



surprised by motherhood

everything I never expected
about being a mom

LISA-JO BAKER

mother | superhero | tea drinker



When you forget who you are, why you are, and where you are going, these are words that fall as gently and right as blossoms, a trail of grace through what you never expected. Lisa-Jo Baker's perfect pages will have you laughing and finding your rhythm again, have you hearing it again when you almost gave up—there—Him singing unconditional love over you. This is a book that is straight-from-the-hip honest, straight-out hilarious, and straight-from-God holy. Breathtaking. Life giving. Pure page-turning relief—pages I didn't want to end—that I will turn to again and again.

ANN VOSKAMP

Author of the *New York Times* bestsellers *One Thousand Gifts: A Dare to Live Fully Right Where You Are* and *The Greatest Gift: Unwrapping the Full Love Story of Christmas*

I so appreciate Lisa-Jo's gut-honest confessions as a woman who never dreamed of having children but who has now found God's healing love in motherhood. Lisa-Jo inspires me to look for God in every moment of my own beautiful but imperfect motherhood journey.

LYSA TERKEURST

New York Times bestselling author and president of Proverbs 31 Ministries

I don't know a woman who has taken on the enormous, daunting responsibility of raising a human being who says that it's exactly what she thought it would be. Because here's the thing: we'd all know she was lying. Motherhood is one of the great surprises of life, and Lisa-Jo has captured the essence of that with her exquisite words. Her fabulous voice lights up every page and makes you feel like you're sitting across from a dear friend as she tells her story and you see your own heart embedded within her words. As you turn the pages of this

book, you're in for a journey that will leave you nodding your head, smiling to yourself, and wishing you lived next door.

MELANIE SHANKLE

New York Times bestselling author of *Sparkly Green Earrings: Catching the Light at Every Turn*

Lisa-Jo has the undeniable gift of writing words that ache with pain but are always buoyed with the hope of redemption. I struggled alongside her in her grief, her doubts, and her fierce desire to be nothing less than who she was meant to be. And I rejoiced with her as she saw glimpses of the way the Lord guided her path and prepared her for each coming season. I saw in Lisa-Jo what I often see in myself without knowing how to express it—the weight of life's reality kissing what is yet to come. She is the young girl trying to learn to cook with her head over a stove as she stirs where her mother used to be. She is the bright student with a world waiting to be conquered. And she is the wife who never wanted children of her own. She is, at once, the one who doesn't know enough yet knows too much. And truly it is the same for all of us. To walk through the days with her, seeing the Lord's hand even when she didn't, is a powerful reminder of His tenderness toward us. This book is a gorgeous example of what happens when we choose to look into our most trying times with a longing for the truth that belies our own intuition and ultimately rests in the security of Christ alone. She is that girl—and I'm so grateful she is. Allow these pages to sink into your own story, blessing you with a lot of laughs, a deep sense of camaraderie, and above all else, a wild sense of hope.

ANGIE SMITH

Women of Faith speaker and bestselling author of *What Women Fear: Walking in Faith That Transforms* and *Chasing God*

I was surprised by *Surprised by Motherhood*—not because I didn't already know that Lisa-Jo is a brilliant storyteller and writer, but because I thought I was done with books about motherhood. They so often just say the same thing and leave me feeling tired. Lisa-Jo has a gift of revealing the sacred beauty in the everydayness of mothering, and I found myself continually nodding, tearing up, laughing, and checking for my superhero cape. This book stayed on my nightstand until the last page was read; I couldn't put it down. I'm left feeling inspired and empowered by her words.

TSH OXENREIDER

Author of *Notes from a Blue Bike: The Art of Living Intentionally in a Chaotic World*

In *Surprised by Motherhood*, Lisa-Jo weaves together stories from some of the most personal, meaningful moments of her life, and I have no doubt that the Lord is going to use those stories to encourage and minister to women at every stage of motherhood. This book is a beautiful memoir of Lisa-Jo's life so far, and her words are poetic, intimate, and thought provoking. I'm not sure what Lisa-Jo's goals were when she started writing this book, but I can for sure tell you what she has accomplished: she has honored her family—and her beloved South Africa—with her gratitude, her perspective, and her deep awareness of God's faithfulness. I really do think that when you finish this book, your heart will say, *Amen*.

