

SAND RUNNER

Vera Brook

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1 RUNNER

Kai woke up with a start, his T-shirt soaked through with cold sweat.

Another nightmare. At least the last scraps of it were fading fast. He was sick of the nightmares. Sick of being trapped in a world where nothing made sense and where, no matter what he did, everyone always ended up dying.

He sat up and dropped his feet to the floor. Rubbed his eyes. Then squinted at the harsh light pouring through the window.

Outside, the sun was already above the horizon, a pulsating yellow disk balanced on top of the ragged line of the distant mountains, the desert heating quickly after the cool night.

He'd overslept.

The race. Kai cursed under his breath and leapt to his feet.

Barefoot, he sprinted out of the house.

Ron lived just down the road. Past a row of identical housing units, their warm beige walls blending into the reddish browns of the desert, the sand lapping and piling up at the foot of each wall like waves.

Ron's house was easy to spot. It was an old house. A real house. Like the one Kai lived in. Not printed by a machine but erected by human hands from the ground up, brick by brick, over a century ago. Long before the Printing Center came to town and the last mason died of snake venom.

Ron was Kai's oldest friend. In both senses. He used to be Kai's parents' friend once. Kai liked to think that he inherited Ron—just like he inherited the house—after his parents died.

So he didn't think twice before bursting through his friend's front door. "Hullo?"

"In here." A low voice came from the back of the house.

Kai cringed as he entered the room. He'd never gotten used to Ron's self-declared occupation. A mechanic. A repairman.

If I only had the right parts, I could fix it for you. Ron used to say things like that in public, not long ago, to random town folks he would run into. Ignoring Kai's warning looks. Ignoring even the shocked expressions on people's faces when they realized they didn't mishear him and he wasn't joking. He really was offering to fix things for them.

As if fixing something that's broken was perfectly normal and acceptable.

Maybe it used to be, once. But not anymore. It wasn't exactly illegal. No one cared if you set up shop in your house and wasted your time tinkering with junk, as Ron did. But you better not offer your services to others. Good citizens didn't try to fix things that no longer worked—they disposed of them and bought new, updated models. To do anything else was selfish and petty. It hurt everyone.

Not that Kai bought into the whole "don't fix—buy new" rule. It was easy for the rich city folk to say, with their fancy high-rise offices and unlimited credit lines. Harder when you lived out here, in the middle of the desert, where there were only a handful of part-time jobs to go around, and all of these jobs put together wouldn't pay for one air ride to the city.

Still, Kai wasn't a fan of Ron's repair shop. All it took

was one glance around the room. At the neatly arranged tools on the rack. At the orderly stacks of spare parts filling the shelves. And worst of all, at the project in progress on the working table. It made Kai's skin itch with unease.

But Kai knew better than to bring it up. Especially today, when the project on the working table was a pair of his own running shoes. He'd asked Ron to work on them as a favor. Not to fix them, though, since they were still pretty new and worked just fine. He'd asked Ron to improve them.

"Morning, Ron." Kai moved closer to the table, eyeing the shoes, trying to gauge if the job was finished. He couldn't tell. The modification was to the soles, so the changes to the original design were mostly hidden from view.

At the other end of the table, Ron was soldering a circuit board. With his broad, strong back, dark eyes, and sun-tanned skin, Ron could pass for Kai's older brother—if it wasn't for the deep lines on his face and his hair, which was the color of steel. Parts of what looked like an old radio lay in front of him. The hand with the soldering iron stopped midair, a wisp of smoke rising from the glowing tip, and Ron glared at Kai over his protective glasses. "They're done. But like I said—it's the dumbest idea you've had yet."

Kai grinned and lifted the shoes off the table. "Thanks. I owe you one."

He wasn't breaking any rules. Runners could wear anything they wanted for the race. Actually, short of waiting for the start signal and not hitting another runner, there were no rules at all.

He turned the shoes upside down and inspected them. He could barely tell where the soles had been cut off and reattached. But the shoes felt different in his hands. The weight was different. And the balance.

