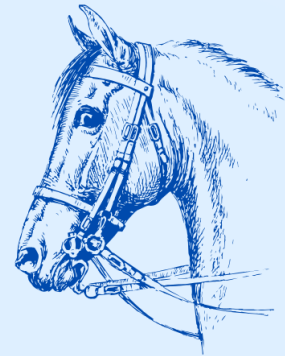


BARN CAT AND BRAVERY





BOOK 2. BARN CAT AND BRAVERY

The girls huddled in the tack room at Hills and Hollows Riding School, their voices low as they replayed the scene from the valley. Perry sat on an overturned feed bucket, frowning in concentration.

“Have you thought anymore about the cut fence from last week’s trail?” she asked.

“Pretty well every day,” replied Liz as she sat on an upturned bucket still cleaning tack.

With their voices low, they replayed the scene from the valley. Perri frowned some more. “It wasn’t just broken—someone deliberately tied the fence back,” she said firmly, her tone leaving no room for doubt.

Liz crossed her arms, leaning against the wall. “So, someone wanted to make it easy for animals—or people—to get in or out. But why?”

Gypsy tapped her boot on the floor. “It’s gotta be one of a couple of things. First, there’s the neighbour Mr. Durley, the coal and oil baron. Mum jokes that he's struck gold because he's buying up land in this area”.

“But wouldn’t he just bulldoze his way if he wanted it that badly?” Liz asked.

“Not without approval,” Perri countered.

Liz looked uneasy. “What about the Valley Heights Riding Academy? You can get to its back entrance further down the stock run”.

Gypsy nodded slowly. “It’s possible. The cut fence is right near the paddock with the broodmares. It’d be easy to herd cows through there and then pretend nothing happened.”

“Or herd mares out!” Exclaimed Liz. “What does Luke say?” She asked.

“He says we’re dreaming and that fences break all the time.” She answered.

Ali slid the door open, “thought I’d find you here. Have you guys finished grooming yet?” She asked, sitting quietly on a hay bale. “What was that you were you saying about Valley Heights?” she asked. “You know what they’re like,” Ali continued. The others turned to her, intrigued. “Always trying to sabotage us. I wonder sometimes, what if they’re trying to cause trouble so Leanne gives up on the school? If they drive the mares off or make it look like Hills and Hollows can’t manage the land...”

“We can’t just accuse people without evidence.” Perri stood, determination lighting her face. “We would need a plan and a map. We’ll have to keep an eye on the fence. Zain suggested setting up night cameras. If someone’s out there, they’ll show up eventually.”



The girls exchanged glances. They knew Perry was right. Whatever was happening in the valley, they couldn't ignore it. They had to protect the land—and their beloved Hills and Hollows Riding School—from whoever was behind the fence cutting.



The girls started gathering up brushes and curry combs. Liz caught a glimpse of Cinnamon, the barn cat, stretching luxuriously in a patch of sun. With her sleek, tiger-like marking and pristine white fur, Cinnamon was in her element at the farm.

“Awe there's the crazy cat Cinnamon, I wonder what antics she has planned for us today!”.



“Look at her,” Ali said, laughing as she pointed. “Doesn’t she look like she rules this place?”

Liz looked at Cinnamon but her mind was miles away, “What about Mr. Durney from the abattoir? I heard rumours he’s been looking for cheap land to graze cattle before sending them off. Could he be moving stock into the property without asking?”

Hayley grinned as Cinnamon sauntered past; head held high. “I know, right? She’s spotless. A real catwalk contender. Even her paws are white as snow! Meanwhile, look at Snoop and Fang.”

The two farm dogs were sprawled nearby, utterly oblivious to the cat’s disdain. Snoop had a patch of dried horse dung along his side, he was forever rolling in it, and Fang’s muzzle was practically grey with cobwebs. Both looked content as ever.



“Liz is right. It could be something as simple as competition for grass”. Hayley offered trying to tone down the alarm.

