The Trinity Conspiracy ~ Book Four
Heritage

Rite of Passage

A.C. Townsend

Complimentary Reading Sample:
Prologue
Chapter One
Chapter Two

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Praise and thanksgiving
to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ
for Your priceless gift of salvation
and for Your constant presence
along this incredible journey.

by A.C. Townsend

The Trinity Conspiracy

Journey of The Dead
Trinity Road
The Path Home
Rite of Passage ~ Heritage
The Vale Bridge ~ Legacy

Once Upon A Weekend

Paw Prints in The Manger

Trinity Families

~ Alyssa Lake, age 33, DOB August 21, 1981. Alyssa is the youngest daughter of Ethan Robert Lake, Jr. & Lucy (Davenport) Lake, and the granddaughter of Ray & Belva Davenport and Robert & Joy Lake.

~ Lucia Sarafina Lake, age 16, DOB August 01, 1998. Sara is Alyssa's daughter and Aiden's sister.

~ Aiden Caine Lake, 18 months of age, DOB September 15, 2013. Aiden is Alyssa's son and Sara's brother.

~ Evan Davenport, 27 years of age, DOB October 12, 1987. Evan is the son of Logan & Leslie Davenport. He is Sabryna Davenport's brother and Sara Lake's 4th cousin.

~ Sabryna "Bryn" Davenport, age 25, DOB Aug 09, 1989. Bryn is the daughter of Logan & Leslie Davenport. She is Evan Davenport's younger sister.

Allies & Associates

~ Blake Maslow, age 67, DOB April 07, 1947. Blake is the firstborn son of Robert & Joy Lake. He was adopted by Area L Commander Josten & wife Millicent Maslow. Blake is Robin Lake's twin brother, Alyssa Lake's uncle, and Sara Lake's great-uncle.

~ General Garrett "Rett" Arden, Jr., age 65, DOB January 05, 1950. Rett is the son of Council Agent Garrett & wife Alice Arden. Upon retirement from a successful military career, Rett joined Blake Maslow as a director of the allies' North American sector.

~ Roan Faire, age 65, DOB November 08, 1949. Roan is an allied agent originally assigned by Quinn Stewart to the Scandinavian sector. He is Janet (Maslow) Faire's husband.

~ Janet (Maslow) Faire, age 63, DOB April 04, 1951. Janet was born to Josten & Millicent Maslow, becoming the younger sister of their adopted son, Blake. She is Roan Faire's wife. Together they have five adopted children, including Everleigh (Faire) Hart.

~ Caleb Hart, age 28, DOB July 11, 1986. Caleb is an adjunct to the allies. He is the husband of Roan & Janet Faire's adopted daughter, Everleigh. Caleb and Everleigh have two children.

~ Hailey Nicole Sommer, age 19, DOB May 30, 1995. Hailey is a friend of the Hart family. She babysits Caleb & Everleigh's little girls while working her way through college.

Area 51 Associates

~ Josten Maslow, 1913-1997, deceased at 84 years of age. Maslow was a Council Agent and Former Commander of Area L. He was a Biotechnologist and Genetic Engineer who advanced the fields of Transgenic, Molecular, and Synthetic Biology as Director of BioCatte laboratories in the Council's underground bases throughout the North American sector. Maslow later paired his aerospace engineering degree with his extensive research into alien aircraft to promote the design and development of stealth aircraft for the United States military. Maslow was husband to Millicent and father to adopted son Blake and daughter Janet.

~ Commander Creed Gallow, age 56, DOB December 13, 1958. Gallow was promoted to Commander of Area 51 on January 01, 1998, following former Commander Quinn Stewart's retirement on December 31, 1997.

~ Dr. Edmund Stim, age 62, DOB March 26, 1952. Stim is a neurosurgeon and neuropsychologist specializing in parapsy-chology. He directs the Jericho Project at Maslow Center in Area 51.

~ Kosta "Kase" Kaseko, age 35, DOB March 28, 1979. Kase is the first successful Construct designed, created, and brought to life under the direction of BioCATTE Director Josten Maslow through the Assassin Project by the authority of the Council. He was 18 years of age when Josten Maslow died on October 31, 1997.

~ Marcus, age 28, DOB February 14, 1987. Marcus is a Hybrid designed, created, and brought to life under the direction of BioCATTE Director Josten Maslow.

~ Ryla and Ren, age 16, twin chimeras designed, created, and brought to life under the direction of BioCATTE Director Josten Maslow.