Kai couldn't hide his excitement. "So how high, you think?"

Ron returned to his soldering, although it looked like he was now intent on melting the board rather than fixing it. "I think you'd be out of your mind to try a drop any higher than twenty feet. And you still have a good chance of breaking both your legs if you don't land right. But then turning a corner at high speed may do the same. The grip will be off."

"How about thirty-two feet?" Kai grinned again. He had a specific part of the trail in mind. He'd already measured the height.

Ron slammed his soldering iron down and pushed the protective eyewear up over his forehead. The glare he fixed on Kai was enough to sear flesh. "Are you out of your damn mind, boy? If you want to be in a wheelchair for the rest of your life, then go ahead. But don't expect me to cheer you on. You know what even a small injury means out here."

Kai's face darkened. He *did* know. And he was sick of being reminded. "So what? I should be careful? Is that it? Because being careful is a guarantee of a long, happy life? Is that what you're saying, old man?"

Ron growled. Kai had a point, and Ron knew it. Kai's parents were careful. Overly so. They never took any risks if they could help it. And it made no difference whatsoever. They were both dead.

"All I'm saying is that some risks are worth taking... and others are not," Ron finally said. "And if you're going to risk breaking your neck to impress some girl—"

"*Some* girl?" Kai laughed. "You must be blind, old man. You sure your blood is still flowing? Sara is not *some* girl. She's... she's..." He fumbled for the right word to describe her. "She's the most amazing girl I've ever met... Okay?" He laughed again. His cheeks were hot. He was never shy—

except when it came to Sara. “And you bet I plan to impress her,” he told Ron. “Just wait and see.”

Ron shook his head. “Well, I hope she’s worth it.” He pushed his protective glasses back down and picked up the soldering iron.

Kai bit his lip. That was his cue to leave. He stuck the shoes under his arm and turned to the door. But something tugged at him. “You coming to watch the race?”

“Nah,” Ron said, without looking up. The circuit board was clearly beyond repair now. But he pressed the soldering iron to it anyway, as if to prove a point. There was a sizzle and a wisp of smoke. “Got work to do.”

“Right,” Kai muttered and marched out. Why did he even bother asking? The answer was always the same. Ron was the only person in town, able-bodied or not, who didn’t come out to watch the race.

But then—Ron didn’t watch the Big Race either. And in that, he may have been the only person on the planet. Whereas Kai never felt more alive than the ten days the Race was on. Even if he was only watching it on the screen.

Kai and Ron were friends. But they didn’t always see eye to eye.

Kai let the front door slam behind him.

2 RUNNER

Everyone was already there when Kai arrived, in an easy jog, the extra cushioning in his shoes adding a bounce to his long stride.

The sun was higher over the mountains, a blinding yellow disk bleaching the blue out of the vast, cloudless sky. They had maybe two hours before the midday heat reached its peak. But the race would be over by then. And if Kai's plan worked, he would be done sooner.

The other runners were warming up by the start line. They were all young men, around Kai's age, with strong muscles and a deep tan earned by a lifetime of rough play and even rougher work outdoors. They hopped from foot to foot, stretched, rolled their necks. Careful not to appear nervous or too eager. A fearless, effortless look was key. It was what earned them respect—even if they lost the race.

On impulse, just before leaving the house, Kai painted his face with mud, the way warriors once did to intimidate their enemies. Three black smudges on each cheek, from his nose to the edge of his jaw. Now the dry mud pulled on his skin. He liked the feeling.

One by one, the other runners turned to stare at him as he approached.

"How's it going?" Kai grinned at them.

Only Greg was unimpressed, his broad face set in the scowl that was reserved for Kai alone. He had won the last two races, with Kai close on his heels but never able to out-

run him.

The memory of the humiliation boiled up in Kai. But he swallowed his anger. *Not yet. Wait for it. Beat him properly.* There was honor in winning a fist fight. But nothing compared to winning a race.

“What’s with the face paint?” One runner chuckled once he got over his initial shock. “You trying to look pretty?”

More chuckles all around.

