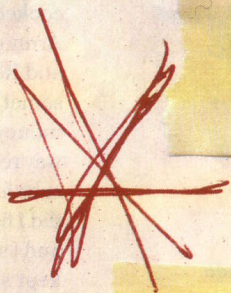


Pepper Smith remembers the day she was stolen from her parents, and the abuse and loneliness that came after. In this *Glamour* exclusive, she tells the dramatic story of her 30-year search to find her family, and the startling discoveries that changed everything.



**“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



At left, Pepper, then called Rhonda by her parents, celebrates her fourth birthday; above, she horsesh around outside, shortly before her abduction.

HUNGRY FOR LOVE

The next 12 years were a blur of cheap motels where we'd stay a day or two, or maybe weeks, before sneaking out in the middle of the night. "Pepper," Shirley called me—never Rhonda. I had no idea why she renamed me, and I learned quickly not to insist I was Rhonda. All that got me was more nasty scolding. I was hungry and dirty. Shirley never cooked for us. She'd take us to Salvation Army soup kitchens for bowls of mush, and Renée and I scrounged for food and sometimes I begged for handouts. For money, Shirley would drive out to highway rest areas and visit truckers in their cabs for 15 minutes; not until I was older did I figure *that* out. Some nights, Renée and I slept in rest-stop restrooms. Shirley kept saying that Renée and I were sisters, but I never understood that. She looked nothing like me, and why had I never known about her? I kept waiting for the nightmare to end, for Mom to show up and take me home, but it went on and on. The hunger, discomfort and fear were bad enough, but the terrible mystery of it all was the worst: Who was Shirley? Why was she so horrible to me? And why had my mother let her take me?

I cried for my mother a lot, and Shirley would snarl that she was protecting me from "that f--ker." She would never tell me what my mom had done to make her hate her so. Shirley warned me never to talk to anybody, especially the police, because we'd all go straight to prison. I didn't understand why, but she said it with such vehemence I was afraid to doubt her. More than once, the police pulled us over. Renée often panicked, screaming and crying so much that the officer would ask what was wrong. Shirley had a story: "I'm the grandmother, looking after them now that their parents were killed in a car crash." I wanted to shout, "No, they weren't!" but by then I'd become such a skittish, traumatized puppet that I kept my mouth shut. Through teary eyes, I'd watch him drive off—my salvation, my deliverance.

I still dreamed of going to school like other kids, but we never stayed anywhere long enough. Two nights here, a week there, always in hideous motels full of drunks and addicts who beat one another bloody. Every now and then, we'd drive in Shirley's old car cross-country to New Orleans, where somebody called Titi lived. There were three boys always in and

➔ When she saw my bedroom, Renée acted oddly.

Later I realized it was because she'd never seen such things as my canopy bed, my closet full of dresses, the toys scattered across my bedroom floor, my fish tank. "This is all yours?" I remember her asking several times. Then Mom dressed me in my favorite red sneakers, packed me an overnight bag and with a kiss on the cheek told me to be good and have fun. "I'll see you tomorrow!" she sang. As we drove off, Mom stood in the street and waved.

I didn't see her again for more than 30 years.

Shirley drove us to an ugly motel, but we didn't stay there. She rushed us up to a room, barking at me to hurry up, and threw a few belongings into the car. We drove off with a squeal of tires and I, suddenly scared, whimpered, "I want my mom!" Shirley turned in her seat and screamed in my face, "Pepper, you shut up!" Nobody had ever yelled at me so viciously, and I didn't know the name Pepper; I started to cry and became hysterical. Shirley snarled at Renée, "You keep that little chink quiet."

And thus began my new life.