

foreword by Lisa-Jo Baker

KAYLA AIMEE

Anchored



Kayla Aimee is hope clinger who knows that true hope does not disappoint. Hanging in the balance of every word she writes, you will find yourself rediscovering a God who truly does not leave us alone in the dark places—he joins us and holds us tightly.

Stacey Thacker, coauthor of *Hope for the Weary Mom:
Let God Meet You in the Mess*

All mothers will relate to Kayla Aimee's fierce love of her daughter in this must-read memoir. Her writing is the perfect blend of passion, grace and humor that had me laughing and crying throughout the book.

Jessica Turner, author of *The Fringe Hours:
Making Time for You*

Kayla Aimee makes the reader a friend by letting us laugh and cry with her story, as if we were in it ourselves. Her vulnerability makes the reach of God into those in pain just as accessible as she is. Her nuanced and enjoyable story is beautifully uplifting for any stage of life.

Sara Hagerty, author of *Every Bitter Thing Is Sweet*

As a mother of a critically ill NICU baby, this is the book I was searching for during his hospital stay. Reading *Anchored* took me back to our own days sitting next to the isolette, and healed places in my heart I didn't know were still raw. It's a whole-hearted, honest, and encouraging story of hope and security, one that covers you like a warm, comforting quilt.

Hayley Morgan, author of *The Tiny Twig* blog
and cofounder of The Influence Network

Kayla Aimee's path to motherhood is one that no mother would chose to walk. In *Anchored*, she shares the story of her daughter Scarlett's birth as a micro-preemie with both raw honesty and humor. Five and a half months in the NICU transformed Kayla from a hesitant, insecure new mom into a competent and vocal advocate and caregiver for her child while preparing her daughter for life beyond hospital walls.

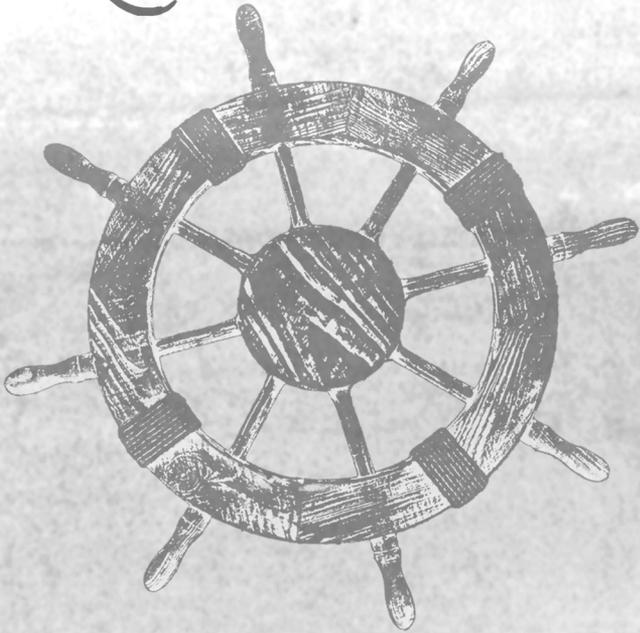
Women will find themselves in this love story from mother to child, regardless of their birth own experience. Kayla reminds us that it's not our own strength or faith that carries us, but a merciful God who extends us His grace. This is a story that needs to be told and a comfort to those looking for God in the midst of pain.

Dawn Camp, author of *The Beauty of Grace: Stories of God's Love from Today's Most Popular Writers*

