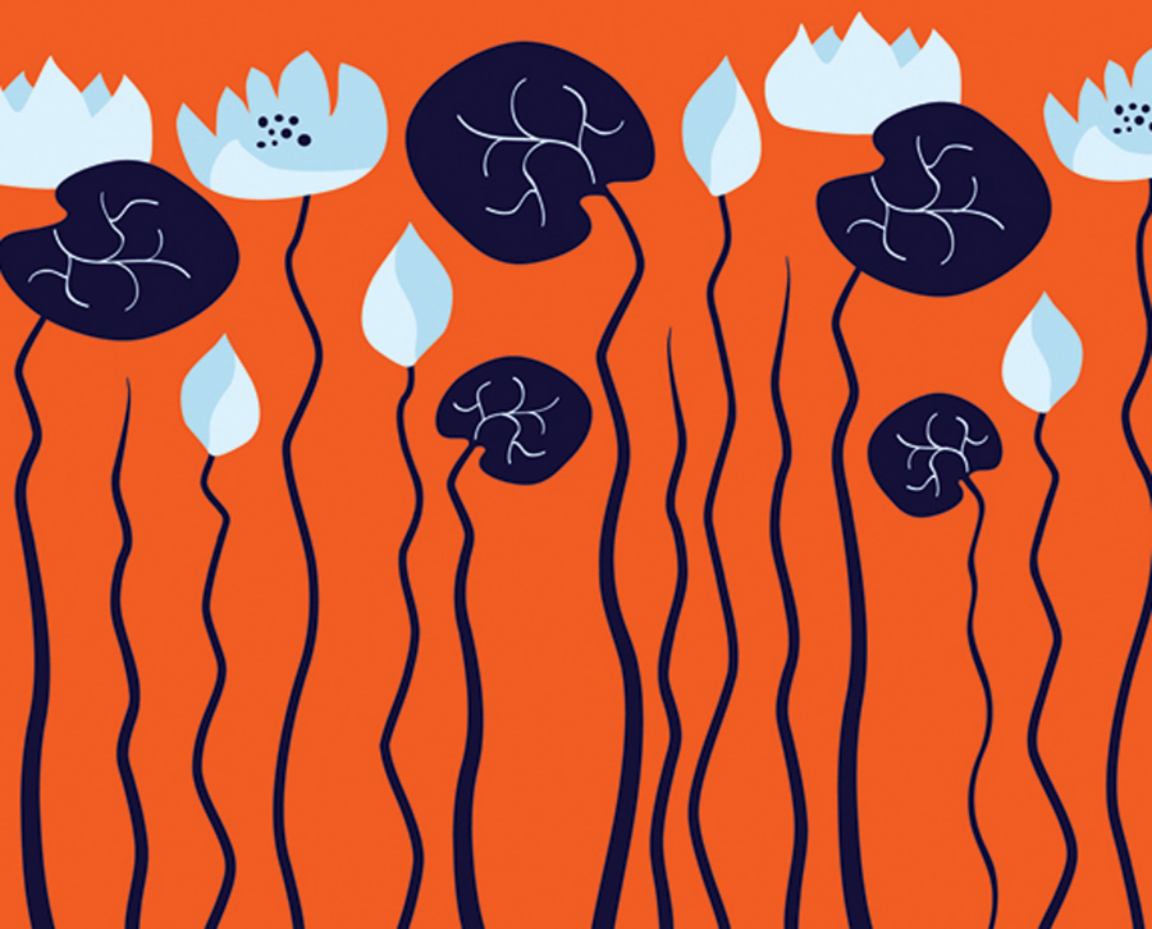


Sofia's Legacy

Marilyn L Rice



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Strategic Book Group

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First, I would like to thank my readers for their continued support and kind comments. For those of you who read *Look After Each Other*, *Sofia's Legacy* is the long-awaited sequel. I hope you enjoy it and, more importantly, like the answers to those lingering and numerous questions, like who finds Sofia's diaries, does Miranda marry Derek, and many more.

