

Chapter 4

FOUND

untangling the knot of regret

Year: 1973 / **Age:** 17

Place: orange county medical center's back bungalows

I had on powder-blue shorts. Any shorter and they'd have qualified as bikini bottoms. I sat there in a little metal chair, bouncing my knees up and down, trying to stay warm. The backs of my legs on the cold metal sent shivers up my spine and made my teeth chatter with every bounce. In reality, it was a big, bad case of nerves.

My cuffed, crisp linen shorts came as part of a suit with a really cute matching jacket, but I left that part at home, not wanting to draw attention to myself.

Too late for that.

I had worn the skimpy number twelve hours earlier when I won the title of Miss Westminster. When they called out my name as the new city queen, I strutted down the runway like a gazelle with a Pepsodent smile! My long, sun-kissed legs pouring out

of those little shorts helped seal the deal, but sexy gams can also walk a girl straight into big trouble. And that's what I was in this morning: big trouble. The glory of the night before faded into the dingy, army green walls now surrounding me. I sat flipping through the pages of a beaten-up *Seventeen* magazine. It was stained and dog-eared from countless other girls who'd sat here before me killing time. I sighed and replayed last night's victory, remembering what a nightmare it was.

Winning a beauty pageant is usually a girl's dream-come-true, but I was blinded by the spotlight and deafened from the sound of the roaring crowd. It was all I could do to walk that runway without slipping, tripping, or falling off my stilettos and into the judges' laps. Little did they know, it felt to me more like walking a ship's plank. "Steady on. You can do this, Michele. They'll never have to know your secret," I said to myself, putting one foot in front of the other. What I didn't count on was catching my mother's eye in the audience. The moment our eyes met, I broke into tears for reasons I hoped she would never know. I covered my tracks by placing my hand over my heart, throwing her a kiss, pretending I was overtaken with joy. I deserved more than a crown last night—I deserved an Academy Award.

My skin had a healthy glow, ten watts brighter than all the other contestants in the pageant, a glow that doesn't come from good eating habits or exceptional genes but from the genetics growing alive and well inside of me.

Walking through the doors of this dank place was much harder than I thought it would be. It made last night's runway stroll seem like a cakewalk. Being here at this clinic was as icky as putting on a wet bathing suit.

"If the judges knew I was here this morning, they'd never have given me the crown," I thought. Who in their right mind wears the very shorts she wore in the pageant to a place like this? I mean, the same shorts that appeared on the cover of today's newspaper—*The Orange County Register*, for goodness' sake? A pair of jeans or even baggy sweats and large sunglasses would have been a smarter choice, but I didn't know any better—that's how lost I was.

I kept telling myself there was no other way but to come here to this God-forsaken place. My mother would be devastated if she knew I was pregnant. She had disappointments enough to last a lifetime. She didn't need another one.

I would be graduating from high school in a couple of months and would enroll in Golden West College next week. The first-ever Commercial Music Department was kicking off at GWC in the Fall, and the staff members were proud of their new curriculum. They'd courted me for months and were thrilled I was coming. I couldn't wait to get there.

Besides all that, how does a girl stand on a moving float and wave to the crowd if she's green with morning sickness? I could just see it now: "Excuse me, Mr. Float Chauffeur. Can we pull over for a second so I can bow at the waist and barf curbside, please?"

And I doubted the Westminster Chamber of Commerce would welcome the idea of gown alterations to accommodate my ever-changing belly. Ribbon-cutting ceremonies could get sticky too. During my last trimester, I'd have a heck of a time reaching over my tummy to maneuver those extra-large pretend scissors. I'd never heard of a beauty queen who looked as if she swallowed

a basketball. Besides, the biggest responsibility and honor a queen is asked to perform is representing her fair city in the Miss Orange County Pageant, the largest county in the state of California. Should she win Miss O.C., she'd be the top seed for Miss California and hopefully go on to win the coveted Miss America crown. When the judges placed that scepter in my arms last night, they didn't picture a baby beside it. Believing I was the future Miss America, they were already patting themselves on the back for their ability to choose a winner.

