

A woman with blonde hair styled in a bun, wearing a red and brown plaid dress and a cream-colored lace shawl, is shown in profile, looking out over a vast valley. In the background, a horse-drawn wagon is visible on a dirt road, and the landscape is filled with green fields and distant mountains under a soft, hazy sky.

The
Doctor's
Lady

JODY HEDLUND

Chapter I

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*I*ndians!”

The sharp call from the back of the sanctuary jolted Priscilla White. She sucked in a breath and twisted in the pew.

“Two of them!” shouted someone else.

Additional cries of alarm erupted around her, and Priscilla strained to see the entrance of the church above the heads of the congregants behind her.

Mary Ann’s fingers bit into her arm.

Priscilla patted her younger sister’s hand and rose from the hard bench just enough to get a glimpse of the wide-open double doors. Sure enough, two Indian boys stalked inside.

“What shall we do?” Mary Ann tugged her. “Should we hide?”

“Oh, shush now.” Priscilla squeezed her sister’s hand and tried to stop the trembling of her own. “They’re just boys.”

The two lean youth started down the aisle with long, confident strides. Their braids dangled with beads and shells that clinked together. The fierce blackness of their eyes captivated her, and she couldn’t look away, even though staring broke the rules of etiquette.

With each step they took, they drew nearer the front pew where she sat with her family, and her heart pattered harder against her chest. Why were they here? What could they possibly want?

Next to her, Mary Ann shrank into the wooden seat as much as her hugely pregnant frame would allow.

The boys’ fringed leggings swished and their breechcloths flapped in cadence.

Priscilla forced herself to sit straighter, to not shrivel like her sister. The taller boy’s dark eyes slid to Priscilla for the briefest instant, and she was sure he could hear the rapid thumping inside her.

The air in their wake carried the scent of melted animal fat and charred meat. She pressed a gloved hand against her nose and drew in a deep breath of the sweet mint that lingered in the satiny material.

When the Indians reached the pulpit, they spun abruptly and faced the congregation. Almost on cue, they splayed their legs and folded their arms across their chests.

A hush descended over the meetinghouse. The babbling of a baby several rows back reverberated through the eerie quietness.

Reverend Lull stood unmoving, like a wood carving, his mouth partly open and his hand raised.

For a long moment, Priscilla held her breath and, like everyone else, stared at the spectacle. There hadn’t been a single Indian

in Allegany County during the twenty-six years of her lifetime. Who knew how long before that?

And now there were two. What was Providence planning for them?

The decisive step of boots at the doorway echoed through the silence.

Once again, Priscilla shifted in her pew. This time she took in the tall form of a broad-shouldered man. With the brim of his battered hat pulled low, she could see nothing but the shadowed stubble on his jaw.

A twinge of trepidation wove through her stomach.

His boot heels clunked on the wooden floor, and with each step forward, the thread pulled taut until, finally, when he reached the front and turned to face them, her stomach was as tight as the stitches in her sampler.

With a flick of his finger, he tapped up his hat and gave them a clear view of his face. Blue eyes the color of a winter sky peered at them from a tanned, weathered face. “Forgive me, Reverend, for disrupting your service,” he said, not bothering to look at Reverend Lull. Instead, his gaze swept across the congregation.

There was something intense and passionate in his eyes, something that spoke of adventure and of daring deeds about which Priscilla could only dream.

Mary Ann’s fingers dug through Priscilla’s gloves and pinched her tender skin. Priscilla absently patted her sister’s hand, wishing Mary Ann’s fear didn’t mirror her own.

Standing next to the savage Indians, the man seemed fierce—from the pistol at his waist to the scar that cut a thin white path from the corner of his left eye to his cheek. Who was this man? And what did he want with them?

Priscilla pressed the knot in her middle. Yet even as she tried

to still her quivering, she couldn't keep from trembling with the thrill of the unknown.

"I'm Dr. Eli Ernest, and I've just returned from exploring Oregon Country."

A doctor? Priscilla sat back against the hard bench. This fearsome, rugged man a doctor? She'd met with plenty of doctors over the past several years, and none had looked like this man.

And none of them had been able to offer her any hope. . . .

An ache of emptiness swelled through her middle. She slid her hand away from her barren womb and tucked it in her lap. She forced herself to not think about the pain, about the fact that she'd never be a good and fruitful wife to any man. How many times must she remind herself to embrace God's plan for her life, even if it never included marriage and children?

"John and Richard"—Dr. Ernest nodded toward the two Indian boys—"agreed to come back with me so I could show everyone just how kind and civil the Indians truly are."

The boys stared straight ahead, their expressions stoic. In their Indian attire, they looked anything but kind and civilized.

The taller boy's eyes flickered to her again, and she caught a glimpse of curiosity in their depths before he glanced away.

For an instant, she could almost picture him as one of her students. With a proper haircut and appropriate wearing apparel, perhaps he could grow to be more civilized. With the right teacher, he could quite possibly learn many things.

Her heart quickened. Soon, very soon, she would have the opportunity to change lives for the sake of the gospel. She would get to teach heathens like this boy, only in India, where the need was greater than any other place on earth.

Any day now, for she was long overdue to hear back from the Mission Board.

"They are of the Nez Perce tribe, a peaceful and generous

people,” Dr. Ernest continued. “I’ll be traveling back to Oregon Country in a few weeks’ time, returning John and Richard to their home.” His voice had a rugged quality that matched everything about him, from his oil-slicked cloak and faded trousers to his scuffed boots.