This novel is written on the assumption that there is an afterlife; some believe but others do not. It is a personal and individual choice. I have found great comfort from using mediums since my dear father passed over. I thank him every day for all that he gave me, and miss him even though I know he is still supporting me in my endeavours. My thanks go to Bob Cooper and John Barber for their constant guidance and readings. Without John, there would be no JT!

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I would also like to thank all at Strategic Book Publishing and Marketing for their constant work in publishing and marketing my books.

A final comment. Should the reader visit the Museum of Iron at Coalbrookdale, Ironbridge, and take a stroll from the car park in the direction of the massive pyramid housing the fur-

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nace used by Abraham Darby, the reader will pass six iron seats which are part of the ITV Millennium Project. Please note: the author really did make that promise! The difficulty is keeping it—you try it!

Marilyn L. Rice
February 2010

Chapter One

May 13th 2005

MSofia watched and smiled. Her children were holding hands and supporting each other at the gravest time of their young lives. They had heard her whisper those immortal words, “Look after each other,” simultaneously. Bravely, their lips had forced a smile despite the sad tears slipping down their faces. The nine-year-old twins, Donny and Sophie, were in the front pew of the church with their father and Aunt Miranda, Donny dressed in a grey suit and red bow tie like his father, and Sophie in her pink dress and wearing the pink lipstick her mother had given her; both trying to be grown up.

They had endured so much in the last few months. Their uncle had been killed in January when he carelessly and in a preoccupied state of mind drove out of a side street into the path of a lorry. At least Sofia now knew that the whole event had not been her fault, and nobody would ever know that he had spent his last hour on earth making love to her or that she was the reason he was so preoccupied. Her father had reassured her. It had been Donald’s time.

After Donald’s death, life changed dramatically at Haslington Towers. Derek had insisted that Miranda stay with them until she felt able to move back home, but it became a permanent move. With Derek’s help, she sold her home in Chilwell and took up permanent residence with them in their five-bedroom Edwardian mansion in Wollaton.

Sofia was looking forward to returning to Haslington Towers with her father, Scott, and watching events from a different angle. Miranda had always wanted Derek. She thought her life would be so much easier as the wife of a heart consultant as opposed to a builder. Miranda was the only one who looked happy, for this was a sad occasion. The church was full of

brightly attired people because Sofia had requested bright colors and not black at her funeral.

She had been dead for eight days, although it only seemed like minutes since that awful accident on May 5th, Election Day, when she walked toward the Victoria Centre in Nottingham, as was her custom on a Thursday. Apparently, a lorry had skidded off the road through a brick wall, and she had been the unlucky pedestrian who was found beneath the bricks. Despite heroic efforts on the part of the paramedics, she had died of multiple internal injuries. In fact, her body, or rather its remains, resembled a rag doll more than a human being. When she had looked down at her earthly body after seeing her father properly for the first time in five years, she had realized the awful truth: she was dead. Deceased. Dead. Now, she was watching her own funeral with her father, Scott.

She was standing at the side of her coffin with her eyes firmly fixed on the children. How would they cope without her? She remembered the day last summer when she had quickly bought Sophie that pink dress for their summer holiday. It was the first week in July after she had seen John Taylor, or JT, as she fondly called him, the well-respected medium. She recalled that hot afternoon, June 24th, 2004, when she had visited his home and listened as the spirits announced her fate; almost a year ago now. She could still hear the accentuated sounds of that scorching day: the lawnmower, the dog barking, the jets taking off from the nearby East Midlands Airport. The aroma of the citrus and sandalwood candles had permeated the room.

She could see JT now, almost at the back of the church singing, along with the rest of the congregation, "You'll Never Walk Alone." He still had that mass of blond hair and a beard hiding the scars which were the result of a car accident and a near-death experience. He did not pass over, but his experience resulted in him having the gift of communicating with the other side. It must have been an awful day for him when he saw the accident that was going to kill her in such a short space of time. She did not know just how distraught he had been as he watched her leave the house and walk along the street to

her car, knowing that they would never meet again during her lifetime.

