

'Did my dad murder my mum?'

Every family has secrets, but for Yasmin Whittaker-Khan, 36, the shocking truth behind her mum's death changed her life...

When I was six, my mum, Shakeela Begum Khan, was murdered. She was 24. I remember my dad – their marriage had broken up a year before – picking me up at school that afternoon and taking me to the flat I shared with her in East London. There were police and ambulances everywhere.

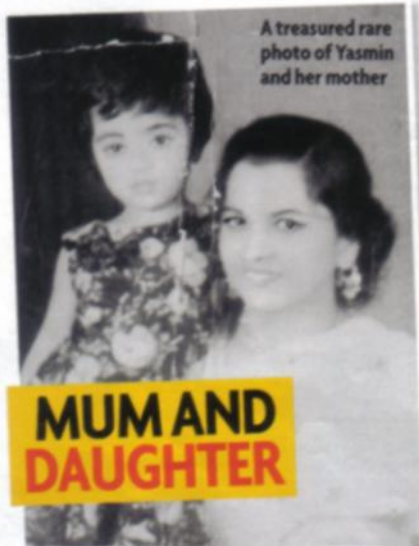
Dad told me to wait in the living room while he talked to the police. He said my uncle would collect me. But I was curious, so I peeked round the bedroom door and saw a body wrapped in a sheet. I have no memory of how I felt. And I was too young to understand that it was my mum's body, and that she was dead.

A week later, my dad, Rasib Khan, was charged with her murder, but I didn't find this out until years later. The police believed it was an

honour killing and that he'd murdered her in revenge for her winning custody of me.

The day Mum died, I was sent to live with my Uncle Zaman, his wife, Parveen, their four children, and my half-brother, Khalid, my dad's son from a relationship before he met my mother.

I asked where Mum was, but everyone changed the subject.



A treasured rare photo of Yasmin and her mother

MUM AND DAUGHTER



MUM AT 20

After years of not knowing what happened to her mum, Yasmin is now determined to find out

Then Uncle Zaman told me Dad had been sent to prison, but no one would tell me why, and I was too young to understand. Every night I cried myself to sleep. I felt so alone and confused.

Khalid, who's 10 years older, was always nasty to me. I think he hated me for being Dad's favourite. Every day I begged him to tell me where my mum was, until finally he shouted at me never to mention her again. From that day on, it felt like she was a dirty secret.

Two months after my father was jailed, my uncle took me to visit him. I was only six and thought the prison was a big hospital with loud banging doors. I remember sitting on his knee as he cuddled me and told me that he loved me.

Six months later, he was

acquitted – I later found out there wasn't enough evidence to convict him. Khalid and I went to live with Dad and his new wife, who he'd married a year before, just after splitting from my mum.

From the first time she saw me, my stepmother hated me. She would tell me I was useless and hit me – but only when Dad wasn't around. I should have told him, but I was too scared as I'd seen him fly into rages with Khalid.

Then, when I was 12, I saw Dad beat my stepmother. I was so shocked – and suddenly an image of the body in mum's flat flashed into my head. By then I'd known for a couple of years that Mum

REAL LIFE TRAGEDY

Yasmin's grandmother in Pakistan, with photos of her daughter and granddaughter



THE FINAL CLUES

I felt strangely numb as I thought about never seeing my dad again – I don't think I even cried. I was just happy to be free of that house – and my stepmum. I wasn't allowed to leave my new house alone for two weeks, and police fitted a panic button in case my dad came to find me. He'd never laid a finger on me before, but that didn't stop me feeling scared. I knew he'd be furious I'd left him – he'd see it as a betrayal.

It was only thanks to my wonderful foster parents, Felicity and Chris Whittaker, that I began to feel safe. I now think of them as my parents. They showed me nothing but love and encouraged me to talk about my past.

After years of silence, it was such a relief to be able to speak about Mum and how much I missed her. Finally opening up about everything that had happened was hard, but slowly I learnt that it was OK to feel sad.

When I was 15, I finally felt ready to write to Dad and tell him what my stepmum had done to me. Despite everything, I still loved him and I wanted him to understand why I'd left.

He wrote straight back asking if we could meet. I didn't have to think twice. We arranged to meet the next weekend.

I was nervous. He'd said in his letter that he understood why I'd left, and he was heartbroken I hadn't told him, but was he angry with me too?

As soon as he got out of his car, he looked at me with such love I knew he would never hate me for what I'd done. But I was shocked at how old and tired he looked. Dad had always been so tough and strong, but he started crying as he hugged me. He told me over and over how sorry he was that he hadn't known what my stepmum was doing, and said he'd left her.

A few years later, Dad moved back to Pakistan and he died in 1991. I don't think he ever recovered from losing me.

When I was 17, I decided to find out more about Mum. Social services helped me track down

my grandmother in Pakistan. She was still alive and desperate to meet me, so I flew out.

It was amazing to be sat in her house, hearing stories about Mum when she was little. I met lots of Mum's relatives, and they made me feel like part of their extended family. I felt it brought Mum back to life. My mum's relatives were angry about the way she had died and believed my dad

did it. I agreed, although I've always thought he had arranged it and could never have done with it his own hands.

I flew home with so many questions. After

years of knowing nothing, I had to find out everything I could about Mum's life and how she died.

Then, in 2001, I realised Scotland Yard might still have their file on Mum's death. I wrote to them asking if I could see it, explaining my story and saying how much I needed to find out the truth.

A few months later, I received a letter telling me that I'd be able to see the file after all witness names had been removed. It's been six years now and I'm still waiting.

But I won't give up. Someone somewhere must know what happened to Mum. And I'm going to make sure I find out.

'The police said it was an honour killing'

was dead, as other kids at school taunted me, saying that my dad had killed her. Now I wondered if it was true. So I didn't tell him about what my stepmum was doing to me, in case he killed her.

Incredibly, though, I still loved him. He was the only real family I had. I never asked him about Mum. It was as if she had never existed.

By the time I was 13, my stepmum was hitting me even more – always on my back or stomach so Dad couldn't see. He worked 12-hour shifts in a rubber factory, so he was rarely at home to see it going on.

When I was 14, something inside me changed. I was so tired of feeling scared all the time. I showed my bruises to a teacher. I felt so ashamed standing in front of her in my underwear while she measured all my injuries and took photos. But I knew I had to do it if I was going to be free of my stepmum.

The teacher called social services and, days later, I was taken into care. That morning, in 1984, I left for school at 7am, but, instead, I was met by a social worker and driven to a foster family in Bedfordshire. All I had with me was my school bag. I was too scared to take anything else in case someone noticed.