

Chasing Stars

Written by J.M. Robison

CHAPTER 1

Jessica pressed her palm against the glass, heat fogging around her hand. *Cold. Wet.* Rain pattered outside, slicking the rails and swirling across the hot platforms. She might spend her entire lunch break watching it, neglecting her tea and croissant, but she didn't know when she'd see rain again.

It appeared God didn't think a city like Salt Lake needed rain, not when they paved over grass and uprooted trees to build yet more pomp and power.

After a blissful moment, the rain stopped. She pressed her cold hand to her cheek, taking a second to selfishly love something man did not create – rain was a rare occurrence, one that she barely knew herself only because current science admitted there were still things man could neither stop nor duplicate. Rain reminded her of rebellion, falling without bias on the heads of those who raged they could not control it.

Her hand warmed again, and she resumed sipping her tea. Her earcuff announcing the time as she grabbed her purse and left the table. The café doors opened with a whoosh and she stepped out, pressing her ring against the electronic pad beside the door. The device dinged once. Signal received.

Tucking her skirt beneath her, Jessica sat on the bench – already dry – and spoke out loud, “WebNet, play the latest social posts,” to her earcuff.

Her transportation took long enough that she was able to catch up on her friends' latest updates and a small snatch of news before the Railed Transport Pod glided to a transition-less halt on the rails in front of her.

She slid inside the RTP, a robotic door lowering on its own.

"Where is it you want to go?" the computer asked.

"Intellecta, level 1375."

A baby could sleep with how quiet and seamless the magnetized RTPs glided across the rails. It turned ninety degrees left into a straight upward vertical, flawlessly communicating with the rail and other RTPs to navigate the web spun around buildings and reaching to lower levels. The purring atmosphere eased her into a sense of solitude as if she were the only one out today despite thousands upon thousands of RTPs rising, diving, spiraling left and right all around her. Like a string of flowing pearls hanging the city's neck.

Her RTP stopped at the platform outside Intellecta and the door opened.

Preoccupied with the copy she was expected to propose after lunch, she stepped out without her purse.

The RTP chirped. "Please remove your belongings," the computer said.

"Oh, sorry," she said, even though computers had no feelings. At least not yet.

Apparently, Intellecta tinkered in that, too. She grabbed her purse and went through two automatic doors.

She walked into her office, everything powering on to welcome her back. Hoping her excursion outside cleared her mental palate, she keyed up her recorder, replaying her slogans she had recorded earlier.

“Trust your life. Trust science,” her recorded voice said.

“Give it one star,” she said to the computer to score the line.

“Last phrase, three stars,” answered a robotic voice.

Every day Jessica listened, scoring and un-scoring. This was her last time to listen to her phrases before she had to present her final, best self-scored phrase to be used by Intellecta’s marketing team.

“When your heart stops, let us keep it going.”

Take away a star.

“Last phrase, one score. Next phrase: Let Intellecta spark your life.”

Add one star.

Three more phrases and Jessica paused the recorder. She’d heard them a hundred times before, so of course they sounded tired. Now was not the time to come up with a brand-new phrase without it being vetted through her usual scoring method. But...

“Recorder, start new.”

“Beginning new.”

She chewed on the tip of her finger. “Life is your choice. Record Stop.”

“Recording has stopped. Replay?”

“Yes.”

She listened to herself repeat, and the excitement warmed her. The rain made her think of it, how it chose to live despite all the odds, despite science’s grudge against its freelance existence. The Intella-heart could keep people alive, making their life *their* choice not governed by the inescapability of death.

Her heart stomped in her chest. She wanted to use it. Place it as her number one. But would it sound as good at her presentation? Hold its zeal as it blasted through everyone's earcuff and inside every RTP next week?

The rain dared fall upon Intellecta today. She would dare, too.

Excited, she gave the phrase six stars and told the recorder to gather her next top two. With more spring in her high heels, she walked to the conference room, taking a detour into the bathroom to touch up her hair and makeup.

Diedra and Angela entered the bathroom a moment after, Diedra anchoring herself in front of the mirror in similar fashion to Jessica, pulling a black tube out of her purse and swiping it at her thick upper lashes.

"How would *you* decide, then?" Diedra asked the red head leaning against the wall next to her, continuing whatever conversation they had been engaged in before the bathroom.

