Did an internet predator target an innocent young girl and persuade her to falsely accuse her loving father of sexual abuse?

- Steve's love for his daughters was clear and he worked hard to provide them with the money to improve their lives
- Claire and Emily were happy children spending time learning to ride and swim as well as singing in choirs and joining the Guides
- However their idyllic family life came crashing down when Claire accused her father of sexually abusing her
- Later, Claire retracted the claims, only to accuse her loving father again just two years later

The photograph captures a moment of tenderness between a toddler and her doting father. She stoops in the surf to pick up her ball. He leans over protectively, ready to catch her if she falls.

The snapshot was taken during a summer holiday when Stephen, his wife Julia, their baby Emily and Claire — the little girl playing in the waves — were a happy family enjoying everyday pleasures.

Steve's love for his daughters was obvious. He worked hard — travelling long distances and putting in punishing hours in his job as a trouble-shooter for an international courier company — so there would be money to enrich their lives.

Claire learned to ride and swim, sang in a choir, joined the Guides and won a Duke of Edinburgh award. And Steve's reward was the knowledge that he was loved by his
daughters. On Father’s Day, the girls would wake him at dawn with home-made cards proclaiming: ‘To the world’s best daddy on your special day.’

This photo was taken during a summer holiday when Emily (pictured) was just a baby, at this point they were still a happy family enjoying everyday pleasures

‘They adored him, and they could twist him round their little fingers,’ says Julia, 43, a PA.

Then one day their happy family life in an Oxfordshire market town was destroyed. Neither Julia nor Steve was prepared for the harrowing shock of it. There was no forewarning — no tears, tantrums, teenage angst or rebellion — of what was coming.

In May 2011, Claire, then 16, shattered their close-knit family.

‘I’d gone to collect her from school, where she’d been sitting a GCSE exam, waited half an hour and she still hadn’t appeared,’ says Julia.
'Finally a policeman came out. His words are branded on my memory. He said: "I'm going to tell you something that will change your lives for ever."

Then he said Claire had accused Stephen of sexually abusing her for the past six months.

The shock was numbing. It was so abhorrent. I felt my stomach knot. My first thought was: "This cannot be true." It was so out of the blue, so incredible — why would Steve, my lovely, dependable husband, suddenly turn into a monster?

I thought: "The minute I see Claire I'll be able to dismiss this as nonsense." But that didn't happen. For two weeks I wasn't allowed to talk to Steve. And from that moment he wasn't allowed into our home.

'I felt sick with fear. At home I gently questioned Claire. She said her father had been coming into her bedroom and touching her, but when I pressed her for details she clammed up. Nothing rang true. It was as if she was reading from a script.'

She adds: 'She didn't seem to have taken in the enormity of what she was alleging. She was almost flippant.

'I didn't for a second believe her accusations. You cannot live with your husband for 20 years and not get an insight into the person they are.

'Steve is a principled, hard-working man. And as a mum I'd have known if one of my daughters had been harbouring a terrible secret, if she'd been troubled or frightened.

'There had been nothing, no indication at all, that Claire was unhappy. The whole thing was so awful that I couldn't eat for days. I walked the dogs in tears.

'But I knew I had to be strong. And I felt sure it was all so preposterous it would blow over.'

But Julia's faith was misplaced. Steve was arrested and charged with sexual offences against Claire. It was a condition of his bail that he was not permitted to go home or contact either of his daughters. He booked into a local hotel. The horror of it all was dizzying. For a week or so he was unable to work.

By then social workers were involved. And despite — or perhaps because of — the furore she had created, Claire stuck by her story.

'We felt she'd dug a massive hole and she couldn't get out of it,' says Julia. 'Once she'd made these allegations and everything had snowballed, she felt she couldn't unsay them.'
'But nothing made sense. Every time I asked "Why have you said this?", she'd refuse to answer.

