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Prologue



Fear.

It was the only word he could use to explain the cold feeling traversing his body. He felt it sink into his heart – as a dead weight as the derailed train now careening off the tracks and into the depths of the valley down below. Tamir savored the bitter taste of regret in his mouth and felt tears streaming down both his cheeks. Had he heeded Perciple’s warning not to take the train that evening, he wouldn’t be there. Notwithstanding the fears and regrets that had engrossed his senses, he could not help wondering...

How did Perciple know something like this would happen?

There was no answer for him, nor was there anyone to provide the answers he needed. Tamir’s last living thought before the train exploded was to muse on who Perciple was.

When death came for him, it was fast and painless. One moment, he was there, and the next, gone, enveloped in the heat until there was nothing left but bone and ash.

Chapter One

The Furball



The houses aligned beautifully, with each residence sitting beside its neighbor, balanced at both ends. The houses were everything a middle-class suburban environment should be dignified and not at all nouveau riche. Amid these adjoining townhomes, one stood out – and was at the end of the neighborhood. The residence was donned in deep plum, the picture of gentility.

The garden was a huge one. Some neighbors would call it “humongous,” which was fitting because of its size and the many unique flowers that Kamille had planted there. Before his death, her husband remarked to her it looked more like an antique flower museum than an actual home garden. Kamille scoffed at this statement – even if the neighbors could not acknowledge the garden’s beauty, she could, and that was enough for her.

Whenever the lights on the sides of the outdoor brick bordering the garden came on at night, it made the most beautiful sight. Kamille reckoned the borders looked eccentric, but eccentricity could be beautiful too. The landscape of bricks

sloped downhill, and the two younger children would often race down the path to the road whenever their mother was not looking.

Despite the recent tragedy the inhabitants had suffered, they still maintained their smiles and happiness. Besides the tendrils of mourning, which were still palpable around the house, one could make out traces of the joy of the returning normalcy of day- to-day activities. There was gratefulness for the gift of life.

Such was the state of the house – one side unfinished and vacant, and the other, completed and occupied. Before his death, Tamir had started renovations of the unfinished side, but now they would never be completed. It was on the finished side that the family lived. Lydia was the oldest among her siblings, and she resented it whenever referred to as a kid. It did not matter she was fourteen and a half years old; she believed she had earned the prestige of being considered an adult.

Downstairs in the basement on the finished side, furnished with a pink metal framed daybed and a wooden reading table on the opposite wall, Lydia gleamed with excitement when she saw it. “At least, I get to have privacy now,” she said to herself. But Lydia didn’t make her contentment known. Instead, she grumbled about preferring a cheery color paint job for her room. The brown was too drab for her.

“White would have given the room character,” she mumbled to her mum as she tried to hide the bravado, she was more than ecstatic to have a room to herself.

Kamille smiled. “White would make your room look like a hospital room,” her mum joked.

Lydia disagreed but remained quiet. She didn’t need to tell her mum that the dreariness in hospital rooms painted white

came more from the sufferings in hospitals, not the white color of their walls.

Although the townhouse was three levels tall and narrow in width, its windows provided an excellent view of the paved road that ran through the Nottingham suburb. Kamille had planted a small garden next to the pathway beside the house. The roses always struggled in summer, but the most beautiful flowers in the garden were the hyacinths, whose sweetscents would sometimes waft into Lydia's room – it made her smile in fondness of nature's beauty.

Lydia's younger sister, Misty, was a happy ten- year-old. She was full of infectious energy, and unlike her big sister's room, her bedroom was upstairs. It was the first room to the right corner, neighboring the landing, so anyone walking up the stairs would come right in front of it.

With her thick black hair and bright hazel-colored eyes, Misty was a lovely young girl. She could be reserved when in no mood to talk to anyone, which was more often than the times she was outspoken and a thorn in Lydia's side.

That morning, Misty was in one of her more spirited moods as she grabbed her school bag and ran out of her room. A moment before shutting the door behind her, Misty paused as she spotted her diary, which she had just started to keep, lying on her pink and white twin bed. She had reservations about keeping one because she had already chronicled a lot of her secrets inside. Misty sighed, then she returned to her bed to pick it up – she thought it best not to leave it out in the open where anyone could easily lay their hands on it.

