

real life moving on

'You'll always be holding hands with Mummy'

Darren Cockle, 43, thought his love life was over when he lost his soulmate. But then he met Carla...

Just a few small words can change your life forever. 'You have cancer,' the doctor told my wife Sarah.

A month earlier, in September 2006, Sarah had discovered a lump in her right breast. She was 33.

Sitting next to me, Sarah started crying – scared, nervous sobs. An awful ache filled my stomach as I hugged her.

She was booked in for a mastectomy the following week.

I couldn't imagine life without her. I'd met her in a bar 13 years earlier, when I was 25. She was 20, beautiful, thoughtful and funny. I knew she was special right away.

We married in 2001 and had our son Sam in 2002, followed by our daughter Olivia in 2005.

We told Sam, then four years old, about Sarah's illness.

'Mummy has cancer, which will make her ill,' I said. 'But the doctors will make her better.'

'I'll lose my hair,' Sarah added. 'But it'll grow back just the same.'

Sam burst into tears. 'But I want it to be red and spiky,' he sobbed.

It was one of those random things

children say, but it made us laugh.

That's how we coped – by laughing. For example, before the surgery Sarah flashed her breast at me. 'Take one last look,' she said.

Her hair fell out during chemo, but three months later she was in remission and in July 2008, Sarah had a breast reconstruction. Her hair grew back and apart from a niggling cough she felt great.

'I feel so lucky,' she said.

Three months later, she was sent for a chest X-ray. 'We've found some lumps in your chest wall,' the doctor said afterwards.

She had another biopsy and we endured another dreadful wait.

'It's what we feared,' a doctor told us finally. 'You have secondary cancer in your chest wall.'

'How long do I have?' Sarah asked calmly.

'Best case – a small number of years,' the doctor said. 'Worst case – a few months.'

I was so shocked I didn't speak until I got home. And I'm ashamed of what I said then: 'I want to put us all in the car and gas us.'

'Please don't ever say anything

like that again,' Sarah cried, as I clung to her, sobbing.

We decided not to tell the kids that Sarah's illness was terminal.

In January 2009 she started chemo again. This time her hair didn't grow back. 'I'm not scared of dying because I know you'll do a good job raising our children,' she told me. 'But I have one fear.'

'Of what?' I asked.

'Of you being lonely,' she replied.

'I want you to find love again. And make the most of the sympathy sex that comes your way.'

I was shocked. 'Believe me, they'll come,' she said.

'I don't want to think about other women,' I replied. Besides, I didn't believe Sarah would die – even when in February 2009 she became blind in one eye and we learnt the cancer had spread to her brain.

At her last chemotherapy session, the doctor said: 'You don't have long left.'

Then in March 2009 Sarah was admitted to hospital. She was weak and in pain and they put her on a drip.

I took Sam to see her. 'Mummy!' he cried joyfully, not caring about

her bald head or bruised body.

'I've refused any more medication,' Sarah told me that night. 'I want this over so you can get on with their lives.'