“Do I look pretty to you?” Kai snarled at the runner.

He meant it as a demonstration, and it worked beautifully. The runner’s eyes grew wide, and he stumbled back. “Damn, Kai. You crazy or something?”

“You bet I am.” Kai laughed, relaxing his face. His gaze travelled past their group, mapping the trail ahead, and excitement shot through him like an electric current.

The trail didn’t change much from year to year. It followed a series of natural obstacles, zigzagging across the varied landscape like a giant board game, before it looped back to where it started. There were long stretches of uneven, rocky ground, with tall grass sharp enough to slice through skin. A patch of shifting sand. A group of boulders that had to be scaled one by one, on your hands and feet. A path of smooth, slippery rocks across a muddy remnant of a river bed, all but dried out since the last storm. A steep path that wound up and across a rocky hill, edging close to a vertical drop, and then back through a narrow canyon that looked up the same cliff.

A hush fell over the runners. Kai turned to look behind him.

A crowd of spectators had gathered in their usual spot, on a flat hill nearby. There were picnic chairs and even some ladders, strategically set up to afford the best view of the race, or what was visible of the landscape from one loca-

tion.

A group of young women had detached from the crowd and was heading in the runners' direction. They looked like a flock of brightly-colored birds in flight, with the breeze tugging at their long hair and skirts as they walked.

Kai's eyes snapped to the tall girl leading the group, and his pulse quickened.

Sara.

The smartest, most beautiful girl in the Valley. Kai dreamt of these smoldering dark eyes and full red lips. Of the supple curves, slender waist, and strong legs tantalizingly outlined by the soft fabric of the dress. Of the long, thick brown hair, with strands of red, purple, and turquoise catching the sun.

But it wasn't just her looks. Her sharp wit and fierce pride were just as intoxicating. And these days, Kai thought about her constantly, whether he liked it or not.

They had known each other since they were kids and had spent countless days out in the desert, playing hide-and-seek and capture-the-flag with other kids. At first they would split into groups with no regard to gender. But gradually, as they got older, boys would pull together and align against girls, as if an invisible magnet drew the two groups to the opposite sides of the game, pitting them against each other. Or perhaps it was girls who pulled together and aligned against boys, since it was really girls who were in control. It was girls who set the rules and threatened to walk away if they weren't obeyed.

Nothing had changed. Girls still set the rules.

As far as Kai was concerned, Sara set the rules.

The two groups faced each other. Kai walked up to Sara, his eyes never leaving her face. "Hi, Sara. You remember your promise?"

Sara's eyes widened at the paint on Kai's face. Then she smiled. "I remember."

"Good." Kai held her gaze, his heart pounding. She always had this effect on him. Her voice, her smile. He felt invincible and powerless all at once. Like he could crush rocks and walk through fire unharmed—but a single glance from her would bring him to his knees. Playfully, he leaned closer, his face only inches away from hers. "I can't wait."

Sara laughed. "*The winner* gets a kiss, Kai." Her dark eyes flashed at him. A tease, a challenge. "You haven't won yet." Her gaze flitted to Greg.

Greg grinned at her and licked his lips.

Jealousy struck Kai between the eyes. "I will," he said hotly. "Don't you worry."

Sara had no shortage of admirers. She could have her pick. She hadn't chosen yet. Not officially. But Kai wasn't the only one she'd gone out with. Today could be his last chance. If he wanted to win her heart—he had to win this race.

A girl like Sara wouldn't choose you just because she liked you. You had to prove yourself. You had to earn it.

The runners lined up along the start line marked in the red dirt and took positions.

The moment stretched, the excitement building. All that energy—packed into flesh, trapped there, waiting to burst forward, to burn itself in exertion. Kai's muscles sang of speed, his whole body tense, poised as if on the edge of a cliff, about to leap, about to plunge—

"Go!"

A sweet, sweet release. And Kai was running.

3 RUNNER

At first the runners moved as a group, heads bobbing, knees and elbows pumping, shoes pounding the ground. A cloud of dust trailed after them.

