

Wake the Dead

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Dedication

To my husband, Randy; my number one proofreader,
Jackie Thomas; and my fellow writers at Word
Weavers.

1

In the near future...

Chase Sterling, with great pride and sentiment, announced the unmatched prizes awarded by his primetime unreality program, *Change Your Life*. “A hundred million in a world exchange account and a ninety-foot yacht to take you to the Caribbean island mansion built for you and your family, Judy Bamber.”

The five thousand fans lucky enough to hold tickets to the show that night applauded in wild astonishment.

Chase lifted his hand, and the cheers fell to a low roar. “That’s not all, Judy. You’ll have the best surgeons we can find to turn you into a goddess, and you’re the new owner of a WR Selfdrive dealership sure to gross millions every year.”

The cries of the throng rose louder. But without the glint of a tear or a single word of gratitude, Judy Bamber dropped to her knees and her portly middle-aged mug slapped the golden stage.

Chase pored over his shocked and simmering congregation. He had to sustain the momentum. The fans had just witnessed the biggest win in the show’s history. And the most dramatic reaction—Judy’s face hit hard. Not that a broken nose mattered now. She’d soon have a new one.

Electric blue beams coursed through the

auditorium and the music reached its peak, but the crowd hushed. Along with them, millions, maybe a billion, likely held a collective gasp in front of their GrapheVisions.

Chase had to deliver, to pull yet another miserable soul from the ranks of the poor, the sick, and the unattractive. His mission, his destiny, was to make winners out of losers. That's what he planned to do for the rest of his life. No one could stop him.

The glorious anthem that accompanied every win ebbed to the melodic equivalent of bated breath. Nice touch. The director played the situation well. But he'd better not flood the stage with medics. Chase could get this dumpling off the floor.

He knelt on one knee next to the show's newest chosen one and turned to the crowd. "People, help me out. Judy is missing the moment." He hoped it worked. "Scream loud enough to wake the dead!"

The hum escalated to a roar and the walls seemed to shake. Within seconds, Judy rose to her feet as though a hand had come through the stage to thrust her upright. Or else, from somewhere among the brilliant lights overhead, a puppeteer had tugged a string and lifted her.

Chase stood and clasped her hand. She smiled, having survived the greatest moment of her life with no visible damage. No broken teeth. No swollen nose.

A reverberation of awe, decibels lower than the dead-awakening shriek, swept through the assembly. Chase kept his eyes on the risen Judy Bamber, but he knew from where he stood that some in the audience dropped to their seats or to the floor of the narrow aisles. No one seemed concerned about this contagion of fainting. Those still on their feet held their stare on

the newest victor.

Chase swallowed hard. It felt like the first time he'd announced a big win. What a privilege to bestow such a blessing. The network supplied the goods—by means of the advertisers, of course—but Chase bestowed the bounty on this floating, glowing gazillionaire. He was Judy Bamber's savior. She was the star, at least for the moment. He was the endless sky.

"Judy, are you all right? You gave us a scare hitting the floor like that."

She scarcely giggled as she nodded. "Forgive me."

"You are our biggest winner *ever*. How does it feel?"

She lifted her hands to the lights. "It feels like air, Chase. Like I couldn't breathe before, but now I can."

"Do you hear that, people? Resuscitation. This woman will never have to worry again. She has entered the world of the wealthy, the universe of the unrestricted. Thanks to SynVue, our generous global network, Judy Bamber is now one of the richest women in the Western Republic. Her prize is beyond anything our wondrous program has awarded to date."

Chase spread his arms wide. "And as you all know, the bigger the *winner's* prize..."

The crowd let loose with a frenzied shout.

"Judy, you know what to say." He faced her to wait with the fans.

"Yes, Chase, my prize is big. My fortune is *their* fortune." She turned her avid expression to him. "What will they receive?"