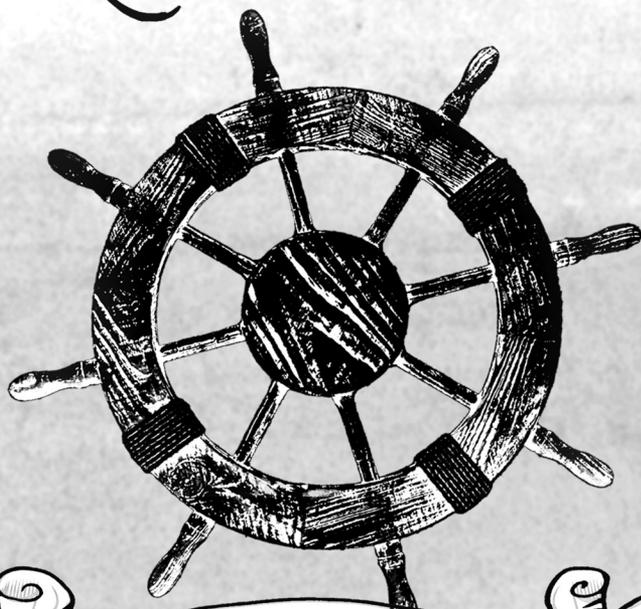
Anchored is a courageous story of hope for all those going through any of life's storms. Through her captivating journey recounted, Kayla Aimee points to the unshakable truth that hope placed in Jesus Christ is beautifully secure. *Anchored* is a precious story of triumph and faith.

Becky Thompson, author of *Scissortail SILK* blog

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KAYLA AIMEE



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To Scarlett,
Who gave me a greater story

In honor of Maelani Rose Hadley

Contents

| | |
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| <i>Foreword</i> | xi |
| <i>Introduction</i> | 1 |
| Chapter One: What I Didn't Expect When I Was Expecting | 3 |
| Chapter Two: A Time to Laugh and a Time to Cry | 21 |
| Chapter Three: Black Friday | 36 |
| Chapter Four: A Thrill of Hope | 49 |
| Chapter Five: Miracles and Motherhood | 64 |
| Chapter Six: Sweet Communion | 79 |
| Chapter Seven: Bless Your Heart | 93 |
| Chapter Eight: Flatline | 107 |
| Chapter Nine: Separation Anxiety | 119 |
| Chapter Ten: The Way It Broke Us | 135 |
| Chapter Eleven: Quarantine | 150 |
| Chapter Twelve: The Scarlette-Lettered Stories | 165 |
| Epilogue: All Creatures of Our God and King | 181 |
| <i>Acknowledgments</i> | 186 |
| <i>Notes</i> | 188 |

Foreword

I CRY EVERY TIME I read birth stories.

Even the stories of total strangers. I'll be sitting in a Panera eating baked potato soup and trying to unobtrusively wipe away my trails of mascara because I can't take my eyes off the achingly beautiful descriptions of how life comes into the world.

Life—wildly raging, batteringly beautiful, frighteningly fragile life.

There's this impossible ache that registers just below the heart when we read birth stories. I think it's because they're this living, breathing testimony to heaven bending down toward Earth and Earth standing up on its tiptoes to receive a new life so fresh from the passing of God's hands to ours.

It never gets old.

This miracle is how God wrapped Himself up in the human form, and we get to celebrate afresh every time we unwrap the echo of heaven in a new baby.

I'm constantly astounded by the fact that we consider motherhood "ordinary." When it's outrageous in its courage. When it, quite literally, bleeds life from the giver. Bleeds prayers and tears and blessings and terrible, holy faith. When it opens our eyes to the majesty of a world we have no control over, reminding us how vulnerable we are and how parenting is this living, breathing parable of surrendering control to the God who had the whole world in His hands all along. We just hadn't stopped to notice until we

became mothers and discovered that most of what happens to our kids and our own bodies is entirely outside our control.

So if regular birth stories make me cry, Kayla Aimee's micro-preemie birth story made me bawl. I pretty much ugly-cried my way through this whole book starting with this sentence, "My daughter was born and she weighed less than six sticks of butter."

I cried and was reminded all over again of the righteous courage of mothers. Of the awe and the wonder that those of us who have brought babies into the world feel. And the terrifying truth of what we will sacrifice to keep them with us—"*Scarlette needed blood continuously and the minute they told me she would require a transfusion, I wanted to cut open a vein and give her all of it, every bit of life that coursed through me.*"

I was humbled by Kayla Aimee's story. Because there's so much I realize I took for granted when I had my own three kids. Because hers is a birth story that came fifteen weeks early. It's a story that reminds us there is no such thing as "ordinary" or "boring" when it comes to motherhood. Instead, the whole realm of sleeplessness and nursing and changing diapers and *breathing* that we take for granted are so much holy ground—especially when viewed from the inside of the NICU.

