

Sara and Neal had six weeks of happiness, then tragedy struck

My LOVE kept you ALIVE

In the next nine months you'll date a few tossers from the city,' he said confidently, 'but they will fizzle out and you will find yourself wondering what Neal Challice is doing now.'

Neal had been trying to convince me to go out with him for over six months. We met though work when I moved to London in 2001.

He was print supplier to our graphic design team and I met him on my third day.

At first I didn't think of him romantically and we got to know each other as friends.

But a few months later Neal confessed he liked me and started asking me out.

There was an 11-year age gap and, having just moved to London, I wanted to enjoy myself while I was young.

But it turned out he was right. I'd dated one 'tossers' when I decided to throw caution to the wind and give Neal a chance.

Next time he asked I said, 'Go on then.'

Our first date was to the Landmark in Marylebone and it was absolutely perfect.

From then on we were inseparable and the early days of our relationship were the happiest time of my life. We fell head over heels for each other.

But just six weeks in, everything changed.

Neal started complaining about headaches and nausea and the sickness got so bad he took himself to our A&E

department twice.

Eventually, Neal was admitted and, after a few sleepless nights, I left his bedside to go to work.

I was in the office when I got an urgent phone call from his sister. 'You need to get back here,' she said, 'they've found something.' I raced back to the hospital in tears. It couldn't be good news.

Neal had a brain tumour. After an operation to remove most of it there came radiotherapy and chemotherapy.

But we were a team and we endured the treatment and endless hospital appointments together because I loved him and wanted to be with him.

Six months later we got the good news that Neal's brain tumour had gone and we picked up where we'd left off.

For almost a year Neal and I enjoyed life as a 'normal couple.'

He had mentioned marriage to me a few times, but I wasn't ready. It wasn't until we drove across Tower Bridge that autumn that I realised my outlook had changed.

I don't know what sparked it but at that moment I knew that I wanted to spend my life



Our wedding day

with him.

On Christmas Day 2003, Neal popped the question.

'Sara,' he said as he dropped to one knee, 'you will make me the happiest man on earth if you marry me.'

I smiled and simply replied, 'Yeah, go on then!'

A few weeks later we jetted off to the French Alps for a skiing holiday and were enjoying our time together when Neal started vomiting.

'It can't be happening again,' I thought to myself.

As soon as we returned home Neal brought his MRI scan forward and we received the devastating news that his brain tumour had returned. This time it was terminal.

He had glioblastoma—the most aggressive form of a brain tumour.

We were crushed and I tried to hide my own heartache as I comforted him.

A DAY TO TREASURE

'You don't need to marry me,' Neal said, trying to hold back the tears.

My heart broke hearing those words, but leaving Neal was never an option.

I was already committed to him, in sickness and in health. So, rather than taking Neal up on his offer to walk away, we took the advice of Neal's specialist and moved the wedding forward.

On 18th September 2004, we said our vows on the beautiful golden staircase at the London Institute of Directors in front of our friends and family.

The whole day was a celebration of life and our love for each other.

We spent the following two weeks in Mauritius on our honeymoon but on our return Neal's health started to deteriorate.

As his condition worsened, I wanted to be there for him in every way I could so I gave up my job and became his full-time carer.

Neal suffered memory loss and started to rely on a wheelchair to get around.

Then in 2012 Neal suffered a huge stroke, leaving him unable to speak and struggling

to eat.

Although Neal had changed physically, the man I fell in love with was still there in that body, even if it wasn't working for him anymore.

Neal spent the last four years of his life confined to a hospital bed in our living room while I, along with carers, tried to make him as comfortable as possible.

As hard as it was to care for him, I knew he was better off at home with somebody who loved him than wasting away in a nursing home.

On 6th September 2015, Neal passed away after a gruelling 13-year battle with cancer, and I was by his side as I always had been.

As heartbroken as I was, our final day together was one I will always treasure as we spent the day watching England beat Ireland in the rugby at Twickenham with my parents.

But when we got home and I hoisted Neal up into bed he suffered a huge bleed on the brain.

The doctors weren't sure how long Neal had left but I stayed with him until he took his last breath.

Looking back now, I had absolutely no idea what I was letting myself in for or how much Neal and I would both have to deal with.

Whilst I wouldn't wish what we went through on anyone,



There to the end

I do believe we face these, sometimes very difficult, life challenges as learning experiences. That is how I chose to see our situation.

I believe it is so important to raise awareness about brain tumours and for me to share Neal's story, so that maybe one day a brain tumour diagnosis won't be a death sentence.

I know my love for Neal, and his love for me, kept him going and alive for years longer than had he faced cancer alone. It's true what they say, love really does conquer all. My soulmate may no longer be with me, but he will forever be in my heart.

Sara Challice, 46, London
AS TOLD TO JESS
SUNDERLAND

Sara has written a book for carers and also has a website, www.caringfor2.com or visit www.thebraintumourcharity.org for more information.