

“One luminous pearl of a sister story.”

—Rita Williams-Garcia, National Book Award finalist for *Jumped*

The Other Half of My Heart



SUNDEE T. FRAZIER

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of My Heart



ALSO BY SUNDEE T. FRAZIER

Brendan Buckley's Universe and Everything in It

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of My Heart



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Summary: Twin daughters of interracial parents, eleven-year-olds Keira and Minni have very different skin tones and personalities, but it is not until their African American grandmother enters them in the Miss Black Pearl Preteen competition in North Carolina that red-haired and pale-skinned Minni realizes what life in their small town in the Pacific Northwest has been like for her more outgoing, darker-skinned sister.

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*For my precious pearls,
Skye Lettiann and Umbria Mae*



Chapter One



Minni's heart soared as the small plane's wheels lifted from the ground. She loved being up in the clouds with Keira, Mama and Daddy, looking down on the lush carpet of ever-greens, the never-ending blue-gray ocean, and the rugged mountain peaks. Gliding, like a bird on the wind.

Keira sank her nails into Minni's arm. It hurt, but Minni didn't pull away. It wasn't often that *she* got to be the brave one.

People who didn't know Keira thought she wasn't afraid of anything. After all, she'd been the first person on the Jefferson County gymnastics team, boy or girl, to execute a double front flip without a trampoline.

But Minni knew her sister better than anyone, and after reading out loud in front of others, Keira's next greatest fear was of riding in the tiny single-engine plane. She only ever

got into Daddy's Cessna 172 out of loyalty—because she prized being together as a family more than she feared falling from the sky. She had told Minni this when they were curled up in their giant zipped-together sleeping bags, lying under the stars on the back deck, listening to the ocean waves pound the rocks like the earth's heartbeat.

The engine's rumble filled Minni's head, and her chest vibrated along with its purring. The crowded space inside the four-seater smelled like gasoline. Daddy must have spilled some fuel on his pants or hands, which were covered in grease more often than not. Mama said the skin under Daddy's nails had been permanently turned black. "Just like half my heart," he would always reply.

The plane bumped over a rough patch of air, and Keira's nails dug in a little deeper. Mama's voice crackled through Minni's headset. "The Sisters are out today." She pointed to the Olympic range.

The two mountains were actually called the Brothers, but their family called them the Sisters. They stood side by side, connected at the hip. The taller one the family had dubbed Minni, and the shorter one was Keira. Minni gazed at the twin peaks, dusted with patches of snow even in late June.

"Just in time for our story," Daddy said. This was their tradition. Every year on June twenty-third, for as long as Minni could remember—first, pastrami and pickle sandwiches at Jerry's, and then, a spin in Daddy's plane. Their destination was always the same: Forks, Washington. And along the way, they heard The Story.

“The day you were born,” Daddy said, “you made news around the world.”

Mama didn’t much like talking about it, even though it had turned out to be the best day of her life, seeing that she’d gotten Minni and Keira in the end. To her it was a tragedy narrowly escaped, but to Daddy it was an *escapade*, an adventure, the way Daddy saw everything in life.

After so many years, Mama must have decided it was okay. She didn’t even say, “Oh, Gordon, do you have to?”

Daddy liked to say the crazy in him called out to the cautious in Mama, and the steady in Mama called out to the roller coaster in him, and that was how they got together. “The day you were born,” Daddy continued, “the crazy won over the cautious.”

Minni looked out at the mountains and listened to Daddy tell them again how she and her twin sister had come into the world, exactly eleven years ago.

It was a clear day, one of those days when the sky is so blue you wish the world would tip upside down so you could fall into the heavens and splash around. Those days were rare where they lived on the Olympic Peninsula—that part of Washington State that stuck out into the Pacific Ocean like a giant crab claw—which was why Daddy had wanted to take Mama flying in the first place. “Might be our last chance for a while,” he said.

So Mama climbed into Daddy’s plane even though the babies inside her were only six weeks from being due. Her stomach was too big to fit in the front seat, so she got in

the back and Daddy flew her around like a chauffeur in the sky.

Mama had rubbed on her belly as if it were a magic lantern. Through the headphones, Daddy heard her telling her babies not to worry, that every little thing would be all right.

“It was the sun and moon told me,” Mama said. “I knew things would work out because they were in the sky together that day—just like my babies were together inside me.” It was good luck, she said, and was why Keira got named after the sun and Minni got the middle name Lunette, which meant “little moon.”

When Mama’s stomach started feeling funny, she didn’t tell Daddy right away. She thought it was the pastrami and pickle she’d eaten before they took off. Or her body getting used to the lighter air thousands of feet above solid ground. Or the banked turn Daddy was making when she felt those first, hard squeezes.

