

I was happy when my twin sister met her fireman fella. But as he began lurching from one drama to another, I made a discovery that sent both our lives up in smoke.

By Karen Crear, 52

'Not MORE bad luck'



James, me and Coleen

One look at my sister Coleen's face set off my twin-tuition and sure enough, she had news.

'I'm going on a date,' she said, excitedly.

She'd been single for the last 18 months after splitting with the dad of her daughters, Laura and Katie.

We'd always been close – best friends as well as sisters – so it was great to see her getting back out there and dating again.

She told me she'd met this guy James online, so I said, 'Come on then, give me a look.'

Pulling out her phone, she showed me the pictures on his profile.

She normally went for lookers, so he didn't seem her type, but she said, 'We've been chatting and we've got loads in common. He's got teenage daughters as well.'

Later that week, while my partner Ryan and I were doing the quiz at our local

pub, Coleen texted me.

I'm out with James. It's going great. We'd love to meet you for a drink, she said.

Of course, I replied.

When they arrived, James introduced himself and got a round in before telling us he worked as a firefighter.

'Saving lives is really rewarding,' he said. 'I once caught a boy falling from a burning building.'

He sounds quite the hero, I thought.

As the night went on, James talked so much we barely got a word in edgeways.

'He's a lot,' I said to Ryan as we made our way home later. 'But he seems nice enough.'

'Maybe he was just a bit nervous,' he replied.

But as Coleen continued to see him, I realised James wasn't nervous at all. In fact,



Coleen and me

he was incredibly confident and he wasn't shy about his love for my sister either.

Coleen and I worked together and one week, he sent her three bouquets of flowers to the office.

'Has this bloke got shares in a florist?' I teased when the third one arrived.

While I thought it was a bit much, Coleen loved it – and him.

James's shifts at the fire station meant they'd sometimes go days without seeing each other, and while it meant he let her down sometimes, she understood.

In time, she introduced

James to her girls, but he seemed reluctant for her to meet his.

'His ex is being funny about it,' Coleen explained. 'He says she's trying to move them to America, so I'm not pushing it.'

Then, when they'd been together for a year, Coleen called in a state.

'I'm pregnant,' she confessed.

'You can't be!' I replied.

I knew James had had a vasectomy early in their relationship after they'd both agreed their families were complete.

'He'll think I've cheated,' she panicked.

But thankfully, when she told him, he was fine about it and once they'd got over the surprise, they both seemed happy about it, so I was happy for them.

Soon after, James proposed by presenting her with a wedding diary with details about the venue he'd booked for a year's time and flights for a honeymoon in Las Vegas too.

'He's asked me to be his best man,' Ryan told me.

We were both surprised

'Maybe he was just a bit nervous'



James, Charlie and Coleen

LIAR, LIAR, pants on FIRE



Me and Ryan

because while they got on, we thought he must have a mate he'd known for longer than he'd known us.

Coleen's pregnancy wasn't easy and at 36 weeks, she was rushed for an emergency Caesarean.

Their son Charlie spent the next week in neo-natal intensive care, but was finally strong enough for them to bring him home.

'He's a little fighter,' I said, cradling my tiny nephew in my arms.

Then one day, while Coleen and James were over, he told us his mum, who lived in France, had given him his inheritance early.

We were aghast when he said it was £2m.

'She wants me to start a business,' he said.

He and Coleen talked excitedly about their plans to open a boutique hotel on Newcastle's Quayside and it got me thinking about my own inheritance from our dad.

It was a five-figure sum and it had just been sitting there

since he died.

'Maybe I could invest in the business too,' I said.

'That sounds great!' James replied.

Ryan thought it was a good idea too, so James and I began discussing business plans and I gave him some money to help get everything off the ground.

He set up an office and got a website and I felt excited.

As well as the hotel, James said he would help me with the renovations on my buy-to-let properties too. But progress with all the projects seemed slow.

'We've got some issues with the contractors,' James explained, showing me emails. 'But I'm getting it sorted.'

Then something happened that put the hotel plans and their wedding on hold.

'James has found a lump,' Coleen told me in tears.

They suspected he had testicular cancer but thankfully, after tests, he was told it wasn't cancer and the wedding was back on again.

James flew to the US to

pick up his daughters, but returned without them.

'His ex won't let his girls come to the wedding,' Coleen explained. 'We can't get married without them there.'

Once again, she had to let all their guests know her big day was on hold.

I took her out for lunch to cheer her up and said, 'Can't he just marry you anyway?'

'I don't want to push it,' she replied.

With her wedding dress hanging in the wardrobe ready, I knew how disappointed she must feel.

But with James it seemed to be one drama after another.

'How can one person have such bad luck?' I said to Ryan.

