

The BOMBSHELL in my INBOX



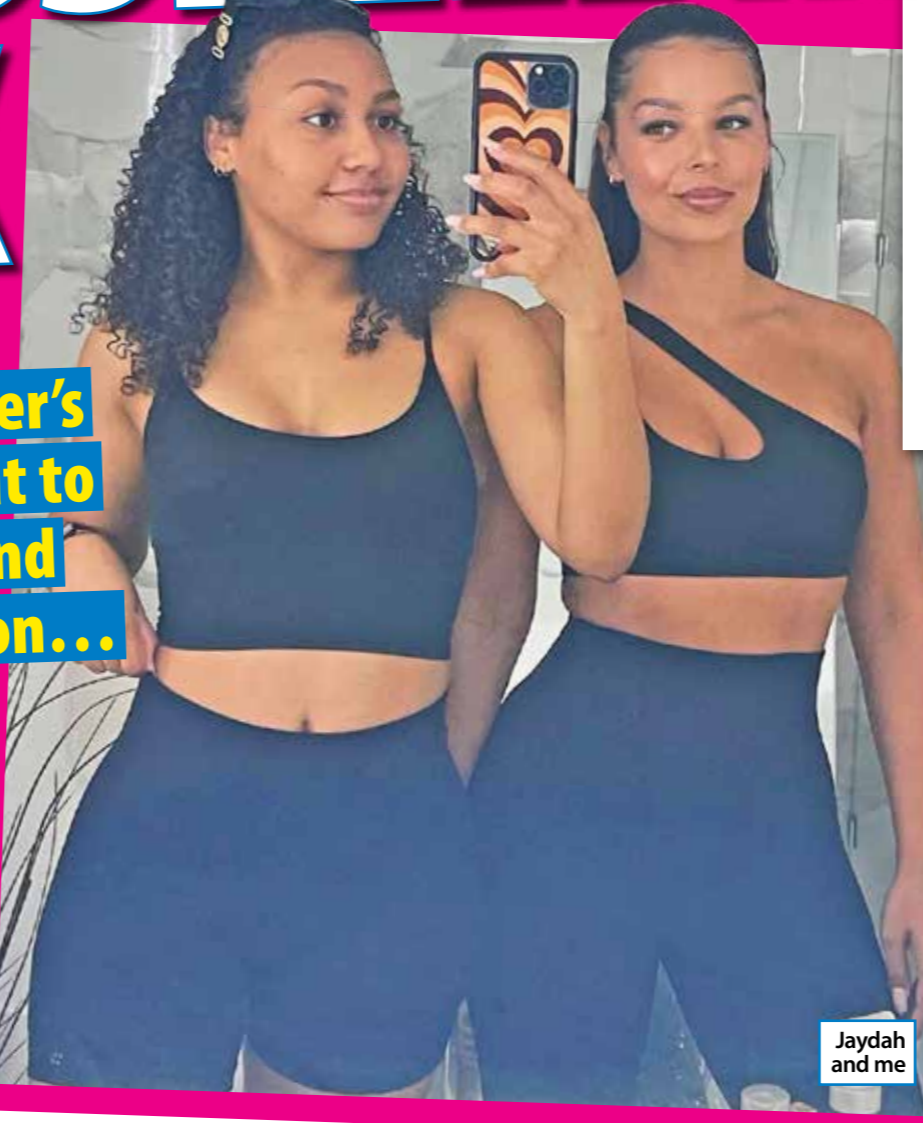
Me (left) with two of my siblings

Opening the email, Heather's life was about to change beyond all recognition...

bottom of my family roots. But when it arrived a few days later, I suddenly felt quite hesitant. What if it revealed something that I'd rather lay buried? Three months on, though, I finally summoned the courage to open it. I took a saliva sample, then sent it back in the post. In the back of my mind, I hoped an ethnicity match would help me find a distant relative, and I could go from there. But I told myself to keep my expectations low.



Jaydah, Dad and me



Jaydah and me



We look so alike

Brushing my thick tresses, I turned to Mum and asked, 'Why don't I have hair like everyone else in the family?' The eldest of six, from a young age I had noticed that I didn't look very much like my brothers and sisters. I had tanned skin and my hair was dark and curly, while my siblings were fair and had straight locks. Mum shrugged it off. But as I got into my teens, I began to ask more questions. I didn't look much like my mum's husband, and I began to think I might have a different dad. 'Mum, what did my dad look like?' I'd asked. But she would always change the subject. Only one day, when I was 14, she gave me an answer I wasn't expecting. 'When I lived in America, I met a man out there,' she started. 'Soon after that, I came back

to the UK – then I discovered I was pregnant...' It was a lot to take in. 'I never told him I was expecting, and I never spoke to him again,' Mum continued. 'So Dad doesn't even know I exist?' I asked. She shook her head sadly. It left me with more questions than answers, but for a while I didn't delve any deeper. I needed time to process it all. Years went by, and I found success as a model and presenter. Life was great. Yet I couldn't shake a feeling that something was missing. Living in a city as diverse as London, people often asked about my heritage. But I could never give them an answer. *I don't even know that myself*, I thought. So one day, when I was 32, I ordered a DNA test kit online to see if I could get to the

