

LORI WICK

THE  
PROPOSAL



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All Scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version of the Bible.

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## THE PROPOSAL

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# *Prologue*

**Tipton**

**Collingbourne, England**

**April 1810**

Seated in the north sitting room, her letters in her lap, Lydia Palmer read the missive in her hand one more time before looking across the room at her husband. He was studying the daily news, but only a moment passed before he glanced her way.

"What is it, love?" he asked kindly. Frank Palmer was always kind.

"My cousin has died."

Mr Palmer frowned. "I'm sorry to hear that, but I must admit I didn't think you had any cousins left."

"Godwin Jennings. He lives near Bristol, or should I say 'lived.' It was not a close relationship, but he was family."

"I know who you're talking about," he said as light dawned. "Who contacted you, by the way?"

"His solicitor," Lydia said, her eyes going back to the official letter.

"And did Mr Jennings have children?"

"Yes. Three of them." Lydia chewed her lip a moment. "I wonder where they'll end up."

"I was wondering that myself. You have so little family of any kind left."

For a moment, Mr and Mrs Palmer were quiet. A few seconds later, however, their eyes met, both faces showing some shock.

"No, Frank. It couldn't be."

"I don't know who else, Liddy. Your brother is the only male heir left in your family."

“But three children, Frank? You know how William Jennings enjoys his independence.”

Mr Palmer shrugged. “I’m just stating the need, Lydia. Unless you’re hiding someone that I don’t know about, by law Jennings would be responsible for Godwin’s children.”

Lydia shook her head. “It’s too fantastic to be real. Jennings barely tolerates women. I can’t think he would have any more interest in children.”

“Well, he wouldn’t have to love them—just support them.”

The room grew quiet again, only the ticking of the mantel clock making itself known.

“Will you write him?” Mr Palmer asked.

“Jennings? I don’t think so. He hasn’t acknowledged a single one of my letters in seven years.”

“But you don’t write to him so that he’ll answer, Lydia. You write so he’ll know you still love him.”

Lydia took the gentle rebuke in good grace. Even before reading the letter in her hand one last time, she determined to write her brother by the end of the week.

# Chapter One



**Aydon**  
**London, England**  
**May 1810**

“And where did you say this was?” Mr Collins asked as he frowned fiercely at the new help, a young man who was now sweating from every pore of his body.

“It was on the floor in the back hall, Mr Collins.”

“The postmark on this letter is five days past. How could it have been missed in the hall all these days?”

“I don’t know, sir. Betsy just gave it to me.”

“Who is Betsy?”

“We were hired at the same time, sir. I believe she works upstairs.”

Mr Collins’ eyes narrowed with even more danger.

“Mr Jennings will hear of this. You may be discharged.”

“Yes, sir.”

The crushed but humble face of the young man before him softened Mr Collins’ heart a bit. He continued more kindly, “As you know, Mr Jennings is out for the evening. He probably won’t receive this until morning. If I can put a word in for you, I will, but know this, young Geoffrey, it will not happen again.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.”

“You are dismissed.”

As Geoffrey walked away, Mr Collins, long in the employ of Mr William Jennings, stood thinking about his next move. He had several options and after just a moment’s

deliberation, took the second one and turned to locate Bates, Mr Jennings' man. It didn't take long. He ran him to earth in the servants' dining area, where he sat with a cup of tea and the day's post.

"This just surfaced," Mr Collins informed him, setting the letter on the table.

"It's five days old," Bates responded with a frown.

"Precisely. Do I tell him tonight?"

Bates looked up at his old friend and smiled wryly.

"You forget, Collins, that when he returns from Lady Wendt's dinner, we won't be doing anything tonight but keeping the house quiet."

Mr Collins had a smile to match his friend's before leaving to secure the letter on his desk, knowing he would have to face his employer come morning.



"Jennings?" Knightly called out as he entered the veranda. "What are you doing out here?"

Mr William Jennings, the man he sought, glanced over his shoulder, not at all sorry to be out of Lady Wendt's stifling ballroom and in the fresh air.

"It was a bit warm in there," Jennings said briefly as Knightly joined him at the railing.

