



"EMILY!"

"HANNAH! LILA!"

Emily's shoulder-length, chestnut-blond hair flew behind her as she raced towards her house on the back of her pony Starshine. Her dark brown eyes sparkled with excitement as she urged Starshine to gallop even faster. They were moving at such a high speed that they almost passed the house. Emily reined in quickly and almost fell off the saddle at the sudden halt.

She leapt off her horse and was immediately enveloped by bear hugs and ear-piercing shrieks of joy from her two best friends from the city who were visiting for the summer. Last summer, Emily's family moved from the city to the countryside, and Emily's dreams came true when her parents finally bought her a pony. Although Emily has made a couple of new best friends,

there were still times when she missed Hannah and Lila, who have been her best friends since she was in kindergarten.

“Oh my gosh, Emily, you’re taller than me now! Oh noooo, now I’m the shortest in the group!” Lila pretended to wail, joining her friends’ laughter at her own exaggeration.

Emily acted as if Lila’s shoulder was an armrest and stood on her tiptoes to make herself even taller.

“But I’m still the tallest of all,” Hannah gloated playfully, crossing her arms over her chest and holding her head high.

The three girls all broke down laughing again.

“Oh! Is this Starshine?” Lila asked suddenly, walking towards the pony.

“Yup! Starshine, meet Hannah and Lila, the two best friends from the city that I told you about,” Emily announced proudly.

“She’s beautiful!” Hannah said, stroking the pony’s light-grey nose and giggling when Starshine nuzzled her.

“And she’s bigger than I expected from the pictures you sent,” Lila commented, running her hands through Starshine’s long mane.

“Yeah, she’s been growing,” Emily laughed. “She should be reaching the maximum height a pony like her can grow though.”

“Before you girls stay out here talking ‘til dusk, why don’t we get our guests settled in first,” Emily’s mom, Mrs. Waters, interrupted their seemingly endless chatter. “Shall I show Hannah and Lila to your room while you clean Starshine up, Emily?”

“It’s alright, Mrs. Waters. We don’t mind accompanying Emily to the stable first,” Lila replied politely.

“Very well, then,” Mrs. Waters smiled.

Emily waited while Hannah and Lila took their luggage into the living room and left it there for the time being. Soon they were running back out and Emily led them around to the stable behind her house.

It was a small one and only consisted of two stalls. A few meters to its right was a shed where all the grooming equipment and riding gear were kept.

“Do you guys still ride twice a week?” Emily asked, trying to recall.

Hannah and Lila shook their heads. “Nope, just once a week now,” Hannah said, smoothing out the fresh hay across the floor of the stall.

“Last time we went twice a week because it was the holidays,” Lila added.

“Oh right!” Emily remembered.

“You have riding lessons three times a week now, right?” Lila asked as she brushed Starshine’s tail.

Emily nodded. “But in the holidays like this I could go there every day. If I’m not at Orchard Stables, I’d probably be riding out in the woods.”

“It’s so cool that you have a small forest so near to your house!” Hannah said. “I can’t wait to go exploring there! In the city there are only the same old paddocks and fields, nothing as exciting as the woods!”

“Yeah, absolutely,” Lila agreed.

Emily glanced at her watch. “It’s barely eleven o’clock. Let’s go get you some horses at Orchard Stables and have a picnic in the woods. I know the perfect place there, and you can finally meet Bella and Violet in person!”

“Awesome!” Hannah and Lila shouted at the same time, pumping their fists in the air.

“It’s a good thing I haven’t taken Starshine’s saddle to the shed yet,” Emily giggled. “I’ll just leave it here first. C’mon, I’ll show you to my room and then we can go!”

The three girls exited the stable, giggling all the way up to the house.

“Ladies,” Emily announced in a dramatic voice, “welcome, to my little palace.” With that, she opened the door to her cozy attic bedroom.

“Wow! This is the cutest room I have ever seen!” Lila squealed.

“A good trade for the room you had in the city,” Hannah agreed, smiling at the warmth of the room.

Emily beamed and held the door open for her friends.

Although the roof was slanted, it was still tall enough for the girls to stand and walk comfortably around the room. After parking their luggage in an empty corner of the room, both Hannah and Lila shot to the small circular window on one side of the roof. The window jutted out slightly, and Emily had placed a cushion in the space.

“Oh! You can see Starshine from here!” Lila exclaimed with delight.

Behind them, Emily laughed and knelt down, resting her elbows on the cushion and poking her head in the space between her standing friends.

“Yeah, this is my favorite place in the whole room,” Emily sighed happily.

After enjoying it for a few more moments, the three of them jumped up.

“Time to go riding!” Emily whooped.

“Woo-hoo!” Hannah and Lila joined in the cheer, bursting into laughter again.

*Thank goodness Hannah and Lila are still into horses!* Emily thought, smiling to herself. *I can't imagine what it would be like if they weren't.*