

## 6: Day Six - Ma Dincht

I set the brush down and pulled my hair back into a ponytail – I couldn't get my fingers to stop shaking long enough to braid my hair. Then I stared at the figure in the mirror dressed in a white Balamb sweatshirt and a pair of worn jeans. *I'm going to meet Zell's mother.* I looked over at my freshly made bed. *No. You're not sleeping.* The urge to check had already made me turn the covers down twice. The figure in the mirror drew my attention again.

Then there was a knock. I blinked. *It's really happening.*

"Yo, Meg. You ready?"

I smiled, and my eyes crinkled at the corners. "I'm coming, Zell! Hold on a sec!"

I grabbed my black brushed-denim jacket, a present from my mom, and opened the door. Zell was dressed in black jeans and a dark blue T-shirt with the usual Garden information of established, creed, and things of that sort in raised letters that varied in colors depending on the light.

I smiled. I actually felt a little at ease around him. Very little, but it was a start. "Good morning," I said softly.

"Morning." Zell gestured to the jacket. "You'll want to put that on once we hit the road. I figured we'd hoof it. It's not that far. I don't get why everyone has to drive. It's only a half-hour walk."

I nodded with a serious expression. As I closed the door behind me, I looked over my shoulder at him. "Do you have yours?"

He lifted his left arm to show a denim jacket with a quilted lining. "Got it. All set?"

I nodded again and fell in step beside him. *Wow.*

"You haven't eaten yet, have you?"

I shook my head as I glanced over at him. Nervousness and excitement had filled my stomach since yesterday. "No. Why?"

"There's this great place in Balamb - it's in the hotel - and I figured you, me, and ma could have breakfast."

"That sounds great," I said quietly, meeting his occasional sidelong glances. "I've heard a lot of good things about their fish."

Zell grinned and met my gaze head on. "Fish." He shook his head as he laughed. "I'll think of Raijin and that dog every time I think of fish, Balamb, and that hotel."

I smiled. "You tease him whenever you have the chance, huh?"

Zell wiggled his eyebrows at me. I giggled and looked away.

Zell nudged my arm. "You know what? We should get together to try and come up with some names for those cooler moves of yours."

I sent him a sidelong smile. "Like 'Booya'?"

He grinned. "Yeah. Something cool like that."

"That would be nice. I'd never know what to call them."

Zell made a face. "Tch! Whatever. With the story you told yesterday? You can come up with plenty, I bet."

Yes, but doing that with you would be more fun. And I so wanted to say that. I looked away. "I guess so, but I think yours will be cooler." *Oh, Sally. Why don't you just admit it to him? Put yourself out of your misery and say 'Zell, I really like you. Is there hope?'* But I wasn't that brave.

At least, not yet.

"We'll hafta see what we can come up with. Then we'll take the list to Rinoa when she visits and see which one gets the most votes."

My eyes twinkled as I looked over at him. "You're always so full of fun ideas."

"Tch!" But his eyes were laughing. "The others would argue."

I giggled, vaguely noticing the students that passed on either side of us as we headed down the main corridor toward the front gate. "They just don't appreciate it like I do." I flushed with the confession as I looked away. *Man. I really am getting more at ease. Cool... I think.*

"Nah. They just remember all the stupid stuff I've done."

"We all do stupid stuff," I said quietly. *Like not doing this three years ago.*

"Yeah. I guess you're right." Zell looked over at me. "Where you from anyway?"

"Timber."

"Really? That's where Squall, Selphie, and me had our first mission."

I nodded with a faint smile. "I know. You guys did really good, too. It was too bad the President wasn't on the train."

"Who're your folks?"

"They own the pet shop there."

"Hey. I was in that shop. We had to pick up some stuff for Angelo."

My smile remained as I held my jacket behind my back with both hands and stared at the ground. "They've got a nice little place, huh?"

"Yeah they do. We'll have to take the train over and tell 'em how good you did on the Fire Cavern exam."

"Okay." But then I'd have to explain you're just a friend. I didn't want to do that. It meant that I'd have to admit it to myself. I definitely didn't want to do that.

