
HERE BE DRAGONS

TREADING THE
DEEP WATERS
OF
MOTHERHOOD,
MEAN GIRLS,
AND
GENERATIONAL
TRAUMA



Melanie Shankle

New York Times bestselling author of *Nobody's Cuter than You*

PRAISE FOR

Here Be Dragons

“Looking back on my thirty years of counseling girls and families, I believe it’s never been harder to be a girl—or to raise one. Much of the difficulty results from what our girls are encountering, and much stems from what we encountered—or didn’t—during our own growing-up years. Raising a teenager to be emotionally and socially healthy can feel like a daunting and insurmountable task—since we didn’t have a road map to achieve this ourselves. But it doesn’t have to be, especially if we have friends a little farther down the road, who are willing to be honest about their own fears and failings, as well as the truth and hope they’ve found along the way. Melanie Shankle is such a friend. *Here Be Dragons* is written with the kindness and honesty of a big sister, the candor of a best friend, and the humility and grace of one whose heart is to point us to the One who has saved her from all the dragons.”

—SISSY GOFF, M.ED., LPC-MHSP, executive director of Daystar Counseling and bestselling author of *The Worry-Free Parent*

“Girl moms have waited a long time for this guidance, and Melanie Shankle delivers it with integrity, wisdom, and perfectly timed humor. How do you handle mean girls without becoming one too? How do you rise above the childhood trauma inflicted by your own mother? In an age in which many families must

navigate toxic relationships—inside their home and outside it, too—this book offers clarity, hope, and a carefully discerned road map on how best to move forward. Melanie is living proof that a healthy family can come from you, even if you don't come from a healthy family—and that peace is possible when God is your guide. I found myself crying and cheering for Melanie and her daughter as they learned to stand up for themselves, stop the mean-girl cycle, and still choose kindness. The generational impact of *Here Be Dragons* can't be overstated.”

—KARI KAMPAKIS, author of *Love Her Well*
and host of the *Girl Mom* podcast

“It’s no secret that Melanie and I are close friends—we’ve done a podcast together for an obnoxious number of years, after all—and that is how I know that this isn’t the book Melanie intended to write. She planned to write primarily about the importance of healing, without focusing too much on the pain of the breaking. But as Melanie started to unearth the layers of her own story, it was clear to those of us who know her best that the Lord was giving her fresh compassion, not just for what she experienced in her own family but also for the ways generational wounds can linger in so many of our lives. Melanie responded to this compassion with courage and candor, and as a result, you are going to see a side of her life you have likely not known before. While it may break your heart a little bit, this book will also make you laugh, will challenge you, and will point you again and again to the Source of our hope and redemption. *Here Be Dragons* is Melanie’s very best writing to date: honest, tender, and full of hope. I’m so proud of her for sharing this part of her story. We’re so fortunate that we get to read it.”

—SOPHIE HUDSON, co-host of *The Big Boo Cast*
and bestselling author of *A Fine Sight to See*

TREADING THE DEEP WATERS OF MOTHERHOOD,
MEAN GIRLS, AND GENERATIONAL TRAUMA

Melanie Shankle



WaterBrook

Disclaimer: This is my story as I remember it, and I've tried to be as accurate as possible throughout this book. However, in full disclosure, some names and details have been changed to protect the innocent who may not be interested in being featured here in print.

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To Caroline:

I would say you are the best parts of me, and perhaps that is accurate. But you are so much more than that. You are a warrior, a wisdom seeker, and one of the funniest people I know. Being your mom is the greatest gift I've been given. I know I haven't done it perfectly, but I've done it with more love, intention, and admiration than you will ever know. Keep chasing after Jesus; He will always be the one who gives us the strength to fight the dragons and loves us back to health.

You own everything that happened to you. Tell your stories. If people wanted you to write warmly about them, they should have behaved better.

—Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird*

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I've been sitting here staring at a cursor blinking on my laptop screen for the better part of an hour. Actually, for the better part of a year. It's been almost four years since I've written a book, and I'm afraid I've forgotten how. Or maybe I remember and realize now exactly how difficult it's going to be. Once, I was a naïve, bright-eyed young author who jumped in with both feet. But after writing six books in eight years, I'm the author equivalent of an old lady yelling at kids to get off my lawn and then posting on Nextdoor about it. *Also, are those fireworks or gunshots?*

The truth is, I haven't even been sure that I would write another book. I'm at an age where I prefer to leave hard things to the youngsters. I've done my time. First Ecclesiastes references toiling endlessly in the sun (verse 3), and that is a young woman's game. I have enough sun damage.

