

HUNTING HILL is about making choices in an age that worships celebrity and fashion. Fate throws Jim Wilmot an astonishing opportunity; can he find his bliss in the court of the gods-or is true happiness found in unexpected places?

Hunting Hill

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# **HUNTING HILL**

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# HUNTING HILL

Jay Trott

## Chapter 1

JIM AND ERIN WERE IN LOVE. Well, sort of. Actually it's hard to say exactly *what* they were. They spent a good deal of time together—occasionally. They were known to have long, intimate conversations and sometimes even appeared to be on the verge of open physical contact—in an offhanded sort of way. A trained eye might perhaps have been able to determine they were in love, but it must be noted that the fact eluded their parents, or rather baffled them, for all concerned were drawn to the respective paramours and felt they had a good chance of being happy together—and yet for the life of them they could not figure out whether a marriage was in the offing or even a Meaningful Relationship, so unsmoothly did the course of true love run in this particular instance.

Let it be said from the outset the problem was not with Erin. There was no doubt in her mind about how *she* felt. She could not forget the first time they had seen each other. It was a hot, hectic Sunday afternoon at the pizza parlor where she was waitressing during the summer of her sophomore year in college, and she was wiping off a nasty table at the dark end of the restaurant when she noticed two good-looking young men coming towards her who had blown in with a ring of the bell. Just then the sea of their handsomeness parted and she caught sight of a dazed-looking fellow skulking behind them with his head down.

Of course she had no way of knowing this was because of a hangover. If she had, she might not have bothered to look at all. But at the very moment she saw him he looked up; and even though they were too far apart for their eyes to meet, to engage, something strange happened. It was like the sensation of hopping out of bed a little too fast in the morning—a shower of sparkles cascading through thick darkness—only in another way it was not like that at all. She did not feel faint; she did not lose her rational powers in any degree. Indeed, they seemed to gather almost painfully to a point.

Had the poor girl spent too much time on her feet that day? Was she dazed by the constant press of customers, the heat of pizza ovens, the low contrast of indoor lights, one too many caffeinated colas? Many probable causes might be adduced by those who take a scientific interest in such phenomena—but for Erin the only thing that mattered

was for one shining moment all of time seemed to stand still, in which moment a great deal was felt and experienced, including the random thought popping into consciousness that *this must be love at first sight*.

Nothing like it had ever happened to her before. She knew a good many young men, of course, not a few of them quite attractive; she herself was quite attractive and had had her share of dates over the years—although lately she had been tiring somewhat of the ritual, for reasons it is probably not necessary to rehearse here. But never before had she experienced anything like the sensation she felt when she looked at Jim, this perfect stranger, in whom, by any normal reckoning, she should not have had any special interest at all.

Stranger still, Jim felt something too—a sensation very much like Erin's—although it took many years to sort this out. And to tell the truth, it was remarkable the poor fellow could feel anything at all, since he was still groggy from an afternoon nap necessitated by a trip to a favorite watering hole the previous evening, where he and his friends had consumed several pitchers of beer and played Miller and Sinatra on the jukebox until all hours of the night, much to the dismay of their fellow young patrons. But feel it he did. It was like looking backwards through some magic telescope that caused Erin to recede in time but not space.

It must be understood that the reality of this experience was never in doubt for either of the principals, or what happened later would have been incomprehensible. It was real enough to prevent Erin from being put off by the forced hilarity of Jim's friend, Bob Clarke, whose natural tendency to glibness in the presence of attractive females was exacerbated by the need to compensate for a disheveled state of mind, and who therefore radiated a high degree of universal love whenever she wandered within psychic karma of their table, blissfully unaware that she was accustomed to having thirty or forty pizza enthusiasts fall in love with her every weekend of the long, hot summer.

(Fortunately Bob's oppressive high spirits were tempered somewhat by the other young man, Arthur Vargas, whose mild eyes might have intrigued Erin under different circumstances, and who seemed eager to assure her, without saying as much, that not everyone at the table was indifferent to her dignity as a pizza waitress.)

