

TRIVIUM

BY

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*For my favorites: Tj, Trinity, Aidan, and my
mother, Jan.*

My life is a beautiful story. Thank you for helping me write it.

CHAPTER ONE

I dreamt of a time when there were no predetermined choices; an ancient society that focused on living a life of freedom. A man was there, with his eyes darting often from his book to my face, stealing quick glances from above the pages. We were lying in a hammock—feeling the breeze gently sway us back and forth as we faced each other side by side—reading. *Pride and Prejudice* for me. A Bradbury short story about a butterfly for him. His face was mostly hidden behind the paperback, and all I could see was his dark hair ruffling slightly in the breeze as it made its way across his forehead and into his eyes. He pushed it away—tucking it behind his ear, although it wasn't long enough to stay there. In the dream, I knew he was mine. Somewhere in the depths of my being, I knew he was supposed to be there. I inhaled deeply and breathed in the smells of fresh cut grass. Birds were chirping, hidden in the surrounding trees and bushes. Somewhere in the distance was the sound of waves crashing on the shore. The silence between us was comfortable and pure. Words unspoken filled the air with a thick essence of longing. I snuck glances of this familiar stranger, searching for any information as to who he really is. I looked for anything that would lead me to his identity, and to answer the

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question as to why he haunts my dreams so often. Just as he decided to put his book down and lean toward me, the hammock turned over suddenly and dropped us into a tangle of limbs. I heard myself laughing and yelling his name, but it was muffled like an underwater echo . . . and then I woke up.

The dreams are happening more often, and I'm not any closer to discovering who this mystery man is. Perhaps he's just an amalgam of every literary hero I've ever read about. My own Mr. Darcy. You can do that in your dreams, right? Make someone up? Surely you can't dream up a person you've never met. That's a pretty outlandish idea—even for the world I live in. I'm left with that thought as I roll over and realize the clock says 7:00 a.m., and I'm already running late for school. Normally I would be panicking—as the importance of punctuality has been drilled into my brain by my parents, but this week is the last week of school and the countdown till my visit to the Trivium. I slide my hand over the back of my neck and feel for the small, raised square nestled under the skin that we call the “D.B.”—the microchip that computes our futures and tells us how our lives will end. The current world is very different from the liberated one of my dreams. Here, we have a choice of predetermined futures. There is no mystery to life and what the future entails. The past holds an air of romance in its innocence and unawareness. I read the history books feverishly trying to understand how they could handle each day not knowing how it would end. The outline of the microchip is faint, and I forget it's there most of the time. It tracks our response to every decision we've ever made, and stores that data until we go to the Trivium at eighteen years old and make our official choice.

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Until now, I've never wondered if it's able to read our thoughts and dreams. Does it know the man whose name flows inaudibly from my lips?

A blaring car horn belting out a Morse code SOS startles me back to reality. I grab my messenger bag that's weighed down with school books and test notes, pull my long blonde hair into a ponytail, and make haste down the stairs and out the door.

"Are you feeling okay? You're never late. Stay up all night studying? Worried about your birthday? Boyfriend problems?"

My best friend Verity is always chipper first thing in the morning. I'm used to her rapid-fire questioning. "Overslept. I'm fine." I sling my bag into the back seat as she takes off fast enough to squeal tires. She starts telling me about some conversation she had with her new boyfriend, Jason, and there are bits and pieces of a new movie thrown in with something about a double date. My mind is wandering back into dream territory—pondering my future and the tough choice that lies ahead—before I realize I inadvertently agreed to see a new action movie tonight with her and Jason. I should tell Gunner what I signed us up for. It wouldn't be the first time Verity conned Gunner and me into a double date with a new boyfriend, but I can already picture Gunner rolling his eyes when I tell him.

School and study for finals occupy my mind for the rest of the day, and I hurry out of my last class at the sound of the bell and head straight toward Gunner's car. His last hour is spent at baseball practice, and the team's final game is only a few days away. He saunters toward me, gear slung across his back and sporting a wry smile when he catches my eye.

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“I take it you already heard about tonight?” I force a fake smile and give an *I’m sorry* shrug.