We passed through the Garden gates and hit the road toward Balamb. The air was chilly but felt good. It kept me awake, proving I wasn't dreaming. I took in a deep breath of the crisp air, releasing it with a smile. It was great. Like I was a new person. The Fire Cavern's behind me, graduation's a greater possibility ahead of me, and Zell's walking beside me to his mother's house while making plans to hang out more...

But it needed to change. I knew it did. I enjoyed- No. No, I really loved being his

friend, but I really, really liked him. I knew I had to take that one step further outside my shell and ask that fated question.

I had to.

"It's a little chilly out here. You better put on your jacket," Zell said as he shrugged into his. "Ma'd toast my butt if I made you get sick." He took my jacket from my hands before I could protest. Then he stopped and held it out for me. "Here."

I swallowed hard, trying to persuade my heart back where it belonged as I slipped first one arm and then the other into the sleeves. Everything he did proved what kind of a great guy he was.

"Thank you," I whispered. *...he smells wonderful... Zell, I think I'm falling in love with you...* But I couldn't say that, could I? I briefly met his gaze and felt his grin... and then I looked away when we started walking toward the town of Balamb again. *I really hate being shy.*

"Say, maybe we could stop by the train station to see what times the trains are running to Timber. Who knows? Maybe we could slip in a trip there and back before tonight?"

I'd die happy if we could spend the entire day together... "Alright."

Zell gave me a slight shove. "What's the matter?" he asked with a laugh.

I reluctantly smiled - his grin always did that to me - and tucked my hands deeper into the pockets of my jacket. "Shock."

He laughed again. "No doubt. You passed and you beat Squall's score."

My smile waned a bit, but I fought to keep it in place. *No, that's not it, Zell. That's not it at all.* "Yeah."

"Oh, and I talked to Headmaster Cid about that Network Admin spot we talked about. He said he'll let you know. I guess he has to do some talking to people first."

I halted, looking over at him with a wide-eyed expression of amazement. "You talked to Headmaster Cid about it?"

Zell shrugged. "Sure. Why not? You said you'd like to do it, right?"

I gave a slight nod.

He grinned. "Okay then. Don't sweat the little stuff."

I blinked up at him. *Don't sweat the little stuff?* But what was 'little'? *The answer you could give to my question. How much of an idiot I'd sound if I actually told you how I felt. Don't sweat it? You've got to be kidding!* I lowered my head and started walking toward Balamb again. Zell followed, but it took him a second or two. *You've got to do it, Sally.*

"Geez, you're creeping me out," Zell said finally, and his voice sounded totally different than usual. "Sally? You okay?"

Zell had used my name, which made me glance over at him. He wasn't smiling. My throat tightened. "I'm sorry. I'm just thinking about some stuff."

"Duh," he said with a brief smile. Then the serious expression returned. "You need to talk about something?"

I looked away. *Do I?*

Expectation and dread rose up like Leviathan probably would. *How does someone do something like this?* I released a deep breath while adjusting my hands in the pockets of my jacket. I kept replaying the conversation we'd just had, and the ones we'd had over the past few days, and desperately tried to think of what to say next. I didn't want to ruin our friendship. I didn't think I would just by being honest, not really, but the possibility wouldn't go away.

"Yeah. I kinda do," I admitted. *But will I?*

"Okay. Shoot. What's the problem?"

I took in another deep and slow breath, holding it for a long moment before letting it out and opening my mouth to speak... but nothing came out. The dread of rejection and humiliation— I shut my mouth with a click. *I really, really hate being shy.* It's like a disease. A ball and chain. A locked door I can't open.

"Sally?"

"I know," I whispered. And I whispered to keep myself from crying because I was so frustrated. I couldn't get myself to say what I knew I had to say. I was freaking him out because of that, and... and I knew I'd never say it. *What do I do? There has to be something to get myself to say four blessed words: 'Zell, I like you.'*

I swallowed hard, blinking at the ground as I fought the tightening of my throat that told of tears. I stopped walking, balling my hands into fists in the pockets of my jacket. He stopped, too, and his expression was probably expectant curiosity. *Just do or say something!*

"Zell..." I swallowed hard again. "Zell, could you do me a favor?"

"Sure thing."

"Could you show me your 'Booya'?" *What?*

"What?"

