

### 3 Lost

The first night after Janey came out of her coma, her brother called a few minutes before midnight, saying, “Ummm... hey. Sorry.”

Janey, still awake, replied, “Yeah, way to shut down a conversation, dumbass.”

He sighed. “I’m so sorry, Janey.” She could hear Eddie shake his head. “It was so weird, eavesdropping on you and Dad, him sending like that, and then Mom warning me not to accidentally tell you everything. Got me so paranoid that I didn’t know how to talk normal to you, and what came out was –”

“– garbage.”

“Yeah.” He paused. “Hell, Janey, I’ve never kept a secret from you in my entire life, and now I’m supposed to keep my big mouth shut on THIS? Aren’t you mad?”

“I was. But not anymore. Dad explained why I couldn’t know.”

“What’d he say?”

“That it was for my safety, that I should trust you all... and that I’m too young to know right now.” Janey gave a snort of laughter. “Makes me sound like a freakin’ preschooler.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Not your fault.” After an awkward silence, Janey said, “You know what? I’m sick of talking about this. How’re you? How’s your first day in college?”

“Ummm... the RA is kinda cute?”

Janey made an odd face and then burst out laughing. “Eddie, you are such a doofus.”

“... Christ, I missed that.”

“You missed what?”

Even with the volume of the house comm speakers turned low, Janey could hear Eddie smile. “Your laugh.”

She stumbled as she tried to find her way, feeling only damp, cool air and hearing her footfalls echo in a space that felt cavernous and desolate.

It was so dark that she almost forgot how to see.

But then her eyes adjusted, and she noticed a cold, blue light faintly above her. Looking up, she saw them – innumerable living dots bathing the darkness – and in that eerie, glowing illumination, she could just make out what had always been there, right in front of her...

Janey woke up, her head hurting. *Ab, not again*, she thought, groaning. She had a feeling that she had a dream, but whatever it was, it was gone, leaving only a faint echo of fear and a dull, annoying headache. She sat up, reached over to the bedside table, got her bottle of mineral water, and drank.

In the early days after she came out of her coma, Janey would go to bed for the night, and her parents and brother would worry, wondering whether she would wake up in the morning or several months later. But after a month of uneventful cycles of sleeping and waking, their worry faded away, and she didn't have to wake up to her well-meaning, early-rising father hovering on the other side of her closed door, lightly knocking on everyone's behalf, and asking, “Janey, are you awake?”

She set the empty bottle back on the side table, lay back down, and, staring at a ceiling that was still dark, waited for her headache to go away.

When Janey had awoken from her coma, she had felt that only a moment had passed from her stepping into the portal on the day of the family reunion to finding herself in her bedroom; in her head, her last school day was only twenty-four hours ago. So, upon waking, she picked up her where she had left off with her schoolwork – except that she was seventeen years old instead of sixteen. When she realized that, if she stayed at her current pace, she would finish high school two years later, at age nineteen, she declared, “No. No way. I'm going to finish high school this damn year.”

“You sure?” her parents asked.

“YES.”

Study. Sleep. Eat. Read. Write. Solve. Test. Study more. Sleep sometimes. Eat whenever. Read-write-solve. Test more. Janey practically lived in the house's study room, immobile for hours in front of the vid screen delivering her schoolwork. Somewhere in the mix, she got some exercise – mostly running at the indoor track of her mother's university – to remind herself that she wasn't just a brain churning through academic material like a machine.

Her father helped, even when his leave ended after Christmas and he returned to Janey's high school. Her mother helped, even when she was away at yet another public engagement (which she never got comfortable doing because it took her away from her family and her lab at the university). Her brother helped, even after he returned to his campus after Thanksgiving Break, even after he adjusted to being a first year college student over a thousand miles away from home.

Any time that Janey hinted that she felt bad for having to depend on so much help from her family, Eddie would remind her, his voice booming through the house comm’s speakers, “You were in a coma for nine months; you’re trying to cram in two years of high school in another nine months. Jesus, Janey, give yourself a fuckin’ break!”