“Yep. Verity caught me this morning after first hour. Who’s the new flame?” His blond hair resembles a dull shade of gold, and his bright blue eyes reflect a mischievous sparkle. Standing there—towering above me—he resembles a modern Prometheus. Incredibly charming while simultaneously disarming. He’s the kind of guy you want to be friends with because he’s enigmatic, but also one you fear. There’s always an undercurrent of thought beneath those blue eyes, like he’s quietly plotting world domination. For me, he’s an oversized teddy bear, and my longtime boyfriend. I have always been on his good side.

“Jason something-or-other. I don’t know, I wasn’t listening to her this morning. That’s how I ended up agreeing to a movie. You know, the nod-your-head-say-yeah when there’s a pause in the conversation and you weren’t listening kind of thing. I’m sorry Gunner. I don’t even know what movie it is.”

“No worries. Just means I’m spending tonight with you. That’s worth the price of admission.”

I can’t help but beam at him while looking away, turning a slight shade of pink. He knows I hate cheesy lines like that, but it’s bewitching coming from him. I have a pretty amazing best friend, the perfect boyfriend, and a bright medical career in front of me—assuming I pass my tests. Seems like every choice I’ve made so far has been the best one. My D.B. chip must have it easy. This is the life I’ve been planning for myself. How could two other options compare? I’ve been very strategic in my choices, so why does the thought of the Trivium put my stomach in knots?

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We ride with Verity and Jason that evening to the local theater on our side of suburbia. It's not a small town as far as size and population, but it's as small as you can get when it comes to mentality. There aren't many dreams of grandeur. No breaking the status quo. It doesn't matter how many people are in this city, it never fails that you'll run into someone you know or who knows your parents. A small part of me would appreciate living with a slice of anonymity occasionally, but the other part feels tethered to this place. Not that it matters as I have no plans of leaving. I'm a planner. I could chart every decision I've ever made to get where I am today. I'll go to the local university after graduation. After that is medical school. I'll fit in nicely at my dad's practice. I'll marry Gunner. We'll live in the historical district downtown in an early 1900s bungalow reminiscent of Frank Lloyd Wright's early work. It may seem presumptuous to create such a detailed list in a time where we can see the future, but I'm confident that this is what the Trivium will show me. Verity isn't so sure of what she wants from life—which is why I think she flits around with different boyfriends and invests in a new hobby every week. Either she's trying to test the efficacy of the D.B. chip in her neck, or honestly doesn't know what she wants so she tries everything and dates everyone.

I do my best to follow the story line, but I can only handle so many explosions and cliché one-liners before my mind drifts off and I'm back to floating in a world of my own making. I can't help but contemplate what lies ahead of me in just a week's time. There is still so much I don't know about the Trivium. I don't fully understand how the D.B. chip works. No one talks about it, other

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than the basic idea of what we learn in school. I guess since you already chose your perfect life, why dwell on the past? But why just three choices? Are we not able to change our course once we choose? Has anyone tried changing their fate? Even though I think I'm comfortable with what lies ahead for me, I do worry a little for Verity. She is always trying new things and never really nailing down any specific passions. After everything she's been through, I want so much for her to have the happy ending that her mother never had. I get so caught up in my musings that I don't realize the end credits start playing.

As we leave the smells of buttered popcorn and the pinging sounds of the digital arcade games, a brief flash of brown hair gets caught in my peripheral vision. As I scan the crowd for the source, I catch a brief glimpse of the boy sporting the tousled brown hair, but not enough to figure out his identity or see his profile. The thought creeps in that it's him—my dream guy—but I wave that thought away quickly as it's not plausible that he even exists.

"What did you think of the movie?" Gunner's looking at me with a crooked smile. I have a feeling he knows I wasn't paying attention. One of his favorite pastimes is quizzing me on things he knows I don't know. My answers are almost always snarky. I don't like being made to feel unintelligent, especially from him, but I usually brush it aside.

"Fine. Good. Lots of explosions, car chases, and guns. Action. Quippy phrases. Everything I look for in a quality film." The sarcasm wasn't lost on him. He laughs, but Verity is giving me the death stare look she has that tells me she isn't amused. I always thought she picked these movies to impress her dates. Now I'm

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curious if she's quite the fan. With all her passions, it's easy to miss *action films* being one of them. The three of them become instant movie critics on the ride back to my house, and I listen half-heartedly—mostly so I know what the movie was about. Turns out, my commentary wasn't far off. I know as soon as she gets home she'll be calling me to discuss my thoughts on Jason. And like clockwork, thirty minutes later my cell rings.