‘After two months, I sat Claire down and told her gently that things would have to change because we couldn't afford to run two households. We'd have to cancel our summer holiday and her horse riding lessons.’

It was at this point that Claire retracted everything. Nothing, she admitted, had been true. She had spun a fantasy.

The police dropped the case, Steve returned home and the family regained a fragile equilibrium.

‘We felt relieved, but still perplexed,’ says Julia. ‘We simply couldn’t fathom why Claire had made the allegations against her dad. We felt desperately sorry for her, but we concluded she’d just been trying to get attention.’

Claire has always struggled socially, say her parents.

‘She is almost hyper-focused — she has a photographic memory — but lacks common sense,’ says Steve, 48.

‘We started to wonder if she has a mild form of Asperger’s, though nothing was ever diagnosed. Even before this she did not seem to be able to equate her actions with their consequences.’

At school she had been bullied. ‘She found it hard to make friends and when she did she had a tendency to make up stories to impress them,’ says Julia. ‘She was also impressionable and easily led.’

While lasting friendships eluded her, Claire formed alliances — as introverted teenagers often do — with faceless contacts on the internet.

She also lived in a world of her imagination. She was an avid viewer of the fantasy TV series Game Of Thrones — whose scenes of nudity and sexual violence have attracted criticism — and had an encyclopaedic knowledge of the police drama CSI: Crime Scene Investigation.
Julia says that Claire always found it hard to make friends and they wondered whether she maybe had a mild form of Asperger's although she was never diagnosed

‘It was as if she thought she was living in an episode of the fantasy dramas she loved to watch,’ says Steve. ‘But we gave her a hug. We forgave her. We resolved to support her and find a way forward.’ In the light of what happened subsequently, however, Steve and Julia wonder if they had, indeed, reacted appropriately.

‘I’ve questioned myself many times and asked if I should have examined more closely the reasons for her behaviour and arranged counselling for her,’ says Julia.

And this is because, two years on, Claire made more allegations of sexual assault against her father. This time, the news came with a knock at the door: two police officers said they were arresting Steve for ‘offences of a sexual nature’.

‘I remember thinking: “Oh no, not this again,”’ he says. ‘This time the charges against me were even more nasty, evil, abhorrent; so gross, in fact, that if they’d been true they would have carried a life sentence.

‘But I didn’t panic. I was just thinking: “As soon as they speak to the family, then the police will know that it’s all nonsense, as it proved last time.”’

But his hopes were misplaced, for in November 2013 Steve was charged with nine offences, from rape to battery and sexual assault.

Released on bail, he was barred once more from living in the family home and not permitted to see Emily. This time, Claire stuck by her claims.

For 15 months, neither Steve, Julia nor Emily have seen Claire, who went into foster care. Now 19, she is at university and has not contacted her parents.

However, Steve has been forced to endure the ordeal of listening to her disembodied voice, via a video link, as she gave chilling testimony against him at his crown court trial last year.

‘It was horrible to hear monstrous allegations coming out of my own daughter’s mouth,’ he says.

He was unanimously acquitted on all counts by a jury.

‘When Claire made the new allegations, they were so awful, so sickening, I didn’t for a split second imagine they were anything but lies,’ says Julia. ‘Claire changed her story and said Steve had been abusing her since she was five.

‘She says she was screaming in her bedroom as Steve raped her; that he dropped her on her shoulder and dislocated it. How would I not have known?

‘One of the weekends when Steve was supposed to have been assaulting Claire in her bedroom was Emily’s birthday. There were seven of us in the house. Wouldn’t one of us have had a slight suspicion?’

The day before Claire made her second allegations, the family had spent a lovely day at the German Christmas market in Birmingham: the girls had come back, loaded with presents, laughing and happy. Now it is a distant memory.
‘We’d just put everything behind us and moved on, and suddenly Steve had to leave our home again,’ says Julia. ‘A friend rented him a room in her house.’

For Steve, the fear was pressing: ‘I felt dirty, tainted. It was as if I was walking round with a label over my head saying: “Pervert.”’

