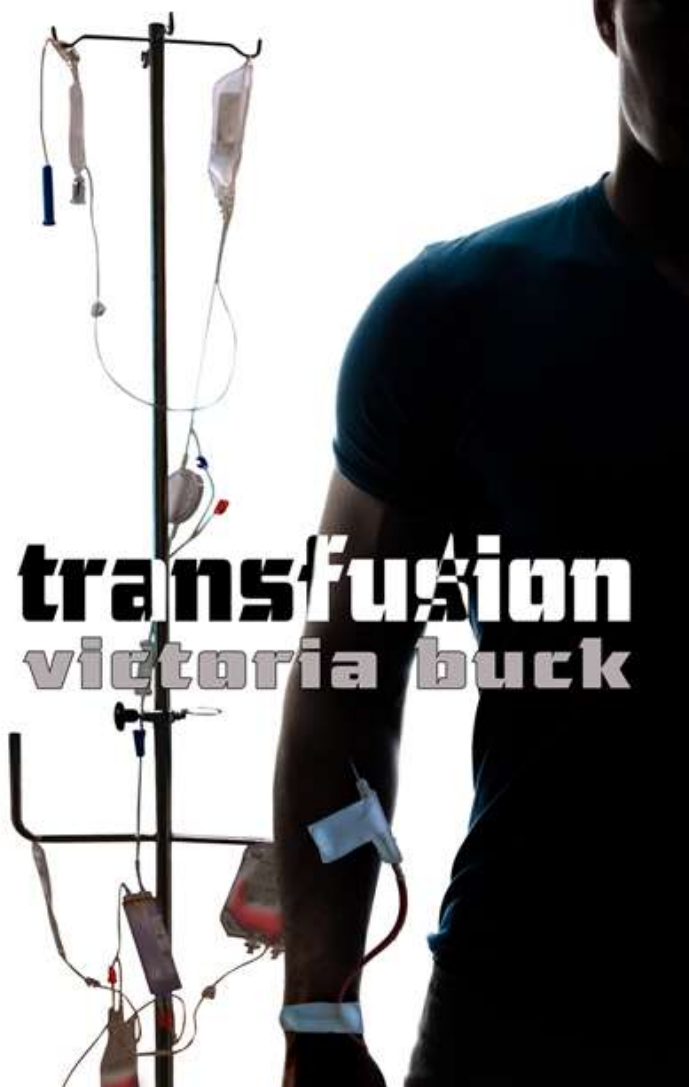


Once, he transformed lives. Now, the world's first transhuman  
must choose the ultimate sacrifice

# **transfusion** victoria buck



# Transfusion

Victoria Buck

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### **Transfusion**

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## *Dedication*

For those who do not grow weary.  
Revelation 2:3



*Other Books in the Series*

Wake the Dead  
Killswitch







# Part I

## 1

Chase considered his audience. Thirty men in ragged coats snarled like wolves judging bait in a trap. The alpha wolf—a guy they called Ep—paced at the far end of the narrow room. Long, bony legs. Impatient puffs of frigid air raging from his flared nostrils. A polished wooden nightstick dangling off his belt.

Alpha Wolf had decided it would be beneficial for Chase to tell the pack what he could do for them. Outlaws seeking revolution couldn't be trusted with too much information, even if revolt was the solution. But Chase had to gain the wolf's trust. Or at least secure the respect of the pack.

He smiled—he always smiled for the crowd. Millions of fans once adored him. But his last audience was a hundred believers stowed deep in the Underground Church. The fans had likely forgotten him. The believers...

The smile left him.

Now this—renegade dissenters holed up in an old campground two hundred miles from Chase's destination. He'd been here three weeks, captured on his way from Quebec to Detroit. Nothing good remained in Quebec since the destruction of the underground's base. He wasn't sure what he'd find in the rundown city of Detroit, but God told him to go

there.

"What do you know about God?" Switchblade grumbled behind him.

Chase angled his vision to the left. "Did I say that out loud?"

"All those superpowers and you don't even know when your stupid thinking is coming out your mouth. These people don't care what you think God told you."

Murmurs filled the room as Chase swung around. "You know as well as I do God is sending us to Detroit."

Switchblade folded his thick black arms. A vein bulged up the middle of his forehead. "Then how'd we end up in this Godforsaken place? Huh? Why ain't we in Detroit?"

