

# Loving parents wrongly accused of child abuse – and torn from their



**TOGETHER AGAIN:** Louie with parents Katie and Matthew

**S**itting in his mother-in-law's living room, Matthew Dean's eyes widened in shock as he listened to what his social worker was telling him. Because he was a man and a soldier – accustomed to fighting for Britain in war-torn countries – he was, they said, more likely to be of a violent disposition, and therefore more capable of abusing his baby son, Louie.

'I was furious,' says Matthew. 'To be told that my occupation and gender should have any bearing on my parenting skills and sense of decency was absolutely beyond belief.'

It was only the latest in a string of traumas social services had subjected Matthew and his wife Katie to since decreeing they were a danger to Louie – and taking him away from them.

Perhaps the most poignant repercussion was the three-month pregnancy Katie later felt forced to terminate – having been told that she would have to hand that child over to social services too.

Katie says: 'I was grieving twice – for the



by **Antonia Hoyle**

little boy I couldn't care for and for the baby I would never see.'

The full story of the Deans' ordeal can now be revealed for the first time after Matthew and Katie spoke exclusively to The Mail on Sunday about their treatment by social services – and the heartbreak of missing nine crucial months of their little boy's life.

It is a sad and worrying saga – and one that seems to be becoming all too familiar – of overzealous social workers acting on a flimsy diagnosis and ultimately tearing an innocent family apart.

Their agony ended last November when Portsmouth High Court decided that they should be reunited with Louie – by now 15 months old and a healthy little boy – and, finally, left alone.

For Hampshire social services, the matter is done and dusted. They were, they claim, simply doing their job when they made accusations of shaken baby syndrome against the parents.

Matthew and Katie, however, see things rather differently. 'Being a family again is unbelievable,' she says. 'We finally feel complete. But we lost nearly a year of our little boy's life and have been treated like criminals. As far as we're concerned that is unforgivable.'

'We understand that social services have a job to do. But we are loving parents who have never wanted anything but the best for our family. They pursued a case against us while they could have been caring for children who really needed their help.'

Sitting in the living room of their three-bedroom home, as Louie toddles happily with his beloved toy Tigger, their love for both their son and each other is unmistakable.

Matthew met Katie in 2002 through mutual friends. She had recently separated from an ex-boyfriend, with whom she had a daughter, Charlotte, who is now nine. The following year Katie and Matthew had a daughter, Daisy, now five. In December 2004 they married and a couple of months later Matthew, of the 1st Battalion Princess of Wales's Royal Regiment, who had previously served in Kosovo and Northern Ireland, was posted to Sennelager in Germany, where his family set up home in the Army barracks.

Katie, 32, says: 'Matt treats Charlotte like his own daughter and we made the most of every minute as a family. We went swimming and to the zoo. We were thrilled when I became pregnant again.'

Carrying Louie proved traumatic, however. As an insulin-dependent diabetic, Katie found being pregnant

relentless routine of taking their daughters to school, playschool and baby-sitters while maintaining their presence at their son's bedside.

But as Louie began to recover, they were called into a meeting with their consultant and a social worker from the Ministry of Defence. Katie recalls: 'We were told that as they couldn't find out why Louie had the clot, we were under suspicion as parents.'

'I ran to the toilet and threw up. My son was lying across the corridor covered in tubes and I was being accused of making him that ill. It was madness.'

After extensive X-rays which showed Louie had no other injuries consistent with child abuse, the Deans were told the next day that there would be no investigation.

However, their consultant was still bewildered by the unexplained blood clot and he told the couple he was sending all the X-rays and medical notes to a former colleague of his at Southampton General Hospital for a second opinion.

No further action was taken and Louie, who was quickly regaining his health, was let out of hospital at the end of November – to his parents' joy and relief.

Then, in January, Matthew and Katie were called back to hospital and

## 'I was screaming and sobbing, sick with shock'

arrested. A child protection police officer said Louie seemed to be a victim of shaken baby syndrome – shaken so hard he had developed brain injuries. 'I was screaming, sobbing and sick with shock,' recalls Katie. 'I couldn't believe anyone could accuse us of hurting the little boy we loved so much.'

An Army welfare officer took Daisy and Charlotte to baby-sitters and Louie was placed in the hospital's children's ward as Matthew and Katie were driven to separate police stations and interrogated for four hours.

'It was incredibly intrusive,' says Katie. 'We were asked if we had a violent relationship and whether we thought either of us could have been capable of harming our son without the other's knowledge.'

It was a question they discussed all night after they were released. 'Although we trusted each other implicitly, we forced ourselves to think about whether there could have been any occasion where Louie could have accidentally banged his head,' says Katie. 'We came up with nothing.'

'The next day we asked the girls the same thing. We had to tell them doctors were trying to work out whether mummy and daddy were responsible for Louie's poorly head. It was heart-breaking.'

They were as scared as they were upset. 'We knew from previous baby-shaking cases that, if convicted, we stood to go to prison,' says Matthew. 'I would be tried in a court martial and, of course, we would lose our Army home as well as my job.'

