

# When is the right time?

**Michelle Wilkins**

Imagine this, a young woman, living in a small fishing town in Devon, travels to Northampton to visit friends and almost immediately falls in love with her own Prince Charming. Within three months the young woman has left her job, her village, her family and friends, to move in with her Prince and his family. Seems hard to imagine this can happen in real life and not just fairy tales but I know it can because this is my story. And, like most fairy tales, it is a mix of happiness and tragedy.

I was 20 years old in November 1991 when I went to Northampton to see some friends for the weekend and I met a wonderful man who was four years older than me. Steve was funny, caring, really good company and very easy on the eye! I fell in love straight away, as the saying goes, it was love at first sight. We began dating and both of us made the 245 mile trip to see each other as much as we possibly could. The travelling started to take its toll on us after just a few months and we knew we wanted to be together so I made the very big decision to move away from Devon to Northampton within three months of first meeting.

We bought our first home together before too long and we had many happy years there. We married in 1995 and my world couldn't have been happier. We started to try for a baby and after quite a difficult time, we finally had our very precious gift of a little girl, Ellie, born in January 1998. Life seemed so perfect; we owned our own business, we had a lovely home, we had great friends, we took wonderful holidays every year, we never argued and laughed always. People used to say that Steve adored us both and would do anything for us.

Then, in August 2003, Steve started to become unwell, struggling with his breathing and feeling lethargic. We didn't know it at first, but this is when our nightmare started to begin. After many trips to doctors, different hospitals, seeing various consultants and a professor, we were told the devastating news in October 2003 that he had a very rare form of cancer called an angiosarcoma of the medistanium. Right away, the doctors told us they were not sure of what they could do and so our world crashed around us.

We were full of questions - why him, why us, we were happy, we had a beautiful five-year old daughter, how did he get this, he was fit, he didn't smoke, we ate pretty healthy, yes he liked a couple of pints at the weekend but nothing heavy. We had so many questions but no-one could answer them. Our lives changed so suddenly. We had to close down the business because Steve was too poorly to

work. I gave up my college training so that I could be with him every day as we didn't know how long we had left together.

After another trip to London to see another professor we were told that they were going to offer some chemotherapy and maybe radiotherapy. From that day forward we vowed we would try our hardest to keep strong for Ellie and that as husband and wife we would face everything together. Steve's treatment went ahead and he slowly started to disappear before my eyes; the weight fell off him, his hair fell out and the chemotherapy destroyed every ounce of his body. Ellie continued to go to school and he promised her he would pick her up every single day. Despite feeling so poorly he kept that promise to her and was at the school gates every day. That is just the kind of person he was.

Before long, Christmas was looming and we knew deep down that this would be our last together. So we arranged for all of our families to be together and to try and have the best time that we could. Steve had his last chemotherapy treatment on the 23<sup>rd</sup> December and the plan was that radiotherapy would start in January. He managed to get up for a few hours on Christmas day to see Ellie opening her presents but then spent the rest of Christmas in bed, his body yet again exhausted by the chemotherapy. New Year came and the radiotherapy began. This finished on the 20<sup>th</sup> of February and Steve then wanted to go to Devon to visit my family. I knew deep down that this was because he wanted to say goodbye. He never ever told me that but watching him hugging my sister as we left broke my heart. My Hero was dying and there was nothing I or anyone else could do for him but watch this terrible disease take him from us.



Steve and Ellie.



Michelle and Lee on their wedding day with Ellie.

Within a few days of being back home Steve was taken very poorly with a chest infection and was admitted to hospital on Saturday 28<sup>th</sup> February. This was when I really knew that my fairy tale life was ending. Every day he slowly got worse; no medicine was helping and we had to face the fact that the awful day of his death was looming. My parents were called and came to stay with me and Ellie. Steve took his last breath on Saturday 13<sup>th</sup> March surrounded by his loving family. As for me, it felt like my world was over. I was 32 years old with a six year old daughter and I was a widow. How had this happened?

I was in shock for what felt like a long time. Ellie and I just tried to get through each day. Looking back I wish I had joined a group of other widows with children so that I could have met up with them and Ellie could have mixed with children that had suffered the same. I had no support for Ellie regarding Steve's illness, we sheltered her a little to be honest but once he had died, she had great support from the school. We were offered counselling for her from the local hospital but she went once and didn't like it. It was our friends and family that really pulled us through those first difficult months.

After a while I started to go out with friends a bit more and while out with them I met a really nice man in a club. Lee and I chatted and when I told him I was widowed, his reaction was priceless. Unlike other men that I had spoken to who would just wince and look at me with a shocked reaction, he just said he was sorry and asked if I wanted to go for a drink sometime. That was how our friendship

began. Our friendship grew over the next few months and we felt that we wanted to take this further and let people know. I was 33 and I wanted and needed to be loved again but I really questioned whether it was too soon. I wasn't sure whether I was ready for another relationship but Lee was always aware of how special, loved and adored Steve was to me. We both knew that this was going to be a rocky road but we vowed we would give it a go.

The first person that had to be told was my daughter. I was worried about talking with her but she was fine with it as Lee was really good with her and they became friends too. My family and friends had a mix of reactions about our friendship having turned into a romance. Some were pleased for me, some thought it was too soon but most of my family were happy that someone would be looking after us again. Thinking back, I wish that there had been more obvious places to turn to get advice about how to talk with Ellie and my family about everything that was going on. Sometimes Lee and I felt really alone and we wanted to get it right for everyone after such a hard time. We were all grieving and we didn't want to make things worse for anyone.

