

LORI WICK

THE  
VISITOR



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

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## THE VISITOR

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# *The English Garden*

## *Collingbourne Families*

### ~ **Frank and Lydia Palmer**

Children: Frank, Walt, Emma, Lizzy, and Oliver

Home: Tipton

### ~ **William and Marianne Jennings** (William Jennings is brother to Lydia Palmer)

Children: Thomas, James, Penny, and Catherine

Home: Thornton Hall

### ~ **Robert and Anne Weston**

Home: Brown Manor

### ~ **Pastor Frederick and Judith Hurst**

Children: Jeffrey, Jane, Margaret, and John

Home: the manse

### ~ **James and Mary Walker** (Marianne Jennings' parents)

Home: Blackburn Manor

### ~ **The Steeles**

Henry, Charlotte (married to John Barrington), Elizabeth, Edward, and Cassandra

Home: Newcomb Park

### ~ **Alexander Tate** (Harriet Thorpe is his aunt)

Home: Pembroke

# *Prologue*



## **London Preston Manor January 1812**

Dr Harvill stood patiently in the hallway outside of Alexander Tate's bedroom. Several maids entered the room, a manservant behind them, all of them seeing to their tasks and exiting one at a time. Tate's man, Hastings, as well as his business manager, Charles Pierrepont, were among the parade of people. Not accustomed in his line of work to being asked to wait, the good doctor remained silent to see what would happen.

"Mr Tate will see you now, Dr Harvill," Mrs Thorpe, Tate's aunt, finally appeared to say. She bid him enter. The doctor did so without comment.

"How are you today, Mr Tate?"

"I have a headache," the gentleman said quietly.

"I don't wonder," the doctor stated mildly, but the comment was not lost on the injured man.

"What do you suggest I do?" Tate asked, his voice still quiet.

"I suggest you get out of London. It may be that you'll regain your sight if all you do is keep those patches in place, but if my vision were in question, I'd do everything I could to aid the healing."

"And what exactly will leaving London accomplish?"

"If done properly, it will give you peace and quiet. Make it clear to your staff that you're not to be disturbed. Leave all your business affairs behind, and rest without interruption or demands on your energy. Let your body heal without all this tension."

Such a thing had never occurred to Tate, and now the very thought of it caused him disquiet. That the fall from his horse had caused his vision to become dim and blurred was difficult enough, but now to give up all sense of a normal life? That was going to take some thought.

"How long?" he finally asked.

"No less than six months—possibly a year."

*Six months?* Tate's mind questioned as his hand came to his head. Had the ache intensified, or was he imagining it?

"I'll check your eyes now," the doctor said quietly as he went to work. Tate had not expected to find his vision clear when the patches were lifted, but the horrible blur of dark and gray, now six weeks old, was disheartening.

The painless yet thorough examination complete, the doctor stepped back, closed his bag, and pulled a chair close.

"We've known each other for years, Tate," the older man ventured with quiet respect. "I've long admired your family's faith, but even God needs a little help now and then."

Even with the eye patches, the doctor saw Tate's brows rise.

"Yes, yes, I might not have stated that well, but you know what I mean. You can't stay here in the name of faith in God and pretend that everything is fine. That fall could have killed you, and we both know it. Do yourself a favor and be reclusive for a time. Go away, and see if your eyesight doesn't return to you."

Tate couldn't argue. He was hoping for a miracle, but miracle or not, the doctor was right: He had done nothing to aid the healing process. Indeed, other than doing business

from a comfortable chair in his bedroom, he had not slowed down at all.

"I'll take your advice, Harvill. Will you be able to recommend a physician for me?"

"When you decide where you're going, let me know. I'll do whatever I can."

Thanking the man and shaking the hand that suddenly found his, Tate found himself alone a moment later. When the door opened after a few minutes, he was quite certain it was his aunt.

"Aunt Harriet?"

"Yes, Alex. What did the doctor say?"

In an abbreviated version, Tate explained the situation, his voice calm, not resigned or anxious.

"I don't expect you to trail after me," he finished, "but you're certainly welcome—not that I know where I'm headed."

"Are you open to suggestions?"

"You know I am."

When Harriet spoke again, he could hear the smile in her voice.

"I know just the place, my dear," she reassured him warmly. "Leave everything to me."

