

## Middle of July

### A series



### Synopsis

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*For Luna and Star, growing up without fathers was their shared reality. But on July 16th that year, a man walked into Luna's life, claiming to be her father. As secrets unravel, their friendship—and everything they believed about family—hangs in the balance*

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### Star's POV

**June, 1999**

"Mom! This house is badass!"

She shot me a stern look. "I've told you to stop using words like that," she reprimanded.

I rolled my eyes and stepped out of the car. I was 7, and my classmates said worse words.

The first thing I noticed was the air—it smelled different, like dust mixed with something warm and delicious, maybe fried plantain. The road wasn't as bad as the one in our old neighborhood, but I still saw little swirls of dust rise whenever a car sped past. Kids my age ran barefoot, kicking an old football, their voices loud and happy.

A woman walked by with a tray of bananas balanced on her head, not even using her hands. A man by the roadside fanned his suya grill, sending smoky, spicy air into my face. My stomach grumbled.

We had finally moved—from that filthy, crappy neighborhood to this bright, shiny, bustling town. I loved it already.

The second thing I noticed, however, was the gate opposite ours. Ugly brown. I scrunched my nose. Of all the colors in the world, why would anyone choose that? It didn't match the deep ashen gray of the house itself or the crisp white interiors I glimpsed through the window.

We managed to move the items we came with, awaiting the remaining ones coming the next day.

Luckily, we bought food on the way so I didn't have to wait for long to squelch my grueling hunger.

I still remembered the exquisite taste of the chicken barbecue we had for dinner that night, as I laid on my bed and fell into a peaceful sleep.

The next day was Sunday. The day I met Luna the first time.

We decided to attend the first church we spotted, not too far away from our house and there she was—sitting in the children's department, tears running down her face like someone had just shattered her whole world. I walked up to her.

"Why are you crying?" I asked.

Between sobs, she said someone had stolen her fountain pen. Apparently, it was a gift from her mom, and she was saving it for when turned 8.

Only pencils were prohibited at the time so she couldn't understand why anyone would take it.

Something about the situation didn't sit right with me. A missing pen in children's department? I looked around and nobody there looked like they'd be interested in the pen so I walked straight to the teacher's desk and reported it. Lo and behold, there it was—just sitting there like it had never been missing in the first place.

That marked the beginning of everything. From that moment on, we were inseparable. Through primary and secondary school, we stood up for each other, defended each other, and made sure no one—not even boys—came between us.

It was like love at first sight, but this time it wasn't love. It was friendship.

Luna's father had also died before she was born. It was almost eerie. The exact same story. The exact same circumstances. What were the odds? We had trauma-bonded over it, but sometimes, I couldn't help but wonder. I mean, really—what were the odds? Still, I was grateful. She understood me in a way no one else did. We weren't broken. We were just...us.

By the time we got to university, we were considered sisters. Luna even looked like me. People joked that we were long-lost twins because we were the same age and born only days apart.

On the years we celebrated our birthdays, we did it together because there was no point in celebrating separately when we were just 3 days apart. She was born on 5th March, 1992 while I was born on 8th March, the same year. Another thing that made me pause. Seriously, what were the odds?

Of course, those who knew us well could tell the intricate differences. Luna was homely, introverted, the kind of person who found comfort in routine. I, on the other hand, was closer to the extrovert side of the spectrum. I hated household chores as much as I hated being called fatherless.

When I was 16, I got into a car accident. I lost so much blood that I needed a transfusion, but my mother wasn't a match. Panic. Desperation. Until Luna stepped forward. She got tested, and—just like that—we were a match.

Sisters, or what?

She meant the world to me. But deep down, I couldn't shake the feeling that maybe, just maybe, finding ourselves in the same neighborhood was more than just a coincidence. We looked alike. Our blood types matched. Even our names—Luna, meaning "Moon" in Greek, and me, Star. Almost like we were...meant to find each other.

Whenever we talked about this, it always ended in a hysteria of laughter, because we found it truly funny when people mixed up our names, or instantly assumed we were sisters before seeing our different surnames and apologizing profusely for making the wrong assumptions. Not that we minded it.

Sometimes I wondered what I did to get so lucky in life. Things like this only happened in movies so it was surreal to experience it—in real life.

Luna's mom was my second mom, and my mom was hers. We were one closely knit, happy family.