March 2015

We spend our years as a tale that is told.
Teach us to number our days,
that we may apply our hearts to wisdom.
~ Psalm 90:9b, 12

Prologue

Seraphina is Latin for 'Seraphim.' They are radiant winged angels who surround the throne of God. It is also Hebrew for 'burning one.'

My mother spoke my name apologetically, because I am named for a memory, and all my mother's memories were tinged with regret. I will never forget her voice in the night, calling out to her past and to her present hope for our future.

"Oh, Sara …"

She demanded the privilege of giving her daughter a unique name of her own design, through which she bequeathed to me her heritage and her birthright. While I have no identity outside Area 51, my mother once lived forever in the space of sixteen years in a place she described as Heaven. She prayed that her loved ones were still there, safe and happy, in Spring Hollow.

My only connection to those Victims of War, the Trinity Test subjects, is my name. But somewhere I have more. These people are my family. Their history is my history. Their blood fuels my passion, and their determination burns in my heart.

My mother never doubted that this day would come. She described the path home in vivid detail and made me recite it back to her until it became as inherent as my own memory. "Don't forget," she insisted. "Don't ever forget."

"You'll know you're halfway to Heaven when you reach the Dark Vale."

I am the phoenix birthed from my mother's ashes. I have her story to guide me and to leave for others to follow.

I have the faith of her fathers.

And I have the Tear Stone.

~ Lucia Sarafina Lake
March 31, 2015
Reverie, Indiana

1

My life on the base below Groom Lake is a progression of escalating experiments. Taskmasters charged with unraveling the miracles of the human mind examine me as both a code that must be deciphered and as a key that might access a remote fortress, if they could only determine whom and how. There has never been a clearly defined why.

All of the Specs – Specimens, the designation of our purpose and our caste – live in apartments, attend school, receive training in various occupations, and hold jobs. We wear standard uniform polo shirts, khaki pants, and canvas loafers. We take our meals in a cafeteria and wash our clothes in the laundry room of our apartment complex. We watch movies and read books that are approved by the Council. Restrictions forbid unauthorized purchases and non-prescribed foods for specs, though Area 51 staff are free to enjoy restaurants and shop for any clothing they wish to wear on their personal time. Money is nonexistent in Area 51. Currency points are stored in the central database and deducted by scanning a microchip implanted in the back of the individual's right hand.

I say 'we' instead of 'they,' for I will always be a spec. Few of the Council's greatest biological achievements can be undone; most will only be cancelled by cessation of the specimen.

My mother used to say the park reminded her of home. Five grassy acres landscaped with flowering shrubs, dwarf trees, and walking trails flourish under a grid of subtle growing lights that, along with nutrient-infused fluids, encourage plants to grow. A constant temperature of seventy-three degrees Fahrenheit is maintained throughout the city of Quinten on Level Six of the base.

The BioCATTE facilities – Biological Communication, Alteration, Transmission, Technology, & Engineering – comprise Level Five. Specs taken to Level Five don't come back the same. Sometimes they don't come back at all.

Area 51 is a covert police state subject to Commander Creed Gallow, its very present god. The Council is the ruling entity over every deep underground base in the country.

Mom has lived here since she was sixteen, the age I am now. Her cousin Evan was twelve years old when he arrived before my second birthday. Eighteen months ago, Mom gave birth to my brother, Aiden, the result of a frozen embryo transfer. We do not know his origin, but Mom doesn't consider herself a surrogate mother. Whether or not she and Aiden are genetically related, they are bound by the love that grew in her heart as the baby grew in her womb.

I have few friends among the other specs. I hang out most often with twins Ryla and Ren. Their ice-blue skin shimmers with the illusion of scales, and they glide like dancers.

My favorite television characters are the alien races from Star Trek, because that's what it's like being friends with other specs. Though we are a diverse collection, don't assume you can tell a specimen by looking at one. Few are as obvious as Ryla and Ren. Most hybrids, chimeras, constructs, and edits appear just as human as Aiden and me. But on the inside, nature and nurture observe very different rules, if they follow any at all.

We endure the violations of physical and psychological procedures because they are lesser evils than the brutal compliance drills inflicted upon those who resist. We are careful to avoid expressing curiosity about the surface world to which Area 51 staff freely come and go. The message is ingrained from birth and reinforced daily that leaving the vast underground metropolis beneath Lincoln County, Nevada is not, nor will ever be, an option.

Evan is not a spec. He was brought here as a test control subject because he is a blood relative of my mother. But his intelligence, swift comprehension, abilities, and adaptability soon situated him as a protégé of the Council, and his keeper began grooming him to take on responsibilities befitting a future agent.