“This time I won’t be coming back. The Nez Perce have asked me to set up a mission among them.”

A mission? Her heart skipped forward, each beat tripping over the next, just as it did every time she thought about life on the mission field and the millions of heathen still needing the gospel.

“John and Richard’s father wants to help his people. They’ve seen the benefit of the white man’s medicine and knowledge, so they’ve agreed to let me buy a portion of their land and build a clinic.”

A mission in the far West? Everyone knew the land in the West was unfit for civilized life. It was a place inhabited by fur trappers, wild animals, and Indians. The rugged terrain made it nearly impossible for self-sufficiency.

India, on the other hand, already had established missions and schools. They desperately needed more workers.

“I’ve come today on behalf of the Board of Missions,” Dr. Ernest said, “to ask for your commitment of support. I’ve spent the winter visiting churches, raising funds necessary for our return travel and building of the mission. Now, with your support, I could raise the last of what I need.”

A chorus of whispers broke the stunned silence that had prevailed since the appearance of the two Indian boys.

Reverend Lull finally moved. “Well, welcome, Dr. Ernest. You’ve come to the right place. We certainly are a mission-minded congregation. We already support several missionaries. The women of our congregation have formed a Female Home Missionary Society.” He cleared his throat and directed

his attention toward Priscilla, his face aglow with pride. "In fact, we have one of our own, my dear sister-in-law, who is planning to leave us to teach in India."

Mary Ann beamed at her husband, while Priscilla nodded and straightened her shoulders.

The doctor gave her the briefest of nods, skimming over her with obvious disinterest before turning to survey the rest of the congregation again.

She sat back in surprise and reached for the cameo pinned at her throat. Patting the twisted knot at the back of her head, she fought a strange sense of uncertainty. Had her hair come loose? Did she have something unseemly upon her face?

Dr. Ernest cocked his hat back further on his head, revealing overlong dusty brown hair with sun-bleached streaks. "As I've repeatedly told the Board, we Americans willingly pour our money and time into lands and people beyond the seas, but we neglect the need right on our back doorstep."

Did he think so highly of his *own* calling that he could dismiss *hers* so easily?

"The natives of the North American continent need our generosity just as much, if not more, than any other group in the world." Dr. Ernest rested a hand on the shoulder of the Indian boy closest to him.

"The Nez Perce are a wandering tribe and live only on the food they can hunt or scavenge, and often they go hungry. They're vulnerable to attacks by the fierce Blackfoot tribe, who kill their people or enslave them. They're being exposed to the white men's diseases through the fur trappers but don't have white men's medicine to help fight them."

His words elicited murmurs of sympathy.

He nodded at the Indian boys, and they smiled back at him, as if they knew they were getting the response they wanted.

Indignation shimmied up Priscilla's spine. Did he think being a missionary to the West was more noble and important than being one to India?

"Perhaps in holding out the hand of friendship to one tribe"—he squeezed the Indian boy's shoulder—"we'll begin to repair the damage we've done to so many others."

"Amen," called several brothers and sisters.

Priscilla pressed her lips together, wanting to speak but forcing herself to raise her hand and wait for recognition.

Dr. Ernest averted his gaze to the other side of the sanctuary.

"Miss White?" Reverend Lull held out a hand to her. "I'm sure we would love to hear your thoughts on this matter."

She stood and nodded her thanks to the reverend. Then she bestowed her sweetest smile on Dr. Ernest. "What you are telling us is all well and good, Dr. Ernest. But how can we justify focusing our attention on *one* tribe when there are *six hundred million* heathen throughout foreign lands who are perishing in sin and require our immediate help?"

Mary Ann yanked Priscilla's dress, and Mother cleared her throat. They only meant to urge her into the silence and submission that behooved a woman of her status. Yet how could she stand back without defending the place and people she would serve until the Lord called her heavenward?

"When those in foreign lands are already receptive and eager," she continued, "I don't see how we can do anything but pour our time and money into overseas missions. Especially when others have already tried to share the gospel with the Indians and have failed to see any results."

"What can we expect from the natives we've forced to relocate?" Dr. Ernest said as he slowly pivoted until he faced her. "Of course, the central plains tribes are hostile to the whites and anything they might offer."

Finally he looked at her. His eyes flickered with irritation, as if he was weary of rebuffing comments like hers. "Thankfully, most of the tribes of the Northwest are still on friendly terms with the whites. And it's my desire to keep it that way."

"Yes, but why would we want to gamble on a mission in the West with savages when the Mission Board is desperate for qualified candidates to work in the missions they've already established overseas?"

He studied her in calculated measures, starting at the tips of her soft leather boots, moving to the shiny muslin of her meeting dress, until he reached the intricately carved cameo at her throat.

She tried not to squirm under the intensity of his crystal blue eyes. Instead, she forced herself to stand taller.

He met her gaze squarely. "What would such a *fine* lady like you know of the harsh realities of mission life?"

The bold question stole away her ready answer. What did she know? Except what she'd read and heard secondhand? "I may not know everything, but I am quite prepared to give my life in service to the Lord's work."

The words of the *Missionary Herald* echoed in her mind: *A generation of heathen lives no longer than a generation of Christians.* She might be a *fine* lady, but how could she sit back in comfort and ease when so many were heading for the everlasting torments of hell?

