

31 BOND STREET

BY ELLEN HORAN

CHAPTER ONE



About three o'clock early Saturday morning, a heavy snow commenced and continued till daylight. The snow turned to rain and the wind blew for four hours, which we cannot but characterize as the worst, the very worst, wintry gale ever experienced in the city, ripping up window shutters and blowing down signs.

Along the side streets, the water and melted snow flooded the lowlands of the City, which are generally the haunts of the poor. The very rats got frightened, and ran about Washington Street, South Street, the docks and markets, as the gushing thaw, like a landlord weary of seeking arrears of rent, summarily ejected them.

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For a boy who watched boats, his room was the perfect perch. He could see the wharves across a jumble of chimney tops, and beyond, a peek of the harbor. He'd count the ships at anchor, all sizes and shapes. There were three-masters and snub-nosed square-riggers and packet boats built to carry tonnage, with black balls on red flags. Pleasure steamers were loaded down with folks out for amusement, heading past the oyster flats to picnic on the islands. A boat from the Orient had a curving hull and mysterious symbols on the sail. Occasionally, in spring, a cloud descended and sat on top of the water, leaving a ghostly smoke that blocked the Narrows.

Skiffs scuttled on the New York side of it, their silhouettes looking like paper cutouts, while the foghorns wailed from the Atlantic side, waiting for it to lift. On summer days, John would crawl out the window to get the widest view, grabbing onto a chimney pot to keep from slipping off the steep pitch. He'd watch for hours from the roof, sitting at a slant, with the sensation that the entire city was straining out to sea.

Winter was different. Ice stretched clear across the East River, and the ferryboats were stalled in their berths. The previous evening, the weather had turned foul. John awoke shivering in his tangled bedding. He hopped through the cold to find his trousers and a woolen vest. He lived in an attic under the eaves with his mother, who lay still on the wooden bed in the opposite corner. She was frail and spent her days in a rocking chair next to the stove. Her hands were gnarled and pained by the cold and damp. She no longer went to the seamstress' shop, for she could no longer sew.

This morning, there was nothing outside the dormer window but rain and a veil of grey. John couldn't see the harbor or the clock on the church tower, and because of the storm, no one was pulling the bells. He wrapped some pieces of wool around his trouser legs with twine, to protect himself from the bitter weather. He crept out of the room and shut the attic door gently, and hurried down the stairs of the small house on Rector Street. He did not know what time it was, but Saturday was payday, and Dr. Burdell would dock him half a day if he were late.

He hurried uptown. Along Broadway, the wind whipped a mixture of snow and freezing rain, rocking the shutters and setting gas lamps swinging on their posts. Old snow blocked the culverts, flooding the intersections, and carriages were left abandoned in water up to their hubs. He made his way to Bond Street, a long row of townhouses, and banged at a door under the stoop. The cook pulled the bolts. "Good, lord!" Hannah exclaimed, "You're wetter than a sea captain. Don't you dare drip on my floor." He followed her down the dark hallway and was careful not to drip, for the cook had hit him before, most recently with a wooden spoon.

In the kitchen, there were two fires burning: one in the brick beehive oven where she baked pies and puddings and one in the cast-iron stove. "Only a fool would come out on a day like today," muttered Hannah. She moved back and forth to the oven, an apron wrapped around her wide girth, pulling out a fresh pie on a wooden

board and then sliding it into the pie cabinet. When one of the oven doors opened, the heat hit John like a furnace blast. Hannah threw some bread crusts into a simmering pot of milk. John watched the crusts swimming around in the bowl as they softened into a pulp.

“Doctor Burdell is still sleeping. I’m surprised he hasn’t rung for his breakfast.” The cook spoke with reverence about the owner of the house, a dentist and a bachelor. John worked as an errand boy: he lit the gas lamps in the sixteen rooms, wound the clocks with a brass key, and hauled coal up and down the broad staircase with buckets on a stick across his back.

“Yesterday, the serving girl was in the basement with a whiskey bottle and she was sent straight to the street.”

“So Alice is gone, is she?” asked John, gulping down his porridge.

“She sure is. And, do you think Mrs. Cunningham has hired another girl?” asked Hannah. John guessed by shaking his head no.

“No, she has not,” said Hannah emphatically, slamming a dough ball against a wooden board and rolling it flat. “So now it’s my job to cook the meal, serve the table, bow and curtsy, all while my bread burns.”

“Hannah!” said the housemistress, appearing in the doorway. Mrs. Cunningham often appeared, sudden and unannounced, to give orders. “Why hasn’t the boy taken Dr. Burdell his breakfast?” she asked, illuminated by the lamp in the hallway. She placed a hand on the doorjamb and spoke from the doorway, as if hesitating to come in. She was dressed to go out, in a wide tailored skirt. Underneath the bodice, which was edged in delicate lace around the wrist and throat, a corset carved her figure into a tiny waist and ample bosom. She brushed away a tendril of a dark hair that had fallen into her face, loosened from its pins. Her milky skin looked paler than usual, and her eyes had a look of concern.

