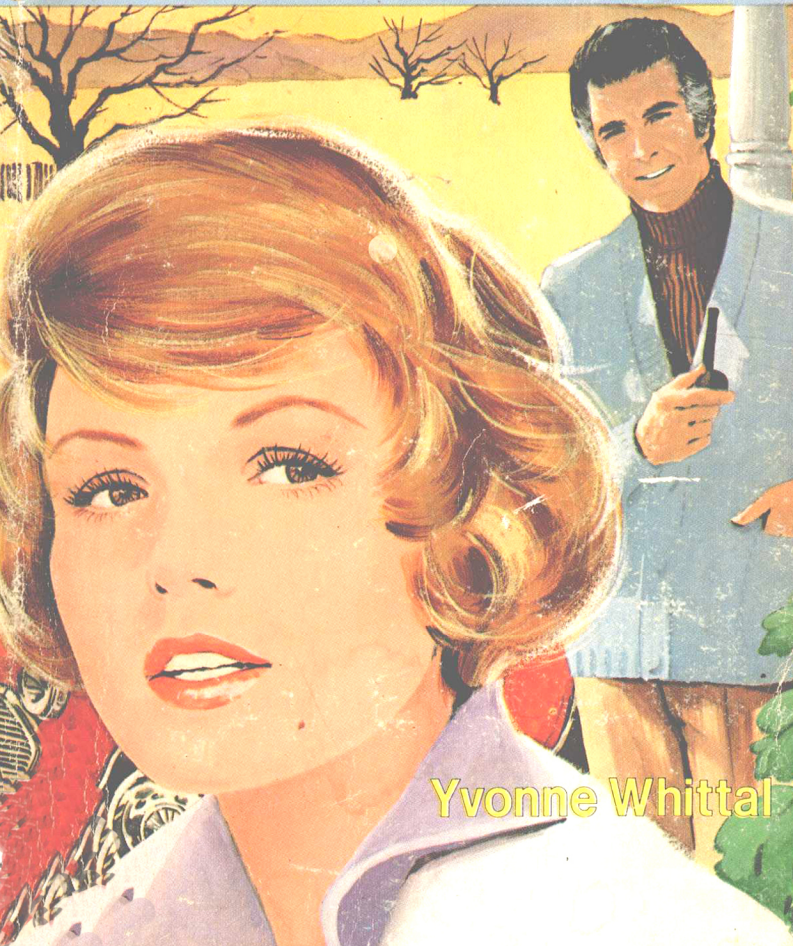


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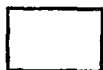
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EAST TO BARRYVALE

by

YVONNE WHITTAL

HARLEQUIN BOOKS

**TORONTO
WINNIPEG**

Harlequin edition published October 1975

SBN 373-01915-7

Original hard cover edition published in 1975
by Mills & Boon Limited.

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**without whose enthusiastic
encouragement this book might
never have been completed.**

CHAPTER ONE

Dr. Jacqueline Thornton parked her small Austin in the shade of an acacia tree and while stretching her legs, she sampled the ham sandwiches she had bought at a café in the small town of Aberdeen. The September sun scorched the dry earth and already the cicadas were sending out their shrill sounds. It was going to be a long, hot summer, the farmers had predicted in Aberdeen.

Jacqueline poured herself a cup of milk from a flask and turned her eyes eastward. She had been on the road since early that morning and if all went well she would reach her destination within another three hours.

“What do you want to go to such a Godforsaken place for?” her medical colleagues had asked her when she had announced unexpectedly that she had applied for a post in Barryvale.

Their bewildered expressions had amused her. They had come from cities all over the country, and she knew that it would be ludicrous trying to explain to them the deep longing within her to return to the town of her birth. With the whole of South Africa to choose from she preferred going where she could smell again the karoo bush when it was wet with rain.

To attend university and obtain her medical degree had always been an obsession with Jacqueline, and for this purpose she had had to leave Barryvale, a small Karoo dorp, and go to Cape Town. She had worked hard at her studies and enjoyed it. There were always the holidays to look forward to when she could rush back to Barryvale and her father, for a few weeks.

Jacqueline's father, Dr. Bernard Thornton, who had been the only doctor in Barryvale for many years, had always been aware of the growing need for hospital

facilities in the village. He had schemed and planned until eventually his dreams materialised and Barryvale acquired its own hospital.