*Ab*, she thought, her headache finally gone, *it’s getting light out.*

The ceiling started to lighten up as the sun rose on a bright morning, but Janey still lay in her bed. Staring at nothing, she was still a little stunned by last week’s news: she had finished all of her high school graduation requirements. It took twelve months, and there was no formal pomp and circumstance for a lone, late-summer high school graduate. It didn’t matter. Eddie hadn’t attended his own graduation ceremony, not wanting to see John and the rest of the seniors from the ill-fated Halloween party, and Janey felt no emotion whatsoever for her high school alma mater. Still, it felt weird not having to launch herself out of bed, to start the daily schoolwork grind. It felt weird not knowing exactly what she would be doing next.

Knock knock knock. “Janey, are you awake?”

She smiled. It had been a while since her father checked on her. “Yeah, Dad.” She sat up and swung her legs over the side of her bed.

“You all packed?”

She glanced at her three suitcases next to her night stand. “Did it last night.”

“Okay. Your brother’s already up, and your mom made breakfast.”

“Are there pancakes?” she asked.

Her father chuckled through the door. “There’s always pancakes.”

“Yay!”

He chuckled again. “When you’re ready, sweetie.”

“Thanks, Dad. I won’t be long.”

She heard her father walk away from her door. *Well*, she thought, *here we go*. She stood up to get ready.

Janey didn’t know exactly what she would be doing next. But whatever it was, it would be in Dallas.

Burnt out on school and fighting cabin fever, Janey moved into her brother’s off-campus apartment, intending to take a year off to work while figuring out what she wanted to do when she

eventually went to college. But first, she needed to get a job even though she had no idea where to begin since she had never worked for pay in her entire life, least of all in a new city.

Noticing Janey fretting after she had settled in after a couple of days, Eddie said, “Miriam could help.”

“Who’s Miriam?”

He replied as he tapped his comm, placing a call, “She was my dorm’s RA when I lived on-campus.”

Janey frowned, confused at first, but then she remembered. “You mean, the ‘kinda cute?’” She stared at her brother. “Is she your GIRLFRIEND?” she exclaimed.

He gave a small smile but shook his head. “She is cute. But she’s a friend, not a girlfriend – oh, hey, Miriam, it’s Eddie.” He paused. “Yeah... me too. Hey, do you still have the info for that staffing agency you used to work for? Yeah, Omnibus Staffing.” He paused again. “You do? Great!” He gave Janey a thumbs up. “No, not for me. My sister’s just moved into town, and right now she’s an unemployed teenager, and I just CANNOT ABIDE a freeloader.”

“Eddie!” Janey punched his shoulder as he laughed. She heard a little “ding!” from Eddie’s comm.

“Got it,” he said, and he projected from his comm the agency’s contact information as a little holographic business card so that Janey could see as well. “Thanks, Miriam. I owe you one.” He paused, listening. “Yeah. See you later.” He tapped his comm, disconnecting the call. He gave a little exhale.

“So... just a friend?” Janey asked.

He sighed and gestured sharply at the image of a glowing business card floating in front of them. “Woman, FOCUS.”

“Okay, okay.” Janey peered at the information. After a moment, she declared, “Jeez, I’m nervous. I’ve never applied for a job before.”

He patted her back. “You’ll do fine.”

It was only supposed to be a year off for work. But Janey had settled into a routine of work and home that was so comforting in its predictability that she decided to let college go for the time being – or at least until Eddie finished his own undergraduate studies in Mathematics and Psychology. At first she was worried that their parents would disapprove, but they agreed that, at nineteen, she was old enough to determine what was best for herself.

“Besides,” their mother said, her voice loud and clear from the apartment’s comm, “your brother’s taking enough classes to count for both of you.”

