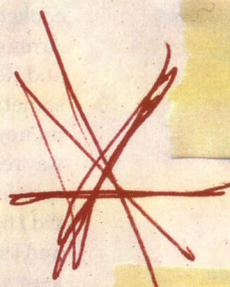


Pepper Smith remembers the day she was stolen from her parents, and the abuse and loneliness that came after. In this *Glamour* exclusive, she tells the dramatic story of her 30-year search to find her family, and the startling discoveries that changed everything.



**“I was
kidnapped
at age 4”**

Once upon a time, I was Rhonda Patricia Christie, a beloved four-year-old princess living with my parents in a tidy garden apartment near the naval base in San Diego. Mom, in her beehive hairdo, would dress me up in frilly purple dresses to meet Dad’s ship whenever he came into port, and he would spend his shore leave teaching me to ride a bike with training wheels. “You’ll start school soon, like a big girl,” Mom would tell me, and I couldn’t wait to be in school with lots of other kids my age. It was a happy, sunny time. I had no idea that dark secrets were swirling around my family—secrets that would swallow my childhood.

One afternoon there came a knock at the door, and when Mom opened it, there was a lady I’d never seen before. Next to her stood a tall girl a little older than me. Mom seemed to know the woman—she called her Shirley—and that surprised me because I didn’t think Mom would be friends with somebody with missing teeth. They told me that the tall girl, Renée, was my sister. She didn’t look like me—her skin was much darker—but I was so happy to have a sister I didn’t ask questions. Mom told me I was going to have a fun sleepover. Renée would play with us for a while, and then I’d get to spend the night with them at their motel! →

AS TOLD TO DAN BAUM

photograph by Sivan Lewin