

## Hangman

Jackie had never met Lane Casey before. Sure, she knew his face well from the newspapers and blogs. She'd seen pictures of him ducking into cars surrounded by reporters, him on the street disguised by a hoodie and sunglasses, him on trial with a stoic expression and a crisp suit. She knew the way his dark hair curled a little bit in the front and the way his eyebrows made two straight lines like charcoal, but she hadn't expected him to be so tall.

Or to look so much like Michael.

When Lane arrived at the hospital room, Michael had just finished the last of his pudding and Jackie was sitting near the bed flipping through an issue of *Cook's Illustrated*. She was trying to incorporate more "kidney friendly" dishes into her repertoire so that Michael wouldn't have to eat the meals the nurses brought with the taste of hospital boiled straight into the carrots and broccoli.

Lane strode straight through the door to Michael's side.

"Mikey!" he said with a grin on his face—she hadn't expected that either, how when he smiled, his eyes crinkled up like his face was made for smiling.

Michael sat up a little to hug his brother, but Jackie could tell the effort it took. It seemed the longer he lay in bed, the sicker he became.

"And you must be Jacqueline." Lane turned to her, and she fought the urge to take a step back. "I've heard so many good things about you."

She held out her hand. "I've heard a lot about you too," she said, and she didn't smile back.

She saw then what she had been looking for: like a Louisiana rainstorm the expression flashed across his face and then it was gone. The beeps of Michael's heart monitor tore holes into the silence of the room. All the while, Lane didn't drop his gaze.

He took her hand. "I'm sure."

"I'll go get us some coffee," she said and left the brothers to catch up.

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When she first met Michael, she hadn't known he was Lane Casey's brother. They were on date number six when he told her, or at least, he told her he had a brother, and that his name was Lane, and she had put the pieces together. Michael had brought her to a Thai restaurant, and they had been waiting for their food for thirty-five minutes. He'd convinced her to play hangman, even though she'd told him that she'd never been good at the game.

"There's an art to it," Michael said. "I used to play with my brother and I never won. Not once. He'd whip out these words like 'marquis' and 'skullduggery,' which no eight-year-old should know."

"I didn't know you had a brother," she said.

"Yeah, he's a year and a half younger. Come on, pick a letter."

"Alright, fine." She looked down at the napkin. There were nine spaces. "'A'?"

He wrote a capital 'A' in the second spot, his pen stroke light and neat.

"You two must be close," she said. Her own brother, Brandon, was seven years older and more akin to an estranged uncle than a sibling. "'E'?"

Michael wrote an 'E' at the end. "We are."

She hadn't taken much notice of his brief answers at the time, but afterwards, she couldn't believe how long it took her to put the pieces together.

“Jesus, where’s our food?” She scanned the crowded restaurant, but their waiter was nowhere to be seen.

“Who knows? But the more you think about it, the hungrier you’ll get.” He tapped the napkin with the pen.

“Right, um.” She scratched at her neck. “How’s about ‘U’?”

“What about me?”

She gave him a look. “I don’t know why I put up with you.”

“I don’t know why either,” he said, “but I’m not complaining. No letter ‘U’ though.”

“‘I’?”

“Bingo!” he said, filling in two spaces. “Are you just guessing every vowel?”

“Should I be?”

“Maybe. I started doing that after Lane used ‘nausea’ against me. I’d gotten the ‘A’ and the ‘E’ and never considered there could be a ‘U’ as well.”

She laughed. “I think I might be out of my league here. We never quite graduated from words like ‘apple’ and ‘shoes’ by the time I stopped playing.”

She was smiling down at the napkin, and then she looked up at him. “What did you say your brother’s name is?”

His smile dropped as well and he sat back. “Lane.” The syllable from his lips was steady, not sharp like he was nervous or soft like he was ashamed. The word was measured and he flicked the ‘L’ off his teeth—a challenge.