But within minutes, Kai and Greg left the others behind.

They were racing side by side. Kai deliberately fell in step with Greg. Greg was taller by a few inches, but with the extra bounce in his shoes, Kai had no problem matching his stride.

Greg shot him a dark look. *Don't mess with me.*

Kai bared his teeth in a grin. Messing with Greg was the whole point. The challenge of the race was mental as much as physical, and Kai meant to wear his opponent down.

They sprinted across a sand patch, the sand spraying from under their shoes. Ron had been right about the poor grip, though. Kai fell a few feet behind. He gritted his teeth and pumped harder.

Climbing over the boulder that sprung in their path was even worse. Kai jumped for the first ledge at full speed, using his momentum to propel himself up the rock. He could leap higher than ever before and easily made the ledge nearly as high as his shoulders. He found a handhold and pulled himself up the wall. But when he kicked off, his foot slipped, and he nearly fell.

He righted himself at the last moment, cursing under his breath. He glanced to the side.

Greg was already tossing his leg over the top of the

boulder, ready to climb down the other side. His lead over Kai had just increased.

But something else caught Kai's eye.

A drone hovered in the sky above them like a giant insect. The drone's camera aimed straight at Kai.

Normally, he couldn't care less. He was used to drones. It was a good day if at least one of those damn things didn't follow you around, and there was nothing you could do about it. Census drones, advertising drones, police drones. Although this one didn't look like any drone Kai had ever seen.

But today he was too much on edge. The stupid drone was distracting him, and he needed to focus. His hand closed on a loose rock, his arm itching to throw it. He used to throw rocks at them when he was little. But he hesitated now. Punishment for damaging a drone was severe.

The sound of Greg's feet hitting the ground on the other side snapped Kai back.

He dropped the rock. *Forget the drone.* He needed to move.

He attacked the wall, and a few seconds later, he was at the top of the boulder. He swung his legs over, his feet landing on a rough ledge, his body already turning forward, away from the rock. The incline was less steep on this side, slabs of rock forming tall steps. Kai half slid, half ran down the first slab then jumped down to the lower one, using his hands for support. A moment later, his feet hit the ground, and he sprinted for the next boulder. Started climbing.

In the corner of his vision, the drone hovered. Following close. Watching.

By the time Kai cleared the third and last boulder, Greg was already at the river bed. He barely broke his speed or looked down as he leapt from rock to rock.

Kai swore under his breath and sprinted after him.

He skidded on the slippery rocks—the only section that still held any water—and nearly fell before he made it across.

Then he raced down the trail after Greg, legs and arms pumping.

The rocky hill was up ahead, the winding path leading across it already visible. In the distance, the air rippled in the rising heat.

Images of Sara rushed at him. Dark eyes peering at him, red lips parted in a laugh. *The winner gets a kiss, Kai.* Her voice in his head, teasing. *You haven't won yet.*

The smug grin on Greg's broad face. As if he'd already won. The same grin he'd worn when they were kids and he'd bullied Kai and pushed him around, simply because Kai was smaller.

Anger ripped through Kai like a whip, turned his vision red at the edges. He concentrated on Greg's figure in front of him and pumped harder, the air burning in his lungs and his muscles screaming in effort.

He raced up the path. His shoes bit the gravel and spit it behind him.

He craned his neck and looked up as he ran. He caught a glimpse of Greg's head and arm. Then the rocks blocked his view.

Come on. Move it. Get the bastard.

The path got steeper. Kai breathed through his clenched teeth, his breath short and ragged. But he didn't let himself slow down.

Move it. Move it. Move it.

Kai crested the top of the hill, his muscles and lungs on fire.

The rocks obstructing his view fell away. Up ahead, dis-

tant mountains swam in the heat, the sun blazing overhead. The hilltop was flat like a table. The path, winding and zig-zagging until now, cut straight across it, briefly edged close to a cliff on the right, then continued on and dipped down on the other side.

Kai spotted Greg ahead of him. Still in the lead, but not by much. Greg had slowed down to a jog to recover from the climb, his breathing heavy. He was getting tired.