"Whoever contributes to society the most."

"Angie, *everyone* contributes to society. There are very few who don't. Taking them out wouldn't even be half a percent of the total population."

Diedra pulled out lipstick next and dragged it against her lips as Angela pushed off the wall with a certain warmth toward the subject.

"I said *the most* contribution."

"Well, neither you nor I fall into *that* category when compared to, like, the CEO of Intellecta. So, according to you, we'd both die."

Angela's gaze roved around the room, across the sinks to where Jessica stood on the opposite end, dabbing the last finishes of her foundation to her forehead. "How would *you* govern population control, Jessica?"

"Uh..." A victim of time and place, she searched for her first opinion she'd ever had on this controversial subject to give to this pair, "I'd chose to be a copywriter. Not a judge."

"It's people like you, Jessica, who feed into the problem. The city can't go up any higher because there isn't enough oxygen, and if people are living longer and dying less, we're going to run out of resources, and we will *all* die. And Intellecta has the gall to create a heart to make you live even *longer*."

Jessica mumbled for a response, but Diedra snapped her powder case closed and walked out of the bathroom, Angela following.

Despite her detour, Jessica made it to the conference room much too early, but there was no waiting it out in her office, either. She sat on the couch, rubbing sweaty palms against her skirt.

Jephron entered the conference room. He sat at the table and turned to her. "Got us a winner, Jessica?"

Too nervous for words, she nodded.

"One that will convince these RTP-sitters to finally stop off at Intellecta's porch?"

"No fancy tagline is going to do that, Jephron." She lowered her eyelashes. "That's *your* job."

“Oh.” He tucked into his chair as if embarrassed. “Someone should have told me, then. Guess we’re going to lose. Unless, of course, you save the day by producing an amazing tagline that will sway nations to our cause like an ancient battle cry.”

“Ya,” she giggled. “That’s *exactly* what it’s going to do.”

“Good girl. I knew there was a reason why Haverick wanted to keep you around.”

Where Jephron’s easy humor loosened her nerves, hearing her boss’s name tightened them again.

Haverick Edelson, CEO of Intellecta, judge, jury, and executioner of his business, he easily claimed a seat next to the top five powerful people in Salt Lake, staring the overpopulation controversy in the eye by creating the Intella-heart, which would extend the lifespan of anyone by at least 20 years.

That is, if anyone would buy it. Hell, they’d be happy for someone would take it for free.

As if her thoughts had summoned him, the man in charge of her dreams coming true entered the conference room. Good thing they were all going to listen to her recordings and not have her say them out loud. Her nerves would prevent her from remembering any of her taglines despite having worked on them for a month. Jessica felt as if she might literally die from anxiety right now.

Haverick sat at the head of the table and Jessica couldn’t help but think that success only touched larger men. Not fat men. Just...large, as if they physically consumed their success, which added length to their bones and muscle to their shoulders. Or they bulked up by wrestling with all their skinny competition.

He intimidated Jessica, even though he smiled and said nice words to her whenever they landed in the same break room.

Arriving at the last minute, in walked Jephron's marketing partner and three publicists. They more or less settled into their chairs as Haverick stood, splaying thick palms on the smooth table.

"Before Jessica proceeds with her presentation, I want everyone to put this in their mind first: which tagline is going to convince the undecided to finally proceed?"

"Before we can decide on a tagline," spoke one of the marketers, "we first need to know why people are resistant to replacing their heart with a machine."

"People are afraid the operation will kill them?" A publicist offered.

Others chimed in with: "The public thinks it won't work." "They worry it can be hacked?"

Haverick looked around the room, but no one offered anything further. "Now let's list the reasons why people *should* get the Intella-heart.

"It will stop diseases before they start."

"Will never give you a heart attack."

"Will keep proper levels of all essential nutrients and will regulate cholesterol. If anything kills you, it won't be because of poor health."

They listed several more benefits, but Jessica barely heard them over the roar in her ears as the moment approached when they would choose one of her taglines.

"All right." Haverick spun in his chair and smiled at her. "With those thoughts in mind, Jessica, give us your best phrases that will link both those thoughts together."

In a quiet tone, she synced her recorder to the one in the room and told it to play.