“Lane Casey,” she said. She’d known Michael’s last name, but the connection hadn’t registered to her before now.

He nodded.

“That’s why you were in Paris for Christmas. That’s where he went after the trial.”

He nodded again.

She remembered thinking, he didn’t look like someone who’d have a brother like Lane Casey. He looked like someone to whom nothing significant had ever happened. His face was freckled and ruddy, and his ears stuck out a little, and his jackets were always misbuttoned. It was amazing how after two months you can think you know someone, even if you never thought to ask if they had a sibling, or if that sibling was responsible for the deaths of eighty-seven people.

“It wasn’t his fault that building came down, and all those people died,” Michael said.

“He didn’t know the concrete wasn’t reinforced according to code. He didn’t know.”

“You really believe that?”

“I do.”

“All that steel that they didn’t use, it saved his company an awful lot of money,” Jackie leaned in towards him. “That was just a coincidence?”

“No, of course not, but just because there was corruption doesn’t mean my brother was the—“

“His own employee swore on oath that he ordered her to cut costs even if it meant breaking building codes,” she argued.

“Shifting blame away from herself.” He balled up a paper napkin in his fist. “Obviously, she’s not going to say it was her idea.”

“It was his building, though. He had his name written all over it. Casey Corporation and all that. He—”

“So you know him personally do you?” Michael said, and he said it with a sneer she’d never seen on his face before.

“Of course not.”

“Well I do. I watched him grow up. I picked him up from school every day and made him sandwiches when our parents were gone. I know what he’s capable of, and he’s not capable of this. He was never capable of this. The courts declared him innocent. Why isn’t that enough?”

“The courts—“

Michael stood up. He pulled out his wallet and threw a couple of bills on the table. “I’m not hungry anymore. Enjoy your pad thai.”

It was so easy to argue the subject of Lane Casey. Jackie and her coworkers used to talk about the trial during lunch breaks, fuming at each new article written. They’d done it at first out of outrage—how could any human being be so cruel, so greedy?—and after a while they’d done it out of habit.

“Wait, Michael,” she called after him.

He seemed tired when he looked down at her. It was an expression she would become well familiar with. “I don’t want to talk about this anymore,” he said.

“Then we won’t talk about it.”

He sat back down. They finished their dinner, and they didn’t talk about it. They didn’t talk about it the whole night, or the next day, or the next week. They didn’t talk about it after she moved into his apartment and they didn’t talk about it even after they got engaged.

The word, it turned out, was facsimile, which she told Michael was unfair, because who even uses that word anymore?

“She walked right up to Raj,” Michael was telling Lane when Jackie walked in. Lane had pulled up a metal chair and was sitting on it backwards. “And she tells him, ‘Actually, that would be epistemology. Not metaphysics.’ You should have seen the look on Raj’s face.”

This, apparently, was hilarious to the two of them. When Lane laughed, he lifted his head and barked at the ceiling. Michael, on the other hand, smiled inward and down. His shoulders shook with silent mirth. They didn’t notice Jackie walk in, two coffees in hand, a third tucked between her arm and stomach.

“I have coffee,” she said.

They looked towards her with little smiles on their faces.

She handed Michael his cup and said to Lane, “I don’t know how you like your coffee, but this is what I have. I put a little sugar and cream in.”

“I drink it black myself,” he said, taking the cup in two hands, “but this is fine.”

“You can go get your own coffee if it’s not,” she said, and it was supposed to be teasing, but it just sounded rude.

“You know what Raj is doing now, though, right?” Michael turned to Lane.

“I haven’t seen the guy since I left for France.” Lane held his coffee and did not drink it.

“Fair,” Michael said, “but listen to this. He’s a bartender, right? But guess what he calls himself. A mixologist.”

Lane and Michael were cracking up again.

“Classic Raj,” Jackie said, as if she knew the guy.

“Isn’t it?” said Lane, his eyes crinkled up into lines.