"Here's what I'm going to give them, Judy. Every one of them." He turned again to the crowd. "You're

all going home with a brand new..." He paused until he thought a few eyeballs would pop out and roll down the aisles. "Autonomous fuel cell car, complete with front and rear reality shield."

The thunderous reaction brought a buzz to Chase's eardrums. Judy clapped her plump hands and smiled as she turned her gaze upward to the rear of the massive auditorium. A foretelling quiet descended on the fans, and then the soft voice called from above.

"Judy Bamber, come claim your prize and begin your new life." This invitation from the show's mystifying producer brought another ovation from the spectators. They knew the voice and turned as one to the blackened portal high against the far wall. From there, the illustrious Kerstin Bennett called forth the new winner. "I'm waiting for you Judy, with all that you will receive."

Judy blasted off the stage and took the center aisle like a nimble twenty-year-old. The fans reached for her as she passed by. They cheered as she climbed the golden stairs, and sighed as she vanished into the passageway between the lower level and the tiered balcony.

Chase took his usual spot—the center platform edged with shafts of white light. But this remarkable episode called for something different. He stepped onto the illuminated ramp and went down into the crowd. A spotlight followed him. The people cried out in delight as the nearest ones reached for him.

"And so we've sent another lucky soul to begin her new life. Remember, our aim is to change *your* life. Good night." He touched a few outstretched hands before racing up the incline. The musical finale resonated through the auditorium as he reached the

backstage egress.

Chase retreated, knowing thousands stampeded the exits to form lines to the prize arena. Dozens of SynVue employees would spend the rest of the night handing out vouchers for the cars. Kerstin's team would devote the next several hours to Judy Bamber. They'd go over the regulations, sign documents, and schedule appearances.

But Chase's part, at least for tonight, was done.

"Nice job out there, boss." His right-hand girl thrust a bottle of cold water into his outstretched hand.

"Thanks, Mel. Can you handle the press?"

"Me? I don't think the queen would like that."

"Watch what you say, Mel."

"Sorry, Ms. Bennett wouldn't like it. Besides, you love the post-show interview, especially after a big win. And this—"

"Is the biggest win ever, I know," Chase said. "I'll be tempted to say too much."

Mel stepped close, her brown eyes growing wide. "About what?"

"Never mind. Don't worry about Kerstin. I'll take care of her." He put his hands on Mel's shoulders and turned her toward the approaching crowd. "Just handle it."

"You got it." She stepped toward the gathering of media reps. "This way to the press room. You know the routine."

"Chase, how's our favorite game show host? You've got to be running out of ideas. And money," one of the herd called.

Chase couldn't let this go without a response. "*Change Your Life* is no game. Unreality programming remakes the real world of helpless individuals. As for

your other insinuations, ideas and money are limitless, my friend. SynVue knows no boundaries. And soon..." He forced his warmest smile before giving them just enough to rouse their curiosity. "Greater things are coming. Thank you all for being here. My assistant will answer any questions about our winner and her wonderful new life."

Chase left them and took the rear hallway. With his pulse racing and his ears still buzzing, he considered his show's future.

After this, they'd bring in a couple of contestants destined for smaller victories. Then, something big. Bigger than the massive fortune just awarded to Judy Bamber. Lucky lady. But her luck would soon be forgotten.

On to other projects. New contestants. Bigger prizes.

Something unforgettable.

2

“Did you see the look on her face when I told her everything she’d won?” Chase smiled. “She turned white as a ghost. I knew she was going to pass out.”

“We couldn’t have planned it any better.” Kerstin kicked off her red pumps and put her feet on the coffee table. “But it would have been ruined if we’d had to carry her out on a stretcher. We’re lucky she got up.”

“She didn’t just get up. It was miraculous. Somebody up there is on our side. We’re jumping to the next level.”

“We’re going back to business as usual.” Kerstin took the clip from her dark hair, and the long tresses fell against her shoulders.