They failed to recognize the full extent of his creativity and ingenuity. They failed to understand that where the heart dwells, the mind is determined to follow.

I will share my story from the moment I ceased to exist and began to live. I will write my experiences in honor of my great-aunt Sarah Davenport Hensley, treasurer of the Trinity family history, so that, like her, my life and my mother's will not pass unacknowledged and without purpose.

~ Sara Lake

Sara tensed outside the bedroom door. Her mother was going to get them all killed.

"Lord, hold my children in Your hands. Surround them with Your holy presence so intimately that they are helpless but to acknowledge Your love. Sara has experienced betrayal too many times to simply accept what she is told. She will have to encounter You personally before she will believe. I know that she alone can make the decision to receive Your salvation. But I surrender anything You ask of me, Father, anything that will open her heart to an eternal relationship with You."

Alyssa Lake requested wisdom and patience, guidance and courage for her daughter. She prayed God's protection over her son. She asked discernment and knowledge for Evan, and she concluded with gratitude for the provision of countless blessings.

Sara lingered out of sight, disconcerted by the passion in her mother's voice. As Alyssa rose from her knees beside the bed, Sara slipped away to the living room just in time to hear a visitor's knock. She opened the door and turned away from Evan's perpetual grin.

Evan pushed the door closed and locked it. "You're upset."

"A person can't be happy all the time." Sara sat on the sofa and frowned into the screen of her laptop.

"There you are!" Alyssa welcomed Evan with a hug. "I saved you a place at dinner. They served lasagna with salad and breadsticks. I'm sorry you missed it."

"Sit with me," Evan requested.

Alyssa joined him at the round white table situated in an alcove that could have been a breakfast nook, had the apartment been equipped with a kitchen. The Council's sole concession, a small refrigerator, sat under the counter. Alyssa's weekly requisition list kept it filled with bottles of water, packages of fresh vegetables, and containers of salad dressing.

Evan reached for the bowl of fruit on the table. "We have a lot to decide in very little time." He shared the day's revelations as he peeled an orange over a napkin, his voice low and even, excited and sure.

"You're absolutely certain," Alyssa whispered.

Evan's eyes, bright with urgency, met the guarded anticipation in Alyssa's gaze. "No fear allowed. We've planned for such a time as this from the moment we met. We've discussed every possible contingency. We're ready. All we have to do is remember our preparations and trust our training, stay together, and no matter what happens, don't panic." He raised his voice. "Did you hear me, Sara?"

Sara looked up from her laptop. "Remember; trust; don't panic." She lowered her eyes to the screen and continued typing.

"Sara."

Alyssa's voice issued a gentle command, and Sara exhaled irritably as she saved the document and shut down her computer. She took her time packing it into her book bag before crossing the room to join Alyssa and Evan at the table.

Alyssa placed her hand on Sara's arm. "Tell us about your day."

Sara turned away. "I'd rather not."

"You'll feel better for sharing your troubles."

"I don't want to relive it, okay?" Sara reined in her anger. "I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry, too," Alyssa said. "I'm sorry that scientists perform invasive procedures on my daughter without my knowledge or consent, and there's nothing I can do to stop them from hurting you."

"It's not your apology to make, Mom. I know you'd protect me if you could."

Evan slid the bowl of fruit toward Sara. She took a small cluster of grapes and picked them apart as she spoke.

"Marcus pulled me out of my Intro to Biophysics class this morning and drove me to Maslow Center. Dr. Stim had scheduled me for an entire day of lab work and messaged Mr. Deighton to excuse me from school. Nice of him to inform everyone but me." Sara snapped a stem in half. "For most of the day, I sat in a room hooked to machines and stared at a blank wall. Dr. Stim read off a whole list of topics he wanted me to visualize. Today he used new equipment. It felt like bees were dissecting paths through my brain. After the machines had a go at my beta waves, he gave me an injection that was supposed to relax my mind and allow Mystery Man in another room to read my thoughts and to project his thoughts to me."

Sara tossed a grape into her mouth and chewed savagely.

"My mind is my own. No one else has a right to my thoughts. Even the drug couldn't force me to cooperate. Dr. Stim should know that after all these years."

"What happened, Lucy-girl?" Evan asked.

The childhood nickname made Sara smile in spite of herself. She arranged the grapes in a circle and placed the smallest in the center.

