

PAMELA HENSLEY  
**LANCE ACCIDENTAL**

THEY WERE THE LAST ONES to leave the meet. Saman stayed poolside, wrapped in a towel, to watch Kevin in the final heat of the boys 13 & under 200m freestyle. Kevin was in lane four, the lane reserved for the fastest swimmer, just as Saman had been in his earlier race. Kevin shook out his legs, his arms, rotated each shoulder, clenched and unclenched his fists. Off the block he flew like a predatory reptile, outstretched into the water. Saman cheered him on through mouthfuls of Kitkat and punched the air with his fist when he won.

Saman's father, Javeed, watched from the viewing area upstairs. He sat patiently on a concrete bench, staving off a chlorine headache in the warm, humid air. He put his head down for a moment, massaging his temples, waiting. His wife was the one who usually took the boys to their meets, who drove their son to morning practice, rising in the dark, eating breakfast in the car, getting ready for work in the girls' change room. It was worth it, Yvonne said, because of what the sport could give him: discipline, focus, pride. Javeed agreed. The kids at school weren't raising the bar for his son; here, at least, boys could set themselves apart. If only Saman would get to know some of the other boys, and let Kevin do the same.

It was dark by the time they drove Kevin home. They pulled up to the house in Oxwood Lane where a Bobcat sat abandoned on the front lawn and piles of soil and mulch blocked the entrance to the garage. There were no cars in the driveway or lights on inside.

"Anyone home tonight, Kevin?" Javeed asked. He turned down the radio, nearly muting R.E.M. to catch the answer. He knew Kevin's mother might be home, unwilling or unable to come to the door.

"Yeah, no problem, Dr. Zare. I've got a key." Kevin reached into the back of the Audi wagon where he'd thrown his duffel bag. "Thanks for the ride."

"You're welcome to come back with us if you're here on your own," Javeed said.

“Eat at our house, dude.” Saman punched Kevin lightly on the shoulder. While Kevin hesitated, a porch light flicked on.

“It’s okay,” he said. He opened the door, stepped out and pulled his bag after him. “Later.” He started up the path to the porch.

Kevin’s mother opened a heavy wood door and looked out through the glass of the storm door in front of it. Javeed thought she hid it well, her morphine addiction. She was a gaunt, silent woman with limp hair and empty eyes. What a contrast, he thought: she and Yvonne. Darkness and light. Discord and harmony. Looking at her made him glad of his own life. It reminded him that things might have been different, that it was a fine line dividing one world from another. He thought then of Kevin’s father and the incident at lunch some days before, and a fleeting sensation rippled through his gut, like tripping down a stair. He put the car in reverse and turned the radio back up.

“See you tomorrow, Kev,” Saman called out the window. “Don’t forget your trombone or Mr. Canning will sit you out.” He sat back and pushed the button that closed the window while the car started to move. Kevin’s mother opened the storm door, stepping out onto the porch in her peach velour housecoat. Their dog, Stella, saw the opening and bolted.

“Stella!” Kevin’s mother cried as the dog raced down the steps.

“*Everybody hurts, sometimes ...*” Javeed and Saman were singing, belting out the lyrics with cracking voices. Javeed had his body turned, one arm stretched across the middle console, as he looked out the rearview window and smiled at Saman in the backseat. “*Everybody cries.*”

“Stella!” Kevin shouted, as she dashed past him on the walk. He dropped his bag and ran after her.

“*And everybody hurts, sometimes.*”

They felt the thump as Stella’s body hit the rear tires.

“What was that, Dad?” Saman asked as Javeed braked hard. He got out with a feeling of dread and walked around to where Kevin was already kneeling.

The previous Tuesday evening, Yvonne had leaned against the kitchen counter, a glass of wine in her hand, while Javeed rinsed spinach in the sink next to her. He was making a salad to go with her lamb stew and he’d poured her wine, hoping she’d stay beside him to drink it.

“It was a misunderstanding,” Javeed was saying. He had his sleeves rolled up and was shaking the spinach under running water. “We’d just

ordered lunch.”

Yvonne reached over and turned off the tap. “You and Ali and Marty.”

“And Ohad. Yes, the four of us. Ohad and I had gone to meet Ali and Marty on campus, and after the meeting they suggested we eat at the club.” He moved the spinach to a towel on the side of the counter opposite Yvonne and paused to look at her.

“Why not?”