Besides, many women of her status and background had already gone. Didn't the Mission Board continually say the most important qualities were the candidate's character, piety, and commitment?

She lifted her chin. "Fortunately, the Mission Board is quite adept in choosing their candidates. They use the utmost care to pick only the most qualified. Wouldn't you agree, Dr. Ernest?"

How could he dare to disagree without casting doubt upon himself?

His eyes narrowed, deepening the permanent crinkles at the edges. “The Mission Board needs to reevaluate its list of qualifications for women. They need to have stricter guidelines, especially for ladies like you.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Priscilla Jane White,” Mother whispered, “enough.”

“Every single letter of reference I obtained applauded my spiritual fervor, talent, education, and industriousness.” Irritation gave liberty to her tongue, even though she knew she would suffer Mother’s rebuke later. “I am physically fit, energetic, and young. I’m eager to serve the Lord and save the lost. What more is necessary?”

A shadow fell across Dr. Ernest’s face, and clouds flitted through his eyes. “My friend and fellow medical student, Dr. Newell, applied for a mission in India. He took his young bride—a delicate and refined lady like you. He’d been on the foreign shore less than a month when he had to send his bride back home . . . in a coffin.”

Priscilla’s breath rushed in, echoing the startled gasps of those around her. She stifled a chill that threatened to crawl over her skin and shook her head, unwilling to let this stranger scare her from her calling. “I’ve heard similar tales. The *Missionary Herald* doesn’t hide the perils of mission life from its readers.”

For the first time, Dr. Ernest’s lips cracked into a semblance of a smile, only it was stiff and almost contemptuous. “Ah, the glorious *Missionary Herald*. What would we do without it and all its glamorous reports of mission life?”

Her confidence faltered, and for a moment she couldn’t think of a rebuttal. She grew conscious of the fact that everyone in the

congregation was watching their exchange and she was making a scene unbecoming a lady.

“Sit down, Priscilla.” Her mother’s angry hiss pulled on her.

Priscilla lowered herself but couldn’t stop from uttering one last word on the matter. “Dr. Ernest, I’m sorry your friend lost his wife. But she died in a glorious cause and surely went on to receive an unfading crown.”

His eyes widened, almost as if he were seeing her for the first time. “There’s a good chance any missionary—man or woman—could end up a martyr,” he said slowly. “Unfortunately, the *glorious cause* seems to be partial to martyring inexperienced young ladies.”

Her mother pinched her arm, and Priscilla pressed her lips together to refrain from further discourse. Let him have his morbid views of women missionaries. There was no sense arguing with a man she’d never see again—especially since they were headed to opposite ends of the earth.

Why, then, did she feel compelled to prove herself to him?



“My husband is giving Dr. Ernest a portion of the offering,” Mary Ann whispered, peeking around the doorframe.

“I certainly didn’t mean to imply that we should shun him altogether.” Priscilla stacked the Sunday school materials. “Do you think everyone thought I was uncharitable toward him?”

The question had plagued her all through the children’s lesson, and the satisfaction she normally drew from teaching had deserted her.

Mary Ann ducked into the small room. “Well, I’m sure if you were uncharitable, it was only because he deserved it.”

Priscilla slid the bench against the wall. “You’re right. It was his fault. If he hadn’t been disparaging, I wouldn’t have needed to rise to my defense.”

Mary Ann grimaced and grasped her bulging middle.

Priscilla spun away, searching for something else to tidy, trying to ignore the sudden pang of longing in her chest.

“Don’t worry about me,” Mary Ann said. “This happens all the time lately. Dr. Baldwin tells me I’m just having false labor pains.”

Priscilla’s gaze slid involuntarily to her sister’s stomach, to her fingers splayed there, to their slow circular caress.

“I guess it’s pretty common.” Mary Ann stuck a fist into the lower part of her back and then arched. The waist of her dress pulled tight. “Enjoy your girlish figure while you still have it. I’ve heard that it’s gone forever after the birthing.”

The sting in Priscilla’s chest swelled into the base of her throat. Once again, she glanced around the room, needing something else to look at—anything besides her sister’s swelling body. If she could give up her girlish figure, she certainly would.

She shook the thought from her mind and tried to muster a smile for the two young girls who’d stayed behind to help her pick up. “What would I do without my helpers?” She forced cheerfulness to her voice.

The girls smiled.

“If I could, I’d pack you in my trunks and take you to India with me.”

They giggled.

“Teacher! Miss White!” A young boy’s urgent call sent her heart into a dash. She rushed across the room. When she stepped into the sanctuary, she averted her eyes from the adults still meeting for their class. She pressed a finger against her lips, signaling for the boy, one of her Sunday school students, to be mindful of disturbing the question-and-answer time the congregation was having with Dr. Ernest.

“Miss White!” The breathless boy dashed toward her, wiping

his red nose across his coat sleeve. "It's my brother, Rudy. He's hurt bad."

"Oh dear." Anxiety put a hustle into her efforts to retrieve her heavy winter cloak and follow the boy outside.

Clutching fistfuls of her dress, she strode across the wide lawn, her boots squishing into the February mixture of old snow and new mud.

When she reached the boys surrounding Rudy, she was puffing. "I shouldn't have let you children out early,"

They hung their heads and moved back to let her approach the boy sprawled upon the ground.

She stepped into the circle, took one glance at Rudy's face, and gasped. She could only stare with a sickening roll of her stomach at the smears of blood.

