

Once, he transformed lives. Now, the world's first transhuman
will have to fight to stay alive.

killswitch

victoria buck



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Dedication

To the future. May we meet it with grace.

Other Victoria Buck Titles

Wake the Dead

1

Life underground mystified the man who used to own the world. Chase leaned against a white partition in the bunker constructed under an abandoned museum. Getting here had consumed his thoughts. Even his dreams.

He scanned the sixty-foot-wide room that used to be nothing more than a cavernous hole. Computers and holographic displays filled the space now, along with a group of people all intent on giving *God* credit for this techno-cave. Odd.

Maybe there *was* a higher power behind it. Something had pressed Chase, caused him to give up everything. Urged him to seek refuge in this strange world.

Or maybe it was just his coding, since he'd gotten blown apart and reassembled—turned into a transhuman.

Whether Providence or programming, he'd made it. Now he'd do what he came to do: connect these people with others like them around the world. Protect them. Keep them a step ahead of government forces bearing down on them. But somebody had better tell him what all this was about. Why the believers held to their faith. His other reason for coming—to find the truth.

But *here*? Was every branch of the Underground Church literally underground?

The middle of the busy command center housed ten computer stations, three to four feet apart. Old-fashioned bulbs hung from the white drop ceiling. In the thirty-eight hours since his arrival, he'd become acquainted with the massive network of information and communication programs. The exoself—the computer built into his very being—now seemed at one with the systems Mel had constructed. No wonder, she'd designed him too. At least in part.

She lifted her deep brown eyes and gave him a reassuring smile, then she motioned toward the door to his right. He returned the smile and nodded. Almost time for the meeting.

Melody Reese—the third reason he didn't stop looking until he found this place. He watched her move across the room. Maybe seeing her again had been at the forefront of his reasoning.

She'd been the one to organize his days at the Synvue complex, making the coffee and handling the calls. Friendship might have become something more if their lives hadn't taken such an unbelievable turn. The whole world knew what had happened to Chase, but Mel had harbored secrets. She'd trained in Artificial Intelligence and Chase never knew it. Not until she was gone. After his transformation, they told him that he didn't need an assistant anymore. Mel was reassigned. Then she disappeared.

They'd had little time to talk now that they were back together. She wasn't the same girl he'd known in Chicago. Black curls, longer than when he'd last seen her, framed her pretty face. The sparkle hadn't abandoned her eyes. In fact, they had a fire in them now. An urgency.

Of course, Chase wasn't the same either.

He took the hallway leading to the rest of the compound. He hadn't interacted much with these people. They didn't know what he could do for them. He possessed unlimited intel and processing capabilities—the stuff Mel hid in the exoself. Now he'd upload the programs into this massive computer.

When he wasn't merging the exoself with the systems, he rested. It'd been a while since he had a bed of his own. And he spent some time with the only other resident he knew, his mother. Kim Redding: stellar mom, upstanding citizen. Active member of the underground? Of all people. Mom had accepted the Lord. That's what she told him. No more surprises could exist in the universe. Was it because of him? Did she need something to cling to when they made her son a transhuman?

Transhuman. The term hadn't caught on, though the movement had started decades ago. Chase was the computer man, a cyborg. A bionic disappointment, as far as he could tell, to the millions who once adored him.

He hated the labels. He was just a man.

He continued through the complex until he reached the largest of six meeting rooms, where he took his place on a make-shift platform. No amount of paint and silicon could diminish the dank odor of a cave. He forced a breath out his nose and waited for his audience to arrive. Mel said it was time for him to speak to the people. Ninety-seven lived and worked in this branch of the underground. What did they think of him?

They shifted in a few at a time and sat in white resin chairs. Not unlike most of the believers Chase had encountered over the last several weeks, they were

practiced in unobtrusive charity, offering whatever Chase needed then moving on with little to say. Nobody had time to explain this reckless existence.

But it seemed they were anxious to hear *his* story. Three men dawdled at the back of the room. All the chairs were taken. Chase stepped across the platform.

A few people were missing—some mothers and their small children. And his own mother. She stayed in the command center to monitor the computers, which was fine with Chase. He'd already told her everything. Well, almost.

Also missing was the cocky guy the group called Switchblade. He'd gone up top in the little town of Herouxville, but the exoself didn't have access to Switchblade's agenda. Probably out spying on local officials, making sure they hadn't noticed the Underground Church had set up operations below the streets of the Quebecian village. The guy had a hero complex.