“Right. Why not. They’re faculty, so they’re members, and they can bring guests.” He began patting the spinach leaves while she sipped her wine. “We were just ordering when Kevin’s father—what’s his name again?”

“Frank. Frank and Jackie.”

“Frank—of course. Why can’t I remember that? I’ve got a mental block around that name.” He left the spinach on the towel and reached for a tangerine from the window ledge. Yvonne got out a wooden salad bowl. “When Frank and two other guys showed up at the door. They’re wearing coveralls and work boots and they look a little rough.”

“Probably doing some landscaping job on campus?”

“Yeah, but it’s a more formal sort of dining room, you know. Not a burgers and fries kind of place.” Yvonne walked around Javeed with the salad bowl and placed it on the counter before tossing in the spinach. She went to the fridge for balsamic vinegar and a lemon.

“Did he see you?”

“Well, that’s just it. I think so. But I didn’t recognize him at first. He waved, and I thought he was waving to the waitress.”

“*Na kheili khoob.*”

“It gets worse. He keeps staring at me, but I’m distracted. I had two laptops out and I’m thinking, I need to put these away before I spill water on them. So the waitress asks, can I move those down to the end of the table for you? She’s trying to be helpful. But I say, a little too loudly, *no they don’t belong here.*” He stopped what he was doing. “What I meant was, I shouldn’t have the laptops out, they don’t belong on the table.”

“No, of course not. So what’s the problem?”

“Frank heard me say it. I think he took it to mean something else. When the waitress was finished with our order, she went straight over to Frank and told him it’s a members-only club. Sorry, you can’t come in.” Javeed went back to his salad, peeling the tangerine and pulling it apart in segments. He tossed the fruit into the bowl while Yvonne poured dressing over top. “I’d

recognized Frank by this point and tried to wave at him. I should have got up and gone over.”

“Oh, Jav. He already thinks you’re a snob.”

“He—what?” Javeed looked at her. “I’ve never said anything against the man.” Yvonne shrugged. “And I didn’t say anything to the waitress.” He sighed. “I don’t want any animosity between Kevin and Saman because of me. I don’t particularly like the family, but—”

“But at least Saman has a friend.”

“Yes.” The salad was finished. Javeed and Yvonne stood against the counter. “It was just stupid. A misunderstanding.”

“Do you want me to say something to Frank next time I see him at practice? I could tell him you were distracted and meant to come over.”

“Nah. That would probably make it worse. Let’s just forget it.”

“Okay, *azizam*. Your call.” She kissed her husband and took the salad to the table.

Javeed found Lance, the new dog, at the Humane Society on River Street. He wasn’t about to pay good money to replace Stella, whom he felt only partially responsible for killing, but he did want to make it up to Kevin and his family, and even to Saman. Lance was a good-looking, healthy, ten-month-old King Charles Spaniel mix. If he were a dog person, Javeed would have liked one like Lance.

He checked with Saman to be sure that Kevin’s family was home and drove over to their house on Saturday afternoon. Lance sat on the floor in the front of the car with him, licking Javeed’s knuckles when he shifted gears.

“Cut it out!” he laughed, stroking the dog’s head, scratching him behind the ears. He’d come with a red-and-blue plaid collar and Javeed had bought him one of those retractable leashes at Bark and Fitz. It stretched sixteen feet, the tag said. They probably didn’t need a new leash, Javeed thought, but what the hell. He’d throw it in.

He steered the car down Oxwood Lane just after four o’clock. As he approached the house, he heard the low hum of a diesel engine and the *beep-beep-beep* of an earth mover backing up. He parked across the road from Kevin’s house, behind a pickup truck with splattered Playboy Bunny mud flaps, and sat watching for a moment before he got out. Kevin’s father and another man, someone from his landscaping company, Javeed presumed, were moving piles of stones from a large metal bin into a trailer. Kevin’s father

was in the earth mover, the Bobcat, wearing a short-sleeved undershirt, his unruly black hair tucked under a Che Guevara beret, raising the bucket while the other man walked around to the back of the trailer.

“Come on, boy,” Javeed said, as he attached the leash to Lance’s collar and opened the car door. “Let’s go.”

Lance jumped up on the seat and crossed over to Javeed’s side. He was out of the car a second later, sneezing and coughing and jumping up on Javeed.