Everyone listened intently to all three, Jessica roiling with nerves over what they would think about the one she created an hour ago.

“Everyone, cast your votes.” Haverick’s heavy gaze linked with each of theirs in turn.

“Raise your hand for, *life is your choice.*”

No one moved.

Embarrassment flushed her cheeks. She should have waited a day to hear it one more time. *She would never make that mistake again.* She looked out the window, but all remnants of the rain had vanished. A yearning filled her, but she could not place what for.

“Raise your hand for, *trust your life, trust science.*”

Everyone raised their hand.

“There; we have it.” Haverick grinned at her. “Thank you, Jessica, for such a wonderful tagline.” He touched his earcuff and spoke some randomized passwords, finishing with, “add 300 dollars to Jessica Halwater’s account, ID number 6756233.”

Jessica’s earcuff chimed with a quiet message saying the money had been deposited.

“Thank you, Haverick.”

He turned to his staff. “Jephron, I want you to push this tagline out immediately to all outlets integrated into your newest marketing plan. We’ve got thousands on the verge of consideration for the Intella-heart. Pending your marketing plan works the way you promised it would, payout will be astronomical. To everyone in this room, if we can get even a thousand to install the heart, you will all receive a very *generous* bonus.”

Jessica perked on the edge of the couch. Everyone else leaned toward Haverick as if he held the bonus in his hand.

“Good luck to all of you. You are dismissed.”

Jessica stood on shaky knees. Her tagline was really just that pop of color to the actual marketing plan, much like a single cherry topped a white-frosting cake.

She listened to the gentle murmurs of everyone else as they pushed back chairs.

“Too bad we don’t have Ayden around to give us a product review,” the blond publicist moaned.

“Ya,” grumbled her partner. “We’d already have that bonus by now.”

Ayden. Patient zero. Dying of lung cancer. In a coma. His parents acting his legal guardian made the decision to accept Intellecta’s free offer to remove his heart and replace it with the Intella-heart. The heart had just completed its final testing phase and now needed a human to try it on.

With the Intella-heart plugged into Ayden’s chest, the boy woke up.

Cured. Completely cured.

The heart uses top secret Intellecta science to cure *all* ailments - and prevent future ones. Everything from aggressive cancers to acne by regulating blood flow, all dictated by the heart. Once the doctor verified Ayden’s cancer had been cured, his parents rejoiced, Intellecta cheered.

Then, Ayden ran away.

Jessica had been woken out of a dead sleep by an emergency broadcast shrilling across her earcuff, giving a rapid description of the boy across the entire network. Intellecta offered a

tremendous reward for his return. Despite his picture shared around the media that entire first year, no one found him. Three years later, he's nearly become a myth. His parents, always ashen faced when asked if they had any idea, would mutely shake their heads, provide stilted answers, and flee the grabby media. Grief did weird things to people.

Intellecta had all the documentation from the doctor to prove his cancer was cured, but with his disappearance, people immediately discounted the Intella-heart.

"Why did he run away," they all asked, "if your product was so good? Unless, of course, it *killed* him."

Ayden's parents didn't have the answer. Nor Intellecta. They've been fighting public opinion ever since.

"Unnatural," the public muttered.

"How does it work?" others asked.

But competing with Loginetics in Las Vegas – where Jessica's sister worked – Intellecta would not advertise the one magic element geared to making the heart function. So, people didn't trust it. And would not if Ayden did not return. It's taken Intellecta the last year of aggressively marketing the heart to even get people considering it. Haverick believed a single, good marketing campaign would finally tip them over the edge to where they would march into Intellecta already undressing for surgery.

Jephron sidled up next to Jessica as she left the room. "I'm counting on you for that bonus," he said. "Your tagline better make me thousands."

"You're the one who voted on it. So, really, if it fails, then it will be *your* fault. Not to mention that it's *your* marketing plan that will make or break the allure of the Intella-heart. In

comparison, my tagline has nothing to do with it. I'm going to go pre-order a Senicci dress, so if I don't get that bonus *because of you*, then I'm going to sit outside your office and cry until you sell everything you own to pay for that dress."

"Sounds like a new identity in the near future for me, then." He turned down the hallway. "See you later, Jess."