It was a private hospital, but it catered for the poor as well as the rich, and was equipped with all the most modern facilities—Bernard Thornton had made certain of that.

Jacqueline's studies prevented her from attending the opening ceremony, but her father had written an unusually long and exciting letter, telling her all about this momentous occasion. A year later the strain and stress of such a vast project took its toll, and Bernard Thornton collapsed and died while walking along the corridors of his beloved hospital.

Jacqueline had been too young when her mother died to understand sufficiently what had happened, whereas the death of her father had knocked the bottom out of her world. She recalled at the time that Dr. Meldon Powers, young friend and colleague of her father's, had been kind and sympathetic. He had offered to have her at his home for the holidays, but Jacqueline knew she could never accept. When the solicitor came to the house to read her father's will, he insisted that Dr. Powers be present as well. The reason for this request became evident as the reading of the will progressed.

Meldon Powers, already a shareholder in the hospital, inherited all her father's shares on condition that he remained in Barryvale and took over as Superintendent of the hospital. Jacqueline inherited the house and a considerable amount of money with which she could not only continue her studies, but live in luxury if she should choose to do so.

A year after her father's death she received a personal invitation from Dr. Powers to attend a ceremony at which the Barryvale Hospital would be renamed the 'Bernard Thornton Memorial Hospital'. Jacqueline had

sent him a polite reply thanking him for his invitation, but regretting that she would not be able to attend. Barryvale without her father was something she could not yet bear to face.

After completing her internship at the hospital in Cape Town, Jacqueline decided that there was only one place for her to go, and so she applied for a post as resident doctor at the Barryvale Hospital. Three weeks later she received a telegram which read as follows:

“Application conditionally accepted. Wire date of arrival. Call at Bergvliet to discuss post. Powers.”

Jacqueline had frowned momentarily at the word ‘conditionally’, wondering what it could mean. Then, shrugging off the feeling of uneasiness, she had wired back that she would be leaving Cape Town the very next day. She was now almost at the end of her long and tiring journey.

Sliding behind the wheel, she left the shady sanctuary of the acacia tree, her little grey Austin kicking up a cloud of dust. Tirelessly she travelled on, until the late afternoon sun started casting long shadows across the earth. It was with a sense of relief that Jacqueline stopped on a small rise just above Barryvale.

From that vantage point she could feast her tired eyes on familiar surroundings and look down on the village nestling at the foot of a towering mountain, so unlike Cape Town’s majestic Table Mountain. The town had certainly grown in the seven years she had been away.

To her right, the hospital stood towering out above the houses, and Jacqueline quivered with excitement when she realised that soon she would be part of the throbbing activity within those walls. And to her left, in solitary splendour against the rise of the mountain, stood Bergvliet, the white-gabled home of Dr. Meldon Powers. The old Dutch-styled house had belonged to the Powers family for as long as Jacqueline could remember, and the gardens and orchards of that vast property were always

well cared for and productive.

It had been a hot day and the heat in the car, now that she had stopped, was becoming oppressive. Pressing the starter, she let out the clutch and drove on further down the hill. The dirt road ended suddenly and she smiled with pleasure as she heard the car tyres singing on the smooth tarred road.

She turned into the main street and slackened off considerably. All around her the shop owners were preparing to close for the night. Shutters were being drawn and the burglar-proofing fastened on to the windows and doors. The local residents were gathering on the hotel stoep, drinking beer, and it was only then that Jacqueline realised how hot and thirsty she was.

A few minutes later she passed through an arched gate on which the name Bergvliet was printed in large black letters. She went up the circular driveway and, after a slight hesitation, parked her Austin beside the gleaming white Mercedes at the foot of the steps leading up to the house.

Jacqueline switched off the ignition and pushed a hasty hand through her hair. She had not thought to stop and freshen up along the way before seeing her prospective boss, but then it was not her looks he would be interested in, but her qualifications as a medical practitioner.

Taking her handbag off the seat beside her, she slowly eased herself out of the car and arched her aching back slightly as she closed the door with a quick flick of her hand. The corners of her lips twitched with mirth as she compared her dusty old Austin to the polished splendour of the car beside it, then shrugging her shoulders slightly, she walked slowly and stiffly up the stone steps towards the large oak door with its heavy brass knocker.

A white-coated Xhosa boy answered her knock and, after asking her name, led the way on to the terrace at the side of the house.