That was the only thing Jackie said for the next two hours. The brothers bounced banter back and forth like a game of ping-pong, moving in a matter of minutes from topics like the

latest Eagles game to some guy named Adrian who had gotten engaged last Saturday to their mother up in Walnut Creek and how she was doing. Next week, apparently, Lane would drive up to see her, and Jackie was already looking forward to his absence.

It wasn't that he was an unpleasant person to be around. Rather, he was a little too pleasant. She wanted him to be cruel and ugly, but instead he cracked jokes and wore the same freckles on his face as her fiancé. She could remember, on one late evening, trying to count all the freckles on Michael's arm. She lost count after forty or so, and settled on 'a lot.' That seemed to be a more apt descriptor anyway. She wondered if Lane had a lover in France who counted the freckles on his arms.

The nurse came to escort Lane away for the first of his tests. It would be months before they knew if he was even a match and if the transplant could take place.

Michael barely waited for the latch to click shut, before saying, "What the hell, Jackie?"

"Hm?" She was seated opposite Lane's empty chair. She felt the impulse to turn it around so it faced the right direction.

"You weren't exactly being friendly."

"I'm sorry, but he caught me off guard a little." The words were too quick out of her mouth. "I was trying."

"I just—" Michael scratched at his arm. He seemed to fidget so much more these days. She wanted to take him out to the car and drive up into the mountains where he would be able to breathe again. She'd never sympathized with the hippies with their all-natural cures before, but she'd spent so much time sitting in this hospital that it was starting to make sense to her. "I just want you and Lane to get along."

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Michael's father had died at the age of forty-seven. She and Michael were packing for their trip to Walnut Creek when he told her. They were going upstate to have Thanksgiving with his mother. It was the first time that Jackie would meet her.

"I just want you to know in case it comes up," he said.

She remembered wondering how many more awful things lay in the past of the Casey family. A father who died young, and an infamous son. She'd wondered what the next sad story would be.

She leaned into him and rubbed his shoulder. "I'm sorry. How old were you?"

"Seventeen. And my brother, he was fifteen."

She'd seen pictures of Michael as a teenager. He'd been short. Hadn't grown significantly until he made it to college. His hair had tumbled over his ears and collar. She imagined that boy in an oversized funeral suit. She imagined that boy's brother standing next to him, both inconceivably young.

He told her that night that there was a fifty percent chance he would inherit the disease from his father. It was a coin flip Michael had lost and Lane had won.

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It was Lane's idea to tag along. Jackie had offered to pick him and Michael up something for dinner, and when Lane said he'd keep her company, Michael had practically glowed.

As they rode down the elevator, Jackie asked, "What does the 'C' stand for?"

"What?"

"In the news, half of the broadcasts referred to you as Lane C. Casey. I always wondered, what does the C stand for?"



His grin showed a little too much teeth. “If you’ve always wondered, why haven’t you asked Michael?”

The elevator dinged and opened onto the lobby. “We don’t talk about you,” she admitted.

“It stands for Christopher.”

“Oh.”

It was already dark outside, and Jackie folded her arms, trying to conserve warmth as they walked through the parking lot. Her family back home in New Jersey would have made fun of her, but after all these years she was still surprised how cold LA evenings got sometimes. They stopped at the car. She rummaged through her purse, but she couldn’t find her keys.

Lane, standing by the passenger door, said, “You don’t like me, do you?”

She looked up. “You’re direct, aren’t you?”

He smiled again. He smiled so easily. He said, “I am. I don’t like leaving problems to fester.”

“Fester,” she said. “That’s such a gross word. Oh! Here they are.”

She opened the car, got in, and cranked up the heating. Lane slid into the passenger seat.

“You’re avoiding my question,” he said.

“I am.” She started the ignition. “I told Michael I’d be civil, so I’m trying to be civil.”

“Fuck civility,” he said. “It’s just the two of us.”

She turned left onto the street.