"I got angrier than I've ever been. I refused to allow the stranger access to my thoughts, but I mentally screamed out for him to leave me alone. Mystery Man was intended to be a sender, but he received my message instead. Dr. Stim got excited and started talking about breakthroughs. A nurse gave me a stimulant injection to reverse the first drug's effects while Dr. Stim asked me all kinds of questions. As always, I didn't answer them, Dr. Stim got annoyed, and the day ended with a check of my vital signs and a review of my eating and sleeping habits for the past week. I walked out of the Center and found Marcus waiting for me in the parking lot. He insisted on driving me home, even though I told him I needed to be alone and walk for a while."

A menacing noise akin to a growl sounded in Alyssa's throat.

Sara glanced at her mother and blushed as she turned her attention back to the fruit bowl. "Part of me would like to get to know Marcus better. He's drop-dead gorgeous, and all the other females are jealous because he pays so much attention to me. The way he looks at me is exciting, but frightening, too, like a predator studies its prey. He's cruel when he doesn't get his way. He held my hand in the car, and when I tried to pull away, he squeezed so hard I thought my fingers would break. He finally had to let go when he needed both hands to drive."

"Did he bring you straight home?" Evan asked.

"I didn't give him a chance. When we stopped at an intersection, I jumped out of the car and ran into the park. I walked the rest of the way home."

"Sara!" Alyssa clasped her daughter's hand. "You could have been hurt or killed!"

"Better by traffic than by Marcus." Sara rolled one grape into the others and watched them scatter. "So, yeah, it hasn't been a stellar day. I missed a cytology lecture at school. I didn't get to hang out with Ryla this afternoon. All the things Dr. Stim did to me in the lab; Marcus forcing me into his car; and now this."

"This?" Evan asked.

"This talk of escape, which is impossible, and even if we did succeed, what then? Have you really thought about that?"

"From the time you were old enough to understand, Evan and I have told you about our lives before we were abducted," Alyssa said. "You've always been just as determined as we are to get out of here, even sharing suggestions and helping us research possibilities so we would be ready for the chance we knew would come."

"We *hoped*," Sara murmured. "You couldn't know for sure."

"We've also talked about faith, and I know you feel that you have more important subjects to learn about, but yes, Sara, I have known since the night I was brought here that I would not remain imprisoned forever." Alyssa's voice left no room for doubt. "I knew, as surely as the original Trinity Test survivors escaped Area L, that my opportunity would arrive. Evan and I have done our best to stay ready to seize that chance. We've prayed for it and planned for it, and we've prepared you for it as well."

"That's another thing," Sara countered. "It bothers me that you pray out loud. It's dangerous, Mom. You're so careful to keep us as safe as possible. I don't understand why praying is so important to you that you would risk the punishment we'd all be put through if you were

caught doing it. I don't know anybody besides you and Evan who even believes in a higher power, and if they did, they wouldn't admit it."

"It makes sense for you to think that way," Evan said. "You've grown up in a world that only acknowledges body, mind, and emotion."

"What else is there?" Sara demanded. "I understand daydreaming for the purpose of discovery and creativity or for exploring solutions to a problem. But imagining an entity for the purpose of placing trust or asking favors makes no sense to me. I'm sorry, Mom. I wouldn't hurt your feelings for anything in the world. But I love you, and I couldn't live without you, and I'm terrified to think of what Commander Gallow would do if he knew. And, Evan …" Sara shot him a look of reproach and lowered her gaze to the table. "You're too intelligent to believe in anything supernatural."

"You've heard me pray since before you were born," Alyssa said. "Evan and I have taught you Bible lessons from memory since you were an infant. We've tried to instill in you that you are a soul, a spiritual person in a human body, and no less than a daughter of the most high God. When you were little, you believed that."

Sara shrugged. "I grew up."

"You've never seen a Bible. You've no idea what church is. We're denied access to Christian books and songs and television shows, even during holidays. With no acknowledgement whatsoever that God exists outside of this apartment, I shouldn't be surprised that you became agnostic," Alyssa said. "But it does break my heart, and it makes me pray all the harder that God will introduce Himself into your life so clearly that you will know beyond the shadow of any doubt that He is real."

"Well, for all our sakes, I hope He does exist," Sara said. "If we survive defying the Council, we'll end up at the mercy of an equally dangerous society. I've overheard the staff talking about the horrific crimes people commit against each other on the surface. Every day in the cafeteria they discuss the latest news about robbery and violence and killing, and that's even before you add the Council's catastrophic methods of population management." She turned to Evan. "You've taught Mom and me self-defense techniques. Knowing I can defend myself gives me confidence, but knowing I might actually have to fight in order to survive is terrifying. At least here, we're in a controlled environment. We know who our enemies are, and we've learned to deal with what they do to us. Out there, we'll be completely on our own. You and I look normal, but Mom has silver skin and transparent hair. Her eyes are gorgeous, but they're not a human color. There is no way she will be able to blend into the general public. Have the two of you honestly considered the reality of what you are planning to do?"

