

ROMANCING MELODY

A CROSSING JOURNEY



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*For baby Jacob
and his brave parents*

*Hear, O Lord, and answer me,
For I am poor and needy.
Guard my life, for I am devoted to You.
You are my God; save your servant
Who trusts in You.
Have mercy on me, O Lord,
For I call to You all day long.
Bring joy to your servant,
For to You, O Lord,
I lift up my soul.*

Psalm 86:1-4

CHAPTER 1



*T*HE CONTRACTION SURPRISED 21-year-old Melody Podell, and she almost dropped her glass. The water sloshed as she slammed the glass onto the table and grabbed the chair for support. Breathing through the pain, she looked at the digital reading on the microwave. 5:37pm. *Third contraction in less than an hour, she thought, and this one was a lot stronger. I'd better sit for a while. David will be home soon.*

Comfortably propped on the couch, she twisted her long, dark brown hair into a bun and held it on top of her head with one hand while fanning herself with a folded copy of the May 9th edition of *The Army Times*. Predictions for a busier than usual hurricane season for the Atlantic filled the evening news.

And Mom thought Fayetteville, North Carolina, would be a safe place. I suppose it is, minus the late summer hurricanes.

Feeling her stomach tightening, she looked at the wall clock. 5:50. *Maybe that clock is off a few minutes from the microwave.*

As she breathed through the end of another contraction

ten minutes later, she reached for the phone. *No answer at work. David must be on his way home. No reason to panic. It's probably just Braxton-Hicks.*



AT 9:52PM THE PHONE RANG IN THE NEONATAL INTENSIVE Care Unit at Womack Army Medical Center on Fort Bragg, North Carolina, and Sara reached for it.

“Thirty-five weeker came into the ER in heavy labor. She’s on her way up to Labor and Delivery. We’ll need a NICU team.”

“Be right there.” Sara hung up the phone, removed her reading glasses, and looked at her supervisor. “Thirty-five weeker. We need a team to L and D.”

“Okay,” her supervisor said. “Wanna take it?”

Sara walked down the hall thinking through her night. Thirty-two years on the job had taught her to take advantage of every quiet moment, even if they were while she moved from one station to the next.

The Rovack baby’s lungs are doing a little better, she thought. But I’ll bet he needs another dose of surfactant. Wonder if McKendrick will head to surgery tonight? She checked the time on her small wristwatch. The redness on his abdomen is definitely more pronounced than when I worked Tuesday. Scavetta is rooming in tonight and should discharge in the morning. That will put us down to nine babies before this new one. Thirty-five weeks, though. He shouldn’t be a problem.

CHAPTER 2



MELODY LURCHED FORWARD IN BED, sitting up with her hand to her chest. Her heart raced as she pushed her hair behind her ears and tried to take deep breaths. The dream remained fresh in her mind, propelling her down the hall to four-month-old Cole's nursery.

Gently pushing open his door, she held her breath as she watched in the soft glow of the froggy nightlight, allowing the movement of her baby's chest to reassure her. His lips puckered briefly and relaxed again as he moved an arm out beside him.

She silently crossed the plush tan carpet to stand at the crib side. Her precious Cole. How close they'd come to losing him. Her mind still clearly remembered all the wires coming out of his small body. His birth at 35-weeks had surprised both her and her husband, David, but labor seemed to go well.

Until Cole came out. Underdeveloped lungs. Surfactant. Broad spectrum antibiotics. The medical terms circled in her head and invaded her sleep. The scary hours as her boy was intubated and she could hardly pull herself from his bedside.

The tears she'd shed when the nurses finally extubated him and she watched him take those wonderful breaths on his own. The days spent in the hospital as he gained the strength to come home.

Pull yourself together, Melody. Doctor Braddock said Cole is looking great. His check-up went smoothly last Thursday. There's nothing to worry about.