She remembered the drive back to Wollaton and how she had collected the children from school and given them three treats on a weekday, much to Derek's annoyance. He considered it irresponsible of parents to give children treats during the week. Routine, organization, and discipline were his key words.

They had been so happy in Wollaton Park, eating ice cream and later having their favorite pizza, the Californian chicken delight, with mozzarella, cheddar cheese, chicken, and mushrooms in a cream sauce.

Then she thought she was too young to die and it was so unfair. How could these two delightful children lose their mother and be left with Derek, Uncle Donald, and Aunt Miranda to bring them up? Of course, she had no idea then that she was to have an affair with her brother-in-law, Donald, or that he was to die four months before her.

That afternoon was when she first realized just how much she took for granted and how little she noticed of her surroundings. She had watched people and wondered if they ever thought about the day of their death, or even if it were likely to be tomorrow. How would they die? When would they die? It was the inevitable end of life and something which everyone would face, but did they ever really think about it or plan for it as she had done. She looked across at JT again and realized how lucky she had been to know that she was going to die early in her life and had acted accordingly.

Everyone should visit clairvoyants and then be in the position to plan for their future, or lack of it, in her case. The last months flittered through her mind as they ended "You'll Never Walk Alone" and the Reverend Harper began the prayers for the dear departed soul of Sofia.

This caused her to laugh and look at him in the pulpit, saying, "I'm here, you silly man." But of course, he could not hear her, and Scott chastised her for uttering such a comment.

In her last months, she had found the courage to change her life, to stand up to Derek and fulfill her dreams before it was too

late. Every downtrodden victim in a relationship with a control freak ought to do what she had done, and it all began with the purchase of a single lipstick. It was all recorded in her diaries. Who would find them, Miranda or Derek? Surely, they would be found, and then the mystery of Robin Hood's reappearance last year would be solved.

Soon they would discover how she had obtained so much money, but she had been careful with those insurance protection plan things and all her debts would be paid off. As the vicar finished the prayers, she congratulated herself on just how clever she had been.

"Look, Sweet Pea."

"What, Dad?" It was so good to be with her father again and to hear him call her by the affectionate term of "Sweet Pea," originally derived from her initials, SP, for Sofia Pemberton.

"Reverend Harper."

She looked back at the pulpit and saw him open an envelope and unfold a piece of paper which was vaguely familiar. He began reading from it, and she recognized it as the letter she had given him three months prior to her death.

"Please do not wear black. It is my wish that people are happy and not sad. Please wear bright colors and be cheerful." He paused. "This information was given to me by Sofia in February, and if she were here today, she would be pleased to see so many of you in the church so brightly adorned and not wearing black. It was almost as if she had a premonition of her death."

Sofia started giggling.

"Be quiet, Sweet Pea, and listen to what he has to say about you."

"Well, you've got to admit it's funny. I think I'm going to enjoy this *afterlife* thing. It really is quite amusing."

"I have known Sofia since she was a child. She was baptized and confirmed in this church. I have watched her grow into a beautiful young woman, a woman who cared for others and was always eager to help anyone in need. As a nurse, she was a comforting figure to many who were in pain or suffering. After marriage, she became a proud wife and mother, devoting her life

to her husband, Derek, and her two children, Sophie and Donny. We console them on their considerable loss, but reassure them that Sofia is now in a better place. Also on this piece of paper," he held it up for the congregation to see, "Sofia clearly stated her wishes. Her final journey was to be by horse and carriage, and she wanted flowers. She gave a list of hymns and readings, and we shall conclude this service with "Make Me A Channel of Your Peace" before going to the crematorium. Her ashes will be spread on the pond in her garden later by the family." He looked at the list of hymns, readings, and information that Sofia had left with him.

PLEASE DO NOT WEAR BLACK. IT IS MY WISH THAT PEOPLE ARE HAPPY AND NOT SAD. PLEASE WEAR BRIGHT COLORS AND BE CHEERFUL.