Misty's room was a delight: her bed faced the large bay window at the front of the townhouse, through which she could see cars come and go. She loved to listen to the soothing sound

of car engines rumbling down the road as she lay on the bed staring at the ceiling and thinking of the many ways, she could escape into one of her dream worlds, like Alice in Wonderland.

She took considerable pride in keeping her room neat; it was her private space, and she loved it when the floors were uncluttered. Kamille found that trait endearing, but Lionel, the youngest child, considered it annoying.

"Such a show-off!" he would say every time their mother patted Misty on the head for being such a neat little girl.

She let out a gleeful sigh as she scanned the room for the last time. Her glasses, which she always wore, were perched on the bridge of her nose, so she pushed them to a more comfortable position and hurried out to answer her mother's call.

"Come on, Misty, we're running late!" her mother shouted from the parlor, downstairs.

"Yes, Misty, what are you doing?" Lionel added with a sneer as he carried his bag and dashed out of his room, which was on the same floor as Misty's room but on the other side of the hallway, with their mother's bedroom between them. It was the perfect arrangement: it gave Lydia some much-needed privacy downstairs in the basement and kept Lionel and Misty out of each other's hair.

Lionel was six years old and a handsome boy. He had intelligent eyes, which looked like they could see right into the depth of one's soul. Lionel had little interest in anything other than making fun of Lydia and playing with his train set, an antique set his dad bought for him a long time ago, and it delighted him. He never tired of rearranging the tracks to suit whatever his imagination concocted.

"Lionel! Get down here right this instant!" Kamille

bellowed. She was amazed by the silly rivalry between her son and her youngest daughter, although she'd appreciated that it was based on nothing but love. She saw it in the way Lionel protected Misty against bullies the last time they were at the park along with the spontaneous protective gestures he showed toward her when he thought no one was watching.

Upstairs, Lionel grimaced on realizing he was wearing the wrong shoe on his left foot. They were running late, and he did not want to push his mum's patience any further than it had already been.

"Coming, Mum!" he answered, running back into his room to wear the right shoe. At the other end of the corridor, Lionel heard Misty chuckling. He gritted his teeth and plopped on his red bed shaped like a car to pull the wrong shoe off. He was facing the back of the townhouse that overlooked the garden. He seldom paid any attention to nature, but even he noticed that the flowers were in full bloom.

"Coming, Mum!" Lionel reassured her and then whispered to himself, "I have to figure out how to put these on first." Once he finished, he raced down the stairs to see Kamille's frowning face. "But. But I tried to be as fast as I could," he moaned with what was a cute forgivable expression.

This sequence of events was the start of an average day for the young family. Such was their way with love and togetherness trickling under the bridge of their day-to-day activities.

Lydia walked upstairs from her room into the kitchen with her dark hair packed into a ponytail as usual. She had a blank expression on her face, in no mood for her siblings' theatrics.

"Oi! Misty, please move it along!" she called to the top of the staircase in her loud voice as Misty appeared running down the

stairs.

"Sorry, Lydia," Misty said, pushing her glasses up the bridge of her nose once more.

Lionel stared at his sister and scoffed. Lydia enjoyed feeling as if she was the boss of them all.

"Misty, please move it along!" Lionel echoed in a distorted robotic tone while moving his head from right to left in slow motion – like a robot.

Exasperated, Lydia shook her head at her little brother's antics, but she said nothing. She was used to his silliness.

"Come on, guys. Into the car, now," Kamille said.

Finally, when they trooped into the minibus outside, she drove them to school. It was a short and quiet trip since every member of the family had something to think about. For Lydia, it was the new boy in the class whose eyes reminded her of the ocean. For Misty, it was the diary she clutched tightly in her hand and how she intended to score the highest in the upcoming test to beat Sarah Levington – her only competition in class – for the first position. For Lionel, it was more of the same: wondering what games he would play with his best friend, Paul, in school, and when Uncle Perciple would come around again.