I felt speechless reading it and at the same time wanted to write a whole book chronicling all the lessons Kayla Aimee's story taught me. Lessons about faith and how as long as God is faithful our own faith doesn't need to always hold firm—because His always will. This anchor that holds the soul, steadfast and sure while the billows roll.

It's a remarkable story. Like her remarkable daughter.

I want to meet Scarlette so that I can kneel down to look into her beautiful, brave eyes and tell her that her mother is one of my heroes. Because she did what moms do—she kept showing up. She spoke up for her daughter. She studied, she stepped outside her comfort zone, she questioned and listened and overcame her own fears in order to stand up for her daughter.

Isn't this the whole legacy of motherhood? This painful breaking up with ourselves and our own wants and needs in order to be able to fully love someone else. And discovering in the midst of it, beneath all that exhaustion and all those diapers, the parable of a God who invites us into the hard truth of living self-sacrifice.

It makes me want to take gifts to the NICU at our local hospital. It makes me want to be brave enough to get over my own awkwardness and connect with another mother who may be grieving.

I'm so grateful to Kayla Aimee for loaning me her eyes to see. To see afresh the God of invisible moments. The God who sees. The God who bears witness to the three a.m. fevers and blood transfusions, the hours spent walking off the colic or walking off the bad dreams. The hours spent waiting in a hard chair for just a few stolen moments to hold the baby you haven't been allowed to touch since she was born. He is the God who celebrates first breaths and never tires of hearing first words.

He is the God who keeps watch with the midnight mothers, with the block builders, the stain removers, the backyard sandbox sitters, the park walkers, the baby-food makers, the classroom volunteer helpers, the play-dough bakers.

He is the God who imbues each seemingly small moment of a mother's day with the eternal, and by simply being in it with us blesses it and makes it holy. By being Immanuel—God *with* us. Modeling the greatest gift a mother gives to her child—in Kayla Aimee's words:

"Mommy's here. Mommy's here," I would whisper and it was all that I had to give.

And what we think we can't give—what we worry won't be enough—Jesus gives thanks for and breaks and multiplies and there is always enough for today. And tomorrow. And at 2:00 a.m.

There He is again, singing over us as we sing over sick babies and breaking our hearts into bits and pieces of holy, sacred

sacrifice. Providing more than we could have known, hoped for, or expected. Measuring our lives in all the broken, ordinary glory. Heaped high.

A sacrifice of praise.

And in this book Kayla Aimee testifies to her making and unmaking and remaking. Reminding all who read it that Jesus gives us immeasurably more than we could ever ask for or imagine. This weight of glory that we only have to be willing to open our hands and lives to receive—every precious ounce of heaven wrapped up in the eternal glory of the weight of six sticks of butter.

Lisa-Jo Baker, 2014
outside Washington, D.C.

Mom to three very loud kids, social media manager to DaySpring, community manager for the millions of women who gather each year at www.incourage.me, and author of *Surprised by Motherhood: Everything I Never Expected about Being a Mom*

Introduction

YOU DON'T LEAVE YOUR child behind. It's a universal truth; we put them on the lifeboat first, we pass them out of burning buildings, we give them the very last slice of bread. But when you give birth to a micro-preemie, you acquiesce to sit in the wheelchair alone and you steel yourself against the pain that slices through your chest as they push you down the hallway and out of the hospital doors and away from your daughter, leaving her behind.

In a cruel irony you'll wait at the entrance of the Mother/Baby wing where you are surrounded by other mothers, the ones who hold their chubby newborns in their arms as the new fathers juggle the balloons and the baby gear, trying to work the car seat. You don't have balloons, and you don't have a baby, and you used to have faith, but as they gently force you into the front seat of the car, you wonder idly if that is going to fail you too.