As for Jim, the one with the hanging head—he seemed determined to ignore her, studying the menu as if deciphering some sort of

complicated code and mumbling his order into the table. Erin was not put off by this mighty show of indifference. To her it seemed like nothing more than bashfulness, a trait she found appealing, since it indicated – what? Well, something different, anyway; something not in the normal run of hazy Sunday afternoons and leering goons. It could also be construed as a sign of an awareness on his part that *something* had happened between them.

That was one thing about Erin – her first impressions tended to be quite accurate. Jim did not look up because he did not feel he could trust himself. He did not know how to react in the wake of such an exotic sensation. He was dazed – rattled – so he retreated from the field. But he was acutely aware of her presence whenever she came to the table and unable to resist the temptation to look for her from time to time as she circulated among the patrons.

The three impatient young men did not linger long after wolfing down their pizza. Arthur was concerned about an elderly couple queued up at the door and Bob was eager to move on to the next thing, which had not yet been determined. Jim waited until his friends left the table and slipped an oversized tip under the empty soda pitcher, keeping his eyes strictly to himself as he worked his way to the exit.

Erin smiled when she saw it, and not because she was in love with money.

## Chapter Two

**N**OW IF PIZZA HAD BEEN THE ONLY MEANS for Jim and Erin to get together, they might never have gone beyond this first ethereal experience of—whatever it was. Jim was not in the habit of recommending himself to attractive strangers. Besides, he had no way of knowing whether she had had the same strange experience as himself; and frankly, it was so irrational that he found it a little embarrassing.

As it happened, however, Erin was *not* a complete stranger—not to Jim’s family, as he and his friends discovered when they returned to his house intent upon a game of hearts on the screened-in porch. At some indefinite point in the evening they were joined by Jim’s parents, who arrived home from a weekend at Boothbay Harbor eager for news and company. The conversation went here and there in the usual desultory fashion of a spent weekend until Mrs. Wilmot asked them if they’d had any dinner, which prompted Bob to narrate the saga of the goddess that had appeared at their table in the form of a waitress.

“Did you happen to obtain the name of this shining Aphrodite?” she asked.

“Well—not really,” he replied sheepishly.

“Cowards. What did she look like?”

“Very pretty; fair complexion, light hair, blue eyes; hair tied back with a turquoise pin; no visible tattoos.”

“My—you *were* paying attention,” she said with a laugh.

“That sounds like the new girl in church,” Mr. Wilmot put in, looking up from his crossword puzzle. “You know—the family from Redding who moved up last spring. She’s working at the pizza shop. I saw her there a couple of weeks ago.”

This comment was somewhat annoying to his wife, as it foiled the big announcement she had in mind. “I’m not surprised you can’t remember the name,” she replied a little sharply. “You’ve only been introduced to the family ten or fifteen times.”

Mr. Wilmot laughed along with everyone else at this reference to his well-known lack of grounding in the minutiae of everyday existence. He was one of those American males who marry strong women and for a time entertain some delusion of their significance

before gradually fading to the point where the entire sphere of their being can be summed up in the phrase "yes dear."

"Why bother to learn names?" he replied with Sunday night blandness. "You know the whole town. I have my own directory."

"Erin O'Connell," she said matter-of-factly, pretending to brush something off her skirt with both hands. The truth is she was rather taken with this Erin, had a notion or two about her and Jim, and was afraid her husband's nonchalance might diminish her luster.

"Oh, no – not another Erin," groaned Bob.

"What's wrong with it?"

"Everybody I know is named Erin. There were about eighty Erins in our class alone, and we didn't even have that many females. She could be a Karen; I could even tolerate a Sharon; but another 'Erin' is more than any sensible person can bear."

"They seem like decent people, the O'Connells," Mr. Wilmot observed, not entirely attuned to the subtleties of the conversation.

"They're wonderful," his wife said. "Just the sort of people you feel you've known all your life. Marcia is such a hard worker. And she's one of the most pleasant women I've ever met."

"*He* seems a little rough around the edges."

"Oh, I don't know if I would call him rough. Just a couple of weeks ago he wanted to talk to me about some neighbor who lost his job and is having a hard time making ends meet. He cares about people – and obviously he has a soft spot for Erin."