But it wasn’t the sandwich or the air or the turn.

“You were ready to come into the world,” Daddy said. “Didn’t matter to you that your mama was six thousand feet up.”

“It was Keira,” Minni said, elbowing her sister in the side. Keira had finally released her grip and held Minni’s hand instead. “She was the one in a rush.”

“I just wanted to give Daddy the chance to be a hero.” Keira grinned and batted her eyelashes at Daddy.

“But you made sure not to come out first.” Minni narrowed her eyes, even though she wasn’t really mad at her sister about that.

When Mama finally faced the facts and told Daddy that it was time for the girls to be born, they were too far from Port Townsend to go back.

It had also turned gray, and Mama wasn't so sure anymore that every little thing would be all right. The sun and moon had disappeared and it was raining, and their plane bounced like a ball on the water, and Mama yelled at Daddy, "Get this thing down!" and Daddy said, "You don't have to yell," because they were wearing the headsets, and Mama yelled, "Yes I do!" and Daddy didn't say any more. He just got the plane down.

Daddy had to land them on the tiny airstrip in Forks, the rainiest town in the continental United States. One hundred and twenty inches of rain a year. Ten feet! Put that all together, and Minni and Keira could do their stunt where Keira stood on Minni's shoulders, and all you'd see would be Keira's tight black curls floating on the water.

The rest of the story was that Daddy got them down before they made their grand entrance, but just barely. He had sent an urgent message to Forks's air traffic control. The ambulance's flashing red lights cut through the gray air as the plane bumped to the ground. They were born in the back-seat of Daddy's Cessna 172. Mama was too far along in the process, and nothing and nobody was going to make her get out.

In the end, it was a good thing Minni and Keira came when they did. Keira's cord was wrapped tightly around her neck. Mama joked Keira had been practicing her gymnastics in her belly and got tangled up in it. Minni's theory was that her sister had done a last-second backflip to avoid being

born first and getting The Name. *Minerva*. After Grandmother Johnson, who had somehow gotten Mama to agree to the idea.

Mama always tried to make Minni feel better by reminding her that her name meant “goddess of wisdom.” It never worked. If only their grandmother had been named Jacqueline or Samantha or Coretta . . .

Keira, which meant “sun” in Persian, was given the middle name Sol—“sun” in Spanish—so between her two names, she was one big fireball. Daddy also liked the name because it sounded like “soul” and they could tell the way she came out kicking and screaming—in spite of the cord—that she would have plenty of that.

Whatever the reason, Minni had come out first, staring with big blue eyes at a big new world, and then Keira, squalling as if she wanted her presence to be known for miles around.

The location of their birth got them on the evening news all across the country, but what got just as much attention, if not more, was something else.

Something they’d been told all their lives didn’t really mean anything.

Same Mama and Daddy. Born seven minutes apart in the back of their daddy’s plane.

But Keira, with her dark curly hair and cinnamon-brown skin, was black, like their mama, while Minni, with her reddish blond hair and milky pale skin, was white, like their daddy. At least that was what the articles on the Internet said.

One-in-a-million twins.

Daddy and Mama hardly ever mentioned it, but Minni knew from the Web that people had heard about them as far away as London, England. They weren't alone, either. She had seen pictures of other twins who came out looking as different from each other as she and Keira did. There were no pictures of her and Keira on the Internet, though. Mama would never allow that.

Some people said it couldn't be true. How could two babies, one black and one white, come from the same mama? Their story had even appeared on one of those Web sites that tell whether something is a hoax . . . which of course they weren't, and the Web site said so. Minni and Keira really existed, and they really were twins, although Minni sometimes wondered herself how it had happened.

She'd asked Mama once, "Am I just white? Or am I black, too?" because when she looked at her pale skin next to her sister's and Mama's rich brown, it sure was hard to see how she could be called black.

"Of course you are," Mama said, not really answering her question. Then she rested her hand on Minni's cheek. "Your blackness is just hidden a little deeper—like a vein of gold running deep within the soil of your soul."

Mama was always pointing out that of the millions of genes that made them all human, only seven or eight told their skin what color to be. A minuscule amount, she said. A very small difference.

So that was what Minni chose to believe, even though somewhere deep inside her brain, in a little drawer she rarely let herself open, lived the concern that the difference she'd

been assured didn't matter actually mattered a lot. That what she'd been told was small might be enormous. Not here, with her family in the sky. Never here. But somewhere. Maybe even everywhere except here.

A tingle ran down Minni's spine as Daddy dipped the right wing and circled over Forks. She squeezed her sister's hand and made an early birthday wish: *May nothing ever, ever come between Keira and me.* Nothing—*big or small.*