SOPHIE HUDSON

Author of *A Little Salty to Cut the Sweet: Southern Stories of Faith, Family, and Fifteen Pounds of Bacon*

Whether you are a mother, know a mother, or have a mother, you need to read the words on these pages. Lisa-Jo Baker shares a story of brokenness and redemption, loss and gain, beauty and the messy process of becoming who you've been all along. What she shares will make you feel less alone, give you more courage, and open your eyes to see the divine right there in the middle of your anything-but-ordinary life.

HOLLEY GERTH

Bestselling author of *You're Already Amazing: Embracing Who You Are, Becoming All God Created You to Be*

From the moment I started reading this book, I fell in love with it. Lisa-Jo's stories are not only hilarious (because all of us moms can so relate!), but they are also raw and real. Reading about her unexpected journey into mothering and how she's learning to embrace the messy, hard moments it brings inspired me at a deep level. Hands down, this is one of the best mothering books I've read. Highly recommended!

CRYSTAL PAINE

Founder of MoneySavingMom.com and author of *Say Good-bye to Survival Mode: 9 Simple Strategies to Stress Less, Sleep More, and Restore Your Passion for Life*

Lisa-Jo is a writer who captures the beautiful essence of motherhood right in the middle of the mundane tasks. In this book we travel with her—around the world and through her journey into mothering, where she finds an unexpected and holy calling. As I read, I not only shared a long, intimate conversation with a friend, but I also stopped often to savor a sentence beautifully crafted and graced with insight. I highly recommend this book to every mother. A story of one

woman's discovery, but really of all of our roads—through surprise to joy.

ALEXANDRA KUYKENDALL

Mom and lead content editor of MOPS International and author of *The Artist's Daughter*

I cried my way through this book. Lisa-Jo's words on motherhood and her story of her own mother-loss are both heartbreaking and dear. In these pages you get a glimpse of a girl stretching into womanhood, struggling against expectations, and trying to find her way as her mother slips away. It is so much more than a motherhood book—although that it is—it is also a deeply moving memoir. Grab your tissues—this one is a must-read.

SARAH MAE

Bestselling author of *Desperate: Hope for the Mom Who Needs to Breathe*

Surprised by Motherhood is an achingly beautiful tapestry of loss and hope, despair and redemption, that sweeps across the globe from the mealie fields of Zululand to the snow-covered American Midwest. Lisa-Jo Baker combines a deeply touching story with vivid prose to create an irresistible memoir that will have you wiping tears out of your eyes one minute and jumping for joy the next. This one is a must-read.

JENNIFER FULWILER

Author of *Something Other than God: How I Passionately Sought Happiness and Accidentally Found It*

This is the finest book on motherhood that I have ever read. Hands down. With breathtaking prose, Lisa-Jo Baker takes moms by the hand and leads us straight into wonder, which we can find right next to our dirty dishes, Cheerio-strewn

floors, and overflowing diaper pails. This book is rocket fuel for weary mamas. I am recommending this book to every mom I know.

JENNIFER DUKES LEE

Author of *Love Idol: Letting Go of Your Need for Approval—and Seeing Yourself through God’s Eyes*

Surprised by Motherhood is filled with grace, comfort, encouragement, sympathy, and laughter for moms in the trenches of motherhood who long for someone to come alongside and whisper, “I understand” and “All will be well.” Lisa-Jo weaves her personal story of motherhood in a way that will live in your heart long after you read it.

SALLY CLARKSON

Bestselling author of *Desperate: Hope for the Mom Who Needs to Breathe* and *The Mission of Motherhood: Touch Your Child’s Heart for Eternity*

Lisa-Jo is a welcome friend for any mama, at any age and season. Her warm, compassionate spirit reminds us we are not alone. A comrade on the front lines, she offers words that call out our best selves as we cherish and steward the years gifted to us. May we mother with our whole hearts.