"It would be strange for a father not to have a soft spot for his daughter. Still, he's not what I would call approachable."

"Who cares about the father?" Bob barked. "We want to know about *her*."

"What would you like to know?"

"Who's her favorite composer? Does she prefer long forest walks or a nice, cozy seat at Yankee Stadium? How does she feel about lawyers?"

"Those are questions I can't answer. Erin strikes me as an intelligent young lady who is unusually mature and well-grounded. Whether such things are still considered important, I can't say."

"Ouch! But what's she doing waiting on tables in a pizza restaurant?"

"Helping to pay her tuition, I assume. She's in her third year at

Storrs.”

“Hmm – party girl. What’s her major?”

“I understand she just recently switched to the nursing program.”

“Nursing! What in the world for?”

“It seems she wants to help people.”

“Why doesn’t she become a doctor if she wants to help people?”

“Maybe she doesn’t want to be a doctor.”

“That’s no excuse. Goddesses can’t be named ‘Erin,’ and they definitely don’t become nurses.”

“I never said she was a goddess. That was your idea.”

“Deceived again! The female sex certainly is a dissembling species.”

“If there was any dissembling going on, I’m sure it was all in your own head. Erin is one of the most unassuming girls I know.”

Jim listened attentively to this exchange while pretending not to. He was having a hard time thinking about anything but the girl in the pizza shop, which is why he passed the black queen to the left and got slaughtered. His spirits soared when it became apparent his parents knew her, but Bob’s disdain had a corresponding deflating effect. He was inclined to agree – there was nothing terribly interesting about a nurse. The notion of wanting to help people registered with mixed results. Did she really want to help people, or was this just a cliché people use when they want to put a good face on something far more mundane and boring?

Still, he could not help being intrigued. Whatever that weird feeling was he had had in the restaurant could not be put out of mind easily. He was happy to hear they went to the same church – it would give him a chance to study her without betraying any definite interest. In fact he made up his mind to go the next Sunday.

There was something vaguely transparent about this plan, since he had not been seen very often in that particular institution since heading off to college, but the idea was to sneak in late and slip out without being observed. The first part went well. He managed to tiptoe into the gloomy narthex without running into anyone he knew and congratulated himself as he reached the side entrance without being accosted by any solicitous ushers. This triumph proved a bit premature, however, for he made a conspicuous squeak as he attempted to elide through the oak door in the middle of a solemn invocation and then found himself glared at by the imperious matron

of the back pew, Mrs. Jacobson, which reminded him powerfully of the novelty of his appearance.

Jim had intended to malingering in the back, but her angry stare was so befuddling that he found himself wandering down the aisle in the general direction of his family, surveying the pews out of the corner of his eye. It was not difficult to pick out the new family at the lightly attended summer service, halfway up the center aisle on the right. With a thrill of recognition he saw Erin seated at the opposite end; it was indeed the exalted waitress from the previous week.

Jim slid in next to his parents, who were so surprised by his sudden appearance that his mother let out an audible "Oh!" to the tittering of neighboring pews. He immediately began to reconnoiter. They were almost directly across from the O'Connells. He did not dare to look at the new family, since his parents were planted between them like a prickly hedge, but did contrive, when rising or sitting, or by any other favoring means whatsoever, to turn in such a way as to cause the object of his curiosity to come occasionally into view, with not wholly unsatisfactory results.

Sad to say, his eagerness to obtain these fleeting glimpses of the fair maiden consumed him so completely that he was not able to follow the sermon, derived little benefit from the readings and hymns, and fidgeted through the prayers, which seemed to go on almost forever in the usual page-hogging way. Nonetheless, there was a sort of religious feeling in him throughout the service, an exaltation, and he could not get the tender Brahms song about Sunday morning out of his head.

Jim slunk away immediately at the end of the service, in fact at the first note of the postlude, or perhaps even the first aspiration of the first note caused by the slight delay in the tracker mechanism, in order to avoid being detected by the object of his interest or appear to be seeking an introduction. An introduction was not long in coming, however. Later in the day he found his mother working on an outsized salad in the kitchen, intended for the annual choir picnic.

