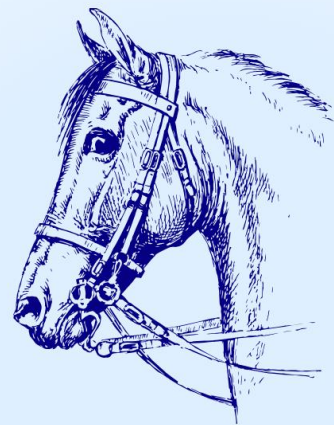


VALLEY ADVENTURE



Hills and Hollows Horse Riding School Series


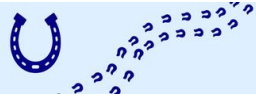


VALLEY ADVENTURE

Sunlight painted the farm in a pastel hue and marked the start of a promising day as the two girls hurried to finish feeding and tacking up the ponies. They knew how much the riding school relied on volunteers to keep it going, especially now with the looming threat of closure. By nine o'clock they had worked through most of the ponies; catching, grooming and saddling them ready for riders to arrive.



Nestled at the edge of the Australian bush, Hills and Hollows was more than just a family farm and a place to learn about horses. It was a place where ponies, children, and nature could unite; and where the noise of everyday worries faded into the rhythm of hoofbeats and the rustle of eucalyptus leaves.



Saturday lessons drew riders and helpers from across Sydney as the hardy mountain ponies brought countless dreams to life. There was a quiet wonder to the riding school, the combination of ponies, children and nature carried the breath of something greater—an unseen hand weaving these together into a harmony that the children could feel. Their grit and purpose offered gifts beyond measure as they took to the chores of stable cleaning and pony care.

But running a riding school was no easy feat, costs often outpaced income and it was a struggle to keep the local Council and neighbours happy. The threat of closure was around every bend for the Moore family: Leanne and Tim, and their kids, Emily and Luke. The volunteers could sense the threat and they made it their job to problem solve where possible.

This Saturday started much as any other for Perri and Liz. They were the longest serving of the volunteers, having begun their riding journeys at Hills and Hollows many years ago. The pair shared a common love of the ponies and farm life.

“Once group lessons have finished, want to go for a ride out through the valley?” Liz asked, a flicker of excitement brightening her face.

The idea of an afternoon ride had become a tradition of sorts, a reward after the long hours they dedicated to helping out during the day.

“Sounds good,” Perri replied, grinning. “We’ll definitely deserve it after today.”



The girl’s had their hopes filled that afternoon when Luke, their instructor and Leanne’s son had agreed to the proposal. Luke had an effortless charisma; his quick wit and easy-going demeanour made him a favourite among the riders. All the better for today, Luke had agreed to ride along on the trail, so now some of the younger volunteers could join in.

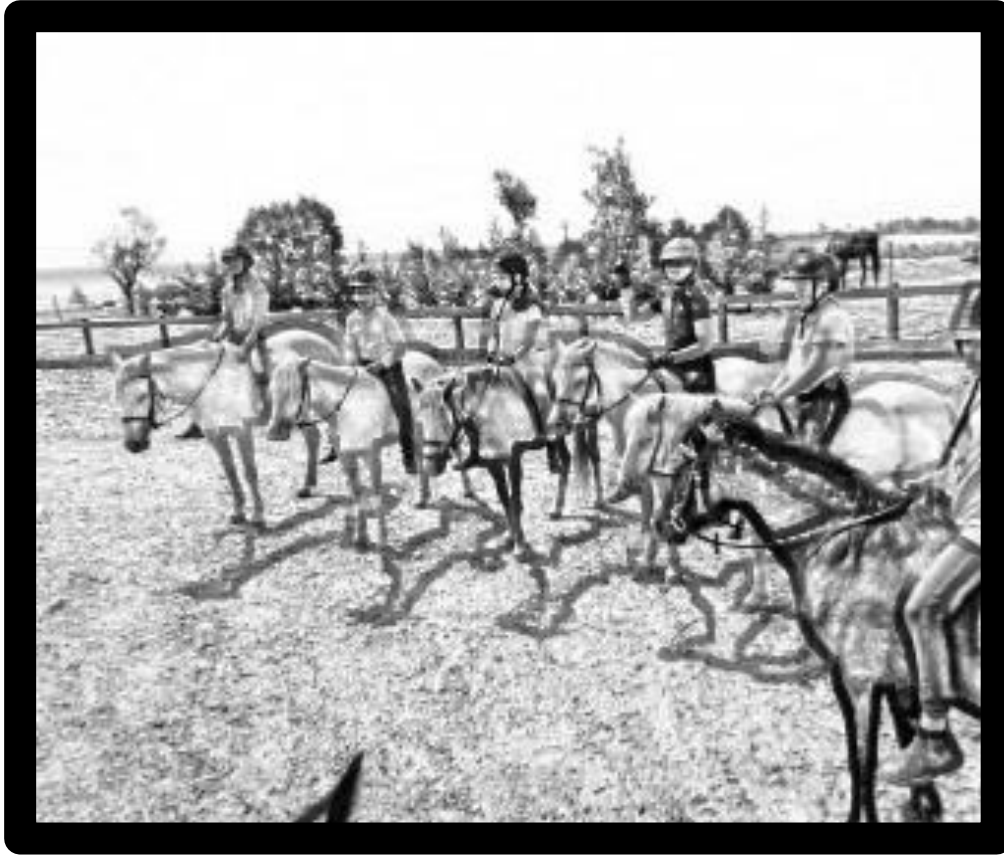
Out beyond the paddocks and riding arenas of Hills and Hollows, lay a vast valley. A place where grassland met towering hillsides and hidden water