She moved to the glider just a few feet from the crib and sat down, looking at the mobile hanging above Cole's peach-fuzz covered head. David had fallen in love with the cute frogs and snails, declaring it the perfect design for a boy. "After all," he'd said in his deep southern drawl, "boys are made from frogs, snails, and puppy-dog tails."

I'm just missing David, she thought. What a rotten time for a deployment.

He'd left with his team on August 29, and she expected him to be gone just over four months. He'd worked hard to earn his place in a Special Forces unit at Fort Bragg, and she didn't want to put his career in jeopardy. *SpecOps is his dream. I can't ask him to walk away.*

But her heart was torn. *How is a marriage supposed to survive this life? Between deployments and training, he's gone more than half the year. He'll miss Cole's first tooth, learning to roll over, maybe his first steps. How am I supposed to do this by myself? Doesn't a boy need his father?*

Sighing deeply, Melody stood to look at Cole one final time before heading back to bed. Maybe this time her dreams wouldn't center on those horrible eight days in the NICU.



MELODY FELT GUILTY DROPPING COLE OFF AT THE CHILD Development Center Friday morning. The free childcare offered to spouses of deployed soldiers was nice, but Cole

was still so young. She paused outside the door, almost turning around to go back for her son, when her phone vibrated.

“Still coming?” the text read.

Melody sighed deeply. *Lunch will be a nice treat. I'm not being selfish. I'm taking a break so that I can be a better mom. Cole is safe. And it's only for three hours.* She repeated the well-rehearsed speech in her mind as she typed out a reply to her friend. “On the way.”



“LOOK AT MY HANDSOME BOY AWAKE FROM HIS AFTERNOON nap.” Melody leaned over the crib, smiling at her son. She tickled his belly, looking for his usual quick grin. His blue eyes, so like his father’s, just peered back at her.

“My goodness, your nose is runny. Is that why you’re slow to smile today? Let’s get you cleaned up.” She laid him gently on the changing table to check his diaper and clean his nose.

“Now where did you catch this?” Melody thought back. *The CDC was a week ago.* He squirmed at the nasal aspirator but was soon breathing more clearly. *Maybe the commissary this morning? How long does it take to catch a cold, anyway?*

She stood him up to face her, allowing him a moment to push against the table with his feet.

“Are you ready to eat?” Melody smiled at him, moving in closer to rub her nose against Cole’s. He bounced, smiling at her and cooing in response. “Oh, yeah? You’re ready to eat?”

Melody moved in again to rub noses with him and realized as she picked him up that her nose was a little wet. She looked again at Cole and grabbed a tissue. “Looks like you might have caught a cold, baby boy.”

Settling in the glider, Melody positioned a pillow to

support Cole while he latched onto her. Rubbing his head gently, she said, "I think we'll just stay home the next couple of days while you get over it. Not like we had someplace to go, anyway."



MELODY APPROACHED THE FRONT DOORS TO ROCKFISH Church on Sunday morning, looking at every person within view.

She has to be here today. Please, God, let her be here.

The greeters held open the glass doors for the crowd exiting from the first service. Melody navigated the crowd entering for the second service, carrying the car seat with Cole safely buckled inside it.

The full foyer overwhelmed her for a moment, but then, finally, she saw the wonderful NICU nurse who had helped her understand everything that had happened at the hospital. Pushing through the crowd, she called out, "Sara! Can I ask you a question?"

Sara turned her head from the lady she was talking to. "Hey, Melody! What's up?"

"I know you're off duty and all..."

"Is everything okay with Cole?"

"No. Well, maybe. I... I'm just not sure." Melody looked at Sara, tears beginning to mist her eyes.

Sara stepped closer and touched Melody's arm. "Come on. Let's go talk."

Sara led Melody to the reception office, the first door down the hallway. Melody put the carrier down on the cushioned chair as a tear fell down her cheek.

"I'm sorry. I'm probably overreacting. It's just with David gone and my mom so far away..."

Sara reached to the desk behind her and grabbed the box of tissues. "It's okay, Melody. I don't mind helping."