"Have you thought about living the rest of your life as a spec?" Evan asked gently. "I know you're afraid. I get it. Planning is one thing. Performing is another. Like your theater class; rehearsals are fun because they're safe. If you make a mistake, it doesn't matter, because you're there to learn and improve and figure out potential problems ahead of time so you don't encounter a crisis when you're on stage in the spotlight and have no choice but to make the best of an unexpected, frightening situation."

Sara nodded. "I believe everything you and Mom have told me. With all my heart I do. And I can't accept that a spec is all I will ever be. But I've never been anywhere but here. I'm intimidated by Dr. Stim. I have nightmares about what Marcus might do to me. But I'm scared of

being on our own in a strange place, too. At least they take care of us here. We have food and clothes and friends and an apartment to call home. Who will take care of us out there? We won't be able to trust anyone. How will we find food and a place to live when we aren't even supposed to exist? If our only choices are hatred on the surface, or abuse underground, how do we know we aren't simply trading one evil for another?"

"Don't give in to the impression that the whole world is dangerous and mean," Evan said. "When we escape, you'll discover that most people are kind-hearted, and you'll experience beauty beyond what you are able to imagine down here."

"The answers you need will be easier to show than to tell," Alyssa agreed. "You and I are descended from generations of survivors who answered your questions every day of their lives. We'll find them. And when we do, you'll understand the reason I've kept them alive in my memory and brought them to life in your heart for all these years."

Sara swallowed down her reservations and nodded. "I was starting my homework, so I'm late to the conversation. But I heard Evan say that Opportunity isn't just knocking; she's throwing open a door."

"That's right," Evan said. "The Council has decided to move Alyssa and Aiden to the deep underground base below Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Ohio. It took a lot of effort to convince the committee that you should be moved as well to stay with your mother. It was far easier to obtain approval for me to go along for the ride. I asked for clearance to visit another underground base, and they agreed that it would be a good way to expand my horizons."

"Why," Sara demanded, "was it hard to convince them to let me go with Mom and Aiden? Surely they don't expect me to stay here without my family!"

"Alyssa and Aiden are to be introduced into a new experimental program to discover if her DNA can be integrated into his. The goal is to alter an unrelated child so that his genetic makeup will appear to be biologically related to his surrogate mother." Evan's hands curled into fists on the table. "Efforts with embryos and infants have failed. Scientists are eager to learn if the potential for success will prove greater if they use an older child."

"Dear God," Alyssa whispered.

"Dr. Stim wants you to stay here," Evan said to Sara. "And so does Marcus. They intend to continue using you in hopes of fulfilling Stim's ambitions for the Jericho Project."

"Thought transfer, genetic connect-the-dots, self-perceived gods playing with live toys until they get bored and decide to break them in two," Sara retorted. "If the devil were real and designed hobbies for his human offspring, he would appoint his demented little darlings to the Council."

Evan winced. "You have extraordinary perception for a non-believer."

"Marcus is twelve years older than Sara," Alyssa snapped. "He has no business wanting anything to do with her."

"Working for Dr. Stim has allowed Marcus access to Sara nearly every day," Evan said. "That's not a coincidence."

"Whatever it is, I don't like it, and I don't like him," Sara said. "So if getting out of here means getting away from Marcus permanently, count me in."

Evan grinned. "That's my girl. I'll stop by tomorrow afternoon right after you get out of school. We have a lot of work to do."

§ § § § § § §

"Denver, St. Louis, Indianapolis." Evan unrolled three maps and laid them flat on Alyssa's table. He placed a thick manila envelope on top and handed a notebook to Sara.

"I've plotted a detailed escape plan from each underground railroad station using ventilation shafts and auxiliary tunnels that ascend to the surface. These outlets appear to the public as culverts, storm sewers, and manholes.

"The principal arteries of the Council's Black Line freight and passenger trains run parallel in a nationwide east-west tunnel system. Secondary lines branch off to serve bases and affiliates to the north and south. Sidings and spurs further expand their range.

"Each Black Line station has two terminals: one for products, one for persons. The Council runs manifest trains, which means the cars carry a variety of products. Freight trains stop at Ward One, where the contents are offloaded into warehouses. Tractor trailers exit the underground interstate highway and back up to docks on the opposite sides of those warehouses to pick up orders and transport them to various destinations."

"What destinations?" Sara wondered.