But when his eyes opened, she read the pain in them and dropped to her knees beside him. "Rudy, what happened?"

The boy managed a groan, the white of his eyes bright against the grime. Blood oozed from a gash above his eyebrow.

She slipped her hand under her cloak to her pocket. Her fingers fumbled at the drawstring, trembling in her haste to retrieve the handkerchief she kept there. "Tell me what happened, boys." She swallowed a swell of bile.

"We were having a snowball fight," Rudy's brother offered. "I guess some of the snowballs ended up having a few rocks in them."

"Ended up?" She gripped the crisply pressed cloth with its perfectly creased edges and hesitated for only a moment before lowering it against the boy's gash.

Rudy winced.

Priscilla jerked back. "Oh, I'm sorry."

"No. Press it hard." Dr. Ernest's command was soft and accompanied a rustling next to her.

She glanced sideways, and the clear eyes of Dr. Ernest met hers.

“We need to stop the blood flow.” He knelt next to her. “Once we slow the bleeding, I’ll be able to take a look at the damage.”

She nodded and dabbed the handkerchief against the gash.

“Harder.”

She pushed.

Rudy squirmed and clenched his teeth together.

“Keep pressing,” Dr. Ernest said calmly.

At the blood, the dirt, the loose flesh on Rudy’s head—her stomach rolled, and she wanted to drop the cloth and scramble away before she embarrassed herself. But she forced her fingers to stay in place until a splotch of bright red seeped into the linen and spread like the fringes of a web.

Dr. Ernest combed strands of hair away from Rudy’s forehead. “Guess you boys learned a lesson.”

They nodded mutely.

Priscilla took a steadying breath, knowing she had to stay and prove that even though she was a lady, she could withstand the discomfort of viewing an injury. And if she could stay poised during the situation, she could surely withstand the harsh realities of missionary life.

Dr. Ernest’s long fingers wove through Rudy’s hair and then moved to his face, brushing at the mud and pebbles.

She tried not to stare at the multitude of white scars that slashed across the tanned flesh of Dr. Ernest’s hands, but the puckered lines drew her attention. He’d certainly suffered incredible trauma to acquire so many lacerations.

“You’re doing fine,” he said to Rudy.

After another minute, he spoke again. “Let’s have a look at the damage now, shall we?”

She hesitated, and then lifted the bandage, making a point of focusing on Dr. Ernest’s face and not the oozing wound.

His wrinkled forehead framed tender but probing eyes. "Son, you'll need a handful of stitches, but other than that, it's safe to say you'll live."

Rudy gave the doctor a tremulous grin.

"I've got my supplies at Dr. Baldwin's house." He pushed a clean portion of the handkerchief back against the wound. "Hold this tight and head on over there so I can stitch you up."

Dr. Ernest hefted himself to his feet then reached a hand toward Priscilla. He towered over her. He'd neglected his cloak, and his shirt stretched against the hard strength of his arms and shoulders.

If she hadn't witnessed the gentleness of his hands, she wouldn't have believed a man of his magnitude capable of it. She placed her hand into his. And when his fingers closed around hers, she drew in a sharp breath. His touch was gentler than she'd imagined.

Without any effort, he drew her upward until she stood. This time when his gaze met hers, a hint of humor crinkled the corners of his eyes.

"You did a good job holding yourself together."

Was he mocking her?

The tiny crook of a grin answered her question.

"I'm a teacher, Dr. Ernest. Not a doctor's assistant." She tugged her hand out of his grip.

"Eli, you and Miss White make a good team." Dr. Baldwin clapped Dr. Ernest on the back.

"Well, you know me. I prefer working by myself."

Priscilla glanced at the crowd that had gathered, and a rush of embarrassed heat pulsed through her. She was making another spectacle with Dr. Ernest.

Taking a step away from him, she shook the folds of her cloak and brushed at the mud clinging to the embroidered edges.

Mother moved next to her and narrowed her eyes at Dr. Ernest before handing Priscilla the gloves she'd dropped in her haste to leave the building. "You're a mess." Mother tucked a strand of loose hair behind Priscilla's ear.

"I'm fine."

"And you've soiled your dress." Mother frowned at the soggy spot on her skirt.

"Hate to be the one to tell you this, ma'am—" Dr. Ernest's grin crooked higher—"but a little mud and blood is hardly the worst of what your daughter will experience when she gets to India."

Mother lifted her nose and peered at him over the top, evaluating him from his head to his boots. Then she sniffed and clutched Priscilla's arm. "Come now, dear. Let's get you home and cleaned up."

"Speaking of India," Dr. Baldwin said, stepping toward them, "I've got a letter for you, Miss White."

Priscilla froze. Even her heart floundered to a stop.

"I've just returned from a Board meeting in Prattsburgh with Dr. Ernest." The old doctor handed her an envelope. "The Board asked me to deliver this to you."

Excitement clutched her middle and twisted it. She took the letter and tried to stop the sudden shaking of her hands. Finally the Board had made its decision. She had no doubt they'd approved her for mission work. Everyone had told her she was an ideal candidate for one of the rare teaching positions they assigned to unmarried females.

The Board had made it clear they preferred sending married couples to the mission field. But she'd explained in her correspondence that she would never marry. If they wanted to use her, they would have to take her as she was.

Now, after months of waiting and raising support, she needed

only to find out exactly where in India they were sending her and when she would leave. Mrs. Wilson's school for girls, perhaps? She'd just read an article in the *Missionary Herald* about how proficient the young heathen girls were becoming in their needlework.

