CHAPTER 1

An Unmistakable Premonition

Lauren

Dad looked like a ghost.

Not one of those screechy phantoms you see in a horror movie, but like a pale version of his usually cheery self—except for the dark circles under his eyes.

"Cheryl." His voice was thin. He coughed, then said, "I don't know if I can do this tonight after all."

"You want us to take you home?" Mom said. "We're not very far."

Dad was behind the wheel, but he nodded at Mom's offer, coughed again, and turned the car toward home. Beads of sweat lay across his forehead.

It was Saturday, December 3, 2011, about 4 p.m.

From our house in West Plano, we were on our way to another suburb of Dallas called Flower Mound. We were heading to The Village Church, where we normally attend, for a regular weekend service. Advent season was upon us, and it felt like Christmas was in the air. From the backseat, I reached over and gave my dad a warm pat on his

shoulder. "Have some chicken soup," I said. "Maybe a little oil of oregano mixed with orange juice. Fights infections, you know. I think there's some in the kitchen pantry."

Dad coughed again and grinned weakly.

I wasn't in the habit of babying my parents, especially not my dad. But there were definitely days I felt like a grown-up around them, a colleague more than a kid. At age twenty-three, I wasn't a child anymore. True enough, I had recently moved back home to start my online fashion journal, *LOLO Magazine*. But living at home was just temporary. I'd graduated from college with academic honors. I'd successfully completed two internships in New York City where I'd lived on my own. I'd traveled to Paris, Montreal, and New York to report on their Fashion Weeks, the intensive seven-day stretch where all the next season's new designs are showcased. I'd done numerous video-reporting segments where I'd interviewed actors, celebrities, and fashion industry insiders. Nearly nine years had passed since the homeless man's prediction of a big life and a big battle for me. Life felt big some days, but nothing that could be considered huge. At least, not yet.

The only reason I had moved home was that Mom and Dad were being gracious, giving me free room and board for a season or two until my magazine began to pay for itself. I spent every waking minute on *LOLO Magazine*. Most days I'd start at eight in the morning and go hard until midnight. The staff consisted of me and Shannon Yoachum, another young, entrepreneurial journalist who lived just a few hours away in Austin. We were throwing our hearts into the project. Our personal tagline was "Live Out Loud," and that's how we approached our work—with the volume turned all the way up. Shannon and I had been close friends since kindergarten, and these days we were writing and editing columns, contacting press agents for photographs, interviewing designers, connecting with industry insiders, and soliciting articles from freelancers. The magazine had been going only a few months, but already we were getting many thousands of hits per month, and at least that many on a separate fashion blog that I wrote.

We dropped Dad back at home so he could go lie down and fight

his cold, and Mom and I headed to church by ourselves. I love hanging out with just my mom. She's one of the most intelligent, caring women I know. She and my dad both work as marriage counselors. They travel all over the country sharing their story, and they've written a book that helps a lot of couples have better, stronger relationships.

We got to church early and saved seats for friends of my parents, Mike and Shannon, and friends of theirs, Curt and his wife, and Chad, who's just a couple of years older than me. The plan was for all of us to head over to Mike and Shannon's house after church for a chili feast. I've babysat Mike and Shannon's daughter plenty of times and tutored her with her middle school homework, and I house-sit for them when they're out of town. I'm like one of the family over there.

Everybody arrived at church, and the band cranked up. We all stood for a time of worship and sang along. Then Paul Tripp, a guest speaker that night, took the stage.

"I don't know if you've thought about this or not," he began, "but you're hardwired for hope. You don't live by instinct. Every decision you make, every choice you make, every response you have to the situations and relationships of your life is fueled by and motivated by hope. Your story, the story of your life, is a hope story. Your happiest moments are hope moments. Your saddest moments are about hope dashed, hope destroyed. You're always looking for hope. You're always attaching the hope of your heart to something."[1]

I had no inkling yet of the journey of hope I would soon embark on, but I could relate to what Paul said. Already I hoped for a lot. I wanted my magazine to be a huge success. But it wasn't just about numbers. I hoped my magazine would help people live better lives. Sure, it's about fashion, about looking good and feeling good. But it's also about being confident, expressing who you truly are. It's about going places and doing things that matter.

I also hoped for that special someone. I guess everybody my age does. Only a month before, I'd broken up with my boyfriend, James. It felt like the right decision at the time. James is six feet tall and has dark brown hair. He's in good shape, and plenty of girls would line up

to date him. He's one of those sincere, solid guys who's always there for you, always says the right thing.

But . . . ah, what was it exactly? In the back of my mind roamed an image of another guy. He was only a figment of my imagination, an ideal whose existence I pondered. I could picture him—the ultimate boyfriend—tall; beachy good looks; laid-back yet driven personality; tender and caring; funny and genuine; a heart for God; and a clear direction in life. But I needed to be honest with myself. This was real life, and James was everything a girl could ever ask for. Almost, anyway. But this other guy—this idealized image of the perfect mate—well, maybe he was worth holding out for, at least a little while longer. Or maybe he was just a dangerous fantasy, like a glossy picture in a magazine.