"He's just had this runny nose since Thursday afternoon. And now he doesn't seem to be interested in eating much. I mean, he's still eating, but not like he used to."

"Let's take a look, okay?"

Melody nodded, and Sara reached for the carrier. Putting the handle down, she pulled the light blanket away and looked at Cole.

"You do have a runny nose there, kiddo." Sara felt his head. "Have you noticed any kind of fever?" Sara grabbed a tissue to wipe Cole's nose.

"Sometimes. It's like 99.2 or close to that. I think the highest has been 99.4."

"He seems to be a little warm right now, but that could just be because it's still plenty warm outside. I think autumn forgot to tell October to cool down a bit."

Melody smiled as she dabbed at her tears with a fresh tissue.

"When's the last time he was in for a well-baby check-up?"

"About two and a half weeks ago."

"And that went okay?"

Melody nodded.

"It's probably just a cold. Keep an eye on him for the next day or two, and if he doesn't get better, or if his appetite continues to decrease, take him in to see his doctor."

CHAPTER 3



“*M*OM, I JUST DON’T KNOW what to do for him.”
Melody sniffed and wiped at the tears again.

“Did you try a humidifier in his room? Or a warm bath?”

Melody nodded before speaking into the receiver, imagining her mom’s slight frame stood before her instead of 2,800 miles away. “I tried the humidifier, but his cold just seems to be getting worse. Now he’s coughing, and his fever is climbing.”

“What’s his temperature?”

“It’s hanging around 100.5.”

“Oh, sweetie, I’m sure it’s nothing. It could just be teething. Lots of babies get a temperature right before a tooth pops through. He’s almost five months, so that first tooth should be making an appearance any time now.”

“You think so, Mom?”

“You said Sara wasn’t concerned yesterday, right?”

“Yeah.” Melody peeked in Cole’s room and watched him sleep. Was it just her imagination, or was he breathing faster?

“As long as he’s still eating, I would wait another couple

of days. If you don't see a tooth by Wednesday, or if his fever hits 101, then you should take him in."

"I wish you were here, Mom."

"Me, too, sweetie."



"MRS. PODELL?"

Melody looked up from where she sat in the waiting room, struggling to hold Cole. She stood, grabbed the infant carrier, and followed the nurse in the happy-colored, kid-friendly scrubs down the short hall to a room.

"Come on in, Mrs. Podell, and have a seat. You called this morning to say Cole is sick?" The nurse blew a puff of air upwards, sending her bangs away from her eyes, but the errant red locks fell back in almost the same position.

"Yes. It started with a runny nose, and then a low fever developed." Cole twisted his head in her arms to look at the nurse. "The fever's been going up, and now he's not really wanting to eat much."

The nurse logged into the computer beside Melody and clicked on Cole's chart. Cole rubbed his face on Melody's chest and turned his head to look out the door.

"When did all this start?" The nurse reached out to feel Cole's fuzzy head.

"The runny nose started last Thursday."

The nurse typed a few notes. "Six days. What about the fever?"

"I started checking him on Friday, but it was only about ninety-nine then. By Saturday night, it had climbed just a little, not even a half a point, though. And by Monday morning, it was just over a hundred."

"All right." The nurse typed a few more quick notes. "And when did you notice a change in his eating habits?"

Cole squirmed, so Melody turned him around to face the nurse. He quickly reached around for Melody, and she turned him sideways on her lap. He looked back at the nurse and then laid his head against Melody.

"I guess a little on Friday, but more so yesterday. Last night he didn't eat much at all before bed, and during the night he really didn't seem to want much."

"How much would you say he's eaten today?"

Melody squeezed him gently to her. "I'm not real good at saying. He's still breast feeding, and I can't really tell."

"Not a problem. How about this? How often does he normally feed and for how long?"

"About every three hours for 25 to 30 minutes."

"And today?"

"I keep trying every hour or two because he's been fussy, but he's only latched on a couple times, and then only for five or ten minutes."

The nurse watched Cole for a moment, calmly lying against Melody. "He definitely doesn't look like he feels good."