"You should come," she said, in her famous tone of irresistibility as she sliced an orange pepper onto the leafy heap.

"I haven't been invited."

"Don't be ridiculous. Everyone's invited. Besides, Erin O'Connell will be there. You know — the famous waitress."

"So what?" he said suspiciously.

“So it’s not just old fogies. There will be people your own age. And besides, I thought you liked going to the Pollards’.”

Actually this was true. The tradition was sort of fun. Jim did not respond immediately, but he did spend the next couple of hours thinking about it and little else, first feeling there was no way in the world he would put himself in such a situation—it was far too obvious—and then feeling rather inclined to go, since he always enjoyed the Pollards, especially Mr. Pollard with his dumb jokes and fascination with things mechanical.

But was he really ready to be introduced to Erin? Wouldn’t that be the obvious reason for going—or at least wouldn’t it be obvious to his mother, who in fact had already alluded to it? And if it was obvious to her, didn’t it seem all too likely that she might contrive to find a way to communicate its obviousness to this new friend of hers, the girl’s mother—Mrs. O’Connell or whatever her name was? And from there might it not spread like an aggressive virus until everyone knew why he had come to the party after a hiatus of seven or eight years—roughly corresponding with the onset of adolescence—and then what sort of horror scene would ensue?

As much as part of him wanted to go, such thoughts prevented him from making up his mind. And as a matter of fact he never did make up his mind. What happened was this: his mother found him lolling on the sofa in front of a baseball game and chased him out to the car. True, he did not resist as much as he might have—that is, he did not *refuse*. But as soon as they were on the way he began to feel uncomfortable, and by the time they reached their destination he had worked himself up into a state of almost positive resentment, which he signified by following his sister Alice into the crowd in a conspicuously masculine way behind his steel-rimmed sunglasses, all the while furtively glancing around the yard and other likely places for signs of the “ineffable she.”

Jim found what he was pretending not to look for as they made their way to the back of the house and the patio on the far side of the kitchen, where they ran into the O’Connells seated in Adirondack chairs like four ducks in a row. Erin was talking to her sister, and it took her a moment to notice him, but when she did her surprise was obvious—at least to someone who had been wondering if she would remember. She glanced back and forth in confusion from him to his

mother, as if not quite able to understand the connection or what he was doing there.

His mother, who had a way of making people feel at home even when it was not *her* home, waded right in and began introducing him to the new family—first the parents, then Megan, the younger sister, saving Erin for last.

“But I believe you two already know each other,” she said. “They tell me you waited on him and his friends last week.”

“I believe I did,” Erin replied, regaining her composure.

“Yes,” Jim said, also hiding his emotions. “There were three of us.”

“And did they behave themselves?” his mother said.

“I think so. They were certainly very generous.”

“Bob was a little overbearing,” Jim explained, swallowing a blush.

“You mean he was acting like himself,” his sister interjected helpfully.

“He was in a bit of a manic mood, but he was handled perfectly.” Jim did not look at Erin as he doled out this compliment in the passive voice. He did not see any signs of suspicion on the faces of his mother and sister—none would be expected from his father—and felt fairly confident he had gotten off scot-free while also giving Erin some hint that he had indeed noticed her and was inclined to think well of her.

The parents began chatting in the usual way about what a gorgeous day it was and what a wonderful place for a summer party and so forth and so on, which sort of talk Jim was too young and full of himself to find very edifying; but it did give him an opportunity to observe Erin more closely under the cover of his sunglasses. His initial judgment tended to reflect the resistance he had brought with him. She did not seem quite so stunning in the unforgiving light of day. She was certainly attractive—but not fatally. Her face was a little too broad, he thought, a little too pale. And she seemed too placid and unresisting as she smiled through the platitudes of her elders.

Jim laughed at himself. Could this be the same girl who had affected him so deeply a week ago? She seemed perfectly good-natured; there was nothing to criticize in her appearance or manner. But he had been hoping for something more. He found he could not resist looking at her—and yet at the same time he seemed to withdraw from her in another part of his being. He wanted her and he did not want her; he thought maybe he loved her in some strange way but he

did not know if he wanted to love her; he had not even begun to be with her and already he was thinking about running away.