# Chapter One



## **Collingbourne, England Newcomb Park March 1812**

Elizabeth Steele, Lizzy to family and friends, worked her way through breakfast, correspondence around her. She had letters from both her sisters, her brother—whose last letter had said he was somewhere in Africa—and even one from an elderly relative in London.

The temptation to tear into her brother's letter was great, but she made herself save it for last. Even as she did this, a conversation came back to her, a conversation during a visit with Anne Weston in a Collingbourne shop just days after she'd arrived back in town.

*"Anne, is that you?"*

*"Lizzy!" Anne exclaimed with delight as she rushed to hug the friend who had entered the aisle. "How are you?"*

*"I'm very well," Elizabeth Steele told her, smiling in delight of their meeting. "How are you?"*

*"I'm married," Anne told her, her smile lighting her whole face. "I'm Mrs Robert Weston."*

*"Oh, Anne, I'm so pleased for you."*

*"But tell me, Lizzy!" Anne rushed on. "Are you visiting or have you moved back?"*

*"I'm back."*

*"How long have you been here?"*

*"Only a week."*

*"And what brought this about?"*

*“Several things, but mostly that my brother has left England to travel for a time.”*

*Anne’s brows rose in surprise. “Which brother?”*

*“Edward. He left in August, but it feels like forever. I told Henry that I wanted to return to Collingbourne, and surprisingly enough he wanted to move as well.”*

*“And is it just Henry, or are all your siblings back?”*

*“Everyone save Edward,” Elizabeth said with a smile. “A little peace and quiet at Newcomb Park would have been lovely, but we’re all home.”*

*“It’s so wonderful to see you, Lizzy. Things are busy just now, but when the holidays are over, I want you to come and visit.”*

*“I want you to do the same. I must meet your Mr Weston.”*

*“And you shall. We’ll be in church tomorrow.”*

*“I shall seek you out.”*

That conversation had been in November, four swift months earlier. In that time Lizzy’s sister Charlotte had married John Barrington, and her sister Cassandra had accompanied a friend on a trip to northern England. Cassandra was scheduled to arrive in Collingbourne within a week, but when she would see the new Mrs Barrington or her brother Edward again was in question.

Thinking back on it, Lizzy wondered that Anne hadn’t questioned why Edward’s departure would precipitate her moving back to Newcomb Park, but right now she was very glad that part of her heart had remained a secret.

Henry, the oldest of the Steele family and by far the most reserved, arrived just then, helping to remove Lizzy’s mind from the unread letter as well as her current thoughts.

*“Breakfast, Henry?”*

*“Please.”*

Lizzy knew very well that if she didn’t push the point, he would be happy to utter only that word to her all day. A man who simply did not need spoken words to live, Henry took



his seat at the breakfast table, prayed, and calmly began to eat.

Lizzy knew she could draw him out with an effort, but at the moment she didn't have the energy. Her mind was on someone else, someone who had traveled with her brother, unaware that when he'd left England, he'd taken Lizzy's heart with him.



### **Collingbourne, England** **Brown Manor**

Robert Weston walked slowly along the garden path, his eyes scanning the lush greenery for signs of his wife. He knew she was out here—the early blooms were irresistible right now—but hadn't spotted her just yet. When he did, he stopped, just taking time to study her.

Anne Weston stood in profile to her husband, the breeze pressing her dress against her and giving full evidence of her condition. Weston watched as she placed a long-stemmed blossom in the basket that hung from her arm before reaching to snip another one. Not until she straightened did she spy her husband and smile.

"This looks fun," Weston commented as he joined her.

"It is, but I'm almost finished."

"Are you getting tired?"

"A little."

"Let Sally do the arranging and take a rest," Weston suggested.

"Actually, I was thinking I might play the piano for a time."

"Can you reach the keys these days?"

Anne couldn't stop her laugh.

"You are incorrigible."

Weston grinned. "I was hoping you would think so."

Weston took the basket, and the two walked toward the house. Work on the conservatory behind them continued at a good pace, but these things always took time. Married just nine months, Mr and Mrs Weston were both delighted that Anne was expecting their first child.

"Oh, that's right!" Anne stopped just as they neared the door. "I was going to gather some herbs from the kitchen garden."

"Sally can do that, or Cook."

Anne nodded in agreement, but her heart wasn't willing to give up one of her passions. Puttering in the garden was one of her favorite activities, and the spacious walled-in kitchen garden never ceased to delight her. Nevertheless, Weston held the door for his wife, and she entered the mansion they called home.