These cold, hard facts were obstacles I couldn't see around, sitting in the little metal chair. That's why I came here to the county abortion clinic to make it right, to buy myself more than time, to buy myself the future I wanted. I was kicking myself for being stupid enough to wind up pregnant. Jim, the baby's father, was eight years my senior and taught art classes at the high school down the street from mine. The impropriety of statutory rape didn't cross my mind until years later and was more than I could deal with at the moment anyway.

To top it off, Jim's dad was my high school music teacher. I was the star pupil of his thirty-year career. If Mr. Sutherland found out about this, he would jump for joy, throw us a party and the biggest wedding in history. That thought scared me even more than sitting in this hallway did. Nevertheless, when Jim refused to pay for the abortion, I snapped back at him, saying, "That's okay. I'll just go ask your father for the money. He'd be more than happy to help me!"

Jim whipped out his checkbook so fast it practically blew my false eyelashes off! I was surprised at my courage and proud of myself for coming up with such a strong comeback. I didn't feel strong, though. I was heartbroken. I snatched the check from

his grubby hand and barely made it back to my VW Bug before falling apart.

I drove here to the county hospital all by myself. And now I was waiting, uncertain of exactly what for. I'm sure there were other girls sitting in their own little metal chairs beside me, but my memory has erased their faces. I only remember me sitting there.

A side door opened, and a woman came out. She pulled up a metal chair of her own. It scraped across the ancient tile floor with the sound of a screaming child. She plopped herself down right in front of me. She was holding a clipboard, and her face bore a huge smile.

"I have great news for you!" she said.

My heart sprang a leak of hope. It was the first positive thing I'd felt since before discovering I was pregnant. She went on. "A new law has just passed, and it's only ninety days old. It's called *Roe vs. Wade*. Now you have choices."

I looked deep into her eyes, searching for something that made more sense than an abortion. Even though seventeen and scared to death, I didn't want one. In my youthful, selfish state, even I knew the difference between right and wrong, and this all felt very wrong to me. But what were my choices? What magical solution did this woman have up her sleeve or on the front side of that clipboard? I listened with both ears.

"Although a minor, you don't have to tell your parents about having this procedure," she began. (I pictured my mother's face. My dad's never came to mind.) Okay. Now I was confused.

That's not a choice, lady. That's more like a right, I thought but didn't say anything. I listened on, wishing I had another ear.

"You don't have to tell the father of the baby," she said.

Oops. Already did. He ran like the wind, lady. But again, I didn't say a word.

My hopes began to wane.

"This procedure is simple and safe. You'll come out of it just fine, thanks to our new technology." The lady said these things with beaming pride and then went into great detail about the new machine. I stopped listening altogether at this point. It was more than I cared to know.

Okay, lady. You're telling me everything I need to know about having a secret abortion, but what about options, choices? Questions were screaming in my head, but like a lamb to the slaughter, I made no protest.

Even though in a fog of confusion, I was tracking better than this lady was. She started her spiel with the word *choices* and then didn't give me even one. When Dee Dee, Dana, Kimmy, and I pressed our noses against the glass at the Banana Shack, the guy wearing the wedge cap pointed out our choices one at a time. He looked closely and watched us as he waved the banana over the toppings until our eyes told him what we wanted. Would it be sprinkles, coconut, nuts, or maybe no topping at all? (That was always Kimmy's choice.) Maybe even no banana at all! Maybe we wanted cotton candy or popcorn.

As I looked at the lady in the metal chair, I couldn't help but

wish the man from the Banana Shack was the one holding the clipboard. Now those were choices! But that seemed light years ago; this was a whole other lifetime, colder and harder than the metal chairs that supported this hopeless conversation.

By this time my head was swimming. I liked the idea of point #1: not telling my mom. Point #2 was moot in my case. And so was point #3, because the word *procedure* made it sound like I was there to get my teeth cleaned or get a fresh haircut. But I knew better. I somehow also knew I wouldn't come out of this thing "just fine," as the counselor promised.

I wondered who had stolen this lady's heart and buried it somewhere far away from her chest? And her soul? Where did it go? How could she make a living doing this with such calm resolve? And how could she muster that smile? Maybe she found mine, the one I lost last night at the beauty pageant. These questions, and many more, were the ones I wondered about but couldn't formulate into coherent thoughts.

