

Reunited by a broken heart

Almost 30 years had passed since I'd split with my teen boyfriend. But when our paths crossed unexpectedly, sparks flew. **By Nicki Simpson, 54**

The music was thumping from the speakers as my friends and I piled into the nightclub and hit the dance floor.

As we boogied away, I spotted a cute guy with blond curly hair and a cheeky smile.

Later, one of my friends introduced me to him.

His name was Barry Newman, but he said: 'Everyone calls me Baz.'

As we chatted, I discovered he had a sense of humour to match that cheeky grin.

I fancied him immediately and the feeling was mutual. We quickly became an item.

Baz was working as a plasterer, while I was training to become a hairdresser.

We dated for a few months and had lots of fun together.

But at 18, we weren't looking for anything serious, and in time our relationship just fizzled out.

We remained friends though, and still saw each other at the Rooftop Garden club where we'd met, in Wakefield, West Yorkshire.

Then a year on, I met Wayne.

We married and I gradually lost touch with many of the friends I'd made in my clubbing days, including Baz.

Wayne and I had a daughter, Laura, but a few years later we separated.

When Laura was 16, I retrained

to become a cardiac physiotherapist at Leeds Community Healthcare Trust.

I absolutely loved my job there and had found my vocation in life in helping people.

Then one afternoon, I checked my work diary and noticed I was due to visit a new patient at their home the following day.

Poor guy, I thought as I read through his notes.

At just 48, the same age as me, he had a critical heart condition.

Then I noticed his name — Barry Newman.

Oh my God, it must be Baz! I realised.

His birth date matched, and his current address was in the same road where he'd lived with his parents, back when I'd met him.

Although I hadn't seen Baz in 28 years, I had never forgotten about him.

I was sad to see he was so ill, and hoped that I could help him.

But because I knew him, I had to follow the rules and ask a colleague to check with him first to make sure he was comfortable with being my patient.

It turned out he was, and the next day as I drove up his road, all the memories of our time together came flooding back.

Suddenly, I had butterflies in my tummy.

When he appeared at the door, he smiled, then he opened his

arms and hugged me.

'It's great to see you, Baz,' I said.

We had so much to catch up on. But first, I had to get down to work, making observations on his health and referring Baz for specialist treatment.

Baz had always led a healthy lifestyle. He wasn't a drinker or a smoker and he went to the gym regularly.

But after contracting a virus, he began feeling short of breath.

He was prescribed antibiotics, but the problem persisted.

After tests, which included a CT scan, he was diagnosed with cardiomyopathy.

Doctors said it had likely been caused by the virus, and now his heart was working at just 13 per cent of its normal capacity.

Baz's only option was a heart transplant. Until then, he'd have to keep putting his life on hold.

'It's been tough,' he said. 'I've had to give up my job and I can't drive any more either.'

Once we'd talked about what I could do to help him, I stayed for a cup of tea and we chatted about old times.

I told him about Laura, and Baz explained he'd split from his wife, but had a son, Robert, now 18.

The conversation flowed so

easily with him, it was like no time had passed.

I couldn't help feeling a spark between us. But he was my patient and I had to remain professional.

Over the next few weeks, I continued treating Baz, but the more time we spent together, the harder it was to ignore the attraction between us.

One day, Baz said: 'Should we make a go of this?'

'I think we should,' I replied.

It meant he could no longer be my patient, but after explaining the situation to my boss, Baz was referred to another cardiac physiotherapist.

In time, I moved in with Baz, and our families and friends were delighted for us.

Then a month later, while our friends were over, he got down on one knee and pulled an engagement ring out from behind his back.

'Will you marry me, Nicki?' he asked.

'I'd love to,' I said, as our friends cheered and clapped.

Even though I knew how precarious Baz's health was, I was over the moon.

I knew that I'd found true love, and I wanted to enjoy every moment with Baz — no matter

how long we had.

By now he was really struggling with his health, and needed to have a defibrillator fitted in his chest, which would restart his heart if it ever lost rhythm.

It meant there was never a time when we could feel confident about setting a date for the wedding. Although I tried to remain positive, I secretly feared I'd lose him before we made it down the aisle.

Then one evening, Baz and I were watching *The One Show*, when they mentioned a charity called the Heart Cells Foundation, which funded pioneering stem cell treatment, not available on the NHS.

We listened intently as they talked about an innovative procedure that involved taking bone marrow from the patient's pelvis and harvesting stem cells, before injecting them straight into the heart.

It seemed like such a quick and painless procedure, and it had already transformed hundreds of people's lives after they'd been left with no other options.

I'd never heard of it, but I knew we needed to look into it.

Baz contacted the charity and he had to fill in lots of forms and

undergo countless assessments in order to be considered for their compassionate treatment programme.

Then, a few months later, on my 52nd birthday, we got the call we'd been praying for.

'They've accepted me!' Baz announced.

'That's the best birthday present I could have asked for,' I said, hugging him.

Before long, we were travelling down to London together, so Baz could have the week-long treatment.

After a series of injections to stimulate the bone marrow, the procedure was carried out on the final day.

Although it was uncomfortable for Baz, he was able to come home the next morning.

Within just a couple of days, he was feeling much better, and after that he continued to improve.

His cardiologist was impressed by his progress too.

Just three months after the stem cell treatment, Baz felt well enough to return to work full time, which was a huge boost to his confidence.

Baz's heart is now at 26 per cent capacity, and he's been able to stop taking his medication.

Unfortunately, the pandemic has put the brakes on our wedding plans, but we're hoping to set a date next year.

For the time being, we're just enjoying our life together.

We've been given a second chance at love — and Baz has been given a second chance at life.

We really couldn't feel luckier.

● For more information, visit heartcellsfoundation.com