What really had happened at the pizza parlor, after all? Was there such a thing as love at first sight? It seemed ridiculous—certainly not something he would ever think of confessing to his friends. And yet he could not deny *something* had happened, something unlike anything he had ever experienced before. He had the impression Erin was aware of it, too. Or at least her manner seemed self-conscious. He thought he could sense some sort of bond between them—even though there was absolutely no good reason for such a bond.

He decided to avoid her until he knew his own mind. This was not difficult to do. He saw her frequently as he was coming and going; their eyes met more than once—well, except he was wearing sunglasses. Yes, he was pretty sure she was aware of him. But she always seemed to be engaged in conversation, which left him free to wander.

## Chapter Three

THIS FIRST ENCOUNTER SET THE TONE for the neither fish nor fowl relationship that followed. Jim could not pretend to be a stranger to Erin for long; increasing social contact between the two families, undoubtedly of his mother's engineering, made them quite constant companions. Indeed, to outside observers it seemed like they were almost always together—but it must be said this happened without Jim asking Erin for a formal date. She began to spend quite a bit of time at his house, and after a while he began to spend some time at her house as well, in spite of her formidable father, merely by way of a suggestion to drop by for a swim or to watch a tennis match on the outsized TV in their family room or by whatever contrivance Erin could think of to bring them together.

Jim never actively pursued the relationship. The only outward sign of positive interest on his part was a significant increase in church attendance. He seemed to fall into the habit and kept it up even when Erin went back to college in the fall, frequently glancing at the O'Connells and pondering his destiny. He knew he was more or less attached to Erin; he acknowledged Erin would be a good person for him to marry—but another voice told him he owed it to himself to hold out for the transcendent bliss promised in so many novels, plays, poems and movies he loved, the happy madness attributed by Plato to lovers who do not have to reason with themselves.

Jim perplexed himself thinking these thoughts as her junior year flew by; and then Erin came home for another summer, and they went on pretty much in the same way, and she went off to school for another year and left Jim in the same pew thinking the same perplexing thoughts; and he was still thinking those thoughts when she came back again, this time with her nursing degree: the beginning of year three.

Their parents did not know what to make of such behavior. Jim and Erin were obviously attracted to each other. They were affectionate and could sometimes be seen holding hands, albeit in a fraternal way. They even kissed one night when they were walking in a hayfield under the dizzying August stars. Jim had had a couple of martinis and his defenses were down, and besides it was a tender moment because Erin was going back to school. But he did not think of attempting to

repeat this intimate sign of affection—or perhaps it is more accurate to say the force of resistance was equal to the force of attraction.

Not that Jim existed on some higher plane than your average young American male when it came to relations with the opposite sex. From time to time he asserted his independence from Erin (without her knowledge, of course) by going out with one of the girls he had dated in the past or met through work or friends, girls he knew he would never marry and could never be serious about; and if he thought of taking any liberties with *them* it was certainly not because he cared about them in any deep way. But with Erin there always seemed to be a barrier to physical attachment. He almost convinced himself he was not interested in her in that way.

Was he “stringing her along”? This may have seemed to be the case from the point of view of those who cared about her the most—but there was no such deliberate plan on his part. He knew she went out on dates occasionally and almost wished she would fall in love with someone else; he felt he deserved a good jilting. But Erin made it too easy to be feckless. Sometimes he became daring and treated her coldly, as if to drive her away. She did not take the hint, however, and he was not sure if this was a good thing or simply another reason to avoid taking a decisive step.

Then they spent so much time together without being physically intimate that such intimacy began to seem improbable to Jim. When two young people first meet there is a spark that kindles into flame, but he spent so much time sprinkling water on the flame to keep it smoldering that it seemed to go out altogether. They became like an old married couple. They enjoyed being together; in fact there was no female with whom Jim felt more comfortable than Erin, except possibly his sister. But if anything they were too comfortable. He could not picture them in a passionate embrace.