Every year, on October 12th, I marked my father's death anniversary. I never cried. How could I? I didn't even know the man. Honestly, I never saw the point in marking it at all. I was angry at him. Why did he have to die? Why didn't he fight to live? Wasn't my forthcoming birth enough reason to hold on?

My mom always said he had early onset diabetes, coupled with hypertension. And, sometimes, I was mad at her too. Of all the men in the world, that's who she chose? A man with conditions that could kill him at any moment? And they were never even married. So, basically, he knocked her up and died? Way to go, sir.

## ***Present Day***

Luna was really pissing me off, and I knew I shouldn't have been that pissed but I was, and it was taking all my willpower to ignore her. How hard was it to find a way to talk to the man? Her mom probably still had his contact details.

She had managed to sneak boys in and out of the house before—surely, this shouldn't be that difficult.

People thought she was the quiet, innocent one. They had no idea. She was the queen of secrecy. She lost her virginity before I even managed to get my first kiss—which by the way was number two on my list of “most disgusting experiences I've ever had.”

The whole situation made me uneasy. I didn't know how to process what I was feeling. It wasn't jealousy. Why would I be jealous? He was an ex-convict. It made sense why her mom had kept the truth from her, but still...this was too extreme.

We had endured so much—years of hate, bullying, whispers behind our backs. And now, she finds out she had a father all along?

Even if he had committed a crime, how bad was it?

I just wanted to focus on the move to our new place, and not think about any of this. I didn't know what to say to her. I didn't know how to be there for her.

I was happy for her, but at the same time, I felt alone. Like we weren't soul sisters after all. Like the glue that held us together had suddenly dissolved.

I knew Luna was upset, but I couldn't deal with that right now.

Suddenly, I'd had enough with my thoughts, so I turned to her and asked the first question that came to mind: "Did your mom cry whenever you guys marked the anniversary of his death?"

She looked at me strangely. "We never marked it," she said. "I never really thought much about it until I found out you and your mom did."

Then, absently, she added, "His name is David Kasim."

My whole body stiffened.

"What?"

"His name," she repeated. "Mom said it's David Kasim."

Oh.

I swallowed. "Wow."

I hesitated before saying, "I think I've heard the name before.

That made Luna's neck snap back to me.

"What? When?" She asked.

I told her I overheard it in a conversation our moms were having, and that they were probably reminiscing on the past. But I lied, I had heard that name before not once—not twice, and it wasn't in a conversation with our moms. It was on the phone, and always when Luna was away.

I didn't put it past Mummy Moon, as I fondly called her, to have a boyfriend. She was still in her early 40's just like my mom. But the way she sounded on the phone the times I overheard her, tenderly calling him Kasim, and repeating his full name occasionally when teasing him. I knew it as well as I knew my period was in two days. It was definitely her father.

Mummy Moon was embarrassed the first time she knew I overheard her flirting with a man on the phone, but I teased her saying she was still young and needed a male figure in her life, so she got a little more comfortable picking up the phone whenever the man called when I was around, but never when Luna was.

She even begged me not to let Luna know she was toying with the idea of getting back into the dating pool, which was ridiculous because I constantly assured her Luna would be just fine with it. We weren't kids anymore, and soon we wouldn't be around much so she'd need love and support.

The truth was staring me in the face, daring me to acknowledge it: Mummy Moon had been in secret contact with Luna's father for God knows how long.

That explained why she nearly collapsed when he showed up. Maybe Luna wasn't exaggerating after all. It was obvious the man showed up unexpectedly, against her mother's wishes.

And yet, she had been speaking with him all this time.

How long had this been going on? And why did she lie to Luna all these years?

Was he really an ex-convict?

Was he ever even in jail?

Maybe he was calling her from jail with his designated phone call time.

If my emotions had been tangled before, now they were knotted beyond repair. I stared ahead, dreading the next few days. Keeping secrets wasn't my strong suit. But how was I supposed to tell Luna the truth?

She was already furious at her mom for the years of lies. If she found out about this?

I didn't want to imagine the fallout.

I opened the window on my side of the bus, letting the wind wash over me, hoping it could carry away the unease settling in my chest. Maybe I didn't hear the name right. Maybe I was confused. Maybe it wasn't her father. Maybe she liked men with the name "Kasim". But if I was right, then everything we thought we knew was a lie.

I had to find out the truth.