I wish I could go back in time to 1973, pull out a clipboard and ask that counselor some questions of my own: "Okay, lady, tell me when it was you talked yourself into this? How do you sleep at night? Does the sound of that new, fancy machine keep you up at night, like it does me, so many years later?" I'd love to hear her explain it to both of us—me and the seventeen-year-old me.

One week later, wearing my now-wrinkled powder-blue shorts for the third time, I drove back to that back-lot bungalow and had an abortion.

I fulfilled my duties as Miss Westminster like a good girl should. I cut ribbons all year and waved from moving floats without a single

spill or tossing my cookies. Somewhere along the way I found the semblance of a smile, but my skin lost its glow altogether.

I didn't go on to the Miss California Pageant; instead of me, a sweet, little blonde girl named Michelle Pfeiffer, representing the neighboring city, Fountain Valley, won the title of Miss Orange County. I came away with third place, or as they call it in pageant lingo, I "won second runner-up."

Michelle Pfeiffer didn't go on to the Miss California Pageant either, though. She quit the circuit to follow her dreams as an actress. I think she made a wise choice. I missed taking her place by one notch because of my third-place ranking. Yes, I sang like a bird in college and realized my dreams as a recording artist but all under the cloud of my abortion. I did my best to put the past behind me, but I never really succeeded at it.

The lady with the clipboard sitting in the metal chair was wrong on every count. She didn't know what she didn't know, and she couldn't see the future.

Jim, my baby's father, was in an accident two years later that rendered him a paraplegic. He'd never have another child.

My mother pulled me aside years later and told me that if abortion had been available to her in 1955 when she became pregnant with me, I wouldn't be alive today. She went on to say, "With three daughters by my side and your father all but gone, the last thing I needed was another mouth to feed." With tears streaming down her face, she continued her confession. "Losing you would have been the single biggest mistake of my life."

That's when I told my mom about my abortion in 1973 and

why I didn't tell her about it sooner. We sat on my couch in Los Angeles, held hands and cried for all we'd lost so long ago.

I didn't need the man from the Banana Shack or the lady with the clipboard for guidance in 1973. I needed my mother. I was a child "with child." I needed her ears, her questions, her perspective, and her support. And my mother didn't need my protection. I know that now.

That was the day I faced the chilling realization that if *Roe vs. Wade* had passed in the 1950s, I—along with more than a third of the seventy-nine million baby boomers—never would have been born. The likes of Steve Jobs, James Taylor, and Tom Hanks—gone.

This world would be a different place without any one of us who exists. I never would have lived to love, to sing, and to tell my mom about Jesus. She and I never would have been a "we" at all, and I wouldn't be typing these words.

And as far as point #3 goes, I didn't come out of it "just fine," as I knew I wouldn't. My left leg ached for six months after my abortion, and the doctors didn't know why. I never became pregnant again, even when I tried to. Was I broken? Had they broken me? Was it a physical brokenness? Maybe it was the deep sense of guilt and shame that kept my body from giving me another child. Not one doctor could answer those questions. By the time God stepped in and answered them for me, I was in my forties and too old to bear children.

These are only a few of the things the lady in the metal chair couldn't see. She couldn't see around corners, she couldn't see Jim's future, and she didn't know my mother's past. And she

couldn't see how I was wired—to punish myself for the next thirty years. So, this pregnancy would be my last pregnancy, my only pregnancy. That lady wasn't God, and neither was I; yet we both acted as if we were.

I asked Jesus to be my Savior three weeks after my abortion. My trip to the county hospital broke me from the inside out, and God was right there to pick up the pieces. He now had my undivided attention, and He didn't use my abortion against me. I needed help from someone who could see around corners. I could see that, now. Before my abortion, I never felt like I'd done anything wrong enough to merit someone dying in my place. I was a good kid. Got good grades. Didn't do drugs or drink. But after my abortion, my eyes were pried open. I knew that if “an eye for an eye”¹ was God's law, then I owed Him my life for the one I'd taken. But the beauty was, He would only ask me to give Him my life for the sake of following Him, knowing Him, and allowing Him to love me and live in me for the rest of my life.