Jessica's summoned RTP arrived with a smooth rise of its door. She slid inside mid-chew on her donut.

"Where is it you want to go?" asked the computer.

"Level twelve—" she inhaled powdered sugar from her pastry and coughed, "—thirty!" she wheezed, coughing more as the door closed and the RTP moved.

The news stream spun up inside the RTP, and Jessica listened to Jephron's grand marketing advertisement about the heart for the first time. Despite their teasing, it impressed her to the point of considering the heart for herself in the future.

"Well done," she whispered to the space around her.

She sat back and opened her earcuff, a stream of updates filling her ear: Cassandra got her promotion. Michael burnt his toast. Logan ranted about President Frodshore with the meme, "The president is a *Frod*."

Hendrix was pouring out his unpopular opinion about population control when Jessica realized the RTP hadn't stopped where it should have.

The window showed a darkening city. Not because it was even close to dark - which still made no difference because the city lights kept the entire sky bright as day no matter the time - but because she was descending lower than she wanted.

Her gaze shot up to the screen on the console where numbers flickered in descending order.

53...52...51...

“No! RTP, STOP!”

“Stopping without a platform is dangerous and will not be acknowledged.”

“Stop at the next platform!”

“Acknowledged.”

The RTP slowed, stopping at platform 46.

The door opened. “Please remove your—”

“No! No! take me to level 1230!”

“Please remove your—”

“Stupid computer!” Jessica kicked the console, her high heel punching a dent into the soft arboform.

A lonely light illuminated the platform. Blackness shrouded all else beyond.

Anxiety ratcheted her heart rate. The RTP had stopped damn near the *ground*. Salt Lake continuing to grow upward, ancient buildings layered over myth, past layered over ancient, new layered over past, and future endeavors topped them all three miles at the top. No city lights bled down this far. The only reason a bulb hovered above this platform was because state mandate decreed every platform would be lit. Even at ground zero, though Jessica doubted a human had set foot on the dirt in nine hundred years. Even Understreet degenerates didn't venture below level 100. Ghosts and witchcraft, they said.

“Please remove your belongings,” the RTP reminded in an infinitely patient voice.

Because of the mass amount of traffic in Salt Lake, you owned your wrong directions, so to get the RTP to take you to the right platform, you had to get out and re-key it. Problem though, is once the pressure sensors on the seat relaxed, the door closes and the RTP leaves.

So, the only way to get out of this horrid, lost, cold, abandoned platform was to get out and re-key. Problem: she couldn't see the keypad normally illuminated by a tiny green light.

She doubted maintenance dropped below level 300. Likely a keypad had not even been installed this close to the ground, not with houses and businesses all much higher up where people actually *went*. She'd have to find a staircase and walk up three miles. She had no food or water. The wireless signal didn't reach down this far, so she couldn't even call for help over the WebNet.

She sobbed, fear hurting her bones, the RTP reminding her over and over to remove her belongings. She couldn't even ask her earcuff for help with information on how to survive on the ground. After exploring all her options with ragged twists on her skirt, she came to the horrid conclusion she would *have* to get out if she was going to get back in.

She had to find the keypad. Sloppy maintenance on a level as ancient as the Middle Ages probably put the pad around the corner where she couldn't see the green light. She asked her earcuff one more time for help, but it remained silent. Like the rest of the world immediately around her.

She stepped out. The door closed. The RTP rose upward on the rail.

Too terrified to move, she stood on the platform under the light of a single bulb.

Finally, some reason pushing and scratching to the forefront of her brain told her the sooner she found the keypad, the sooner she could leave. Drawing in a shuddering breath, she

turned and stepped toward the concrete wall. She walked to the edge of the light, searching the darkness.

No green light.

A rattle of metal somewhere beyond made her scream and scuttle directly beneath the light bulb. "Stay back," her shaky voice barely whispered.

More noise. Closer this time.

"Get away from me!"

Steady steps now, thumping along a ramp arching out into the darkness. She couldn't see beyond the light.

Her heart seized as a body stepped out of the darkness.

Death-white skin and black holes for eyes.

She couldn't scream because she couldn't breathe.

A ghost.

This is where she would literally die.

She passed out instead.

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CHASING STARS

A SCI-FI SHORT STORY

By J.M. Robison

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