"Yes, and getting warmer. Did you see Louisa Dent tonight? Her husband leaves for France, and she throws off every inhibition."

Jennings shook his head in disgust and said, "I've known for many years what Dent has yet to find out: Most women cannot be trusted."

"I'll say," Knightly agreed fervently, draining the glass he'd brought out with him.

“Knightly?” a female voice called from behind the men just as they were beginning to enjoy the silence. “Are you out here?”

“Yes, Augusta, I’m here.” Knightly turned from the railing. “Are you coming back in, Jennings?”

“I think not,” that man replied. He was tired and wished to go home.

“We’ll see you later,” Knightly said and moved toward his wife.

Jennings did not reply. He was in need of solitude and knew that home was the only place he could be guaranteed of that.



The carriage delivered Jennings to the front of his London home precisely on time, but that man barely took notice. Though footmen in attendance and his man, Bates, didn’t often see him elated, at times they sensed a lighter mood. Not tonight. Tonight he seemed far away, his mind in deep thought.

In the eyes of Jennings, Lady Wendt’s dinner party had been dreadful, full of women who had nothing more on their minds than catching a rich husband or gossiping about a woman who had. His dinner companion had been a vain, blonde creature so occupied with herself she had never stopped speaking. It had given him a headache.

Now in his dressing room, having stated that he wished to be alone, Jennings slowly loosened the cravat at his throat, telling himself that tonight’s dinner party would be the last. In truth, he didn’t know why he’d gone in the first place.

His mood growing more pensive by the second, he waited only until his throat was free to retire to his study to sit by the fire. No other lights burned, and for long moments he stared into the flames.

Jennings had not been reared to distrust women, but his own good mother was dead, and his sister, a woman he'd admired for many years, had changed since she'd found God, cementing Jennings' belief that women were not all that trustworthy.

Jennings hated to even think about the change. It made him angry. That anyone with half a brain would embrace the teachings of an ancient book and say they were life-changing, was incomprehensible to him.

Prior to her religious experience, his sister had been a brilliant woman. Articulate and keen—why, that's what had drawn Frank Palmer to the altar thirteen years ago. They'd been a promising couple. But Jennings couldn't stand to be around either of them any longer. For him, the relationship was over.

Warm from the fire, Jennings felt fatigue creep over him. The blaze lulled him as his irritation drained away. At moments like this, when his sister and her family came to mind, and only if he was very tired, he asked himself if he'd made the best choices. Maybe he should have looked into a family for himself. Maybe having sons to carry his name would have been worth taking a chance on a wife, but he would be thirty-four on his next birthday, and though not old by many standards, Jennings felt he was now too set in his ways to accommodate a family.

Sleep began to crowd in, and Jennings fought it. Just when he thought he could nod off in the chair, Jennings, a man of discipline, made himself rise and find his bed. The cool touch of the linens against his skin was enough to rouse him for a time, but the day's activities and the busyness of his mind were catching up. Asleep before the clock struck one, he never heard a sound.





"How did he take the lost letter?" Bates asked.

"I can't tell you. He didn't want the post with breakfast."

The two men looked at each other before going on about their duties.

The staff was accustomed to a life of order and discipline, so this was a surprise to them. Jennings was not an unreasonable man, but he liked his routine. And since he rarely stepped from the routine himself, it left his servants in something of a quandary. They carried on as best they could.

Bates went soundlessly into the room to see to his master's needs, but clearly Mr Jennings' mind was elsewhere. He seemed to be eating the breakfast in front of him without notice or even taste. All over the house, people were moving about quietly and for his comfort, and faint sounds of this activity drifted even to the small dining room where he sat, but there was no outward recognition of anything.

This went on for an hour before Jennings reached for the day's newspaper. He had only just immersed himself in an article on finance when Bates came to the dining room, this time to interrupt.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, sir, but a situation has arisen."

Jennings, wanting his solitude at the moment, still put the paper aside.

"Yes, Bates, what is it?"

"Some children have been delivered to our door, sir. The coachman insists that they are to come here to Mr William Jennings." Bates paused a moment but then went right on. "And if I may be so bold, sir, I have also brought you the post. On top is a letter that was given to Mr Collins yesterday. It was misplaced for a few days."