Coming to know Jesus was bittersweet, because I was still recovering from my abortion. My heart felt a deeper love than I'd ever known, but my body was torn to shreds. I was in so much pain. During one of my many post-op doctor visits, a nurse said, “They must have hit a nerve up there.” (She said it like it was nothing.) *They hit a nerve, all right*, I thought. *One that starts in my heart and goes all the way to China.*

I was so thankful finally to know the name of the Person who'd been there to protect me as a young child. His name was Jesus, yet I couldn't help but wish I'd met Him three weeks earlier. I moved on with my life with Jesus in my heart but was unable to embrace total forgiveness about my abortion. Since I couldn't see how

broken I was, asking God for help wasn't on my radar. For years I lived believing Jesus died for everything except my abortion.

This subtle torment caught me off guard when I least expected it. The moment I stepped onto platforms like the Billy Graham Crusades, shame covered me like a blanket. It felt like the recurring dream I had as a child, where I was walking to grammar school on a windy day in a crinoline skirt and realized I wasn't wearing underwear. I hated that dream! That's how I felt at the Graham Crusades and countless other public appearances after my abortion: uncovered and ashamed.

This secret shame was a foe that wouldn't let me be. He was the uninvited guest who acted inappropriately at formal occasions, like a Lampshade Louis following me around through life. He was distracting. He weakened me when I needed to feel strong and good about myself. *What's he doing here?* became my focus instead of *What am I doing here?* This foe made it hard for me to enjoy life and my accomplishments and blinded me from seeing that I was blessed. I felt helpless and like an impostor. I didn't know how to ask for help, because I was too ashamed to talk about it with anyone, especially God.

I stopped singing and touring in the mid-90s for many reasons, not the least of which was the shame. Untangling. Untangling. Untangling the shame. It took time and lots of it. It took shining a light on it and dousing it in God's opinion of me in light of His promises. Now, out of the limelight, I was in no hurry. I just wanted to be free from the heebie-jeebies.

I wanted peace. I wanted someone to lower the tightrope so I could step down. I disappointed so many people when I stopped working. Cash flow stopped. People lost their jobs and, for a

people-pleaser like me, it felt like professional suicide. In many ways it was. But as each knot broke loose, I knew I'd done the right thing when I stepped away from ministry. In my mind my singing career was over for good.

But this new spiritual boot camp landed me somewhere between solitary confinement and heaven on Earth—a double-edged sword to say the least, and the honeymoon wore thin. I didn't know who I was without my music, and God wanted to change that. But the roots ran deep. I'd buried all my skeletons under my music. The more dirt I piled on top of old wounds, the more they began to stink. That burial ground ushered spiritual and emotional death into my life.

I was bound to my shame and to the shame of others that had been slapped upon my life. God would need to change that, too. It was a push-and-pull process. I doubted myself, and I doubted God at every turn. I kicked and screamed. I protested and felt sorry for myself. I hated feeling like a nobody. The process was taking too long.

Voices in my head told me I was unfixable: born this way or that; I was being punished and would never be whole, never worthy to sing about God again. I wished I could go back and change my mind about untangling these knots, these mind-sets. I wanted God to stop, but I would have had to leave Him behind to make that happen. I couldn't. I knew better now, so I kept walking, listening, learning. God was uncoiling a thick metal spring inside me. When the tension finally snapped loose, I loved who I was without my music. I loved the peace of mind. I loved belonging to Him and Him only. I loved trashing the hamster wheel. I loved laughing despite my past and letting go of the house I grew up in. I was a hostage to neither one any longer.

Years passed, and low 'n behold, in 2005 I was walking through my barn, minding my own business, when God spoke to my heart, *It's time to lighten your load. It's time to go back into ministry.* I shook it off. I tried to ignore it. I'd gotten really good at being alone. I was happy with "alone." I was succeeding at this thing called life and didn't want to rock the boat. Honestly, I was afraid to return to the scene of the crime.

My job now was working and managing a small horse-breeding program with a staff of three: me, myself, and I. It was a far cry from teetering crowns and Grammy telecasts, but it felt good, really good. Every day began the same way, feeding horses and mucking stalls. I stacked hay in August and worked with the mares and their babies in the snow and ice. I took on the roles of midwife and vet and slept in the barn with one eye open, listening for water bags to break. I marketed and sold the foals and made just enough profit each year to keep it all going.

Now and then I sang at church, and I served on the executive board of the not-for-profit organization Closer to Home to assist the needy in my community. That was all the ministry I needed. Life was calm, cool, and collected.