“Those dogs have rolled in something gross,” said Liz, as she wrinkled her nose. “I saw Snoop rubbing his face in the manure earlier.”

Just then, Cinnamon took notice of the dogs and narrowed her eyes. Twitching her tail, she pranced past Snoop, who lifted one eyelid and sprung



to the chase. Not to be outmanoeuvred, Cinnamon hunched her back and spat at the undignified farm dog who sheepishly retreated.

The girls burst out laughing as Snoop tried casually to slip away from Cinnamon. Fang only crossed his eyes and blinked in confusion. He let out a half-hearted “woof”, and then flopped back down, as if too lazy to defend his pride.

“Oh, she definitely thinks she runs this place,” Ali said, stifling a giggle. “And she kind of does!”

“I say we consult Zain on the options and start by revisiting the cut fence. We could have missed something”. Liz concluded.

Cinnamon gave one last disdainful flick of her tail before strutting away to a clean spot on top of the pile of saddle cloths, settling down with a satisfied purr.

Just then the dogs switched suddenly into their alert mode. “Probably a rabbit or wombat,” said Ali. “Although they seem a bit useless at times, they still protect their patch,”

“Yeah, a bit like us,” Liz joked and the girls giggled.

The musings of the group were broken by Snoop's sharp bark. “He has turned from goofy to guard dog in no time at all” said Hayley as they watched him, standing rigid, ears pricked, his gaze locked on the distant hillside. He barked again, more insistent this time, and then bolted up and back through the paddock, his lean body pouncing through the grass as he looked up toward the distant hills and back at the group.



“What’s gotten into him?” Liz asked, her voice edged with unease.

The girls froze, watching as Snoop disappeared into the valley and stopped halfway up the hill, barking furiously at the distant hillside. His head whipped back toward them before he dashed off, his tail stiff and alert.

Gypsy frowned “We might need to act sooner than we'd planned,” she said.

The air was still, unlike the wild weather that had accompanied their first discovery of the cut fence.

“Time to ride. We meet back here in 5 - with or without Zain.” She spoke.

Perri tightened her pony's girth, her face set with determination. Just then a car pulled into the carpark and a familiar figure emerged.

“You're late!” she said half playfully, half anxiously.

“Yeah, my sister sprained her wrist.” Zain walked hurriedly to the mounting area as he spoke.



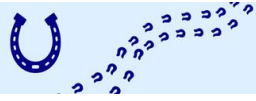
“Oh no. But sorry to say, I'm glad it wasn't you. We will need all the help we can get if we are to ride these ponies back to valley and solve the threat to Hills and Hollows before Luke and Leanne return with the hay today”.

“Are you sure it's okay?”

“Well, we are approved to ride independently so I guess it's ok,” Perri replied.

“It's just I'd rather Luke was here,” Zain said.

“I'm not sure he believes us about the fence being cut,” Hayley said.



“I'll come too for support,” offered Ali. “And we must agree to tell Luke”.

Glancing at the others, Perri said, “We already have and it didn't help remember”. Looking up she said, “We stick together today. No splitting up unless absolutely necessary. And also, we don't confront anyone—we're just here to observe.”

Liz, already astride her pony, nodded nervously. “What if we're seen?”

“We act normal,” Perri said firmly. “We're just kids out on a ride, nothing suspicious. But keep your eyes open.”

With that, they set off. The trail was familiar now, but the sense of unease was palpable. Every rustle in the bush, every distant noise seemed magnified. The thought of who—or what—they might encounter weighed heavily on them, though no one dared voice it.

When they reached the fence, Perry slid off her pony, looping the reins over a sturdy branch. The others followed suit, tying their ponies to nearby trees.

“The twine's gone,” Gypsy said, pointing to where it had been tied back. “It's been completely removed.”

“That's not good,” Ali murmured, frowning.

Perri crouched to inspect the area. “Whoever did this does not want to leave a trace. They're being careful.”