REBEKAH LYONS

Cofounder, Q Ideas and author of *Freefall to Fly: A Breathtaking Journey toward a Life of Meaning*



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why I wrote this book: because you are my people

I GUESS MOST people who write books about motherhood start out by telling you how much they always wanted to be a mom. That is not my story. At sixteen, I was a skinny South African teenager with a crush on the tall, lanky swimmer who rode a motorcycle and left me roses. When I was seventeen, my mom was in the hospital and I was trying to figure out how to cook roast chicken while the pastor's son laughed at me all barefoot and cliché in the kitchen. When I was eighteen, my mom died and I swore I would never have kids. At twenty-one, I fell in love with a boy from the American Midwest with cowboy-green eyes, and at nearly twenty-five, I married him, on the condition that he wouldn't expect me to produce children.

More than a decade later, we have three. There's also the dog and a hamster. This is the story of how I got from there to here. *Here* being a sleep-deprived, messy rental house where I've discovered three things about motherhood. One,

motherhood is hard. Two, motherhood is glorious. Three, motherhood is hard.

In between, there's a lot of sleeplessness, laundry, and diapers. And I'm still such a newbie. At this moment, Jackson, my oldest, is about to turn seven and lives for tae kwon do summer camp and flexing his biceps in our full-length mirror. Our middle, Micah, is four and a half, weighs more than his brother, and will lay you low if an animal is ever harmed in his presence. The baby girl, Zoe, arrived just over sixteen months ago, and my heart will never acclimate to the daily awe of rediscovering myself in her deep-sea-fishing-blue eyes.

Somewhere God is grinning. I can hear Him saying, "I promised you so" over and over again. How He always saves the best till last, and each new baby has seen me unwrapping unexpected treasure again and again until I'm laughing too and agreeing. Yes, the best. The very best. Even at 2 a.m. with the rivers of projectile vomit. Even then. I wouldn't trade it.

But I would do some things differently. I would throw away the parenting books that made me feel like I was somehow failing this most important test of womanhood—being a mother. I'd throw out the advice about what I was doing wrong or should be doing differently or should aspire to be doing. I'd just revel in the daily, sleep-deprived merry-go-round and eat a lot more chocolate cake.

Also, I'd go up to tired moms dragging screaming kids through Target and give them flowers. I would stop each and every new mom I ran into with chocolate and promises that they could do it. I would tell them they're my heroes—for

every month of pregnancy, every 3 a.m. feeding, every boob kissed, every diaper changed, and every plate of food they never got to eat hot.

I'd be tempted to break into song. But since I always forget the words of any song I try to sing and am notorious for just making up whatever pops into my head, my new plan is to write to them instead.

Sweet, exhausted, amazing, resilient, fearless, remarkable, run-down mom—this book is for you. No matter how you got from there to here, can I just take your precious face between my hands, look deep into your sleep-deprived eyes, and whisper, “You are much braver than you think”?

You are my hero. Someone needs to say it out loud, and I'm happy to be that someone.

Would it be weird to say I think about you late at night? When I'm rocking Zoe in our old, white rocker with the faded-yellow, Desitin-stained cushions, I'm thinking about all those mamas working the midnight shift. I'm thinking about all of us who are dancing our babies back to sleep or waiting up for them, like every generation of mothers before us—the ancient two-step that tattoos our love into the carpet, the hardwood, and the bosoms of our children.

Tired we may be. But also victorious. You are a wonder. What you do—it amazes me. You've got this. Even on the days when you think you don't. When you can't imagine one more shift. When you want to take off running after the ice cream truck. When you can't remember when you last washed your hair. When you want to climb back into your

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pre-baby body and the days that didn't start with Elmo and end with bathwater anywhere but in the bath.

You've got this.

This book is for you. And for me.

This book is for us.