HYMNS

*The King of Love my Shepherd Is
You'll Never Walk Alone
Guide Me O Thou Great Redeemer
Make Me A Channel of Your Peace
How Great Thou Art
Jerusalem*

READINGS

*Psalm 23
John 14 v 1-6
1 Corinthians 13 v 1-13
Ecclesiastes 3 v 1-8
Desiderata*

I would like a selection from the above hymns and readings in my service, which should be more of a celebration of my life than a dirge over my death. I would like my final journey to the church to be by horse and carriage, and lots of floral tributes rather than donations. I love flowers and have sadly missed them during the last years.

Marilyn L. Rice

After the service in church, I wish to be cremated and my ashes spread on the pond in our garden so that I can be near my children and they can walk down to me whenever they want.

*Sofia Haslington
21st February 2005*

He was satisfied that her wishes had been fulfilled and he intended to give the document to Derek at the crematorium.

The only people wearing black, their traditional uniform, were the funeral directors, who now moved forward to the coffin and removed the two beautiful floral arrangements which lay on the top. Sofia moved forward to read the cards. Naturally, the large mixture of seasonal blooms which almost covered the lid was from Derek. She read his words and then howled with laughter.

To my darling wife, Sofia,

You were my first love and my love for you will never die. I miss you, my darling, and I am lost without you.

Your ever-loving husband, Derek.

“Why are you laughing?”

“Read Derek’s words, Dad. What a lying hypocrite! He doesn’t know what real love is and the only person he has any affection for is himself. He’s a cold, heartless heart surgeon. He’ll have hated spending money on those flowers. It’ll be for show and to impress everyone.”

“That’s Derek, Sweet Pea. Look at the other floral tribute.”

The much smaller bouquet of twelve pink roses with foliage had a card with one simple word, *Mummy*. That one simple word spoke volumes, and said so much more than all of Derek’s spiel.

The coffin with her mortal remains was now being moved down the aisle on the shoulders of six strong men.

“Come on. Let’s follow it to the crematorium and then we can go back to the party at the pub.”

“Will that still be going on?”

“Of course.”

Derek, with head held high, was following the coffin and leading the mourners out of the church. Sophie and Donny walked behind him, still holding hands and silently trying to comfort each other, while Miranda followed them. Scott and Sofia walked on either side of her. She had adhered to Sofia's request and was dressed in a red, blue, orange, and green caftan which resembled Joseph's coat of many colors.

Sofia remembered the revelation about Miranda at her last reading with JT.

"Who's Miranda?"

"My sister-in-law."

"She doesn't like you, does she?"

"I don't think so, but we used to be such friends. I don't know why things have changed."

"They're telling me she's a jealous woman who always wants what other people have. She wants Derek."

Well, she had always wanted Derek and now she could have him, but she must look after the children, too. Sofia noticed Charles Urquart-Latterley was following Miranda and his eyes seemed to be undressing her in that typical masculine way. He could not see the dark blue mess that was supposed to be eye shadow on her eyelids, or the black liner, the deep red, blotchy lipstick, or the plastered-on foundation and powder. Miranda was a mess; she was also a wealthy and desperate widow.

Charles Urquart-Latterley, known to his friends as C.U. Later, was the new orthopedic surgeon at the hospital. His father, now retired, had been an eminent Harley Street specialist and his mother a Greek Cypriot. On his arrival at the hospital, he had won over the physiotherapists by giving them moussaka made from his grandmother's traditional recipe. Miranda had noted his looks favored his mother's family, and she was besotted with him.

Sofia was amused by his presence as he followed Derek and the procession. She remembered just how much Derek despised him. He had been employed to fill the sad vacancy left by Gerald.

“Where’s Gerald, Dad?”

“Gerald?”

“Yes, you remember him. Usually drunk, married to Joanna, but the love of his life was Victoria, the red, 1958 Austin Healy sports car that I rode in as Lady Godiva at the hospital fête last summer. He died of a heart attack last November. Is he still at the pub? I saw him when I first arrived.”

“Probably. He was never very fond of Derek, but then, who was or is? Look at the people here. They’re not here for him but out of respect for you and for your children; my grandchildren, who still think that I live in the attic, but not for much longer.”

