

People
EXCLUSIVE

I WAS KIDNAPPED Taken at 12 and Held
Captive for 19 Years



Paralyse McGee

September 11, 2017

People

**Leah
Remini**

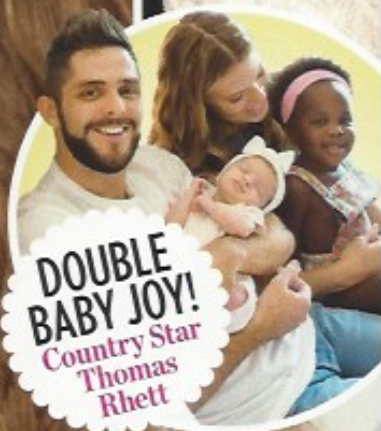
**MY
BATTLE
AGAINST
SCIENTOLOGY**

EXCLUSIVE NEW DETAILS

How she's rebuilding her world after 30 years in the controversial church—and why she'll never stop fighting to help others who have left: 'I am not afraid'

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Taylor Swift
GETTING
REVENGE &
CHANGING
HER LIFE



**DOUBLE
BABY JOY!**
Country Star
Thomas
Rhett





Sister Act

"I want them to grow up the best of friends, and I hope they encourage each other," the singer says of his girls. "I can't wait to see what they become."



Me & My Girls!

THOMAS
RHETT

THREE MONTHS AFTER ADOPTING
THEIR TODDLER DAUGHTER FROM UGANDA,
THE COUNTRY STAR AND HIS
WIFE WELCOME HER BABY SISTER

By EILEEN FINAN

For weeks 21-month-old Willa Gray Akins couldn't stop talking about the baby on the way. "Ada? Ada?" she'd ask, pointing to her mother Lauren's growing belly. But when her little sister Ada James arrived on Aug. 12, Willa wasn't sure it was worth the wait. "I think it wrecked her when she realized it was a human instead of a baby doll!" recalls Lauren Akins, wife of country star Thomas Rhett. But now with both baby girls nestled in at their Nashville home, the couple are finding family life better than anything they could have imagined. Says Thomas Rhett: "It was amazing to see our daughters together."

And it was a long time coming. After marrying in 2012, the couple, who have known each other since elementary school, had tried for some time to get pregnant, but to no avail. Lauren, 27, who has a nursing degree, first met Willa Gray (then nick-

named Blessing) in early 2016 when she was volunteering at a children's home in Uganda with the charity 147 Million Orphans. She fell in love and a few months later brought Thomas Rhett, 27, to Uganda to meet the orphaned infant. "It was like she was already our daughter in a weird way," the star says. Soon the couple began an arduous adoption journey that kept him and his wife shuttling to Africa every few weeks. "I was leaving a show, deadheading to Uganda for four days and coming back to play another show," recalls the "Die a Happy Man" singer. "I was like, 'I think I'm losing my mind.' And I think my wife was too." Then in the midst of it all, Lauren learned she was pregnant—a big surprise given their previous infertility struggles. "I was in complete shock," the singer says. "No one is ever prepared for that."

Willa Gray's homecoming to Nashville on May 11 was a welcome relief: Lauren was six months pregnant and no longer able to fly. "I feel like I went through two separate births!" she says. "The process was so defeating at times, I didn't think Willa Gray would ever come home. Emotionally it would just wreck me."

Daddy Duty

"Before I had children, any baby I held, I felt like I was holding glass," the singer says. With Willa, "I learned how resilient children are. If they lean down and grab an Oreo off the ground, they're not going to die!"



A New Tune

On Thomas Rhett's new album *Life Changes* (out Sept. 8), the title track chronicles his family's unique journey to becoming a foursome ("You make your plans, and you hear God laughin'," he sings): "I'm partial to that song because I'm the only one who can sing it!"

Baby Ada's journey was more conventional but no less exhausting for her mom. During Lauren's 30-plus hours in labor, her husband "did not leave my side. It shocked me. Since middle school he's been the most dramatic, squeamish person, but he did everything!" The singer admits, "I wasn't going to watch, but I got a little glimpse from this mirror and was like, 'Well, I'm invested now!' Watching Ada being born was the most miraculous thing I've ever seen."

Now, surrounded by his girls, the star has his hands full. Willa climbs on his back, sticking her tongue out mischievously. "There's never a dull moment!" Lauren says. With two under 2 (plus two dogs), she's not kidding. "The first night we were home with Ada, we were like, 'How are we going to do this?'" says Thomas Rhett. "I got up every 30

minutes just to put the pacifier back in her mouth. And the moment Ada falls asleep, Willa wakes up." Adds Lauren: "There are moments where I'm definitely like, 'Well, this isn't pretty!' It's tricky enough managing with two parents, but soon the country star will be on the road again, promoting his newest album. "The whole time I'm away, in my head I'm like, 'There's no one at the house with Lauren, and I'm sure it's chaos right now,'" says the singer, whose upcoming two-week trip to New York will be a test. "After working all day, how do I spend time with my kids and then get up at 4 a.m. to do the *Today* show? It seems impossible, but if Luke Bryan and Jason Aldean can do it, I can!"

Despite sleepless nights, tears and some sibling rivalry, the couple wouldn't trade a thing. "No amount of sleep deprivation, babies crying or the house being a wreck shakes the joy that I have," Lauren says. "I'm just beyond thankful we're all here." ●

Like Father, Like Daughter

"It's almost like she's been here forever, she's such a go-with-the-flow child," he says of Willa Gray, who already shares a few traits with Dad. "She loves the spotlight. She's a ham of a little girl."



'Our first morning together, all four of us, I thought, "We finally got here. And look how beautiful our girls are." It brought me so much peace and happiness'

—LAUREN AKINS



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Watch the full episode of *People* Features: *Thomas Rhett—Meet My Baby Girls*, available now on the *People/Entertainment Weekly Network (PEN)*. Go to people.com/PEN or download the PEN app on your favorite mobile or connected TV device.