A couple of days later, Katie's retired mother Christine, 62, flew to Germany. In what sounds like a farcical arrangement, social workers agreed that she could care for Louie – from Katie and Matthew's house.

'We weren't allowed to be alone with Louie,' says Katie. 'Mum even had to take him to the toilet with her. But nobody seemed remotely bothered about the welfare of our daughters. It was ridiculous. Still, we felt ashamed and paranoid about what our neighbours would think and became much more introverted as a family.'

After six weeks, and to avoid having Louie put in foster care elsewhere in Germany, Christine took him back to Britain and to the home at Eastleigh in Hampshire she shared with her 62-year-old husband, Kerry, a self-employed plumber.

Matthew and Katie, now realising they faced a fight for custody of Louie, decided they too needed to be in Britain and Matthew asked for a transfer. Army bosses, who were as disbelieving as the

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baby – deliver yet another shocking indictment of the child care system

# Social workers said because I was a soldier, I was more likely to be violent to my own children



**PROUD FAMILY MAN:** Matthew on his wedding day in 2004 with Katie, Daisy and Charlotte, front

couple's relatives that the Deans could be involved in their son's injury – and gave them legal aid to help them fight their case – granted him a recruitment position in Gosport, 22 miles from Katie's mother and Louie.

Their case was transferred from Ministry of Defence welfare officers to Hampshire social services who decreed that Katie's mother and father would be Louie's foster parents. 'It felt like we were being interrogated too,' says Christine. 'We had to say where we were schooled from the age of five and even whether our relationship was physical.'

Matthew and Katie were allowed supervised daytime visits to Louie twice a week.

Katie says: 'We missed his first steps, and his first word, which was dadda. I wanted to bathe him and sing him Twinkle Twinkle Little Star as he went to sleep.'

'I felt overcome by guilt and terrified that he would come to regard my mum as his mum.'

Shortly after they had arrived back in Britain, Katie discovered her contraceptive had failed and made the agonising decision to have an abortion. Because the clinic was nearer Christine's home than her own, and she had an early-morning appointment, she stayed with her mother the

night before. When Christine accidentally told their social worker that Katie had stayed over he was furious, saying she had flouted the terms of their agreement.

Katie says: 'I had to tell him why I'd stayed. When I asked him if I would have had to hand the baby over after it was born he said yes without a flicker of compassion.'

She claims their social workers – there were three in total – kept up

## 'We missed his first steps and first words'

their bullying demeanour as the months passed.

'They said if we confessed we could have Louie back. But we found that highly unlikely, and in any case we weren't going to confess to something we didn't do.'

Matthew – who was brought up by his electrician grandfather until he joined the Army at 16 because his parents found raising a child too difficult – was also subjected to their prejudices.

He says: 'They told me that because I had an unconventional upbringing

I was more likely to abuse my children. I was equally as shocked when they said my job would make me more prone to violence.'

Worse still, at regular meetings at their house and Katie's mother's house, the social workers tried to cause trouble between the couple themselves.

'They said I didn't have to cover for Matt,' says Katie. 'They bullied me more because I seemed more vulnerable. They were definitely trying to split us up. They asked us how this had affected our physical relationship. They even said Louie could end up dead if they let him come back and live with us. Yet we co-operated throughout and they admitted they couldn't find anything negative about our family life.'

Matthew adds: 'We said from the start that it wouldn't come between us. We made sure we talked about everything and actually became stronger as a couple.'

'We tried to keep things as normal as possible for Charlotte and Daisy's sake. They missed their brother desperately.'

Last summer, Matthew and Katie received a letter from the police

saying there was not enough evidence to pursue the case and that there would be no charges. But to regain custody of Louie they still needed to proceed with a hearing against social services, which took place last November. 'After everything we'd been through we were prepared for the worst,' says Katie.

But the court found in favour of the Deans.

Louie was placed back into the care of his parents and later the family enjoyed their first evening meal together for over a year. Katie says: 'Louie slept in our bed that night.'

She admits she's now overly cautious with her little boy, saying: 'When Louie banged his head the other week I took him to the doctor. I can't risk them thinking I have hurt him in any way.'

In fact, there were several innocent explanations for the blood clot including Katie's diabetes, the meningitis Louie contracted or even

the way he was delivered at birth.

Beneath Katie and Matthew's euphoria at having their family reunited is a resounding sense of anger that they were torn apart in the first place.

'We nearly lost everything,' says Katie. 'Yes, we're thrilled to be together again. But it would be nice if someone said sorry for what we've been through.'

John Coughlan, Hampshire's director of children's services, said: 'If children's services have reasonable grounds to believe that a child may have suffered or is at risk of suffering harm, we are obliged to act accordingly. This includes where there is the presence of serious unexplained injuries.'

'In such cases the local authority will make application to the courts for relevant orders. In this case the courts were of the view that Hampshire County Council acted properly in making the application.'

'Hampshire County Council remains confident that all actions in this case were necessary, proportionate and appropriate and we believe we have fulfilled all of our statutory obligations.'