"Thank you." She smiled at Dr. Baldwin. But instead of returning her smile, he glanced at his shoes.

She stared at the letter, and her heart lurched. Was she really ready for this? Once she read it, she might as well kiss Mother and Father good-bye.

"Go on, open it!" someone called.

Of course she was ready. Past ready. She'd wanted to go since God had laid a calling upon her heart at the revival meeting when she'd been a girl of fifteen.

She pressed her finger into the seal, broke it, and then unfolded the crisp paper. God had given her the burden and desire to use her gifts to help save depraved souls. And now it was finally time. . . .

"Read it aloud," another voice said.

Eager eyes watched her. "Very well." She lifted the paper and cleared her throat. "Dear Miss White," she began, but the next words stuck in her throat. She scanned the sheet, and her chest constricted painfully until she could hardly breathe.

Quickly she folded the letter. "I think I shall wait—"

Mother snapped the sheet from her hand. "Priscilla Jane White, you'll do no such thing." Before she could think to react, Mother unfolded it. "These people are your biggest supporters. They deserve to share in your excitement."

"Mother," she murmured, "I'd rather read it in private—"

"My dear, stop being so modest." Mother stepped out of her reach and settled her spectacles upon her nose.

"Perhaps Miss White is right," Dr. Baldwin said.

"Nonsense."

“Mo-ther . . .” Priscilla’s whisper contained all the agony roiling through her heart.

Mother adjusted her spectacles. “Dear Miss White.”

Dr. Baldwin’s eyebrows drooped together over sad eyes. Even though he was on the Board, she knew their decision wasn’t his fault. He was the only other person in Angelica, besides Mother and Father, who knew the truth. He’d been the one to give her the diagnosis.

He’d known how important this position was to her—one of the few positions for a single woman. He knew just how much she longed to leave Allegany County and all the friends and family who would never understand why she couldn’t get married.

“We regret to inform you that at this time we cannot accept your application . . .” Mother’s voice trailed off.

An awkward silence descended over the gathering. Mother read silently and then creased the letter back into its original fold. “Well.” She pursed her lips together. “I’m sure there must be some mistake.”

Each beat of Priscilla’s heart spurted pain and confusion into the rest of her body. Her mother was right. The Board had made a mistake. Surely once she informed them the unmarried teacher position was her only option, they’d reconsider.

Dr. Baldwin shook his head. “They’ve finally made the resolution that they will not—absolutely cannot—accept unmarried candidates.”

“But why?” Priscilla’s confusion added a tinge of desperation to her tone. “I thought they were beginning to see the value in single female missionaries—”

“Miss White,” Dr. Ernest cut in. “It won’t do you any good to argue with Dr. Baldwin or the Board. Over the past few days I’ve talked with them until I was hoarse, and they haven’t budged on their requirement.”

“Oh pishposh,” Mother said. “They’ll make an exception for my Priscilla.”

Priscilla shivered and pulled her cloak tighter.

Dr. Baldwin’s eyes held hers, and the sorrow in their depths did nothing but make her shiver more.

“Now, Dr. Baldwin,” Mother said, turning to leave, “you must visit us this afternoon and clear up the misunderstanding.”

“Of course.” Priscilla nodded, pushing aside her fears. “It’s just a misunderstanding.”

“You’ll be wasting your breath,” Dr. Ernest muttered.

Mother didn’t acknowledge the young doctor’s words and instead slipped her hand into the crook of Father’s arm and tugged him forward.

Priscilla knew she should follow her parents, that it would do her no good to spar words with Dr. Ernest. And yet, there was something about his face—a roughened, rugged appeal that drew her attention again.

“I’m afraid you don’t understand the first thing about my situation or my qualifications.”

“Then go ahead and argue with the Board.” His lips cocked into a half grin. “But sooner or later you’ll have to accept their decision. And maybe even accept it as God’s will for you to stay home.”

His words dug into her, and she couldn’t keep back her retort. “I find it strange that you’re the only one who has questioned my qualifications. And since your opinion doesn’t matter in the least, I’ll continue to look to the One whose opinion matters the most. He’s called me to mission work. I’ll continue to trust that He’ll provide a way for me to go.”

She spun away from the doctor and forced herself to walk away, evenly and calmly, just as a lady should, even though her heart quavered and stumbled with each step.

Would God indeed provide a way? And if so, how?

Chapter

2

*Y*ou've turned into a good doctor, Eli," Dr. Baldwin remarked between puffs on his pipe. "Too bad you're not as good when it comes to women."

Eli pulled the silk thread up through the boy's forehead and made the last suture. His fingers flew over one another to make a tight knot. With his small scissors in hand, he squinted in the dim lighting of Dr. Baldwin's home office and snipped the loose thread.

"Oh, I'm not all that bad, Dr. Baldwin." He pressed a clean cloth against the stitches and wiped away the last traces of blood. "I've had to chase away plenty of women in my days."

The boy stared at him with wide pain-filled eyes. Traces of tears lingered on the pale face. The older brother squeezed the boy's hand.

"I've had more women hang on me than I can count." Eli winked at them.

His young patient braved a small smile.

"*Harrumph*," Dr. Baldwin half snorted, half laughed. "Too bad you don't have any of those *countless* women hanging on you lately."

Eli forced a grin—for the sake of the boy—but it didn't reach his heart. If Dr. Baldwin's comment hadn't been so pathetically true, he could have laughed.