However, Kamille's mind was a riotous mess. Despite the many months that had passed, she still mourned in the dark recesses of her mind. Her eyes would assume a forlorn look whenever she was in that dark place of sorrow and wishful thinking. More than ever before, she missed her husband; she longed for him so much that it caused a constant ache in her heart. She was too young to be a widow, but she knew she had to deal with the card life had given her.

It did not mean it had to be a painless process.

Most definitely, it was not an easy one.

"Is Grandma Habibah coming today?" Lionel asked with a little grimace. He loved having his grandmother around, but there were things about her visit he dreaded. For example, she had to stay in his room, because there were no spare rooms in the house.

"Yes, Lionel, Grandma Habibah will be here later today. I hope your room is not a complete mess again," Lydia said, baring her teeth to show her braces.

Lionel scoffed and squeezed his face into a frown. "Don't worry about Grandma Habibah," Kamille said, flashing a smile in Lionel's direction through the rearview mirror. "She's coming to help me out with you guys and stuff around the house. I can't be there for you all the time when I have to work."

"Hmm!" Lionel scoffed once more and focused on the fast-moving trees speeding past them as their mum drove them to school. He was not excited about having to share his room. He liked his privacy; he enjoyed being able to watch what he loved on his TV. Besides, Grandma Habibah clacked her teeth in her sleep, not something he liked hearing.

"Have a wonderful day!" Kamille said to her kids as she dropped them off.

"You too, Mum!" the three of them chorused as they ran into the school.

She glanced at her wristwatch. It was 8:30. She had forty-five minutes before picking up Habibah at the train station. She had taken the day off work to get things ready for her mother-in-law's visit. In the past, she always looked forward to Habibah's visits because of the positive energy the older woman brought along with her; however, this visit was different. Habibah was coming to help with the kids; Kamille needed all

the help she could get in the wake of her husband's death.

At thirty-eight, Kamille was an unprepared widow. Her husband's death changed a lot of things in her life, and not for the better. Where she used to be bubbly, the young woman had now become subdued and withdrawn. There was nothing to cheer her anymore.

She felt tears well up in her eyes as memories of her husband played through her mind. She remembered how they had met in the university – he, an Arabian who had traveled to London to study; and her, a young woman just starting her life. He was the most amazing person she had ever met, so inevitably, Kamille fell in love with him.

A teardrop rolled down one cheek as the memories assailed her once more. It had been weeks since she felt grief this intense; it all felt a little too much for her to bear. Returning home from her children's school, she parked the car at the front of the house and walked toward her front door distractedly – she didn't even notice the frantic waves of Mrs. Frough, her neighbor from the other side of the quiet suburban street.

From East London, Kamille was as British as they come. With a mid-sized body of healthy womanly curves, she was quite the epitome of good looks. She had curly black hair which tumbled to the arch of her back when let loose. It was one of her most attractive features – that and her wide almond-shaped black eyes.

Turning the key in the lock and entering the house, she was greeted by the excited barks of her dogs. The family had two small terrier dogs: Mister was the heavier of the two and weighed about four pounds, while Lady weighed around three pounds. Both dogs wagged their tails and barked. Kamille bent to rub their smooth black-and-white fur.

“There, there. Why are you two making such a fuss?” It soon dawned on her they had forgotten to feed them that morning. “Yes, it’s official. I need help,” Kamille mumbled as she poured the last of the dog food into the bowl for the two dogs.

She stood by the sink afterward and stared out into her garden through the kitchen window with a saturnine look in her eyes, reliving the night her entire life changed.

What made her feel most awful was she had been angry with Tamir – the thought her husband might have died thinking she was upset at him for forgetting to buy Lady and Mister’s food was agonizing. Her anger had later turned into disappointment in herself, given she mentioned her displeasure at his forgetfulness with most of the household chores. She had wanted to drive her point home, so she pretended to be angry with him until the end of the day.

The Unknown

At a similar time but different place, down on Sixth and Vine in Winston-Salem NC, in the heart of the city, another family lived in a three-bedroom two-story home. It had a finished basement and a detached car garage out back that led into an open alleyway. Two sisters, Lee, and Bonnie rented the house together. They lived in the home with their children – Lee had a daughter named Marie, eight years of age and the youngest child in the house, while Bonnie had three kids: Matthew was fourteen, the middle child, Colin, was ten, and Debra, sixteen, was the oldest.