Lisa-Jo Baker



NEXT TIME I'D DO MOTHERHOOD DIFFERENTLY.
I'd just revel in the daily, sleep-
deprived merry-go-round and
eat a lot more chocolate cake.





CHAPTER I

motherhood
is a superpower

HARDWARE STORES USED to intimidate me. All those aisles of wood—two-by-fours or four-by-eights or ten-by-twelves—I have no idea. It's like an entire store full of math. And math has never been my friend. The rows of glue and tools and things that require electrical wiring skills are only somewhat more intimidating to me than the men who work there. In their gruff orange aprons, they seem to be able to smell estrogen from a mile away, and I've always been sure they would shut down any communication attempts at the first whiff. Nothing terrified me more than having to ask where the air filters were. I'd rather have walked laps around the store than be forced into admitting my sense of deep confusion and

desperate need for storewide GPS to make it out with my dignity intact.

The gym could make me feel the same way. Stocked with so much big equipment that fit, sweaty people who don't at all look like they need to be there in the first place seem to know intuitively how to use, these places have always struck me as a clubhouse I'm not cool enough or brave enough or fit enough to enter. My friend Katherine could tell you about the time I showed up at a gym in an outfit that screamed, "I have no idea what I'm doing here" and sneakers that added, "I've never been on a treadmill in my life and would prefer to go back to walking the mall, where I belong." I did one obligatory circuit before I hightailed it out of there and didn't return for a decade.

It didn't matter that I'd gone to law school, worked overseas in jobs with big titles, or been through a bunch of passports, or that I spoke several languages; I always felt ridiculous anytime I entered either a hardware store or a gym.

But then I gave birth to three human beings.

Not all at the same time, mind you (although it sort of felt that way the first time around). I grew a baby and pushed him out and lived to tell the tale. And a few weeks later I walked into the biggest, most macho super-trendy gym in our neighborhood. I walked past the rows of workout machines. Past the aerobics studios and stationary spinning bikes. Past the pool and the warm-up area and the indoor track all the way into the deep, far recesses that housed the gym equivalent of a "man cave"—the weight room.

I walked in wearing pink and just stood there. I surveyed the landscape of muscles and testosterone and weight-lifting hulks, and I didn't blink. At home in my brand-new, brave body, I stood and let the rush of assurance run through me that I wasn't afraid anymore. I had scaled Everest. I had run with the bulls. I had shot the rapids. I had bungeed with the best of them. I had done something that required a kind of strength none of the men in that room could imagine, let alone replicate.

I just stood there and let the braveness seep all the way through me, and in my mind I might as well have been Kate Winslet, with arms spread eagled over the tip of the *Titanic*, yelling, "I'm flying, I'm flying!" And it was true. Just with much less glamor and a lot more call for nursing pads.

It was like discovering a superpower—becoming a mom for the first time. It has led me to believe that motherhood should come with a superhero cape along with the free diaper bag and samples you get when the hospital sends you, otherwise defenseless, home.



But the feeling fades. It fades under the mounds of laundry and more diapers than any of those pre-baby war stories could have prepared you for. It is threatened by the mundane reality that you will never be alone again. Ever. And that a baby would put an FBI tracking device to shame for the strength of its orbital pull on a new mother, who cannot leave

the driveway let alone the neighborhood without what feels like years of planning.

So we turn to books. We buy bookshelves full of good advice from well-meaning experts who manage to make us feel even more tired than we did to begin with. Seven years ago, I thought there was a formula to parenting—you do what the books tell you to do, and then the baby does what the books tell him to do. I'd aced college and law school and figured motherhood would go down the same way. It turned out my baby had completely different plans in mind.

Motherhood became the first test, other than federal taxation, that I thought I was truly going to fail.

I would read all those books that tell you when the baby should be sleeping and when the baby should be eating and when the baby should be this, that, and the other thing-ing, and all I would see was a big, fat red F. Jackson did nothing according to anybody's schedule but his own.

And he threw up a lot. I would finally get him to eat, and he would look at me deadpan, cough, and puke it all out again. Forget crying over spilled milk, I wept over what felt like oceans of baby puke.