“No—down, boy,” Javeed said, unsure how stern he should be. Lance snorted and began to circle Javeed, pulling on the leash, tangling it and trapping Javeed so that he finally had to undo the leash from the collar, untangle and reattach it. “Stop it!” he said. Then: “Be good. Let’s go.”

They crossed the road, walked up the driveway and around the trailer, and Javeed said hello to the man he didn’t know. The man nodded and continued his work, levelling the stone pile in the trailer with a shovel. Kevin’s dad brought the bucket down and cut the engine when he saw Javeed, but he stayed in the driver’s seat.

“Hi there,” Javeed said, instantly forgetting Kevin’s father’s name.

“What can I do for you?” he asked. He reached forward for a pack of Number 7s on a ledge at the front of the cab.

“I’m Sam’s father, Kevin’s friend’s—”

“Sure, I know who you are.” Kevin’s father lit a cigarette.

“You look busy.” Javeed looked around. The ground was muddy and he noticed that his new shoes, the loafers he’d picked up in London when he was there presenting a conference paper on the misuse of cerebral vasodilators in the treatment of dementia, were covered in mud. He cursed and stepped aside, looking for a drier patch of land. “I wonder if we might have a word? It won’t take long,” he said, settling a few paces back. “I’ve got this dog, here,” he said, holding out the leash in Kevin’s father’s direction.

“I see that.”

“Well, I’m sorry about your dog. Your old dog. It was most unfortunate, what happened.”

“Yes, it was.”

“It was accidental, of course.”

“Was it?” He sat back, crossed a forearm over a protruding belly, and fixed his dark eyes on Javeed.

Javeed looked back at him, unsure why he would say that. Unsure what he should infer from such a remark. He saw something in the man’s eyes

that bothered him. A challenge, or perhaps a threat. “Yes, it was. Of course it was. Accidental and unfortunate.” He leaned over and patted Lance’s head.

“Well, I wanted to get you another dog, as a replacement. As much as one dog can replace another.”

Kevin’s father looked at Javeed, then at Lance, then back at Javeed. “You brought this dog for us?”

“Yes.”

“Did Kevin ask you to do this?”

“No. Kevin doesn’t know about it. I thought it would be better as a surprise.”

“You thought you’d just get us a new dog.”

“Well, I didn’t quite know what else to do. I felt badly—although it was just as much your wife’s fault.” What was Kevin’s mother’s name?

“My *wife’s* fault?”

“Well, if she hadn’t opened the door—”

“Maybe if she just hadn’t got out of bed that day—”

“Okay. Listen. I just wanted to do this and hope that we can get past it. Move on. For the boys’ sake.”

“My wife hasn’t been well,” Kevin’s father said in a low voice. “I don’t know if you knew that. I don’t know what kids talk about. But Stella was helping. She was part of my wife’s treatment, part of her therapy program.”

“I didn’t know. But of course, pets can be an effective part of treatment in some cases.” Javeed thought this was encouraging, that maybe Lance would be considered therapeutic as well. “Maybe Lance will help get her back on track. His name’s Lance, but you can change it if you like. Up to you. Should I tie him up somewhere?” He decided to walk over to the trailer and tie Lance to the hitch, glad the whole incident was almost behind them. He was at the driveway when Kevin’s father restarted the Bobcat’s engine.

“You’ll be okay, boy,” Javeed said to Lance, who’d begun to tremble. He crouched next to the hitch and shortened the leash so that Lance couldn’t get it tangled again. He secured the leash with a knot, tugged to make sure it was tight, and scratched Lance behind the ears one last time. “You’ll be fine,” he said.

He stood up and turned to wave good bye to Kevin’s father, but he wasn’t looking. Javeed started down the driveway and Lance followed him as far as the leash allowed, jerking him back at the end of the tether. He whimpered. Javeed turned. “Go.” He gestured to the trailer. “Go on, boy,” he repeated, speaking to Lance as he would a clingy child. “Just wait until

he's finished his work." He winked at the dog, turned around and started walking again. The whimpering grew louder. He walked to the bottom of the driveway, crossed the road and was at his car when he heard something else: the Bobcat had crossed the lawn; it idled, the bucket lifted, and then there was a sudden hydraulic drop. A brief, ear-piercing cry filled the air. Then quiet.

Javeed felt a shock pass through his body. He stood still, his hand gripping the car door handle. When he turned to look, he saw the man he didn't know running up the driveway. He heard the man shout at Kevin's father, saw him drop to his knees beside Lance and reach out a hand. Kevin's father stayed in the cab of the Bobcat. The man shouted again, words of anger and disbelief, like the ones that didn't form in Javeed's mouth. Javeed watched as the man strode over to the Bobcat and smacked an open hand against its metal side.