The past few years have found me at a new stage in life. My daughter, Caroline, just finished her sophomore year of college, and I've officially been an empty nester for almost two years. I

think it was the fastest period of my life. It's given me time to reflect on where I've been as a mother and a woman and where I'm headed, even though at age fifty-two, I continue to have days when I feel as though I'm still searching for a life vision.

Way back in ye olden days of 2015, I wrote a book called *Nobody's Cuter than You*. It's a memoir about friendship and essentially a love letter to all the great girlfriends I've been fortunate to have over the course of my life. Some of those relationships were just for a season, and some of those friends continue to be my ride-or-die girls, but they all shaped me in some way. And to this day, *Nobody's Cuter than You* continues to sell really well. I could show you the sales numbers, but then you would be depressed at how few people actually buy books and read them, so I'll spare you that knowledge. Let's just say that 99.99 percent of all authors are not J. K. Rowling. But if anyone would like to license and build a *Nobody's Cuter than You* theme park, please call me.

Anyway, when I wrote that book, Caroline was twelve years old, just on the cusp of her teen years. We hadn't yet experienced any of the mean-girl dynamics that people had warned me about. In fact, she'd made it all the way through seventh grade fairly unscathed. I thought that maybe her teen years were going to be easier than I'd been led to believe. Plus, I'd written an entire book on female friendship, which made me an expert for guiding her through high school, right?

Let's say it together: "Aw, buddy."

If the past several years have taught us anything, it's that we never know what twists and turns we will face and what challenges lie ahead. And I will tell you, I wasn't prepared for what brand of Hades high school would wreak on my girl. I found

myself floundering, seeking solutions that wouldn't come, and searching for that buried treasure of parenthood known as having the right answers. I'd never been more in need of some sort of map to show the way or more aware that no such map was available. Parenting is life's equivalent of a pop quiz in the hardest class covering a topic that was covered on a day you chose to sleep in. Which is to say, we are all just, in the words of Bon Jovi, "livin' on a prayer."¹

I'm not any sort of expert in ancient mapmaking, but there are stories about cartographers during medieval times who marked maps with the Latin phrase *Hic sunt dracones*, which translates to "Here be dragons." That phrase signified uncharted waters and unexplored territories where no one knew what dangers might lie ahead. Essentially, our whole life could be marked "Here be dragons" because we never know for sure what is waiting ahead.

The August right before Caroline started her sophomore year in high school, she was playing in her first soccer tournament of the club season when she took a ball right to the face. Her nose immediately began to gush blood, and she had to run to the sideline because there are rules about bleeding on the field. I watched from the far sideline as she held a towel to her nose and wondered if she'd just messed up thousands of dollars in orthodontia and if I needed to take her to the emergency room. About that time, she changed into a teammate's clean jersey, ran back onto the field like nothing had ever happened, and proceeded to score two goals to close out the game.

Little did we know then that getting nailed in the face with a soccer ball was basically going to be a metaphor for the rest of her high school years. I realize now that moment was what we

call foreshadowing, and the following years were ones I don't think I'll ever forget. When people ask me about the hardest years of my life, I'll say, "High school," and I won't mean my own high school years; I'll mean hers. It's painful to watch the person you love more than anything fight difficult battles that you can't fight for her. You feel every bit of it so deeply yet are powerless to make anything better.

Those were the years when Caroline had to learn to stand strong for what she knew was right, even when it meant she might be alone as she stood up to mean girls. She had to make tough decisions about what is worth fighting for and when it's time to walk away. She learned that life isn't always fair and things don't always work out the way you think they should. She figured out that sometimes the only prize for making the right decisions is the peace that comes with knowing you did. She also figured out that maybe she needed to filter some of her thoughts and that she wasn't always right. And I had to do my best to parent every inch of that while also allowing her to learn how to stand on her own.

What I didn't know at the beginning of this whole journey was the ways parenting would cause me to have to continue to heal and deal with my own past and the baggage I'd carried along the way. It was a catalyst that made me realize that the first mean girl I ever faced was my own mother.

Can you say "generational trauma"? I knew you could.

