

"I've known Dad all my life – BUT I'VE ONLY JUST LEARNT HIS REAL NAME"

Lyndsey is determined to uncover her father's secrets

Lyndsey Buckingham, 20, from Wellingborough, Northamptonshire, is still trying to piece together the jigsaw puzzle of her father Charles Stopford's life – after discovering he lied about everything, from his name to his nationality

I sat bewildered on the floor of the storage cupboard, a dark nook that held fragments of my father's secret lives. In one hand I held an envelope addressed to Alexi Ruminov, a name I'd never heard before, yet the letter was meant for my dad. In the other I held a European ID for Hans Peter Schmidt, another name I didn't recognise but which was next to a picture of my father.

"I'd always known this man as Dad, Christopher Buckingham, the person whose surname I'd been given and shared. Now, aged 19 and delving into his past, I discovered he had two other identities. Was he a spy sworn to secrecy about his former life? An assassin? A drug lord? My mind raced, trying to find a reason why my father had lied both to me and to my mother ever since he'd met her 23 years earlier.

"I was five years old when I asked the one and only question I'd ever ask my dad about his past. Like most evenings, I was

perched on his lap while he sat at the computer (he worked in IT), Jimi Hendrix playing on the stereo.

"Where are your parents, Dad?" I expected him to ignore me, a tactic he often used when he didn't like a question. He was intensely private. He paused. 'They died in a plane crash in Egypt many years ago.' Subject closed. I never brought it up again. Even as a child you can sense when you shouldn't pick at a painful wound.

"Mum divorced Dad when I was nine. They'd been married for 14 years but her intuition told her something didn't add up about him. He'd claimed he was raised in London, yet he didn't know where Buckingham Palace was or how to use the tube. She started asking questions, which he blanked, so things fell apart.

"After the split, he vanished. It was as if he was a fugitive on the run from the truth. I'd try to phone him three times a day, but

he didn't contact us until a year later – which at that age felt like a decade. I carried around a picture of him, like a security blanket, so I'd never forget what he looked like. If I kept thinking of Dad, maybe it would bring him home.

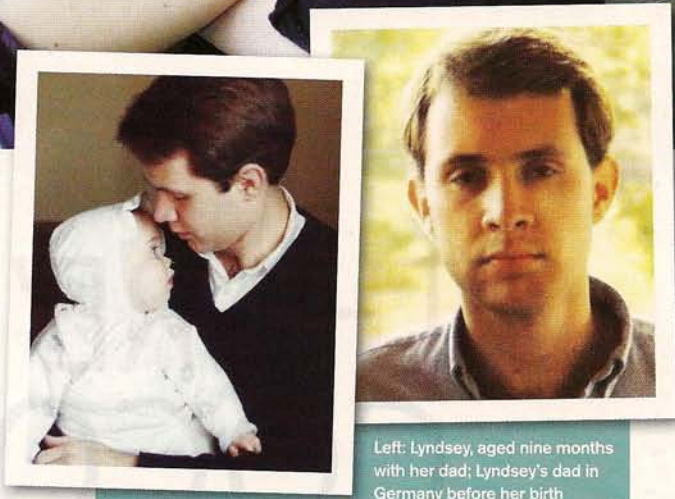
"When the phone did finally ring, I snatched it up. 'Hello?'

"'Who's that?' demanded Dad, who was very drunk.

"'It's Lyndsey.'

"'Lyndsey who?' he slurred. Crushed by his brush-off, I passed Mum the receiver.

"After that, my brother Edward, now 17, and I started to see Dad again, although he refused to tell Mum what his phone number was. Once I accidentally let it slip and the next time I was at Dad's, Mum rang to talk to me. Dad answered. I felt guilty for my >



Left: Lyndsey, aged nine months with her dad; Lyndsey's dad in Germany before her birth

mistake. He calmly handed me the phone but afterwards I walked past his room and saw him hunched over on his bed, racked with sobs. It looked like the weight of the world was on his shoulders but there was too much of a wall between us for me to comfort him. I felt helpless."

