

CHAPTER 2

Up ahead, at the entrance to a pathway leading into the settlement, stood four sharply dressed individuals I assumed to be Governus representatives. A crowd had gathered behind and around them, comprising a mixture of racers and Egan residents—colony folk. Broad smiles of welcome split the local's faces. Tipping my cowboy hat, I smiled back. A bottleneck had formed up ahead where participants stopped to provide their own customary greetings to the organizers. Layered voices and engines of all kinds hummed and growled to life as the procession slowly moved along. Herc's ears flicked in all directions while he surveyed our chaotic surroundings.

As we walked, the odd individual got a little too close, jostling for position and crowding in on Herc. Most of the time, he tolerated it, even though his ocular implant shone green. An understandable reaction. But, whenever his eye turned red, nostrils flaring, I spoke up.

“You better back off unless you wanna get kicked,” I warned one such racer who'd squeezed in on Herc's right, my tone as flat as the Manitoba prairie.

The bulbous fellow with greasy hair covering most of his body scoffed and flashed two crossed fingers at me. Historically, the gesture indicated a desire for good luck back on Earth, but Galaxium-wide, it was better known as a tell-off. A harsh one. The guy pushed forward, roughly shoving Herc's hind end in order to squeeze his slender solar cycle past.

“Hey!” My protective instinct kicked in. “Don't touch my—”

Herc's neck bumped into my shoulder as one of his powerful rear legs shot out, kicking the guy's cycle right out from under him. The bike clattered to the ground, banging against another vehicle, and the guy toppled onto an unimpressed racer—a tall man wearing an ornately embroidered green hooded cloak—who promptly swore and shoved him off. Popping back up to his thick webbed feet, Mr. Hairy-Pants checked the damage, seeing a hoof-shaped dent in the side panel of his vehicle. He scowled at me, spitting a few choice words.

“Warned you.” I shrugged, leading Herc right on past. I stared straight ahead, worried he might escalate things, but he didn't, and I tried my best not to let on that I'd been nervous. It was imperative not to appear weak in this competitive and uncertain atmosphere. Calling bluffs in certain black-market

casinos had taught me that. *Stand tall, Finn. Fake it til' you make it.* Most folks gave us a respectfully wide berth after that, which was a relief. But to make things easier, I manoeuvred Herc to the outskirts of the throng and kept moving forward. No use making waves.

Several minutes later, we reached the back end of the clustered bottleneck.

A group of colony children caught my eye on the left. They jumped up and down like they had springs for feet, pointing fingers at Herc with wide eyes. *They've probably never seen a horse before.* Flashing an amused grin, I gave a signal for Herc to prance. In his agitated state, my highly trained horse responded slower than usual, but within a few seconds his neck arched and his knees lifted high—hooves bouncing. The brief action sent the kids into a flurry of excited whispers, and to my surprise, a collection of adult colonists clapped at the display, too.

Oddly, I felt like one of those pageant queens I'd seen in reels at the humanity museum. On display for everyone's viewing pleasure. "Hopefully there won't be a swimsuit portion," I muttered to Herc, whose eye still glowed a tell-tale shade of green. Somewhere nearby, an engine backfired and his well-muscled body jolted to the side. I held firm to the reins, hoping he didn't decide to bolt—I'd never be able to hold him if he did. His legs were too powerful. But thankfully, he let me pull him back in close. I patted his neck. "Easy now. Everything's alright."

Competitors sized each other up as they made their way down the makeshift aisle. There was a real mixed bag of species. Many I'd encountered before on space stations or during my past gambling excursions, but others were truly new to me—perhaps hailing from more remote parts of the Galaxium. Some eyes were friendly, some curious, others calculating. Not everyone I'd met on board had been friendly, that's for sure. Not a shock given the nature of the race.

Taking my turn, I stopped before the Governus reps and presented a hand to shake amidst the chorus of chatter surrounding us. A bearded man—an advisor—with a nest of horns twisting atop his head shook my hand first. After him came a grey-skinned and well-muscled male whose entire lower half was bionic. His name tag said Steel—a CEO. He presented a grin that didn't quite reach his eyes, and I took a mental note. Next down the line stood a tall woman with similar grey skin. Another CEO. Khana. She wore a black bowler hat with a sleek striped pant suit, perfectly streamlined to her shapely form.

