

UNHOLY BOND



CHAPTER X

Dr. Clifford Bronson, an interne at Cosmopolitan Hospital, is bitterly disappointed when Janet Harris, a nurse, marries Dr. Eynon of the hospital staff, after she has inherited Oakhart Estate from old Mr. Hartigan, who had been a patient at the hospital. At the suggestion of Dr. Eynon Janet turns Oakhart into a home for convalescent children. Dr. Bronson, (Cliff) for whom Janet has the highest regard, and who had urged Janet to marry him, believes Dr. Eynon mercenary, and that this was for him a wedding of convenience. Janet is greatly surprised when Dr. Eynon suggests building a wing onto Oakhart and taking out a mortgage to do it. She visits the hospital where she used to work and has a talk with Dr. Bronson. She asks him to drive out and have Sunday dinner with them.

"No, keeping her away from me. I'm sure she doesn't care for me and I want to avoid a scene. Richard is very fond of Dr. and Mrs. Farquhar and I'm sure they've no idea of the way Naomi is acting. In the morning when she's teaching the children I'm in the laboratory, but I'm afraid a whole day of Naomi and Richard fawning over each other is more than I can take."

To her surprise, Cliff frowned. "I think you're being unfair. From what I can gather, the infatuation is all on Naomi's side. But if it will mean being with you, Janet, I'll come, of course."

When she returned, it was to find Mr. Prentice's tonneaued town car at the entrance to Oakhart. As she walked by it she was startled to see a thin, white-faced, little boy peering from the back seat. He was almost lost in the heavy folds of a steamer rug. "Well," she said, "who are you?"

"Jonathan Prentice," he said seriously.

"You are? Is Mr. Prentice your grandfather?"

Before the child could reply, the liveried chauffeur turned stiffly in the front seat. "Mr. Prentice is Jonathan's father, ma'am." He smirked at some humorous secret of which Janet was evidently supposed to be aware. She ignored him and stared at the child. He was very delicate in appearance, his skin so thin and clear that the veins at his temples were a deep blue. He couldn't be more than nine, yet Mr. Prentice was easily sixty. "I was all very strange, somehow Janet had never thought of Mr. Prentice as having a family of any sort."

As she turned, Richard and the lawyer appeared at the front door. Mr. Prentice hurried over to the car and stared anxiously at the child. "Not too cold, are you, son?"

The youngster shot him a wan smile and shook his head. "I didn't even know you had a child, Mr. Prentice," Janet said. "Yes," he said, "Jonathan is my entire family—he's all I have."

Snow began to fall before noon on Sunday. Not a gentle, slow fall of a temporary, quick-melting coating, but the thick, swirling hard-driven kind that swiftly formed a new layer over the two-foot-deep crust surrounding Oakhart.

Janet wondered, even hoped, that it might keep Naomi in the city—but promptly at twelve she and Cliff arrived. Naomi was excited.

"Isn't this weather thrilling! If Cliff hadn't had chains we'd never have made it—we passed dozens of stalled cars."

It was plain that Cliff didn't share her enthusiasm, he even seemed worried, an unusual emotion for him.

"If it keeps up we may have to ski back," he said half jokingly.

"We can always put you up," Janet said politely, though the thought of Naomi and Cliff being snowbound at Oakhart appalled her.

Naomi smiled a little secretly, but didn't reply; instead she spun around in a circle until her dark hair stood out like a shimmering fan.

"Cliff, come and see my schoolroom — it's about the prettiest one a teacher could have."

Cliff followed her obediently into the playroom.

"How is your work going at the hospital?" Richard said.

"Much against my will, I'm apparently slated to become a pediatrician," he grinned ruefully. "My greatest accomplishment is telling mothers different ways of disguising castor-oil."

Naomi raised her eyes. "What's wrong with that?"

"Cliff has his heart set on becoming a surgeon," Janet interposed.

"Is that all? Maybe I could fix it up with Dad, Cliff — he could have you transferred to another department."

His face reddened. "No, thanks, Naomi, this is my own private battle."

"But it's silly to waste your life doing something you don't like."

"Maybe it's silly," Richard said, "but a great many people do it. Seriously though, Bronson, why don't you have a talk with Windell?"

"I had one talk with him before you left the hospital — that was enough."

