

WE FELL IN LOVE...

Sara Challice had only just started dating Neal when he faced a devastating diagnosis. Here, in heartbreaking detail, she reveals why she stood by him...

I WENT FROM NEAL'S WIFE TO HIS CARER

vomiting. While we both hoped it was nothing, Neal moved his regular scan forward and tests showed the cancer was back. It had spread to several places through the centre of Neal's brain, where the doctors couldn't operate. They tried to be positive, but the look on their faces said it all – the cancer would kill Neal.

At home that night, we talked about our fears as Neal crumbled. 'You don't have to marry me, you know,' he said.

But I wanted to make the most of whatever time we had. So on 18 September 2004, surrounded by friends and family, we made our vows – in sickness and in health – a promise I'd made to him even after we'd been together six weeks.

We enjoyed a blissful honeymoon to Mauritius, but almost immediately after, reality set in as Neal had intravenous chemotherapy three times a month and

was now no longer able to speak. He was fitted with a feeding tube in his stomach and I set up a bed for him in the living room.

The next two years were the hardest. Neal could only communicate through hand gestures and hoisting him into his wheelchair was back-breaking work.

Still, we tried to get out together – even if only occasionally. In September 2015, I took Neal to Twickenham to watch a

rugby match. As I cheered on England, Neal by my side, for the briefest moment I could imagine we were like any other couple.

Except I knew we weren't.

That night, Neal started being very sick. I took him to

A&E – a place we'd visited more than 20 times over the years. 'I'm afraid Neal has had a huge bleed – he's dying,' the doctor said. Neal was too ill to understand, but despite knowing how unwell he had been,



2003



ENGAGEMENT



WEDDING



2014

6 weeks later he was given a death sentence

New relationships are always exciting as you find out each other's favourite things – whether that's food or films – and then there are those little surprise gifts you get, just because he's thinking of you.

But when I first met Neal, we barely had a chance to get to know each other before he faced something so shocking that it could have shattered our relationship. Instead, it made us stronger...

Back in December 2000, I'd just moved to London for a job as a graphic designer when Neal came into the office with a couple of bottles of wine. 'How do you do and Happy Christmas,' he smiled, explaining he was one of our suppliers.

As he continued to visit the offices every few weeks, I discovered he was

a keen sportsman who enjoyed rugby and skiing. At first, I only thought of him as a friend, but by April 2002, I began to think there could be something more.

I didn't have to wonder for long, as he invited me for afternoon tea. Out of work, he was just as charming. We agreed to go for dinner three days later and over the next few weeks, we saw each other as often as we could – I met his mum and sister, he met my parents and we had a weekend in the New Forest. And when we weren't together, we'd talk on the phone every night.

But just six weeks after that first date, Neal rang to say he'd had pins and needles and wooziness. He'd been to A&E, but doctors said it was probably just stress. I tried not to worry, but a few days later,

panic washed over me as it happened again when we were together. Worried, I insisted we went back to the hospital for answers.

After running tests, including an MRI scan, the doctor's face was grave. 'You have a glioblastoma – a malignant brain tumour – the size of a satsuma,' the doctor told Neal as I sat beside him.

Hugging me tightly, Neal tried to be brave. But he told me that he was worried this would be too much for me.

Perhaps some women would have walked away – after all, we were barely a couple.

We didn't have a lifetime of shared memories, just a few weeks of fun.

But, hearing Neal's diagnosis, I couldn't think about the long-term – all I knew was that he needed me right now, so

'HE NEEDED ME RIGHT NOW'

I was by his side as he was wheeled into surgery to remove the tumour.

Afterwards, I visited Neal every day as he lay on the sofa, weakened and sick from the chemo and radiotherapy. And as he slowly recovered, our relationship became stronger and stronger.

We'd endured more than most couples who spend a life time together, so we were delighted when doctors gave him the all-clear. Spending our first Christmas together, we snuggled by the fire and drank a toast to happiness and health.

And the following year, we had even more to celebrate when, on Christmas morning, Neal got down on one knee clutching a Tiffany-style diamond ring.

At New Year, we went skiing and we hardly gave the cancer a second thought. But sitting on the ski lift, Neal started

I juggled my work around his treatment.

By August 2005, Neal's balance was getting worse. As he got more unsteady, I went freelance so I could be at home with him full-time. It broke my heart to see the changes in the man I loved.

But Neal was a fighter and for the next four years, he never complained about how sick he felt.

Then, in spring 2009, Neal came off the chemotherapy because it was making him so weak. He started using a wheelchair and it marked a change in our marriage as I went from Neal's wife to his carer. But I wouldn't have had it any other way – I loved him.

The biggest change came in January 2012, when Neal suffered a mild stroke. My charming, outgoing husband

I felt totally unprepared to say goodbye.

I stood over him with one hand on his chest and stroked his head with the other as he died a few hours later – he was only 55. While I felt shattered and empty, I was glad that Neal wasn't suffering anymore.

Now, more than a year on, I'm trying to get used to life without Neal. I've thrown myself into helping other carers and have written a self-help book for people looking after loved ones. I've also learnt a lot – I am a lot more patient than I used to be and kinder to myself, too.

Neal and I had just six weeks of being healthy and care-free. For the rest of our relationship – all 13 years – his cancer affected everything. But I'm glad of our time together and I'll never stop loving him. ☺

The Carers Pocket Book by Sara Challice is available online at caringfor2.com

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