Steve told his bosses about the allegations. Though he had served his company loyally for 26 years, he says they were unsympathetic. His working hours escalated and he was putting in 16-hour days.

‘In effect, they squeezed me out,’ he says. Finally, he resigned, and now runs his own company.

Meanwhile, Julia had reached her lowest point.

‘I couldn’t see the point of carrying on, but I had to,’ she says. ‘You just keep going. I had to provide for Emily. I had to stay strong. But I’d drive home from work crying.

‘All the time I felt cut in pieces and it was heart-rending. I was torn between being with Emily and spending time with Steve — I was allowed to see him outside our home — and I was plagued with worries about Claire.

‘Where was she? What was going on in her head?’
The police investigation meant that bedding, underclothes and pyjamas were taken from Steve and Julia's four-bedroom home for forensic testing.

'I was glad. I thought: “The sooner they do the tests, the better, because they will come back negative,”' says Julia. Indeed, tests failed to incriminate Steve.

Two insistent questions continue to plague the family: why on earth would Claire concoct such monstrous lies against a parent who so evidently loved her?

And why would the police, without a shred of evidence against Steve other than his daughter’s unreliable testimony, pursue the case through a court of law?

Julia and Steve continue to speculate. So far, the most potent clue to Claire’s motivation is a sinister Svengali figure they discovered she had made contact with on the internet.

‘He was a middle-aged American, a father of three, who called himself “Missy” and befriended a number of blonde girls in their early teens,’ says Steve.

“We know he groomed Claire — we saw transcripts of their internet conversations that showed he was building up her trust — and he clearly exerted a huge influence over her.

‘He poisoned her against all her relatives. His mantra was: “Trust no one.” And he fed the fantasy that I had abused her.’

From what Steve and Julia have seen of the online conversations, he encouraged Claire to elaborate in grotesque and graphic detail about the alleged assaults, whether to get a perverse thrill from it they will never know.

‘Because Claire was insular and impressionable, she was an easy target for him,’ says Steve. ‘He encouraged her to view him as her surrogate parent. He sent her a Valentine’s gift. He said I was an “ogre” who had clearly abused her.

‘But when we tried to contact him, he had evaporated. He withdrew his Facebook profile and, because he lived in the U.S., we couldn’t track him down.’

Chartered psychologist Elaine Douglas says this worrying case is not unique. ‘It’s an extreme form of attention-seeking behaviour, probably provoked by an amalgam of different factors,’ she says.

‘When a child is less socially successful than her sibling, she may be more vulnerable and suggestible, in this case to the “friend” on the internet, who could well have planted the seed of an idea that she was sexually abused and certainly fed the false accusations.

‘If Claire is also on the Asperger’s spectrum, she will be less able to process the fact that her actions will have radical consequences for her father and family.’

Claire’s younger sister Emily does not rail against her sister, but she is angry about the situation.

‘I don’t hate her. I’ve got better uses for my energy,’ she says.
‘But she told such horrible lies. She said I’d witnessed Dad abusing her. It was ridiculous. And because of her lies, she deprived me of my father for 11 months and that is very hard to forgive.’

Even after Steve’s acquittal there was no celebration. The family will never be the same again.

‘Claire will never be able to live under the same roof as Steve again,’ says Julia. ‘The trust is broken. I love her — I always will — but I can’t yet forgive her.

‘I don’t blame her entirely for what she did. I believe she was led. She’s not a very strong person.

‘When Claire grows up, when she develops a sense of responsibility, I think she’ll come to her senses and realise what she’s done.

‘I don’t want her to be unhappy, but I’d like her to say: “I made a huge mistake.”

‘And even then, we still have the question: “Why? Why would she do such a thing?”

‘And though it’s over now, of course I’m still bitterly upset. When all’s said and done, I’ve lost a daughter, haven’t I?’

For legal reasons, all names have been changed.