My fists tightened until my nails bit into my hands. I faced him, slowly raising my eyes to meet his. "Could you show me your 'Booya'?"

Zell's expression showed amazement. "You mean do it on you?"

I nodded. *Are you nuts? You can't really be considering this!*

He rubbed the back of his neck, one fist on his hip as he gauged my face. "Sure, if you really want." Zell lowered his arm. "You gonna try and create a move like it?"

"No. I just want to try something." *Really? You're going to do this?*

Zell grinned suddenly and set up. "What the hell. Sounds like fun."

I did the same as I tried to summon my courage. I knew I had to have some someplace. *You just... you're just going to do that? Just like that?* At least I'd go out with style.

He was his usual quick self, moving past my defenses without a problem to grab my shirtfront and pull me close... I closed my eyes and pressed my lips against his— *soft... warm...* And sparks must have not only exploded in my brain but in the air around me.

It was the best first kiss I had ever had in my life.

...okay. That sounded really dumb, but come on! I had just kissed Zell Dincht!

That second lasted a blissful forever, and then he released my shirtfront and took a step back. Zell's hands were still in the same position, and his face held an odd expression. Forcing myself to just stand there, I ignored the flames that burned my cheeks.

Finally, Zell lowered his arms to his sides with a blink. "I've never had it countered that way before," he said slowly, and his ears tinged a slight shade of pink.

I reluctantly smiled, but then it faded. *What now? You know you have to say something.* I gnawed my lower lip as I began to worry the bottom ribbing of my sweatshirt with shaking fingers. *Don't you dare apologize, Sally!*

Zell suddenly grinned. "Beats a fist in the mouth." Then he pointed at me, the laughter obvious in his voice and in the twinkle of his eyes. "Just don't think you'll get away with that a second time."

I knew I couldn't, too. I looked into his twinkling eyes and his laughing face and heard the words I wanted to say fade to a murmur, my courage spent.

"I've gotta tell ma," Zell said as he gave my arm a tug, urging me forward. "She'll get a kick and tell me it served me right."

I fell into step beside him. *Why can't I do anything right?* It should have been so easy: Kiss him and then say 'I really like you, Zell, and I want to be your girlfriend...' *Tomorrow. I'll say it tomorrow.*

But I was only saying that because I didn't want anything to ruin the day we'd planned. *I want to meet his mother. I want to have breakfast with them. I want to take the train to Timber and have him meet my folks. I want us to share our stupid stories of life and laugh at each other's less-than-glorious moments...* There wasn't any guarantee I'd be able to do that if I told him I had a monstrous crush. It would change everything.

"That was pretty slick," Zell was saying as he gave my arm a shoulder nudge. "I'll have to tell Selph. She'll probably give you extra credit." He grinned.

I nearly moaned. *Extra credit? Who cares about extra credit? If you tell Selphie, she'll tell Quistis, and then Quistis'll know I like you. Then she'll tell you— I'll be mortified!* Good word,

too. "I- Couldn't it just stay between us?" I asked quietly. "I don't want... What I mean is, I didn't do it to..." I cleared my throat and kept my eyes away from his face. *I just wanted to kiss you for so long...* "Please don't tell."

Zell laughed, giving my arm another nudge. "Okay, but I've got to tell ma. I'll just make sure she knows not to blab. How's that?"

I gave a slight nod.

"So that was the whole thing? You just wanted to see if you could beat me at my own game?"

*Not hardly.* But I didn't want to lie and say it was. If I didn't, though, he'd ask. Wouldn't he? "No, but it's not any big deal." *Just my future of happiness.* "Don't worry about it." *It's my fault I'm a chicken-wuss, not yours.*

"You sure? I'll help, Sally, if I can. It's no sweat. Really."

*I know, Zell. I know.* I nodded, and my throat tightened. "I just... I just want to have fun today." *Just one last day of fun before I confess all. Please?*

"Cut loose, huh? Well, hey, no prob there. You should after your awesome score on the Fire Cavern." He stopped and faced me. After a moment, I faced him, too. He stuck out a hand. "Here's the deal: No school talk, no stressing, and no being responsible or serious. Just fun, laughs, and food. Deal?"