These people didn't know Chase could wipe out the communication programs of the local police with one carefully directed thought. That would take care of the would-be spy's high opinion of himself.

Chase brought his focus back to the gathering. In the past he'd stood before thousands, while millions watched on GrapheVisions across the continents. Something in his gut grieved the loss of stardom. Maybe Switchblade wasn't the only one short on humility. He shook off the yearning for his old life and addressed his waiting audience.

"Good morning. Most of you know me as Chase Sterling. My real name is Charles Redding. My mother was the one who nicknamed me Chase. It was Synvue that changed my last name. I'm changing it back." He

smiled. "But what Mom says, goes—I'm still Chase. Never argue with my mother. You may have noticed she's the only one who refers to the supercomputer you've built here at Blue Sky Field as the 'desktop.'"

Laughter rose from the crowd. Chase let the moment pass before continuing.

"I was the beloved host of *Change Your Life*. I remade pathetic souls—plucked them from a life of hardship and dropped them into a dream existence where they had everything they'd need for the rest of their lives. Riches, beauty, position, restored health. I considered it the ultimate salvation to take people with failing bodies, or unattractive ones, and make them thrive, make them stunning. The envy of everyone who witnessed the miracles. Then I made them wealthy beyond their wildest dreams, gave them the career—the government assignment—they'd always wanted. Or if they didn't want to work, I made sure they had enough funds to squander until they died."

Chase spotted Mel at the end of the first row of chairs. She gave him a nod and he continued, "As you know, I became a project, a scientific endeavor of the Western Republic."

A few derogatory comments and groans preceded one voice, feminine and aged. "We must pray for our leaders. God appoints them for a time and purpose."

More remarks followed, some too unkind to be directed at an old lady.

Chase raised his hands. "Let's not get caught up in knocking the WR." The crowd settled and Chase continued, "I worked within the entertainment network, Synvue, which is controlled by the WR. Or maybe it's the other way around." He stepped to the edge of the platform. "Those of you who've been

underground for some time may not know what happened to me. I'm sure you've all heard something of my injuries. Of my death."

Whispers carried confusion through the room.

"I was reborn. The first of an evolutionary leap. So said my creator."

The murmuring continued. Chase's superior hearing picked up every word.

"He thinks he's reborn?" someone whispered.

"He doesn't *know* his Creator," another added.

These people were ready to toss him out.

He glanced at Mel. She pulled out her VPad and Chase read the text in his mind as she typed:

They have a different understanding of what it means to be reborn. They don't really go for the whole evolution thing. And God is the only creator.

"OK," he said. "I guess I know as little about you as you do about me. Let me explain. I didn't die, I suppose. I was mortally wounded and then rebuilt with bio-genetic lab-grown organs that will never wear out. My vision, hearing, and strength were enhanced. And I have computer-generated intelligence and a connection to multiple cyber systems around the world."

A roomful of eyes stared. Jaws dropped.

"And I think I can be useful to you. I want...to help you."

He waited. If their expressions were an indication, they weren't convinced.

Mel rose from her seat and joined him on the platform. "I told many of you about this already, so don't look so surprised," she said. "I know it's a lot to take in. I designed and installed programs and added them to his processors to give us—the Underground

Church—a way to connect all the branches around the world. To help us with supplies and transportation. With protection. Chase is willing to let us utilize these programs, even though I didn't have his permission for any of this. Everything that was done to him, whether by me or by the scientists who rebuilt him, happened without his knowledge. He lost the life he once had and got transformed into the something he didn't want to be.

"He could have stayed up top and lived like a king. There's no one else like him. But he chose to escape, to become a hunted man, to seek us out, and to help us. Please, give him a chance."

"If he's a hunted man," a voice called out. "How do we know they won't hunt him down and us with him? We heard what happened to the group in Atlanta."

"Exactly," Switchblade said from the back of the room. His black eyes seemed to laugh, but his thick arms crossed to deny any humor in the situation. "In fact, I think they've already tracked him. We got federal deputies in town and I don't think they're here for the local cuisine. Didn't see nobody with a plate of *poutine*."

People rushed from the room. Frantic voices faded into the hallway. Mel wrapped her hands around Chase's arm. The laughter in Switchblade's eyes found his lips, which formed into a judgmental smirk before he dashed away.

"They tracked me. I thought I could hide." Chase pulled free from Mel's grip. "I should never have come here."

