

CHAPTER ONE

Emma Woodhouse



Emma Woodhouse, beautiful, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and a happy nature, was very fortunate, it seemed. She was nearly twenty-one, and in all her twenty-one years, not much had come into her life to trouble her or worry her. She was the younger daughter of a kind and loving father, and she had an older sister, Isabella. Emma's mother had died so long ago that she could not remember her well, and an excellent governess, Miss Taylor, had taken care of the Woodhouse girls.

Miss Taylor had been with the Woodhouse family for sixteen years, and was very fond of both daughters, but Emma was her favourite. Between *them*, there was the closeness of sisters. Even when Emma was a child, Miss Taylor had been too gentle to give her any punishment, and once Emma no longer needed a governess, they became more like affectionate companions than teacher and pupil. Emma did just what she liked. She highly respected Miss Taylor's judgement, but mainly followed her own.

When Emma's sister Isabella had married and moved to London, sixteen miles away, Emma had become the mistress of the family home, Hartfield. She kept the keys, gave orders to the servants, and paid the bills.

Emma's father, Mr Woodhouse, loved her so much that in his eyes, she had no faults; and because she was the cleverest in the family, he always asked her opinion before deciding

anything. So Emma's only problem was that too often she could do just what she wanted, and most of the time, she thought a little too well of herself. There was a danger in this to her future well-being. But as she was blind to the danger, she did not see any disadvantages in her situation.

A gentle sadness did come into Emma's life: Miss Taylor married, and moved away. Losing Miss Taylor made Emma feel real unhappiness for the first time. On the wedding-day of this dear friend, Emma realized how different things would be now. That night, after the wedding, she and her father were left at Hartfield to have dinner together, with no hope of a third person to lighten a long evening. After dinner, Mr Woodhouse went to sleep in his chair as usual, and Emma could only sit and think of what she had lost.



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The marriage would, she was sure, bring happiness to Miss Taylor. Miss Taylor's new husband, Mr Weston, was well-respected, he had enough money, he was the right age, and he was pleasant to everybody. The Westons' house, Randalls, was only half a mile from Hartfield, but there was a great difference between a Miss Taylor in the house and a Mrs Weston half a mile away. Emma knew she would miss her friend every moment of the day. Miss Taylor was the best kind of companion: intelligent, well-informed, useful, gentle, and interested in all of Emma's ideas and plans.

Emma loved her father dearly, but because he had married late in life, there was a great difference in age between them. That was not the only difficulty: he seemed much older than someone his age should be, and although everyone loved him for his kindness, he was not known for his quick intelligence.

Emma and her father were the most important people in Highbury, the large village where they lived. There had been Woodhouses in Highbury for years and years, and everyone had great respect for them. Emma knew many people there, but there was no other young woman who was her equal in social class or intelligence.

These were the thoughts in Emma's head on the evening after Miss Taylor's wedding, but when Mr Woodhouse woke up from his sleep, she had to put them to one side and smile and talk cheerfully to him. Mr Woodhouse was a sensitive man, fond of everyone and everything he was used to, and he hated change of any kind. Marriage, as it caused change, was always a worry to him. He was still not happy about his older daughter's marriage, and only ever spoke about poor

Isabella with pity, because she had had to move away.

‘Poor Miss Taylor!’ he sighed miserably now. ‘Why did Mr Weston have to marry her?’

‘Father,’ said Emma with a gentle smile, ‘Mr Weston is a kind, pleasant man who needed a good wife. Poor Miss Taylor could not stay with us forever, living with my strange habits! It’s much better for her to have her own house.’

‘Her own house! Why would she want that, when this house is three times bigger? And you do not have any strange habits, my dear.’

Emma smiled brightly and tried to make Mr Woodhouse think of something else, but it was not easy, and she was delighted when a visitor walked in. Mr Knightley, a cheerful, sensible man of about thirty-seven or eight, was an old friend of the family, and the older brother of Isabella’s husband. He lived about a mile from Hartfield, and was a frequent visitor, always warmly welcomed.

‘I have just returned from visiting your daughter in London, sir,’ he said to Mr Woodhouse.

‘Oh, how is poor Isabella?’ asked Mr Woodhouse in a worried voice. ‘And the dear children?’

‘All are well, I promise you,’ replied Mr Knightley, smiling. ‘And how was the wedding? Who cried most?’

‘Ah yes, the wedding!’ said Mr Woodhouse. ‘Poor Miss Taylor. It’s a sad business.’

‘Poor Mr and Miss Woodhouse,’ said Mr Knightley, ‘but I cannot possibly say “poor Miss Taylor”. She has her own home now, and it must be better to have only one person to please than two.’



Mr Knightley was a frequent visitor, always warmly welcomed.

‘And of course, one of those two is so very difficult!’ said Emma playfully. ‘That is what you’re thinking, I know.’

‘I believe it is very true, my dear,’ said Mr Woodhouse with a sigh. ‘I am afraid I am often very difficult.’

‘My dearest father! You cannot think I mean *you*!’ said Emma. ‘Oh no, I meant *myself*. Mr Knightley loves to find fault with me, you know. But none of it is serious. We say what we like to each other.’

‘I was not trying to find fault with anybody,’ said Mr Knightley. ‘Of course, Emma will miss her companion, but she knows that this marriage is a very good thing for Miss Taylor.’

‘And I am also pleased,’ cried Emma, ‘because I made the match myself. Everybody said Mr Weston would never marry again when his first wife died. But I knew at once that Miss Taylor would be a good match for him.’

‘You made a lucky guess, that’s all,’ said Mr Knightley. ‘Why are you so proud of that?’

‘A lucky guess is never just luck,’ said Emma. ‘I think there is always a little cleverness behind it.’

‘My dear, please do not make any more matches,’ said Mr Woodhouse. ‘They are silly things, and they destroy the family circle.’

‘Only one more, Father; only for Mr Elton. Poor man! You like Mr Elton, Father. I’m sure he needs a wife.’

Mr Elton was the vicar of Highbury. He had moved to the village a year before, and was a handsome, respectable man of about twenty-six or twenty-seven, who was popular with everyone.

‘If you want to be kind to Mr Elton, my dear, ask him to dinner at Hartfield,’ said Mr Woodhouse. ‘That will be much better. Perhaps Mr Knightley will be kind enough to join us?’

‘Delighted to come, sir, at any time,’ laughed Mr Knightley, ‘and I agree with you. Invite him to dinner, Emma, but let him choose his own wife.’