The woman grasped my hand, shaking firmly. “Welcome to Egan.” Khana’s voice sounded husky yet powerful. A wide smile graced her face, her striking ice-blue eyes exuding incredible warmth. “I must say your mode of travel is most... interesting.” She seemed a pinch curious, or perhaps mystified. Maybe both.

“Happy to be here, ma’am. And yes, this is Hercules, my horse. Ever seen one before?” Herc stomped his hoof, ears twitching.

“I haven’t. You’ve given me a first today.” Khana nodded regally, before waving me onward. “The race begins at noon. Please make your way to the start line to register and receive your implant.” She pointed down the dirt road leading through the settlement. “Good luck.”

“Thank you, ma’am.” I smiled, then moved on to shake the final Governus advisor’s tentacle-like hand. After sharing a final nod, I notched a boot into a stirrup, and swung onto Herc’s back. With reins in hand, I squeezed my heels and we took off at an easy lope.

Riding through town, we slowed to a walk and I took in the rows of buildings lining the street. Sheets of metal were bolted together in various angular constructions. Some had been slathered with colourful paint, which I assumed was an attempt to make it feel homier. The odd storefront was intermixed between homes, each one offering a variety of basic goods and services. Shopkeepers stood at the ready watching the procession go by, eagerly awaiting the business this influx of travellers might bring.

A pair of three-wheeled off-roaders kicked up dust as they sped toward the crowd gathering up ahead. I watched it swirl and found myself smiling. Growing up on a cattle ranch, I’d been exposed to a slew of historical movies called “westerns”. I was kind of like one of those cowgirls right now. Riding into a new town seeking to make a fresh start. If it weren’t for all the commotion these high-tech conveyances caused, I’d half expect a tumbleweed to roll by.

When we finally reached the end of the settlement, the buildings halted abruptly, with nothing but grassy hills and sky existing beyond them... except for the hazy smudge stretched across the horizon. That had to be the Sweep—the uncharted wilderness we’d be racing through. The new settlement of Novus and free land parcels awaited racers on the other side.

It seemed a bit odd that it remained unmapped or explored, especially given the scanning technology that existed today. I was surprised a powerful

company like Governus hadn't done that first thing before sinking any resources into colonization. But I pushed the wayward thought aside as we arrived at the line-up. The notion of an uncharted Sweep wasn't outlandish enough to outweigh the reward of free land. It was time to focus. Getting through that forest and securing my land was all that mattered right now.

Competitors filed forward to sign in with the registrar and we followed suit. I was dying to know how many racers there were. Two fifty? Two seventy-five, maybe? My stomach grew heavy thinking about it, like I'd just gorged myself on a bowl of my mom's fireside beans—which I realized I might never taste again. I cleared the sudden lump in my throat, then told myself it could be worse. A less risky race would've attracted way more competition. I wiped a band of moisture from my brow and replaced my hat. As the sun climbed higher in the sky, the air warmed with it. Two hours to wait. I swung a leg over the saddle and dropped to the ground. Best give Herc a break before go time.

Thirty minutes later, we finally reached the front of our line and the race administrator recorded my details on his sign-up sheet. The portly fellow handed me a roughly drawn map and an information sheet, then transferred the contract to my wrist cuff.

“So... Finnley Rucker. Read it, sign it. Don't forget to hit submit. No signed contract, no race. Once you do that, you head into *that* building—” He pointed to the last structure on the far side of the street. “Get your monitoring implant and you'll be good to go. No implant, no race. Got it? Good luck.”

“Yes, thank you, sir,” I said. “Can I ask—” But he was already waving the next competitor forward.

Alrighty then.

I led Herc into the shade of a nearby building, and gave him a chunk of carrot while I reviewed the contract. From what I could tell, everything seemed on the level. An injury and indemnity waiver added to the rules I'd already read. No strange provisos or overworded clauses meant to confuse. Simply race at your own risk for a chance at free land. Well... almost free. If I won, ten percent of my homestead's annual earnings would be due to Governus in perpetuity. A living tax, essentially—and not excessive. I could handle that.

For good measure, I saved a copy of the file to my cuff's internal storage. Then I digitally signed it and hit *submit* before turning off the projected 2D

digiscreen. Turning to Herc, I ran my hand over the star etched into the polished metal that covered most of his forehead and right cheek. A real star used to be there before the accident. I blinked away images of his body laying broken on the rocks, still as vivid as if it happened yesterday.