2

Chase and Mel followed the crowd to the command center. Already pulling data from computers in the town's police station, the exoself found nothing to indicate a problem. Of course, WR Feds would use their own systems. Chase searched for a connection.

His mother worked in front of a large transparent monitor. Her fingers glided across the screen, moving data from one position to another, much as Dr. Fiender had done when he first showed Chase the exoself. No need for such a display now—Chase could read the data flowing inside him without the visual aids. He located four VirtuPads registered to the WR. Communication passed between them and Chase processed the voice transcripts:

No reason to believe he's still in this hole of a town. The old woman said she gave him clean clothes and sent him on his way—said he was looking for a farm or something.

Chase didn't need to hear anything else. They'd questioned Molly, the sweet elderly lady who'd helped him when he first arrived in town. No telling what they did to her. His strength sensor activated and he threw back his shoulders.

"I have to go." He headed for the door that opened to stairs leading upward.

Mel reached for him but he pulled away. She hurried after him. "What do you mean you have to go? You can't go up top."

He faced her. "They've been to see Molly."

"How do you know that?"

"I just know." He swiped his hand through his hair. "Look, Mel, I can read their communication. I know what they're doing."

"So, what are they doing?"

"Looking for *me*, of course. I've got to see if Molly is all right."

"I'll go."

"Don't be ridiculous," a man said from behind them. Amos, a short, balding man in his fifties—the leader of this group.

As Bear had been the head of the underground in Atlanta, Amos was the overseer of Blue Sky Field. But *this* was the location that managed all the branches in the world. The man in charge had an awesome responsibility. Chase had only seen him once before the meeting today. He seemed to spend a lot of time in his private quarters. They hadn't even been introduced. Now it appeared they'd skip the handshake and get right to work.

Amos sat at a computer station. "They know who you are, Melody. If they catch you, they've got Chase. They know he'll come after you."

"Of course I would come after her, and I'm going to check on Molly," Chase said. "They could have killed her."

"That's entirely possible." Amos's words held little emotion.

Chase spun around and rushed for the door.

Switchblade blocked the exit, his feet spread apart, his arms crossed. "Can't let you go up there. I'll go to Molly's. She likes me. Brings me those muffins of hers every time she comes to a meeting."

Chase stiffened. "I feel responsible."

"You *are* responsible." Switchblade lunged forward and pointed a finger close to Chase's face. "But I'm going. Check your brain, Charlie. See if those deputies up there know anything about me." He pulled the hood of his jacket over his close-shaved head and put on a pair of mirrored glasses. "They don't know me from Adam. As far as they can tell, I'm just an out of place punk who never did nothin' for the WR, 'cause the WR never did nothin' for me. I'm good to go."

Chase folded his arms and lifted his chin. "What's your real name?"

Switchblade stepped close, lowered the glasses, and glared down into Chase's eyes. "Don't care to divulge that information, Charlie. You got anything in that exoself to read my iris? Not much of a computer man if you don't."

"Yeah, I've got it. Stop calling me Charlie." He did a quick sweep of WR job assignments, schools, housing, prisons—this guy had to have a record. But no, as far as the government knew, he was just another lost cause out of the system. No name—just a vague record of him being born in Cleveland, and his age—thirty-two.

Wait, there *was* a former job assignment. He spent two years as a bodyguard for Synvue.

"You worked for Synvue? When?" Chase asked. "And why don't you have a name?"

The man's shoulder tightened and his upper lip twitched. "I'm going up now."

He faced the door and flipped open the locks.

"I got all the way here from the Southwest Territory without getting caught," Chase said. "I'm going with you."

“No,” Amos said. “Switchblade will contact us as soon as he knows anything. You’re here to help us. What would it profit for you to get caught?”

The man was right. Chase watched the hooded wannabe hero take the stairs three at time.

“Come on, boss. Let’s go check the data. Maybe we can find something.” Mel took his hand and led him back into the command center.

His mom had the same consoling smile she’d given him twenty-five years ago when he struck out in a Little League game. He started toward to her, but then focused instead on the monitors near the other side of the room. It wouldn’t do anything for these people’s confidence to see him running to his mommy.

He’d gathered extensive data from the four WR VPads. A group assembled as he sat at a keypad to categorize the information. His mother joined them. Had she caught the way he’d avoided her? Her wink and half-smile said that she had and she wasn’t offended.