"Medical and pharmaceutical corporations, laboratories, educational institutions, department superstores, and other sites managed by the Council," Evan said. "Passenger trains stop at Ward Two. Each terminal has a shopping mall along with motels and restaurants. Staff from any of the bases can drive to the terminals in their personal vehicles.

"Maintaining the speed and efficiency of interstate commerce is priority on one side; ensuring passengers reach their destinations on time takes precedence on the other. Passenger terminals are massive, crowded, and extremely busy. When we escape, regardless of which stop presents the opportunity, it is imperative that we stay together.

"I will ride in a secure room of our private car with two agents and two transport officers," Evan continued. "The Council is sending me for the sake of education and information. None of our keepers knows we are family. They know how frequently we visit, but not how dedicated we are to looking out for each other. It would not have been wise to suggest that my relationship with you has anything to do with my interest in visiting Wright-Patterson."

Evan dropped into a chair and took a laser pointer from his pocket. He directed the red dot of light around Denver on the top map. "I am going to go over every potential escape route from all three terminals. From there, I'm going to point out major city streets, crucial locations, popular landmarks, and current events. Sara, grab your pen and take notes. No, not your laptop. It's not going with you. We can't use any electronic devices that might be trackable. You are going to write down and study the information I'm about to give you, and you're going to memorize it down to the last detail. I'll destroy your handwritten notes before we leave."

"You're making me nervous," Sara said. "How long do I have to learn all of this stuff?"

"About twelve hours," Evan said.

"Twelve hours!" Sara threw down her pen.

"Twelve hours. Marcus was sent to tell you, but I intervened and got him reassigned so I could deliver the message myself. He's not too happy with me right now." Evan grinned.

"What message?" Alyssa demanded.

"You are ordered to pack all your personal effects tonight. You and your children leave Area 51 at seven o'clock tomorrow morning for the Black Line Lincoln Terminal. At nine a.m., the three of you will board the Implicit for the journey to your new home."

2

I had never been anyone but me.

That's not entirely true. In my imagination, I had often been better versions of myself, smarter and stronger, a fearless and daring Sara completely in charge of my own life, though I had no reference points from which to truly comprehend what the rewards and ramifications of such freedom might be.

Evan was only fourteen and had resided in a neighboring apartment complex for two years since his arrival. One night the distraught teenager knocked on Mom's door, desperate to know why he had glimpsed his own last name in a computer file containing the medical history of Alyssa Lake.

They talked for hours. They traced their connection to Mom's grandfather, Ray Davenport, and Evan's great-grandfather, Logan Davenport, who were first cousins. Evan described the day of his abduction; Mom, omitting certain details, described the evening of hers. They discussed physical experiments, surgeries, injections, emotional manipulation, and psychological reinforcement. They talked about their families.

They vowed that they would find a way to escape.

Evan visited Mom at least three evenings a week from the time his keeper deemed him conditioned enough to be trusted to choose his own friends without compromising his allegiance to the Council.

One Wednesday night thirteen years after that initial conversation, we played Charades, which was especially fun because several of our friends came over. When the party broke up and everyone had gone but Evan, he asked Mom and me what names we would choose for ourselves if we could have any we wanted. In keeping with the evening's games of pretend, we both thought up names that we agreed were beautiful and individual and distinctive.

Exactly one week later, Evan sat at our table with maps and escape plans designed to surmount as many obstacles as he could anticipate from the three terminals at which our train would stop en route to our final destination.

Every spec is implanted with a zettachip below the hairline behind the right ear. The z-chip constantly monitors and records the host's bodily functions and activities. It archives audiovisual files of every physical and psychological experiment in which the individual is used and stores every medical record from the moment of the spec's inception. The z-chips wirelessly transmit our data to the central database, allowing the Council to identify and locate us, track our movements, and scan for retrieval of our files.

Evan excised the chips from me, Mom, and himself, and used flesh-colored putty to mold them invisibly to the surface of our skin, where they could be scanned upon our departure, and from where we

could easily remove them as we fled. Aiden was too little to understand what was taking place, and we couldn't risk him crying and alerting our captors to what we had done, so Evan instructed Mom and me to remove Aiden's chip moments before our exit from the train.

Symbols tattooed on our left wrists identify us as test subjects. Technicians do not call specimens by name. Humanizing a spec runs the risk of emotional involvement, which could compromise the accuracy of a test at the very least; at worst, a moment of mercy could jeopardize an entire program. Aiden is too young to have received a tattoo. Evan purchased lovely cuff bracelets for Mom and me from the mall to cover those symbols. The forbidden jewelry, more than anything else, filled me with overwhelming anticipation of our impending freedom.