Lee’s bedroom was on the ground floor toward the back of the house. The living room, dining room, bathroom, and kitchen were on the first floor. There was another door in the kitchen that led down to the finished basement. Bonnie’s

bedroom was upstairs, along with a bathroom and one other room, shared by the four children. The children's bedroom had two sets of bunk beds. The ceiling light in there had a chain dangling from it to turn it on. The light was only a foot away from the bunk bed shared by Debra and Colin. There were bound to be trivial clashes between them on the light being on or off because Debra would often refuse to pull the chain.

Bonnie's boyfriend, Augustus, was in his sixties. He had salt and pepper gray hair with bold features and a distinguished look. He was a laid-back man, casual in his ways and in his clothing. Augustus usually wore a button-down shirt, pressed jeans, and gray Converse tennis shoes. Bonnie once asked him about his family, but his response was a somber face, so Bonnie decided not to push him for details until he was ready to talk about it.

"I am alone in the world. I lost my entire family years ago," he had said.

Augustus loved children. This was clear in the way he related to Bonnie's and Lee's children. He was always taking them to baseball games, movies; or he'd just spend time together with them around the house. Strangely, Bonnie had met Augustus at Barret's funeral her ex-fiancé and father of her three children. People had often teased them because of their names, Bonnie, and Barret – double Bs.

Barret died in a freak accident while he and Bonnie were out one-night having fun at a bar. Barret wanted to ride the bull, and Bonnie had no objection, believing Barret could. He rode the beast, and it got faster with sudden turns and jerks. Barret had one hand raised high as he yelled over to Bonnie, "Woohoo, Bonn, I'm a natural-born bull rider!"

"You sure are; ride 'em, cowboy!" Bonnie yelled back.

Barret kept holding on. He only had less than a minute till the ride was over. His body remained stiff, jerking to the left, to the right, back and forth until one jerk was too hard and made him fall off the mechanical bull. He landed awkwardly and snapped his neck on hitting the ground. Barret died instantly.

It was a vulnerable period for Bonnie because Barret was the love of her life, and they had decided to get married after all the years of being together. She was grieving and didn't know how to stop – her entire world had just been shattered., she dragged herself out of the gray mist of pain and tried to remain stable for their children, who needed her more than ever. From then on out, not only did she confide in her sister, Lee, but she also consulted Augustus on the things she couldn't discuss with Lee. Bit by bit, a relationship took shape, and Augustus soon became the primary source of support in her life.

She knew she had to keep herself occupied so she wouldn't miss or even think about Barret too much. After a while, she could feel herself finally letting go. A year after Barret's death, Bonnie decided to further her career and enrolled in college. It was one of the busiest times of her life, and with the combination of work and school, she didn't have time for Augustus anymore.

"I am sorry, Augustus. You know I don't take you for granted. I am just so busy," she would say, feeling his dissatisfaction every time. However, he knew there was nothing she could do about it. Life had taken a new turn, one she was not willing to derail from.

"Let me at least help you with the kids," he suggested.

"Don't worry about that; Lee will watch the children while I'm in school."

There wasn't much more he could say or do. It was clear he

was no longer needed. This realization left Augustus feeling left out and dispensable.

The children were in their preteen and teenage years, and they had many friends. There were two telephones in the house, but only one worked. The broken phone had terrible wiring, so they stripped it from the wall and put on a shelf in the basement. The functioning telephone rang constantly. One would often hear noises from the house, primarily arguments about who should get to use the phone first and who had used it the most that past week.

"Debra, you spoke to Cassandra for almost thirty minutes yesterday; it's my turn now!" Marie bickered.

"That's not my business; she's calling again. Who knows? Maybe she has something important to say!"

"I have something important to say too!"

And they would continue arguing; it was always the same.

When the older kids took charge of the working phone, Marie would often play down in the basement with her dolls and games.

