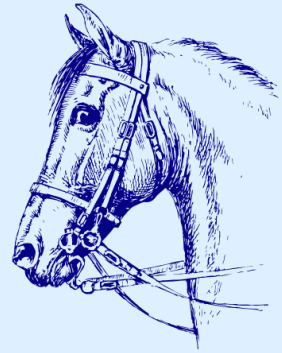




PONY IN A TANGLE



Hills and Hollows Horse Riding School Series



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The sun was barely over the hills and the summer heat was already strong, as Perri and Elizabeth arrived for the morning feed run. Thick air hung with the scent of gum trees and dust, mingled with the earthy smell of hay and leather. Crickets chirped lazily in the shadows, their song the only sound breaking the stillness of dawn.

The girls made their way toward the feed shed, metal buckets clinking in their hands. Every step stirring dust that settled quickly back to the cracked, sun-baked ground. The girls' faces were already glistening from the penetrating heat as they opened up the shed.

As they began scooping feed and measuring grain, the steady rhythm of the morning routine returned. "Two scoops lucerne chaff, one scoop oaten", Perri said confidently,

"Good that's the chaff, how much grain?" Liz asked, she knew to check carefully as feed portions changed with the seasons and pony workload.

"We don't need to add grain until autumn remember, just a half scoop of the pellets for now," Perri replied,

"Too easy," Liz obliged, measuring pellets from the feed bin.



This was Hills and Hollows: the warm summer mornings and the girls' unwavering resolve to help out and care for the ponies, no matter what.

The routine was so familiar: load the farm buggy with hay and feed buckets, crisscross between paddocks to check horse and pony herds, check water and feed. Smaller herds seemed to make for happier horses and so the patterns of care had grown out of trial and error over the years at Hills and Hollows.

As they counted and inspected each pony in the pony herd, a creeping sense of unease settled over them—Ebony was missing.



“Where’s Ebony?” Perri asked, glancing at Elizabeth with worry etched on her face.



“I’m not sure,” Elizabeth replied, her voice low. “She should have come up with the others. Maybe she’s injured or stuck somewhere. It's been so hot. She could die without water.”

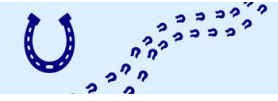
Perri frowned, the thought of Ebony in trouble igniting a sense of urgency. “I think we’d better ride out and see if we can find her. She might be in the gully or one of the ravines.”

“Are we allowed to do that?” Elizabeth hesitated, glancing around as if expecting Leanne to appear. “Is it safe enough without Luke or Leanne?” She asked.

“We don’t have a choice,” Perri insisted. “Ebony is missing, and if we don’t find her quickly, who knows what could happen?”

“Alright then,” Elizabeth agreed reluctantly. “We do have approval to ride here without supervision. I guess it’s the same. Let’s saddle up two of the safest ponies to be sure.”

Liz was cautious and curious by nature. The ponies had a hold on her heart that was undeniable and she was prepared to go to all lengths to help the school survive. She and her mum had spent many days collecting manure and teaming up to clear the gully trails of problem weeds. This was just the sort of help Leanne needed to meet the growing demands of the local



Council. Ever practical, one day, Liz would be a Diesel Mechanic like her dad and her attention to detail suggested she'd be a good one.

The girls quickly prepared the ponies, ensuring the saddles and gear were secure, and then mounted up, the excitement of adventure momentarily overshadowing their worries. "I'm glad we're setting out early before the day heats up. What if she really can't get to water!" Perri said, pleased with their decision.

The pair set off, taking a track called the Echidna Trail that led to the small dam in the gully area. This trail was well known for its surrounding uneven patches, shaped like little mounds, where echidnas often nested, but it was a route that required careful navigation.

Once they reached the dam, they crossed a small bridge. The bridge was adjacent to the goats' paddock and they loved to bleat at riders as they passed. On their way across, Perri lightened the mood by joking, "Billy Goats Gruff – it's a bit like a fairy tale, I hope the ending is a good one".

The trail then wound through a tall gum forest, where the sunlight flickered through the leaves, creating a dappled effect on the ground. The trees here held secrets—many animals found refuge in the shelter of their branches, but today they only found silence.



