

# How They Met

A Novel

By Allan Hunter

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## Chapter One

They were telling each other the stories of how they met when the phone rang. Bill got to his feet.

"Hang up call," he announced from the kitchen, then he opened another bottle of wine and took his seat again.

It was an impromptu dinner, and they ate in the warm flicker of candle-light amid the drop cloths, the brushes, the paint congealing in trays, and the lingering tang of paint thinner that even open windows and a summer evening breeze couldn't displace.

Leaning back in his chair, Bill began to tell them the story of Holly and himself. It was the sort of thing one was supposed to do with neighbors you hardly knew who brought you lasagna dinners after you'd put in a hard day's painting. As he spoke he swirled his cheap Cotes du Rhône, which he hoped everyone thought was expensive Cotes du Rhône, round his glass. He called it the story of the Black Slip.

"Why do you always call it that?" said Holly, scowling at him. She picked some lasagna crust from the baking tray and ate it. "It makes it sound like an Edgar Allan Poe story."

"I see, an American Gothic story done in an English accent." Jerome grinned at his hosts, then at Sue, seated beside him, but his attempt at humor didn't quite manage to smooth over her comment. So neighbor Jerome's a conflict

avoider, Bill said to himself. Only just met us and he's trying to keep it light.

He put down his wine and gazed at Holly.

"I like the title and it describes the story exactly, Sweetie. So here it is. Once upon a time I gave a party in this rather cavernous house I used to share with a couple of guys from work. This was when I first came to the States, and we were going to have a fairly sedate sort of evening, lots of wine, food, and a few laughs."

"Very British," Holly said, taking an olive.

"Well, it turned out that Holly and a couple of her friends had heard about the party and decided to invite themselves along. I didn't discover this until I was in the kitchen, pulling some little pizza things I'd made out of the oven, and Holly wandered in looking for wine, and asking who lived there. I didn't point out that I was her host; no one likes to embarrass the guests." He laughed, and Holly threw the olive pit at him. "See? I had her summed up even then."

"Yeah, right," Holly shook her head at Jerome and Sue on the other side of the table. "I don't know why he tells it like this." She pushed a tangle of reddish-brown curls back from her face.

"All right, I'll keep it short. Well, it turned out that Holly and her friends helped the party get going. Soon the music was loud, people were dancing, people were arguing, getting acrimonious - about baseball, I think - "

he smiled at Sue, "and the neighbors were doubtless upset. And I was dancing with Holly."

"Yeah, and it began to get hot in that funny old house," Holly added. "They had a wood stove going and it was February, and I was dancing and getting a little sweaty. So I ducked into the bathroom and took off the dress I was wearing, took off the chemise-slip thing I had on under it..."

"The Black Slip," chortled Bill.

"Yeah, the black slip. It was more of a long chemise, really, but Bill insists it was a slip. Anyhow, I hung it on a hook on the bathroom door. By the time I'd put the dress back on and straightened my hair, I'd forgotten the slip, and when I left with my friends at some godawful hour I remembered about half way home that I'd left it behind. And that's it." She went back to picking at the lasagna.

"Not quite." Bill was quick to rescue the story before it could fall flat. "You see, when I went into the bathroom the next morning and found this black silk thing hanging up - very expensive obviously, and rather sexy, I might add - naturally I wondered what had been going on. I didn't often find articles of intimate female apparel in the bathroom in those days. Well, not ones I didn't know anything about, at least."

"He says that to annoy me," Holly poured herself another glass of wine and played with the candle flame with her fork. Bill continued as if he hadn't heard.

"Two days later Holly calls me and leaves a message on my answering machine asking if I'd found her slip. She hardly knew me, of course, and she'd no idea where the house was because she'd taken a ride with someone else. So she was asking if she could meet me somewhere and collect it. I called back and left a message saying, sure, I'd hand over the hostage if she'd meet me at Rinaldi's in Central Square."

"I know Rinaldi's. At least I used to. Is it still there?" Jerome ran a hand through his hair which only drew attention to how desperately thin it was. It had reached the stage when it would have been more straightforward to cut it short and accept the baldness, but he kept it long and combed across his skull. Our small vanities show us up, thought Bill.

