

TISAL (Tactical Intelligence and Surveillance Analysis Laboratory)

By Lordan Brichetto

I thought I'd look different on my 18th birthday, but no, I looked just the same as yesterday. I liked what I saw though. My hair was very blond and naturally curly. Everyone commented on how lucky I was to have 'real' blond hair. I'd never given my hair much thought, but maybe they were right. To me, it was nothing special. Most people told me I was pretty, which may or may not be true. I wasn't one to fuss about my appearance, just the opposite! Give me a ball cap and an oversized shirt, and I was happy.

I knew I wasn't beautiful and maybe not even pretty, but I liked my face, especially the stark contrast between my light hair and dark eyebrows. I thought that made my face interesting. Yes! Interesting was far better than pretty.

"Oh Mama, do I look anything like you at all; or do I look like my dad?"

I'll probably never know, I thought, as I turned away from the mirror. That realization always took me to a dark place.

"Snap out of it, silly! Turn that frown upside down Kaitlyn Marie; it's your birthday!"

As usual, my pep talk didn't work. My mind kept drifting back to the unanswered questions that were stuck in my head, what happened? Why did you give me up?

Kaitlyn Marie was my name, but I didn't know my last name. That fact especially bothered me! A name spiritually connects us to our heritage, to 'our' people. Instead, I was assigned the last name of Carver when I was left at the Foundling home as an infant. Carver wasn't a horrible choice because it was the last name of the home's housemother. Mrs. C was the only mom I'd known. Several other residents shared her last name because no one knew who they really were. At least I knew my first and middle name, unlike some of the other kids. The name, Kaitlyn Marie, was my only personal connection with my birth parents. It was something tangible that they gave to me. Yes, names are very important.

But who was I kidding? The ever-present sense of the unknown and missing someone I'd never met was an ache that was always with me, like breathing, or the color of my hair, which I secretly hoped was the same as the woman I called, 'Mama.'

For most people, 18 is a birthday that marks independence and adulthood, or hopefully getting somewhere close to one of those goals. For me, 18 marked the day when I aged out of the foundling home that I'd lived in since I was one year old. This place was the only home I'd ever known.

“Okay kiddo, let’s do this; Yes, I can do this!” I kept repeating those words to myself as I climbed down the narrow rope ladder that connected my room to the rest of the home. Heading to the kitchen, I found Mrs. C and some of my friends waiting to wish me a Happy Birthday.

As I looked around the table, I saw my family. I felt their love on that special day. Yes, it was a happy day, but also there was sadness, as we were aware that our time of living together was coming to an end. Soon, most of us would have to find another home, as several within our friend group had turned 18 recently, or soon would be. It was time to grow up, ready or not!

“Cheer up, everyone!” I said as I tried to distract myself from thinking about my upcoming move. I reminded my friends that my birthday wasn’t the only reason to celebrate, because it was also the day that our village celebrated Tracking Day. What made this year’s event even more exciting was the fact that all of us who were over the age of 18 were finally going to have a chance to enter a competition that awarded a vacation to the winners. Every one of us was born in TISAL and we were never allowed to venture outside of its borders. Each of us wanted to win the trip. Especially because none of us had ever visited the mysterious world located somewhere above TISAL. The competition started in a few short hours. Would any of us be one of the lucky winners?

We were just finishing breakfast when Mrs. C said, “Kaitlyn before everyone leaves for the Tracking Day, we have something very special to give you for your birthday.”

Her eyes filled with tears as she handed me a plain brown envelope that was secured with a red wax seal.

“When you arrived at our home, this envelope was pinned to your blanket with a note instructing us to give it to you on your 18th birthday; I hope this isn’t too much of a shock, but we felt it was important to keep this safe for you until today.”

Inside my head, I was thinking very unkind thoughts but managed to say, “Thank you, Mrs. C!” as she handed me the envelope. I tried to sound calm when I asked her, “Do you know who it’s from?”

She shrugged and said, “I don’t have a clue; Go on then, open it! I’ve waited 18 years for this!”

Looking down, I carefully rubbed my fingers across the faded brown envelope while turning it over, all the while looking for any clue as to who had left this for me. It wasn’t heavy, but I thought I could hear something jingling when I shifted the envelope. The moment was surreal and deeply personal.

Too personal! I took a few steps back and said to no one in particular, “I need to be alone; I want to open this privately.”

Looking up to see Ms. C and my friends staring at me, I turned and started to leave the kitchen when I heard one of my friends ask, "Are you still going with us to the Tracking Day venue?"

"Sure, but don't wait on me; I'm not sure how long I'll be."

Looking back, I'd do anything to know then, what I was about to learn. I could have stopped my friends from leaving.

I knew just where to go. Ever since I was a little girl, my favorite hiding place was under a huge Poinciana Tree near our home. Every summer the bright red flowers blanketed the branches causing them to bow down to the ground under the weight of the blooms. This summer was no different.