Chapter One

What I Didn't Expect When I Was Expecting

“Rejoice that your names are written in heaven.”

—LUKE 10:20

I FELT FAINT AS I stepped out of the shower and lay down on the floor, pressing my face to the cool tile. Laminate, actually, because we were fairly broke and our grand plans to renovate the home we had bought the year before were sitting on a metaphorical shelf somewhere, stored away next to our other big dreams like traveling the country or having a baby. He found me that way, lying on the floor of the bathroom, and asked what I was doing down there. Sometimes people refer to me as neurotic and I suppose there is evidence to the claim, such as the fact that when my husband stumbles upon me prone and half-clothed on the bathroom floor it raises no cause for alarm. There's also the fact that I may have possibly started singing Natalie Imbruglia lyrics because, let's be honest, how often does a perfect opportunity like

that arise? Not often enough, let me tell you. “Jeff,” I responded, “I’m cold and I am shamed lying naked on the floor. Obviously.”¹

This is why no one takes me seriously.

He started to roll his eyes and step over me when I grabbed his leg and persuaded him that despite my uncontrollable tendency to be a smart-aleck, I really was very sick and needed him to bring me some toast and ginger ale, stat. Then I made him press cool cloths to my head (he’s a very patient man, my husband) as I wondered aloud why in the world I felt so nauseous and light-headed.

You might think that I would easily recognize the signs of a pregnancy, having been pregnant before and also having successfully passed my sixth grade health class, but the thought of being with child never crossed my mind. For one thing, I had never stayed pregnant long enough to become overly familiar with things like morning sickness and really shiny hair. For another, years of pregnancy loss and infertility had left me barren of hope.

In the months preceding that morning, I had worn thin the pages of an ancient text and its tale of Hannah, who deeply grieved her empty womb.² She and I were sisters in our infertility, a shared story that spanned across thousands of years. Through time and culture, our tears were shed from the same source and mine fell on her page in the family Bible. In Hannah’s despair she ventured to the temple and wept there, so much so that the priest questioned her, asking if she was intoxicated. (Men!) Hannah had more grace than I possess because she was not at all sarcastic when she informed him that no, she was not drunk, she was just really, really sad that she couldn’t have a baby. I knew just as well as Hannah did that you can’t make yourself un-want a child, even after months of unanswered wishing. Eventually you stop obsessively analyzing every slightly swollen body part and attribute a bit of queasiness in the morning to the fact that you are approaching thirty and ate birthday cake for breakfast four days in a row.

As it turned out, that scene on the bathroom floor would become overly familiar, as it was where I would spend my entire first trimester thanks to a little thing called Hyperemesis Gravidarum, otherwise known as “extreme and debilitating morning sickness.” It is one of many things that I have in common with one Princess Kate, along with a love of shiny sapphire rings and an adolescent crush on The Prince of Wales. (Okay, so maybe that’s all we have in common.)

I was as sick as I had ever been because on a hot summer day in June there were two pink lines.

I was pregnant.



I held three white sticks in my hands, because I am nothing if not thorough. And also because I had become a bit addicted to taking pregnancy tests. Those little things lure you in with their promise of potentially flashing the word PREGNANT at you. Pregnancy tests are like cereal box toys for grown-up women. I hesitated even taking one this time around because my husband had basically forbidden me from buying them on account of how I was “flushing all of our money away” or something. Apparently he was not fond of my inability to take the tests in the actual window of time where they can register a pregnancy. I was trying hard to refrain from buying them because, “If a man binds himself by a pledge, she should really quit buying a bunch of pregnancy tests” and all that. But they were on sale that morning when I stopped to get a box of muffins because for some reason I became completely ravenous in the time it took to drive the eight minutes from my house to work. Sure, that box of muffins caused me to break a vow, but they were a delicious way to celebrate the flashing word on all three sticks: PREGNANT!

Less than forty-eight hours after I lined all of my pregnancy tests on the counter, I saw the blood.