“There’s no turning back now, Herc,” I whispered, leading him toward the implant location. “We’re in it to win it.” He blew a warm breath of air in my face, his fuzzy whiskers tickling my cheek as I tied him to a post several feet from the door. Racers were scattered about all over the place, killing time by reading, chatting, gambling, arguing, or even napping. I eyed the closest individuals warily, not particularly keen on leaving Herc here unattended.

After removing my pulse rifle from its scabbard, I energized the reins and engaged the built-in shock lock feature on the leather saddle bags straddling Herc’s back. If anybody tried to untie him or break into my bags, an alarm would notify me while simultaneously sending a solid jolt into the offender’s system. A standard feature these days. Couldn’t be too careful.

I slipped inside the building to obtain my mandatory implant. “Will this take long?” I asked the nurse who led me into a small operating room.

She gave a soothing smile. “The procedure takes ten minutes, tops.”

“Thanks.” *Good. I don’t want to leave Herc for too long.*

The multi-limbed doc strode in moments later and explained the procedure. “I will numb the area, then affix this appliance to your temple.” He held up a metallic button-sized retinal monitor. “The implant’s needle houses bio connectors designed to patch into the host’s visual cortex—your visual cortex—allowing viewers to see through your eyes.”

“Right... got it.” I nodded slowly. “But, what about privacy? And permanency?”

The doctor tapped his clipboard. “I assure you the implant is fully removable post-race, and it has an auto-sensor to protect you. It has no audio, and no sensitive body parts will be visible at any time.”

I remained leery. Not having had any enhancements done to myself beyond a synth tattoo on my hip, I wasn’t keen on getting an implant. But I also wanted a shot at winning that land. Realistically, retinal implants were pretty common. *Suck it up, Finn.*

“Listen.” The doc must’ve sensed my hesitancy, because he hooked the implant up to a screen and handed it to me, pointing to its pinhole exterior

capture lens. “Point this at whatever sensitive bits you like and watch what happens on screen.” He turned away. “Go ahead.”

“This is just bizarre...” I mumbled, but grudgingly did what he said—had to. How else would I know for sure? Flashing the pinhole down my shirt, I snuck a peek at the screen with one squinty eye. Nothing but indistinguishable blurs showed up. I smiled, relaxing. *Okay, this is doable. No embarrassing bathroom episodes.*

“Good?” The doctor’s tone hinted at impatience.

“Yeah, good.”

About ten minutes later, I walked back outside. A bit groggy, I winced in the sunlight and tenderly rubbed the circular disc on my temple. The doc had warned lethargy and nausea were common side effects of the relaxation shot I was given. “It will pass soon,” he’d said.

It better. I need to be alert for this race.

Herc nickered a greeting as I re-joined him. To my relief, his eye glowed blue again—a positive sign. Clearly, nobody had messed with him while I was away, and he was finally getting used to our new surroundings. Too bad I couldn’t warn him it was about to get a lot crazier.

Another forty-five minutes passed before an announcement called all racers to the start line. I led Herc over, my grogginess long gone, and stopped at a heavy-looking steel desk where a floppy-eared guy was organizing things.

“Here’s your number,” he said. “It corresponds to a space on the start line. Head over there now. Oh, and there’s two-hundred of you racers here, so keep things calm and orderly.”

Two hundred racers had turned out for the race. Well now, that number was less than my original guesstimate. “And just to confirm, there’s only fifty parcels up for grabs, right?”

Floppy-ears gave a bored smile. “Yes, fifty. Move along. Good luck.”

I clucked my tongue as we claimed our designated space on the line. *Two hundred racers...* So, that meant I had a twenty-five percent shot at a piece of land. Those odds still weren’t as good as I’d like them to be, but they were good enough to keep my hope alive.

CHAPTER 3

Nearly an hour later, most racers had been registered, implanted, and pointed toward their designated spaces along a sprawling red start line. Ol' floppy ears had walked by several minutes ago, announcing the race would begin as soon as everybody was in place. Craning my neck, I spied the last competitors making their way to their spots.

Any time now.

While Herc topped up on water I'd poured from an outdoor tap, I surveyed the competition. What a collection of individuals. Lifeforms of all shapes, sizes, colours and consistencies were on display. There were the slender and ever-grumpy Ganglians, the statuesque Pembu, Zebords like Jorgep, slippery-faced Tumcah, and spotted Feedo. I also spied eight-limbed Monam, spike-backed Lashee's, and translucent skinned Neersoo, among countless other species of alien residing within a month's travel of Hobs. Not many humans, though. Sarah, Griggs, and I were among the few. Well, Sarah was half-human anyway. Her other half was a reviled reptilian species, but thankfully, she hadn't inherited many Crimeon features. The faint texture to her skin gave her enough trouble as it was. Her lineage didn't bother me at all, though. To me, Sarah was good people until proven otherwise. I was happy the three of us connected on board the ship during our four-week journey to Joya. Despite being fully prepared to race alone, the idea of forming an alliance had grown on me.