Hannah glanced at the iron bells that were strung along the kitchen wall, each a different size, one for every room of the house. “The doctor hasn’t rung for his meal yet, Ma’am, that’s why,” she said.

“What time did he return home last night?” asked Mrs. Cunningham.

“I was asleep in the attic, Ma’am. I do not keep track of my master’s comings and goings.”

“Helen is taking the train at noon. Please tell Samuel to bring the carriage around.” Mrs. Cunningham’s daughter was returning to boarding school in Saratoga, and she spoke as if Dr. Burdell’s

carriage and driver were hers to command.

“I wouldn’t send anyone out in this weather unless I expected them to swim or take a schooner,” the cook retorted.

“I see that John arrived this morning without being swept away,” she said curtly. “Please do as I say. Have John take Dr. Burdell’s breakfast upstairs, now. And ring me when Samuel has come, so he can fetch the carriage.” She gathered her skirts and departed the kitchen.

Emma Cunningham had arrived at 31 Bond Street the previous October with her two daughters and twenty trunks. It was common for a bachelor like Dr. Burdell, who lived alone without a family, to lease the upper part of his large townhouse to a widow who would oversee the housekeeping and the servants. Only thirty-six, and a recent widow, Emma Cunningham was younger and prettier than most in the position. She irritated Hannah, for she spent her mornings at her vanity, smoothing her pale skin with scented creams and pinning up her hair into fanciful arrangements. Hannah was always harping about her—she wasted gas and decorated her room with yellow roses and an eiderdown a foot high. Her teenage daughters, Helen and Augusta, sailed around the house as if they owned the place, their hoop skirts scraping against the walls.

Hannah grumbled while fixing the breakfast tray. She rushed about, adding missing items: a small spoon for the jam, an extra knife for some hard sausage.

“May I have some more?” John asked, lifting his empty bowl.

Hannah slapped him on the head. “Get upstairs with the tray. You heard the lady. If Dr. Burdell is missing his breakfast, everyone in this house will suffer.”

John carried the tray out of the kitchen with the china teapot tilting and wobbling, balancing it carefully. He climbed up the narrow kitchen stairway to the front hall, passing the double parlor, ornamented with twin mantels and a high ceiling ringed with stucco designs like watchful angels. A tall clock in the hall rang eight times. Out the large window at the curve in the main staircase, the branches of the trees in the back garden scratched against the glass.

On the second floor, John placed the tray on the carpet in front of Dr. Burdell’s office, which was next to his bedroom. He pressed his ear to the door to hear if he was awake. Then he spotted something curious—a key was dangling from the keyhole, about to topple onto

the floor. It was odd because Dr. Burdell, an intensely private man, always locked his door at night from the inside. John wondered if perhaps he had risen early and left the house before breakfast. Hearing nothing, John turned the knob. The door cracked open and scraped along the carpet a few inches until it jammed against a heavy object. The boy pushed harder until the door burst open.

Inside, Dr. Burdell was sprawled in the center of the floor, his arms outstretched, and his head in a sticky puddle that had hardened like tar. His lips were pendant and blue. His throat was slashed with a wound so deep that it nearly detached the head from the torso, revealing a sinewy tangle of muscle and tiny pearls of spine. The doctor's eyes stared up at John, glazed, sunken into the temples. His tongue was protruding, swollen, as if choked on a last, silent scream.

John ran to the stairway and leaned over the banister. "The Doctor! The Doctor! Hannah, come quickly."

Hannah's head emerged, bobbing from below. "What are you yelling about boy?"

"He's in there. I seen him!" John cried.

"Seen what, pray tell."

"The Doctor. He's on the floor! He's dead!"

"Don't you go telling tales, boy. Are you playing me for a fool?"

"I am not telling a lie—there's blood on the floor, and all over the walls and his neck is cut."

In her floured apron, she huffed up the staircase, her grey hair flying from her cap. Hannah reached the doorway and peered in. "Oh, my God, my God," she screamed, putting her apron to her face.

Emma Cunningham, hearing the noise, rushed from the third floor, with Augusta and Helen behind her.

"Hannah, what is the commotion?"

"The master is dead!" cried Hannah.

"That's impossible," Emma said, pushing Hannah aside, craning her neck to peer into the office, her voice trailing, "I just saw him yesterday before supper. . . ." She turned away, clasping her hands to her breast.

"It's a carnage!" wailed Hannah. "A bloody murder!"

Augusta looked inside, and then dropped to the floor in a faint. Mrs. Cunningham grabbed Helen to keep her away from the gruesome sight, and the younger girl started to cry. John stood next to

the pile of women, his eyes welling with tears.

“What are you standing there for, you foolish creature?” screamed Hannah. “Run down to the street and fetch the doctor that lives next door. Then go to the precinct house and look for an officer.” She hit him on the side of the head, as if spurring a horse.

John turned and rushed down the stairs two at a time. In the vestibule he pulled the bolts on the heavy front door and jumped down the stoop. The street was misty and the rain had turned to snow. He paused and looked back at the house. For a moment he had the sensation that he had lost direction, not knowing which way to turn. Then he ran toward Broadway, his boyish figure, bundled in scratchy grey woolens, dissolving in the dim, snowy light.