

## 1 Blind Date: Part I

Janey Babson entered the street-level café, sat down at one of the window-side bistro tables, and placed her battered messenger bag by her feet before the host could seat her. Without a menu, she ordered the one item that few diners knew the kitchen made, as the dish had never been advertised nor mentioned in the menu, not once.

“How do you know?” her waitress asked. Her little name badge said PAT, and she was a pert, young woman. Her blue-dyed eyebrows raised in surprise.

“Are you new?”

“No – I mean, yes.”

“Pardon?”

“I mean, I started in the café this week. But I started in the childcare center here before Christmas. I mean, I work part-time in both. So....” Pat grinned sheepishly.

“Ah. Well, I’ve been gone for a while, but my family’s local. This place has been a favorite of ours for a long time, so I know the secret menu.”

“Oh. Okay.” She made note of the order. “And to drink?”

“Black coffee.” Seeing Pat’s question forming, she added, “No cream, no sugar.”

“Oh. Okay. Anything else, ma’am?”

“That’s all. Thank you, Pat.” Janey watched her waitress walk to the back of the café to place her order. *Ma’am*, she thought, *she called me ma’am*. She shook her head, laughing a little. *Do I really look that old?*

Even though Janey had only been gone for one year, many things could change in that time, especially in a city that was always changing in the name of progress. Since her mother’s childhood, the city of Dallas had grown even more modern, its buildings ever taller and sleeker with high tech glass and metal, its many streets and roads redesigned as subterranean tunnels with above ground covers populated with trees and bushes to serve as heatsinks in an ever hotter world. Looking around her, Janey was grateful that this little café still existed as it always was, hidden in plain sight in downtown Dallas’ Commerce Street, within a building that once housed a historic hotel back in the day. With human beings working as hosts, wait staff, and cooks. With tables and chairs made of well-worn wood and napkins made of linen.

She looked through the one-way window, past her image faintly reflected, and towards a cold, rainy December afternoon, the last day of 2059. *Hope the rain stops before tonight's fireworks.*

“Your order, ma’am.”

Janey looked away from the window and smiled as her waitress set down the massive dinner plate and the cup of coffee. “Thank you, Pat.”

The cherry cobbler was exactly how she remembered – the top crust caramelized from being flambéed and still tasting like Tanduay rum. Smack in the middle was a large scoop of vanilla bean ice cream, its mounded structure slowly disintegrating into the rum-soaked cherries. This was her grandmother’s favorite dish, along with the black coffee, and for Janey the cobbler meant she had come home. She had already consumed a third of it when she tapped the old-fashioned comm behind her ear. With a quick series of taps, she keyed in a short-cut number.

Ring-ring.

She took another bite of cobbler.

Ring-ring. Ring-ring. Ring-ri – “Hey, doofus, where the hell are you? Are you in town yet?”

She heard through the comm, a bit faint as if the person was nearby and overtly eavesdropping, “Edmund! Is that any way to greet your sister?” and then her brother’s exasperated response, “Miriam, just go – GO over there! Jeez, woman!”

Janey stifled a snort. “And hello to you too, Eddie,” she replied. Her voice was slightly muffled with cobbler, so she took a quick sip coffee. “So Miriam is there. But aren’t you and Isaac setting up her baby shower right now?”

“Eh, you know how she is. Taking charge to the bitter end. I wouldn’t be surprised, six weeks from now, if she tried to order around the labor and delivery team when she gives birth.” Her brother sighed. “But seriously, you’re back in town, right? You’re able to make it tonight?”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world.” She took a quick bite of cobbler and another sip of coffee.

“So where are you – wait. Are you eating?”

“Yup.”

“You’re back and you’re someplace eating – JANEY!”

She started laughing, imagining her brother’s outraged expression. “You better come on down before I eat all of this yummy yummy cobbler.”

“YOU SUCK.”

“Edmund!” This time Isaac, Miriam’s younger brother, was scolding Eddie as the comm disconnected.