The majority of the racers kept busy tinkering with their machines or sizing each other up. Not counting Jorgep and myself, the field consisted of mechanical vehicles propelled by all manner of wheels, skids, or tracks. I'd seen a few hover ships earlier in the day, but sadly, none made the cut during inspection. I'd witnessed one such rejection up close en route to our spot.

"Flak off you slagers!" a Sessiyon had shouted, slamming his fist onto the Governus inspector's table. He had pale grey skin and striking eyes, just like the two Governus representatives I'd met earlier.

In response, the Governus inspector stood tall, crossing his arms. "A hovercraft does not have wheels, therefore it travels by air. Air travel is not permissible. It said so clearly in the rules. You shouldn't have brought it." He

swept a clawed hand toward the Sweep. “If you wish to race on foot, be my guest. If not, kindly remove yourself from this line. My decision is final.”

“Nobody on the transport told me it would be rejected!” the Sessiyon growled.

“The transport is just that. A *transport*. It’s not their race to govern.”

The livid racer thrust two crossed fingers into the inspector’s face.

“The transport ship departs for Hobs tomorrow.” The inspector calmly held up a credit wand. “Here, please have a drink on Governus for your trouble. Just hold up your wrist cuff.”

“A drink? A drink!” The Sessiyon swung a fist at the inspector, who skillfully dodged it before pushing the man’s back to send him flying. Two Governus guards swooped in from nearby and captured the offender’s arms, dragging him backward.

The inspector held up a hand and the guards paused.

“No, I insist.” He approached and tapped his credit wand to the seething racer’s cuff. “Safe travels home.” Then the inspector waved him away.

What a gut punch that must’ve been.

Ousted racers aside, the general mood on the line was a mix of cheerfulness and impatience, with a few token faces looking like they just gulped some sour milk. Some racers interacted, while others kept to themselves. Arguments or fights broke out now and then. One Tumcah dude down the row even sang to pass the time, his less than melodic opera earning him several requests to shut up. But the guy just laughed, his generous gelatinous belly jiggling as he belted it out. Jorgep wasn’t far away, and seemed to get a real kick out of the crooner’s infectious cheeriness. His unmistakable guffaws sliced through the din with ease. But many, like me, stared ahead, contemplating the raw alien expanse of forest that laid before us. The Sweep.

Herc finished his water and I collapsed the container, tucking it into a saddlebag. Wiping the sweat from my brow, I clipped the edge of my retinal monitor, wincing as a twinge shot through my temple. The doctor had said it would take a few hours to get used to the implant. At first it had tingled, which I didn’t mind. But now it felt like a nasty sunburn, mixed with the odd needle poke. I wasn’t overly keen about having Governus in my head, either. But at least the reasoning they gave made some sense. With all the action of a race, external cameras could be lost or broken too easily. In order to thoroughly monitor and respond to medical emergencies, the cameras had to be reliable.

I caught eyes with Sarah down the line on my right and waved. She'd brought a bright orange and yellow bio-mech suit. It was capable of tripling an athletic human's natural speed—a sport model, though all mech's were still bulky. At least it would do most of the hard work for her.

I noticed the same tall, green-cloaked racer from earlier claiming his designated spot five down to my right. The hood hid his facial features well, yet he looked up enough once for me to see he was a Ganglian. That explained the height. He caught my curious glance and glared back.

Averting my gaze, I focused on Griggs, a few bodies away in the opposite direction. He shot me a quick smile, dimples on display. Ignoring the faintest tingle that caused, I tipped my hat in return. Being an ex-military guy, I thought he'd be driving some huge beast of a machine, but no. He rode a sleek chrome covered spyro cycle, designed to travel light and low to the ground. Its hybrid engine was powered by both the driver's foot rotations and fuel.

“You ready to rock?” he asked, quoting one of his favourite slang terms from the 21st century. Griggs had quite the obsession with pre-contact earth culture. Some of the things that interested him were just bizarre—like the internet, muscle cars, or rap music.

I scoured my brain, then replied, “You got it, dood.”