Kai's spirit soared. His plan could still work. He could still win. He had to.

He started across the hilltop at a measured pace. He forced himself to breathe slowly, but his heart was already pounding in anticipation.

When the path brought him near the cliff, Kai stopped. He faced the edge and stepped closer. Another hill rose across from him, forming a narrow canyon below.

He didn't have to look down to know how tall the cliff was. Thirty-two feet.

"Hey, Greg!" Kai yelled. "Forget Sara! She's mine!"

Before Greg could turn around, he leaned forward, ran two steps—and launched himself over the edge.

For a moment, he was in the air, the floor of the canyon rushing up at him.

The drone swooped down toward him.

Then his feet hit the ground.

Even with the enhanced shoes to soften the landing, the impact nearly knocked him down. But he caught himself. He didn't fall.

For a split second, he was exhilarated. *It worked!* He took a risk, but it paid off. Nothing in the rules said he couldn't take a shortcut. Greg would never catch up with him now.

Then he took a step, and pain shot up his right leg,

white hot and blinding.

He froze, balancing on his good leg, his skin instantly drenched with cold sweat. Ron's warning echoed in his head. *You know what even a small injury means out here.*

Did he break it? What if he couldn't walk again? Terror gripped him, worse than any pain.

He looked down at his injured foot. It throbbed. But there was no bone sticking out, no blood. It was a sprained ankle and some bruising, nothing more.

Relax. It's nothing. You're fine.

A sound reached him. Heavy footsteps. Coming closer.

Greg.

Kai straightened. The finish line was a straight shot from where he was standing. A crowd had already gathered around it, all the faces turned in his direction. They must have seen him jump.

He spotted Sara, in her red dress, up front. He imagined that she was looking straight at him. *The winner gets a kiss, Kai.* A shiver ran down his back.

He was so close. It was the last stretch of the race. Solid, flat ground. No more obstacles. Easy.

Kai forced himself to take a step forward. A stab of pain. He took another step. More pain.

His heart pounded, and sweat poured down his back. But he kept going, limping and hobbling down the path.

He glanced over his shoulder. Greg was gaining on him, his teeth bared in a snarl and his eyes fixed on Kai.

An ancient, primal hatred toward his rival shot through Kai and propelled him forward, drowning the pain. *Faster, damn it.* He growled through clenched teeth, without mercy, pushing his limbs to speed. *Move it. Move it. Move it.*

He kept his eyes on Sara. Her red dress, her red lips. His beacon. His prize.

By the time Kai crossed the finish line, red flashed across his vision in concert with the piercing pain in his foot. But he was almost running, and there was a grin on his face.

He did it. *He won.*

Sara was true to her promise. When the race was over, she sauntered up to Kai. Her smile alone set Kai on fire, flames licking his insides, tingling on his skin. But then she slipped her arms around his neck and kissed him on the mouth—a kiss that took his breath away and nearly melted his bones.

The crowd hushed around them. And then exploded into wild cheers.

Sara lightly pushed Kai away.

“That’s it?” Kai’s tone was playful, but there was a shadow of real hurt there. Sara’s kiss was good, better than good, while it lasted. But it only made him want more.

He tried to pull her in for another kiss, but she slipped away from him, fast and nimble. Kai almost fell, his injured foot throbbing.

Sara tossed her head, hands on her hips. “Hey! You won the race, and you got the kiss. That was the deal. Now behave yourself.” She was back to her usual, teasing self.

“Can I take you home then? I promise I’ll behave,” Kai pleaded, his eyes locked on hers. He took a limping step. He injured himself to win the race for her. Didn’t that count for something?

Sara only laughed, eyes sparkling with wit and mischief. “In a rush, are you? It’ll take a whole lot more than winning a race and spraining an ankle”—she glanced at Kai’s foot—“*to take me home.* So long, Kai.” She threw him one more smoldering glance, then turned on her heel and walked away.

Watching Sara's figure getting smaller and smaller, an intense longing gripped Kai. A dull, burning ache that started in his chest, snaked around his groin, and radiated to the rest of his body.

