

Foxhollow's Gift

Everyone was excited to go home for Christmas but her. Being at Foxhollow Equestrian School for Girls was the first place she felt at home. Emily loved everything about Foxhollow. Of course, being able to spend so much time with her horse, Smokey, was at the top of the list. She kept to herself, but enjoyed being adjacent to the laughter and silliness of her peers. Her next favorite thing to do on the grounds was visit the sunken Italian garden with its fountain and vines. She could sit under the pergola, even in the cold, looking out over the meadow and feel genuinely at peace. What Emily loved most was that no one fought here. She didn't have to walk on eggshells around her alcoholic mother and her angry father. Because it was Christmas, Foxhollow was going to close for three weeks. Why couldn't she stay?

A pillow flew by her face. "Aren't you going to start packing? Our drivers arrive tomorrow," said her roommate.

"I guess I'm just a slow packer," said Emily.

"What are your plans for Christmas? I can't wait to see my family. We have so many guests coming!"

Emily wasn't sure how to answer that. Should she say, "I will be alone in a big house. I'll get to watch my father yell at my mother when he comes home because she drinks too much."

She couldn't bring herself to say that so she said, "About the same as you."

Emily sadly put her things in her trunk. At least Smokey would be going back with her. Many girls couldn't take their horses home for Christmas.

The last evening before break a special dinner was held. The girls dressed formally. She preferred casual fashion, even though as an Astor, she was expected to look elite.

The girls did look lovely. They were used to seeing each other in uniforms or riding clothes. The colorful velvet and satin worn by the girls added to the festive mood. She was admiring the pretty tree in the corner when Ms. Farrell announced to everyone dinner was being served. They all enjoyed delicious fare and Ms. Farrell wished everyone a happy break and Merry Christmas.

The next morning, Emily's car and trailer came. She had misty eyes as she looked at the school one last time thinking of what was ahead of her. After a long car ride, her stable hand, Amos, welcomed her home and unloaded Smokey. Now came the real tears. She hopped on Smokey bareback, and rode him fast through the property. Hugging Smokey's strong neck as he pumped made her calmer.

After her tearful ride she took Smokey to the stables and ran to her room, passing her mother who was asleep in front of the fire, her empty decanter and glass on the coffee table. No surprise. Her father wasn't home yet, so there would be a few moments of peace for a while.

Her maid, Ida, was unpacking her trunk. When Emily flopped on the bed, Ida said, "I found a package for you in your things, miss. I laid it on your nightstand."

She turned her head to see a small box wrapped in red paper with a green bow. She rolled onto her belly and reached for it. Sitting up she opened it to find a white rock and a note. Her hand felt the stone's smoothness as she read:

Dear Emily,

I have enjoyed you being at Foxhollow. You are a quiet girl, but have a loud presence. I've never seen anyone ride like you. The way Smokey responds to your cues! So many girls admire you. I have noticed you retreat to the Italian garden alone. It is a beautiful place that I go to as well, after you all go to bed. I find the fountain there and the stars a lullaby for my nights. I'm sending home with you a stone from the path to remind you that school is closed now, but is waiting for you to come back. Christmas break will be over soon and your time to shine will come again. I look forward to being in your presence this new year.

As Ever,

Ms. Farrell

Emily smiled so big. For the first time in days her heart felt free. She may not have a happy Christmas break, but thanks to Ms. Farrell's gift, her Christmas will be filled with the hope of returning to where she felt at home, Foxhollow.