“But Kerstin, sweetheart, business as usual means we have to make the next big win bigger than tonight’s win. We’ve been on a progression for two years. We’ve got to keep the—”

“Chase, really, you’re going to bankrupt SynVue.” She sipped from a stemmed goblet.

“Not possible.”

“We just gave away more money than the combined annual salaries of two thirds of SynVue’s employees.”

Chase dropped to the sofa and put both arms around her. “Two thirds of SynVue’s employees don’t make much.” He kissed her ear. “But the rest of them—”

"Includes you and me. So stop giving away our money."

"I just do what I'm told. Besides, it's the advertisers' money, and they're not hurting."

The feel of her flawless skin energized him. Everything about her was perfect, from her unembellished beauty—the SynVue surgeons were not needed here—to her management of the show. She brought in the advertisers and their money, chose the contestants, arranged every detail of the winners' new lives, and then kept those fortunate souls from recklessness. They had to be maintained.

The show truly did change lives. But its success depended on the lasting triumph of the winners. No one wanted to see someone monumentally prized, outrageously wealthy, and virtually reborn come to failure. Kerstin made sure the winners stayed winners. If Chase was the adored one, and he was, then Kerstin was the revered one. She made it all happen.

But Chase was not left out of the running of the show. Ideas were easy—funding was the hard part. Kerstin would love this idea, and it wouldn't cost SynVue anything. He sat straight and looked her in the eye. "I've come across something new. Something better than plastic surgery and outrageous wealth."

"Life is money, Chase, and money is life." Kerstin's VirtuPad chirped. She reached for it and read the message. "We've got trouble." She slammed the VPad on the coffee table. "My gutless assistant says *you* will tell me about it."

"I don't know any—"

"Checked your messages lately, Chase? You can't be out of touch. I've told you that."

So much for timing. He stood, reached for his

jacket, and plucked his VPad from the pocket. It came to life at the touch of his hand.

Kerstin's creamy skin turned a mean shade of red. "I knew something like this would happen."

"We don't know what happened, Kerstin." He paced across the living room then out the open glass door and onto the moonlit patio. Kerstin's breath hissed on the back of his neck. "There's a message from Mel."

He punched the text-only option, and then grabbed hold of the iron railing that encircled the patio as he read the news. The very bad news. Why did he have to be the one to tell Kerstin? He turned to face her.

"Well, what is it?" Kerstin folded her arms.

He stuffed the VPad into his pants pocket. "One of our re-creations is having some issues. We'll need Dr. Jacobson. And a suite at SynVue Estate. And a good psychiatrist. Latmore, maybe. Or—"

"Chase. What happened?"

"Elaine Jenz. Remember? New face, new body, job anchoring for SynVue."

"Of course I remember. We made a star reporter out of a sow's ear. What did she do?"

Chase wiped his hand through his hair and then put both his hands on his hips. "She took a laser knife and cut up her own face. On the air, during a broadcast."

Kerstin covered her mouth with her hand.

"She said something about *Change Your Life*."

"What about it?"

"That it was our fault."

Kerstin turned to go back in the house and grabbed her VPad. "OK, damage control. I'll get the

publicity team on this. We'll issue a sympathetic refute. Nobody can blame us for this. She cracked. That's all."

"Poor woman," Chase said. "What would make her do something so awful?"

"I'm not as concerned about that as what this will do to *us*—to the show."

"Kerstin, she's obviously sick. Shouldn't we stand by her?"

"Listen to me, Chase." Kerstin came beside him and put her hand on his shoulder. "We can't take blame for this. Our reputation is rock-solid. We make people's lives better. Wonderful. Perfect." She brushed her fingers against his temple. "We'll stand by her, yes. But only as long as it takes to distance ourselves as gracefully as possible."

3

Chase escaped to his dressing room while the directors planned the next shoot. He fell to the sofa and closed his eyes, but recent events flashed a show of their own.