“Oh, Dad, why did I marry him?”

“You know the answer to that now. Surely you must have learnt something since you passed over.”

“Of course. It was meant to be.”

By now, they were outside the church. Her coffin was being placed back in the hearse ready for transporting to the crematorium. Derek was clearly enjoying being the centre of attention, as people came up to him and muttered condolences or tapped him on the shoulder as a show of support.

Miranda had her arms round her nephew and niece as they watched their mother’s coffin carefully being prepared for its last journey and the flowers being put in the car that followed it. Sofia watched as Charles Urquart-Latterley walked up to Miranda, and then was horrified as she saw how Miranda looked at him. It was not just infatuation or a menopausal fantasy as Sofia had originally thought when she was alive; there was sexual chemistry between them.

Miranda, her sister-in-law, also recently widowed, had only ever had one boyfriend and husband, Donald. He was Sofia’s brother-in-law, Derek’s twin, and the same Donald with whom she had had a passionate love affair. Memories of that wonderful weekend in New York, their stolen time of afternoon lovemaking in Athens when Derek and Miranda had taken the children on a sightseeing tour, and their Tantric sex experiences floated through her mind.

She had planned everything so well in those last months and had expected Miranda to marry Derek and become a mother to the two children she had left behind. There was even a letter for Miranda in which she asked her to marry Derek and take her place, but if she married Charles instead, what would happen to her children?

Sofia looked for Scott, who had decided to go stand by the gate and have a cigarette.

“Dad, what if Miranda marries Charles?”

“She’ll think she’s marrying a good and wealthy man, but will realize her mistake when she finds out the truth.”

“What? Will she marry him? She can’t.”

“Why not? Just because you’ve decided that she’s going to marry your husband? Maybe she will or maybe she won’t. Wait and see.” He laughed and took another drag on the cigarette.

“When you are ready, Mr. Haslington, sir.”

Everything was ready for the final journey. People leaving the church were convinced they could smell the aroma of Embassy cigarettes as they went through the gate. Scott watched them sniff and turn in his direction, but they could see nothing.

Sofia was more concerned about Miranda as C.U. Later escorted her and the children to the limousine. Derek was too busy accepting condolences to even notice where his children were. Sophie turned to her brother and took his hand before saying, “We’ll always look after each other.” He smiled and nodded. Somehow, because they had each other, the pain was more bearable.

Derek joined them in the car. Charles left for his own vehicle and the cortege left.

“Come on, Sofia; let’s get to the crematorium before they arrive.”

“Okay, Dad.”

The next thing Sofia knew, they were standing by the entrance to the crematorium as the hearse and cars drove in.

“How did you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Get here so quickly.”

“It’s the power of thought, Sweet Pea? You’ll learn to use it soon. Remember, your physical body or shell is in that box; what you have now is completely different.”

Sofia looked down at herself. She was dressed in the same clothes she had worn on that fatal day when she visited the Victoria Centre in Nottingham: jeans and the bright caftan top. They still looked clean and presentable despite the fact that it was now May 13th, and she had been dead for eight days. To her, her body looked and felt just the same.

The pall bearers were carrying her coffin into the crematorium.

“How do I change these clothes? I must have been wearing them for a week, but it only seems like minutes.”

“I’ve told you; time doesn’t exist here. If you want to change, just think about what you want to wear.”

She closed her eyes, thought, opened them again, and was wearing that beautiful beige, halter neck, knee length dress with a white flower pattern in the skirt, brown edging round the bust and hemline, a back bow, and white lace both at the bust and hemline. She looked down at her dress and the beige wedge sandals. It was the attire she had first worn on that Sunday almost a year ago when she had started to change her image. She remembered how she had gracefully walked down the stairs to where Derek and the twins were waiting to go to Chilwell for the usual family brunch. Derek had been furious because she was not only wearing makeup, something which he had forbidden her to do, but she was also showing her legs and, in wedge sandals, she towered over him.