holes. Wallabies, Kangaroos, wombats and other native animals took shelter in the valley. The school took pride in its abundance of native bush and had planted over a thousand trees to help maintain it.



The trails seemed a world away from the bustle of the city of Sydney and the pressure of life. Riding at dusk would be the perfect time to catch a glimpse of the native animals and allow the ponies to stretch out after busy Saturday lessons.

A group of 8 riders joined Luke. They each prepared their ponies with a mix of excitement and trepidation, eager to ride out and discover the adventure that lay ahead.



“How about we check the far fence line and the broodmares while we're out?”

Luke asked as he closed the gate behind them. It was more a statement than a question.



“That's a plan Luke!” Perri said as she smiled back at him. Perri was a natural leader, her calm confidence and genuine care for others shone through in everything she did. The middle child in a family of seven, she carried a deep sense of responsibility and a love for people and animals alike.

Perri urged her pony forward, her heart filled with determination. She loved the thrill of riding her favourite grey mare, Lynlea. She was always up for a challenge but as they approached the valley's entrance, she sensed a weight of responsibility on her shoulders. Her younger brother Vale had joined the ride; would he be up to it? Controlling the ponies and keeping them calm during a ride out in the country was different to typical lessons with Luke and Leanne in an arena. She knew her mum would be counting on her to look after Vale.

Beside Perri rode Liz, who looked around with wide eyes, absorbing the sights and sounds of the Australian bush. Leanne said she could be named after Liz Taylor - a beautiful movie star with the same eyes and hair, who starred in an old movie called National Velvet where she saves a horse and wins a race.

The sun cast a golden light and long shadows across the grassland as the children's excitement grew. Gypsie, the free spirit of the group, laughed as she urged her pony into a trot, her carefree grin inspiring others to let loose and enjoy the ride. Zain, who rode along her side, looked at Luke for a cue to



pick up trot and when Luke nudged his dapple grey, Posiers forward, everyone fell in stride.

Zain was always ready to help and eager to learn. His optimistic outlook helped ease any tension between the others. “I hope we get to ride in the rain,” he said, looking up at the dark clouds banking up in the southern Sky.

Willow and Vale rode a pony length behind with Hayley and Ali at the back. Ali had overcome a series of health struggles to master riding and her determination and spirit had become her signature trait. She was a quiet problem solver. Hayley, who rode alongside her, despite seeming to have everything going for her, lacked confidence and frequently doubted herself. Although she was a good rider with a balanced seat, Hayley clutched her pony’s reins a little too tightly and this only served to stir up her spirited black mare, called Raison, causing her to prance a little and toss her head. Though she was a bit unsure of herself, Hayley still couldn’t resist an adventure and Raison was a willing mount.

Like all of the ponies at Hills and Hollows, Raison had been bred on the property by Leanne. Part Warmblood, part Welsh pony, the little mare had a lion's heart and a limitless curiosity to back up her slender athletic frame. Her coat was so dark that only a white blaze and one hind sock distinguished her from night.