"Do you think it's just teething?"

The nurse smiled at her. "I'm sure it's something just that simple. Let me get his temperature and weight; then I'll finalize these notes to Cole's chart. Dr. Braddock's running just a bit behind this afternoon, but it shouldn't be too long."



MELODY HELD COLE CLOSE. AFTER THE NURSE FINISHED, HE had snuggled into Melody and fallen asleep. Now, twenty minutes later, fear was setting into Melody's mind once again. *What if this isn't just a cold? What if they send him to the hospital? Can I get ahold of David? Should I even tell him?*

Melody began to rock slightly. *David needs to focus on his*

job. I can't distract him. But what if this is serious? How bad does it have to be for the Army to send him home?

"Mrs. Podell, I'm sorry to keep you waiting." Dr. Braddock closed the door behind him and washed his hands. "I see my patient fell asleep on me."

He sat down at the computer and read the few notes the nurse had taken and then turned around to face Cole. "Well, his temperature is definitely a bit higher than I'd like. Other than not eating, what else have you noticed?"

"He's been grumpy and not sleeping well. He'll sleep for an hour or so and then wake up for awhile. Even at night."

Cole coughed.

"When did the cough start?"

Melody sighed as she tried to remember. "I'm not sure. Sunday afternoon, maybe. Or maybe Saturday night. I, I just..." Tears began gathering.

"It's okay, Mrs. Podell. Don't stress over your answer. Let me just take a listen to those lungs of his."

Melody shifted in her seat so that Cole's weight fell more against her as she removed her arm from his back to give the doctor access. She watched him move the stethoscope around and turn to make some notes in the computer. *He's just being thorough. Nothing is horribly wrong with my baby.*

"I'm going to take a look in his ears too." He reached for the instruments hanging against the wall and a disposable cover. After he finished with the ear facing outward, Melody gently turned Cole's head to give Dr. Braddock access to his left side. He turned back to the computer to make a few more notes as Melody nervously began rocking Cole.

"Okay. I can tell you definitively that Cole has an ear infection in his right ear. He seems to be working hard to breathe, and while I don't hear noise in his lungs, the air doesn't sound as free as it should be. Congestion, runny nose, cough—that's all obvious. This is probably just an early

winter cold, but I want to run a couple of simple tests to make sure, okay?”

Melody nodded.

“Am I remembering correctly that your husband is on active duty?”

“Yes.” Melody barely squeaked out the word.

“Is he home?”

“No, sir. He just left a little over a month ago.”

Dr. Braddock nodded. “Afghanistan?”

Melody nodded.

“How long will he be gone?”

“About four months.”

“Well. I’m sure all this will be well behind you by the time he gets home.” He turned back to the computer. “I’m putting in a prescription for amoxicillin. I want you to start Cole on it as soon as you possibly can and give him a dose every six hours. I know you’re not going to want to wake him if he’s sleeping, but it’s really important that he gets this as close to that six-hour schedule as possible.”

“Okay.” Melody swallowed. *Amoxicillin. I can handle that.*

“Any questions for me?”

“I don’t think so.”

“All right then. Before you leave, I’m going to send the nurse back in. We’ll have you out of here in just a few minutes.”

Melody nodded. As the doctor walked out, she held Cole closer. He seemed to sleep better sitting up with her. “Maybe we should try sleeping in the recliner tonight, sweet boy,” she whispered above his head.

A moment later, the nurse whisked back into the room with a small tray. “Well, he seems to be sleeping all right for now. You know, with that ear infection, he’ll probably be more comfortable propped up than lying on his back.”

“Okay. We’ll try that.”

“I just need to get a nasal sample, and you’ll be good to go.” She held up a culture swab. “If you’ll just hold him still, I’ll get a little bit from what’s runnin’, and he won’t notice a thing.”

The nurse took her sample and handed Melody a tissue to wipe the rest from Cole’s upper lip. “Your prescription has already been called in, so you can stop on your way home. This will head to the lab tonight, and Dr. Braddock will call you tomorrow if there’s anything to be concerned about.”