“I remember the first time you wore that. Derek’s face was a picture. I thought it might bring on a coronary, he was so red and angry,” Scott uttered. “Come on; let’s watch you turn into ashes. Don’t worry. You won’t feel any pain when your physical body is finally disposed of. It’s much better than being left six feet under and decomposing at a slow rate.”

They walked into the crematorium next to John Taylor, the medium who had known of her imminent death but could not tell her during the reading. He was the only person who could see her and Scott, and smiled at them.

“We’ll sit next to you,” Scott said.

John nodded.

“It’s difficult for them, Sweet Pea. If they talk to us when other people are around, it looks as if they are completely bonkers, talking to invisible people.”

“I guess it must be.”

Her coffin was in place and everyone was seated for her final departure, although most of them were more concerned about the banquet they would be going to afterwards. Derek was well-known for his extravagant barbecues. The first one had been a couple of weeks ago, on the May Day holiday. The marquee was still up in the garden, and although Derek had employed a catering company for the wake, they all knew it would be a first-class do.

The Reverend Harper was at the front and called for the mourners to join him in saying the Lord’s Prayer. The stillness was disturbed as a chorus of voices started muttering, “Our Father who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name, Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done . . .” The voices started to fade at this point as it was clear that at least half of the congregation did not know the Lord’s Prayer. They were “the hatching, matching, and dispatching” kind who only attended church on the three main occasions in life.

When the *Amen* had been said by the truly faithful ones, Derek walked out of the front pew and stood in front of the coffin.

The Reverend Harper looked at him and said, “Derek would like to do the final reading.”

“Trust him,” Sofia said.

“You know he has to be in the limelight. He couldn’t possibly let you have all the attention, even at your own funeral.”

“I know, Dad. I just hope Miranda has better luck with him than I did.”

Derek coughed to clear his throat and make sure everyone was listening to him before beginning. “The reading is taken from the First Book of Corinthians, chapter 13, verses 1 to 13. It is one of the readings my dearest wife chose.” He paused as if overcome with emotion.

“Trust him,” Sofia repeated. “He’s chosen the longest of the readings on my list; dearest wife, indeed! Hypocrite! It’s just like those flowers. Everything’s for show. He’s even pretending to be overcome with emotion. Go on, Dad, have a puff on your cigarette and give them all the beautiful aroma of Embassy.”

John was the only one who could hear the conversation between Sofia and Scott, and muttered under his breath for her to hear, “True, true.”

“I may speak in tongues of men or of angels, but if I am without love, I am a . . .”

“Love! What does he know about love? Hypocrite!”

Scott had started smoking again and they both watched as people seemed to be more concerned about an aroma of cigarette smoke than listening to what Derek was saying.

Sofia continued, “Come on, Dad, let’s go to the front and heckle him.”

They moved toward the coffin. John watched them and smiled encouragingly as Scott blew smoke rings in Derek’s face and Sofia was sticking her tongue out at him and making faces.

“Love is patient; love is kind . . . love will never come to an end.” By now, Derek was aware of the Embassy aroma. He was used to it at home and very much aware of his father-in-law’s existence even in the afterlife, and realized that Scott and probably Sofia were by his side and deliberately sabotaging his attempt at claiming some glory on this occasion. Sofia had been out of his control during the last year of her life. During their ten years of marriage, he had successfully turned her into one of his possessions, killed off her independent spirit, and taken complete control of her, until the last months, when a rebellious streak had changed her. She had started to fight back. He thought of the recent occasions when she had embarrassed him. There was the hospital fête when she had insisted on entering the fancy dress competition as Lady Godiva, and then she had entered a competition without his authority and taken the first prize of a trip to New York alone. The thought of the expensive weekend in Athens crossed his mind; she had manipulated the situation and forced him to pay for his brother and sister-in-law,

as well. Even now, at her funeral, she was upstaging him. In death as in life, it seemed that he was unable to control his wife.

By the time he had reached the tenth verse of his well-rehearsed reading, he found himself automatically raising his voice in a pathetic attempt to compete with the pungent aroma which his audience were more interested in than his words. John was watching the two of them and having difficulty keeping a straight face; it had become more of a comedy act than a funeral. He wanted to stand up and shout "Encore" as Sofia and Scott were putting on such a grand performance.