"Is this your luncheon day with Judith Hurst?" Weston asked just after he'd passed the flower basket to Sally.

"Yes. She's coming at noon."

"Will you rest before then?"

Anne, who had still been thinking about the herbs, finally looked at him.

"That's the second time you've mentioned resting."

"I just don't want you to overdo. And if my memory serves me correctly, the last time you had company, it wore you out."

Anne had forgotten about that.

"Do I look tired?" Anne now asked.

"Not tired, but a little flushed."

She saw the concern in his eyes and decided to take it easy.

"Good," Weston said when she told him. "You might actually fall asleep."

Anne, sure that she would do no such thing, only smiled and moved to the yellow salon to put her feet up and read

for a while. When Weston checked on her some 30 minutes later, the book lay open in her lap, but her eyes were closed in sleep.



"I have news for you," Judith Hurst said the moment the two women were alone.

"Good news?"

"Very."

"Tell me."

"Your first child and my fifth will be in the nursery together."

"Oh, Judith," Anne said softly, moving to hug her friend. "That's wonderful. Is Pastor ecstatic?"

"Over the moon. You'd think it was our first!"

"How do you feel?"

"Usually fine. Morning can be a bit tense, but it's nothing that won't go away in a few more weeks."

"Have you let any of the church families know?"

Judith grinned. "We think it's more fun to let them find out for themselves."

Anne laughed at the look of conspiracy in her friend's eyes as the two enjoyed a lovely meal together. They also caught up on the latest news, something they usually didn't have time for on Sundays.

By the time Judith took her leave, Anne was weary, but her face held a smile. The Hursts' plan to let the congregation learn of the pregnancy on its own was a brilliant idea. Anne decided then and there not to tell Weston. She would wait until he heard the news and then have the delight of telling him she'd known all along.



**Newcomb Park**

Lizzy read Edward's letter again the next morning. Nothing had changed. She hadn't missed a thing, but her lonely heart somehow willed the words to be different.

Laying her head back against the sofa in the small sitting room, her eyes slowly closing, Lizzy remembered the last time she'd seen Thomas Morland. It was a Sunday morning in Bath.

*"I'm going to be gathering the last of my things tonight, Edward," Thomas said as soon as they exited the church building.*

*"All right. Shall I meet you at your house then?"*

*"Tuesday morning. I'll expect you at 8:00."*

*"I'll be there."*

*Lizzy stood quietly, as did her sister Cassandra. Henry had gone ahead to the coach to find some papers he'd promised Pastor Greville. For a moment it didn't look as though Morland would even remember to glance their way, but just before he turned away, his eyes found Lizzy's.*

*"Well, Lizzy and Cassie, I won't be seeing you again for a time, so I guess this is goodbye."*

*"Have a good trip, Morland," Cassandra bade him. "Take good care of yourself and our Edward."*

*"I shall. Goodbye."*

*"Goodbye," Lizzy put in as he turned, but he'd broken eye contact by then.*

*Lizzy wondered all the way home if her face showed how frozen her heart felt. It had all been so fast, and with no word on when they would see him again. She glanced at Edward, but clearly he was preoccupied with his own traveling plans. Cassandra was gazing out the window, so for the moment Lizzy felt free to let her eyes slide shut.*

*"Are you all right?"*

*Lizzy was stunned to hear her brother Henry quietly asking this. So stunned in fact, that for a moment she didn't answer.*

*"Yes, Henry. Thank you."*

*Henry's eyes remained on her for a few moments before shifting to the window. Lizzy's own gaze shifted as well. All she could wish for was her older sister, but Charlotte was visiting with her fiancé's family and would not be home for several more days.*

Lizzy surfaced from the memory with a start, sitting upright in her seat. The scene was so painful in her mind that for a moment her breathing was labored.

"Do you need something, ma'am?"

Lizzy's personal maid had come to the room and found her mistress so pale that she interrupted her.

"No, Kitty, thank you," Lizzy said quietly, managing a smile. But the occurrence caused Lizzy to head for the mirror. After a brief look, she concluded that she looked awful and decided not to sit about and baby herself any longer. Calling for a basket and her small hand-clippers, she headed for the garden. Flowers were not her favorite pastime, but anything had to be better than sitting around and feeling sorry for herself.



## **Collingbourne, England**

### **Pembroke**

"Tate?" Harriet called as she knocked, opening the bedroom door just enough to be heard. "May I come in?"