They never talked about what had happened the first night they saw each other. Neither one was absolutely certain the other had had the same experience, although they both felt this was probably the case. On Erin’s part it was caution. She was not afraid of embarrassing herself, but she felt, correctly, that any attempt to verbalize such a connection would drive him away, regardless of whether he also had experienced it. Jim’s reluctance was less complicated. He never

mentioned it because he knew it would be tantamount to a declaration of love.

As long as Erin was still in college, Jim had a perfectly reasonable excuse for keeping their relationship in a holding pattern. It was not a good idea for her to get serious with *anyone* until she obtained her degree—or at least this was the high-minded rationalization he liked to trot out when challenged by his family. But now Erin was done with college, and the interest on his apparent concern for her welfare was coming due.

He was fully aware it. But he had a lot on his mind just then. He had taken, as his first job out of college, a position as a junior copywriter at a Manhattan agency and commuted for a year before deciding the bar car was not adequate compensation for giving up four hours of his day. Then he managed to waltz into a cushy writing job at Prometheus Corporation in Westport, a software company of indeterminate significance that had recently staffed up with an army of smooth-faced young grads, and where his immediate supervisor happened to have matriculated at the same ancient institution up the coast as himself and hired him on the spot in his first interview.

The atmosphere was heady in those days of “ecstatic capitalism.” Prosperity fever was running so high that a lucrative career seemed almost like a birthright for someone of Jim’s ability. The job was easy for him because he was a natural writer and knew how to be convincing. He also enjoyed the role of creative maven and had taken to wearing bow ties and suspenders in case there was a doubt in anyone’s mind. There were power meetings and evenings at the opera and “business trips” to exotic places—no, he was not thinking about marriage just then. He was enjoying himself and dreaming of infinite good luck.

In fact he felt so confident about the future that he took the bold step of becoming a landowner. He was not quite ready for the oceanfront property he craved but did manage to find a nice lake cottage in a picturesque little hamlet called Hunting Hill. Jim found that he enjoyed home improvement and poured his free time into renovating the house and improving his small estate. Well, most of his free time. There was also the round of parties that passes for existence and fills the gaping weekends of many an aimless young professional.

Had he forgotten about Erin? Not at all. He knew she was there. He was even dimly aware he had come to count on her being there. But he was not sure if they were supposed to spend their lives together – and even if they were, he was not sure they had to start doing it *now*.

Jim could not make up his mind about Erin. They seemed to be going in opposite directions, with his promising trajectory in the high-powered world of advertising and her decision to carry bedpans. This ambivalence led to an unfortunate falling-out on the night of her graduation party. The party itself was a provocation. What was there to celebrate? What did she have to look forward to but drudgery and the smell of antiseptics? Could he see himself marrying a nurse? It seemed like stooping from the Olympian heights.

After the party, when everyone had gone home, Jim and Erin were sitting alone on the porch in the dark, listening to distant echoes of pans and dishes being washed and put away in the kitchen. Her head was resting on his shoulder – actually his clavicle, not comfortably, from his point of view. He began to feel self-conscious. It was the first time they had been alone all night, and he recognized this as a moment when he might be expected to say something to the point. Naturally the perceived pressure only made him feel like resisting.

“So now you’re a nurse,” he said.

“I guess so,” she said wearily.

“Why do you say it like that?”

“Well, it’s a little late to change my mind.”

“Why don’t you become a doctor?” he said – and even as the words came out of his mouth he remembered Bob asking the same question many years ago; apparently he had been carrying it around with him all this time.

“I’m not *that* good in science,” she said with a laugh. “It’s incredibly difficult to get into medical school. But even if I could, I don’t know if I would want to be a doctor. They’re on call twenty-four hours a day, and I’m not so sure I want to make that kind of commitment.”

“They’re compensated rather well,” he observed.

“Not from their point of view. They pay huge liability fees. The insurance companies tell them who they can see and what they can do. They’re constantly afraid of being sued. No – I think you would really have to want to be a doctor to put up with all of that.”

“You’re saying doctors don’t make good money?” Jim scoffed.

"No—I guess I'm saying money isn't everything."