“Hey, so what do you think about Jason? He's great, right?” She blurts this out before I've even finished saying hello. She may try to live a life of unpredictability in what she does, but she's completely predictable in her behavior.

“He seems like a really nice guy. He doesn't go to our school, does he? I don't remember seeing him around before.”

“Oh no, he goes to that private school on the north side. The one for arts. He's a very gifted poet and painter. Granted, I don't know my Shakespeare from my—I don't know—Eliot? But I've read some of his work and I love it. I think you should read it sometime. You're into that stuff. You'd be a better critic.”

“So, he's sharing his poetry with you? Is that a clever ruse to get you to date him, or is this a serious thing? Because you need to prepare me for potentially serious relationships so I can grill him interview-style next time I see him.”

“Cassia, you kill me. Am I ever serious with anyone? He's fun. He's talented. But I'm not betting my future with him or anyone right now. I just want to have fun while I can. Only a few weeks left for me, I'd hate to fall in love and then get my heart broken if he wasn't my future . . .” Her voice falters, and then she's silent. There's an air of sadness that has crept in, and I'm finally piecing

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her together like the puzzle I know she is. My fiery, red-headed beautiful friend that has always lived her life with abandon, carefree and lighthearted, has just admitted her biggest fear. I can't remember ever having a moment of vulnerability with her. I've known her since we started school at age six, but all throughout our lives, she's never been truly open with her feelings. Uncomfortable with this revelation, I try to ease her worries.

"Verity, you're going to end up with a perfect life fit for you. You know that, right? You'll be living the life you've always wanted, where you want to live. I don't think the Trivium has ever been wrong."

"What if I don't know what life I want? I know you have your life all planned out and that I've never really mentioned what I think my future will be or should be, but I'm really worrying, Cassia. What happens when you can't decide? What if there's not a future I see myself in? Then what? I'm at a loss right now and it's all I think about. Sorry to throw this on you suddenly, but I guess I'm at that point where reality hit me. I can't continue to live carelessly anymore. At some point, I've gotta grow up and think about my future and be serious, and I just don't think I can handle it."

Her voice grows quiet again. I'm so caught off-guard by her sudden serious demeanor that I struggle for the right words to say. I have planned my life out just like she thinks, but she still doesn't know that I'm beginning to have doubts myself. I want to be supportive and say all the right words to comfort her, but it wouldn't be sincere. For the first time in my life, I have no words.

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“Cas, are you okay? Is this too much?” Her eyes are clearly holding back tears; I hear it in her voice.

“No, no not at all. I’m just—” I’m grasping for the right words to say so that I don’t reveal my own fears, especially since I’m still struggling with what the root of that fear is. “I don’t know many people that aren’t happy. Or at least they all *seem* happy. Have you ever heard someone say they made the wrong choice?”

“Well, no. I don’t think so. I’ve never asked before though. I mean, my dad—” She breaks off into silence abruptly. Verity’s mother was in a car accident several years ago and was on life support for several months before they lost her. I know what she’s thinking. Did her dad know it would happen? Did he see that far into his future and still choose it? Or was it her mom that chose? I can’t imagine Verity asking her dad much about her mom and their past. He hadn’t been the same man since, and no one faulted him—least of all his children. The worst of it was that he checked out on being a father—so much so that Verity ended up raising her brother, Jordan. Sure, her dad has always faked a cheerful demeanor and recognized his kids’ accomplishments. He’s been to every sporting event and award ceremony. On the outside, it seems like he’s a great father, but you can peel back the façade and see how much pain he’s still in. He’s emotionally checked out. I have never experienced that kind of loss. Is it deep love that would make a person choose a fate where they die young? It’s something I’ve never put much thought into, but now I can’t help but wonder. Did those in the past worry every day if it would be their last? “Ver, I just have to believe that everything works out in the end. Call it choice, call it fate, call it destiny or whatever you want, but if all

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options have us still being best friends when we're older, it can't all be bad, right? As long as you're in my life I know that everything will be fine." She does a half-laugh-half-sigh and I know it means she's rolling her eyes and shrugging her shoulders. When you're this close to someone for so long, you pick up the slightest details—even over the phone. Maybe it's your best friend that is your soul mate sometimes. When everything else falls apart, it's your friends that put you back together. We end on a better note, and as I close my eyes, I wonder if I'll see him again. Verity may be the person I share my secrets with, but a part of me is still too scared to share something that isn't real.