James handled the breakup in a totally good way. We reassured each other we'd stay friends. We always did. We'd actually broken up once before and then gotten back together. "Promise me you'll be really careful, Lo," he said when he dropped me off at my house the night we broke up. "I can't quite explain it, but I have this feeling like something bad is coming your way."

I nodded, and we hugged, even as I shivered a little. James had always been there for me. He saw God's purpose in things, even difficult things. What more could a girl ever want?

XO

When church was over, we headed to Mike and Shannon's house in McKinney, which is about twenty minutes from our house. Sometimes it's hard for someone who's not from Texas to understand the size of things in this state. For instance, if you go to a restaurant and order a soft drink, they don't have small, medium, and large. They have small, medium, and "Texas-size." People just do things in a big way around here.

Mike and Shannon are no exceptions. Everything Mike does, he does in a Texas-size way. Mike buys and sells companies, in addition to being a real estate developer. Their home is one of about 130 houses built around a private airstrip. One of Mike's hobbies is flying, and he owns three planes.

We all ate chili and salad around the long wooden table in Mike

and Shannon's dining room. Some other friends came over. There were maybe a dozen people total. Christmas music floated in from the sound system. Everybody was just talking and laughing. Nobody was drinking that I remember. It wasn't that type of party.

"Who wants to go flying?" Curt asked. "The Christmas lights are going to be great tonight." A bunch of people waved their hands. "Hey, Mike, you mind if I borrow your plane?"

"Help yourself," Mike said. "You know what to do." Mike, Curt, and Chad all have their pilot's licenses. I'd been flying with Chad just three days earlier.

I don't know how or why I got to go for a ride first. Everyone else must have been feeling generous. So I followed Curt out through the backyard and into the hangar that's directly behind Mike's house. Chad came along to help me board the plane. On the far end of the hangar is a huge garage door for the planes, and beyond that lies a tarmac area. Then there's a taxiway, and beyond that a runway. It's like a house built around a golf course, except Mike's house is built around an airstrip.

Chad helped me climb over the plane's stabilizer bar, and I slid into the seat behind Curt. It was a small plane with only two seats. We put on headphones so we could talk to each other once we were in the air. Curt went through his checklist, started the plane and warmed it up, and we taxied out.

The night was dark and rainy. Shadowy clouds were thick above us in a starless sky. For some reason I began to feel cold. The heater was on in the tiny plane, but what I felt wasn't that type of cold. It was more of a tingle. A shiver. I took a deep breath and looked out the window.

"Nice lights," Curt said.

"Uh-huh."

The feeling shot up my spine again. Unmistakable fear. *This is stupid*, I thought. *Completely stupid.* Not the experience of flying but this definite feeling of dread coursing through my body. Mike had vouched for Curt as a strong pilot who was qualified on several levels and owned his own plane. *Get a grip, Lo*, I told myself. *You need to relax.*

Up in the air, the atmosphere grew calmer. The rain let up and turned

into a slight mist. It might have even stopped. There was no thunder or lightning. No strong winds. All I heard was the friendly drone of the plane's engine and the occasional crackle over the microphone's earpiece. But I still couldn't shake this crazy fear.

I couldn't shake it at all.

My body grew tense, and my breathing became shallow. My heart thumped in my chest. It wasn't like me to be afraid. Certainly not in situations like this. I'm the type of girl who loves an adventure, particularly a tame adventure like we were having tonight. I like to ride bikes and go snow skiing and slalom waterskiing. In my bedroom is a very cool street longboard with a Hawaiian sunset motif that I've ridden for years. Even when Brittany and I were five-year-old kids and Dad took us skiing at Vail, my sister would ease down the bunny slopes while I'd bounce through black diamond moguls. So why was I so afraid of this flight? I gripped both sides of the plane's seat even tighter. And then it hit me. *We're going to crash.* I thought my heart was going to explode. *Jesus*, I prayed. *This plane's going down, and we're both going to die. I just know it. Oh Lord, my parents and sister. Please watch over them. Jesus, Jesus. Whatever happens, God, my life is in your hands.*

I'm sure the Christmas lights were pretty that night, but I was too nervous to really concentrate on them. I don't remember anything in particular. No landmarks. No huge display at a shopping center. Just darkness and lights and the fields and streets around McKinney. The plane flew in a big circle.

And then we landed.

The air went out of me like a rush from a leaky tire. My fear went along with it. We were safe. Completely safe. The plane taxied back to Mike's house and pulled up facing into the wind and parked on the tarmac, all set for whoever was going to fly with Curt next. *Hmmm, maybe I'm cracking up*, I thought. *I wonder what that was all about?*

I don't remember Curt saying anything directly to me. I don't remember anything he said at all. He might have said something. I just don't remember. It was hard to hear him without my speaker on. It's still pretty loud with the plane's engine running, sitting on the tarmac.

I remember shinnying out of the plane.

I remember my feet touching the tarmac.

I remember the sky was black; we were on the dark side of the plane.

Those three memories took place in a split second, about the time it takes to walk two steps.

It was December 3, 2011, and after that split second, I remember absolutely nothing.