*Heb. Isaac and Miriam – the same as always.*

Janey ate a few more bites and then set down her spoon, leaving half of the dish remaining for her brother. Just like when they were younger, they had equal shares, as was appropriate for being twins.

Pat returned. “Are you doing all right, ma’am?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“Would you like a takeaway box?”

“No. I’d like another black coffee and also one more coffee, but this one with cream and sugar.”

“I’ll get that right out, ma’am.”

“Thank you.” Janey smiled a little as Pat walked away. *Ma’am again.* She guessed her waitress was seventeen or eighteen, perhaps a high school senior lucky enough to secure a job during the school holidays. Being twenty-six, Janey supposed that made her an official adult in Pat’s eyes. She looked at the window again, this time seeing her reflection. Physically, she was twenty-six, but mentally, well...

“Hey, doofus.”

Janey blinked away her reverie and saw a tall, fit man with floppy dark brown hair, honey-colored skin, and silver gray eyes. In other words, he looked like a young David Babson, their father, while Janey took after their maternal grandmother, Zoey Fitzpatrick, with her shorter stature, darker hair, olive skin, and cobalt blue eyes. In the past, Janey used to be bothered that they looked so dissimilar that people wouldn’t believe that they were related, let alone were twins. But such concerns were silly these days, as she saw a man who looked frazzled and overwhelmed with new-found responsibilities, and yet overjoyed with what the future held for him.

“Hey, goober,” she replied, as she stood up and hugged her brother.

“Hmmp,” he said.

“What?”

“Did you go directly from the airport to here? You didn’t stop by the house?”

“Yeah, I was craving Lilian’s cobbler. I’ll go by the house after. Why do you ask?”

“It’s because, Janey-girl, you STINK.”

Janey shoved her brother back as he laughed. “GOD, Eddie, seriously?” She sat back down and watched him sit on the chair opposite of hers, pick up the second spoon from the unused place setting, and start tearing into the second half of the dish.

“That’s what I miss this past year – teasing you,” Eddie said between bites. “I mean, I appreciate that you’ve touched base with us a couple of times a month so that we’d know that you weren’t dead, but no one appreciates my sense of humor.”

Janey smirked. “Even Miriam and Isaac?”

“Isaac’s okay, but he just tolerates it – doesn’t play at all. As for Miriam, that woman takes herself too seriously. For instance, just the other day, I said, ‘Hail, Miriam, full of Grace, the Lord is with thee!’”

“YOU DID NOT.” Janey knew that Miriam was carrying a girl, and she had already named her daughter Grace.

“And she punched me!”

Janey laughed.

“It hurt!” Eddie pouted, looking like a cross between an aggrieved victim and a little boy, and shoveled more cobbler in his mouth as if it were a consolation prize. “No sense of humor at all.”

Janey shook her head, still laughing. “You are such a dork. I can’t believe technically you’re my older brother.”

“Only by ten minutes. You should’ve been more assertive.”

“And I can’t believe you’re going to be a father.”

Eddie paused in his eating. “You and me both.”

Janey propped her chin on her interlaced hands as she regarded her brother. “I gotta say, I was surprised when you told me. I was in Greece at the time. Nearly choked on my souvlaki.”

“Heh.”

“I didn’t even know Miriam wanted a child.”

“She did. But she kept it to herself until she couldn’t anymore. What surprised me was that she wanted ME to be the father.”

“Since she’s ace.”

“Yup.”

“And you’re married to Isaac.”

“Yup.”

“Wasn’t that awkward?”

“Not really. Remember, Miriam was my best friend first, and I met Isaac through her.” He paused. “Actually, I fell in love with Miriam before I fell in love with Isaac.”

“Well – DUH.”

Eddie chuckled. “Yeah, I guess that was pretty obvious.” He laughed again. “Just my luck that she only wanted a platonic relationship with me – and just my luck that she decided to set me up with her brother, whom I found absolutely irresistible.”

“So... you and Isaac marrying so quickly earlier this year and then Miriam getting pregnant later on – it’s so that you all three can be related? And Grace will technically have three parents?”

