



Chapter 1.  
The Barrel Cactus  
**Strength That Still Bloomed**

The barrel cactus isn't found growing in soft, sandy places.

It grows up out of dry, tough ground, round and sturdy, holding onto water deep inside. On the outside, it's covered in spines, almost like it's wearing armor to keep people from getting too close. It doesn't bend or break when the sun gets hot. It keeps going, even when it hasn't had rain for a long time.

But beneath that exterior is life carefully preserved.

The barrel cactus does not waste what it gathers. When it rains, it soaks deeply. When drought arrives, it pulls inward and conserves. It protects what sustains it. And when the season is right, it blooms not wildly, not constantly, but intentionally. Its flowers appear at the crown, like quiet evidence that endurance and beauty can share the same body.

This cactus survives because it had to.

And you know what? Some moms love just like that.

They didn't grow up in homes full of hugs and soft words. They grew up in places where you had to be careful, strong, and always on guard. They learned early that if you wanted to make it, you had to watch every penny, every minute, and even your own feelings. So they held onto determination, discipline, and responsibility. Being soft wasn't always safe. Tenderness wasn't always something they saw. And rest? That was a luxury.

So love took a different shape.

If your mom was like this, you probably know what I mean. Love showed up as making sure you had what you needed. It looked like sacrifice. It sounded like instructions and advice. She kept showing up, even when it would have been easier to give up.

It may not have sounded like reassurance. It may not have felt like a sense of emotional safety. But it was real.

Some kinds of love confuse us before they comfort us. Not because they aren't there, but because they come out of what was needed, not what was easy.

This chapter is not an indictment. It is an invitation.

It's an invitation to see a kind of love that was shaped by survival. To honor the women who carried that kind of love. And to decide what we want to keep and what we can gently let go of. Survival shapes love in its own way.

Some of us grew up with mothers whose love did not arrive wrapped in tenderness. It came dressed as responsibility, and it sounded like an instruction. It looked like a sacrifice, yet felt practical, measured, and heavy.

If your mom was like this, maybe you've wondered, Was this really love? Or was it just survival dressed up as motherhood? Our moms were independent because they had no other choice. They were strong because being weak wasn't an option. They survived because life forced them to. They provided because someone always needed food, a home, and protection.

Just like the barrel cactus in the desert, they learned to hold onto what little they had. They saved their softness for later. Their love showed up in sticking it out, not always in hugs or words. Their tough side wasn't to hurt anyone, but to help them survive.

A lot of us, as daughters, saw other girls get hugs, kind words, and closeness from their moms, and we wondered why love at home felt different. Why did it show up as doing things instead of saying things? Why did it feel like we were being managed, not just loved on? It took me a while to realize that love often speaks the language it learned to survive.

Let me share what that looked like in my own life.

Let's travel back to 1987.

I was nearly fifteen, overflowing with the unique anticipation that comes with standing on the edge of growing up. It was finally my turn to plan my own Quinceañera, a rite of passage in the Latino culture that celebrates a girl's transition into womanhood. After attending so many of my friends' celebrations, I could hardly believe it was my turn at last. I'd picked out a soft pink dress with layers of tulle and puffed ruffles, the kind that made me feel radiant and full of possibility.

One afternoon after school, I walked into our home and found my mother sitting in her metal rocking chair, waiting still and silent, as if she were preparing herself to share something difficult. Even before a word was spoken, the air was thick with tension. With tears in her eyes, she told me she couldn't afford my quinceañera anymore. My heart sank.

My parents had just gone through a divorce. What might have been shared responsibility now rested entirely on her shoulders. There simply weren't enough finances to facilitate this birthday party.

The ache came fast, the kind that settles in your chest before it spills out in tears. I cried there on her lap, and for a moment, she cried too.

In that moment, she wasn't strong or resolved; she was simply human.

But then something changed. Somewhere between her tears and my broken heart, she did what she always did. She pulled herself together, just like that cactus holding on during a dry spell. She looked me in the eyes and, with that same determination, said,

"Don't cry. You know what? You're going to have a quinceañera no matter what."

That was her way of loving me. Not with comfort or soft words, but with determination. And months later, she made it happen.

On the day of my quinceañera, I stood in my beautiful dress and looked around for my mom. She was busy serving everyone, making sure all the guests had food before she even sat down. She was the last one to eat that day.

That's when I saw her wiping away tears. She tried to do it quietly, but I saw. I knew what those tears meant. She had carried all of this by herself.

The long hours and the exhaustion.

The quiet sacrifices no one applauds. I knew the cost.

Without even thinking, I walked over, hugged her from behind, and whispered, "Thank you."

In that moment, there was everything: gratitude, love, and the quiet understanding of what it took for her to make my dream come true.

That's how she loved me. By sticking it out. By providing. She showed up, even when giving up would have been easier. She pushed through everything just to see me smile.

If your mom was like this, your story might look different, but I bet it feels familiar. Love that comes out of survival is still love.

And still, it's okay to admit that it hurts sometimes.

### **At The Root**

Where did your mother's strength protect you, and where did your heart quietly long for something softer?

### **Where It Blooms Differently**

What expression of love are you choosing to practice now that survival is no longer your only option?

## **Desert Prayer**

God,

Thank you for the woman who carried strength long before they could carry softness.

For my mother who survived seasons I may never fully understand.

Thank you for a love that revealed itself through provision, sacrifice, and unwavering resolve.

Your Word says,

“He knows how we are formed; He remembers that we are dust” (Psalm 103:14).

You see how I was shaped and understand what formed me.

Jesus, You hold compassion for what we carry.

Today, I ask You to heal what survival hardened.

Where love felt distant, come near.

Where strength felt heavy, make it light.

Where my heart still aches, meet me gently.

Your Word promises,

“See, I am doing a new thing... Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?” (Isaiah 43:19).

So I declare: You are doing something new in me.

You are growing something softer in my home, and redeeming what once felt scarce.

Over my mother, I declare peace.

Where she carried too much, give her rest.

Where she felt unseen, let her be seen and honored.

Where she survived alone, surround her with Your kindness.

Over myself, I declare freedom.

I am not confined to inherited patterns.

I can keep the strength and let go of the scarcity.

I will love with both endurance and tenderness.

Over my children, I declare blessings.

May they grow in a home where love is spoken and shown.

I declare that they will feel secure in belonging and walk in their God-given identity.

They will not have to earn affection, but will see strength that rests and boundaries that embrace.

Your Word says,

*“The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you”* (Numbers 6:24–26).

So I receive and extend Your blessing over my family.

I ask that, what survived in one generation, would bloom more fully in the next.

Grow in us what the drought once tried to silence.

Teach us to rest and to love in ways that reflect Your heart.

In Jesus' name

Amen.