Truth be told, he'd never had much time for the fairer sex. He'd always counted himself too busy, too devoted to his work to pay attention to the girls who'd shown him interest.

That was before he'd begun making plans to open a clinic in the far West. When he'd approached the Mission Board with his idea, he'd had to work hard to convince them of the validity of such a post. When they'd finally agreed to support him, they'd given him one stipulation: He had to take a wife.

He'd argued long and hard about the fact that a white woman had never made a crossing overland to Oregon Country, that taking a wife along would only slow him down, perhaps even threaten the entire trip.

But the Board had insisted he go with a wife or not go at all.

"You don't need countless women." Dr. Baldwin leaned back in his chair and blew a cloud of smoke into the dusky air. "You just need one."

Eli helped the boy sit up. "*I had one.*"

"Yes, *had*," Dr. Baldwin said.

Eli steadied the boy on the edge of the examining table. "And it's not my fault she married someone else while I was on my exploration trip."

His gut twisted, as it did whenever he thought about his first glance at Sarah Taylor during the Sabbath meeting the day

after he'd arrived home. When she'd stood to greet him, first her eyes, then her very rounded abdomen had told him all he needed to know.

It had only confirmed the foolishness of the Board's stipulation. Sarah hadn't really wanted to go. She had deserted him at the first opportunity. And there weren't too many other women excited about the idea of traveling where no other white woman had gone.

He couldn't blame them.

"The Board knows I tried to find a willing partner. And now they need to just let me go."

Dr. Baldwin shook his head.

Eli had tried to overlook his wounded pride, tried to make excuses for Sarah. The truth was that her rejection had stung—it had hurt a lot more than he cared to admit. And he wasn't ready to face the possibility of another rejection anytime soon.

"How are you feeling?" Eli asked his young patient.

Tears pooled in the boy's eyes.

"Still hurts more than the worst whoppin', huh?"

The lad nodded.

Careful not to touch the wound, Eli wrapped a strip around the boy's head and covered the stitches. Then he nodded at the patient's brother. "You take him straight home and tell your ma to give him another dose of laudanum. It'll take the edge off the pain for a little while."

He helped the boy from the table. "And tell her to keep the wound clean."

"Thank you." The older boy slipped an arm around his brother. He hobbled with him to the door, stopped, and looked back. "Oh, Doctor, if you need a real good woman, you won't find a better lady than our teacher."

"That so?"

"Yep. Teacher . . . well, she really cares for us. And I just know she'd make a great ma someday."

"Thank you, son."

The boy nodded solemnly, as if he'd just done Eli the greatest of favors.

Dr. Baldwin coughed. And once the boys were gone, Eli turned to look at his old friend. "What?"

"Oh, nothing."

Eli dipped his hands into the basin on the bureau near the examining table. The ice cold water rushed over the calluses he'd gained during the past year and reminded him of the mountain springs he'd washed in not many months past.

He scrubbed at the blood on his fingers and glanced around at the dark paneled walls of Dr. Baldwin's office. Was this to be his fate? A tiny office? And the never-ending bumps and bruises of the neighborhood children?

Keen longing flashed through him. What he wouldn't give for a ceiling of blue skies and four walls of endless mountains. And the beautiful brown eyes of the natives who were still open to the gospel and untouched by the hate of the whites.

"You might want to take the boy up on his advice," Dr. Baldwin said.

Eli took a deep breath of the stuffy, tobacco-spiced air. What he wouldn't give for just a whiff of the fresh, wind-tossed air of the prairies.

"She's one of the best young women I know," Dr. Baldwin continued.

"Who?"

"The teacher."

Eli's stomach pinched. "I just don't want a wife."

"Eli, now, we've been over this before, and you know as well as I do that most of the single missionaries we've sent out have

ended up fornicating with the native women or marrying among them.”

He nodded. He couldn't fault the Board's logic. After many long months traveling with the fur trappers, he'd seen enough abuse of the native women to realize the depths to which a man could sink when he was lonely.

He shook the water off his hands and reached for the towel. But still, the Board could have given him the benefit of the doubt, especially after all the work he'd already put into planning for the mission.

Frustration contracted the muscles in his chest.

He wiped his hands and tossed the towel onto the table. He knew it would do him no good to argue about the matter any further. The American Board of Missions had made their decision. He must find a wife or he couldn't go.

The trouble was, he only had four weeks left before he needed to be in Pittsburgh, where he'd arranged to meet the missionary couple that would be joining him.

“You want some help finding a wife?” Dr. Baldwin peered at him through narrowed eyes. “Or are you going to let a little pride stand in the way of your plans?”

Eli read the kindness in the depths of the man's gaze. “Apparently you've got the perfect woman picked out for me.”

He shrugged. “Of course no one is perfect. Not even you.”

Eli stared at the doctor, then finally sighed. “All right. Take me to meet this teacher.”

“I'm headed to her house right now.” Dr. Baldwin sat forward in his chair. “Why don't you come with me?”

“It had better not be Miss White.”

“And what exactly is wrong with Priscilla White?”

With a growl, Eli reached for his leather roll-up surgical case. “Come on, Doctor. If I have to take a wife, I want a strong one.

Not a woman who'll blow away like tumbleweed at the first hard gust." He wiped the blood from the scissors and stuffed them into the case. "I won't take a woman like her—not after what happened to Dr. Newell."