Only one thing eased his pain a little—the look of bitter defeat on Greg's face.

Overhead, the drone sparkled like a silver coin suspended in the white sky.

4 AGENT

Digital audio file ES002889

"You really think he's got what it takes?" A somber, older male voice. Rasping like his vocal cords were encased in gravel, and every word was agony. The Mentor.

"Yes, I do. He's hungry. That's the first thing I noticed about him." A female voice. Younger. Tough. Or careful to sound tough. The Agent. Emily.

"Hunger is good. Hunger is necessary. Nothing happens without it. But it's not enough. You know that."

"I know. You taught me well. But don't worry. He's got a spine too. He won't break. If he were the breaking type, he would have broken a long time ago. Most people would have, if they'd been through what he's been through."

"All right. A spine is good too. But not too strong. Remember, you have to control him. He's got to do exactly what you tell him and never question it. He's got to let you do all the thinking, all the decision making, for him. The moment he gets out of line, it's over. For both of you."

"He'll listen. Trust me. He'll do what I say. I just have to make him see that I'm on his side. That we're a team and we want the same thing."

"Well. Let's not get carried away. He must be-

lieve that, of course. But you, my dear, should be more... cautious. It will only hurt both of you if you get too close. And about wanting the same thing... In a race like that, I'd say you should keep an open mind. Sometimes winning and losing are—how shall I put it?—relative.”

5 RUNNER

The next morning, Kai's ankle was still swollen and bruised. But the pain had subsided. Or maybe Kai simply didn't notice it as much.

He had other things on his mind, the most pressing among them, convincing Trish to give him a day off. With pay.

Kai did deliveries for Trish, and he was on his feet pretty much the whole time he was on the clock. He was useless to her today, and usually no work meant no pay. But occasionally, when she was in good mood, Trish wasn't opposed to bending the rules. With her white hair, wrinkled skin, and lifetime of experience, Trish took a broader perspective on what was good for business. After all, Kai'd won the race, and Trish was the most avid fan.

Kai turned the corner and started down the broad, cobble street.

He called it the Ghost Street. He came here as a little boy with his mother to shop and run errands. The street used to be full of life then, full of voices and laughter, people going in and out of the small, brightly-colored shops on both sides. Kai would get an ice-cream, a heavenly creamy concoction made from real milk, which started to melt as soon as his fingers closed around the cone, and he'd have to lap at it in a hurry, in a race with the hot sun.

Now all of that was gone. The shops stood empty and abandoned, the paint on the walls faded and peeling in the

harsh sun, the windows shattered or boarded up against the encroaching sand. All the businesses put out of commission by the Printing Center.

A restless energy filled Kai. The damage could be fixed, and the shops could reopen... But he pushed the thought away. It wasn't like he could bring the ghosts back to life. Nobody could.

Up ahead, three figures detached themselves from the wall and stepped out of the narrow shadow and into the sun.

"Yo, *Kai!*"

He squinted at the boys trotting toward him. Jamie and Trace were his fellow runners, tall and lanky. Sam was of a more compact build—and getting rounder in the middle. Kai had known them since they were kids.

Jamie and Trace got to him first, both grinning from ear to ear, eyes bright. "Congrats again, man! That jump was *prime time!*"

Kai grinned back. Prime time was the highest compliment, a reference to the Race, which aired during prime time each summer, obliterating all the other shows. "Thanks. No luck today?" He directed the question to Jamie and Trace. They should've been at work by now. Sam didn't start until late afternoon. He worked second shift in the kitchen at The Tavern.

Jamie shrugged. "Got a day off. You know, things are slow." No surprise there. Jamie did odd jobs around town.

Trace nodded. "Yeah. Same here." He had a job at the Printing Center. But even working at the Printing Center didn't guarantee steady pay these days. There just wasn't enough work to go around.

They were quiet for a moment, commiserating.

"How about you, Sam?" Kai asked. Sam was the quietest one of their bunch.