“Nice! A late 20th century catch phrase. You've been paying attention.” He flashed me a thumbs up, then pulled on his helmet. Reclining in the seat of his cycle, he stretched his feet to the pedals. Then, reaching forward, he pulled down the handle bars—ready to go.

“What about you, bud? Are you *ready to rock?*” I smirked at Herc, rubbing his muzzle. He bobbed his head and stomped, as if impatient for the race to start. I heard the faintest hum as his robotic eye scanned left and right. It shone blue again, a good sign he was settling into the near constant engine revving and cacophony of voices surrounding us. I tightened the braids woven into his mane, then gave the saddle a once-over for good measure.

There was nothing to do now but wait.

Questions niggled in my brain as I admired the rolling plain. Long emerald, blueberry, and straw-coloured grasses rippled rhythmically to a melody the wind created. Roughly a mile up ahead, the sweeping expanse disappeared into the mysterious forest, which stretched on for an indeterminable distance. What existed there remained completely unknown. Questions snuck into my

mind. *Was I right to take the gamble and come here? Isn't gambling exactly what I've been trying to atone for the last three years? Am I even strong enough to do this?*

"Hey, human!" a throaty voice boomed from my right. The Ganglian, who'd seemingly taken a shine to glaring at me, motioned for my attention with a flick of his wrist. He stood tall beside his robust motorcycle-looking rig with thick pipes sticking out the sides like stubby wings, the whole thing covered in hand-painted symbols. His slender sinewy form looked odd next to that beast of a machine. Like a full-grown bull rubbing up on a flagpole.

Several sets of curious eyes swung my way.

"The name's Finn," I clarified with a nod, forcing a smile.

"Yeah, whatever." He let his hood fall to his shoulders as he strode closer, passing the other machines between us. He looked Hercules up and down. Fleshy scale-like protrusions covering his skin twitched as his thin lips curled in amusement. "You really expect to compete with *this?*" Laughing, he slowed to a halt a few feet away.

"Most certainly," I replied evenly, already sensing how this interaction was likely to proceed. Typical Ganglian with a mightier-than-thou attitude. Ever since the trade accord was signed, allowing them to do business with green-listed planets, they'd been a barely-tolerated presence within the civilized Galaxium. If not for the vast mineral resources and innovative technology Ganglia produced, nobody would give them the time of day.

A surprised reaction was understandable, though, since there weren't many horses in these parts. Not yet anyway—I aimed to change that. However, I didn't get the feeling he was merely surprised. I didn't like the way he was sneering at my horse.

"This is an Earth *horse*, correct? A flesh and blood creature." He scoffed, reaching a lanky arm to poke one of Hercules's metallic front legs. "Well, mostly."

"Hey, no touching." I moved between the Ganglian and my mount. Herc sidestepped, snorting behind me, and the unsavoury fellow backed off. But only slightly. "Can I help you with something specific, mister...?"

Twisting his narrow features into a sneer, he answered, "Raker." Then he glanced around, raising his voice. "And help from a *human?* Never."

A few snickers filtered into my ears.

There was obviously more than one Earth hater in this lineup, a fact which only reinforced the need to watch my back. Humans were nearly as despised as

Crimeons by a select minority. When humans first achieved sustainable long-range space travel and encountered life on other planets, they'd been viewed as rudimentary at first—like cute little babies that knew nothing. It was true in a way. Humanity had barely begun their quest for the stars. Yet, over time, being nothing if not determined, humans worked hard to harness more advanced tech and forged peaceful relations with other species. Then, about 100 years ago, Earth played a large role in creating transport conduits that regulated and allowed efficient travel for all treated planets within the Galaxium. Humans claimed a place in the upper echelon of civilized cultures.

However, regulating the trade routes pissed off a lot of folks—especially the black-market planets with their beyond-the-law business ventures—and the lingering bad blood never seemed to scrub out of the carpet.

“Yeah, alright.” I tipped my hat in a curt gesture, opting to disengage. “Well, since we have no business with each other, you best get back to your spot, then.”

“Oh, don't mind my curiosity...” Raker continued exaggeratedly, adding a faux polite nod. “I couldn't contain myself. I simply *had* to come see this slothenly creature up close.” He took a step back, eyes lingering a second too long on Herc's saddle packs.

“Slothenly,” I replied flatly, doing a poor job at hiding my irritation. I'd had just about enough of this guy. Clearly, he'd deemed anything Earthly as less-than. If I let it slide, I'd only add fuel to his misguided beliefs...but I didn't want a confrontation either. So, I opted for the competitive answer. “Well, I guess we'll see, won't we?”