It seemed to be the same each time, the cautious elation followed by horror and sadness. It was not a new experience, miscarriage, but my heart ached in a way that felt fresh and raw. I made the requisite phone call to my doctor, the drive to the clinic, the walk to the back room, and positioned my arm outward for the stick. They would take my blood and draw numbers from it that would drop steadily until the pregnancy disappeared completely, unable to be measured any longer by anything other than my memory of it.

First, though, there was an ultrasound just to be on the safe side. We squinted at a fuzzy black screen but it was blank. This time the doctors worried that the baby might be ectopic, attempting to grow outside the safety of my uterus. Apparently this is a hostile environment for a fetus and a critical danger to its host, which would be me, its mother. If this were the case, they would take both the baby and part of my womb, rendering this barren woman even more ruined. They sent me home on those words to wait.

I spoke Hannah's words aloud over my still flat stomach, "For this child I prayed" (1 Sam. 1:27 NKJV).

Forty-eight hours later I lay on a table as Doctor T smiled kindly at me while reading numbers off my chart. "Your progesterone has more than tripled," she told me, "and if I were a betting woman I would guess there is more than one baby in there." *Babies?* I wondered as she continued to supply me with all sorts of medical details. *Babies!* I thought. To go from stripped to several was a sweet sound. I told Jeff as soon as he walked in the door. "Babies?" he stammered, eyes bulging at the plural.

The next time we had an ultrasound a tiny little spark darted around the screen. Tears of joy brimmed in our eyes as my husband squeezed my hand, looked at the doctor, and asked with great sentiment, "So that's just one baby, right? Just one baby in there?"

It was just one baby, who would scare us again a few weeks later when I would make the drive back to the doctor's office as

blood pooled on the seat and fear pooled in my veins. A subchorionic hemorrhage, they told me. My placenta had torn. The baby was safe, but bed rest was mandatory until the bleeding stopped. Coupled with the extremely high dose of progesterone my body was churning out, I was sick, slight, and scared.



Limited to the activities I could achieve from the confines of our queen bed, I began tasking myself with finding the perfect moniker for our unborn child. Jeff and I were watching a documentary when we discovered there are people employed as Baby Naming Experts. Apparently these people write websites and books devoted to baby names. Don't even get me started on Baby Name Books. I am older than my sister, with enough of a gap between us to remember reading baby name books in search of a name for her, as though my parents were actually going to let me have a say in the matter. For reasons beyond me, the name "Philadelphia" did not appeal to them. (I suggested we call her "Delphi." I still think this was a missed opportunity.) My own name rarely appeared in these books because my mother named me after a soap opera character.

My middle name was supposed to have been Michelle, not for any good reason other than the fact that I was born in the eighties and that was the decade of teased hair, slouchy socks, and girls named Michelle. (Or Amanda.) But after something like four hundred hours of labor, my mother was fairly laden with heavy drugs and my father, who had been lobbying to name me after his grandmother, took advantage of the opportunity and wrote in Aimee on the birth certificate.

Later in life my great-grandmother Aimee would decide that she thought A-I-M-E-E was a ridiculous way to spell her name and would change it to Amy, leaving me with a middle name that was only slightly significant to my heritage and a first name that informed people that my mother was an avid fan of *Days of Our*

Lives. My parents would go on to name my sister Marah, which basically just cements my theory that my mother watched far too much daytime television.

Back then baby name books contained a few variations of some well-known names as well as their meaning. These days the so-called baby-naming experts are just making stuff up. (You can't just make up fake names in order to make your book longer, Baby Name Experts. I am on to you.) Have you looked at a baby name book lately? No, you haven't because since I was a kid there was this new thing invented called "The Internet." It sort of got rid of all the books and replaced them with websites (which feels slightly Orwellian except that maybe you are reading this on your e-book reader, in which case it feels totally awesome). That's where the Baby Name Experts work, at the Baby Name Websites, listing more names than a single person could ever even read during the nine-month gestational period of their miniature human. Unless you happen to be on bed rest and your only choice is to read incredibly long lists of potential baby names or watch reruns of *Full House*.

