

Chapter Four

Last First Friend Date

Day 1 A.L.

It took Amie eight whole minutes to convince David that she had actually been stuck in a time loop.

“You can say it was a prank. I won’t be mad.” He was sitting at his kitchen table, a box of miscellaneous batteries at his elbow. Someone he’d found online had sold him the box for five dollars, and he was using a voltmeter to test the juice on each of the batteries. So far, none of them were the least bit juicy.

Amie briefly closed her eyes, trying to find patience. The text from Ziya had been sitting, unresponded to, for fifteen minutes. The more time she let pass, the more opportunity Ziya had to say, “Never mind, you lost your chance! Bye forever!” (She knew that would be very uncharacteristic of Ziya, but that knowledge didn’t do much to ease her worry.)

“Again,” she said, “*why* would I prank you?”

David shrugged, extracting another battery from the box. “I dunno. Nutty old man living alone in his apartment gets convinced that his neighbor is stuck in a temporal loop. Hilarious.”

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“Does that sound like something I’d do?”

David sighed heavily. “No,” he admitted.

“Besides,” Amie added, planting her hands on the table, “how else would I have known about Genevieve?”

She’d used David’s code phrase regularly during the time loop, giving her regards to the fabled Genevieve any time she needed to convince him that what she was saying was true. He’d been right; the line always worked. David would stare at her for a moment, nod slowly, then ask if she wanted to change the music.

“Yeah, you did know about Genevieve, didn’t you?” he grumbled. She knew the grumbling was less toward her and more toward the voltmeter, which was once again showing an unwelcome result. He tossed the battery into the bag at his feet and reached into the box again.

“How else would you expect a time loop to end, anyway?” Amie pressed, wanting to make sure he was convinced before moving on to the next order of business. “It’s not like you would’ve noticed anything different. I was the only one who was aware of it.”

“Could’ve been a big flash in the sky,” he said. “Or an earthquake or something.”

“Okay, well,” Amie said, “I’ll pass on your critique for the next time loop.”

“That’s all I’m asking for. Damn. This one’s dead, too.” Another battery dropped into the bag.

“Sooooo . . .” Amie slid into the chair across the table from him. “Now that we’re back on the same page, I need your help.”

David was busy pressing buttons on the voltmeter, but momentarily flicked his eyes up at her to indicate that he was listening.

“Ziya wants to hang out tonight, but I’m not sure if I’m ready.” Amie paused. “Are you listening?”

“You only said one sentence.”

“I know, but you don’t really look like you’re listening.”

David cursed as a battery slipped from his hand and rolled across the table. “Weren’t you supposed to get dinner yesterday?”

Out of the Loop

“Yeah, but I canceled.”

He paused. “Did you ever go?”

“Sometimes.” Amie had stopped the runaway battery and was absently rolling it under her fingers. “I tried to keep it the same every time. Doing things differently based on how it went in previous loops felt . . . unethical.”

“Because you want to win her back.”

Amie’s mouth fell open in shock. “No I don’t.”

David rolled his eyes, returning to the batteries.

“I *don’t*,” Amie repeated. “I’m very determined to make this friendship work, and so is she, clearly, since she made time to reschedule our dinner to tonight.”

“How do you know she ‘made time?’” David asked, tossing another faulty battery away.

“You know how Ziya is. She’s always booked up at least two weeks in advance. No way she just happened to have tonight free.”

David nodded sagely. “So she’s trying to win *you* back.”

“I really feel like you’re not listening to me.”

“I am, only just barely. Say something that requires a little more mental stimulation and I’ll listen more.” David grabbed a handful of batteries from the box and held them out to her. “In the meantime, pass these to me as I check them.”

Amie accepted the batteries and set them down on the table, passing one back.

“There’s just a lot of pressure for this to go well,” she continued. “And I’ve seen it go badly. People say, ‘What’s the worst that can happen?’ I can give a play-by-play. I just don’t want to mess it up.”

She paused as he dropped a battery into the bag and held out his hand for another one.

“I was kind of . . . not great this morning.”

David glanced up as she passed him a battery. “‘Not great’ how?”

“Like . . .” Amie looked up at the ceiling as if it held answers. “. . . a complete mess? I was jumpy and panicky. I could barely talk

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to people. Spilled tea on myself, stepped in dog poop. It was like I had such a cemented idea of how things were supposed to go that I couldn't handle it when they were different."

Amie looked back down. "On one hand, I think it'd be good for me to live my life normally to try to move past the whole . . . time thing. But on the other hand, I don't want to risk ruining this friend date by getting back out there too soon. I could barely hold a conversation with the barista at Eons."

"You're not having trouble holding a conversation with me."
Thump. "Battery."

Amie scowled. "It's pretty easy when all the other person says to you is 'Battery.'" She passed him one. "I think it's because you'd always have me start our conversations in the time loop, so we'd never talk about the same things. I don't have these expectations for how our conversations are supposed to go. I *know* how this date is supposed to go. So what if I freak out if it isn't the way I expect it to be?"

She stared at David as he put a new battery into the voltmeter, frowned at the screen, then held out an open palm as he extracted and dropped the offending battery.

After a few seconds of his palm remaining empty, he looked up. Amie had crossed her arms, raising an eyebrow expectantly.

David dropped the hand. "Would you want to tell her about the time loop?" he asked, sitting back in his chair.

"No!" Amie said immediately, horrified. "God, no. I don't even know if she'd believe me."

There were many times during the loop when Amie had been tempted to tell Ziya. But after their disastrous third first friend date, she had been reluctant to say or do anything that might have ruined the evening, even if it was all due to reset in just a few hours.

"I think," she said, hesitant, "if we were still dating, that she'd believe me. But when you're broken up, it's different."

"Why?"

Out of the Loop

“It just *is*.” Amie could feel herself getting frustrated. “Look, maybe I’ll tell her someday, but not at this dinner, so I need a plan B.”

She took a deep breath. “Please.”

David looked up, the ceiling apparently being a popular spot for finding answers.

“What if you went somewhere else?” he asked.

“Like, a different restaurant?”

“Sure.” David looked back down at her. “You said you couldn’t handle it when things didn’t go as you expected them to. But if you’re in a completely different place, you won’t have as many expectations. Takes some of the pressure off.”

Amie tried to ignore the anxiety creeping up the back of her neck. “Yeah. Yeah, that could work.”

“And,” he added, reaching over to grab a battery, “if it gets bad, you can just leave.”

Amie wasn’t sure about that. She doubted there’d be a second (third? She was losing track) friend date if she suddenly ran out in the middle of it. She frowned at the memory of Ziya smiling sadly at her before suggesting they give it more time.

“Hey.”

David’s expression had morphed into what she’d internally dubbed his “dad face.”

“You’re the only one who knows what you can handle,” he said. “If you don’t think you can do tonight, that’s fine.”

Amie wasn’t sure if she knew what she could handle. Her experience that morning indicated that she was incapable of even a short walk to get breakfast. One line of police tape could send her running for the hills. She didn’t want Ziya to see her like that.

“Did you hear about Savannah?” she asked, needing a change of subject.

David had returned to his battery testing. “What poor soul was subjected to her foul misdeeds this time?”

“Um . . . God? Or Satan, I guess. Or no one. Depends who you ask.”

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David looked at her. “What are you saying?”
“She’s dead?”