

a breakfast serials story

The Winner's Circle

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Chapter 1 Welcome to Wind Rider Farms

Ben Quigley glanced out the window when Mrs. Langton from Family Services put on the blinker. A sign for “Wind Rider Farms” slid past and he clenched his fists around his backpack straps. The car surged up a gravel road lined with fences, and then a rambling white house came into view, set amid barns. Nearby was an oval of dirt, ringed by another fence. The sun was setting, and the golden light made every window on the house look like it framed a fire within.

Not fire. Ben refused that thought. Definitely not fire.

“You’ll do fine, Ben,” Mrs. Langton said, in her fifteenth attempt since leaving New York City to start conversation. “And there must be plenty of other boys around.”

Ben stared straight ahead. Boys whose parents would warn about the city kid, *His father’s at Mt. McGregor Prison, the boy’s probably a bad seed and who can blame him with no mother, but stay away.*

“We’re here,” the woman said tightly.

The front door opened. A gray-haired man in jeans, rubber boots, and a Harvard T-shirt came out, while four

dogs of assorted sizes wormed past him and lolloped away. He had the kind of country-preppy look of a gentleman farmer.

“This is it,” Ben muttered, pulling on the door handle.

“Mr. Brennan?” Mrs. Langton called as she stood up.

The man’s boots *flump-flumped* on the porch as he strode forward. “Welcome to Saratoga.” He gave Ben a wide smile. “Please, come on in.”

Ben stepped inside and found himself facing a wall of photos. Horses. One horse after another. Head shot. Profile. Full-body shot. Running. Standing. There were people in the pictures, too, and Mr. Brennan was in lots of them—gray-haired, black-haired, pictures of him young, even one of him—it looked like him—as a teenager, his arm thrown across the shoulders of another teenaged boy whose face was lined with a deep scowl. Ben stared at the scowling boy and felt a sudden, inexplicable shiver.

He turned away, taking in the rest of the front hall. It looked like one of those houses he’d seen in magazines, with antiques and Oriental carpets and dark oil paintings on the walls, except that it didn’t actually have any of that stuff. The hall seemed strangely empty. Just a small table with a cell-phone charger and some keys.

Shrugging, Ben went back out to the porch, where Mrs. Langton was reviewing some paperwork with Mr. Brennan. She signed some papers, gave Ben a handshake, and headed for the car. They watched her pull away.

“Ben, let me show you around,” Mr. Brennan said. “Just leave your stuff until later.”

Mr. Brennan kept up a running commentary as he led the way. “Well, this is our farm. That pond there is good for swimming—we swim the horses in it, too—you can swim, right?”

He paused long enough for Ben to nod, and then smiled again. “Great. That’s the tractor barn—got a little machine shop—and this way”—Mr. Brennan pushed open a gate, ushering Ben toward a long, white, immaculate barn—“is where the boss lives.”

The sun poured in through the door of the barn, highlighting flecks of floating hay that glinted like sparks. Over the door was a red *No Smoking* sign with a tattered bird’s nest half-obscuring the *No*. The place smelled sweet.

As they entered, horse heads began to appear at the open half-doors of the stalls—gray and black and red and dusky brown. Halfway down the aisle, a gray horse nodded as if in greeting. Mr. Brennan paused there, rubbing the horse’s nose.

“How ya doin’, Gogo? Ben, this is the boss.”

Ben gave a little wave. “Hey, Gogo.”

“Go By Wind,” Brennan said, rubbing Gogo’s nose again. “Gogo’s just his stable name.”

The gray horse stamped a back foot and nodded. Cautiously, Ben reached toward Gogo’s nose. The horse made flapping moves with his lips, revealing giant teeth, and Ben jerked backward.

Mr. Brennan laughed. “Hold your hand flat, let him smell you,” the man explained, and Ben approached again warily.

The horse snuffed hot damp breath out onto Ben’s hand, and bristly short hairs tickled his fingers. The stillness of the barn was broken only by the occasional thump of a horse shifting its feet. For a moment, Ben wondered if he could be happy here. Mr. Brennan cleared his throat.

“Ben, I know this is hard, getting thrown in with strangers. Any time you want me to take you to see your dad, just say the word. That’s why you’re here—Mt. McGregor’s just twenty minutes up Route 9.”

Almost before Ben’s eyes, the stalls became prison cells, and the brown and red and gray and white horses became inmates behind bars. He couldn’t bear to think about his dad—not behind bars.

“No thanks,” he choked turning away.

He slouched toward the door, hands in his pockets. A voice reached him from outside, and footsteps. Ben halted, keeping out of view. He couldn’t see who was speaking.

“Did that foster kid arrive? Brennan must be outta his mind, I mean his dad’s in prison for arson. That’s not a happy thought with all these racehorses.”

Shame scorched Ben’s cheeks as the voice continued, moving nearly out of earshot.

“We better just hide all the matches, man. Hide *all* the matches.”

Next Week: Hoofbeats in the Fog

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