

Two years after 'Land Rover in the River' tragedy killed four of her children,

by Antonia Hoyle

Sleep does not come easily to Sara Bolland. And if it comes at all, it invariably ends in a nightmare. With crushing predictability the themes are always the same. She is screaming, paralysed with fear on a sunny river bank and staring at a row of lifeless little bodies. After she wakes, Sara lays the table for breakfast, putting out seven bowls and seven spoons. Then she stops herself, remembering, with an agonising ache, that she needs to set only three places.

It has been two years since four of her seven children drowned but for Sara, 33, the grieving process has barely begun. It has taken since that terrible day, Sunday, September 16, 2007, for the immediate shock to subside.

Even now, she struggles to accept the harrowing reality of what became known as the 'Land Rover in the River' case. The haunting image of the canary yellow vehicle being winched from the murky water shocked a nation.

Sara's fiancé, Nigel Gresham, had been driving when he lost control and it went spinning off a narrow Lincolnshire lane, rolling into a river below. In a scene of almost unimaginable horror, the car filled with water. While she, Nigel and

their three elder children managed to escape, the youngest four, unable to undo their safety belts, were trapped inside, and perished.

In December 2008, Nigel was convicted of four counts of causing death by dangerous driving. A month later he was sentenced to two years in prison.

Nobody could deny that as a father he is suffering and that the crash was a tragic accident. But it was Nigel's recklessness that inadvertently caused it because, as a keen participant of 'off-road' driving, he had modified the Land Rover. In doing so, as Lincoln Crown Court heard, he created a 'death-trap' with dangerous brakes and steering.

Most in his situation would have shown remorse. Yet Nigel refused to plead guilty and has so far failed to exhibit a scrap of regret. In a letter he wrote from prison last week he went so far as to declare himself a 'good father'.

It is a response Sara is struggling to comprehend. As Nigel, now 38, will be released from

prison in little over two months, she feels compelled to give her version of events. She says: 'I am appalled Nigel made the Land Rover unfit to drive. It was something I didn't learn until some months after the accident. I wanted to throttle him. He's a nasty piece of work. He has behaved so arrogantly. But he is also my children's father.'

'And while I am nervous about him coming out of prison, I want him to be released for their sake. What they have been through is hard enough without them having to see their father locked away.'

Unlike Nigel, she is consumed by guilt, and critically analyses everything she did that fateful day. 'I am tortured by thoughts that I could have somehow saved the children - that I should have realised that Land Rover was dangerous,' she says. 'It is almost impossible to explain how heart-wrenching this has been for me as a mother.'

'I still think they are here with me. I lay places for them at breakfast and make enough dinner for seven children instead of three. I can't understand how the children - how I - have coped. At times I considered hanging myself. I couldn't see a way forward. But that would be selfish. I have to stay strong for my remaining children.'

Sara is speaking about the ordeal from her farmhouse in the village of Swineshead in Lincolnshire, where she is bringing up Star, 15, Liam, 14, and Amber, 12. Her grief is so tangible about the loss that it is almost painful to witness.

Her own father Peter combined farm work with lorry driving, while her mother Sheila was a shop manager. They lived in the village of Snarford near Lincoln. Sara has two elder sisters who now work as a college lecturer and a barmaid. Yet after completing her GCSEs she harboured no ambitions other than motherhood.

'I always dreamed of a big family,' she says. 'My own childhood had been happy and loving and I wanted to recreate that.'

She met Nigel 16 years ago. To an innocent, unworldly 16-year-old such as herself, he seemed an ideal partner.

He wanted children, he had a job as a welder and he was a handsome charmer. She thought the fact that he had been disqualified for driving without a licence was, if anything, racy and attractive.

Fatally, she didn't see it as a portent of the future. Nor did she know about the depression he would develop and which could make him volatile and incautious.

But what Sara lacks in eloquence and rationale in her relationship with their father, she makes up for in the unadulterated love she feels for her children. 'They'd load the dishwasher together and sleep in the same bed,' she says. 'Star and Liam were protective over the younger ones. They interacted so well together that it was almost easier having seven children than three.'

They were a team but they each developed a distinctive personality. Willow was a strong-minded Daddy's girl. Angel was quiet and ladylike, Keavy was nicknamed Dr Doolittle for her love of animals and Thor was an ardent fan of Doctor Who.

It is a memory of her son pretending to be a Dalek in the hours before the accident that she returns to when her nightmares overwhelm her.

'Thor had cut the cardboard from cereal boxes to cover his ears and the others were laughing,' says Sara. 'Angel had just finished her first week at school and had a new picture book. We'd been invited to my mother's for dinner in Boston and everyone was excited.'

Sara strapped them into the car. It was Nigel's pride and joy. It had cost £7,000 and he spent hours tinkering with it. Angel and Amber were strapped in behind Nigel and Sara, with the other five on bench seats behind them. It was about 4pm, as they drove along the narrow Lincolnshire lanes near the village of Tattershall Bridge.

'Keavy sang along to a pop song on the radio and a group of rowers passed by the river below. I replied to a text message and looked up when I heard Nigel swear.' A white Transit was heading towards them.

The court heard that Nigel was travelling between 50 and 60mph, on a road barely wide enough for two vehicles. The Land Rover skidded on to two wheels, rolling on to its roof before landing back on its wheels on the river bed. Within seconds, it filled with water.

Nigel kicked down the windscreen and



TRAGIC FOUR: Sara's children who died when the Land Rover crashed into the river. From top: Willow, Angel, Keavy and Thor



he, Sara, Liam and Star escaped. The others were trapped.

'We couldn't get to the others as the back doors were jammed from the impact of the crash,' says Sara. 'I screamed as we hauled ourselves on to the roof. I pulled Amber out with my feet and dragged her to the bank.'