I kept my wedding ring on from my marriage to Steve until I felt that my relationship with Lee was going to work. It was like a security blanket for me but once I knew that we were going to give it a go and move in together, I then removed my ring. This to me was another big hurdle but I felt again that if I wanted this relationship to work I had to slowly find ways of letting go of the past. I didn't want to forget but I also really strongly felt I needed to live in the present too. It was hard sometimes being Michelle the widow and Michelle the person with a new love all at the same time.

Lee moved in with us after about seven months of being together, but this was my marital home which Steve and I had made over the years. Even though I didn't have loads of pictures about, his presence was everywhere in the house, so after living together there for about six months more, we made the decision to buy our own house. This for me was a really heartbreaking decision to have to make but I felt if I wanted this relationship to work I slowly had to let go of the past. I didn't ever want to forget Steve but Ellie and I also had to move on with life. The house finally sold and we moved out. Packing up memories is hard enough when you are moving but packing up a perfect life and saying goodbye to part of the past that held so many perfect memories is even harder. That was more than just a house – it was my home with Steve, I got married from there and it was where our daughter was born and raised.

Lee, Ellie and I moved into our new home and we became a family. Some of our neighbours knew my past but some didn't and so just accepted us as the new family in the street. We started to make this our new home, together, and then Lee asked me to marry him. I felt so lucky in one way.



Ellie, Michelle and Lee – The Wilkins family.

I had met a wonderful man who hadn't walked away, who took on everything it meant to marry a widow and to raise her child. I wanted to be his wife but I also had so many uncertainties. What was I to do about my surname - Bray? Steve didn't leave me and Ellie because he didn't love us anymore; he fought his hardest to stay with us. I felt strongly that I didn't want to lose his name. It felt like I owed it to him to still be a Bray but I also felt a loyalty to Lee and as if I owed it to him to take his name – Wilkins. I also wanted Ellie to be the same as me. After restless days and sleepless nights, I asked Lee how he would feel if maybe I became a Bray-Wilkins, but I also wanted Ellie to become one to.

Ellie loved her Dad and she had told Lee and I when we first got together that she would not be calling Lee 'Dad' because he wasn't and she didn't want to be disloyal to Steve. I admired her for her honesty and sharing her feelings. I wasn't sure how Lee felt as he didn't say too much. So, after tears and lots of discussions, we as a family made a very big decision for Lee to adopt Ellie and to change her name by deed poll. We decided that we would have a wedding and naming ceremony on the same day so we would all leave the registry office with the Wilkins surname but that Ellie and I would have Bray as well.

We began our new life together and this is when the questions started to happen. For example, Ellie has blond hair and blue eyes, just like her dad; Lee and I have dark brown hair and dark eyes. When we were on holiday one year, someone innocently said, wow where does your daughter get her lovely colour hair from? I replied her dad and the person said oh I thought Lee was her dad. I had to explain that no, her dad is dead. Her reaction was of complete horror, she shuffled off quite quickly and I was left feeling that I had done something wrong. I felt so bad, I wondered, was I wrong to be so blunt? Why didn't I just say something like, oh she gets that from her dad's side of the family. But in my heart, why should Steve not be mentioned? Over the years this had happened on a few occasions, sometimes with the conversation stopping and

the whole focus then being all about me and when did I become a widow, how did I cope with a small child, blah blah blah!!! Because I am quite an open person I usually didn't mind talking about it.

Then Ellie went to college when she was 16 and she needed an ID badge and she was struggling to fit her name on it. This is when she decided that actually she would like to be just Ellie Wilkins on things. She said she would never forget her Dad but now she was Ellie Wilkins. Once Ellie had made this decision it made me think about myself. Was I just holding onto Steve's name for Ellie's sake or did I still need to have his name because I didn't want to let go?

Then a couple of years ago, I decided that I wanted to volunteer for Cruse Bereavement Care as a Bereavement Support Volunteer. I was accepted onto the ABC training course and sharing my experiences, listening to others and learning all about grief and bereavement made me understand about myself, my family and the trauma that we actually did go through. I passed my training and I became a volunteer for Cruse in the name of Michelle Wilkins. I chose to use this name because I was Lee's wife and he had encouraged me to train, supported me throughout and I wanted him to be proud and say, that's my wife.

After working with clients and all the different dynamics that go on in families I myself started to think more and more about my relationship with my husband and my dead husband. The final push came when we were on our last holiday and we were joining couples on trips and names were being called out; we were never just Mr & Mrs Wilkins, we were Mr Wilkins & Mrs Bray Wilkins. We met lots of different couples due to being on a cruise and got chatting. Most of them were celebrating special wedding anniversaries and the question came about how many years we had been married. We both said that it would be 10 years next year and that we had both been married before. We were quite open with everyone and Lee said that his marriage broke down and that I was widowed. Again this was when some of those people said that this explained why we had different surnames. The conversation turned to me as it so often did and then Lee just got ignored. This time I just quickly brushed it off and we moved on.

Lee and I talked that night about what always goes on when we mention that I was widowed. I felt that after all this time I owed it to him and to myself to be his wife completely and this is when I made the big decision that I now would be known as Michelle Wilkins. I had been Steve's wife and was proud to have his name, I then carried both their names but now the time felt right and I am now proud to be Michelle Wilkins. ■