But I couldn't deny this stirring to reenter the ministry. *Maybe it's a midlife crisis*, I told myself. But it was constant and unrelenting. *God's gifts are without reproach* went through my head more than once. I asked God for further instruction, as if I didn't understand, but He was silent. I'd hear nothing more from Him until I'd done what He'd already asked of me to lighten my load.

I gave in, and I found new owners for my mares, Nandie and Breeze, as well as their offspring. I cried when the last horse left the farm, but that was replaced with the urge to write. Exhuming

my atrophied gifts felt like pulling an old car out of the garage, dusting it off from hood ornament to tail pipe to figure out what still worked and what needed to be replaced. When I got confused or discouraged, God would simply say, *Tell the truth, Michele. Tell the truth.* For the next two years His prodding was always the same.

So I did. I told the truth. I wrote about everything the best way I knew how. I shed light on what happens to a Christian who falls down as hard as I did, in hopes it would make its way to someone out there who needed to know.

Then, one day it hit me: The shame was gone, and so was the pain. It was as if I was writing about someone else's life. My secrets were like a basket of old laundry. I could hold them up for display and point out the moth holes, stains, rips, and tears, because the garments no longer fit me, were out of style, and I'd never dream of putting them on again. I love that about God. Walking with Him in truth changes everything, and it happens in the calm, quiet places almost without our knowing it. While I'd been going about my mundane life, God was busy working to untangle thread after thread.

Writing, creating again, felt like waking up from a very long nap. I called my friends BeBe Winans and Chris Eaton and asked if they'd like to get together and write a song. Both said yes, and we found a day that worked for us.

The night before our writing date, I crawled into bed and asked God what He wanted us to write about. "I don't have anyone to answer to but You."

I don't remember closing my eyes. I don't remember falling asleep. I didn't fall down a deep hole like Alice in Wonderland did, but I

found myself walking through a wonderland just the same. I was floating over a brilliant, stunning green meadow that would make the greens of this world appear gray.

There was a low-lying mist kissing the top of the grass, and a tiny cabin was nestled in the tree line. Smoke rose from the chimney of the sweet cottage, and animals of every variety inhabited the meadows, grazing, sleeping, and wandering around.

I was walking toward the cabin when the door burst open, and out ran hundreds and hundreds of little children of varying ages. They were coming out to play, and the sound of their voices was the most beautiful thing I'd ever heard. They were singing, dancing, laughing, jumping rope, and clapping their hands. None of them could see me, so I stopped, stood still, and drank it all in.

Then, one child's eyes caught mine.

He looked about ten months old, and he waddled his way through the crowd, making his way to me. I pushed through as well, trying to get to him as quickly as I could. Closer and closer we made our ways. When we were within an arm's length, he reached for me and I for him, and he grabbed my little finger. The minute we touched, I knew who he was.

He was mine.

Every fiber of my being focused on my son. Every cell in me underwent a momentary job change: to memorize every detail my senses could gather about him. I could hear my son's heart beating strong and true, and long-awaited relief filled my soul. He looked into my eyes with nothing but love, and without saying a word said, "It's okay."

Before I could respond, he smiled, turned, and walked away. I tried to follow him, but he melted into the sea of children, off to play, off to dance, off to live. He sang a song, and the others sang along, “It’s okay, my mother’s here. It’s okay for God is near. It’s okay, for I am found . . . in the Land of Forever where life abounds.”

I awoke with a start, crying like a baby.

Once again, a knot, the deepest one to date, was loosened and freed—a knot lost so deep in memory that God had to anesthetize me to reveal it.

God wants me to write a song about my abortion, I thought. I cracked a smile—a real one, the one I lost the night of the pageant in 1973.

As I got ready to leave to write with BeBe and Chris, I replayed the dream over and over in my head. I burned into my heart the image of my son’s face, along with his hands, feet, toes, and hair. And his smile—I’ll never forget his smile.

Most of all I remembered “It’s okay.”

What I really wanted to do was to skip the writing session altogether and run back to bed to find my son again, living in the Land of Forever, but I knew I couldn’t. The dream had done its job. It began the process of a healing long overdue and birthed the new song “Found”.

But before “Found” would be written, there was one more thing to be done.

My courage flew out the car window on the drive to the writing

session. I wondered, *What will people think? Will they question my sanity? Maybe things like this are better left unsaid, left in secret, Michele.*

God said nothing.