By then, paramedics had arrived and as Amber was resuscitated, two men who had stopped when they saw the crash hammered down the windows and pulled out Thor, Keavy and Angel. It wasn't until the fire service arrived that Willow could be cut from her booster seat.

The family was taken to hospital with the youngest four put on life-support machines. 'At first, I felt strangely calm,' says Sara. 'It was almost as if my body had shut down in order to cope. I felt like I was watching someone in a film. I couldn't believe it was happening to me.'

A nurse warned Sara that Willow wouldn't make it. 'I demanded to see her,' she says. 'She had already died

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for the facts

mother tells why she can't forgive the father who drove them to their deaths

Every morning I pull seven bowls out of the cupboard for breakfast ... but then realise I only need three



IAN MCGORM / PA

but I wished he would open up. We handled it in such different ways. Eventually I told him I didn't love him any more.'

In the spring of 2008, Sara went to stay with her parents, leaving Nigel with the children.

'I shouldn't have left them but I was a mess,' she says. 'I felt a part of me was missing – that I was redundant. Suddenly there were no nappies to change, no baths to run. I couldn't eat or sleep. I could barely summon the energy to get out of bed. Thoughts of suicide kept crossing my mind and I had to get away.'

Nigel was charged in July 2008. It was only then that she discovered how dangerous the Land Rover had been. It contained the components of four different vehicles. The rear brakes barely worked and there were faults with the rear axle and steering.

'I was furious,' she says. 'He insisted that I knew what he'd done to the car. But I didn't. We haven't spoken since then but I knew I had to keep going for our children.'

Nigel was convicted of four counts of causing death by dangerous driving at Lincoln Crown Court last December. And there was worse to come. Sara found out that Nigel had another nasty secret in his life. He watched violent internet porn and had embezzled funds donated by well-wishers to help pay for the children's funerals.

'I was utterly, utterly shocked,' says Sara. 'I knew nothing. But people conceal things. I thought I knew him – but I didn't.'

Nigel has since claimed that Sara had also driven the Land Rover alone when she had only a provisional licence. She admits doing so.

'It was wrong and of course I'm ashamed,' she says. 'But I didn't realise there was anything wrong with the car and I would never drive on my own again.'

Now, the local council provide taxis to take the children to school. All three visit their father. 'It was their decision and they are old enough to make up their own minds,' says Sara. 'They love Nigel. They don't blame him for what happened and I don't want them to hate him.'

It is an extraordinarily generous gesture on the part of a mother who has lost four children and seen her wider family torn apart.

For the tragic repercussions are wide-reaching. One of Sara's sisters and her mother no longer speak because they disagree on whether Nigel should have been sent to prison. Her mother blames herself for inviting the family to dinner. Her father had to stop work for nine months because he was too traumatised by the accident. In doing so, he lost their home.

And yet, there is hope. Six months ago, Sara bought the farmhouse she now lives in with her new boyfriend Frazer Edwards, 29, a financial adviser who was also a friend of Nigel's. He has a quietly spoken kindness that has helped her regain a semblance of normality.

'He is fantastic with the children, although it's tough for him,' says Sara. 'When they're angry they tell him he can't tell them what to do because he's not their dad. They're still suffering.'

To mark the second anniversary, Sara scattered four red roses at the river bank where her children died. She then held a family barbecue where everyone released a balloon in their memory.

'The worst thing is when people tell me my children are "in a better place",' she says. 'They're not. The best place for them to be is with me. But for the ones who are still alive, I need to keep going.'

HAUNTED: Sara Bolland keeps asking herself if she could have done any more to save her children



GUILTY FATHER: Nigel Gresham and his Land Rover being winched out of the river hours after the horrific crash



when I did. Nigel and I went in together. I can't explain how painful it was to hold her in my arms and kiss her goodbye. No mother should have to go through that.'

One by one four of her children lost their fight for life. The next day Keavy's life-support machine was turned off. The following afternoon Angel and Thor died. 'I howled at the doctor to make it stop,' she says. 'I was weak, sick and scared.'

She drew scant comfort from Nigel. In losing four of their children they

lost much of the bond that had kept them together for 16 years. 'We barely spoke,' says Sara. 'We were trapped in our own thought processes.'

Before the children were taken away, their siblings drew around their hands and feet with crayons. The prints, together with clippings of their hair, are kept in memory boxes.

'I told the children they had gone to Heaven – that they were now stars in the sky looking down on them,' she says. 'They sobbed

uncontrollably. I hated having to cause them so much pain.'

Their three-bedroom council house in the village of Chapel Hill, which had once been filled with children's laughter and happiness, was suddenly marked by an unbearable silence.

More than 2,000 mourners attended the funeral. People lined the streets of the Market Place to pay their respects. The family had been popular in the rural community and there was, initially at least, a wealth of

sympathy towards them. Each child was cremated with their favourite toys. Keavy had her cuddly rabbit, Angel had 'Clifford' her red dog, Thor had his Walt Disney cars and Willow her Fifi And The Flowertots doll.

'Family and friends were incredibly supportive but it all passed in a sickening blur,' Sara says.

She lost five stone through grief and stress. Everyone in the family was given counselling.

'The children went from being polite and friendly to angry and reclusive,' she says. 'We had to put Star and Liam into a private school for troubled children. Amber shouted constantly.'

She and Nigel grew apart. 'I tried to talk to him about it, but he didn't want to discuss his feelings,' she says. It was a silence symbolic of their relationship.

'He was a depressive who suffered from black moods, and used to be physically violent towards me,' she says. 'He was already reclusive, but now, more than ever, I needed him to talk to me.'

Each family member was questioned by police in January 2008. 'Nigel didn't think it was his fault,' says Sara. 'I didn't blame him either