As keen as the sister he admired, Jennings was lifting the letter and opening it to read just moments later. The news that a cousin he barely knew existed had died was

surprising enough. Learning that the man was leaving his three children to him was staggering. Jennings sat utterly still for a full three minutes before standing to face Bates.

"Where are these children right now?"

"In the foyer, sir. The coachman would not be swayed." Jennings consulted the letter again.

"Three children?"

"Yes, sir. Two boys and a small girl."

"And their father's just died," he said almost absently.

Bates remained quiet.

"Ready a room they can all sleep in tonight."

Jennings made his way toward the foyer. It didn't take long to identify his guests. Standing in a sober mass were three children. The boys stood side by side, but the girl tried to stand behind her older brother. Upon seeing Jennings approach, the older boy gently pulled his sister out to stand next to him.

Jennings went directly to the oldest child.

"I'm William Jennings, your father's cousin," he said, putting his hand out to shake the boy's. "I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thank you, sir. My name is Thomas Jennings. This is my brother, James, and my sister, Penelope. We call her Penny."

"Hello, James," Jennings greeted him, shaking his hand as well. But when he turned back to the little girl, she was already trying to hide behind her brother.

"May I ask you a question, sir?" Thomas, pale from the events of the last weeks, took the courage to ask.

"Yes, you may, Thomas."

"Were you expecting us, sir? Is this where we are to stay?"

As though a present had been dropped from heaven, William Jennings saw what had been given to him. The answer to the boy's question came from Jennings' mouth just heartbeats before it entered his mind.

“Yes, Thomas. This is where you’re to stay.”

The young man, near his thirteenth birthday, bowed slightly in acknowledgment. His ten-year-old brother and six-year-old sister made no comment or movement at all.



“How are they?” Jennings asked, hovering near the base of the main stairway and waiting for Mr Collins to descend.

“Settling in, sir.”

“Did they need anything?”

“No, sir. Young Master Thomas assured me that he would see to things and make us aware of their needs.”

“Are they coming down?”

“I don’t believe so right now, sir. I heard Master James say that the little girl needed to sleep.”

“What’s her name again?”

“Penny, sir.”

“That’s right.”

“Is there anything else, sir?”

“No, Collins. Thank you.”

Mr Collins had all he could do not to shake his head. He’d never seen his employer so anxious or animated. He couldn’t wait to learn Bates’ opinion on the matter.

Left alone at the bottom of the stairs, Jennings debated his next move. The children needed time to settle in to their new surroundings—they’d been through quite an ordeal—but at the same time he wanted to get to know those boys. Many times in his life he had yearned for this very thing: sons to share his life with, and now he had two of them! It was almost too fantastic to be real. Last night he’d been mourning his choices, and now he had two sons without the trouble of a wife.

His mind ran with the things he wanted to tell them and show them. Not sure when they would be ready to come down, Jennings retired to his study to prepare for such a time.



"It's all right," Thomas said to his sister as he stroked her hair and tried to believe his own words. "Just go to sleep."

"I'm cold," she sobbed.

Thomas shifted the covers up closer to her face.

"The fire is high; you'll be warm soon. Just close your eyes, Penny."

The little girl did as she was told, but not before whispering, "I need Papa."

Thomas didn't reply. He wanted their father too. From his place at the edge of the bed, Thomas looked over to where James sat by the fire. Normally rather bookish, James hadn't read a word since their father's death. Even now he looked into the flames, seemingly unaware of much else.

A glance down at Penny told Thomas she was asleep. She'd traveled in wide-eyed terror all the way to London, and he knew she was exhausted. Moving quietly to the fire with James, Thomas took a moment and looked at the room they were in. It was a large room with two wide beds. They would be very comfortable in here, but something in his young heart told him not to get too relaxed.

"Is she asleep?" James asked quietly.

"Yes."

"I'm hungry," James admitted.

"I am too."

James looked at his brother. "Do you want me to ask for something?"

"I thought I'd wait until Penny woke."