For a while, some mystery took hold of the house, and there seemed to be no explanation for it. The kids told their moms that one of them had been listening in on their calls with their friends. The narrative shared among them was that the mysterious person would join in on their call and say nothing – just breathing., all the kids denied being the culprit.

It made little sense to their mothers, and one day when the kids started the allegations again, Lee told them to think about it.

"There is only one phone in the house; it's not possible for any of you to listen in on anyone else's calls. It must come from your friends' lines, and they're not telling you. They're trying to

scare you, or someone in their homes is playing games with them.”

The Furball

Kamille sighed with intense sadness as she sat down on the couch with a plop; it was the most challenging moment of her life. She reflected on everything that had happened in the past few years and squared her shoulders. She had to be strong for the sake of her kids.

But how can I be strong when I still miss him so much?

The question was directed at no one in particular, and the only answer she got in the quiet house was silence.

When Tamir didn't return from work that night, she felt a curl of something ugly unwind in her heart. As soon as she switched on the TV to see a piece of breaking news, coupled with the grave expression on the reporter's face while making the announcements, her heart turned into a large stone of ice in her chest.

Breaking news! Reports from Windley says we have had a major train accident in the intersection between the Windley station and that of Nottingham. No survivors have been discovered yet. This is a sad day in history, and our hearts are with the victims and their families...”

That was all she heard before her mind went numb. With great fear, tears streaming out of her eyes, and shaky hands, Kamille picked up the phone and dialed her husband's number.

You have reached Tamir. Kindly leave a message, and I'll get back to you as soon as I can.

She must have heard that line a hundred times before the doorbell rang. The kids were fast asleep, and she was grateful they were not aware of the possibility that their lives might have

just changed forever.

When she opened the door and saw the funereal faces of two police officers, she knew the news they came bearing; however, knowing did not make it any easier to hear.

"We're sorry for your loss. Your husband was on the train when it derailed, and the chances of survival are low, but we are doing everything we can to find him."

Two years before

Tamir stood at the station waiting for his train home. It had been a long day, and the only thing he could think of was getting home to his wife and kids. He pictured Kamille's frowning face over an argument they had earlier that day and smiled. He had plans to make it up to her that night; the bunch of flowers he held in his hand was only the beginning.

"Flower for your lady?" someone beside him asked.

He looked up to see a taller, older man with a kind smile.

"Yes, I might have made her a little angry earlier today," he said and caught himself before saying more. He was not the type to tell his business to anyone who asked, but something about that man told him he could be trusted. Something that made him want to tell him everything.

"We men are good at making our women angry, aren't we?"

"That we are," Tamir replied with a whimsical smile on his face.

After a brief silence, the older man echoed Tamir's response, "That we are." He then outstretched his hand. "I'm Perciple."

"Tamir." He reciprocated the gesture.

"I detect a Middle Eastern accent there. Am I right?"

“Great ears; I moved here to study and found love, so I stayed.”

“That’s beautiful,” Perciple said as they heard the rumble of the train moving nearer.

There was a comfortable silence between them for a moment, each man being immersed in his own thoughts., Perciple broke the silence.

“Your wife must be an amazing woman,” he said. “Oh yes, she is.” If there was one topic of discussion Tamir could never tire of, it was his wife and kids. They were the best thing that had ever happened to him, and he took immense pride in telling anyone who cared to listen about his beautiful wife, his two daughters, and how different they were, and about his headstrong son.

Tamir flipped his wallet open and showed Perciple a picture of his family. They took the family photo during the last holiday, and in Tamir’s opinion, a perfect representation.

“Oh, you have a beautiful lot,” Perciple said with a genuine smile.

“Thanks. What about you? Family?”

Perciple just stared preoccupied with thoughts.

“Yes, your family. Do they live around here?”

“I have lots of families,” Perciple said with a cryptic smile that got Tamir wondering what he meant.

Tamir studied the man he was talking to. He had a fascinating look about him. He was in his mid-sixties and in excellent shape. There was no paunch under the button-down shirt he wore, which made Tamir a little envious as he stared down at his own midriff. The gray hair on his head neatly combed into a side parting; Perciple was a well-groomed man.

Tamir inspected the man’s face and smiled. He took considerable pride in taking care of himself – his bold features