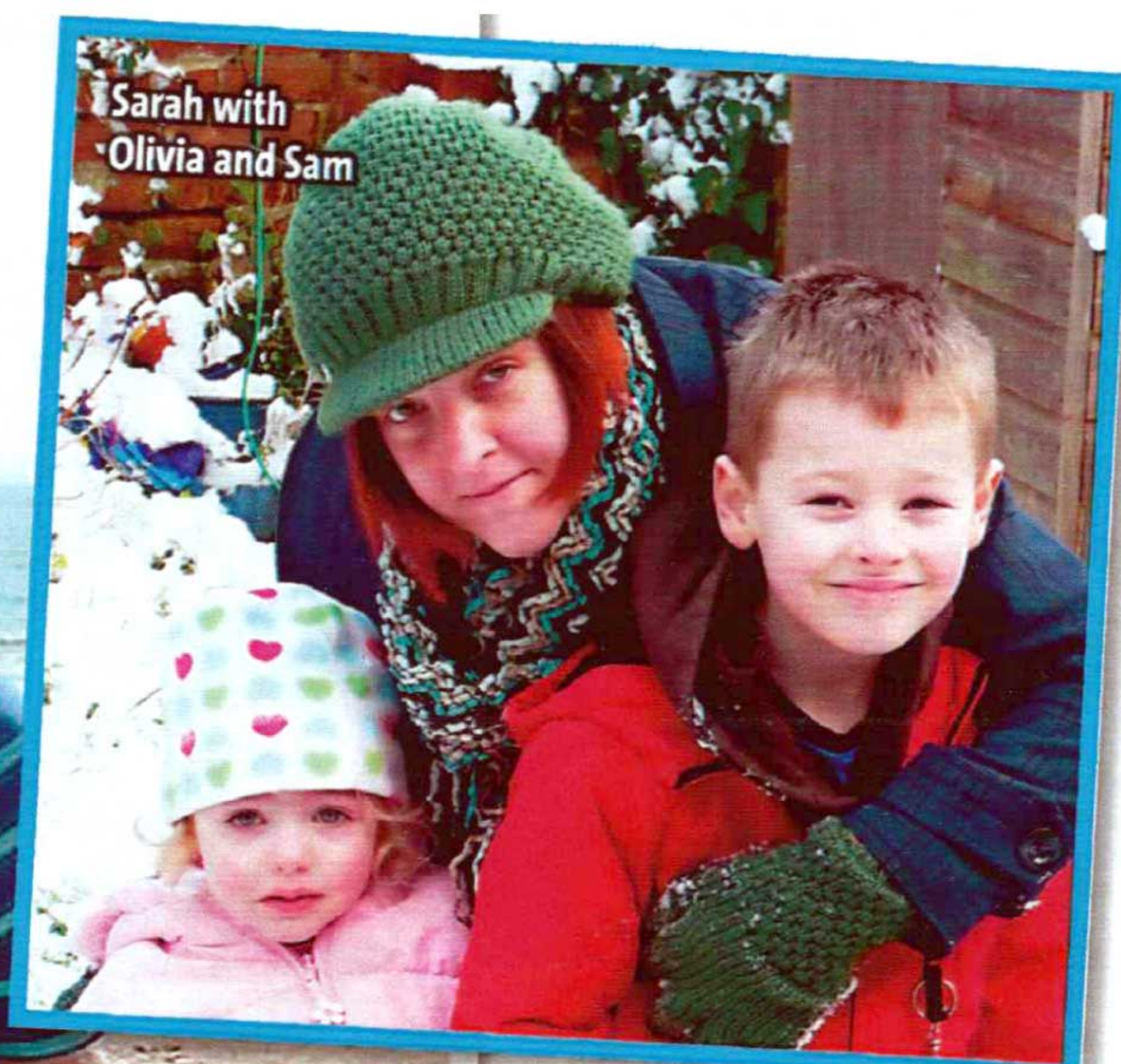
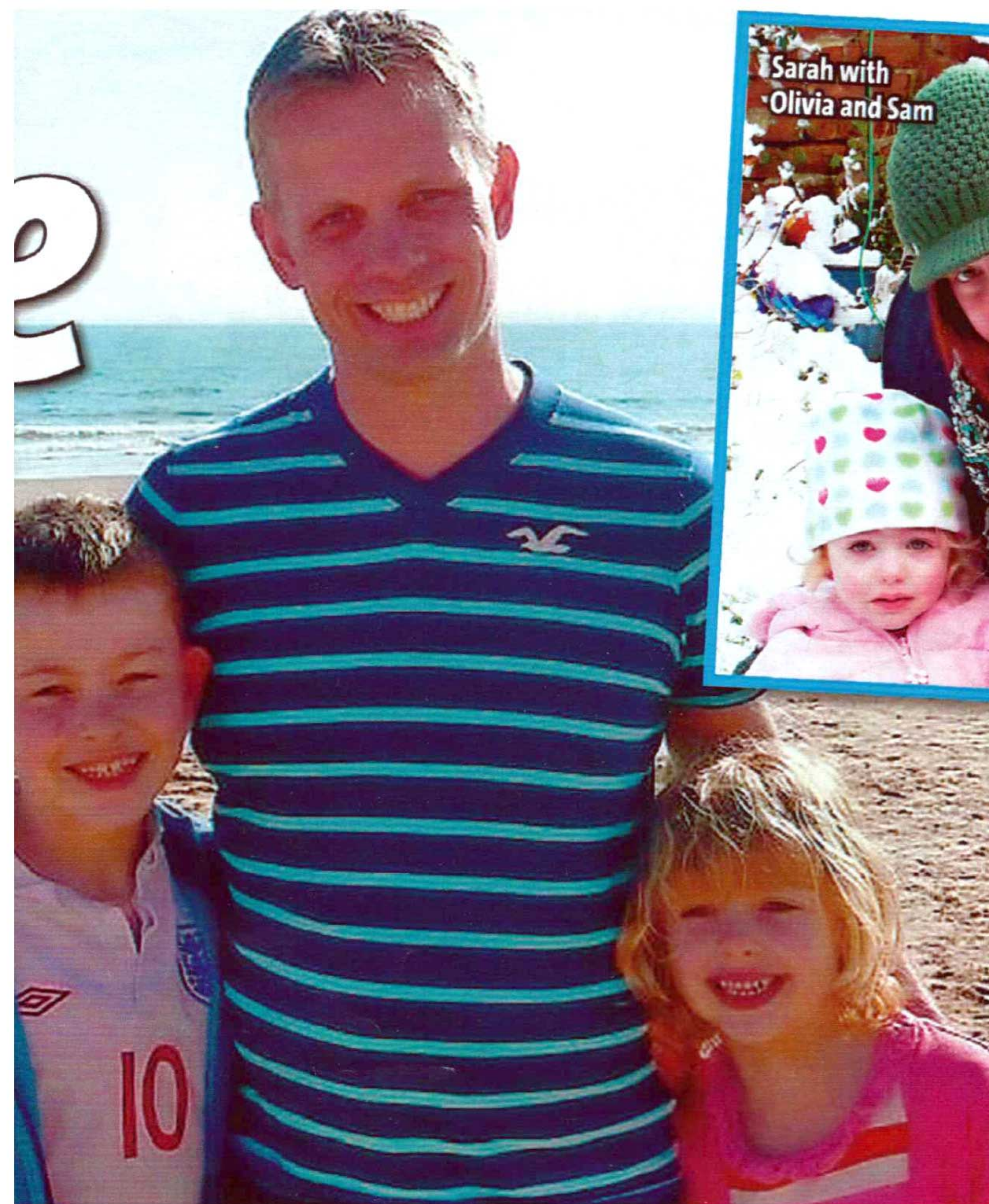
I had to respect her decision even though I was terrified.