“I don’t think we intentionally planned it that way.”

Janey stared at her brother. “Maybe not you or Isaac, but I bet Miriam did.” She took a sip of coffee.

Eddie shrugged. “You know, you’re probably right.” He smiled, shaking his head. “The analytical vixen that she is.”

Janey nearly choked, stifling a laugh.

“Ma’am, are you okay?” Pat had arrived with a tray laden with a coffee pot, a coffee cup with spoon, and a small saucer with creamer capsules and sugar cubes.

Janey waved her hand as she cleared her throat. “I’m fine.” She saw Pat glance at Eddie with a shy smile, set the cup and saucer on the table, filled up Eddie’s cup, and topped off Janey’s.

“Would you like anything else?”

“We’re good – thank you.”

Pat looked at the nearly empty plate. “How’s the cobbler?”

Before Janey could respond, Eddie replied, “Heavenly.”

Pat’s smile widened a little. “I’ve heard it’s good. I’ve never tried it.”

“Really?” Eddie took the clean spoon from his cup, dried it on his linen napkin, scooped up an untouched area of cobbler, and offered it to Pat. “Here, try it.”

“Ummm....”

“It’s really goo-ood!” Eddie’s voice ended on a sing-song, falsetto note.

Pat stared at Eddie’s silver gray eyes and then shrugged. She took the offered spoon and put it in her mouth. “Oh!”

“See? Delicious, isn’t it?”

“Yes! It really is!” She looked at the plate. “It’s nearly gone, though. Do you want me to take that away?”

“Nope,” Eddie said, beaming. “I’ll just scrape this plate clean. This is food for the gods. It’ll be a sin to waste it.”

Pat giggled. “Your friend is really funny,” she said to Janey.

“He’s my brother.”

“Oh!” Pat, flustered, glanced at Eddie again and then quickly back to Janey. “Ummm, well, just ask if you two need anything else, okay?”

“Okay. Thank you,” Janey replied as Eddie gave a quick thumbs up. Janey saw Pat walk away, this time with a little bounce to her step and a happy, golden glow all around her. She looked at her brother. “Flirt.”

“What? Me? Noooo.”

“And you’re a married man. No more on the side for you – well except for Miriam, but that doesn’t count.”

“That DEFINITELY doesn’t count. Miriam is nobody’s ‘on-the-side.’” As Eddie carefully and meticulously scraped every last bit of cobbler, he said, “When I said that it really wasn’t awkward when Miriam asked me to be the father, I lied. It was awkward in one respect – and you probably know why.”

“Because Miriam wanted to go natural.”

“Yes.” He paused. “Miriam is special. She doesn’t do sex, doesn’t want sex. And I respect her; I know our boundaries. So when she asked me to help her make a baby without medical intervention – and Isaac gave Miriam his support – I realized how much she trusted me. How much Isaac trusted me.” He paused again. “When Isaac went away on a weekend business trip, we were left alone in the house. It was awkward... and embarrassing... and absurd. But it wasn’t awful.” He shook his head, remembering. “Miriam chose this way because it was the simplest. If she hadn’t gotten pregnant this first time, she told me that we’d go the artificial route, and I was okay with that. Lucky for us we didn’t have to try again.” He gathered the last cobbler bits on the spoon, licked it clean, and set the spoon on the empty plate.

Janey slid the plate aside, reached over, and held her brother’s hands. “You’ll be a good father, Eddie.”

“How can you tell?”

“Because you’re already a good husband – to both Isaac and Miriam.”

Eddie chuckled. “I guess you, of all people, would know.”

“Damn right.”

He squeezed her hands. *I know you needed to take off – to get away and just be yourself for a while – but a year without talking like this... that was a helluva long time, Janey.*

She stared at her brother, for he had switched to sending instead of speaking, so she felt and saw everything behind those words. In response, she sent not words. Instead, flowing from herself to him, were memories of the past year as she traveled the world, just one lone woman seeing how Earth’s inhabitants lived – and lived with each other.