"Yes."

Tate turned to the sound of his aunt entering as the door opened completely. He'd been standing in front of the open window, taking some air. The blackness was always there,

surrounding him in every way. Most of the time he could ignore it, but just then he'd smelled something pleasant through the open window. It might have been a flower, bush, or combination of both, but without going out to investigate, he was left wondering.

"How are you, dear?" his aunt asked, closing the door behind her.

"A bit cross, I must admit."

"Is there anything I can do?"

"Nothing comes to mind."

Harriet couldn't stop the smile that came to her mouth. Even in a poor mood, Alexander Tate was polite. He might be tempted to ask her to leave, but if he was, he was careful to keep such thoughts from showing on his face or in his voice. Certainly one could mask a great deal when eyes could not be seen, but Harriet was looking at her nephew's face, and there was not so much as a cross wrinkle to his brow or a single stern line to his relaxed mouth.

"You've a letter here from Banks," Harriet said, referring to the man who ran things in Tate's London home. "Would you like me to read it to you?"

"Not just now. Thank you, Aunt Harriet."

The smile dropped from Harriet's face. Tate was doing an admirable job of hiding it, but his spirits were beginning to droop. The inactivity, darkness, and lack of companionship were starting to wear on him.

Harriet was on the verge of telling him her plans for the rest of the day, hoping to distract him, when someone knocked on the door. Harriet went to answer it, relief filling her when Hastings stood in the hallway and informed her that Dr Tilney had stopped by and wished to see Tate.

"Certainly, Hastings," Harriet told Tate's right-hand man. "Send him directly up."

Harriet didn't know if the doctor would have good news, but his visit alone would be a welcome interruption. The

older woman left the men alone during the examination, but Harriet Thorpe wasted no time once Dr Tilney was through. She met him at the front door and walked him to his coach.

"How are his eyes?"

"There's improvement, but he needs to keep on as he is for several more months. That's when we'll know if all this darkness and rest have been worth it or not."

"Thank you, Dr Tilney."

"You're welcome," he said. He would have turned away, but Harriet wasn't done.

"I have something I want to ask you."

The doctor listened as Tate's aunt discussed an idea with him, one she felt desperate to try.

"I like your plan, Mrs Thorpe," the doctor said. "But it would have to be just the right person. Someone calm and undemanding. Someone who will know when to leave, a person who can read the signs that are not spoken."

Harriet nodded, glad that he had agreed.

"You're right, of course; not just anyone will do. But at least with your permission I can begin to keep my eyes and ears open."

The kind doctor put a comforting hand on her shoulder.

"Collingbourne is full of fine folk, Mrs Thorpe. No doubt the right person will come to you very soon."

Harriet thanked him without further comment, but there was plenty on her mind as the doctor's coach pulled away. *I'm sure Collingbourne does have many fine folk, Dr Tilney, but I won't be looking far and wide. I'll be concentrating my search within the church family.*



"Are you ever like Jonah?" Pastor Hurst asked the congregation in the closing minutes of his sermon on Sunday.

“Four chapters in the Book have this prophet’s name on them, and more than two of them are about his disobedience. Do more than half the things said about you concern your disobedience?”

“Jonah’s discontent was at a remarkable level. This prophet of God needed to be ashamed of himself in light of how swiftly wicked Nineveh repented. Jonah was given a job and ran. The citizens of Nineveh learned of their doom and fell to their knees in repentance. While we read about Jonah’s repentant heart in the belly of the fish, it didn’t take long for him to pout when God did things he disagreed with. When he was in trouble, he said God was His salvation, but when you look at chapter 4, verse 2, Jonah is disgusted with God for the salvation He offers to Nineveh.”

Pastor Hurst smiled gently at the group gathered before him, his eyes warm.

“We’re so like Jonah, aren’t we? We have in our mind the way we think things should be done, and when they don’t happen that way, we frown toward heaven and pout. But there’s hope, isn’t there? Jonah himself, even though he wasn’t very happy, had to admit that God is a gracious God, merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness. That’s why there’s hope. Not with us, but in the God who loves us.

“No matter how often we have failed, frowned, or followed our own path in the past, our gracious, kind, merciful, saving God is ready with forgiveness.

“We’ll be talking about Jonah for several more weeks. There is much to be learned here about God’s love and our discontent. If you have a chance, study the book of Jonah on your own. Ask God to teach you things that will change you forever.”