"The Missus must please wait here," she was told politely as she stood beside the garden table on which a jug of iced orange juice and several glasses were set out invitingly.

The servant had brought Jacqueline through the thickly carpeted sunken living-room with its heavy antique furniture and marble fireplace, up two steps into what looked like a music room, with a grand piano in the centre and the busts of famous composers arranged about the room. Meldon Powers obviously liked music. Did he play, she wondered, or was the piano only part of the décor?

It was from this room that double glass doors led on to the terrace where Jacqueline was now awaiting the arrival of Dr. Powers.

She moved about restlessly until, leaning against the stone wall overlooking the ornamental garden, she saw a fountain sending a spray of water into the air that fell back into a pond filled with white waterlilies. This was surrounded by shrubs and roses and hedges clipped into quaint patterns. She was just admiring the bougainvillea which was ranking along part of the terrace wall when she heard a step behind her. She turned and looked straight into the piercing blue eyes of Meldon Powers.

There was a quality about him that reminded her of a panther with all its fury and strength kept tightly leashed. Refusing to be intimidated by his outward appearance, yet instantly on guard, Jacqueline squared her shoulders and met his gaze fearlessly.

"Welcome back," he said, and her small hand disappeared almost completely as he gripped it firmly in his own.

Jacqueline had to look a long way up to meet his eyes, but found nothing welcoming there at all. His whole attitude gave the impression that he was finding this interview distasteful, and wanted to get it over with as soon as possible.

Meldon Powers walked over to the table.

"Orange juice?" he asked, holding up the jug. "Or would you prefer something stronger?"

"Orange juice, please," Jacqueline replied, walking across to where he stood and taking the glass from him.

"Please sit down," he told her in his deep, well modulated voice.

Jacqueline felt unusually tense, and painfully aware of the fact that she was not looking her best after the long journey as she subsided into the chair he had gestured to. Meldon Powers seated himself opposite her and waited patiently until she had emptied her glass before he started speaking again.

"Did you have a good trip?"

"Uneventful, thank you."

He nodded thoughtfully.

"The reason I asked you to come here first was to discuss a few conditions connected with this post of yours." He was obviously a man who wasted no time in getting to the point. He frowned slightly, then hastily swallowed down the last of his own drink before continuing. "You will be expected to stay in the staff quarters and eat in the staff mess. You will be working shifts just the same as all the other junior resident doctors, and you will also be expected to do a certain number of outside calls." He paused there and looked at her sharply. "I presume you do have a car in good running order?"

Jacqueline thought of her dirty grey Austin parked beside the Mercedes at the front door and suppressed a grin.

"Yes, I have a car," she replied calmly, fingering the pleats in her skirt.

Meldon Powers took out his gold cigarette case, opened it and held it out to her. When Jacqueline refused, he lit one for himself, blowing out a cloud of smoke as he crossed his legs and looked beyond her with narrowed eyes.

He had not changed much since their first and only meeting seven years ago, Jacqueline thought. Except for a dusting of grey at the temples, he was very much the same. She wondered what had caused the premature appearance of those grey hairs. Could it be that the responsibility of hospital affairs were too much for him? His dark hair was brushed back severely, and the aquiline nose reminded her of an eagle. Stern, perfectly chiselled lips were set above a square, determined chin.

“There is one other fact I wish to point out. I knew your father very well. He was a fine man and a wonderful doctor.” He flicked his half-smoked cigarette over the wall and pinned her down with a cold glance. “Don’t trade on his name. You’ll be judged only by the quality of your own work.”

Jacqueline was aware of a vague uneasiness taking possession of her. Was Meldon Powers issuing a warning or a threat? Her golden-brown eyes darkened with anger and disappointment.

“If that’s your opinion of me, Dr. Powers, then I’m surprised you considered me for the post at all.”

“It’s not my opinion that counts, but the opinion of the Hospital Committee,” he told her bluntly.

“Of which you are chairman,” Jacqueline reminded him coldly.

His lips twitched slightly, but otherwise his expression remained the same.

“A chairman can make suggestions, but the decisions are entirely up to the committee members.”

“Perhaps,” she agreed. “Will there be someone at the hospital to show me to my quarters?”

“You’ll be spending the night here in my home,” he told her calmly. “I’ll take you to the hospital in the morning.”

“Dr. Powers, to use your own words, don’t trade on your friendship with my father as far as I’m concerned. I