"In a word, there are three things which last forever: faith, hope, and love; but the greatest of them all is love." At this point, Derek closed the Bible he was reading from and returned to his seat.

"Love? What does he know about that? He's the heart surgeon without a heart."

"I can see we're going to have some fun back at Haslington Towers together. My old tricks of changing the clocks, playing with the lights and his DVD collection are nothing to what we can do together."

"Yes, Dad, but we must not upset the twins."

"Would I ever do anything to hurt them? They think I'm a wonderful grandfather who lives in the attic. Watch."

The Reverend Harper was talking again. They were to sing the last hymn before the curtains closed in front of the coffin. "Guide Me O Thou Great Redeemer" suddenly echoed round the room. Sofia wanted to rush over and hug Donny and Sophie; they were holding hands, tears trickling down their faces as they watched their mother's coffin slowly disappear from view. She was gone forever.

Scott held her back. "You can't do anything for them at the moment."

"Look at Derek and Miranda."

Neither of them had noticed that the twins were crying. Miranda was happily thinking of herself in Sofia's shoes; living permanently at Haslington Towers looking after Derek and the twins and being a lady of leisure. It was a pity that she had

lost Donald earlier in the year and been widowed, but as Sofia had always said, everything happens for a reason and if by losing Donald she was to gain all that Sofia had had, then it was worthwhile. She had recently learned that she was never to have children of her own, so to have Sofia's readymade family was the fulfillment of her dreams. She was definitely the happiest person at the funeral.

Derek, too, was in his own dream world as the coffin disappeared. At last, the woman who had borne his children and then become an uncontrollable source of embarrassment was out of his life. Miranda would stay in his home and look after him and the children. She would never embarrass him in the way that Sofia had. In a few minutes time, they would leave the crematorium. The vicar was just telling people that they were all welcome back at the house where refreshments were waiting for them. Derek would be in his element again: the centre of attention and the focus for everyone's condolences. He was particularly enjoying the fact that people were paying him more attention because of the loss of his twin brother and wife in such a short space of time.

He had loved the newspaper article. The headline, *Double Tragedy For Heart Specialist*, was specifically about him! He was the heart specialist mentioned on the front page of *The Nottingham Post*. The story of his wife and brother's deaths was irrelevant as far as he was concerned. Everyone who read that article was reading about *him*!

It was time to leave. Derek walked out of the pew with his head held high again. He was the one everyone would look at. He did not even turn and look at Miranda or his children. It was Miranda's maternal instinct which took over when she finally noticed they were crying. She gave them both a hug as they slowly left the pew, and told them that their mother would be proud of them.

"Their mother certainly is."

"Miranda will look after them; you know that."

"Yes, Dad, but it's all so strange. I just want to be able to cuddle them."

“That’s not possible, Sweet Pea, but you can see them even though they can’t see you, and you can watch over them. Now let’s go and see what kind of spread he’s put on for you at the house.”

“I still don’t know what happened down here when I died. Who told the children? Did they find Sheba? The poor dog was in the car waiting for me to return. She must have been really frightened.”

“Patience, my dear. I’m sure the sad day will be mentioned during the food and you’ll be able to see Sheba for yourself.”

Outside, people were getting into cars and waiting for Derek and the chief mourners to leave. Derek was enjoying himself, talking to the funeral directors and the vicar. He was complimenting them on their work. When Sofia heard that, she was amazed. Compliments did not flow from Derek’s lips, only “Derekisms,” the hospital’s and her latest euphemism for all of Derek’s complaining.

She also noticed that Charles Urquart-Latterley was by Miranda’s side again. He was very much aware of Derek’s self-importance and it was in his own interest to befriend the wealthy widow, Miranda. At long last, Derek joined them in the limousine, and Scott and Sofia watched them all leave.

“Come on, Sweet Pea; let’s go and have a wander round Haslington Towers before they arrive.”

Haslington Towers, home sweet home, she thought. But what would it be like now? As Scott took her hand, she was about to find out.

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