"Is it still there? No, It's gone now. I liked to go there for Sunday brunch. That's why I chose it. I knew it was really easy to get to on public transportation, and easy to find. I knew she didn't have a car, you see, and I didn't want her to think she had to come on a date with me just to get her slip back, so I tried to leave it sort of non-threatening. Shows you more about my neuroses than anything else, now I think about it. That's how we met the second time. Well, we had this really good talk - about George Eliot and nineteenth century literature, as it happens - and when it came time to leave I realized I'd forgotten the slip. That's when it became a Freudian

slip." Bill paused for effect. Jerome and Sue smiled back at him. Holly picked at the candle wax that had flowed down to the holder.

"I suppose I could have mailed it to her, but I wasn't about to lose a good opportunity when I'd run into it. So we arranged to meet again the next Sunday. And that's how it moved on, and here we are." He beamed at Holly.

Jerome and Sue applauded politely, smiling. Holly threw another olive pit at him.

"And how about you?" Holly looked at them both, but it was Jerome who responded.

"Ah, we met in college. We sort of knew each other for a while, and then became an item in our senior year, and then Saskia was born about six months after graduation."

"And then we got married," Sue gave him lopsided grin, "don't forget that part."

"Which college were you at?" Bill had caught Jerome's evasion. Now it's my turn to help the situation along, he thought.

"Brown." said Sue. "Then we moved here. Sixteen years ago." With her dark blonde hair, eyes that in this light seemed to be green, and her faded Levi shirt Bill could easily imagine her as a typical post-seventies student.

"That'd be when you graduated from Wesleyan, right?"  
He looked at Holly, who nodded. He turned back to Sue.

"So you've lived right here all this time?"

"Oh no. We only moved to this street about nine years ago or so." She shrugged. "When you've got a kid it takes a while to get settled. And now you've done all this painting you're pretty well established too."

"Yeah," Bill looked at her, "I thought we'd be all moved in and have things set up in a few months, but here it is nearly a year later and we've only just managed to re-do two rooms downstairs and half a bedroom. Although," he glanced at Holly, "I really think the rest of the house is O.K. There's not much more to do."

"We wouldn't have had to do the bedroom if you hadn't been in the attic and put your foot through the ceiling." Holly sounded bored.

"True, true. I happen to believe in insulation. Some people believe in God. Some in aspirins. Me, I believe in insulation." He paused, "Still... good things come out of disasters. This way we got a new bedroom and we got to meet our wonderful neighbors, who bring us food when we're gasping and covered in paint."

"It's a pleasure, Bill," Sue smiled at him. "Of course, if we hadn't seen you in your painting clothes we'd never have had the chance to do more than say 'hi' and be the usual neighbors who barely speak. It was Jerome's idea to offer the lasagna."

"Well, we're very glad you did." Bill smiled. Sue looked at him and could feel the genuine warmth in his manner. That, she thought to herself, is his strength. He makes you want to trust him, even if his stories are a little lame. Something in the pitch of his voice does it. Or it could just be the British accent.

That was when the phone rang the second time.

Bill stood up and walked back into the kitchen. They were all momentarily silent at the table, and Sue suddenly realized that Holly had stopped picking at the candle and was listening intently. She glanced at Jerome, who was helping himself to more wine.

"No," came Bill's voice, "I will not talk to you. And I will now unplug the telephone." They heard him do so, and he walked back to join them.

"It's her again, isn't it?" Holly spoke to her plate.

"Yes. I'm afraid it is."

"Our harasser," announced Holly. "Everyone should have one, you know." She pushed her curls back and stood up, her mouth set firm. "Shit."

Jerome and Sue exchanged glances. She could see a look she didn't like. It was a look that said 'triumph'. Was it a pleasure to him that these neighbors of theirs in the elegant Victorian, with the larger lot than theirs, had problems too? And as she watched the look disappeared so

completely that she almost doubted it had been there at all. But she knew her husband. He was glad that these people had problems. So insecure. She turned back to Bill.

"What kind of harasser is it? Is it a dirty phone caller or what?"

Bill sighed and looked off above her head. She was aware suddenly how much eye contact there had been during the meal, and felt him distance himself. He was about to speak when Holly cut in.

"It's some wacky woman he used to counsel." Holly came back to the table with a gallon of ice cream which she dumped unceremoniously in front of Sue. "He probably made eyes at her or something, the way he does when he's talking and he's so into his own ideas he doesn't know what he's doing, and she's been following him around ever since." She turned to Bill. "I'm really pissed off she's found out this number. After all our efforts, too, goddamn it." She looked as if she was about to smash the bowls she handed round.

