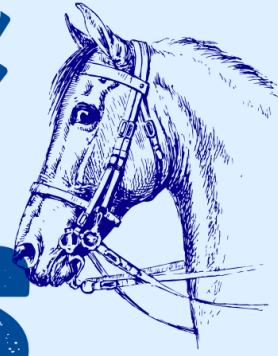


# BUSHFIRES & BROODMARES




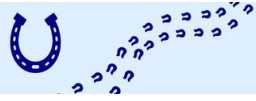
Hills and Hollows Horse Riding School Series



# BOOK 3. BUSHFIRES & BROODMARES

The thick smell of smoke hung in the summer air as the small group rode out to bring the broodmares back to safety. A high risk of fire loomed over the farm, having started in a stock route adjacent to the riding school. Now, urgency quickened their pace. The sun, a blood red orb, was like an omen forewarning danger.





The riders dropped into the valley and the haze thickened as smoke curled around trees and set the riders in a ghostly hue.

The group of riders climbed through the steep, rough terrain of forest oaks out beyond the valley floor and the ponies began to tire. The path narrowed, bordered by towering trees that swayed and creaked in the hot wind, a hazy orange sky above laced with foreboding.

Luke pulled his horse up on a flat section of the spur, just where the forest oaks gave way to more open grassland. He gave the horse a moment to catch its breath, relieved to find a brief reprieve from the climb.

Suddenly, two black cockatoos hurtled past, screeching as they banked through the wind-swirled trees. The noise echoed in the forest, and Luke's heart raced at the unexpected chaos. The horse he rode, a young black mare, stood, legs splayed, trembling in fear. As the birds disappeared into the dense foliage, their screams continued to reverberate, an ominous reminder of the volatile situation surrounding them.

“Let's keep moving,” Luke urged, trying to mask his own anxiety. The smoke that clung to the air swirled in clouds around them, a constant reminder of the threat they faced. Willow, riding nearby, suddenly shivered as a chill crept over her, contrasting sharp against the heat of the day. The anxiety of the moment sank into her bones.

“We need to find those broodmares,” she murmured, glancing at the others. They needed to keep moving, and she tightened her grip on the reins, encouraging her pony forward.

The path, though still rough, was marked slightly more clearly now, giving them hope that they were on the right track. They pressed onward, pushing

through the unease that surrounded them, determined to locate the mares before the smoke and heat could worsen their situation.

With each hoof beat, the urgency grew, fuelled by the fear of what might happen if they didn't reach them in time. The bond with their ponies felt stronger than ever, and together, they navigated the challenges of the rugged terrain and conditions, driven by their mission to bring the herd back to safety.

The group divided into smaller parties, each tasked with searching through the thick smoke and swirling dust for the broodmare herd. Their mission was clear: locate all six mares and their two foals before bringing them back to an open grass paddock that was unlikely to burn, even in the worst conditions, due to its sparse grass cover and running water.



With a nod of determination, they spread out. Some riders ventured up the narrow passage cloaked by dense vines and paperbark trees, while others



opted for a more direct route, taking the cross-country paddock as a shortcut to the broodmare's usual grazing ground.

Another group led by Zain tackled the steep ascent beyond the creek line, determined to cover ground as quickly as possible. As they moved through the terrain, their hearts raced with anticipation. The thrill of the hunt was mixed with the anxiety caused by the smoke that swirled around them. Each rider called out periodically, checking in with each other and ensuring no one was left behind in the chaos.

Zain's group was the first to spot a mare and foal and Willow let out a familiar "Cooee" call that reverberated through the thick smoke and heavy air, signalling their arrival at the herd. Soon the "cooee" came back from Luke as his group approached from the rear and together, they surrounded the herd of broodmares.

With careful coordination, they began to corral the mares, guiding them into a narrower space where they could be haltered. The key challenge now lay in whether the foals would follow their mothers or resist the unfamiliar activity and flee.

A wave of relief washed over the group, as the broodmares nudged their foals forward. The riders leaned back into the steep downhill path, hind legs wobbling to hold steady and each step deliberate and awkward as they navigated the down descent.

"Wombat hole ahead to the left" cried Willow, unsure if others would see it in the confusion, as foals darted through the already unsettled squadron of riders causing distraction and chaos.

Continuing downward, and dodging wombat holes and panicking foals, Ali felt a surge of panic rise up. Zain felt it too. “We've been here before” he said in a restrained calm voice, “almost at the bottom now.”

Ali recalled her experience crossing the valley floor and gathered renewed courage. From the bottom of that terrible descent, she yelled back to riders, “Here's the soft grass of the valley floor”. She hoped her words would encourage the riders still struggling to pick their way down.

The mares instinctively sensed the safety ahead and began to lead their foals along the valley track toward the stables at Hills and Hollows. The riders worked in harmony, encouraging the foals with soft voices and gentle nudges, ensuring they kept pace with their mothers.

Finally, the group returned to the mares and foals to the yards. Although smoky and dusty, they were familiar and safe. Smiles spread across their faces as they exchanged glances filled with a sense of accomplishment, knowing they had played a crucial role in keeping the herd safe. In that moment, they felt the bond of the Hills and Hollows family stronger than ever, united in their care for the ponies and the land.