Pastor Hurst then led them in a final prayer and dismissed the congregation.

Lizzy sat for a moment and thought about what she’d heard. She had been discontented since Thomas Morland



left with Edward. She now realized what a waste of time that had been—her time and God's. It was time to confess her selfishness and agree with God no matter what His plan.

"Lizzy."

Lizzy looked up to see Mrs Walker calling to her from the end of the pew.

"Come and hug me," the older woman bade, "and tell me how you are."

Lizzy did as she was asked, glad for their friendship.

"I'm doing better after that sermon," Lizzy admitted as the women embraced.

"I'm glad to hear it. Can you and Henry join us for lunch today?"

"That sounds wonderful. I'll check with him."

Henry Steele enjoyed James Walker's company immensely. They might not have contact for months or even years at a time, but whenever they were together, their conversation picked up without faltering. With this in mind, Henry agreed to lunch at Blackburn Manor without hesitation.

Lizzy and Mrs Walker also enjoyed one another's company, but today there was an added bonus. After going home to check on Tate, Harriet Thorpe arrived for lunch as well.

"Mrs Thorpe," Lizzy greeted her warmly. "How are you?"

"I'm very well, Elizabeth." The two had met in January. "How are you?"

"I'm well. I was thinking about your nephew this morning when I saw you come in alone. Has there been any improvement?"

"Not yet. The doctor still wants him to take it very slowly."

Mrs Walker invited the women into the sitting room to get comfortable; the men were still in the study looking at elaborate plans for a plumbing system, something Mr Walker had picked up at the town market.

"When does Cassandra arrive?" Mrs Walker asked Lizzy as soon as the women were settled.

"This week."

Lizzy went on to tell her hostess something about a recent letter, but Harriet barely heard her. As on the first occasion they had met, she couldn't remember the last time she'd spoken with such a beautiful young woman. She couldn't help but wonder if Tate had ever met her.

"I can't remember, Elizabeth," Harriet began when there was a lull. "Where were you moving from when you came to Collingbourne?"

"We have a home outside of Bath. We haven't lived or visited here for some time, but it's still like coming home."

"Tell her about Pembroke, Harriet," Mrs Walker put in. "It's such a fun story."

Harriet smiled. "Pembroke was built in 1755. It has a large ballroom, very ornate, and grounds of more than 600 acres. Twenty years after it was built, an observatory was added. Garden windows sit all along the first floor, and the sweeping view from the rear windows is nothing short of breathtaking."

Harriet smiled again before adding, "I honeymooned at Pembroke. When Thorpe and I were married, the house belonged to his father. We spent six months here, roaming about and falling deeper in love. When it was time to return to London, I cried. When my father-in-law died and everything came to Thorpe, I cried again, knowing we could visit whenever we wished. We didn't come nearly as often as I dreamed, but it was lovely knowing it waited here for us."

"How wonderful," Lizzy said, her voice betraying a tinge of envy.

"When Tate is feeling more the thing, you'll have to come to visit."

"I would enjoy that."

"Still no visitors?" Mrs Walker questioned her friend.

“No. Tate still needs to take things quite slowly. Dr Tilney and I have thought of something that might work, but it’s a rather delicate matter. If you could pray that I’ll have wisdom in the days and weeks to come, I would much appreciate it.”

Harriet feared she might have said too much. She didn’t wish to be questioned at this time, and she was relieved that the men joined them before the conversation could proceed further. The five acquaintances moved to the dining room to eat, and Harriet was able to keep her plan private.

She surreptitiously watched Lizzy Steele the rest of the afternoon, wondering in her heart if she might be the person Tate needed. Lizzy was certainly lovely enough—not that looks mattered at a time like this. Still, Harriet’s heart was uncertain, so she kept her mouth shut. *It’s one of two things, Harriet, old girl,* she said to herself. *Either the whole idea is an ill-fated one, or Elizabeth Steele is not the person needed at this time.*

For a moment, Harriet’s gaze shifted to Henry Steele, only just realizing he’d been rather quiet during the meal. However, she didn’t completely count him out, either. *It could be anyone, Lord, anyone at all. If the idea will work, You’ll show me somehow. Help me to be wise and aware.*

Almost with a start, she realized she’d done little but think of Tate since arriving. Knowing enough was enough, Harriet settled in to enjoy the rest of lunch and her visit.