"It sounds like this has been going on for a long time." Sue tried to appear concerned.

"Three years, more or less."

"Three years! Haven't you done anything about it?"

"Well, yes, actually. I've done just about everything I can." Bill pulled at his ear lobe and the lines above his brow deepened as he explained, apologetic. "I changed

my phone number; several times. As it turned out we moved house shortly after she started, and then about a year after that we moved into a short lease apartment until we came here, so we changed address and phone and now we have the number unlisted. Not even the people at work know my home number now. I have voice mail, of course, or the administrative assistant takes the messages. Then she calls me, and she's been told never to give the number out. It's a little cumbersome to have to call everyone back. I'm a sort of therapist, you see, with Montrose Corporation."

"I've driven past that place often enough," Jerome added. "Looks nice from the outside. What sort of therapist?"

"An organizational consultant is what they call me. In my darkest hours I imagine this inaccessibility by phone probably holds up my promotion to a better job, but what can do? I used to use the voice mailbox at work and this stupid dingbat would fill it - completely fill it - with her half-witted messages. Very bad New Age poetry, mostly. I couldn't use the answering machine and neither could anyone else. I'd come in most mornings and have thirty messages, all idiotic, all from her."

"Yes, but there are things you can do, aren't there? To stop her, I mean." Jerome's air of practicality hovered between helpfulness and reproach.

"Like break her fingers so she can't dial?" asked Holly. "Yeah, that'd be direct, at least. Let's change the subject, for God's sake. More wine, Sue?"

"Please, yes. A little." Holly sloshed wine into her glass and Jerome raised his for replenishing.

"Tell me about your work, Holly," Jerome asked, as his glass was refilled, "I've seen you carry great armfuls of papers to and from your car, and I've often wondered what you do."

"Oh, I'm a sort of editor and general dogsbody at The Power of Women magazine. I don't suppose either of you know it?" Neither of them did. "It's a new feminist publication, with a low budget and so it's still pretty small, but we have some good names working with us. I get quite a lot of my own writing in it. Articles, reviews. That's what I care most about, not the organizational stuff."

But the mood had been broken. Holly, angry at the harasser, at Bill's helplessness, let her feelings spill over the rest of the conversation. She focused on Sue, forcing her to listen rather than engaging in a dialogue. Bill knew the signs, and observed his guests. Sue seemed to know better than to take issue with any of the comments Holly flung around, while Jerome looked as though he was ready to run for cover, sensing an argument about to explode.

As Holly kept talking and refilling her own glass, Bill fell silent. His wife's words seemed to land on him like blows, and he looked forlorn. His eyes had lost their brightness and he kept turning his wineglass on its coaster.

There was a ring at the doorbell.

"I'll get that," Bill stood up.

"Yeah, take a baseball bat with you," sneered Holly.

"We don't have one, Sweetie." He moved out into the hall and they all listened, without seeming to.

"Hi, I'm Saskia." A young voice. "You've got my parents here. I tried to call, but you're not in the book, so I just hopped over." She walked in with the easy charm of a sixteen year old who doesn't really understand what adults could be doing that could in any way matter.

"Hi Mom, Hi Dad. Wow! Nice place you've got here. It's so much bigger than ours, even though it looks the same on the outside. Sorry to interrupt, but I need you to help me, Mom. I'm halfway through my homework, and I can't get the computer to do the pages right, and I really have to do it tonight because tomorrow I have play practice and then I'm baby-sitting. Please." She looked questioningly at Sue from under the Red Sox cap she'd pushed her hair into.

"Of course, Sweetheart, but you're forgetting your manners. This is Bill, and this is Holly. And this is our daughter Saskia. And this is probably our cue to go." She

looked at her watch. "It's past ten, and you both must be tired. We have an early start tomorrow anyhow. Let me help with the dishes."

"Oh no, that's O.K. We'll throw them in the machine..." Bill took the plates from her hands and put them back on the table.

There then followed the familiar to and fro about "we can't leave you with all these dirty dishes," - a discussion that seems to hang over suburban neighborhoods, waiting to descend, and which merely destroys whatever closeness was shared during the meal.

Jerome and Sue left their hosts with the dishes and walked the few yards to their own door under a heaven filled with stars.