

## One

### Off the Map

No one was there to meet Hilary when she stepped off the plane. Not that she had expected anyone, but it was another reminder of isolation in her sense of purpose. Here she was, a blond, blue-eyed, twenty-eight-year-old civilian heading to a new job in the midst of a military occupation in the Middle East.

Alone and unable to hide the fact that she was an American, she had to look like she'd done this before. She needed to get to her hotel without being ripped off—or worse. She managed to trade dollars for dinar, but she knew her ignorance would show as soon as she asked about the price of a cab ride. So she questioned one driver, then used that information to barter with a second.

Forty-five minutes later, she arrived at her hotel.

The next morning she boarded a military aircraft to fly from Kuwait to Baghdad. Strapped into a jump seat with her back against the inner wall of the airplane, she fell asleep and woke up with the muzzle of a gun leaning against her—her soldier seatmate had fallen asleep too.

But no one sleeps through the drama of a Baghdad landing. The plane dove and rolled from side to side, maneuvering wildly to avoid any unfriendly fire. It gave her the sickening sensation that her life was now completely out of her control.

The road from Baghdad International Airport to the U.S. military-secured Green Zone in the city became a notoriously dangerous passage. But that day in July she made the trek in an unarmored thin-skin vehicle—and her driver was nonchalant about whether the passengers should wear the body armor they had been issued. That was when she realized she couldn't make any assumptions that others would look out for her security. She wasted no time in heaving on her bulletproof vest packed with heavy armor plates.

## Out of the Green Zone

Baghdad's Republican Palace, once the seat of Saddam Hussein's regime, was now the headquarters of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) and the hub of activities in the Green Zone. An air force colonel met her there.

"Miss White, welcome to Baghdad. You're going to spend the night here and go to Hillah in the morning."

Apparently there was some confusion. Hillah was not a part of her plans. Going to a remote city somewhere to the south did *not* sound appealing.

But the colonel was insistent.

Hilary resolved to accept the change for the time being, go to

Hillah, and get herself back to the Green Zone as soon as possible. She wanted to leave most of her belongings in Baghdad as collateral, but the colonel informed her everything would be going with her. The next morning they packed up her three massive black trunks—filled with six months' worth of clothes, food, and supplies—and left for Hillah.

They rolled through arid desert for an hour and a half on a highway Saddam Hussein had built for his military. An oasis of date palm trees emerged in the midst of the desert dust as they neared Hillah. As they crossed over a bridge that spanned a tributary of the Euphrates near the ruins of Babylon, Hilary thought, *This is where it all began*. It was like stepping back into ancient history.

There was no exit from the highway to the road that led to their destination on the outskirts of Hillah. So they made their own, off-roading over uneven terrain before intersecting a route that ran to the U.S. compound.

The residence where Hilary and others stayed was a hotel, parts of which Saddam's Baathist regime had used as a brothel. Almost every Iraqi Hilary met had lost family members to the violence of Saddam's regime.

But things were changing in Hillah. Widows on the edge of destitution were learning how to make a living. Schools were being repaired, and student texts from the prior regime were being replaced. Iraqi Shia started painting their houses vibrant colors to celebrate their newfound freedom. Hillah was an oasis of good news, and Hilary had come to Iraq to share the country's good news with the

rest of the world. There was no better place for her to be. God's sleight of hand had moved her beyond her own stubborn expectations for a purpose that would leave her more content than if she'd had it her way.

### How Did I Get Here?

Hilary never dreamed she'd be going to Iraq when she neared age thirty; she thought she'd have been married with children by this time.

Lots of other unmarried twenty- and thirtysomething women expected to be married by this age too, but instead they find themselves in the midst of adventures they never imagined. Marriage is not as prompt a suitor as it was in our mothers' generation. Back when those of us in our midthirties were born, the average age of first marriage for women was just under twenty-one. Today it is over twenty-five.

Whether by nature or nurture or a combination of forces, little girls usually grow up wanting to be wives and mothers, not going to work in a war zone. Nine out of ten high-school senior girls say that a good marriage and family life are important for their future—and *that* statistic hasn't changed much in twenty-five years, in spite of the hike in marriage age.

Our culture in general, and the Christian subculture in particular, fosters in young women a desire for marriage and the presumption that marriage will be a part of life sooner rather than later.

Each of us has her own script for the perfect life, spliced together from scraps of happy-ending movies and sentimental stories. But almost invariably in these fictional scenarios, marriage makes its entrance by age twenty-five, thirty at the latest.

Reality, however, regularly departs from the script. Almost six out of ten women today are not married by age twenty-five. Three out of ten are not married by age thirty.

As unmarried women, we may instead find ourselves in situations that, while not as intense as Hilary's, leave us out of our element, occasionally confused, and every so often with a pit-in-the-stomach realization that life is not tidily within our control. Even when we are confident of our callings—knowing that we are in the right place doing the right thing for the moment—we can experience fear, insecurity, and uncertainty about all kinds of practical details in life. We struggle with our own and others' conceptions of singleness, especially when we're surrounded by so much cultural confusion about male-female relations, women's roles, and personal fulfillment.

For many of us in the midst of this confusion, however, being single is no more—and no less—of a statement than, *This is what God has for me now.*

## Finding the Way

Hilary knew that she was meant to be in Iraq. But her sense of purpose was under assault the minute she set foot alone in the Middle East.

Months before, she had gotten the idea that she'd like to help in the rebuilding of Iraq. Then she waited for weeks to hear whether a public relations post would open up for her. Waiting to go to Iraq was filled with uncertainty, just as following other promptings from God often are; one day an opening would appear, and the next day it would close. All she could do was watch for a door to begin to open, first just a crack, then partway. When it finally opened fully, she could walk through. Many doors had to open, however, before she got to Iraq.

“You never know for sure you're going to Iraq until you're on the plane and it's taking off,” she tells others who think they're headed that way. One day she was getting vaccinated at the Pentagon, and a few days later she went to pick up her bulletproof vest. Soon after, she was on an airplane to the Middle East. “And it wasn't until I was flying across the Atlantic that I had the *Aha!* moment—that satisfaction when hope finally becomes reality.”