I hoped at least now things might start moving with the business. But that seemed beset with delays and problems still too.

'I wonder where my money

is actually going,' I told Ryan one night, because while I was watching every penny, James was always taking Coleen to fancy restaurants. He even bought her a new Mini.

Worried, Ryan and I started doing some digging. After checking the names of the businesses James had set

up, we were shocked to discover that none of them actually existed.

'If James is lying about that, what else is he lying about?' I fretted.

We called the fancy wedding venue he'd booked, but they had no record of any booking.

As every thread we pulled began to unravel, I felt sick with panic.

By now, I'd given James £80,000 of my inheritance and I had no idea what he'd done with it.

But while I was devastated, I felt worse for my sister. Never mind Fireman Sam,

she'd pinned her future on Fireman Sam!

'She doesn't know she's with a conman,' I said to Ryan. 'I have to tell her.'

When I called, Coleen was in the car with James, so I said, 'Ring me when you're alone.'

She rang soon after and I said, 'He's lied to all of us, Coleen.'

I told her what we'd discovered and she was confused and shocked.

'Don't tell him, but we're coming over to ask where my money is,' I said.

She agreed, and we jumped in the car. But he must've realised he'd been rumbled because as we arrived, he was speeding off.

'He said he'd be back in a minute and drove off,' Coleen said, stunned.

'James has stolen my money,' I told her. 'I have to go to the police.'

Ryan and I went and told them everything. After checking his car registration, they told us it was insured in the name Greg Wilson.

So James Scott as we'd known him, wasn't even his real name.

Despite everything I'd lost, I was more worried about Coleen. Her fiancé, the father of her child, had been living a lie. He wasn't who he claimed to be and it seemed he'd had no intention of

marrying her.

When I told her what we'd discovered she was distraught. That night, I slept in her bed with her and held her as she wept.

'I can't believe this,' she kept saying.

The next day, after scouring social media for Greg Wilson, my niece Katie uncovered a bombshell.

He had a wife and two sons, who lived just 30 minutes from where we lived in Chester-le-Street, County Durham.

James – or Greg – had been living a double life.

And the shocks just kept coming. Coleen rang the fire station then said, 'They'd never heard of him.'

More digging by us and the police revealed he wasn't a heroic firefighter – he was an unemployed, ex-soldier. He didn't have any daughters, or a rich mum in France who'd given him money.

'Some of the lies just seem pointless,' Coleen wept.

Now, while I tried to support my sister and sort out the financial mess he'd left me in, Greg Wilson was on the run. It was two years before police arrested him.

In time, Greg Wilson, 39, appeared at Newcastle Crown Court and admitted 13 charges, including eight of fraud, two of forgery.

The court heard that to perpetrate his £100,000 fraud, he'd hired actors to play business contacts, forged bank

statements and conducted email conversations with fictional people to steal from me and others.

The judge told him, 'You lied about your name, occupation, family details, marital status and, quite bizarrely, faked a vasectomy.'

We were relieved when he was jailed for six years and

banned from

contacting us for life.

When the case hit the news, a woman tracked us down through social media and said she was engaged to Greg.

He'd told her he was in the SAS and had planned to fly her out to Dubai.

'He just won't learn!' I said to Ryan and Coleen.

Shortly after he was sentenced, I filed for bankruptcy.

'We've lost everything,' I wept to Ryan.

I'd given up work after

'They'd never heard of him'



Coleen and me

investing in what I thought would be a successful business.

Now, I took a waitressing job at a local bar. Only then I fell ill and was diagnosed with stage three kidney cancer. I needed surgery immediately and was left bedbound for months.

While I was recovering, Ryan who'd been my rock through everything, said, 'You've been through so much, you need to write a book.'

At first, I was hesitant. But, after talking it over with Coleen, we decided to do it together.

'I bet we'll sell 50 copies max,' I joked after our story, *Playing with Fire*, was published.

But we've now sold more than 10,000 copies, and have donated a significant portion of the profit to Women's Aid.

It helped me realise that writing was my calling in life and I've since written six books and now run my own small book publishers.

Thankfully, Coleen has been able to move on too and she's married a wonderful man called Scott, who has also adopted Charlie.

People have often asked if I have any hard feelings towards my sister, and the truth is I don't. We were both taken in by that man and betrayed. I lost everything financially, but her whole future had been built on his lies and deceit.

If anything, what we've been through has brought us closer together.

That flaming liar is now out of jail and while we can't undo what happened to us, we want to warn other women to stay away from him.

Once a scammer, always a scammer!

● Karen's debut novel *The Reinvention of Lottie Potts* is published by Crear Publishing, and *Where There's a Wheel, There's a Way* is out now. Both are available on Amazon.