That might seem like a tough choice but only if you've never seen John Stamos as Uncle Jesse. Then it's like OF COURSE I SPENT THE ENTIRE DAY WATCHING *FULL HOUSE* RERUNS. There is probably a correlation between the amount of *Full House* reruns I watched during my extended bed rest and the fact that my two-year-old looks almost identical to an Olsen Twin circa their days spent in the role of Michelle Tanner. The lesson here is: if you want to have a cute kid, watch a lot of early nineties television during your pregnancy. Or something.

So I tossed the book aside and attempted to convince my husband that what the baby really wanted was to be named Lila, mostly because of a long-held love affair that I'd had with the name ever since I read *The Sweet Valley Twins* series.

Only I didn't tell Jeff about that part because for some reason, he was all averse to the notion of using the name Fox for a little boy. As it was my maiden name, I thought Fox would be

an awesome name for our offspring. So I proceeded to try and convince him that people are actually named Fox and that I know this because I used to watch *The X-Files* and also there was a character on a soap opera I watched once named Fox.

(*Passions*. It was *Passions*.)

That is when my argument fell flat, because Jeff was all, "Aren't you always griping about how your mother named you after a soap opera character? And this is your best argument?"

Touché, Jeff. Touché.

We made elaborate lists of names. "Lila? Mia? Anne?" We volleyed them back and forth over the dinner table. "Veto" one of us would reply as we laughed and touched my ever-growing belly. "I want to name the baby for my grandmother," I repeated.

My husband never knew my grandmother, as she passed away before he had the privilege to meet her. On our wedding day, she accompanied me down the aisle in a pearl-studded picture frame, catching the candlelight and sending it dancing as it dangled from my bridal bouquet. "Why?" he questioned as he aimed the scanner at a set of bottles on the baby registry we were curating.

"Because," I answered simply, "she was one of the best women that I have ever known. I want the baby to have her legacy."

Vonne, I figured, was a name that could work for either gender. It was even in the baby-naming book and meant, "*God's Gracious Gift*." Jeff was unsure about it, expressing his concern that using Vonne as a middle name sounded like, "one of those musicals you like to watch." I assume that he was referring to the Von Trapp children.

At twenty weeks, we had settled on a boy name but were still debating what we might name a girl. One night we were watching *The Island*, which is very disturbing if you are pregnant, when Jeff leaned over. "I like the name Scarlett," he said as Scarlet Johansson paraded across the screen. "Scarlette," I repeated. It had a certain charm, I thought. I added it to the top of the list.

"Scarlette?" I asked on the drive to the gender ultrasound.

He thought it was going to be a girl all along, my husband. He is often right about things like that but don't tell him I admitted to it in print. My current plan is to spill something on this page in his copy of the book.

I gripped his hand as the nurse pointed to a small set of lines that I recognized immediately from scrutinizing far too many ultrasound photos on the Internet. (The things you can find online these days!)

"It's a girl and she's healthy," the technician said as tears spilled freely down my cheeks and threatened to fall from my husband's eyes as well. Twenty weeks. A girl. Healthy.

On the way out of the office, I called my parents and held up the phone to the car speakers, from which the lyrics to one of my favorite songs blared loudly: "I bet you say what could make me feel this way? My girl, talking 'bout my girl!"³



I decided I should probably learn some things about labor. Specifically the part about how to get a baby out of your body. I've seen babies and I've seen my body and it did not seem as though that was an attainable goal. I mean, obviously I knew the basics. Plus there was this one time that the husband of one of my girlfriends tried to show me a photo of their brand new baby and accidentally pulled up a photo of said baby in the process of being born. It was awkward for both of us and it also sort of scarred me for life. I did not realize that babies did that to your unmentionables.

Since that same thing was about to take place within my own body, I figured that it would be a good idea to familiarize myself with the details of the whole process. Which is the story of how my husband walked in from work to the image of an unclothed woman bent over the side of a bed with a baby dangling from her nether regions projected on the massive television that he had wanted for so long. Possibly as long as I had wanted a baby. I had a feeling he was regretting going with the 55-inch screen.