"Why don't you just rub it in? I thought I could get us there and I failed. You think I don't want more than anything to wake up to my wife's beautiful face instead of *your* ugly mug? You think I don't wonder how we're going to find her if we even make it to Detroit? All I can do is to follow what little instruction I get from God."

The muscles in Chase's throat tightened and his tone rose an octave. "I can't depend on intel from the underground, because it shut down. Remember? But God will get me there. *That* is what I know about God."

Switchblade's furrowed brows relaxed. "Now you're ready." He placed his big hands on Chase's shoulders and forced him around to the stunned audience.

Alpha Wolf snarled.

Switchblade smacked Chase across the back. "Go on and tell them what you know about God."

"I don't think that's what the boss man wants."

“You scared of that old dog? We got stuck here for a reason, robot.”

Laughter rose among the men’s agitated whispers. Alpha Wolf slapped the nightstick against his leg.

Tell them what he knew about God? These men weren’t waiting for a Sunday school lesson. During his time here, Chase had read the irises of most of the outlaws. Files kept by the Western Republic listed them as thieves. Murderers. Swindlers. Hackers. People like that served a purpose in the Dissenters of the Republic. The leader had no felon’s record, but he was an outlaw just for going rogue. Anybody bowing out on the government’s agenda was a criminal. Including Chase, who’d long since found his own name among the WR’s Most Wanted.

But he wasn’t a felon—not like this bunch of none-too-smart, freezing, half-starved men. Most of their weapons were stored away by the wolf in charge. Chase could outthink them. Overpower them. So why was he still here?

*Patience.*

The message didn’t come from the exoself. Chase had learned to tell the difference between the constant stream of information flowing through his processors and the whisper in his soul. God would get him and Switchblade out of here. In time. Right now, they were just a couple more freezing, half-starved men in need of shelter during the worst winter in recorded history. Soon the snow would melt. The men’s hearts would soften. Chase had to be patient.

He allowed the signature smile to return. With an out-of-control beard and hair nearly to his jawline, he barely resembled the man he used to be. But he still had the smile. And the voice.

“Gentlemen, your leader”—Chase eyed Alpha Wolf—“has asked me to explain how I came to have, as he puts it, a supercomputer inside my head. It’s actually not confined to my head. Sensors and processors run throughout my body. They not only give me access to government intel, they also regulate my lab-grown organs. They work with my muscles to increase upper-body strength. My hearing is enhanced. I can see in the dark. But most of you already know all that. I guess what I’m supposed to tell you is how my ability to worm into WR programs might prove useful.”

Switchblade cleared his throat.

Chase’s shoulders tightened. He sucked in a breath. “But I’d like to tell you my story. My real name is Charles Redding. I became Chase Sterling when the WR made me a game show host. A star. Then they turned me into a transhuman. I want to tell you how it happened. How I became a believer. Where I was headed when your leader detained me.”

“Never mind,” Alpha Wolf bellowed. He leaned against the plywood wall and crossed his arms. “I don’t want to hear about your life as a pretty-boy celebrity or as an outlaw convert. Just tell us what you can do for us. You can plant information in WR systems, so you could have turned us in. Of course, a raid would mean your capture. You’d never get out of here before the Feds showed up. But come springtime, you might make it work. So now, while I’ve got you trapped, work that transhuman magic and make us all upstanding citizens.”

Chase lowered his eyes to the floor. “It’s true—I’ve entered false data in government programs before. To protect my people.” He lifted his gaze. “When I got

rebuilt, a change took place in me. I'm not talking about the technical transformation. I didn't like what they did to me, so I ran. But I wasn't running away from something as much as toward something else. And I found what I was looking for. The Underground Church. My mother and my closest friend were there." He motioned to Switchblade. "And this guy—he got assigned to guard me. And there were others I came to love. I used my abilities to keep them safe."

He ran his hand through his hair. "I thought I could save them, but the friend I'd searched for told me what I needed to hear—that I couldn't save anybody. She told me I needed the One who calms the seas and shuts the mouths of lions." He glanced at the leader, who waited with unexpected silence. "And wolves."

Chase pulled his arms tight around his chest and raised his eyes to the decaying ceiling. "So I found what I was running to. And I married the girl who'd told me the truth." His gaze met the stillness of the meager crowd.

"And then the transhuman failed. I lost them. My friends. My family. My wife. All I've got left is this ill-tempered bodyguard and the whisper of God telling me where I need to go. What He is *not* telling me to do is plant some bogus story in WR intel about *you*. I'm sorry. When I'm ready to go, I'm going. I won't turn you in. But I can't help you."