I prayed since the day Caroline was born that God would make her strong, confident, and brave. I just didn't think about the dragons she'd have to conquer to forge those characteristics. I didn't realize the bridges that would have to be burned and the healing that God would have to continue to do in my own

life so my child could grow up in an emotionally healthy environment and become a strong, independent, well-adjusted woman in her own right.

Caroline took a lot of hits, and it was hard to watch even though I knew those were the very things that were making her into the person God meant for her to become. And isn't that the reality every mother of a teen girl experiences as we watch our girls struggle with friendship dynamics, painful breakups, and all the other obstacles they will face on this precipice of adulthood? A mother's heart is stitched together with the most tender of materials, so we feel everything. Every tear, every struggle, every injustice. And I believe that it all gets amplified because we were once teen girls ourselves. Don't you remember how terrible and wonderful it could be (sometimes all in a twenty-four-hour period)?

It's hard to bring up a warrior who fights dragons rather than a princess who gets rescued. Dragons are terrifying to face, but they can destroy everything in their paths if allowed to remain. It's a lot messier and not nearly as pretty as the fairy tale. But our girls have got to be resilient because the world will knock them down and tell them all the ways they aren't good enough or smart enough and all the reasons they should lower their expectations.

And here's the thing I witnessed during her high school years that I first saw a glimpse of during that soccer game when she ran back onto the field: Caroline never quit getting back in the game. She took her hits, wiped off the blood and tears, and got back up over and over again, even though sometimes she got a little belligerent with both the referees and her parents. Meanwhile, I did my best to cheer her on, pray like I'd never

prayed before, and equip her to fight the dragons she encountered. My husband, Perry, and I trusted God every step of the way and did our best to point her to Him in every aspect of her life—without quashing the strong-willed parts of her personality, but helping her soften some of the rough edges. And I can say with all confidence that He never once let us down, even when things didn't look like we'd hoped or planned.

In the map of my life, the gift of raising Caroline has been my greatest adventure and a reminder that the dragons you face will make you stronger and more resilient than you could have ever imagined before you found yourself among them. This is how you become a warrior. This is how you raise a warrior. Perry has a tender saying that you are welcome to print out and hang in your home: “If you don't deal with your sh%\$, it's going to come out sideways.” Ultimately, this book is the story of the sh%\$ I had to live through, heal from, and overcome to become a healthy woman, wife, mom, and friend. It's about the cycles we must break if we don't want them repeated.

As you'll see in the pages that follow, leaving behind the dysfunction I was born into to become some version of what God made me to be has challenged me to my core. My prayer is that this book can serve as some sort of map if you've found yourself in the midst of the uncharted waters of raising a teenager, healing from your own emotional wounds, and wondering if you can possibly survive it.

Spoiler alert: You can. And you will.

Let's Begin Our Journey

Something permanently shifted in me the day I found out we were having a girl. A daughter. Somewhere deep inside me I'd suspected we were going to have a daughter. I'd even bought a couple of pink dresses. But it was the confirmation of the ultrasound technician pointing out the telltale signs and declaring, "Congrats! You're having a girl!" that changed me forever. I knew two things for certain at that moment: I'd never wanted anything more than I wanted a daughter, and I was terrified to be the mother of a daughter.

Perry and I drove home, excitedly talking about our girl, who now felt officially like a reality. We'd had a long road to get to this point: a miscarriage that turned out to be a molar pregnancy, months of blood draws and eventually injections to get my body back to normal, and then finding out I was pregnant about two months earlier than the doctor had advised was safe for my body. Apparently, there really is no such thing as safe sex, so let that be a lesson to you, children. It really does take only one time to get pregnant.

And then, even after the doctor confirmed I was pregnant, there were concerns about my hormone levels and my ability to carry a baby to term. The nights I lay in bed with my hand over my stomach and prayed God would let this baby live were countless. All that to say, to reach the twenty-week mark and see an ultrasound of a healthy baby girl with impossibly long legs moving around inside me felt like nothing short of a miracle. What felt substantially less wonderful were all the thoughts and doubts swirling in my head as I questioned if I would know how to raise an emotionally healthy girl. Would God give me the strength and wisdom and fortitude to break the unhealthy cycle I'd come from? Would I be able to recognize patterns and behavior that had caused so much brokenness in me and stemmed from the relationship I had with my mother?