When she didn’t say anything, he continued, “Come on. Just say it. You think I’m a murderer. You think I killed those people.”

She braked at the stop sign and took the opportunity to glance at Lane. He was twisted a little in his seat to look at her. His striped purple tie was pinned to his chest by his seatbelt. She

wondered why he was wearing a suit. He wasn't a CEO anymore, although she wasn't sure what he'd been up to in France. He certainly wouldn't need to work if he didn't want to. He had enough money.

"I think you should be in jail," she said, turning back to the road. "I'm sorry but it's the truth."

"Darling," he said. "I don't care what you think. I just hate it when people don't say what they're thinking. It's better just to drag it into the light and be done with it."

"You think we're done with it? The whole subject, just like that?"

"Of course. What else would there be? Do you want me to confess myself guilty and send myself packing to jail?"

"That would be ideal," she said, not quietly, but not loudly, because she hadn't decided to say it at all.

"Well then, you'd have to say goodbye to my kidney as well," he snapped.

She kept her eyes on the road. "I thought you didn't care what I thought."

He paused. "I don't."

They spent the rest of the car ride in silence.

The Mexican place was dimly lit and the counter was manned by a woman who looked like she'd been standing there since the Pleistocene. A girl, college aged, wearing a headband and her hair in a ponytail, was at the register. She ordered a large horchata and twelve carne asada tacos. When she was done, Jackie and Lane walked up.

"Can I help you?" the old woman asked.

"A carnitas burrito, chicken fajitas," Jackie said, rattling off her and Michael's usual order, "and—" She looked at Lane.

“Two carnitas tacos for me, thanks,” he said.

The woman disappeared into the back kitchen. Lane and Jackie stepped away from the counter, and the girl, who was standing near the soda fountain, looked at Lane.

“You look familiar,” she said. “Are you like a celebrity or something?”

Lane raised an eyebrow. “Something like that.”

“But seriously. Who are you?” she asked. She leaned forward, a bit off-balance, and Jackie could smell the rum on her breath. It was only seven in the evening.

“Lane,” said Lane.

The girl squinted at him, and then made an exaggerated face of surprise. “Jesus Christ, Lane Casey, the devil himself. You know, my best friend’s brother is dead because of you.” She prodded him in the chest. “How does that make you feel, Mr. Casey?”

Lane didn’t look surprised. He had the same look on his face that Michael had had when he came home from the hospital that day, when he told her his kidneys were failing him. Lane looked tired. Resigned. His smile was gone and he said, “What was his name?”

“Tom O’Leary,” she said.

Lane held her gaze and nodded. “I’m sorry, if that’s worth anything.”

“It’s not.”

The girl grabbed her food and left. Jackie could hear the noises of the kitchen, and the cars outside, and the buzzing of the lights overhead.

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When they got back to the hospital, Michael was asleep. They sat on the hallway floor outside his room, leaned up against the wall, and ate their food. Jackie’s burrito leaked all over her hands, and Lane passed her a napkin.

“We could play hangman,” she suggested, “until Michael wakes up.”

“Mikey and I used to play that, you know,” he said, “when we were kids.”

She nodded. “He told me about that.”

Lane swallowed his mouthful of food. “I thought you two didn’t talk about me.”

“We didn’t. He told me about hangman though. That you used to beat him every time.”

Lane laughed. “That’s only because I was crafty, used to look up words in the dictionary. I’d find the most obscure ones and memorize them just so I could pull them out the next time we played.”

“What a cheater,” she said.

“It’s called being resourceful.”

“Sure,” she said.

After they finished eating, they continued to sit, side by side, listening to Michael’s heart monitor through the wall. She stared down at the crumpled napkin in her hand and thought of Tom O’Leary.

She looked at Lane. “Do you know their names? All eighty-seven of them?”

Lane brushed the crumbs off of his pants and then rested his head back against the wall.

“Every single one.”