Alpha Wolf laughed. "You *will* help us. And you're not leaving—not in one piece." He skulked to the door and pulled it open. A cold gust carried flurries into the room before the leader marched out and slammed the door. The pack didn't move, except to tug on their coats.

Switchblade launched forward and planted himself between the men and Chase.

"That's rough," a voice called out. "You ain't got no idea what happened to 'em?"

"I think..." Chase drew his brows tight. "I pray my wife and some of my people are in Detroit."

"God told you?" another voice asked.

"I'm sure of it. And Mel—my wife—sent me a clue. But others are dead. Killed by the WR. The ones who escaped need me." Chase blew out a breath. "I need *them*. Soon I'm getting out of here. But I could use some help." He stepped off the platform. "Who's with me?"

## 2

Sunlight reflected off the snow. Chase squinted as he eased down the wooden steps of the bunkhouse and into the crunch of day-old, foot-deep snow. After three weeks in confinement, freedom to walk the compound offered some hope. Alpha Wolf had moved his captives to the main bunkhouse when he figured warming another building was using up too much firewood. The unrelenting winter made escape impossible anyway. So Chase and Switchblade settled in among the outcasts. None had been eager to make conversation. Especially after Chase's plea for help yesterday. They'd asked a few questions. Some had even shown a bit of sympathy. But that was all.

"They're not helping me."

For the first time in a month, the frozen assault had ceased on what was, according to the exoself, the southwest corner of a former national forest near Saginaw Bay. Now the land was abandoned to the wild, no longer listed among the WR's protected properties. They still owned it—just didn't maintain it. Which made it the perfect place for people like the dissenters.

If Chase could make it to the bay, he'd find a way to get around it. Or across it.

What he needed was a sympathizer—somebody assisting the underground. If this area held dissenters,

there must be believers too. Christians still existing in the world up top were faithful to offer a hand to the ones who'd gone under. Ten weeks ago, it would have been easy to find that kind of help. But Mel had cut him off from the underground. She'd done it to protect him. *He* was supposed to protect *them*. But he lost them.

He lost *her*. His wife of one day.

"It wasn't even a whole day," he said to the sky. Frigid air slapped his face. White breath escaped his mouth. Tears puddled and he quickly swiped the moisture away with his gloved hands. "God, I can't do this. I got Your people connected and then You took it all away. Now they're worse off than before. I don't understand."

The rhythm of a steady drip drew his sight to the overhang on the bunkhouse. Melting snow. Just a bit. But tomorrow, if the sun held, more sweet percussion would accompany this beat.

He trudged through the snow to the building where lunch waited. Other men marched alongside him. But not Switchblade. Maybe he had kitchen duty. As though they'd agreed to join the renegades, Chase and Switchblade had been ordered to perform chores like permanent residents.

Two men reached the steps alongside Chase. Both turned away. No surprise. The unreasonable request of helping a transhuman get to Detroit was too much for these poor guys.

At least they didn't run to their leader. Alpha Wolf would've forced Chase and Switchblade back into confinement by now if the men had squealed. Cold wind delivered a few flurries. Chase ran a check of weather reports and groaned at the news of more



snow. No need to confine anyone. Nobody was leaving.

The exoself streamed data of snowbound towns. Impassable roads. The Feds wouldn't find Chase here—not anytime soon. And in the middle of the frozen wilderness, at least he couldn't hurt anybody by trying to help them.

Maybe the world was better off without a transhuman.

He pulled on the door of the mess hall and entered a room warmed by the wood-burning apparatus used for cooking. Chase slid his hands out of the brown gloves and dropped them to the floor as he sat at the nearest table. He pushed back the hood of his jacket.

Rations were limited to a few crates of apples, some dried beef, and several sacks of potatoes. The makeshift stove supported a huge aluminum pot where today's potatoes were boiling. Would the food hold out until spring? Alpha Wolf had a computer. He had connections. But he'd secured himself and his men too far off the grid. The mega blizzard made it impossible to get supplies in.

Or get Chase out.

Where was Switchblade? Chase counted the men. Twenty-six. Alpha Wolf sat at a table on the other side of the bunker. Four men had skipped lunch. Five, counting Switchblade.

Chase rubbed his face and then slapped his hands against the rough wooden table. "What's he up to?"