"Priscilla White is a hard worker." Dr. Baldwin tapped his pipe in the ashtray on the side table. "There's no other young woman who works the way Miss White does. Every time the church opens its door for a prayer meeting or a revival, she's the first there, helping however she can."

"Then let her stay here and do her part for missions on the home front." Eli stuffed the silk thread into his surgical case and folded it together.

Dr. Baldwin pushed himself out of his chair. "Eli Ernest, you're exasperating me."

He grinned. "I've been told that's one of my best qualities."
"You mean worst."

"That too."

Dr. Baldwin finally smiled. "Let's go, then. We'll speak to Priscilla together. The two of you can get married. And you'll both be able to fulfill your callings."

Eli stared at his friend and wished it were that easy. Even if she'd been the right type of woman to handle the rigors of missionary life, it was obvious they were worlds apart. "Her mother already turned up her nose at me. And now you expect that woman to agree to let her precious daughter marry me once she finds out I've got nothing but the hard-earned shirt on my back?"

"She'll come around."

Eli could only imagine the humiliation he'd have to suffer first. "No thanks."

"I guarantee it."

Something in the doctor's tone stopped Eli.

Dr. Baldwin lowered his voice. “Priscilla White had a severe case of mumps a few years ago.”

Suddenly Eli knew what the older doctor was telling him, even before the words were out.

“She lost her monthly courses, and she’s been infertile ever since.” Dr. Baldwin’s brows drooped. “I’ve done everything I can for the poor girl. But the fact of the matter is, she very likely can’t—won’t—ever be able to have children.”

Eli stared at his friend, surprised at the weight that pressed on his chest.

“I’m telling you with the understanding you’ll keep this confidential, one doctor to another.”

“Course I will.”

“No one in this community knows except me. And they want to keep it that way. They don’t want the disgrace of their oldest daughter becoming known as the barren wife of the community or the town’s old spinster.”

Eli shook his head. “There’s no disgrace in not being able to have children—”

“You know as well as I do the stigma that follows women who can’t conceive.” Dr. Baldwin pinned him with a sharp glance.

“So she’s using mission work as an escape from embarrassment?”

“See? There you go.” The older doctor pursed his lips. “Exasperating me again.”

“Doesn’t seem like the right motivation for getting involved in missions.”

“Priscilla has always had an interest in missions. Her family has encouraged her. And when she learned of her infertility, it served to strengthen her resolve toward the high calling already placed upon her heart.”

"Priscilla White might have good intentions," Eli said, "but she'd never last a day on the trip west."

Dr. Baldwin heaved a rattling sigh. "I take it that means no, you won't marry her?"

Eli hesitated. He didn't want to ruin his chances of going west, but he wasn't so desperate that he'd willingly marry the wrong woman.

"Dr. Baldwin, I'm sorry to let you down. . . . I'm not partial to sending wives back in coffins. So I'll just keep praying the Almighty finds me a better option . . . and soon."



"You must go back to the Board and convince them of their mistake."

Priscilla cringed at her mother's demand.

"They won't be swayed." Dr. Baldwin squirmed in his high-backed chair by the parlor door.

"I'll go with you." Mother paced in front of the wide fireplace. The high flames crackled but couldn't bring warmth to Priscilla's fingers. "And Priscilla will come too."

"Now, Mrs. White, that's enough." Her father rubbed his mustache, circling his fingers around his chin.

"We'll leave on the morrow." Mother didn't bother to look at Father. "Once they see Priscilla and hear from her, they won't be able to say no."

"Mrs. White, I said that's enough." Father's voice boomed. Even though the room had bright green molding and vibrant gold wallpaper with pink florets, the shadows were dismal in the late winter afternoon. "Sit down and listen to what the man is saying. For once."

Priscilla plucked at the braided trim of the settee and wished she were still small enough to crawl underneath and hide.

Mother glared at Father. "Mr. White, am I to understand that you don't care what becomes of our daughter?"

"Listen to the doctor. He's told you a hundred times now that the Board won't change their decision."

"Judge White is right." Dr. Baldwin pulled at the top button of his double-breasted waistcoat. "Everyone has agreed she's an ideal candidate. And they'll willingly send her anywhere. But . . . she must get married first."

Priscilla clutched her hands in her lap. "Doctor, that's precisely the problem—"

"I have in mind a missionary who is in desperate need of a wife. If you marry him, you'll both get what you want. It's the perfect situation."

Mother stopped pacing. "Who?"

"He's an adventurous, hardworking, resourceful fellow. If I were going to the mission field, I'd want a man just like him by my side."

"And just who is this *fellow*?" Mother asked, her brow disappearing into her hairline.

Dr. Baldwin cleared his throat. "Dr. Eli Ernest."

"Absolutely not!" Priscilla's rejection came just as quickly as Mother's. "We're headed to opposite ends of the earth."

"My daughter will never marry a man like that," Mother said. "It's obvious he is of the lowest rank and would be unsuitable for her."

"There you go putting on airs again." Father rolled his eyes. "You're not the Queen of England. Your father was a chair maker. And I was only a carpenter when we got married."

Priscilla had only a vague memory of the log cabin she'd lived in as a little girl when Allegany County had been considered New York's western frontier. Father hadn't had anything but his enterprising spirit. He'd staked out a claim of eighty acres.

Over the years, he'd steadily acquired more land and wealth until he'd moved the family to a fine wood-framed house, only a half mile from the center of town, in the better part of Angelica.

