



We were so close

A DEADLY SILENCE

Laura had an uneasy feeling about quiet Dustin. But then her younger sister started dating him...



Erika and me



Erika



Dustin Creech

Snuggling up in bed, I felt a gentle prod on my shoulder. 'Can I get in?' my three-year-old sister, Erika, whispered.

'Go on then,' I replied, pulling back the covers.

With three brothers, I'd been so excited when I finally got a baby sister.

Despite our 10-year age gap, we were inseparable.

When Erika was a baby, I helped Mum with night feeds and her cot was in my room.

As she got older, she'd often sleep with me.

At 18, I left home and joined the army and Erika stayed with me during the summer holidays.

Over time, I had my own kids, Tristan and Brianna. When I found myself as a single mum, Erika was a godsend.

She was the best auntie, taking her niece and nephew on days out and looking after them whenever I needed.

In time, I started dating again, and James quickly became a father figure to my children.

I often gave him and his friend Dustin lifts on nights out.

It always struck me how quiet Dustin was.

Eerily so.

Months after Erika left school, she moved in with me.

Sadly the following year, we received awful news.

Dad passed away at only 54. It was so unexpected.

Then three months later, we lost our 27-year-old brother Ryan

to a seizure.

I threw myself into my factory job to take my mind off the grief.

But Erika struggled. She began drinking heavily and suddenly moved out, eventually going to live with Mum.

Three years after their deaths, Erika found someone and seemed more settled.

They had two children, and Erika was a natural mum.

She'd do anything for her brood.

But I could see she was struggling too.

There was a sadness in her eyes and their house was always messy.

One day, I went round to help her clean and asked how she was doing.

'I'm not happy,' she confided.

Her and her fella were constantly arguing and shortly after, they split, sharing custody of their son and daughter.

James and I had broken up too, so I had space for Erika and the kids at mine on the nights she had custody of them.

It wasn't long before she was back to her happy and bubbly self.

Erika was a hopeless romantic, and longed to find The One.

So, she joined Tinder, and over several glasses of wine, we'd spend evenings swiping and laughing at her matches.

Not long after, my phone buzzed one evening and it was a text from Erika saying, *Dustin*

will drive me home tonight.

What a blast from the past! I thought.

I assumed she must have bumped into him at a bar.

I hadn't kept in touch with Dustin but knew he had two kids and was recently divorced.

At first, I was hesitant. He was 12 years older than her. Plus, although I couldn't put my finger on it, I'd always felt unsettled around him.

But the next night, she asked if he could stay over.

While I wasn't happy about the situation, at least it meant I could keep an eye on them.

Dustin hadn't changed.

He was still strangely quiet.

'Hey Dustin,' I said, as I walked into the kitchen.

But he just sat there awkwardly

at the table.

'What do you see in him?' I asked Erika later.

'I just like him,' she shrugged.

They became inseparable and he was over most days.

I tried to get to know Dustin. Over dinner, I'd ask him about his family.

But he'd just quickly change the subject.

There's something off about him, I thought.

Then Erika and Dustin started to argue. They argued far too much for a couple in the honeymoon phase.

One night their yelling woke me up.

'Dustin, you need to leave!' I said, storming into their room.

Thankfully he left the next morning.

I hoped that was the end of it.

Only, a few days later, Dustin's ex-wife messaged me on

Facebook.

What she wrote was chilling. *Get her away from him. He's a bad person,* she wrote.

At first I brushed it off, thinking Erika was caught in the middle of some tiff.

Thanks for looking out for her, but they're adults, I replied.

Only, she continued to message me.

I don't want him to hurt her, she stressed.

Initially, I didn't want to mention the messages to Erika.

But I grew concerned, especially when it became clear she and Dustin were going to end up getting back together.

'If you're going to be with him, you need to find somewhere else to stay,' I told her. 'I don't want him in my house and around my children.'

So, Erika and Dustin stayed at his mum's house.

Soon after, Erika came to mine in floods of tears.

'Dustin wants to get back with his ex-wife,' she sobbed. 'She told me he's messaged her, saying he'll leave me right away if she gets back with him.'

I didn't know what to believe. I just wanted my sister away from

that toxic man.

'His ex-wife has messaged me too,' I told her. 'You don't have to be with him, Erika.'

But the pair kept splitting up and then reconciling.

It was exhausting, and I was feeling increasingly uneasy.

Every time they broke up, she went running back to him and I could never understand why.

'I can't leave him,' she'd say.

'You can make your own choices,' I told Erika. 'But I don't want him anywhere near me.'

A few days later, Dustin's niece – who was dating my son – called me.

'You need to go to Dustin's,' she cried. 'Something is wrong.'

'What do you mean?' I fretted.

But she didn't say anything else.

I hung up and went on to our local police Facebook page.

Seeing the most recent post, I panicked.

Shots fired. Two people down, it read.

Hands shaking, I

called Erika.

But there was no answer.

Jumping into the car, I drove to Dustin's.

I arrived to find police cars swarming the house.

Then I spotted Erika's car.

I prayed she was still alive and sitting in the back of an ambulance.

As I walked towards the house, a man stopped me.

'Are you Erika's sister?' he asked, and I nodded.

'There was an altercation this morning,' he explained. 'Unfortunately, Erika didn't make it.'

In that moment, my worst fears were realised.

That monster, Dustin Creech, had taken my baby sister.

Overcome with rage, I screamed.

'I told her to leave

to tell them she was going to be late, which she never was.

She also asked them to call the police as they'd been arguing.

As Erika got into her car, Dustin had shot her in the head. Then he'd turned the gun on himself.

No one knew what had made him snap, or what they were arguing over.

Thankfully, Erika's children had been at their dad's.

Erika's friends later revealed that

Dustin had threatened her with a gun before.

She deserved so much more than that brute.

A month later, we held a funeral for Erika.

It was a beautiful send-off for a beautiful soul.

Today, Erika's children live with their dad.

They're still young but we regularly talk about their mummy.

On Erika's birthday we take cupcakes to her grave and then sing happy birthday to her.

I'm determined to keep Erika's memory alive.

I hope sharing her story gives those in abusive relationships the courage to leave.

There is help out there – please seek it.

Laura Painter, 40

'I don't want him anywhere near me'



Me and my beautiful sister