James looked surprised. "She could sleep for hours."

Thomas nodded, knowing how true that was. He could see they had little choice.

"I'll go, but we might need to take turns so one of us can sit with Penny."

"All right. You go first."

"Well, we'll see," Thomas said as he made for the door.



Jennings had tried very hard to find more to do in the study, but a sudden need to move about found him in the large entryway. For this reason he spotted Thomas' descent almost as soon as the lad was on the stairs.

"Is everything well, Thomas?" Jennings asked as soon as Thomas finished the last step.

"Our room is very nice. Thank you, sir."

"Is there something you need?"

"My brother and I find we're a little hungry."

"Of course you are," Jennings said immediately. "Why don't you go and get James, and the two of you can join me for tea."

"Actually, sir, I feel that one of us needs to sit with Penny, so if we could eat separately, that might be best."

"Very well," Jennings said, his face giving nothing away. In all his plans for the boys, he'd forgotten their sister again. "I'll just have something sent up, shall I?"

Thomas paused but still managed to say what was on his mind.

"At the risk of sounding ungrateful, sir, I don't wish to have Penny disturbed."

For the first time Jennings actually looked at this boy. His eyes were red while the flesh around them looked bruised from lack of sleep. He was pale, even to his lips, and he looked as though the world had been set on his shoulders. Jennings knew a compassion he'd not felt in years.

"Of course you don't want her disturbed, Thomas. Come with me and eat something, and then James can take your place."

Knowing nothing but relief that he'd been understood, Thomas went gratefully, planning to eat swiftly so that James would not have to sit hungry much longer.

He wouldn't have hurried so much had he realized the day was going to be spent in their room watching Penny sleep.



Thomas Jennings woke slowly the next morning. He could feel James' warmth beside him and realized that he'd slept hard all night. Shifting his neck a bit after feeling its stiffness, he pushed up against the headboard before looking at his sister's bed.

Penelope Jennings, dark hair a mass around her face, sat looking across at him.

"Are you awake, Thomas?"

"I'm awake."

"Do they have food in this house, Thomas?" she asked.

"Come here," he said, motioning to her with his hand.

Not a very large six-year-old, Penny slipped off her bed and climbed up onto the one her brothers shared. Thomas had curled his legs in, and Penny sat on the counterpane in front of him.

"You slept all night," Thomas said when she looked at him, reaching to push some of the hair from her face.

"Do we go home today?"

"No, Penny, we're staying here."

"Will they let us have food?"

"Yes. Are you hungry?"

Penny nodded and Thomas looked at her face. If the portraits didn't lie, she was a picture of their mother as a child, the mother who had died having her.

"Is Papa happy with Jesus, or does he miss us, Thomas?" Penny suddenly asked.

Rested as he was, the oldest Jennings child still felt tears stinging at the back of his throat.

"He is happy with the Lord Jesus, Penny, and he trusts the Lord Jesus to watch over us, but I think if Papa had had a choice, he would have wanted to stay and take care of us."

James rolled over then to face his siblings.

"I was thinking about that too. I think if Papa knew he was going to die, he would have told us about William Jennings, so it wouldn't have been such a surprise."

"Did he know William Jennings?" Penny asked.

"He knew of him," Thomas said. "I'm sure of that, but I don't know if they had much contact."

A noise in the hall just then gave the children hope. It was hard to tell if it was too early for breakfast, but they wouldn't know until they dressed and ventured forth. And that plan went well until they got to Penny's hair. Mrs Murch had seen to things before they left Morehouse, the children's home, so this was the first time Thomas had been left with the task. He found in a hurry that the tresses had a mind of their own—just curly enough to be difficult and just thick enough to make it a challenge. Thomas ended up brushing Penny's hair out and leaving it to fall down the little girl's back. It was never left that way at home, but they were all growing more hungry by the moment, and it would do for now.

Hungry as Penny was, leaving the room was hard. The house was large and strange, and she didn't want to see William Jennings again. He didn't look at all like her papa, who had been a man who smiled most of the time, and she

was a little bit afraid of him. Nevertheless, her stomach was quite empty. She kept glancing toward her brothers, who seemed to know their way around, and was startled when they suddenly spoke to someone.