The lies unravel

"I was 13 when Dad moved to Switzerland and announced he was actually a lord. I admired a plaque on the wall of his flat and he told me it was the Buckingham coat of arms. He changed all his credit cards and seemed to enjoy the attention when shop assistants asked about his aristocratic background. I wanted to believe him but something stopped me from boasting to my friends that I was a 'lady'. I now realise that was because I sensed it wasn't true.

"It wasn't until I was 16 that Mum started investigating Dad's past. I remember her looking for his parents' obituaries, to no avail, and discovering that he never went to Cambridge University as he'd always claimed. Suddenly it hit me that if he'd lied about those things, he could have distorted other details, too. I was too scared to demand the truth; besides, I knew he'd just ignore my questions like he always had. I didn't want to upset him so much that he'd disappear from my life again.

"He always found it hard to be affectionate and pay me compliments. Once, in Switzerland, a friend of his said to me in German, 'You've grown into a beautiful woman.' I thought I understood her comment but when I asked Dad to translate, he brushed it aside and said, 'It's nothing.' I pushed it but he'd only reluctantly mutter under his breath. He was never one to talk emotions.

"When I was 18 I went to the University of Huddersfield to study drama. Dad came to see me quite often; to outsiders I guess he seemed like a normal father, assembling my bedroom furniture for me just like any other dad would.

"Then in January 2005 he was arrested for fraud. Passport control had been

tightened since 9/11 and he was stopped while travelling through Calais. The authorities matched the name on his passport to that on a dead baby's birth certificate. Mum rang me at university to break the news. I hid in my hectic social

life, going out every night and necking £1 shots at student nights, trying to block out the fact this was happening. If he wasn't Christopher Buckingham, who was he?

"Then I had a light-bulb moment. I remembered Dad's shifty behaviour

in Switzerland by the end of the month.' I wanted to believe him but the evidence was beginning to stack up against Dad – as it was about the honesty of the relationship he had with me.

"In October 2005 he was tried. It emerged that he'd faked his identity in the '80s, using this other birth certificate to get a National Insurance number, and married Mum under a bogus name – but why? And what else had he done? I didn't go to court; that would make it real. The case hit the headlines but I couldn't face reading articles speculating my dad was a 'killer' and calling him 'Lord of the lies'. I even avoided my local newsagents and told my housemates not to answer the door as the press swarmed outside the house. I

tried to maintain a facade of being laid-back. What the papers called an 'astonishing and complex' case of fraud was a story for me to tell down the pub. I was in denial about the entire mess.

"When I heard he'd been sentenced to 21 months for deception, I was speechless. Dad still refused to reveal his real identity, even to us. I wanted to see him to shake the truth out of him but I didn't want to have the conversation in that environment, so I stayed away. All my friends were incredibly supportive but ultimately they didn't know what to say. If I'd

been cheated on by a boyfriend they would have had some

experience of it and been able to offer advice. But how many people have a fraudster for a father? I felt so alone. When people first move away from home, as I had, they try to figure out who they are but normally your family and your background are a constant. I'd just had the rugs of both pulled out from under me.

"Then, in January 2006, a TV company called Redback Films started making a documentary about my father's mysterious past. I agreed to be involved straight away; I hoped they'd help me find some answers that I never could alone. Somehow they tracked down a storage cupboard in >



Christopher Buckingham was arrested for fraud in January 2005 when authorities matched the name on his passport to that on a dead baby's birth certificate

crossing the Swiss-German border whenever I visited him abroad and he took me on trips. He would only cross late at night when the guard was dozing, feet up on the desk, less vigilant with sleepiness. I finally realised why.

"Dad was released on bail later that month and ordered to stay in England until his trial. I coped by pretending nothing was happening. He'd visit me at university and we'd do everyday things like go shopping. The gravity of what he'd done wouldn't sink in. I'd casually ask, 'How's that passport situation going?' And he'd brazen it out, saying, 'It's all a terrible mistake, I'll be back

Milton Keynes that belonged to my father. The plot thickened, but working with the crew gave me a focus and helped me deal with things. It was in that cupboard that I discovered the two other identities Dad used: Alexi Ruminov and Hans Peter Schmidt. Also concealed in the back of the cupboard were an air rifle and a target. Sleepless nights followed where I turned it over in my mind. Had he killed people? Were his false identities just the tip of the iceberg?"