This exchange was not going the way Jim wanted. He had not meant to suggest money was everything, and her reply made him impatient with what he took to be her superior attitude.

"But don't you think nursing is kind of degrading?" he said, not quite able to conceal his irritation.

"What do you mean?" she said, becoming annoyed in turn.

"Cleaning up people's messes and those silly uniforms—it's all so mundane."

"You don't think there's something important about taking care of people?"

"I suppose so, but how many nurses actually do? The ones I've seen seem to spend most of their time sitting around the nursing station reading romance novels."

"There are good people and bad people in any profession—even advertising, I assume. Most of the nurses I've worked with are very dedicated and take it seriously."

"I don't see how they could. It seems to me you'd almost have to be not very bright to take something like that seriously."

Not surprisingly, this made Erin angry. "So now you're saying I'm not very bright."

"I'm saying I don't see why someone who *is* bright would want to be a nurse."

"All the bright people become copywriters, I suppose."

"Well, you have to admit it's a little more interesting than wiping people's bottoms all day long."

"No, I don't have to admit anything," she said, getting up and turning on him with a fury he had never seen before. "And just what are you doing for the world that's so important and gives you a right to look down on others? Hying things people don't need? Going to important meetings with other people who also think they're important? Well, I'm happy for you. I hope it gets you a membership at some country club and a nice sports car. And by the way—thanks for ruining my party."

She stormed into the house—as much as Erin was capable of storming—allowing the screen door to slam behind her. Jim was shocked. She had never raised her voice to him before and the effect in the silence of the spring night was devastating. He wondered if they

had been heard—the banging from the kitchen seemed to have stopped. He did not know what to do with himself. Should he try to make up? He crept to the door and knocked timidly but no one answered. He was afraid one of her parents would come if he knocked any more loudly, so he stole away into the night.

His face was still burning when he reached his red (sports) car and began the drive home, but it was not Erin he was angry with—it was himself. He could not believe what he had said; could not believe he had stooped to the level of attacking her integrity. He could not blame Erin for being angry. If anything her reaction had been too mild.

He almost called the next morning—almost. But it was Sunday, and he figured they were probably getting ready for church. Besides, her angry voice was still ringing in his ears. It seemed like a good idea to let her cool off for a day, which became a couple of days—and then he fell into the work routine, and a couple of days mushroomed into several days, and suddenly it was the weekend again and he *still* had not called—and now in addition to feeling guilty about what he had said he also felt guilty about having waited so long to apologize.

Naturally the longer he waited the worse it got. One week became two and then three; before he knew it the whole month of June had evaporated and he had not seen or heard from Erin at all.

Part of him longed to call. He hated himself for the things he had said and wanted to apologize from the bottom of his heart. He cared about Erin and did not want to hurt her. And to tell the truth he valued her good opinion and wanted her to think well of him; but this last consideration also stopped him from calling, since doing what he needed to do to make her think well of him again seemed likely to lead to the same old conundrum.

Besides, in a way the argument was good, or so he told himself. He regretted the verbiage and the hurtful manner but not necessarily the substance of what he had said. The fact is her chosen career made him uneasy. He did not know why and did not spend a great deal of time analyzing his emotions in an attempt to find out. It was simpler to strike a pose of superiority and tell himself there was something degrading about being a nurse and his own profession was far more rewarding than Erin had made it sound.

At that point in his life it was not hard to believe. Raises and bonuses and praises were showering down on him like helicopter

petals from a maple tree. It did not seem very difficult to stand out—there was no great superfluity of talent in the corporate world that he could see, at least not in the copy department—and the rapidly rising fortunes of the company and sense of enthusiasm and confidence about the future were infectious.

Meanwhile the continuing silence on Erin's end was hardly surprising. He did not deserve to be called by her after what he had done and would not have thought very much of her if she *had* called. But as the ominous silence lengthened into weeks and then a month, Jim began to wonder if it was over between them. There seemed to be little chance of running into her, since they did not live in the same town anymore. The only place he was likely to see her was church—which is why he had stopped going.

Jim was not sure he wanted it to be over, but he did not seem to be able to make a commitment. And perhaps it was better to let go, he reasoned, now that an opportunity seemed to have presented itself, than to keep her hanging on.