Eddie, sleep-deprived from pulling yet another all-nighter writing a paper, moaned, “Don’t remind me....”

Janey, sitting back with a tall glass of cold, sweet tea after a long day, crowed, “Sucks to be YOU!”

“Janey, be nice,” their mother chided, but she was chuckling.

“Take care of each other,” their father added.

“Of course, Dad,” Eddie and Janey said together.

With that worry gone, Janey resumed her life as her brother’s roommate and a temporary employee assigned to various long-term jobs from her staffing agency’s highly eclectic clients.

When Janey was new at the agency, she would accept whatever assignments her agency offered her. She had donned mascot costumes and waved at apathetic would-be clients at various company events. At one weeklong wedding exposition, she had manned catering kiosks, served food samples, and tried not to punch walls when dealing with entitled, sleazy would-be grooms and fathers-in-law.

*Assholes.*

In another assignment, Janey was supposed to digitize the paper archives of a company’s private daycare, but she found herself babysitting an entire room of terrified four-year olds because their preschool teacher was out sick. The fulltime employee remaining was the teacher’s aide (who wasn’t that much older than Janey), who was trying to calm down one particularly out-of-control little boy. He screamed incoherently, flailing on the floor.

Janey began to twitch, as the young aide looked as if she was about to snap, and Janey thought, *Oh God, please don’t bit him* –

But then, just in time, a much older teacher showed up to assist. Janey left, relieved that she could return to her original duties, but she couldn’t help but look back, seeing the little boy dissolve into sobs as the veteran teacher held him without saying a word. For some reason, the image of that hit her with a keen ache in her chest. *NEVER AGAIN*, she thought. Then and there, she swore never to take an assignment that involved children.

After a number of these unpredictable assignments – *Christ, another one?* – she requested structured, corporate assignments, even though most of those clients preferred college students. The first of those types of assignments was Janey filling in for a woman on maternity leave, whose job was

to audit logistical data with statistical analysis because even AI-generated algorithms weren't 100% foolproof.

After two months of that – proving that she wasn't incompetent just because she only had a high school diploma – her next assignment was for the same company, negotiating on-time shipping schedules with freight dispatchers. When speaking to them via non-vid comms, they were convinced that Janey was a hard-drinking, hard-smoking middle-aged veteran of the industry, instead of a teenaged girl with a head cold.

Janey would still get the other, lower-skilled jobs as well, but it didn't bother her as much anymore. As long as she got paid well enough and the duties weren't illegal, immoral, or demoralizing, then she'd roll out of bed and go to work.

Miriam, who had become a big sister figure for Janey, once asked her, “If you're not planning to go to college, then why don't you look for a permanent position?”

“Maybe... because I don't know what I want to do permanently.”

“Are you telling me that nothing you've done has captured your interest? What are you looking for?”

Janey shrugged. “Like I said – I don't know.”

Miriam shook her head and shrugged. “Well, you're still young. You have time, I guess.”

And after that conversation, nothing had changed.

“Ahhh,” Janey sighed, coming home after another long day. She was filling in as a high-level executive's assistant at a financial services company, so she had to wear a skirt-suit set with heels, attire that she despised. Once at home, she kicked off the heels, washed off the makeup, rumbled her hair-do, and quickly changed into a T-shirt and sweatpants. She was about to pour herself a glass of tea when the apartment door opened and in came Eddie, looking exhausted as always, and Miriam, toting a cooler with homemade food, which she did more often these days.

“Miriam, you didn't have to,” Janey started, but Eddie interrupted, “Don't bother. You know that she'll do whatever she wants to do.” He kicked off his shoes.

“Edmund!” Miriam chided. She closed the door behind her and slipped off her shoes. “Who else is going to make sure you two eat a balanced meal, eh?”

“But tacos are delicious,” Janey said.

“That's what I said!” Eddie responded.

Miriam exhaled a long-suffering sigh. “One cannot live on tacos and pancakes alone.”