“HE’S SLEEPING RIGHT NOW, MOM. I STUFFED A COUPLE OF pillows and a thick blanket under one end of his mattress so it’s at more of an angle for him.”

“The doctor just thinks it’s an ear infection?”

“Yeah, and probably a cold. The nurse said he’d call if the tests turned up anything.”

“Well, good. Are you going to tell David about it?”

“I’ll probably just tell him about the ear infection. I don’t want him to worry.”

“What if the tests come back with something?”

“I’ll deal with that then. It’s not like he can call regularly. He’s not at any of the bases.”

“I thought he was in Mazari Sharif?”

“No, Mom. He just flew into there. I can’t really talk about it on the phone. Remember OpSec.”

“That’s the security stuff, right?”

“Yes. Operational security. I can’t discuss where he’s gone, what he’s doing, or when he’ll be home over any telephone line, including the Internet.” *Not that I really know that much anyway*, Melody thought. David’s job as weapons sergeant with the 3rd Special Forces Group brought with it quite a bit of secrecy. And not being raised around a military base,

Melody was still trying to figure out the basics, like if a brigade was bigger than a battalion or vice versa.

Melody heard her mom sigh. "I don't think I'll ever understand all those acronyms."

"Me either, Mom."

CHAPTER 4



“**C**OLE, YOU HAVE TO EAT, BABY.” Melody tried to hold back the frustration as tears lined her lower eyelids. The little sleep he’d gotten over night had been fitful, and his eating had continued to decrease. He struggled to sit up, so she lowered her shirt and held him close. He nestled against her shoulder.

“I know you don’t feel good, sweetheart.” She rubbed his head gently, rocking in the glider in Cole’s room. Her phone vibrating against the changing table interrupted the peaceful moment.

“Hello?” She sandwiched the phone between her ear and shoulder so she could securely hold Cole.

“Mrs. Podell? This is Dr. Braddock.”

Melody’s heartbeat seemed to speed up as a lump formed in her throat.

“I have the test results back from Cole’s culture, and I have some concerns. How quickly can you get him to the hospital?”

Melody’s mind raced. *Hospital?* “Uh, we could leave in just a few minutes.”

“Great. Will you be going to Womack?”

“Y-yes.”

“I’m going to call in some orders to Pediatrics, so when you get there, don’t bother checking into the ER. Just go straight to the third floor. Got it?”

“Okay.” Melody hung up the phone and hugged Cole tightly. *Third floor.* She walked to the diaper bag and quickly examined its contents, adding a few diapers. *I wonder how long we’ll be. Is Cole being admitted? Sigh. I should have asked that. He said get there quickly.* She laid Cole down in his crib and grabbed two more diapers and a pair of jammies to stuff in the diaper bag before rushing to get her shoes.



SARA EXITED THE ELEVATOR AND WALKED DOWN THE HALL toward the front entrance of the hospital. Her afternoon on the town with her husband had been interrupted by a call from the NICU to come in to sign a form on a child she’d worked with two nights before. They needed it done before she’d be back on shift in three days. She smiled as she thought about her spouse patiently waiting in the truck out front to start their afternoon with lunch at their favorite restaurant.

As she rounded the corner, she looked up to see a very disheveled Melody come rushing through the front door. “Melody!”

She watched her jump slightly and then come rushing over. “Sara! Thank God, you’re here.”

“What’s going on, honey?”

“Dr. Braddock called.” The tears started running down her cheeks. “He said he had some concerns and needed to run more tests. He told me to report to the Children’s Place.”

Sara suppressed a smile at Melody's mistake. "Do you know where you are going?"

"No!" The word came out more of a sob than anything. "Third floor is all he said."

"Come on. I'll walk you up to the children's ward." Sara put her arm around Melody and turned her in the right direction. "What tests has he already run?"

"Yesterday he listened to Cole's lungs and had the nurse get some of his snot on one of those big Q-tips."