The gang of children who beat up a mangy, ugly dog and the one little girl who came to its rescue, but too late. The father driving an ancient motorcycle laden with wares one meter high and one meter wide to sell to the night market, humming a song in a language he didn’t understand. A group of mothers, their skin wrinkly and distended from several childbirths, enjoying a thermal bath in the nude, away from jeering, lascivious male eyes that would meet them as soon as they left the safe environs of the women’s bathhouse. A crackdown of would-be protestors, who had no chance against authorities with powerful firepower and superior algorithmic calculations and yet would return again, even before their dead had a chance to cool in their graves.

These and many others, from small moments to major events, she witnessed and sometimes participated, as she learned how to be Amanda Jane Babson on a planet both beautiful and brutal.

“God, Janey,” her brother said vocally. His silver gray eyes stared widely at Janey’s blue eyes, but then he blinked, preventing tears, and cleared his throat. “Don’t make me cry in public, you goober.”

“Heh.” Janey released her brother’s hands and shook her head, for after one year, she had become unused to sending, that telepathic and acutely intimate communication of thoughts and emotions that was unique to her family. She picked up her cup and took a long sip. “Drink up before your coffee gets cold.”

“Okay – MOM.” Eddie dropped in two creams and two sugars and stirred with his cobbler spoon since Pat took away the coffee spoon. “Speaking of Mom, you know that Mom and Dad won’t be at the shower, right?”

“I figure,” Janey said, “since it’ll be at Saint Augustine’s.” She pointed up, towards the rooftop bar several floors above the café.

“Even though Isaac reserved the whole space, there’d be no way to keep the shower private if world-renowned physicist Dr. AJ Fitzpatrick was attending.”

“Nobel Prize winning,” Janey added.

“Mother of Quantum Entanglement Communication,” Eddie included.

Janey sighed. “Mom would hate that.”

“We’d all hate that. Anonymity is a luxury these days. That’s why few know that ADE Corporation that owns this building is Miriam and Isaac’s company. They wouldn’t be able to eat lunch in peace at the restaurant named after their grandmother if everyone knew.” Eddie shook his head. “It’s too bad Mom’s work requires her to have a public face wherever she goes.”

“So what will they do?”

“They’ll come when Grace is born, since the birthing center’s a secured place as it is. Also, Mom and Dad already paid for everything in the nursery, even all the baby care stuff, so we really don’t need anything else. Honestly, this shower is more for pre-mom Miriam – one last, late-night adults-only party before the baby is born. Most of the Adebayos are overseas and can’t make it, but some of the maternal Martín cousins are local, so they’ll be there, as well as close friends of ours from work and the university. Even though Saint Augustine’s on the rooftop, it isn’t huge, so it’ll feel cozy without feeling claustrophobic. And of course, at midnight, we’ll have a perfect view of the downtown fireworks over the Reunion Tower.”

“Less cheesy baby shower, more casual grown-up get-together, then? That fits Miriam perfectly.”

“Exactly.”

“Good. I don’t think I’d be able to hold it together if I had to do anything with pastel pink jelly beans or rolls of toilet paper.”

Eddie snorted. “Miriam would’ve KILLED me and Isaac if we had done anything like that.” He glanced at his watch. “Crap. I’d better head back before either Isaac or Miriam badgers me for being away too long. It starts in two hours, and we still have to set up the suya taco bar.” He knocked back his now lukewarm coffee, quickly swiped his mouth with a napkin, and stood up. “You’re still heading to the house to settle in and wash up?”

“Yup.”

“Cool – the passcode’s unchanged. Also, don’t take too long. Downtown’ll get pretty crowded, so you might wanna come early.”

“Okay.”

“And don’t worry about the bill – it’s taken care of.”

“Eddie –” Janey stood up.

He walked over to her side and hugged her again. “You look really good – I meant to say that earlier.”

“You too. Being a grown-up suits you.”