In the last two weeks, he'd taken heat in countless interviews, rejecting conclusions of why a former winner turned to despair and self-mutilation. "Elaine Jenz had a drug problem," Chase told the reporters. She didn't adhere to the coaching she'd received, and she slipped back into old habits. The explanation sufficed. None of it was true, but he had to protect the show. Now that a little time had passed, the incident was hardly remembered, at least by the press.

As for Elaine, Chase tried visiting her at SynVue Estate, but after a few minutes, she pounded on the shatterproof windows of her private suite, screaming to be saved from the devil.

Kerstin was right. He had to distance himself. He didn't go back.

The episodes following Judy Bamber's big win spotlighted a middle-aged man in need of a kidney transplant. And major debt reduction, of course. How did these people get themselves into grave-deep debt? Chase came alongside Larin Andrews, as with all the poor souls chosen as contestants by SynVue, and acted the part of sympathetic confidante.

Larin played the game, though it wasn't really a

game. And he would win—there wasn't any chance he'd lose. After three episodes filled with emotional tugs and careful management, viewers would pick the winner's prizes, casting their votes on VPads and graphene systems across the world. Of course, SynVue execs picked the prizes ahead of time. The votes meant nothing. Chase shifted on the leather sofa and put both hands behind his head.

"A week and a day 'til I tell Larin he'll get a new kidney. But I don't know if I'll have the prize ready."

"Boss, are you talking to yourself again?"

Chase opened his eyes to find his assistant standing in the doorway. "Mel, how many times have I told you to stop calling me boss?"

"Stop calling me Mel and maybe I will."

He smiled, and Melody smiled in return. She came into the small room and began straightening items on the desktop. "You got a call from some doctor," she said.

"Dr. Fiender?" Chase leaned forward and put his elbows on his knees as Mel shuffled some papers. "Don't throw those out."

"Yeah, that was his name." She sat on the edge of the desk. "You know I'm not going to throw out anything important. What are you doing with all this? If we get caught using so much paper, we'll get fined."

"They're printouts from Kerstin. I have to look into some things for her."

"Why didn't she just send it to your VPad?" Mel folded the pages together, held them over the wastebasket next to the desk, and dropped them in.

"Mel...*Melody*, I told you—"

"They're filed right here, boss, where you can find them." She dropped to the desk chair and folded her

hands on her lap. "What sort of doctor is he? You sick?"

"No, he's a scientist I met a few weeks ago."

"Why's he calling you?"

"He wants to talk to me about the show." Chase rubbed his hands together. "I think he can help with Larin."

"I don't like that look in your eyes." Mel crossed her arms. "What are you planning?"

He smiled at the way she studied him. Black curls framed her face. She looked like a kid, but she was one smart woman. And she was always on his side.

"I'm just looking into some possibilities," he said. "I was going to tell Kerstin about it. Then we got into the whole mess with Elaine Jenz, and I decided I'd better wait. Now we have a contestant who needs a transplant. It's like it was meant to be."

"I'm not sure what you're talking about, but you know you're not going to do anything without the queen's approval."

"If Kerstin heard you say that, she'd have your backside on the street. Then what would I do?"

"You'd get your own coffee and file your own papers." She motioned to the wastebasket. "Seriously, what's this science man got up his sleeve? You do something behind Kerstin's back, she'll put *you* out on the street."

"Says he can make body parts out of nothing. Parts that won't wear out. We could get Larin a kidney. Remember the last time we tried a transplant? We got a genetically altered liver grown in a pig. It was a disaster. Took three months for the ratings to recover."

"Boss, that poor man died. And nobody makes something out of nothing. Nobody but God."

"If God can do it, then it can be done."

"Don't go comparing some witchdoctor to God." She turned in the chair and gently touched the ceramic bobble-head figure on Chase's desk. "You don't want to mess with the man upstairs any more than you have already."

"Mel, are you still worried about that thing? I told you, there's nothing wrong with a bobble-head Jesus. It's just a souvenir."

"It's a joke," she said. "Something the devil would keep on his desk. A little harmless, do-nothin' Jesus."