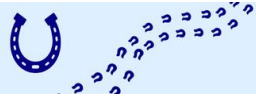
As they entered the valley, the excitement grew. They marvelled at the effect of the wattle blossom which had scattered across the valley floor like a patchwork blanket. The sounds of frogs and crickets filled the air as their sure-footed ponies selected the paths through the countryside. Against the backdrop of gathering grey clouds, Perry's sharp eyes caught dark shapes moving along the ridgeline. Luke, noticing Perri's expression, followed her gaze and said "What's moving up there? Urgency had crept into his tone. Curious and uneasy, the group decided to investigate, urging the ponies on until they met their first challenge—the path diverted to a narrow cliff trail that wound high above the valley floor.

"Stay close, everyone," Perri called out, leading the way. Her confidence shone as she navigated the rocky terrain but, as they reached the edge, Hayley's heart raced. The steep drop made her feel dizzy.

"I—I can't do this!" she stammered, gripping her pony's reins.

Zain, sensing her fear, slowed his pace. "Just take it one step at a time, Hayley. We're all here together."

Perri turned to Hayley, softening her tone. "It's okay to be scared. Just focus on the pony in front of you, and remember to breathe."



With her friends supporting her, Hayley took a deep breath and focused on the pony in front of her. Slowly, she moved forward, finding strength in their encouragement.

Onward and upward the ponies led them, the trail twisting through dense stands of forest oaks. These ancient forests provided homes for native black cockatoos, also known as gang gangs, distant relatives of pink and grey galahs. Above them the rare and ancient gang gangs offered a distinctive wail as if forewarning danger.

Once out onto the open grassland the ferocity of the wind became more noticeable, carrying with it the scent of impending rain.

It wasn't long before they discovered the cause of the disturbance: a section of the boundary fence had broken, leaving the way open for stray cattle. The intruding cattle had come through a stock run to enter the property. "They could belong to anyone," Luke said his frustration obvious.

The task ahead was clear but daunting. "It's time to spread out quickly to drive the cattle back towards the gap." Luke said.

The ponies snorted nervously at the unfamiliar sight and smell of the large, lumbering beasts. Some baulked, shying away as a cow turned too sharply,



while others froze under the pressure. Perri's voice carried above the rising wind, rallying her friends with calm instructions and encouragement. Slowly but surely, the kids gained confidence, working together to outflank the cattle and herd them back through the damaged fence.

By the time the last of the cattle disappeared through the fence, the storm was nearly upon them. With icy gusts tugging at their jackets, the first drops of rain spattered their ponies' coats. Liz and Zain dismounted and hurried to secure the fence while Luke took a final check for strays.

"I'll hold Quickstep Liz, while you both close the hole", Perri offered. The stockhorse was restless and pawed at the ground impatiently.

"Look there," exclaimed Perri. "There's a piece of yellow baling twine holding that wire back and keeping the hole open,".

Liz and Zain looked on in horror. Perri frowned as she shook her head slowly from side to side, "that fence has been cut and tied back!" She exclaimed the wind whistling her words away as Quickstep stomped and pulled against the hash needles of rain.

She resisted the horses tug to head for home and used her legs on LynLea, closing around the girth to drive her forward closer to the hole, "Who would



deliberately cut the fence open and cause such a huge problem for the riding school,” she asked, annoyed now. “We’ve got to tell Luke!” She exclaimed.

Zain and Liz looked up at her in dismay. There were no answers. The evening was closing in on them and soon it would be completely dark. The storm had made everything more difficult.

“Okay. It’s all clear here!” came the cry, muffled by the wind, from Luke. “Let’s head back down that spur and quickly”.

“Luke, Wait! The fence! It’s been cut!” Perri yelled in desperation as she started her mare towards him, her words whisked by the rush of wind.”