“Heh!” Eddie pulled away and started to leave. “Oh, heads up,” he said, looking back a moment, “I’ve invited someone. Really cool guy – in town for a morning sound production session at ADE Games. I convinced him to stick around for another day since the session ran long and it’s New Year’s Eve. You two should meet.”

“Wha – what? Are you setting me up on a blind date?”

But Janey only saw him pretend not to hear her as he waved good-bye, walked faster, and then exited the café.

“SERIOUSLY?”

Even though her brother’s house stayed the same, Janey felt weird entering it while its owners were away. This was never her home when she lived in Dallas, as she had her own tiny apartment, which she had let go – along with all of her household possessions – when she set off for her yearlong journey around the world. Technically, it was Isaac and Miriam’s home, a modest three bedroom ranch house originally purchased by their grandmother Lilian, who had passed away several years before Eddie arrived in Dallas to attend their parents’ university alma mater; Janey arrived a bit later. Its ordinary appearance helped secure the inconspicuous anonymity of the Adebayos that Eddie had talked about, and this fact only added to Janey’s sense that she was an intruder in another person’s private space, even though she knew exactly where everything was laid out.

One obvious change, however, was the guest bedroom. It was now a nursery. Janey took in the cheery, light green walls and ceiling, with a forest themed mural tastefully spanning one wall that reminded her of *Winnie the Pooh*; a minimalist crib and changing table; a rocking chair; and a simple pull-out sofa, perhaps so that if Miriam, Isaac, or Eddie needed to stay with the baby overnight, one of them could simply crash in the nursery. Until Grace arrived, Janey figured that sofa would serve as a guest bed.

Standing in the middle of a beautiful, happy space anticipating a baby, Janey, in spite of everything that she had gone through and had overcome, still felt a twinge of sadness. *Hah*, she thought, *is this what Eddie still saw in me? Is this why he wants me to meet this mystery man?* She shook her head and left the nursery for the hall bathroom. After a short shower, a quick change in a simple button-up shirt and jeans, and her still-damp hair put up in yet another ponytail, she shouldered on her coat, stepped outside, and got into the waiting autonomous car. The vehicle was privately owned, which was one of the few indicators that the Adebayos weren’t your typical middle-class household.

The route was already preset, with Saint Augustine’s as the terminus point, but Janey added a middle detour. With the familiar hum of an electric car, it pulled away from the curb and sped efficiently through residential streets and then thoroughfares that crisscrossed the metropolitan area that locals still called the Metroplex. Janey leaned back into her seat and closed her eyes, letting her mind drift along to the car’s hum. After a short while, it arrived at a rambling nature preserve on the extreme southeast of the Metroplex. It stopped but didn’t power down, as if it were a horse that was waiting for its rider to dismount.

The door opened with the hiss of hidden pneumatics, and Janey stepped down. It was early evening on New Year’s Eve, and no one was there. It didn’t matter. Janey began walking, first across a wide pavement and then a weedy field. Soon enough she found the trail, and after a while, she simply closed her eyes as she walked. When she opened them again, she was where she needed to be.

The old tree was as she remembered – a species that shouldn’t have existed in modern-day Earth. Even in winter, without its leaves, it was still majestic, its broad, many-fingered branches gnarled and extending out and up. She walked up to it. Even though it was empty and locked, she leaned forward, her forehead resting against its rough, old trunk.

*I miss you*, she sent. But the response was only silence.

She wasn’t a princess. She didn’t need saving. There wasn’t a prince, and this wasn’t a fairy tale. She also wasn’t a kickass superhero. There were no superhuman powers to protect a world that needed saving. There wasn’t a supervillain, and this wasn’t an epic adventure.

She was just Janey, and she missed her best friend.

After a long, silent minute, she gave an appreciative pat to the trunk and made her way back to the electric horseless carriage that awaited her.

*Blind date*, she thought, as the little car sped away from trees and dirt, back to metal and glass. She stared out the passenger window, trying to be optimistic. *Third time’s a charm*.