Wept.

Parenting is not for the faint of heart. And it's especially not for those type A personalities accustomed to having all their ducks in a row, all their check boxes checked, and their sofa cushions, cereal boxes, and entire lives neatly arranged.

I had a nursing chart. I'd harnessed my elementary school poster-board and marker skills and set up a timetable. After

each feeding, I would dutifully put a check mark in the box—which side I'd nursed and how long—before I stumbled deliriously back to bed. Jackson cried, I nursed, I made check marks, and he never, ever once slept or ate as much or as long as the books promised my chart and me he would.

F, F, F, F minus in parenting.

I pretended it made sense to me. I pretended I had a handle on his “routine.” I pretended I hadn't started to resent all those parenting books lining the shelves of our teeny one-room cottage.

And still he ate at a snail's pace and woke up to eat slowly at 11 p.m., 1 a.m., 3 a.m., 5 a.m., and 7 a.m. I kept waiting to fall in love with him, and instead I just felt like we'd both failed our midterms.

There was an afternoon when a friend came over for tea. (We do that a lot in South Africa. It's one of the best customs ever—early-morning and late-afternoon hot tea and cake or cookies or pie or rusks—our version of biscotti. And it's genius, I tell you. Genius.) Jackson was passed out on a milk high in my arms, and Natalie had two kids wrapped around her ankles. I was desperate. I was up-since-five-on-a-cold-South-African-morning tired, sore, and desperate for a formula that would give me back my old life.

I had been living with one foot in my stay-up-late, sleep-in-late, come-and-go-as-you-please world and one foot in my I-want-to-be-a-mother-if-the-baby-would-just-leave-me-alone world, and I wanted something to make the commitment to motherhood easier. I wanted the baby to adore

me. I wanted to be the mom on those billboards with the beautifully blow-dried hair, lying in bed with one cheek resting against her cherub as he beams up at her. I wanted Jackson to want me for more than my milk. I wanted him to care about my feelings. I wanted him to wrap chubby arms around my neck and declare his undying affection for me and my sacrifices in front of smitten strangers. I wanted him to feel bad for all the puke and the laundry and the fact that I couldn't remember the last time I'd actually been out to a movie theater.

I wanted the baby to love me with such unbridled, adoring passion that everything I'd lost along the way would be worth it. Especially my size 6 jeans from Prague.

I didn't know it then, but I was grieving.

I was grieving the loss of a stage of life I'd loved, and I needed directions to navigate into this new one. A life where everything was unfamiliar and often scary. A life that couldn't be reduced to a poster-board checklist. A life that was mundane and unpredictable at the same time.

I stared over the top of Jackson's blond head and asked Natalie, "But when will he *love* me?" That one question carried all the weight of a mom half out of her mind with exhaustion and confusion.

And from the way Natalie paused and how gently she answered, I think maybe she understood everything I wasn't saying. She read the billboard over my head and quietly answered, "What you're doing now—all of it—that is what will build the love." I thought about it. I thought about every

wake-up, every diaper change, every bottle, every single step of pacing to rock him back to sleep, every thankless load of laundry, every extra shift of cleaning up all the food I'd just fed him.

We drank tea in silence for a while. Kids played. Jackson slept.

The parable of motherhood is a profound one. I just didn't know it yet as I spooned more sugar into my Five Roses tea, passed the rusks, and wondered if time spent visiting could have been better spent sleeping. I didn't know that I was being grown up by this baby who had spoiled all my alone time. I didn't know that you continue to labor long after the baby is born. I didn't know that there was someone connecting the cacophony of dots that spelled out my life, which so far had seemed without rhyme or reason.

I walked with Natalie down the flight of stairs and rows of framed family tree photographs to the top of the steep driveway that rolls downhill and away from my parents' front door. The jacaranda tree was blossoming—a purple rain—and we hitched babies on hips and hugged good-bye one armed. Jackson was awake, and I felt ready to go another round.