Raker's eyes narrowed. “Yes. We will, indeed.”

Murmurs rippled through the crowd, breaking our stand-off.

The Governus representatives strode past the start line into the field, a league of underlings in tow. They called for quiet from both the racers and the colonists who'd gathered to watch the proceedings. Excitement quashed the impatience previously on everyone's faces.

The dapper-looking leaders held their heads high, showcasing the polite disinterest typical of a big corporation. Like other such businesses, buying up new planets had made them powerful, their operations expanding and turning profit from mining ore and other precious materials wherever they laid claim—or took a claim from a lesser company. Perhaps that's why I'd been surprised by the race advertisement at first, wondering why such a prominent

company would give away free land. It seemed odd, but they were also huge on colonising, and that equalled money too. They must've had a clear strategy fuelling their decision.

The Governus representatives' reserved expressions broke into gregarious smiles. The woman with grey skin and those startling blue eyes took a step forward, her arms spread wide.

“Greetings! I am a CEO of Governus, Khana Leenayt. This is my business partner, Steel—” She motioned to the half-bionic man beside her. “And we'd like to officially welcome you all to our newest, and very beautiful planet, Joya.” A metallic insignia of three triangles framing a planet glinted in the sun on each of their bowler hats.

Raker shot me one last glare then strode back to his own space.

Ignoring him, I focused on the CEO. *Here we go.*

“Governus is currently celebrating our 150th year in business! To commemorate that amazing milestone, we planned this race as a way to give back and pay our prosperity forward.” Khana paused for applause before continuing, her voice echoing from the loudspeakers erected along the start line. “Now, I trust you've all signed the contract, read the rules, and are aware of the dangers. Each of you has been outfitted with an implant that allows us to visually monitor the race and provide updates to the residents here, who will be eagerly cheering you on. Since we're dealing with uncharted lands, monitoring was a prudent safety protocol to implement. I'm sure you understand.”

She pressed her palms together in front of her chest, then swung one arm out toward the trees in the distance. “Beyond the Sweep lies Novus, a fledgling settlement, and fifty free parcels of fertile land. But you won't just find land there... you'll find dreams, too. The kind that come true!” A few hoots erupted from the crowd, and the CEO smiled—her lips wide, yet tight.

She motioned with her hands for silence. “If you're among the first fifty racers to reach Novus, you'll join us as a valued member of Joyan society henceforth. I guarantee you will fall in love with our communities, and trust me when I say, we can't wait to meet the lucky winners. So—race hard, be safe, and we shall see you on the other side.”

The crowd clapped, whistling and cheering. The CEO signalled her colleagues and all of the representatives engaged their boot thrusters. In a synchronised motion, the group rose into the sky. Khana deferred her

spotlight to Steel. The metal-legged rep who wore an ornate suit jacket with tails, and held up a strange wide-barrelled gun, moved forward.

“One last reminder. If anybody has medical or vehicle troubles, we *will* see it and arrange to get you as soon as is feasible. We will also see any kind of aggression, so ensure you play nice.” His tone deepened for those last pointed words, hard as quenched Damascus, but then brightened again. “We wish you the best of luck as you venture forth to grasp your destiny. The race will begin when this gun fires.” He raised the weapon, finger hovering over the trigger.

Chaos erupted from the competitors. Engines roared to life, drowning out the already boisterous spectators. Energized yips and hollers sliced the air as racers psyched themselves up.

I ran a soothing hand down Herc’s neck when he startled, prancing and shaking his head. Grabbing the suede saddle horn, I planted a foot into the stirrup and swung into the saddle. Herc reared and I compensated, whispering, “Shh, big guy. I know it’s a lot, but I’m right here with you. Shh...” His heavy front hooves thumped back to the ground. “That’s a good boy. We can do this, you and me. Let’s crush this race and build our dream ranch. I’ll do the human stuff; you do the horse stuff. Deal?”

Herc’s prancing lessened, but I could tell he was still nervous. His mood-ring eye never lied. Knowing Herc, he just needed to get running and everything would be fine.

Adrenaline coursed through my veins, activating and invigorating my senses. The breeze felt crisper against my skin; my vision clearer; hearing sharper. *This is it.*

The Governus rep, shouted, “Ready?”

Engines revved. Gripping the reins, I leaned forward, heels down.

“Set!”

A hush descended over the crowd.

Bang!