Evan then presented us with a thick manila envelope. He used his skills and security clearance privileges to access WITSEC, the government's Witness Security Program, where he created two comprehensive new identities for each of us. He printed birth certificates, social security cards, driver's licenses, academic and work histories, former addresses, credit and medical reports, family trees, every document and detail common to an ordinary person, and he placed these individuals in the national database, where we instantly existed from the moment of our fictitious births. Evan then erased all evidence of his trespass.

Thus Mom and I were given names of our own choosing, along with a charade to bring each one into reality.

~ Sara Lake

Alyssa placed a stack of folded polo shirts atop three pairs of khaki pants in the wheeled suitcase. She slipped undergarments into one mesh pocket, a belt into another, and arranged her few hygiene products in a zippered case to place in the bottom of her shoulder bag.

Her fingertips caressed the Tear Stone suspended from a cord around her neck. She had been in Area 51 less than two weeks when a stranger brought it to her. She remembered black hair and a deep voice and the smoky cobalt eyes of a Trinity survivor on a well-built man old enough to be her father.

"I have something for you," he said. "It belonged to your aunt. She would have wanted you to have it."

He took Alyssa's hand in his, pressed the little velvet box against her palm, and closed her fingers around it. He looked into her eyes for the briefest moment as though searching for something he despaired of finding, but somehow, did. Alyssa felt their connection. He released her hand and walked out the door, and she clutched her hand to her chest for the longest time to keep the warmth of his touch from fading.

She opened the box and saw the Tear Stone her Aunt Sarah had cherished, and she wept so hard that a nurse brought a sedative to make her sleep through the night. She expected the gift to be gone when she awoke, but it waited in its box beside her pillow the next morning. She lifted it by the silver clasp, examined the slender woven cord, and wondered why the pendant no longer hung from the leather string Aunt Sarah had laced through it. Alyssa held the Tear Stone up and, for the first time, truly studied the unique rock her family had treasured. It was shaped

like a teardrop and not much larger, full and round at the bottom as though just ready to fall. Embedded crystals glimmered and sparkled, a kaleidoscope of prisms dancing in the lamplight.

Alyssa fastened it around her neck and wore it ever after.

The dark-haired man did not visit again. Guardians ignored Alyssa's questions when she demanded to know his name. She didn't ask how he knew her, how he acquired Aunt Sarah's Tear Stone, or what had happened to Aunt Sarah and the rest of her family, for fear that this sole precious link to her past would be taken away.

Council agents had questions of their own. Where, amidst the two million acres that comprised the Daniel Boone National Forest, were the Trinity survivors hiding out; how many remained alive; how many descendants like Alyssa had been born to the original Victims of War; how many were diseased or demented; were they weak, were they strong, were they friendly, would they fight?

Confused by the contradiction between the stranger who brought her the Tear Stone and the ignorance, real or feigned, of the investigators, Alyssa refused to answer, knowing she would be punished for her silence and surprised when she wasn't. The man who led the interrogation visited her daily, then weekly, then rarely. He accused her as a criminal. He cajoled her like a parent. He approached as a menace and then became a solicitous friend who cared deeply for her welfare and talked to her as though they shared a close confidence. Regardless of how he presented himself on any given day, Alyssa willed herself mute and focused on the triumph of withholding her voice from the enemy. Her beloved family would suffer no further betrayal at her hands.

Within weeks of her arrival, a solitary blessing monopolized her attention as she hoped for, longed for, entreated Heaven for the unexpected miracle growing within her womb. Her baby became her reason to survive, and she constantly lifted up her request that God would bring them both safely through the labor of delivery. Alyssa knew well her family's history. Belva Davenport died giving birth to Lucy. Lucy died giving birth to Alyssa. Alyssa prayed that both she and her baby would live. She prayed that the Council would somehow be persuaded to honor her right to cherish and raise her child and treasure her privilege of motherhood.

After her first year as a captive, the investigator's visits dwindled to quarterly interviews. His attempts at conversation remained laced with efforts to elicit a reaction that might confirm or contest the current direction of his search for descendants of the Trinity Test subjects. Alyssa faced him without expression, inwardly rejoicing at the knowledge that her family had thus far eluded capture. Her only perplexity with the General Arden to whom others responded with near-holy deference was the underlying certainty that, for all the variations of harassment through which he attempted to gain her confidence, he really wasn't trying all that hard to force answers from her. Alyssa filed this anomaly away amidst her other observations about Area 51 and refused to allow curiosity to compromise her resolve.