'Dad doesn't even know I exist?'

email and held my breath. As I scanned the screen, I couldn't believe my eyes. I shared a 25% DNA match with a woman named Jaydah Smith. After doing a quick calculation, it struck me. 'She must be my half-sister!' I gasped. It also said my father was likely a man called Milton Smith. There were a few other names listed as well, who I assumed must be distant relatives. I couldn't believe it. The results also said that I was 30% African American. It made sense, as I knew I wasn't fully white. It was a relief to finally

know who I truly was. Still, it was a lot to absorb. Only then did reality set in. *What if they don't want to know me?* I suddenly thought. My dad and sister might not be ready for another person coming into their lives. What if it caused unnecessary drama for all of us? After mulling it over, I decided to contact one of the other family members on the sheet, Linda. Not wanting to give my dad or sister a shock, I reasoned that reaching out to a distant relative might be a better idea. Finding her on the Ancestry app, I messaged her. *Hi Linda, you don't know me, but I think I'm a long lost relative of yours*, I tapped out. Just a few hours later, she

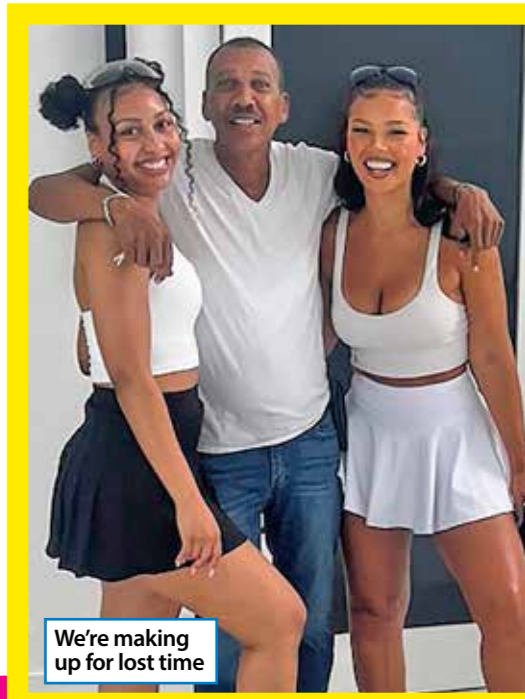
got back to me. Linda explained that she and my dad were first cousins, and she would be delighted to help me. She reached out to Milton and Jaydah, then passed their contact details on to me. *They would love to chat to you*, Linda said. I let out a little squeak of delight. But it was also anxiety-inducing. Jaydah and I arranged to speak over FaceTime. And any nerves melted away when she came on screen. 'Heather?' a friendly face asked. 'You must be Jaydah!' I laughed, thrilled. Chatting away felt surreal – not only did we look similar, but were also so alike. We clicked instantly. She was 27 and lived close to our dad, Milton, in Miami. We spent hours chatting, and it made me realise that I had nothing to worry about. Next, it was time to ring Dad. 'Hi, Dad,' I said, nervously. 'Heather,' he replied. He sounded calm, and it put me at ease straightaway. We chatted for hours – I'd come as a total surprise to him. Mum hadn't told him about me at all, or even that she had become pregnant. 'If you need anything, I'm here for you,' he said, as the

call was coming to an end. 'I am your father, after all.' It was a moment I never thought would happen. Over the following months, I kept in constant contact with my dad and sister. Later that year, that side of my family were having a big get-together in Florida, so I flew to finally meet everyone in person. Pulling up at the hotel, I was a bundle of nerves. Then I spied Milton and Jaydah waiting in the car park. I ran straight out of the car and into their open arms. We shared the biggest hug and all three of us cried. It was magical. 'I can't believe I have a second daughter!' Dad said. 'And my girls look so similar!'

'I can't believe I have a second daughter'

news, and he got me into basketball. When the reunion was over, Jaydah and I weren't done catching up. Deciding we should do something we'd have done as children, we went to Disneyland! Heading home was emotional, but we made a promise to try to travel the world together whenever we got the opportunity. 'I'm so excited for our future,' I said as we hugged at the airport. Since then, I've flown back to see my dad and sister, and Jaydah met some of my British siblings when she came here. Later this year, I'm going to take some of them with me to meet my American family for Thanksgiving. Now, whenever Jaydah and I hang out, we always try to wear matching or co-ordinating outfits, as if we were children again. She's like my twin! We have so many holidays planned and still talk every day. I'm determined to spend as much time as I can with my dad, too, as he's now 70. Every day, I wake up and pinch myself. I can't believe that I've found the missing piece to my puzzle. My life is like a real life version of Disney's *The Parent Trap* – and I couldn't have asked for a happier ending!

Heather Jayne, 35, Liverpool



We're making up for lost time