“They can’t track me using traditional methods because of the exoself.” Chase leaned back and dropped his hands from the keys. “But I may have made a mistake.”

“What mistake?” Amos asked.

“I met up with my show’s producer in NYC. She found me there and I told her what I was doing—that I wanted to help the Underground Church. Not the smartest thing to say.”

“You saw Kerstin?” Mel’s tone darkened. “Why would you tell her that? Why would you tell her anything?”

“She was sick and I...” He hadn’t told these people, not even his mother, everything he could do.

Of course, Mel knew. She was there when the scientists installed the device enabling him to detect illness simply by touching a person.

"She needed a kidney, and I told her to go to Robert. Then I asked her to let me go. And she did."

Mel drew back from the crowd as she lowered her gaze to the floor. Was she angry with him for trying to save a life?

"You told this woman you were coming here?" Amos didn't overreact. The leader seemed like he could handle anything.

"No. Just that I was going to try to find your group. She must have notified the Feds to look for anybody transporting believers. Your communication about moving goods and people is lacking security measures. But I can take care that." Chase searched beyond the twenty or so people standing around him. Mel sat alone at a station, typing on a keypad. "If it's not too late."

"How did they find Molly?" Mom asked.

"A few questions in town led the deputies to a lady living in the outskirts who takes in strangers and frequents unregulated meetings. That made her a suspect to harboring believers."

Amos circled the group and poked a screen at another station. "She was one of only five believers in town who hadn't joined us here. The ones up top are essential. The WR may have gotten all five. What a loss." The man blinked his droopy blue eyes. "But...to die is gain."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Chase looked at Mel. "The incoming data doesn't indicate anyone's been killed."

But something was there in the communication

between the agents and superiors. It wasn't good. Chase kept his eyes on Mel until she looked at him.

"What is it?" she asked.

"They're on their way to a detention camp. All five of them. Somebody get in touch with Switchblade. You can do that, can't you?"

Amos pulled a VPad from the pocket of his brown vest.

"Tell him not to go near Molly's," Chase said. "It's a trap."

The leader prompted the call. "Might be too late."

3

The hidiers in Blue Sky Field had VPads. The church in Underground Atlanta had avoided them like snakes. Thanks to Mel, a techno-revolution was taking place in the underground. Authorities seeking to shut down the activities of the church could no longer track their use of electronics.

Chase could process both sides of the conversation on any nearby VPad, and he listened in on the private call.

Amos spoke first. "The upside believers are gone. Don't go near Molly's—they're waiting for somebody to show up there."

"How do you know that?" Switchblade asked.

"Chase says so. Get back here. That's an order."

"That robot don't know everything. I'll just take a look. Nobody will know."

Chase grimaced. *Robot?* Let the thug get caught.

Mel grabbed the VPad from Amos. She eyed Chase as if she knew what he was thinking. Maybe she did. Maybe she hadn't told him she could read his mind.

"Switch, he picked up on communication from above. If he says they're gone, they're gone. Get out of there."

Switch? How long had Mel been using a pet name for this guy? Chase crossed his arms and took three steps back. But the conversation continued. He could've stopped the transmission if he'd wanted to,

but he didn't.

"OK, Melody. I'm coming." Switchblade ended the call.

This guy didn't follow the orders of his leader, but Mel could turn him?

Mel handed the VPad back to Amos. "Where are they?" she asked Chase. "Can we get them back?"

"I'm working on it. There are three detention centers within seventy miles of here. One is for dissenters. One is for common criminals. The other one is a mix." Chase dropped into a chair. The people, once again, gathered around him. His mother put her hands on his shoulders. "I've got it, or at least I know what's on the report. I don't know why they would try to trip us up—they don't even know I can access their systems."

"What if Kerstin told them?" Mel's voice carried a chill.

"She doesn't know everything." Chase crooked his head toward Mel but didn't make eye contact.

"Maybe Fiender filled her in when she showed up for a transplant."

"He wouldn't do that. Anyway, I don't know that she even went to him. She could get a kidney elsewhere."

"Not like yours. That's what you wanted for her. Right?" She moved closer, her arms folded tight.

His eyes met hers. "There's really no need for—"

"For organic replacement. I know that." Mel sat next to him and touched a large-screen VPad. "Show me where they are." She pushed her curls behind her ears.

Chase instructed the exoself to display a real-time view of the surrounding area. "Here." He pointed to an