

## Emily's Handmade Christmas

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Emily Granger is 8 years old; an independent third grader now. She lives with her parents in a little white house, whose windows are framed by green shutters, on a street that is busy twice a day: When people are on their way to work or driving their kids to school, and in the afternoons when they are on their way home.

Emily also lives with Archie, the round orange tabby cat (with white on the tips of his toes). Archie came to live with the family one day by dropping out of the large Magnolia tree in the front yard and landing right into her father's arms. He sleeps on Emily's bed every night and thinks the world is a very mysterious place.

Christmas is coming. There are signs of it everywhere. The Grangers have been receiving holiday cards in the mail, and Mom is trying to keep track of them in the piles of bills, other correspondence, and the always-present junk mail. Emily overheard her parents as they discussed those bills and knew that there were worries in their house. The construction company Emily's dad worked for was having troubles, and he had been working extra hard. Emily's mom was looking for work.

"Everything's going to be fine," Mrs. Granger assured her. "Don't worry. Money's a little tight now, but we'll be okay. We just have to tone it down this year."

Allowance was one of the things the household had cut back on. Emily had been trying to save, but, as often happens to the best of us, her piggy bank was a little light. When she pulled out the round rubber stopper at the bottom of her pig and poured out the contents onto her bed (with Archie watching carefully), she found exactly five quarters, two one-dollar bills, 11 dimes, 63 pennies, and five and 1/2 buttons. Four dollars and ninety-eight cents (not counting the buttons). This would not buy Dad the socket set he wanted or the artist's paintbrushes Mom had admired when she was looking through her art supply catalog.

Emily thought and puzzled over just the right presents for her parents. She also wanted to buy a new collar for Archie. And her grandparents needed gifts. Both sets. Emily sighed. The situation seemed hopeless.

At school, Emily's class worked on picture frames to give to their parents as gifts.

Mrs. Little, Emily's teacher, told the kids:

"The best gifts for your parents are presents that you've made for them by hand. They'll treasure them always."

This gave Emily an idea. At home, she had her own set of art supplies: paints, brushes, pens, pencils, crayons, and drawing pads. At school, her class had been studying different artists and had even painted some of their most famous paintings. Emily decided to create her very own works of art to give as gifts, but this posed a bit of a challenge. How was she going to make her creations without her parents finding out?

As luck would have it, Emily's parents had made plans for her to spend the night at her grandparents' house on Friday night. (Mom and Dad were going into the city to enjoy a rare night out). She quietly packed her art supplies so she could take them with her and work secretly at their house. Grandma Marian was soon on board with Emily's plans.

Emily quickly got to work. For her mom, she painted, from memory, a field of purple and blue irises inspired by the Van Gogh painting she'd seen at the museum. For her dad, she painted their house. (If you looked very carefully, you'd spy Archie in the corner of the yard, hiding behind a bush.) When Emily's grandparents weren't looking, she created paintings for them too. Both sets.

"Some day you're going to be a great artist, Emily." Her grandparents praised her work. Emily quietly beamed.

Before she went back home, Grandpa Jim and Grandma Marian took her to the dollar store. The shelves of the store were full of trinkets, and the aisles were full of shoppers looking for gifts or things that one needs at home. In the pet aisle, she found a lovely green collar for Archie. It had six sparkly rhinestones. She knew he'd look so handsome and regal. It was the perfect collar for her best friend. (And she had money left over to buy her other best friend, Amanda, a friendship bracelet.)

Emily's parents opened their gifts that Christmas morning. First Mom, then Dad.

"This is a beautiful painting, Em!" Mom gave Emily a big hug.

"I have just the right place for this on my desk." Dad picked Emily up and the three shared a group hug.

Emily was happy. And her parents knew they would treasure their paintings always (because that's what parents do).

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