Eddie padded over to the breakfast nook and collapsed into a chair. “Okay, MOM.”

Miriam followed into the kitchen, set down the cooler on the table, leaned over, and kissed the top of Eddie’s head. She never took being called a mom an insult, even though she was a stunningly beautiful twenty-seven year old Afro-Latina who wasn’t married nor had children. “Well, you ARE younger than I am.”

“Only seven years,” Eddie protested.

“You’re younger than my little brother.”

He looked up and held her dark, luminous eyes. “I’m not a kid, Miriam.”

She regarded him and then looked away. “You’re right,” she said. “You are not.”

Janey glanced at Eddie and then at Miriam. Even though she couldn’t see their colors, she could feel the tension between them. “Ummm...”

Eddie closed his eyes and exhaled. “Shit.” He reached up and wrapped his arms around Miriam’s waist. Miriam looked down, surprised. Then her body softened as she murmured, “Edmund,” and that was when Janey quietly yet quickly exited the kitchen and discretely went to her bedroom.

Janey waited, leaning against her closed bedroom door. She felt herself feel sad and angry, which made no sense to her. So her brother was having relationship problems with Miriam – so what? Yet she had to breathe slowly, forcing her heart to stop aching, to reign in emotions that didn’t match her thoughts. *Why am I upset?*, she thought. *Where is this coming from?* After a while, she had calmed down, and then she heard the front door open and close. She peeked out, seeing Eddie alone and unloading Miriam’s cooler of her uniquely fusion meals, of Nigerian-TexMex dishes.

He saw Janey and nodded. “Hey.”

Janey noticed his silver gray eyes, red-rimmed and puffy. “Ummm... are you and Miriam okay?”

“Yeah.” He shook his head. “Sorry about that. I thought we had cleared things up, but – not quite. We’re all good now.”

“Uh... can I ask what happened?”

He smiled. “It’s no secret. You know that I’ve been dating Miriam’s brother Isaac, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I guess we were getting a little too exclusive – no, I know we were getting too exclusive...”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“I mean that we were shutting Miriam out. I was shutting Miriam out. Which is awful because she’s the first friend I made when I came here on my first day. Sure, she started out as my dorm’s RA and kinda treated me like a kid back then – understandably, because I was seventeen then – but she was a great listener when I felt overwhelmed with being so far away from you, Mom, and Dad. She may as well be family. Actually... she IS family.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“I mean, did you know that Miriam and Isaac’s grandmother was once taught by Lola Zoey?”

“Lola Zoey? Mom’s mom?”

“Yeah. Lola Zoey used to be an English professor here in Dallas, remember? But more importantly, when Mom found out that my best friend at college was Miriam Adebayo, she told me that Lola Zoey leased her townhouse to Miriam’s grandmother Lilian, and when Lola Zoey died, she bequeathed the townhouse to Lilian so that she and her grandkids didn’t have to move. She raised Miriam and Isaac there – in the same home where our own mom grew up – and when Lilian died years later, the property went to Miriam and Isaac.”

“WOW. Were you surprised? That our family knows Miriam’s family?”

Eddie shrugged. “Not really. Weird things have always happened to our family, after all.”

Janey nodded. “That’s true.... But Miriam lived in the dorms when you met her. So does that mean Isaac lives in Mom’s childhood home?”

“GOD, that would be weird.” Eddie made an odd face, but Janey decided not to ask why. He continued, “No, the property value had skyrocketed like crazy, so they sold it. Invested a lot of it, and the remainder Miriam used to fund her schooling; Isaac took his share and traveled.”

“Oh, so that’s why you didn’t meet Isaac until last year.”

“Yes. He came back to town a year ago, and Miriam introduced me to him then. We hit it off really well.” Eddie blushed a little. “A little too well. I was neglecting my best friend, and Isaac was neglecting his big sister, but Miriam didn’t want to ruin anything, so she just kept quiet. And suffered.”