His eyes blazed and he began to concentrate on Mrs. Miles' apple pie. Janet knew he was remembering the scene in the operating room and was still half blaming Richard for the senior surgeon's criticism which followed. Hastily her mind sought to introduce a new topic of conversation.

They sat around the den after dinner, desultorily making conversation. Several times Janet saw Cliff's eyes stray to the windows and the ominously gray skies and dizzily whirling snow. She knew he longed to leave and was only staying because of his promise to her. Once when she caught him he flushed painfully and stared across the room to where Naomi was discussing one

of her new theories about child psychology with Richard. At last he got to his feet.

"I hate to break up what I can tell is a highly scientific discussion, Naomi, but we'll have to be leaving soon and I'd like to see Dr. Eynon's laboratory before we go."

Richard seemed surprised and pleased and the two disappeared into the lab.

Janet felt uneasy. What was Cliff up to now? He had shown no interest in the alterations at Oakhart when she had wanted to show them to him a month or so ago, yet he looked very determined as Richard led him out of the room.

She and Naomi didn't attempt to talk. There was a little left to say when they saw each other nearly every morning. They each selected a magazine and began to read.

Fifteen minutes later the two men returned. There were grim white lines around Richard's mouth and Cliff looked sullen.

"Come on, Naomi, we've got to be leaving—it's been very nice, Janet."

"I'm glad you came, Cliff, make it again soon . . ."

Her voice trailed off—a queer, muffled explosion had come from somewhere outside. They all stood silent, waiting . . .

It came again, louder, and this time it was followed by the brittle tinkle of breaking glass in the kitchen.

Richard's face turned red with anger, his mouth tightened. "Someone," he muttered, "seems to have forgotten that the hunting season is over."

He dashed into the kitchen and they heard the back door slam. Janet's heart began to pound with fear.

They stood there in the hall listening, the three of them — Janet, Naomi and Cliff.

Abby came out of the playroom and hurried past them; they were hardly aware of her. Janet's pulse was throbbing in her throat; she put out her hand.

"Cliff, I'm afraid, I'm afraid . . ."

"Easy, Jane." His fingers tightened on her arm. He picked up his coat. "I'll go outside and see if I can help." He looked away from her to hide the uneasy premonition in his eyes.

They followed him uncertainly into the kitchen. One of the small leaded panes was lying in fragments on the floor and already snow was drifting through the gaping hole.

Mrs. Miles came in from the cottage, her gray hair so powdered with flakes that it resembled an old-fashioned wig. "I thought I heard a shot," she said, and stared at them, a question in her eyes.

"Someone broke the window," Janet explained. "Richard has gone outside to investigate. Mrs. Miles, please go in and stay with the children — we'll be right

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back." Richard and Abby had preceded them, their floundering steps making a blurred, indistinct pattern in the new layer of snow. The trail led around the house, away from the kitchen.

They trudged along in single file and just as they turned the corner near the children's sun room, another shot rang out. It was followed by a shout from Richard, muffled and angry . . . "Put down that gun, you fool! You're going to do some real damage."

It relieved Janet so to hear his voice that she almost smiled. The man must be crazy, she thought. What would anyone be shooting at in a snowstorm? Then a new fear seized her—not crazy, but foolish, childish! Not responsible . . .

"Richard! Richard!" she called frantically, but the storm deadened her words as though a blanket had been tossed over her head.

They almost collided with Abby. She was standing stolidly under an apple tree and slowly beginning to look like one of the children's snow statues; her homely face was red with cold. "It's my poor brother, William," she said through stiffening lips. Their eyes followed her pointing finger.

Richard was standing about forty yards away, and beyond him, a large figure in hip boots and a well-padded hunting jacket was menacingly waving a rifle. His wild, dark face was not threatening, however; instead, he scowled and smiled alternately like a child guarding a new toy.

"You leave me alone!" he shouted, "this is my gun."

"You're going to hurt someone," Richard said gently, "you've already broken a window."

Abby moved forward a few steps. "Let me talk to him, Doctor."

William was distracted momentarily by the sight of his sister and Richard took advantage of his inattention to inch nearer him.

(To Be Continued)

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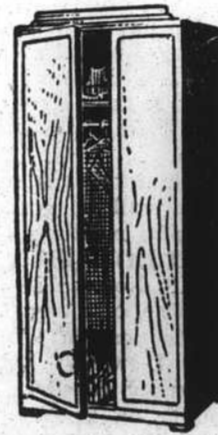
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