As I ducked under the branches, I was greeted with a loud squawk. Jinx was always happy to see me, mostly because I always brought him food from the kitchen. Looking around for him, I spotted him on his usual perch. I rescued Jinx when he was a chick after he'd fallen from his nest and been abandoned by his mother. He was a pitiful sight with a badly broken wing, and very few feathers; so, it took a while for me to figure out that he was a crow. Thankfully, the struggle to keep him alive had been rewarded. Even though Jinx never fully recovered from his broken wing, not much slowed him down. Although he couldn't fly, he was able to move about and had learned to get up to the lower branches of the Poinciana Tree. We've become very close friends over the past 2 years.

Jinx kept squawking at me, tilting his head expectantly. He could be very pushy!

"I'm sorry buddy, I don't have a treat for you today; please don't look at me like that!"

Jinx always seemed to understand what I was saying to him. He was a mystical creature. Sometimes I thought he was reading my mind. The intelligence in his eyes was unsettling; I felt like he had a spiritual connection with me. Something about Jinx was otherworldly.

Jinx was faithful, always underfoot, and sensitive to my feelings. Despite his limited mobility, he tried to follow me everywhere; just like a dog would. He was brave and stubborn, and very mischievous when he was set on getting something he wanted. As soon as he thought I wasn't paying attention, I'd catch him going through my pockets looking for a treat, or something that caught his eye. He was a little thief and a hoarder, which was evidenced by a stockpile of goods he'd hidden around and in 'his' tree.

Jinx knew when to push my buttons, but he also sensed when I wanted to be with him but still be alone. Jumping down from his perch, Jinx hopped over to me and sat down close to

my leg. He just stared up at me, waiting quietly. It felt right being with Jinx as I reached for the envelope.

“Okay, my old friend; it’s time.” Jinx tilted his head as if to agree.

“Breath Kaitlyn,” I said to myself, as I began to hope that maybe, just maybe, my mother or father had left the mysterious ‘gift’ for me, and just maybe, I was about to finally learn who they were, and who I was.

Savoring the surreal moment, I began to peel off the wax seal. I was careful not to damage either the seal or the envelope; both were precious to me. If one of my parents had touched either of them, the physicality of the envelope, its contents, and a simple wax seal was tangible evidence that someone may have cared about the little baby girl I once was. Maybe, they had even loved me. Had they missed me? I hoped so. The thought that someone other than me was hurting made me feel warm inside.

Suddenly calm, I focused on the contents that I’d emptied onto the ground. Surprisingly, Jinx didn’t try to touch them. Instead, he sat still as if he knew something important was happening.

The first thing that caught my eye was a gold locket that looked quite old. It was a little tarnished, but it was still beautiful. As I looked more closely at it, I could tell there was an inscription on one side of the locket, and I was sure it contained something. There was also an old-fashioned key with a red ribbon tied around the top loop, and what looked like a folded piece of parchment paper.

The locket came first. I took a deep breath, looked at the engraving, and saw the words that instantly changed my life.

‘For Kaitlyn, My Beloved Daughter’

“I’m a beloved daughter!” Empowered by that thought, I cracked open the locket to see a photo of a young woman staring up at me. She looked so young and familiar even though I knew I’d never seen her before. That realization cut deep, but the joy I felt was stronger than my disappointment. My hope was that my mother lived here in TISAL. After all, everyone knew everyone else in our world, but I was certain I’d never seen the woman in the photo.

It was a surreal moment when I reached for the letter that my mother had written for me so long ago.

My dearest Kaitlyn,

Today is your 18th birthday. By now, you’ll have received this letter. I would do anything to be there with you, but I will be gone by the time you read this. My time is

short so I'm writing this quickly. I had to leave you because I am sick. I left you at the founding home to keep you safe. Please know that I did it for you, my love.

The people responsible for my illness are trying to silence me, so I am hiding as I write this to you. After you've read my letter, you will understand that I would never leave you willingly. My sweet girl, I had no choice.

Inside this envelope, you'll find a gold locket with my picture. Keep me close to your heart and remember that I will always love you. The key in the envelope unlocks a box where you will find the evidence you will need to save others from my fate. You will find TISAL's Book of Records, along with documents that will prove that what I am about to tell you is true. The location of the box is written on the inside of the envelope that you are holding. Guard it and stay safe.

I hope that you will get this letter before it's too late. There is so much I can't share in writing but know this; you must never leave TISAL and you must warn everyone else that nothing, but death awaits them if they leave. I made that mistake, and I don't want you or anyone else to meet the same fate.

This is going to be hard for you to read, but everything I am going to tell you must be made public. Everyone must be warned.

The world outside of TISAL is not safe, and the officials who run this town are not to be trusted. They are evil!

This is what I have learned: TISAL's name is an abbreviation for Tactical Intelligence and Surveillance Analysis Laboratory. Our town was created many years ago as a haven for survivors of a chemical war that resulted in the death of millions of people. Since then, the atmosphere and soil everywhere outside of TISAL are toxic to all forms of life. Nothing survives outside of the Biodome that covers our town.

Kaitlyn, I am dying because I left TISAL. The Tracking Day competition is a scam that the government uses to lure people to willingly leave on a supposed 'vacation' when they are being sent out to test whether the atmosphere outside of TISAL is still toxic.

You must make this public. Everything you need is in the lockbox.

I love you more than anything in this world, my sweet girl. Please never forget me.

My heart is yours forever, Mom (Sophia Elise St. John)