“Which you could see.”

“Which I could see. It pissed me off, that she’d lie that everything was fine. I can’t read minds, Janey, but I can read emotions. And Miriam was hurting. I called her on it, forced her to tell me what’s wrong, and she played the whole ‘I’m older, I know what’s best, don’t worry about me’ bullshit.” He shook his head. “I told her – right here – that I would rather break up with my lover than lose my best friend.”

“WOW.” Janey felt a little twinge in her heart that quickly faded away.



“Yeah,” Eddie replied. “She cried, I cried, it was one crying party. But we cleared the air – finally. I’ll talk with Isaac about it tonight.”

“Will he be mad?”

“Maybe. But if he’s sincere that he loves me... then it’ll be okay.”

Janey nodded. Then she said, “That’s another thing I didn’t know.”

“What?”

“That Isaac’s younger. I thought he and Miriam were twins. They look exactly alike, except one’s male and tall and the other’s female and not as tall.”

Eddie shrugged. “Nah – Isaac’s two years younger than Miriam.”

“So he’s five years older than you.”

“Yup.”

“Cradle-robber.”

Eddie gave a bark of laughter. “Like that story of Mom and Dad’s first date?”

“Hah!” Janey laughed. “God, Mom was a player. And Dad was –”

“Lamb to slaughter. Good thing, though, or else we wouldn’t be here.”

“True.” She opened a container, and the aroma made her mouth water. “We wouldn’t be here, enjoying your not-girlfriend’s yummy yummy food.”

Eddie was quiet. “Janey,” he asked, “if you ever feel that I’m shutting you out, you’d tell me, right?”

She rolled her eyes. “You goober. Of course. DUH. Now let’s eat. I’m starving!”

He grinned. “Okay.”

Looking up, she saw them, and she realized what they were – glow worms. Innumerable glow worms, adhered tightly against the cavern ceiling, illuminating the darkness and the silence.

In their soft, blue glow, she could just make out what had always been there in that hidden place, right in front of her: six kneeling figures, separated from each other and yet positioned in a circle with heads bowed low towards an unseen center. She gasped, for she saw fluorescing waves of indigo emanating from their bodies like negatively imaged coronas.

Then one of them raised its head and saw her...

RIIING! RIIING! RIIING! RIII –

Twenty-two year old Janey jolted into waking and yelled, “Alarm off, dammit!” She flopped back, groaning, and tried to recall her dream. *Jeez, why can’t I ever remember?* She suspected that she had

the same dream, as she had woken up from her nap with that all-too-familiar feeling: the faint echo of a panic-stricken fear, the dull throb of a slight headache. It annoyed her, that she likely had been having the same dream for several years, but not once could she remember anything once she woke up. *Argh. Whatever.* She sat up, feeling disoriented for having slept heavily on a post-lunch Saturday, and was relieved that she didn't sleep through her alarm. It would have been bad to be late.

After all, her brother was graduating today.

“Ah, that took forever,” Janey's mother said in a low voice, gesturing at the closing pomp and circumstance before them. She was wearing a dark wig, large glasses, and barely-there make-up in order to blend in as just another parent, watching her grown children graduate from college.

“It does feel interminable,” Miriam, sitting in front of her, agreed, “especially since Edmund walked across the stage two hours ago.”

Janey's mother glanced at a direction, down and in front of them where Eddie was likely sitting among the massive throng of black-robed graduates, and then at her father, who sat next to her mother. Janey, sitting on her mother's other side, saw her father nod in silent confirmation. Just by her parents' body language, Janey guessed that they had received a sending from Eddie. Her mother declared, “Let's go before we're caught in the crowds.”

Isaac, who was sitting next to Miriam, looked back. “Are you sure, Mrs. Babson?” he asked. He was careful not to say “Dr. Fitzpatrick” or “AJ” in public but used Janey's mother's alias.

“Yes,” Janey's mother replied. “Eddie'll meet us at just outside the main foyer.”