But before Sam could answer, Jamie jumped in. “Sam has a new plan, and it’s genius.” There was clear mockery in his tone. “Tell it, Sam.” Jamie and Trace exchanged a look. They were having trouble keeping straight faces.

Kai frowned. Sam had a passion for cooking, and he was darn good. On the rare occasions when his boss, Pancho, gave him free rein in the kitchen, Sam could whip out cheeseburgers and barbecue ribs and vegetable stews that were almost as good as Kai’s memories of his mother’s meals, prepared on the real stove, with ingredients that had to be peeled, chopped, and marinated instead of squeezed from a tube. Sam’s dream was to open his own restaurant.

Sam took the bait. “You have to think outside the box. Try something different. Do the opposite of what everyone expects.” He wasn’t one to get straight to the point.

“I hear you. So what’s the new plan?” Kai prompted, eager to get on his way. His best bet was to catch Trish early. And his foot was still bothering him. None of them had even asked about it.

“Real food,” Sam declared.

Jamie chuckled, and Trace snorted. Sam ignored them, his eyes shining with excitement.

“Where are you going to get real food?” Kai asked.

“Grow it myself.” Sam was unfazed. “Start small. Some beans, some tomatoes. Chickens for eggs, maybe.”

More chuckles and snorts.

“You should do it, Sam,” Kai said encouragingly. “I don’t see why it shouldn’t work.”

He lied. Nothing grew in the desert but scrub brush. But he felt bad for his friend.

Jamie couldn’t contain himself any longer. “Hey, Sam? Is that before or after you become a famous chef in the city?”

Sam pursed his lips. "Go ahead and laugh. But you're printing your next burger."

Jamie's face fell. "Come on, man. I was only joking."

"Guys!" Trace called out. "*Behind you.*"

Kai turned. A drone hovered in midair, no more than a yard from his face, as if suspended on an invisible line. Kai stared at it, fascinated. It was an unusual model. But he'd seen it before....

It was the drone that followed him during the race.

As if on cue, the drone's camera turned on Kai. "Kaiden Reed. Confirm identity?" The voice was flat and metallic.

For a moment, dread gripped Kai, and he had an impulse to make a run for it. Drones never brought good news, in his experience, and Kai had no idea what this one wanted. Was he in trouble with the law? Come to think of it, he probably broke a dozen laws every day, without even knowing it. Obscure laws that no one knew about or understood, or impossible laws that everyone knew about but ignored simply out of necessity.

But Kai couldn't run. Not with his sprained ankle. And even if he could, where would he go, anyway? This was his home.

Kai turned to face the drone. "Who wants to know?"

"Kaiden Reed. Confirm identity?" the drone repeated in its hollow monotone.

Jamie stepped forward. "Yo, drone! Who are you? This is our town, and you're trespassing."

The drone swiveled around its axis until the camera pointed at Jamie like a large, unblinking eye. "James Miller. Seventeen. IQ 90. Number of offenses prosecuted: zero. Number of offenses recorded: twenty-eight. Do you wish to make a statement?"

Jamie turned white as a sheet.

“James Miller. Do you wish to make a statement?”

“No statement,” Jamie muttered.

“Thank you for your cooperation, James Miller.”

The drone swiveled back to face Kai. “Kaiden Re—”

“Yeah, yeah,” Kai cut in. “I confirm. I’m Kaiden Reed. What do you want?”

A screen blinked to life, and a young woman, not much older than Kai, appeared on the screen. She had hazel eyes and her dark hair was pulled back in a ponytail. “Hello, Kaiden. Can you see me?”

It took Kai a moment to respond. The girl was looking straight at him. It was like standing two feet away from her. He knew he was staring. But so was she. “It’s Kai. Er... Yeah. I can see you. Who are you?”

The girl gave a curt nod. Her gaze never left his face. “My name is Emily Starr, and I represent the Optimex Agency. Have you heard of us?” Without a smile to soften her features, her expression was almost stern.

The girl’s—Emily’s—gaze was so direct, so intense, that Kai found it difficult to focus. Who did she say she worked for? And then the name caught up with him, and a jolt went through him.