"What the fuck?" he shouted. "What the fuck did you do that for?"

He smacked the cab again, but Kevin's father just sat there. The man looked over at Javeed.

Javeed looked away. He opened his car door and got inside. His hands were shaking as he turned the key and slipped *The Talking Heads* into his CD player. He wanted a Number 7, but he didn't smoke.

*I'm an ordinary guy,  
Burning down the house.*

He drove without seeing the road. He ejected the CD, pulled onto a main street and into a drive-through, scalding the roof of his mouth on the coffee he sipped too quickly. When he got home he went straight upstairs to his office. At dinner, he said nothing to Yvonne or Saman about what had happened.

Saman and Kevin competed at Regionals in Nepean a month after Lance was killed. When Yvonne picked them up in the Square One parking lot on a Sunday evening as darkness fell, they were quiet in the car.

"How'd it go, boys?" she asked, but Kevin had his earbuds in and Saman just shrugged his shoulders. She looked at her son in the rear-view mirror, saw his face turned towards the lights of the 401, his body slumped forward. After they dropped Kevin off, she asked him if everything was alright.

"Kevin's quitting the band," he said.

"Oh, honey. The school band? That's too bad."

"And he made us lose the medley relay."

"Made you lose. What do you mean?"

“I hit the wall first with the fly. I got us ahead so we were going to win. But he lost it in the last 100m.”

Yvonne sighed and shook her head. “He must feel terrible.”

“No, he doesn’t. He doesn’t care. I don’t want to go the meets with him anymore.” Sam shoved his gym bag across the seat.

“Sam?”

“He doesn’t care about the band either. We don’t have another trombone player. What are we supposed to do?”

“I don’t know. But he’s your friend; shouldn’t you be there for him?”

“No. He’s not my friend anymore.”

They drove the rest of the way in silence. When they got home, Javeed was in the kitchen starting dinner. Saman went to his room while Yvonne joined her husband at the counter.

“You need to talk to Saman,” she said, repeating what their son had told her.

Instead of agreeing, Javeed said, “It’s okay. Saman’s right about Kevin.” There was an onion on the chopping board, lentils soaking in water in a measuring cup, and an open bottle of wine on the counter. He reached into the cupboard for two glasses.

Yvonne frowned. “No, this is not how you treat a friend. This is not what we teach our son.”

“Our son has already learned his lesson. If a child feels the weight of expectations, he’ll try harder. Kevin will never try too hard.”

“Jav, stop it. Why do you dislike them so much? Why?”

He didn’t look at her as he poured the wine.

“Do you forget what it’s like to be treated this way? For other people to tell their sons not to play with you?”

He was concentrating on Yvonne’s voice, trying to see her face in his mind. The brain stored visual memories in the hippocampus. If triggered, the images could be retrieved in an instant.

“Do you forget how families like yours and mine struggled? It wasn’t that long ago, *azizam*. They were just different struggles.”

He heard reason laced with passion, his wife’s fine balance. He turned and presented her with a glass of wine. When she took it in her hand, he stroked her wrist. “Did I ever tell you that I almost had an arranged marriage?”

She stared at him. “What?”

“I try to hide certain things because I hate to disappoint you. I have a cowardly nature, you see, and I’m sorry. My parents were insisting. I almost didn’t marry you.”

Yvonne sipped her wine. “Do you wish you’d listened to your parents?”

“Oh, god.” Javeed closed his eyes and saw the other woman, a stiff-looking girl from a good family, sacrificed to someone else in the end. He stood in silence until he felt Yvonne’s hand brush across his back as she crossed behind him. Then he opened his eyes. He watched as she poured a second glass of wine, the blood-red liquid flowing into the bowl and dripping down the inside.

“Is it soup you’re making?” she asked.

Before Lance was crushed on Kevin’s driveway, he was a beautiful dog with soft brown fur.

“If that’s what you’d like.”

Stella’s death was accidental.

She nodded and held out the glass to him. “Only talk to Saman if you think you should.”

“I will.” His life with Yvonne was unimaginable with anyone else. He was glad when she smiled and it reminded him that she had chosen him, too. He was glad to be standing with her in their kitchen, about to make lentil soup.