A whole new family

"I wrote a letter to Dad while he was in prison, although I never had the guts to post it. It was therapeutic to finally let my raw, angry emotions out. I wrote, 'Have some consideration for the people that love you most by telling us the truth. Stop thinking about number one for a change. I know I'll never see you again after your release! Experience had taught me that when Dad wants to avoid confrontation, he runs away – I was preparing myself for losing him for good.

"Dad remained tight-lipped about who he was and no leads came from the police investigation to unearth his true identity. It was all so frustrating. Then, in May this year I opened my email and clicked on one entitled 'Your father – I know him'. I assumed it would be from another lunatic (the police had received many hoax leads), but the sender claimed to be Dad's brother – my uncle. He said his family, the Stopfords, had been looking for their son Charles since 1983 when he'd gone travelling with friends. I opened the attached link and burst into tears – there was a picture of a young Dad with a huge beaming family.

"The police checked the photograph and confirmed it was genuine. Dad was actually an American called Charles Stopford, from a small town and a loving family. I was reeling. My family is so important to me; how could he have held back about his for so long? In some ways it would have been easier to discover he was a spy sworn to secrecy, rather than an average Joe with no reason for deceiving us all.

"It floored me that he wasn't English, either. He'd always been vehemently anti-American, pouring scorn on those 'stupid,

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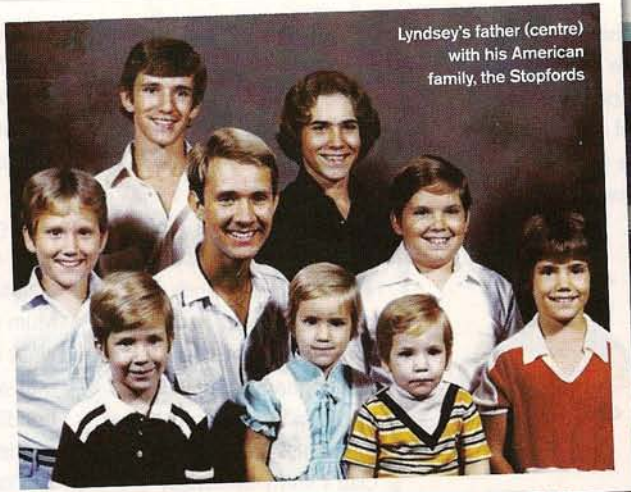
brash, loud idiots'. Maybe it was a clever tactic to strengthen his cover as the quintessential English gent. He dressed as if he went yachting at weekends, had a clipped accent, quoted *Monty Python* and drove a vintage MG, like he was mimicking a British stereotype from a film. I've since found out that as a teenager Dad was obsessed with British culture. He even had a Union Jack flag in his bedroom.

"In June I travelled to Orlando, Florida, to meet my new family. It was a life-changing experience. I discovered Dad had always been a reclusive character, prone to hatching eccentric plans – and that I'd inherited a set of grandparents, eight aunts and uncles and 25 cousins. Overwhelming. I could even see a family resemblance between their faces and mine, yet until that moment I had no idea they existed.

"I remembered a conversation I had with Dad years before, when he said he loved

wearing flares at my age. I always assumed he was talking about his life in London, but now I knew it was America. Growing up, whenever I'd had a problem with friends, he never commented or offered advice from his experience on how to solve it. It always seemed as if he had no history; now my new family could fill in the blanks.

"Dad's now been deported to his family home in Florida. Apparently he still insists on being called Chris, not Charles, and claims memory loss to avoid the million-dollar question: why? I haven't seen him since just before his trial and, although we speak on the phone, he won't tell me anything. I may go and visit him in a few months; after all I still love him, but I'm extremely disappointed. Dad was my hero. Why did he keep me from his amazing family? Will I ever find out what made him run from his real identity? Was it just a fantasy that spun out of control? I'm determined to be strong, to push my father until I find out the truth – even at the risk of being ignored. I want answers. And every last piece of the puzzle." **C**



Lyndsey's father (centre) with his American family, the Stopfords



Clockwise from above: Lyndsey's father on a family holiday in Canada in 1992; Lyndsey with her American aunts, Rachel (centre) and Becky (right); Lyndsey and brother Edward meet their grandmother