As they got up as a unit – her mother, her father, Miriam, Isaac, and Janey herself – Janey wondered if Eddie ever got around to telling Miriam and Isaac about the unique qualities of their family. Ever since she and her brother had moved three states away from their parents, her brother had no pressing reason to make his abilities known, especially since Janey could do none of them and Miriam and Isaac were what Eddie called “normals.” When he and Miriam became close friends and then he and Isaac became lovers, Janey once asked him if he would tell them, and Eddie had replied, “Honestly? I don't know. I mean, it all sounds pretty crazy to anyone who isn't us.”

“Eddie....” Janey had responded back then, but she didn't push it, not wanting to nag.

But Eddie had known Miriam for five years, Isaac for three. He had even invited both to their parents' house several times, for Thanksgiving and Christmas, when he and Janey would return to California for the holidays. As far as Janey knew, their parents welcomed the Adebayo siblings as extended members of their family, what with the past friendship between the grandmothers Zoey

Fitzpatrick and Lilian Adebayo. However, just like Eddie, Janey noticed that their parents never called attention to seeing anyone’s color nor communicating through sending, so she assumed Eddie hadn’t revealed that part of himself to Miriam and Isaac yet. She and her parents seemed to be following Eddie’s lead, trusting that he would inform Miriam and Isaac when it was the right time.

However, sometimes the waiting bothered Janey. It reminded her of herself, trusting that, someday, someone in her family would tell her what exactly happened to her – six years ago.

*Has it really been six years?*, she thought.

The front entrance doors of the graduation venue opened up, and out spilled graduates and their friends and families. Among them, Janey saw Eddie emerge from the crowds and made a direct bee-line to where she stood. Her brother was bedecked in his doctoral regalia (for he had earned so many graduate-level credits in Mathematics by his second year that he decided to go all the way) and was still holding his ceremonial diploma cover. He looked grown-up, distinguished even.

“Congratulations, you big doofus,” Janey said, reaching out for a hug.

Instead of a hug, Eddie grabbed her and swung her around like a rag doll. “That’s DOCTOR Doofus to you, young lady!”

“Eddie!” Janey exclaimed, laughing. “Put me down, you dork!”

“Don’t you mean, DOCTOR Dork?” their dad said, smiling.

“Hah!” Eddie set her down and hugged her properly. “Thank you, sis,” he replied. Then he leaned closer so that only Janey could hear. “I gotta tell you something – later, okay?”

“Ummm... okay?” she whispered back, and Eddie broke away from the hug. Janey looked on, puzzled, as Eddie went on to hug their mother, their father, and then Miriam, who kissed his cheek and said, “I’m so proud of you, my dear.”

Eddie beamed. “Thank you, Miriam.”

Last was Isaac, who hugged and kissed Eddie, and then, leaning back a little, said, “Congratulations, love.”

Eddie blushed a little. “Hey, don’t get mushy on me.”

Isaac rolled his eyes, saying drily, “Always the romantic.” He stepped back. “I guess I won’t give you this, then.” From the messenger bag slung across his shoulders, he pulled out a distinctive red-labeled bottle of a rarely-made whiskey.

Eddie stared, agog, and Janey’s father asked, awestruck, “Is that... is that an Abroath Red Reserve?”

“Indeed it is, sir,” Isaac said. “Bottled in 2033 – the year when Eddie and Janey were born.”

Their father – a long-time connoisseur of whiskey who had also been raised near the Scottish town of Arbroath – turned to Eddie and declared, “Son, you must NEVER break up with this man.”

Eddie laughed. “Whatever you say, Dad.” He looked past where they stood. “Oh, hey, the van’s here,” he said, noticing their reserved ride-share vehicle pulling up to the curb.

“Good,” Miriam said, frowning at the increasing crowds and the still-insufferable heat of a May late-afternoon in Texas. “Let’s go home, shall we?”