She was a religious girl. Chase wasn't sure if anyone else at SynVue knew this. People didn't talk about such things. What Mel did in her private life didn't bother him, and he didn't want to offend her.

Nor did he care to hear another insinuation that he was some horned beast from the underworld.

"If it bothers you, throw it out. It's just something I picked up in the EU. I thought it would be funny, you know, since I change people's lives."

Mel shook her head. Silver earrings dangled against her brown skin. "Not funny." She picked up the bobble-head, but her confident expression was gone.

Chase laughed. "You can't do it, can you? You can't throw it out."

"Well..." She looked at the little figure's quivering head and then at Chase. "He does look kinda like Jesus, I guess. How can I put him in the trash?"

"You need to let go of the old ways, Mel. You're so intelligent. Wise beyond your years. Why do you believe that stuff? It's not like you're in the Underground Church or anything. Are you?"

"I wouldn't be here working for you if I was. Wise

beyond my years, huh?" She set down the bobble-head, stood, and headed for the door. "Well, you're just a wise guy." She flashed him a sly grin, and she was gone.

Chase remembered why she'd come—the call from Dr. Fiender. He fished his VPad from the pile of clothes on top of a wooden trunk. Dr. Fiender's message popped up. Chase ran his finger across the numbers highlighted within the text and touched the real-view option on the small screen. He put the VPad in a stand on his desk. The doctor's image appeared in the room, and Chase leaned forward and smiled.

"Good day, Mr. Sterling. You're a hard man to reach."

"My apologies, Dr. Fiender. The life of a celebrity..."

The doctor grunted and wiped a finger across his gray mustache. "I understand you've had some problems with a past winner. I thought you might have come to the conclusion that I could be of service in the matter of Elaine Jenz."

"No, that didn't occur to me. We talked about body parts. I have a new contestant who needs a kidney, but I don't know how you could help Elaine. She had a breakdown."

"Meet with me, Mr. Sterling. Come to my facility."

"Where?"

"South of Phoenix, near the town of Florence. I could send my jet. You'd be here in thirty minutes."

"You have a Globejet?" Chase lifted his hand to his forehead and then wiped the sudden emergence of perspiration from his top lip.

"How else could you get from Chicago to the Southwest Territory so quickly?"

“Why me? Why not one of the execs from SynVue?”

“Because, Mr. Sterling, people call you the most influential man in the Western Republic. And I need an influential man.”

Chase drew a breath and straightened his shoulders. “I’d have to be back tonight.”

“Be at BHO International in one hour. My associate will meet you at the information counter at Terminal 44.”

“Can you help with the kidney?”

“I’ll send one back with you.”

“Should I bring a cooler?”

The doctor lifted his brow and grinned. “No cooler needed.”

4

Chase held to the armrests of the padded seat. The other seven seats in the Globejet were empty. A curvaceous blonde flight attendant stood near the door to the cockpit. No sign of a pilot.

Chase wasn't a good flyer. He wasn't afraid of heights. Falling, however, was a different fear altogether. And speed. Going 140 on the city tram was bad enough. This was unbelievable. He dug his nails into the plump upholstery.

"Sir, we'll be landing in four minutes." The blonde moved toward him. She took the glass of melting ice and folded the tray upright. Chase kept his eyes on her elegant stride until she disappeared behind a partition.

It was a long four minutes.

The jet landed smoothly, and the blonde reappeared and bid a pleasant good-bye as Chase exited. Still no pilot.

Florence Jetport was small, with one long runway next to several shorter ones. An unmanned motorized cart carried Chase to the terminal building where Dr. Robert Fiender's driver waited.

The ride in the black limo gave Chase time to recuperate. His muscles, his mind, everything in him still soared. But the soft black leather warmed and massaged his thighs and back. The big electric vehicle made little sound, but when he closed his eyes, he heard the roar of the audience. Giving up on rest, he