I recalled sitting in the rickety metal chair in that dingy, green hallway at the abortion clinic wearing my powder-blue shorts. Only this time I had duct tape over my mouth and around my feet and hands, unable to speak, unable to move, unable to get up and walk out of there. I was unable to defend myself from the pillage that was about to rob me of motherhood and take my son's life. But this time I did something about it. "No more!" I shouted, driving on I-65. "No more! Not this time around!" I think every driver on the road could hear me. "*no more!* Not again, Michele! Not this time, lady with the clipboard!" I shouted, and my courage returned on the wings on my words.

God's voice chimed in, loud and clear. *It's time to heal, Michele. But first, it all has to come into the light! Tell the Truth. It's time to tell me everything, Michele, and then tell the world.*

My tears fell like rain as this epiphany filled my heart and mind. *You, Lord, are the Truth, and I never again want to be afraid to tell You everything. You trump all my truths, my secrets, my shame, my knots!* I exhaled.

Tell the Truth, tell the Truth, rang in my ears. I understood for the first time that telling the Truth means telling God everything.

I nearly pulled the car over to the side of the road. I was crying so hard I soaked the back of my sleeve, wiping my eyes to see the road. I kept driving as I cried out to God.

I told the Lord everything I could remember about my abortion. I allowed myself to recall all I had imagined about what happened to my baby that day. Everything my body felt inside my innocent womb. Every sound, every jab . . . everything. Every detail I tried so hard to bury in 1973 came flooding back. I confessed my false belief that abortion is unforgiveable and mourned the lie that I wasn't worthy to have other children. I told God how sad that felt to me, now that I knew better. I screamed out to the father of lies and laughed in his face, telling him he didn't win after all! I told God how sorry I was. I thanked Him for taking me to where my son lives now and forever. I thanked God that my son didn't really die in 1973, that he was alive and whole from the instant he left my body. With each word of our conversation, I felt my long-awaited healing taking place.

Knot after knot after ancient knot. *Gone, gone, gone.*

I'd always believed that horrible imaginings, etched in the mind like Polaroid pictures, can't be erased—only lived with. I know better now. The Truth can change those images. My son is alive. He is beautiful. Whole. All the lost children are. Since my dream, I'll never see them any other way.

I walked though Chris Eaton's front door without a speck of mascara on my eyelashes and gazed at BeBe through swollen eyelids. I told them about my dream, and they listened with tender hearts. I finished by saying, "But I don't know how to do this. How do we say so much in a three-minute song?" As long as I live I'll never forget BeBe's response: "You had a dream, 'Chele. We have to try."

And try we did. Chris sat at the keyboard and played the kind of chords that only Chris Eaton can play. BeBe and I sat together

holding up the living room wall and, with pen and paper in hand, BeBe spoke the words, “They were lost, now they’re found” for the very first time. We watched as this beautiful portrait of a song was birthed in honor of the unborn. We worked for hours until the last note of “Found” was on paper.

Today, as I write, is Easter Sunday morning 2010. New life is in the air. The words “It is finished!” dance though my head and circle ’round my heart. Where would I be without the promise of new life? Where would my son be? Things done in the dark and sealed in the grave of time and choice are no match for the resurrected Christ! He breathed life into the lungs of a helpless, voiceless baby boy in 1973 and offered forgiveness to his mother decades later in 2006. But it came only after she opened her heart, opened her mouth, and asked for the Truth to reveal the truth to her and set her free.

“To dream the impossible dream. To fight the unbeatable foe,” a songwriter once penned. I think he was wrong. There is no foe unbeatable. Who is this foe the writer speaks of? Is it the woman holding the clipboard? Is it the doctor who went to work that morning and took my child’s life? Is it me?

No.

The foe is silence. So, I speak. To individuals, to groups, to a broken world, and I tell the Truth, everything, especially that Jesus’ obedient, sacrificial act is greater than any act or deed I have ever done, greater than what any of us has ever done.

And because I speak, this foe has no choice but to run and hide—back to the darkness, back to the deafening silence, to a place where there are no children playing, no babies singing, no

MICHELE PILLAR

mothers healing, and no life everlasting. This foe has no place
where everything lost is finally found.