A few weeks after that ultrasound—as we continued to debate naming our baby Caroline, Olivia, or Kate—I was sitting in a church service in a small garden chapel. Everyone around me was standing up and singing worship songs, but I'd had to sit down because those aforementioned long legs of my baby girl were engaged in a game of kickball with my bladder and I felt like I was about to wet my pants in front of a bunch of Methodists. I don't mean to glamorize pregnancy in this way, but this is the truth. Don't hate the player; hate the game.

In an attempt to distract myself from the tiny foot wedged beneath my rib cage, I picked up the Bible that was in the pew rack in front of me. I was just kind of thumbing through it when I stopped at Isaiah 44 and read,

I will pour water on the thirsty land,
and streams on the dry ground;

I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring,
and my blessing on your descendants.
They shall spring up among the grass
like willows by flowing streams.
This one will say, "I am the LORD's." (verses 3–5, ESV)

I knew that God had led me to those specific words to assure me that He saw me and had heard my whispered midnight inquiries asking Him if I was up for all that was ahead of me. I'd spent most of my life feeling all the ramifications of coming from a relationship with my mom that often felt barren and cold, yet there was God promising to pour out His Spirit and blessings on this new life that was clearly in a gang fight with my bladder.

A few months later, Caroline Tatum Shankle arrived. In a move that turned out to be so indicative of her entire personality, she arrived two weeks early and barely made a sound as they suctioned out her lungs, cleaned her up, swaddled her in a blanket, and handed her to me. She just stared at me with eyes that never seemed to blink, like she was sizing me up and deciding if I was up for the job of being her mother. I thought, *Honestly, kid, we'll see. I thought the labor pains were food poisoning from eating chicken spaghetti, and I just pooped on the table while you were being born, so I don't know that we're off to the most auspicious of beginnings.*

Here's the thing about having a baby: You are exhausted from labor, a little overwhelmed by everything you just realized your body could survive, and emotionally fragile to a degree you didn't know was possible. I mean, I ate a McDonald's McGrid-dles the morning after giving birth and declared it to be the

most delicious thing I'd ever eaten. Why had people been keeping the secret of the McGriddles from me? A subpar breakfast sandwich infused with the flavor of maple syrup brought tears to my eyes.

Friends who'd already had babies had told me to let the nurses occasionally take the infant back to the nursery so I could get some sleep, and this turned out to be solid advice. For twenty-four hours after giving birth, I had sweet nurses who brought Caroline to me and showed me what to do. They gave me ice packs to sit on and mesh panties that should be Victoria's real secret. And then, just as I was kind of settling in, they told me it was time for Perry and me to take our baby and go home. Just the three of us. It was harder for me to get a job at Sound Castle Records when I was a fifteen-year-old with no résumé than it was for the hospital staff to let me leave their establishment with a human to raise to adulthood.

That first week home went by in a blur of diaper blowouts, swaddling attempts, and my boobs feeling like they might explode. The details of that time are a little foggy from the viewpoint of twenty years later, but I vividly remember one night as I was rocking Caroline in her pink nursery after a late feeding that I hoped would mean both of us would sleep for at least three hours. I looked down at this unimaginable beauty wrapped up in my arms with her milk-drunk face and knew I'd never loved anything more. She was my whole heart in a petal-pink blanket. And because I like to worry about things way in advance, I began at that very second to dread the day I'd have to send her to kindergarten. Which led to my thinking about the day she would inevitably graduate from high school, and I genuinely prayed that perhaps Jesus would return before I had to

deal with that milestone. There was no way I could ever bear to not always have her with me. How would I ever be able to let her go?

And it was right after I'd had this flood of concerns that another realization hit me in such a way that it almost made me physically hurt.

I knew at that moment that my own mother had never loved me like I loved this baby.

I mean, don't misunderstand. I knew that my mom loved me. But when I was growing up, we always seemed to be in this precarious dance of wills and resentment, admiration and jealousy. Rather than feeling her unconditional love, I always felt that my mom's affection was dependent on my being exactly what she wanted me to be, often at the expense of my own needs and feelings.

As I looked at my little girl and thought about my mom, I knew that the only thing I wanted for my baby was for her to find the peace and joy that come with being exactly who God made her to be. I didn't want her to be a version of me, I didn't want her to be my competition, and I didn't want her to ever feel that my love for her was conditional on her ability to be a certain way. And I definitely didn't want her to bear the burden of feeling responsible for my mental outlook. That was it. It was as if I'd spent my whole life looking for a missing puzzle piece and finally found it.