## Chapter Four

**A**ND WHAT ABOUT ERIN? Did she think it was over? It is hard to say what Erin thought. On the night of the argument she went straight to her room and sat in her painted rocking chair by the window, the one that had long had a place by the fire in the cozy home she imagined for herself and her soul-mate ever since she was old enough to imagine such things, which was pretty young. All night she sat there, rocking, rocking, bitter fits of tears softening only with the dawn.

She heard the lingering sounds of her parents cleaning up from the party and longed to go down and pour out her heart—longed to be with the people who loved her the most and drink sweet draughts of commiseration—but that was impossible. Everybody knew, without it ever having actually been said, that she had set her sights on Jim. She could not contemplate the shame of conceding she had been wasting her time all of these years—at least not now. Nor was she willing to deprive them of *their* happiness on a night when they had every right to be happy, having just invested a minor fortune in the piece of paper resting on her bureau.

Had she been wasting her time with Jim? If so, then she was determined to take the brunt of the disappointment on herself and not burden her poor parents, who had neither openly encouraged nor discouraged the connection. She felt she had no one else to blame for her predicament but herself. Other young women might have blamed Jim; certainly Erin had every right to blame him. But blaming others was not something she was generally inclined to do. She was angry with him for misunderstanding her; unhappy with him for apparently rejecting her; but she was too lacking in vanity to conceal her foolishness from herself.

Jim had not encouraged her to put her life on hold for two years. Of course he had not exactly *discouraged* her, either—but the waiting had been all her own doing. This was the real cause of the bitterness she felt. Erin was too brave to seek consolation in being a victim, and to sit in the rocking chair while she tried to work out her feelings was especially brave, because so much of her dreaming was attached to that chair and the uncharted future it betokened.

Erin was at once very easy and very difficult to understand. There

were three things that were of utmost importance to her—faith, family, and friends. In a sense this made her transparent, since these values were the driving force in everything she said and did. She had little interest in money; it was her pure blind trust that she would have everything she needed. She had no interest in fame; those who raised their voices in the street were like shadows to her and the pageant of the world an empty show where there was too much laughing and too much talking and not enough depth or reality.

But this same transparency also made her a bit of an enigma to many. After all, why sit in her chair and suffer? The answer was both simple and hard. She loved Jim, but she knew she had to risk losing him. She could not put it off any longer. She had to sit in that chair until it became possible to give it up; to become indifferent to its charms and the illusions it created in her mind. It was the only way she could be free from the purgatory in which she had willingly placed herself.

Erin saw things in Jim that Jim may not have seen in himself. The kindness, the respect for others, the generosity of spirit and desire to do what is right—she believed she saw such things even when he seemed determined to hurt her. She also felt, profoundly, that they had been made for each other. She knew the strength of her own attachment, and felt he was somehow attached to her as well, in spite of his behavior. What had happened the first time she saw him was to her a sign—and Erin believed in signs, believed in the existence of a plan and the importance of acknowledging it and following it.

With Jim she thought she could find as much happiness as is likely to be found in this vale of tears. They treasured the same things, at least the most important things. They both loved country life. They both put a high priority on family. They had similar tastes and similar ideas about the world. She felt certain he would honor and cherish her—if he ever managed to get to the point of being able to lay aside whatever it was that kept him from coming to her.

But what *was* that something? Here she was stumped. She could not read his mind. The future was dark to her, and she did not seem to be able to escape the darkness. She could cling only to what she felt. She had decided long ago to give him as much scope as possible in order to avoid any appearance of coercion; indeed, coercion was something of which she was almost incapable.

Erin did not want much, but she did want what she wanted. And she knew that what she wanted required trust. Jim had to choose, and she had to sit in her favorite chair until it became hard to her, until her own dream became indifferent to her, because she knew it was the only way for him to truly love her – if he could love her at all.

HUNTING HILL is about making choices in an age that worships celebrity and fashion. Fate throws Jim Wilmot an astonishing opportunity; can he find his bliss in the court of the gods-or is true happiness found in unexpected places?

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