Optimex!

Was she kidding? Of course he’d heard of them. Everyone on the planet had heard of them. They were one of the highest profile athletic management firms in the world. Another jolt, as the meaning of this exchange hit him.

“You recruit runners for the No Limits Race.”

Sounds of excitement from his friends cut through Kai’s tunnel-like concentration—shuffling feet, slapped thighs, a sharp whistle.

A hint of a smile crossed Emily’s face. “That’s right. But we do more than recruit them. We manage their training

and their... careers.” Was there a hesitation there? Kai couldn’t be sure. He was suddenly fascinated with every nuance of her expression and tone of voice. “Think about it this way—we find the best runners, and we make them even better. We make them into legends.”

“*I’m in.*”

Emily blinked in surprise but recovered quickly. “I see you already guessed my purpose. Very well. Yes, we want to offer you representation.” She glanced down, and there was a faint sound of typing. “Here’s a copy of the contract and some information we would like you to review before we go any further.” A tray appeared underneath the screen, and on it, a thin, foldable tablet displaying a page of text. “It should be ready now—”

“I’ve got it.” Kai snatched the tablet off the tray.

Emily looked up. “I’m sorry. Can you read? If you prefer an audio file—”

Kai’s face grew hot. What kind of question was that? “Yeah, I can read! But I already told you—*I’m in.* I’m ready. Sign me up.”

Emily’s expression hardened. “I appreciate your enthusiasm. But the regulations require an informed consent process and a minimum twenty-four hour deliberation period.” Then she added, “It’s not a decision you want to take lightly. You can’t exactly change your mind later.”

Kai rolled the tablet and stuck it in his back pocket. “I’ll read it tonight—”

“Read it and *think about it,*” Emily corrected, looking him straight in the eye.

“Fine. I’ll read it and think about it.” Kai held her gaze. “And I’ll see you tomorrow. Same time, same place?”

Emily’s face relaxed. “Perfect.” She glanced down and typed some more. “And Kai—here’s something for your an-

kle.” A different, smaller tray popped out on the side of the drone, and on it, a transdermal medical patch. “It’ll take care of the pain and speed up the healing.”

Kai picked up the patch. The fine electronic circuits hummed under his fingers. Patches were commonplace and used to treat anything from food poisoning to sunburn. But he’d never seen one like this before. He bent down and pressed it against his ankle. The throbbing pain eased instantly. “Thanks.”

The girl gave another curt nod. “We like to protect our investment.” Then the screen blinked off.

The interview was over.

The drone rose slowly, then sped away like a bullet, until it was just a speck of silver on the horizon.

Trace turned to Kai. “*Whoa!* Are you on a winning streak, or what? You just got recruited for the Race. *The Race*. Prime time, man!” He slapped Kai on the back, hard. “And that agent lady? Holy shit! She’s... she’s...” Trace broke off, at a loss for words.

“Bossy as hell?” Kai offered. He didn’t know how to describe Emily either.

“Yeah—bossy as hell is right.” Trace spun around. “Hey! We should have a going-away party for you. My place, tomorrow night. I’ll let everyone know.”

“Thanks, man.” Kai smiled. He couldn’t wait to see the look on Sara’s face when he told her.

Sam beamed at him. “This is great. You—running in the Race. It was your dream ever since you were a little kid—and now you got it. Out of the blue. Handed to you on a silver platter. Now you have to come up with a new, bigger dream.”

“Thanks, Sam,” Kai said. It was best not to analyze Sam’s pronouncements too carefully, just focus on the general

sentiment.

Only Jamie wasn't caught up in the excitement. "How come they know so much about me? I don't remember taking any tests." He kicked at a rock, and a cloud of sand rose in the air. "It isn't right, man. I'm telling you. It isn't right."

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About the Author

Vera Brook is a neuroscientist turned science fiction and fantasy writer. Follow her on Goodreads, connect with her on Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter, or visit her website to sign up for a newsletter—*and never miss a new release or a giveaway!*

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