With the exception of General Arden, Alyssa's guardians did not look her in the face or speak with her except to issue orders that she learned to promptly obey. She endured horrific physical experimentation until her baby girl was born. Her prayers were answered when Commander Gallow allowed Alyssa to name her daughter and to raise Sara in her own apartment, separating them only for medical procedures. As years passed, Alyssa noticed that she and Sara were not subjected to the most extreme levels of life-altering – and sometimes, life-

ending – research studies for which other specs were used. The Council also provided her a small allowance of currency points each month to spend at her pleasure, a benefit unheard of among specs.

She never discovered why the Tear Stone had not been taken away from her or why her wardens allowed her to wear the pendant, but her gratitude for the family heirloom ran deep. She possessed only one other keepsake from her youth.

Alyssa reached across her bed and lifted Pandora from the pillow. Plush black fur, green eyes, a plastic pink heart-shaped nose, and embroidered paws made the stuffed kitten so adorable that Alyssa automatically wanted to cuddle it and protect it from harm. She felt that way when she saw it for the first time in a country crafts store on Halloween night seventeen years ago. That was the night she met Jared; the night her daughter was conceived; the night she was abducted by Council agents and detained in a vehicle that transported her and Jared here to the underground base at Area 51.

Upon their arrival, Jared had been sedated and carried away by two suits. That was the last time Alyssa saw him. But she recognized him every day in Sara. She remembered him every night with Pandora.

Alyssa placed the kitten gently in her shoulder bag, where it wouldn't be damaged during the upcoming trip. Pandora would ride atop the hidden pocket that concealed Alyssa's prayer journal and the new identification packets Evan had created for her and Aiden.

Alyssa zipped the luggage closed. She extended the handle, looped the strap of her shoulder bag around it, and rolled the suitcase out of her bedroom into the hall.

"Are you ready?" she called to Sara.

"I am!" Sara answered from the living room. She greeted her mother with a smile and an exuberant hug.

Alyssa laughed with surprise at her enthusiasm.

"I've memorized everything." Sara drew a deep breath. "I'm ready. And I'm excited. I wish we could know in advance from which terminal we'll try to escape. Not knowing should leave me in a panic, but I'm not even scared anymore, because I'll be with you and Evan, and together we can't help but succeed."

"Do you also remember the directions I gave you, the details that will lead you all the way home?"

"I remember." Sara smiled. "You've taught me so well, I believe I could lead us every step of the way without even one hint, once we get to Faust."

"I'm proud of you." Alyssa reached out to touch her daughter's hair. "You are smart and strong and capable of handling whatever life throws at you. You are so much more sensible that I was at your age. I love you with all my heart. Don't ever forget that."

"I love you, Mom."

"Got your wallet with both your new IDs?"

Sara patted the purse balanced atop her luggage. "Right here. Aiden's bag is next to the door. I woke him and dressed him, but he fell right back to sleep."

"I'll go sit on the bed with him," Alyssa said. "He should at least have a cup of milk before we leave. We can all eat later. Evan said our private car will be stocked with food."

"I have a couple of oranges in my purse, just in case." Sara returned to her bedroom for one last look around to make sure she wasn't leaving anything behind that she would miss.

Alyssa took a carton of almond milk from the refrigerator and a small capsule from her sweater pocket. She poured half a sippy cup of milk, opened the capsule, and sprinkled its powder into the cup. Returning the two halves to her pocket, she stirred the powder into the milk until it dissolved.

Evan had insisted, and despite Alyssa's misgivings, she couldn't argue with his logic. A sedative potent enough to ensure that Aiden would sleep through their escape efforts, yet so mild that he could be awakened occasionally until the effects wore off six hours after he ingested the drug, was necessary to their very survival.

She had four capsules in her wallet, enough to last through the entire journey, should their plans take longer to execute than anticipated. Sara was also aware of the pills and how to use them, though she also despised the necessity of sedating her baby brother.

Alyssa woke her son and snuggled him close in her arms while he drank the milk. He fell asleep as he finished, not because of the sedative, but because he wasn't accustomed to being awake so early in the morning.

The door buzzer startled Alyssa, but Aiden responded only with a deep sigh as he nestled against his mother.

Sara admitted two security guards who checked her family's luggage, scanned their zettachips, and escorted them to the SUV that would transport them to the terminal.

Sara reached across the back seat for her mother's hand. As the vehicle pulled away from the curb, she and Alyssa looked out the rear window for one last glimpse of the life they were leaving behind.

Continue Sara's story in
Rite of Passage ~ Book Four of The Trinity Conspiracy

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