“I’ll walk the fence line,” Zain offered. “Maybe there’s something further up.”

“I’ll go through and check the stock route,” Perri said, already climbing through the wire. “Liz, Gypsy—come with me. Ali, Hayley, stay here and keep watch.”

The stock route stretched ahead, shaded by towering gum trees. Perri’s boots crunched softly on the dry ground as they walked, scanning for anything out of place. It was Gypsy who spotted it first—a gate into the neighbouring coal mining property, tied with twine the same colour as the piece they had seen before on the cut fence.

“That’s it,” Gypsy whispered. “That’s the same twine.”

Perri’s stomach churned. She shaded her eyes, peering across the paddock. In the distance, a man sat atop a tractor, the hum of the engine faint but unmistakable.

“We should go,” Liz urged, her voice tight.

Perri nodded. “Agreed. Let’s get back to the others.”

Unbeknownst to them, the man had turned his tractor was heading straight for them. The group was still scanning the neighbouring fence line for clues. Perri spotted more baling twine, tied hastily to patch a section of wire. The sight sent a chill through her.

“Same twine,” Perri murmured, running her fingers over the knot. Her mind whirred with questions, but before she could voice them, Gypsy tugged at her sleeve.



“Perri,” she said, her voice tight with urgency. “Hayley and Ali are waving at us.”

She turned to see the two girls standing by the original cut fence, their arms gesturing wildly. She squinted, trying to make sense of their frantic movements, but their shouts were lost in the distance.

“They're trying to tell us something,” Elizabeth said, frowning.

“We should head back,” Perri said. The group started walking toward the fence cut and the girls, the stock route stretching out behind them, but none of them noticed the distant hum of a tractor growing louder.

By the time Perri glanced over her shoulder, it was too late. The tractor barrelled down the track, kicking up a cloud of dust. Behind the wheel sat a stocky man with a weathered face and a scowl that could cut steel.

“Who's that?” Elizabeth whispered.

“That’s Mr. Durley,” Perri said grimly.

The tractor screeched to a halt in front of them, the engine still rumbling. Mr. Durley climbed down, his boots hitting the ground with a solid thud.

“What do you kids think you’re doing up here on my property?” His voice was sharp, his gaze cutting through each of them.



Perri stepped forward, steadying herself. “Yesterday, we found a hole in our fence,” she said, keeping her voice polite but firm. “We fixed it, but we came onto the stock route today—it’s public land—to check if we missed anything.”

“Missed anything?” Mr. Durley barked. “What could you possibly have missed?”

Perri met the man’s glare, refusing to back down. “Well, that’s what we were wondering,” she said quietly, the words hanging in the tense air. For a moment, neither moved, their eyes locked in a silent standoff. Mr. Durley’s expression faltered, a flicker of something unreadable crossing his face. He fidgeted, shifting his weight before jabbing a finger toward Perri.

“Make sure you stay on your own property, kids,” he snapped. “Or you’ll find yourselves getting into trouble. Do you understand me?”

With that, he spun on his heel, climbed back into his tractor, and drove off, the roar of the engine fading as he disappeared into the distance.

The group stood in stunned silence until Zane appeared, his face pale. “What just happened?” he asked, his voice shaking.

“We’re not sure,” Perri muttered, running a hand through her hair. “But something’s not right.”

They led their ponies down the ridge spur, the tension still thick as they descended into the valley floor. By the time they reached one of the sunken pools, they could hardly breathe from the weight of it all.

“We need to tell Luke,” Liz said finally, breaking the heavy silence.

Sitting by the waterhole, they let their ponies graze and tried to piece it all together. The baling twine, the cut fence, Mr. Durley’s reaction—none of it added up. Perri nodded. “We will. But tell her what? There was a hole in the fence and her neighbour is crabby? She stated, rather than asked. “No, first we need to figure out what this all means.”

Mounting their ponies, the group rode for home, their thoughts tangled with questions they couldn’t yet answer.

