

My daughter was SOLD

When Melanie Hayes' daughter Sophie went on holiday to Italy, it was to be the start of a six-month ordeal that still haunts her today...

To an outsider, our family must have looked as if we had it all. A spacious six-bedroom house in Leeds, and fantastic holidays in Florida and Spain.

Despite an unhappy marriage, my husband and I worked hard to send our daughter Sophie*, now 29, to private school. After I divorced, I married Steve, who treated Sophie, then 18, like his own.

Sophie and I had always been close. As a child, she'd follow me around and we'd go shopping together. She was bubbly and clever, and a fantastic big sister to her brothers and sister.

Sophie loved her job as a sales advisor and when she left

home, she got her own flat just a few streets away from us.

She also loved to travel. When she was 24, her friend Kas invited her to Italy for a week, and I encouraged her to go. She'd known Kas since she was 18 after she met him in a local nightclub. Originally from Albania, he'd moved from the UK to Italy a few years earlier. He was a year older than Sophie and worked as an IT consultant. Well, that's what he told her...

I knew I had to let her spread her wings

For the first day or two after Sophie flew out to Italy, she called home constantly, full of excitement. Kas had taken her to see the Italian lakes and

they'd gone out for dinner. I could tell she was starting to see him more as a boyfriend than a friend. I told her to be careful, but I was pleased that she was so happy.

Then, after three days, she called to say she and Kas were going to travel round Italy for a few months. I was a bit taken aback – after all, she had a flat and a job in the UK. It was a lot to suddenly leave behind. But she insisted she was fine.

I told her she should tell me if she was in any trouble at all. 'If you can't explain, ask me about Aunt Linda and I'll come and get you. It will be our code,' I said. I felt a bit over-dramatic saying it, but my mother's instinct told me to.

That evening, Steve reminded me of how Sophie

had wanted to spread her wings. So I left it at that. I trusted his instincts and mine.

As the weeks passed, I couldn't help feeling that something was wrong. But Sophie would still call us every week, and seemed quite normal, so I pushed my worries to the back of my mind.

Her trusted companion brutally betrayed her

Then, after she'd been away for six months, I got a phone call. Sophie was in hospital. My heart pounding, I asked her: 'Do you need to ask after Aunt Linda?' 'Yes,' she whispered.

Relatives looked after the other children while Steve and I rushed to the north of Italy to see Sophie. I wept when I saw

Sophie, 29, a business consultant, says:

I'd only had a few boyfriends before I was forced into prostitution. The idea of having sex with strangers made me feel sick and disgusted. I'd sob as I did it, convinced I had no option but to comply. He said he would kill my family - and me.

Kas and I slept in separate rooms of his flat. I'd work until 5am every morning. During the day, I'd sleep and cry. He only let me use my phone to call my mum. It broke my heart to hear her voice, but I thought that by keeping my ordeal from her I was protecting our family.

As the months passed, I grew weaker. I lost 2st in weight. Having sex with so many people left me battered and bruised. I was constantly ill and caught pneumonia.

I didn't have any intention of leaving Kas when I went to hospital. I was still too scared of him. But away from his clutches, I knew I couldn't go back. The relief of seeing Mum, who is also my best friend, was enormous.

I had no one to blame but myself. It was my decision to go to Italy. Kas had made me

so terrified of him that only back in Britain did I feel able to tell Mum the truth, and she couldn't have been more supportive.

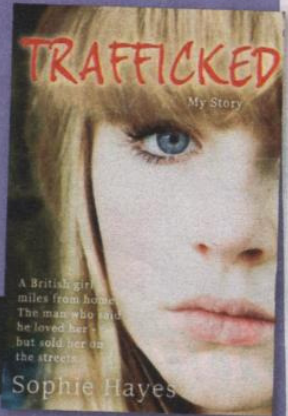
For months it was agony. I felt paranoid that Kas was watching, waiting to get me. When he tapped me on the shoulder, my worst nightmare came true. But it also gave police the chance to arrest him.

Since he was deported, I've been working with a human trafficking charity and have set up the Sophie Hayes Foundation to help other victims. I've also written a book about my ordeal.

It has been a cathartic and healing thing to do, and hopefully it will help others.

I feel that some good has to come out of this. I won't suffer for nothing.

Trafficked by Sophie Hayes is published by HarperCollins, £6.99



kill me, or my family, if I tried to disobey him, and he dragged me to a nearby lake and told me I'd end up dead at the bottom of it if I disobeyed him. He said he knew where my brother lived. He was so terrifying, I felt I had no choice but to take him at his word,' Sophie told me, tears streaming down her face.

She was too scared to bring him to justice

Kas had taken her passport and sent her on to the streets in a mini-skirt and knee-high boots. She'd slept with up to 30 men every evening. If she didn't earn enough money, he would crack her shoulder blade, beat her or stick a gun into the side of her neck. He said he knew people in the police, and there was no point in even trying to escape,' Sophie said.

The thought of my little girl being abused like that was too horrific to bear. We called the police who identified Kas from Sophie's description and said he was wanted for a shooting offence in Leeds. But Sophie

was too scared to press charges for what he'd done to her. The police and I reluctantly accepted her decision.

As the weeks and months passed, I held her as she cried and listened as she lashed out. She became withdrawn. I felt powerless and angry with myself for not being able to stop her pain. Counselling made little difference, although when she went back to work it provided a distraction. We found a human trafficking charity who helped Sophie begin to feel stronger. With their support, she was eventually well enough to move back into her own flat.

Only Steve, Sophie's sister Emily and I knew what had happened to her. We told the younger children she'd been taken by a bad man but didn't go into details. Sophie didn't want to upset them.

A year after we brought her home, she called me in tears. 'He's back, Mum,' she sobbed. Kas had tapped her on the shoulder when she was out shopping in Leeds. He told her

she had to start prostituting herself again for him.

Terrified, she fled to her flat and called for help. The police and the sex trafficking charity who'd supported her arranged a safe house for Sophie as they arrested Kas. He was convicted of the attempted shooting and sentenced to eight months in prison. Afterwards, he was deported to Albania.

Of course, he hasn't been punished enough. I feel he should have been killed for what he did. But Sophie is too terrified to testify against him in court and like her, I'm now living with the fear that he may come back.

I'm determined to protect my daughter

The scars are slowly starting to fade. I'm overprotective as a mother and Sophie is still traumatised by her long ordeal, but she is becoming more like the daughter I once knew. I can't turn back the clock, but I will make sure that nobody ever hurts her again. ☺

her. She was emaciated. Her leggings and T-shirt hung off her and there were dark shadows on her face. She'd been hospitalised for exhaustion.

I was desperate to know what had happened, but Sophie refused to tell me. 'Just act normal,' she begged. 'Get me away from Kas.' Apparently he had tracked her down to the hospital, and had grudgingly agreed to let her return to Britain until she had recovered.

Sophie looked haunted. But it was four days before she broke down and told me the horrific truth.

On the third day of their trip, Kas had told Sophie he was a drug dealer, and had brought her to Italy to sell her body, to pay his debts for a deal that had gone wrong. 'He told me he'd

WORDS: ANTONIA HOYLE. PHOTOS: PLAIN PICTURE. ALL NAMES HAVE BEEN CHANGED