“Let’s stop here and listen for her,” Elizabeth suggested, feeling the weight of uncertainty. They called out for Ebony, but their voices echoed back to them without an answer.

“Will we ever find her across all these deep ravines and spurs?” Liz asked despairingly.


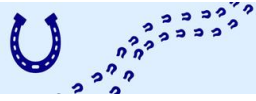
“Why not let the ponies lead us,” suggested Perri. “They have a sense for these things”.

The ponies took the trail known as the Serpentine as it snaked across hillocks and ravines and led toward the source of Spring Creek.

Soon the riders emerged from the dark, dense forest to a grassy hillock where they could see the creek below. A tangle of vines wrapped around the trees lining the creek like nature’s ribbons.

Liz’s eyes searched out for Ebony across the stretch of valley before them and down into the dense thicket leading to the creek's edge.

There was nothing. Then, suddenly she paused, noticing a section of disturbed earth by the creek. “What could have done that?” she wondered.



Perri also looked down toward the thick vegetation of the creek and the disturbed leaf litter but was distracted by her restless pony, as the small safe Welsh pony known as Bear started to paw at the earth, scraping leaf litter from beneath him.

Then, in perfect harmony, Perri and Liz stared at one another, the same thoughts racing between them...“if our ponies can make this mess with leaves”.

Without a shared word between them, they each leaned forward, urging their ponies on, down the steep, open hillside. The air rushed past as hooves pounded against the earth, sending small stones tumbling. Then, just as they neared the bottom, something moved in the shadows beneath the trees and vines at the riverbank.

They caught only glimpses—an unexpected shape slipping between branches, a flash of darkness hidden by the underbrush. Their hearts raced, their senses on high alert as they approached the creek, the sound of water now mingling with their steady breath and pounding hooves. “There!” Perry pointed, “what’s that?” She asked urgently.

At the creek’s edge, a dark shape struggled amidst the thick vines. As they approached cautiously, their hearts sank—Ebony had gotten herself entangled, her neck caught in a solid vine that was trapping her. The ground



around her had been disturbed, with loose soil and leaves scattered about as she had fought to free herself.


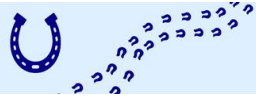
“Easy girl, easy girl,” Elizabeth said in a reassuring tone, a trickle of sweat traced down her cheek. “We’re going to get you out of there. It’s going to be alright.”

Ebony whinnied and knickered softly, recognizing their voices. The two quickly assessed the situation, knowing they had to work carefully to avoid causing her more distress as they began to untangle the vines.

“Hold still, we’ve got you,” Perri whispered, her hands deftly pulling at the thick vines while Elizabeth worked on securing a halter around her head. With one final tug, they freed her neck from the tight grasp of the vine. Ebony shook her head, the panic in her eyes slowly giving way to trust as they slipped the halter on.

“Let’s get you back to safety and look you over.” Liz said, leading Ebony up the slope toward the familiar path.

With Perri guiding from behind, the trio made their way back through the trees, each step leading Ebony further away from the danger of the creek and its forest of vines. The worry they had felt was now replaced by relief and the promise of safety, and as they emerged back onto the riding path, both



kids exchanged glances filled with gratitude for the bond they shared with their beloved ponies.

Once they returned to the riding school, they couldn't wait to tell Leanne about their adventure, the lessons learned, and the importance of looking out for each other—both pony and rider alike.

Relieved by their careful execution of the plan, Leanne smiled, “You two showed courage and teamwork today,” she said. “I’m glad you coined the bridge ‘Billy Goats Gruff’ because it’s a fable of courage and cooperation to overcome the wicked troll and get across the bridge”.

Perri grinned, a little weary from the adventure, “I guess we weren’t just rescuing the pony – we were facing our own trolls,” she said.

“From now on, the bridge crossing near the goat’s paddock will be named Billy Goats Gruff and the story told to remind us of your courage and help,” Leanne said as she helped the girls to sponge down their equally weary ponies knowing the gentle rhythm of grazing with their herd was all the reward that the ponies needed for their role in today’s rescue.