

I COULD WRITE A BOOK
EXCERPT

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HIGHBURY, KENTUCKY

DECEMBER, 1973

George stood at the front door of the Woodhouse residence and rang the doorbell. It clanged with an old-fashioned kind of formality, making him feel rather insignificant. The two-story Doric columns framing the house front always made him feel like a small boy, even after all these years.

Mrs. Davies, the housekeeper, opened the door and gave him a bright smile full of welcome. "Mr. Knightley! Come in. It's so good to see you! Let me fetch Miss Emma. Won't you have a seat?" She gestured to the living room on the left.

"Thank you, Mrs. D." He nodded his appreciation and stepped inside.

It had been quite some time since George had graced the Woodhouse home. Before the stroke, he saw John most every day at the office. And Emma had been, of course, away at school.

His eyes wandered to the top of the two-story foyer. The chandelier crystals sparkled in the late afternoon sun, showing a layer of dust, some of which floated in lazy patterns down to rest on the sturdy hardwood floors. The foyer had an open, graceful elegance that strongly reminded him of Barbara Taylor Woodhouse in her prime: equestrian heiress, daughter of old money—older even than his own. The Taylor farms and land were left to her half-brother Edwin, in the grand old male-inherits-land tradition, but Barbara still inherited a vast sum of money from her parents. She'd had education, opportunities, and class—a result of the union of her family's good fortune and her own good sense. It was regrettable that she was unable to pass these advantages to Emma in person.

Nina was, in many ways, a good role model for Emma. Nina Taylor didn't have to work, but she did because she enjoyed it. The library was a productive outlet for Nina's need for intellectual stimulation, a characteristic she and Emma shared. In George's opinion, however, she just didn't have the same authority that a mother would have.

And that led him to the current situation, and why he canceled a date to go horseback riding with Valerie this afternoon.

The other night at the Donwell Christmas party he'd stuck his nose in where it didn't belong, and he knew that. If Nina found out he'd chastised Emma that night—after she'd warned him off—he'd have some explaining to do. But because of the connection between their families, and now the marriage of their siblings, George harbored a specific interest in Emma's well-being. As any brother-in-law would, of course. And the "poor, motherless lamb," as his mother often called her, had no one to guide her.

It was time to let go of the college disagreement. Emma was right; she was grown up now, although she didn't always act like it, and it was her decision to make. Besides, he had a grudging admiration for her devotion to her family.

"George!" She came bounding down the stairs, rounding the newel at the foot of them and clearing the last step with a little hop. She had on blue jeans and one of those flimsy, gauzy tops you could

practically see through. "Well, hello there! What are you doing here?"

"Came by to visit your dad—and you, of course. If I'm welcome."

She sauntered to him with a smile and linked her arm in his. The smell of honeysuckle drifted over him, and he relaxed.

"Handsome fellows are always welcome at Hartfield Road," she said, leading him toward the parlor.

He halted, causing her to turn around and face him. "I also wanted to make amends—for the other night."

She waved him off with her free hand. "Oh, you were just being you, Professor Knightley. I'd forgotten all about it."

Her eyes flitted downward, indicating that might not be the absolute truth, but there was also friendliness in her manner, and he knew that was genuine. She would forgive him, although forgetting might take time.

"So, to help make amends, I brought you a present—a gift of goodwill."

Her eyes lit up. "Oooh, I love presents! Although, they say 'beware of Trojans bearing gifts'—but I'm sure you wouldn't bring a wooden horse. Where is it?" She leaned around to look behind him.

"It's out on the front porch."

She bounded toward the door, laughing. "Maybe it is a horse, after all."

"Wait!"

"Why?"

"I need to explain first."

She crossed her arms and frowned. "Okay..."

"It is a gift, Emma Kate, but I don't want you to feel obligated to take it."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, why wouldn't I want to take it?"

"It's, well...maybe I should just show you. But remember, if you don't want to keep it, all you have to do is say so."

"The suspense is killing me! Will you just show me the present already?"

He stepped outside and returned a second later, carrying a big box.

It clunked from side to side, held high enough that she couldn't see into it. He set it on the foyer floor and lifted the lid. His hands disappeared inside, and a little yelp was heard as he drew the golden bundle out of the box.

"Oh, George! A puppy! It's beautiful!"

"It's a she, actually, a golden retriever. She's nine weeks old."

Emma reached out her arms for the wriggling, tail-wagging ball of fur. "Aren't you the prettiest little thing? Oh, look! She likes me!"

He laughed as the pup leaned up and licked Emma's face. "Well, of course she does. Everyone likes Miss Emma Woodhouse."

Emma held the pup, crooning to her in soft tones, like one might use with a baby.

"She's to keep you company, when your dad is resting, or when you go outside, and he doesn't want to go with you. I know how you love the outdoors."

He waited a minute, watching while Emma played with the dog. "Do you like her, Emma? Would you like to keep her? It's not a bit of a problem to take her back, if you don't think—"

"Take her back? Absolutely not! She's adorable. Thank you, George!" She buried her nose in the soft fur. "I love her already." Emma set her down on the floor and watched her walk around in a circle before letting out a bark.

"What will you name her?"

"Hmm..." Emma's eyes opened wide. "I'm going to name her Maude."

"That's an odd name for a dog."

As if in reply to his derogatory statement regarding her new name, Maude came over and promptly wet on his wing-tips.

"It is not an odd name!" She snatched up her puppy. "Don't listen to him, Maude. He has no idea how to talk to ladies."

Mrs. Davies came hurrying in. "What was that noise? It sounded like a..." She did a double take at the dog in Emma's arms. "Mr. Knightley, you didn't!"

"He surely did, Mrs. D. Meet Maude, our newest family member.

And fetch a towel, if you don't mind. Our new family member just tinkled on Mr. Knightley's shoe."

Mrs. Davies pursed her lips and frowned at George as she hurried off to get the towel, muttering something about "more work" and "shoes" and "serving you right."

"I've got all her paraphernalia in the car. Bed, leash, food, water dish. She's all scheduled for shots at the vet and for obedience training when she's old enough."

"You thought of everything."

He shook his foot. "Everything but an extra pair of shoes."

Emma laughed and gave Maude a gentle squeeze, making the pup let out an excited yelp.

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