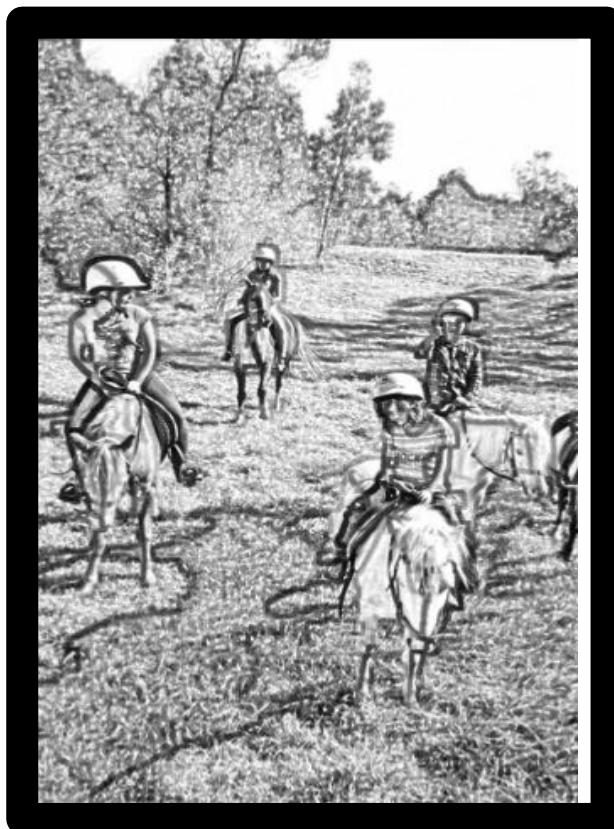
“Later Perri!” Luke’s response was brisk and dismissive. “Let’s focus on our job here!” He said harshly.

“Please Luke, the fence hole! It was deliberately cut!” Perri spat the words into the wind as Zain and Liz caught up. Liz took the reins of Quickstep from Perri without a word, sensing the tension.

Luke’s reply put an end to Perri’s report, “No! That’s enough! It’s time to go!” His frustration was clear as he held his strong restless mare against the wind.”

The trio paused momentarily to exchange looks of frustration and concern. Then Liz and Zain mounted and they caught up with the rest of the group as the first rumble of thunder rolled across the hills.

With the rain streaming down heavily, they faced another, more threatening challenge... the small stream that meandered between the valley's hills had grown from its regular trickle and would soon be an uncrossable torrent. Some of the ponies may refuse to cross or leap over the running water. Perri glanced worriedly at her little brother Vale. He was doing well on his first trail ride but she needed to return him safely to their mum. "I'm worried the ponies will leap" she said.





“I’m not sure we can make it across,” Hayley said, anxiety creeping back into her voice.

Luke thought for a moment, then nodded. “Let’s cross one at a time. I’ll go first, then Zain. Then the rest follow.”

As Zain crossed the swollen waters behind Luke, Ali felt a surge of determination. “I want to go next,” she declared and nudged her sturdy grey pony Eva forward, her heart pounding but ready to try.

Halfway across, Ali lost her grip on the reins and panic surged through her as she slipped but Zain was there. “Steady girl!” he spoke in a steady, soothing tone to calm Eva.

With a rush of trust, Ali pushed on, collecting her reins and using her legs to guide Eva as she had learnt in lessons. She squeezed her calves against the pony's sides to keep the forward pace. The group cheered as they made it across and followed, one-by-one.

Approaching the hillcrest toward home, they paused to take in the breathtaking views. The sun was setting and the sky was etched with hues of orange and purple. Each child felt a sense of accomplishment, their spirits lifted by the adventure they had shared.



“I can’t believe we made it!” Gypsy exclaimed; her eyes sparkling.

“You all did it together,” Luke said. After years of riding at Hills and Hollows, he understood that today's journey belonged to the kids; their growing reverence for the ponies and; for the harsh beauty of the bush; and for forged friendships- united through an unspoken presence that inspired joy and offered growth through each new challenge.

Ali smiled, feeling valued, knowing she had contributed in ways beyond physical strength, to the success of the adventure. Hayley’s confidence had grown. The whole group was certain they wanted-“in” on any future sunset rides.

As they entered the safety of the riding school yards, they all knew this adventure had changed them forever. The valley of Hills and Hollows had shown them the beauty of nature and the strength found in friendship, proving that every challenge could be met with courage and teamwork.

They reached the stables just as the sun dipped below the horizon.

The parents' cars were parked, waiting in the flooded car park. “I'll feed the ponies, just lead them safely to the yards,” said Luke. “Phew!” thought Ali. “I don't have much more left in me”.

There was activity from the carpark as parents called out. Some waved from under umbrellas, while others huddled near the cars. Perri, Liz and Zain paused and exchanged glances as the other riders exited the gate.

Zain's jaw was tight as he broke the tension, "We've got to talk to Luke about this," he said.

The weight of the incident was not lost on them. But there was still so much to do- horses to untack and care for, parents to reassure. Luke would be at it for hours, alone through the dark. The break in the fence would have to sit like a stone, on their hearts and in their minds, for another time. This wasn't over- not by a long shot.





Hills and hollows