Father continued. "I'm sure the doctor is about as decent a man as our daughter can find."

"He studied at the College of Physicians and Surgeons in New York, which is where I met him," Dr. Baldwin added. "He got a real degree."

"See, Mrs. White. That's more book learning than I ever got." Father smoothed a hand over his bulging stomach. His title of judge had come only after the townspeople had elected him to various local offices, certainly not because he'd earned a law degree.

Mother only shook her head. "If we are going to consider marriage for Priscilla, then we need to find a man devoted to the ministry."

"But I'm not considering—"

"I said *if*." Mother shot her a censoring glare.

Dr. Baldwin studied Mother. "Very well, Mrs. White. I understand the prestige associated with the ministry. But if you pass up this opportunity for Priscilla to marry Dr. Ernest, you will miss even greater prestige."

"How so?"

Dr. Baldwin stood and situated his black top hat onto his head. "I think the woman Dr. Ernest marries will easily become the most famous American woman of this generation."

Mother straightened. "Famous? What do you mean?"

Father snorted. "You got her attention now, Doctor."

"The woman who travels to the far West with Dr. Ernest will be the first white woman ever to make the overland trip to Oregon Country and cross the Continental Divide. I have no doubt the eyes of every single person in this country will be watching her with great interest."

A light fanned to life in Mother's eyes—a light that made Priscilla's heart thud with despair.

Dr. Baldwin sidled around his chair and exited into the front hallway. "It's too bad you aren't willing to consider him," he called. He appeared back in the doorway, having retrieved his greatcoat from the coat stand.

"Now, wait a minute, Dr. Baldwin." Mother stepped after him. "You've misunderstood me. He may not be the ideal candidate for marriage, but we are still willing to consider him."

Priscilla jumped from the settee. She couldn't sit back and listen to any more. "Dr. Baldwin, I'm sorry. But I can't possibly consider going to Oregon Country with Dr. Ernest. It's out of the question. I'm going to India."

"I realize you had your heart set on India," Dr. Baldwin said slowly, as if choosing his words carefully. "But the far West is in need of teachers too."

"Even if I agreed to go to the wilderness of Oregon Country—which I won't—I think everyone is forgetting something very important here." She took a deep breath to ease the strain in her back. "I can't get married. I'm unable to . . ."

She couldn't get the words past the tightness of her throat.

Mother was quiet for a moment. "We don't need to tell him," she finally said.

Priscilla gasped. "Mother!" They'd agreed those many years ago on that fateful day that they would never deceive a suitor, that it was their Christian duty to inform a prospective spouse of her condition before marriage.

Once they'd made their decision, they'd also resolved that she would remain single, that it was too risky to share the news with any man. They couldn't chance his spurning her and then spreading rumors about her and ruining her reputation.

Dr. Baldwin cleared his throat. "You won't need to tell Dr. Ernest anything."

Her gaze, like her parents', swung to the old man.

The sympathy in his eyes reached out to touch her. "You won't need to tell him, because . . . I already have."

"You have?" A strange tremor of anticipation rippled through her. "You told him about . . . that I can't . . . ?"

The doctor nodded.

"And what did he say?"

"Well . . ." He fidgeted with the brim of his hat. "Let's just say I got the impression your infertility was the least of his concerns."

"Then he'll marry our Priscilla, even though he knows of her condition?" The hope in Mother's voice fanned the anticipation flickering inside Priscilla.

Dr. Baldwin's brow crinkled.

His hesitation was just enough to snuff out her glimmer of hope. She rubbed her arms, suddenly cold, as if a frigid breeze had blown through the cracks in the big parlor windows.

"He didn't exactly say he would marry Priscilla," the doctor said.

This was ridiculous. She refused to marry Dr. Ernest, and she had absolutely no inclination to go west. What kind of ministry could she have there compared to what she'd have in India? She started to shake her head, but Mother's fingers dug into her shoulder and squeezed her rebuttal to the back of her throat.

"Let's not be so dramatic about it." Her mother smiled. "If God has ordained our Priscilla to become one of the first women to cross to the West in her quest to serve Him and save the heathen, then He'll most certainly protect and provide for her each step of the way."

Father shook his head. "Doctor, I'm amazed at how quickly

and smoothly you convinced this woman to marry off our daughter.”

Dr. Baldwin gave a faint smile, but the light in his eyes wavered.

Priscilla tried not to squirm under her mother’s grip. “He may have convinced Mother. But there’s just one very major problem.”

“Of course there’s no problem,” Mother said quickly.

“Yes, Mother, there is.” She pushed aside that familiar helplessness—as if she were caught in a river current, trying to swim for the shore but never quite making it. “The problem is that Dr. Ernest hasn’t agreed to marry me. And I most certainly haven’t agreed to the union either.”

“He’ll be at the prayer meeting tonight, won’t he, Dr. Baldwin?” Mother’s tone was less of a question and more of a command.

“Yes,” the doctor replied, stuffing his arms into his heavy coat. “I’ll do my best to see that he comes.”

Mother bent over and looked Priscilla in the eyes. “Then we’ll dress our Priscilla up and fix her hair becomingly. All she’ll need to do is be her usual charming self.” The sternness in the depths of Mother’s gaze warned her not to disobey.

“No man has ever been able to resist Priscilla,” her mother said. “And I’m sure if she makes a little effort to win Dr. Ernest, he won’t be able to resist her either.”