**hapter Six: The Weight that Mothers Carry**

The roads were thick with ice the night I told my parents I was pregnant. My boyfriend and I broke the news to my mother first, as we sat on that old, gold couch in the living room, waiting for my dad to get home from the midnight shift.   
 My mother, who had been a teen mother herself, was disappointed, probably because she knew the hard road ahead of me. She wanted me out, and she was sure my dad would feel the same.   
 I had just turned seventeen and was in my senior year of high school. I was an underachieving Honors student. I stopped caring about school the day I met my neighbor’s blond haired, blue-eyed best friend. And there I sat next to him, five months pregnant with his child.   
 The trailer where I grew up was cold that night, like always. The lack of insulation and ancient oil furnace meant frozen pipes and the necessity of covering the windows with plastic and duct tape. Even with the back door nailed shut and a kerosene heater on high, my brother and I shivered in our beds at night. That night—one of the most nerve wracking nights of my life—was no different. I kept my coat on as we waited to hear my Dad’s car pull up under the carport out front.   
 Leroy was clearly sick to his stomach. His plan was to ask my dad for my hand in marriage. Given that my dad was six feet tall and more than 400 pounds, it’s safe to say that he was more worried about my dad physically assaulting him than him saying no.   
 We waited for my dad to shower and eat his late night dinner. I can still see him there, sitting in his spot on the couch, eating a plate heaped high with fried chicken and mashed potatoes. His lips and fingers were shiny with grease. After he handed my mother his plate, littered with bones and breadcrumbs, Leroy cleared his throat, and I felt my stomach drop.   
 “I want to marry your daughter.”   
 My father’s eyes never left the TV, which was blaring a *Quincy* re-run, and replied, “When she’s out of high school.”  
 Leroy said, “Well, by then it will be too late.”   
 My dad’s head turned slightly toward my end of the couch, “Too late for what?”   
 “She’s pregnant,” Leroy croaked, visibly bracing himself for impact.   
 “That’s fucking nice,” my dad said bitterly. Then, rather unexpectedly, he went silent. A few moments later, he kicked me out. “You are not my responsibility anymore.”   
 I packed a small bag of clothes and schoolbooks and walked out the door with Leroy. Although we asked my dad for a ride, given the below zero temperatures, he refused. So, we slipped and slid the two miles from my parents’ trailer park to the trailer park where Leroy lived with his sister and brother-in-law. I was scared and excited. Leroy was glum and had little to say in response to my nervous chatter.   
 We stayed there for a few weeks, then eventually moved in with Leroy’s parents—in another trailer—far out in the country, away from anyone I knew. I quit high school after a homeschooling request was denied, and, of course, I turned to my old friend food.   
 I would sneak out of our room every night and gorge on whatever I thought no one would miss—chips, candy, even raw potatoes. I would be so full and tired when I went back to bed that I’d sleep until nearly noon each day. Between the bingeing and sleeping excessively, which began when I refused to have an abortion, I had grown nearly numb to Leroy’s lack of interest in me. I was depressed and tired and always, always hungry.

That spring, we moved to a little town just across the river in Ohio. After Leroy’s drunk driving record prevented him from getting a truck driving job, we signed up for welfare and moved into a one-bedroom apartment. We had very little money for groceries, so we bought bags full of cheap food. I binged on frozen pizza and potpies so often that I was rushed to the ER, swollen and bloated, under suspicion of toxemia when I was seven months pregnant.   
 A month before I was due to give birth, the Department of Welfare told us we had to move to a two bedroom apartment, but my monthly check was not enough to pay for it. That’s when we bought Leroy’s parents’ 1972 Shasta Starflyte camper, an 18 x 12 foot box their family had used for summer vacations. The couch and table folded down to make a bed, and the toilet sat so high off the floor that I had to jump to sit on it, but the stove and furnace worked well enough to get by. We put out the awning and set our old kitchen table out front to have a place to sit when the weather was nice. We even planted a garden that summer, rows of carrots, tomatoes and other vegetables.   
 The camper looked out on a major highway and was backed by railroad tracks. Four times a day, the train would come through and vibrate the little trailer until the dishes rattled in the cupboard. Sometimes I would sit alone in the cool grass behind the camper and wait for the train to go by on its midnight run. The rush of wind and the howling sound it made as it stormed by was liberating. If only for a moment, nothing else mattered but the train and the damp grass between my puffy toes. I was not a pregnant high school dropout living in a camper trailer in a one-horse town in Ohio. I was just a girl growing a life inside her body, enveloped in the calm eye of a locomotive tornado. After the train passed, I would head back inside to eat whatever I could find and fall into bed next to Leroy, who had often been asleep for hours. I was lonely and hungry for something deeper than what food could satiate.   
 As it happened, our tiny abode was set up on a lot right next to an ice cream parlor that illegally accepted food stamps. That last month of pregnancy, I binged hard on ice cream cones and fountain Pepsi. By the time I gave birth that August, I was constantly swollen and more than 100 pounds heavier than when I got pregnant.   
 Although I was desperate to fit back into my pre-pregnancy jeans, the bingeing only worsened after my daughter came along. I ate while I nursed her. I ate while I rocked her on the bed. Meanwhile, Leroy had started drinking more heavily and was spending whatever money we had leftover on booze. Even though he tried to hide it from me, I found his empty cans in the trash out back, usually when I was trying to hide the wrappers from my own deadly habit.   
 We argued often, and he wanted nothing to do with our daughter, Samantha. He spent as much time as he could digging in the garden or working on his car. Eventually, we realized we had to do something, so I moved in with my parents, and he went to the Carolinas to stay with his family while he looked for work. A month later he returned to the Valley, financially broke and spiritually empty. He took a job at a fast food restaurant, and we rented half a duplex not far from my parents’ house.

We relied on a kerosene heater for warmth because we could not afford to turn on the gas. I stayed home with Samantha and tried to stick to my diet, and failed. In fact, I was so obsessed with food that the report I gave to the police the morning after Leroy murdered Samantha included a detailed description of the meal I made for dinner the night before: pork chops, Rice-a-Roni, and corn.