

*a breakfast serials story*

# The Winner's Circle

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## Chapter 2 Hoofbeats in the Fog

**The Story So Far:** Foster kid Ben Quigley has arrived at a farm in upstate New York, near where his dad is in prison. A cloud of suspicion follows Ben, and some folks wonder: is he a firebug like his father?

The next morning Ben was awake early, disoriented by the countryside silence. For a few moments he lay with his arm thrown across his face and replayed last night's dinner: Mrs. Brennan coming in breathless with two bags bulging with Chinese take-out, and a shrimpy kind of guy called Leo right on her heels with two more fragrant sacks. Leo was short and old and leathery, and had a kind of crooked, bent-out-of-shape look to him, like he'd fallen off of horses at high speed so many times he'd run out of bones to break. As they'd begun setting out plates several more people arrived and the kitchen was filled with noise, and people grabbing for egg rolls and heaping their plates with General Tso chicken and pork lo mein. Ben noticed one of the men trying to pay Mr. Brennan back for a share of the take-

out but without success. Mr. Brennan just laughed and held his hands up, saying, "Forget it."

There seemed to be a lot of people associated with Wind Rider Farms and a lot of houseguests who were really into horse racing. The talk was all about races and trainers, and they'd all just come from the track in Saratoga Springs; as far as Ben was concerned, the conversation might as well have been in a foreign language. He was careful to avoid meeting anyone's eyes, in case someone started asking questions, but nobody tried to drag him into conversation. Ben wasn't sure if they were all being sensitive and giving him space to settle in, or if they were ignoring him, or didn't know anything about him—or were just used to finding new people at the Brennans'. It seemed like the kind of home where the welcome mat was always out, the porch light was always on, and there was always room for one more guest at the table.

Now, rolling onto his side, Ben looked out the window into the branches of a broad, leafy tree. He'd never had a tree outside his window before; he'd always had the same view of the airshaft in his apartment building. One leaf on this tree was already fiery red: signs of autumn came early in upstate New York, he realized. It was still August.

Urgently, as if summer were disappearing before his eyes, Ben hauled himself out of bed, pulled on jeans and a T-shirt, and stepped into flip-flops. The digital clock beside the bed said 6:35.

He eased himself out of his room onto the landing, listening to his own breaths. The house was full of dogs, and he didn't want to rouse them. Careful not to let his flip-flops slap against his heels, he made his way downstairs through the empty foyer and opened the front door.

Through the door was another world, wreathed in mist as thick as smoke. An orange cat appeared almost magically, padding on silent feet, a limp furry thing dangling from its jaws. The cat slipped through the door with its prize.

Too late, Ben lunged for the cat. "Don't bring that inside!" he whispered. But the hunter was too nimble for him and was on its way up the stairs in a blur of orange legs.

"Yuck. Don't leave it on my bed," he muttered. Grimacing, Ben shut the door and took a few steps out onto the drive. The air was visible, tiny jiggling swarms of water vapor snaking and sliding past Ben's face. Instantly his skin was clammy and his eyelashes were beaded with droplets. He put his hands out like a swimmer, pushing the mist aside. He couldn't see to the other side of the drive, and after two or three steps the house was swallowed by the fog.

Under the thin rubber soles of his flip-flops, the gravel crunched and grated. He narrowly missed stepping in a pile of horse manure, and Ben began to regret his flip-flops. A cold drop splatted onto his head

from the tree above; he shivered. It was so quiet Ben could hear his own heart beating.

The thumping grew more and more noticeable, until at last it was obvious that it wasn't his own heart he was hearing, but hoofbeats. They were muffled, coming from nowhere. Ben turned one way, then another, straining to make out which direction the horse was approaching from. If anything, the mist seemed to gather in around him even more thickly, and now Ben's heart *was* pounding in his ears. Now the hoofbeats were grating on gravel, and Ben understood that the horse was on the same stony drive he was standing on, coming toward him, but from which side? The house had disappeared behind him—or was it in front of him? And he couldn't tell which direction would take him to the edge of the driveway, the safety of the lawn, and out of the path of the oncoming horse that was louder and louder. Ben's mouth was dry with fear.

He was caught, trapped, pinned like a mouse in the jaws of a cat, and just as he cried out in desperation, "STOP!" the mist parted in front of him and the horse shied back and leaped in an explosion of hooves, spurting gravel, and a lashing whip.

### **Next Week: The Lashing Whip**

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