A young man with blond hair past his shoulders yanked a chair away from the table and slid a plate in front of Chase. "Who? Your bodyguard?" The man lowered another plate and sat in the chair. He was nearly as big as Switchblade.

Chase eyed the plate in front of him. A strip of jerky. Half an apple. Four chunks of potato. "For me? You shouldn't have." He picked up the meat and bit it.

"You're welcome," the man said. "Switchblade's in a meeting. He sent me to get you, but he said I should feed you first. Said you can't let a transhuman go too long without food. Is that true?"

"He's in a *meeting*? What the—"

The man elbowed Chase.

Alpha Wolf crept toward them. He stopped behind Chase and poked the nightstick between his shoulders. "My cabin. Four-thirty. Don't keep me waiting." He exited the mess hall.

Chase picked up a steaming potato, dropped it, and rubbed his fingers together. "One hundred forty-seven degrees. Don't you people have forks?"

"You know the temp just by touching it?"

"What sort of meeting? What's going on?"

The man smiled. "You want out of here. Right? Some of us are ready to help."

"You weren't too eager yesterday."

"We had to talk it over. You know how it is."

"No. I don't. What are you all doing here with that drooling dictator wannabe?"

"Waiting for the revolution." The man pulled out a pocketknife. "And we got no place else to go." He stabbed a potato, blew on it, and eased it into his mouth.

Chase bit his apple. "None of you have family? You've got to know somebody besides Henry Theodore Epsin."

The man's brows went up.

"Your leader."

"Oh. Right. Ep's the only name he ever told us."

The man smiled again. "I guess you know my name too."

"Jeffrey Allen Turner. From Ohio. Arrested for relieving the WR of an armored transit. Two years in prison. Released to the custody of your grandparents." Chase eased his finger onto a potato. "So you do have a family."

"True to the Western Republic. Kicked me out when I refused to report for my job assignment. I took up with some dissenters and ended up getting recruited by Ep. None of us has any strong attachments. Couple of guys were married, but their wives booted 'em when they went rogue."

Chase popped the rest of the potatoes into his mouth. Followed by the jerky. He left the browning apple on his plate. "Enough getting to know each other. Tell me where I can find Switchblade." He reached for his gloves.

Jeff grabbed the apple off Chase's plate and held it with his teeth. He pulled his tattered jacket closed and motioned Chase to the door.

They crossed the frozen ground toward four small cabins. One was Alpha Wolf's personal living space. Another housed the latrine. The third was Chase's former prison cell he'd shared with Switch for three weeks. The fourth, he'd never been in.

Jeff headed toward it.

Chase shuddered. The building resembled the one behind the WR detention center in Quebec, where the Feds housed the device called Bloodless. The execution machine. He followed Jeff through the door. A dim bulb hung on a wire from the ceiling. Switchblade looked up from a map. Four others sat with him around a small table.

Chase examined the map, the men, and the room. Some sort of storage building. Shelves filled with notebooks lined a wall. The men showed little expression except for a hint of fear. They shivered—this building had no heat.

Across the top of the old map—*Michigan*. Across the bottom—*United States of America*. Maps like this had disappeared a decade ago.

“What are you doing?” Chase asked.

“Planning our exit,” Switchblade said. “Nothing transhuman about it. Just old-fashioned hightailing it out of here. You ready to go, Charlie?”

### 3

"More snow coming." Chase slid a chair across the bare wood floor and sat next to Switchblade. Jeff stationed himself at the one small window and peered out.

"I don't need a robot to tell me that," Switch said. "We've got a radio. Supporters are broadcasting a signal nearby. Well, not too—"

"Supporters? You mean...believers?"

Switchblade eased into a grin. "That's right. Somewhere between here and the bay."

Chase slumped back in the cold metal chair. He'd lost the ability to pinpoint transfers between believers, but Switchblade and these good-for-nothing dissenters had done it. Somewhere between gratitude and relief, something ugly wriggled inside. Envy? Pride?

"Great." Chase leaned forward, his elbows on the table. "But we don't have a two-way, so how are we supposed to find them?"

"You're the one with a computer in your head," Switch told him. "Figure it out."

A scrawny man with a tattoo of a lion on his neck pulled a small radio from his jacket. The type of signal the antique picked up—the kind sent out by supporters—was illegal. But their signals still roamed the airwaves.

The man rubbed his hand over his greasy black hair. "If we could get to Ep's outgoing signal, we