Sarah fell into a coma and I next visited her, her breath was rough and laboured.

I got into bed beside her and



Darren and Sarah's wedding day in 2001



Sarah with Olivia and Sam

take our anger out on pillows. 'I'm worried she's still ill in heaven,' Sam cried. I reassured him she was fit and healthy there.

I'm ashamed to say that women did come forward with sympathy, as Sarah predicted. I had a few meaningless relationships, but no one compared to her.

Then, in November 2009, I was at a

birthday party with the kids when I bumped into Carla. She was a single mum of two boys – Aidan, eight, and Leon, six.

'I'm so sorry about Sarah,' she

ld her hand. 'It's okay to die,' I whispered. 'I'll look after the children. I love you so much.'

'Thank you for being in my life.' I felt her fingers move, ever so gently, against mine.

Then I drove to my parents' house and cried in my dad's arms.

I said nothing, just soaked up my grief with his love.

That night, I put Olivia to bed and sat Sam down. 'Mummy's

not coming home,' I said. 'She's going to heaven.'

'Will she be back for Christmas?' he asked.

'No darling,' I replied. 'Mummy's going to die.'

'What am I going to do with Mummy's Mother's Day card?' Sam sobbed.

That evening, Sarah passed away with her mother by her side. She was only 35.

I threw myself into organising the funeral, picking the same flowers and venue as our wedding. It was appropriate – it was where our story had begun.

I got the children to make their handprints with paint to put in the coffin. 'Now you'll always be holding hands with Mummy,' I said.

I did mine, too.

The next few months were a blur of grief. I struggled with the kids, as Sam cried constantly for Sarah. But slowly, with the help of the bereavement charity Simon Says, we muddled through.

We made memory boxes and were encouraged to

separate from the kids. Then after a few months we introduced them to each other. They were reserved at first but then went off to play.

But I was still eaten up with guilt. I felt like I was cheating on Sarah.

One day I blurted out to Carla: 'If Sarah came back, you'd be gone.'

She looked hurt. 'Some things don't need to be said,' she replied.

I apologised. 'It's okay, I understand,'

she reassured me.

I didn't want to upset Carla, but I was still too consumed with thoughts of Sarah. So I decided to write a book about her.

Carla was completely supportive. In fact she even agreed to proofread it for me.

It can't have been easy for her to read about my love for another woman, but Carla stayed strong.

'It's okay that you still love her,' she said.

But she did struggle with the 50-odd photos of Sarah I'd put up around the house.

'They're not coming down,' I said, defensively.

'You need to start living in the present,' she said.

And slowly, I accepted she was right. I realised by loving her I wasn't dishonouring Sarah.

Now there are just 10 photos of Sarah in the house – mostly in the children's bedrooms – and a family portrait hangs in the front room.

It took me a year to finish the book, *The Life And Death Of An Unknown Celebrity*. I chose that because Jade Goody died two days after Sarah. I felt my wife deserved as much fuss as she did.

I hope the book will comfort and inspire others dealing with loss.

Carla and I still live separately. We'll only move in together if we can find a house with enough space for all of us. The kids get on great and Sam and Olivia still talk a lot about Sarah.

'You're happier when she's around,' they say about Carla.

They love her, but they won't call her 'Mum'.

I'm so thankful Carla has come into my life but I will never forget or stop loving Sarah. ■

'Sarah was just 35 when she died'

said. 'It's not the same but my father is dying from cancer.'

We went for a coffee and bonded over our shared experience.

After a few more coffee dates, I started to realise I felt more for Carla than just friendship.

'Would you like to go out to dinner?' I asked. And she accepted.

I was flooded with guilt. Was I being disloyal to Sarah? But then I remembered how her dying wish had been for me to find love again.

Carla was caring and honest and wouldn't let me wallow in self-pity.

'She's good for you,' my parents said. 'You're so relaxed around her.'

Initially we kept our relationship



With Carla today