

Chapter 1

My name is Tookie, but the name on my birth certificate is Latoya Latisha Lynette Blackburn. The 'L' names were my mother's way of protesting. She couldn't specify or identify my biological father as the culprit because she'd signed away that right for \$5,000.00.

That shocking option is still possible in some states and doesn't require parental permission. In essence, it meant she'd never even whisper the feasibility that he was the father. It meant that she'd never come to his

family for child support either. She'd signed away her rights and mine too.

His last name is Langley. His role in my origins was a secret and would always remain that way. His parents had made sure of it with their checkbook.

Royce Langley was sixteen. His parents had big plans for his future and it didn't include a black wife or a mixed race baby. Royce would never acknowledge me as his progeny. He'd never admit that he'd slept with Janetta Blackburn when she was practically a child. He'd never come clean about any of it because he's "double-u-double-u." White and wealthy and we aren't either of those things.

We're not considered poor or at the poverty line, but we certainly don't have the financial advantages and resources of the Langley family. Not many people do in this area of the state. It takes two working parents to support most households. Even then, the majority of families can't quite reach the threshold of middle class.

The first two years of my life were happy and secure. I don't remember much interaction with my mother, but I remember my grandmother. Neiva loved me. She took care of me.

When I was crawling around on the living room rug one day, grandmother said, "*Come here, my sweet little cookie. Let your Neiva rock you for a while.*" I adored my grandmother and repeated everything she said. My regurgitation of that phrase came out as 'Tookie.' Neiva loved it. "*Tookie, huh? Well, my-oh-my! It suits you perfectly,*" she beamed. The name stuck.

Chapter 2

I'm fifteen now. I live in Gulf Breeze, Florida with my grandmother. I attended Gulf Breeze Elementary School, Gulf Breeze Middle School and I'll begin Gulf Breeze High School in the fall. It has to be providence that I ended up living with Neiva...that I found my way back to her...that she wasn't dead as I'd been told. I'm fortunate to live in such a beautiful place. I'm lucky to be alive. I wasn't always so privileged or blessed.

These are my memories. This is my story—the past, the middle, and now.

Sometimes, the line between each section of my life is a little jumbled up as I try to lay out everything in chronological order. I've been told it's a side effect of the drugs I was force-fed.

I talked before I could walk.

I read before I ever went to school.

I sang in perfect pitch after hearing songs on the radio and television.

I remember things that no one should remember.

I've forgotten and relearned everything I once knew.

I was given a second chance.

You don't get to hate me because I'm intelligent or talented. I keep those traits a secret. You don't get to judge me because I'm beautiful or live in a dream vacation locale. I'm here hiding in plain site from the experiences of my past.

It might look and sound as if the proverbial deck was stacked in my favor, but I never had a chance. Not really. Maybe those traits would've had a significant impact if I'd been born to a

different mother. Perhaps those advantages would've been more useful if I'd been reared in some other life or city, some other time and place. Those traits—the ones that others envy—didn't offer me any extra help or benefits. They were canceled out because I was born to Janetta Blackburn in the backwoods of northern Mississippi without a father.

My situation was a cruel hand of poker and I played the dealt cards the best way I could. I'm grateful for how things turned out in the end. Overall, it could've been a whole lot worse.

Chapter 3

Having twins made the baby bump appear very quickly. When Janetta started to show, Royce Langley punched her in the stomach repeatedly. He beat her and then left her at the curb in front of her home. Doubled over in agony, she managed to get inside and to the bathroom before the bloody mucus streamed down her legs. The beating caused Janetta to lose my twin brother, but I held on.

Seeing my twin, the love of my life, ripped from my presence and flushed away broke my heart before I was ever born. He was everything to me. We shared all and knew each other in the most intimate stages of

development. We knew each other naked and alone. We loved each other because of that and in spite of it. We loved more deeply than parent and child or regular siblings can comprehend. We loved as eternal soul mates—two halves of one personality reunited.

“Move back, Sister. Hide in the darkness. Be very still as long as you can. I’ll protect you. One of us has to make it. It’s our destiny,” he whispered a stern warning as the tremors began.

“No! Please don’t go,” I begged, reaching out to touch him through the bubbles that separated us. It was impossible because the amniotic sacs, the membranes, kept us apart. “Our destiny is to be together. Please, don’t leave me here alone. I won’t make it without you.”

“I’ll always be with you. I’ll always watch over you. You must hold on. One of us has to make it. We have a designated path, a plan to fulfill. That’s why we came here. Remember?”

“Then, you stay and I’ll go,” I bitterly sobbed, but as the shaking and upheaval became more forceful and intense, he slipped out of sight. He’d sacrificed himself to save

me.

He was gone!

Suddenly, I was alone, completely isolated and terrified. What happened to my twin was intentional—someone wanted us dead before we were even born. This world was dangerous. I wasn't safe. That knowledge and the loss of my brother were almost more than I could bear.

It was both shocking and surreal.

Although he was only a millisecond older, we'd been together since the beginning. We'd known each other for as long as I could remember—even before. I almost gave up and followed him, but I heard his words again and my undying love honored them. I moved further back into the darkness as directed. I stayed there until the violent earthquake subsided. I remained extremely still for an eternity. He was gone, but I felt his soul presence around me. I cried softly for that lost love; I was afraid to make a sound or reveal my hiding place.

My twin's death wasn't honored. He didn't get a funeral or burial. He wasn't given a certificate of any kind—either birth or death.

He wasn't named. He was just gone—expelled from the womb too early to survive; too early to be anything at all to anyone except me. Even so, I called my brother Jacob.