"Did he tell you what that found?"

"No. He just said to get here quickly."

Sara hit the elevator button and then texted her husband that Melody was at the hospital with Cole. As the doors opened, her nurse mind began to analyze the little bit she was able to glean, and a frightful thought came to her mind: RSV.

Respiratory syncytial virus was common among children, but most breezed through it without their parents knowing anything was seriously wrong. *However, if there are complicating factors—*

Sara stopped herself, remembering her devotions that morning. *2 Corinthians 10:5. I will take every thought captive and make it obedient to Christ. Even the medical ones. But, dear God, what are you doing with this precious child?*



MELODY LOOKED AT HER BABY, TRYING TO CONTROL THE TEARS and understand what the doctor was telling her. RSV. Isolation. IV fluids. Antibiotics. The words ran together and circled in her brain. *Not Cole. They're wrong.*

She felt Sara beside her, heard her asking questions. Cole cried out as the nurse stuck a needle into him. She longed to

hold him, comfort him. *It's okay, baby*, she thought. *We'll be home soon. This won't be like last time. We won't be here for long.*

"Thank you, doctor," said Sara. "Melody?"

Melody ripped her gaze from her child and looked at Sara. Tears streaked her face. She raised a shaking hand to push a strand of hair behind her ear. "I don't understand. He was doing good. The doctor said he was fine. I thought we were past all this."

Sara grabbed her hand and led her to a chair, sitting beside her. "Melody, you didn't do anything wrong. The doctor didn't do anything wrong. Lots of kids get RSV. It's very common, and these doctors and nurses deal with it a lot."

Melody looked at her child, still whimpering as the nurses worked on him. "Did they have to put the IV in?"

"He's dehydrated and needs the fluids. Plus, the antibiotics they'll be able to give him through the IV will absorb better into his system than anything oral. It will help him feel better faster."

Melody nodded her head. *How am I going to explain all this to David? He doesn't even know Cole is sick yet. Will I even be able to talk to him?*

"What can I do?" said Sara. "Do you want some lunch?"

"No." The thought of food made her queasy.

"Can I call anyone? Do you want anyone at church to know?"

Melody's mind flooded with emotion. *Mom needs to know, but I should call her. What about David?*

"How long do you think Cole will be here, Sara?" *Maybe if it's just a day or two, David won't need to know until it's over.*

"The fluids should work pretty quick, so it's really a matter of how fast he responds to the medicine. I would say at least a couple of days, but they'll know more tomorrow."

A couple of days. Will David try to call? Who else might he try

if he can't reach me? Melody's mind sorted through different faces at church, but the truth was they hadn't connected with anyone. They showed up on Sunday morning just before service started and left right after. She wasn't even sure how to call the church.

"I can add Cole to the prayer list." Sara looked at her expectantly.

"Yes, please." *It certainly can't hurt.*



MELODY WOKE DURING THE NIGHT AS THE NURSE CAME IN TO check Cole's vitals. She sat up and watched the short woman work, her head barely visible above the top of the bars on Cole's crib. She looked at the monitors and made a few notations before pulling out a notepad. Then she grabbed her stethoscope and gently placed it on his chest. Melody watched her expression change.

"Is everything okay? Is he doing better?"

The nurse looked at her. "Did the doctor do any x-rays?"

"I don't think so. We came straight up here, and Cole hasn't left this room since."

"I'm going to talk to the doctor. I think we need to get a look at what's going on in these lungs of his."

Melody's throat restricted. She balled her fists around the thin hospital blanket provided to her. "Is he worse?"

"Nothing we weren't expecting, Mrs. Podell. Pneumonia is a natural progression for RSV. I'm sure it's nothing to be overly concerned about."

Natural progression? Not be overly concerned? Melody tried to breath deeply. These nurses saw this all the time. Every day kids got sick, and every day kids got better. *Cole just needs a little more time for the medicine to work. That's all. Just a little more time.*

ALSO BY CARRIE DAWS

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