“Good morning, Mr Collins,” Thomas ventured. “Are we too early for breakfast?”

“Not at all, Master Thomas. Please come this way.”

“Thank you.”

Penny brought up the rear of this foursome, her eyes taking in statues and paintings that were far above her head.

“Here you are,” Mr Collins offered once they were in a room with a large table. Thomas directed Penny to a seat. James sat next to her, and Thomas sat across the table.

“Breakfast will be served momentarily,” Mr Collins informed them before leaving.

Penny waited only until he exited the room to fix her dress. She had sat on it awkwardly, and the neck was choking her. Putting a small glass figurine on the table, she shifted until she was comfortable.

“Oh, Penny,” James chided, sounding aggrieved. “You didn’t bring Mr Pat with you.”

The little girl looked upset as she took it back in her hand.

“Will Mr Jennings be angry?”

“No, but there’s no place for it at the breakfast table. You should have left it in the room.”

“Put it in your pocket,” Thomas suggested, not wanting James and Penny to argue.

Penny did so, her eyes large and sober. James looked her way and felt bad.

“It’s all right, Penny. I just don’t want us to make a mistake and get booted out of here. I don’t know where we would go.”

“Is that going to happen, Thomas?” Penny asked.



"No, Penny, I don't think so, but Father would want us to be on our best behavior."

Penny nodded, looking as lost and little as she felt.

Relief, however, was on the way. Not aware that they were up already, Jennings did not join them, but platters of food began to arrive, and in little time all hunger was forgotten.

The report back to Cook that the three children were good eaters made that woman's day. She started baking cookies, four different varieties, with plans to get word to the children that they were to visit her in the kitchen and have samples as often as they liked.



"I think this is the door," Thomas said as he led his siblings toward the back of the house and outside a short time after breakfast. Once the door was shut behind them, they stood and took in a high-walled garden, quite large and overflowing with flowers. It was nothing like the rolling hillsides at home, but the fresh air was nice, and the flowers in William Jennings' yard were beautiful.

"Stay on the path," Thomas directed when Penny started forward.

That little girl was careful to obey, and when she came to a stone bench, she sat down, noticing that it was just her size. Thomas and James moved to look at the lattice work on a trellis, and that was where Jennings found them.

"Good morning, Thomas. Good morning, James. How was your night's rest?"

"Very good, sir. Thank you."

"And breakfast? Did you have enough to eat?"

"Plenty, sir. Should we know the times for meals, Mr Jennings? Were we too early this morning?"

“Not at all. Why don’t you tell me when you like to eat, and I’ll see to it that Mr Collins alerts the staff.” Remembering again that he was going to have to give the boys time, he mentioned tactfully, “I’m often out in the evenings, but maybe we could breakfast or lunch together.”

“Thank you, sir. We would enjoy that.”

“Is this a sundial?” James asked, having been distracted by the instrument high on the stone wall. He’d never seen one that didn’t sit on a pedestal or base on the ground.

“Yes, it is. I found that at an auction a few years ago and thought I had a good spot for it. What do you think, James?”

“I think it’s a perfect spot. I’ve read about these but have never seen one. Our father had a sundial in the yard, but the base broke which tipped it slightly. After that it was never correct.”

“I bought this trellis at the same time,” Jennings went on to add, walking over to put his hand on it. “Did you happen to notice it?”

“Yes. It looks heavy.”

“It’s very heavy. It was too large to come through the house, and they had quite the time getting it over the wall.”

“Is there no door in the wall?” Thomas asked, wishing all of this was as normal as it must have looked.

“There is, but it’s too small.” The gentleman went on speaking about various things in the garden, but Penny did not join the other three. When she had heard the door open, she scooted off the bench and behind a bush. She could see her brothers from where she was, but at the moment they didn’t look for her. Penny listened to their conversation and relaxed a little when she realized their host had not come to boot them out. Even though she heard the calm, quiet sound of Mr Jennings’ voice and did not find him as scary as she remembered, Penny hoped her brothers would not miss her until he had gone back inside.