My heart and soul warmed as I stared at his hand, so eager and inviting. Accepting, just like him. *I don't want today to end. I want to be trapped in this day forever. Why can't that wish come true?* Finally, I reached out and took a firm hold of his warm hand, giving a slow blink as we shook. *Zell, I really, really like you...* It should've been so easy.

"Deal," I whispered.

"Cool." Zell seemed to give my hand a brief squeeze before releasing it and motioning toward Balamb. "I don't know about you, but I'm hungry. Let's hurry it up a notch."

We jogged the rest of the way.



"Yo, ma!" Zell bellowed as we entered his house.

"Zell?"

Ma Dincht appeared from the kitchen, where she'd apparently been cleaning the oven from the tell-tale smudges on her face and arms and the gloves on her hands. "What are you doing home?" she asked as she rescued her hands from the gloves' grip. "And don't give me that nonsense about outdoor class."

Zell grinned as he motioned for me to come further in. I looked around with wide eyes. "Nah," he said. "Day off."

"And who's this little dear?"

I flushed and lowered my eyes to my clenched hands. "Sally."

"Sally's a friend, ma. She's a candidate at Garden." He smiled over at me. "She just had an awesome score on the Fire Cavern," Zell sent me a wink before he looked back over at his mother, "and she beat Squall's score! So I thought we could go grab some grub at the hotel to celebrate."

Ma Dincht smiled. "That sounds fun, Zell, but I'm afraid I can't. The girls and I were going to head on over to Deling City and make a day of it. I'm sorry, son."

Zell waved it away with a "Tch! Don't sweat it, ma. Sally and I're gonna grab the next train to Timber anyway. Her folks're there."

"Oh." Ma Dincht smiled at me. "Good for you. So many of the kids don't spend much time with their folks." She looked back at Zell, but I kept watching her. My tension began to fade. "Do you think you could come for dinner later, Zell? I'm sure we'll be back before it gets too late."

"Sure, ma. Just send an email or leave a message if you're not gonna make it. I can always rent a car to take Sally home that way, if it gets too late."

My stomach fluttered and my lips twitched with a smile. *You're going to have fun, Sally. You're going to have some real fun with Zell Dinct!*

Ma Dinct nodded. "I'll be sure to do that. Now," and she ushered us toward the door, "I've got to get cleaned up before the girls get here, and you've got to feed this girl some breakfast." When we were standing on the threshold of his home, Ma Dinct gently pinched my chin between her thumb and forefinger. "If we don't have dinner tonight, Sally, come by and visit again. I like getting to know Zell's friends."

"I will," I promised quietly.

"And call me 'ma'."

I smiled. "Ma."

She gave my chin another pinch before giving us both a gentle push toward the hotel. "Now get on with you and fill those young stomachs of yours. Have fun today, too."

"We will, ma. See ya later," Zell called as he backed toward the hotel while I walked forward. He turned and looked over at me. "If that's what had you bummed before, don't sweat it. Ma likes you."

I adjusted my hands in my pockets as I stared at the cobblestone walk at our feet. "She's really nice. I like her, too." I glanced over, meeting his smiling gaze. "Do you think we might really be able to have dinner here tonight?"

Zell shrugged. "There's no way to know. Her and her 'girls' like having fun. They could be out all night."

I looked away. "Oh."

Zell gave me a nudge. "Hey. No stress, remember? I told her we'd wait and then drive to Garden. If she makes it, she makes it."

I flushed. "Okay. No stress." *Maybe it's good to put the grand confession off until tomorrow. Spending an entire day with him; learning more about him; getting to be more at ease around him...* I sighed.

"None of that," he said with a grin and a firmer push.

I giggled and found myself pushing back. "It was a good sigh," I laughed.

Zell pushed again, nearly sending me toppling over, and quickly caught hold of my hand so that I wouldn't. "Whoops. Sorry," he apologized, his expression adorably sheepish.

When Zell released my hand, I immediately stuffed it into my jacket pocket to preserve the feeling. "It's okay. I should've had my feet set better."

Zell laughed. "You're catching on."

Then we were at the hotel getting a table on the back patio looking out onto the ocean. The view and the location and the company were better than one of my fantasy dates. I had a hard time keeping my brain believing this was reality.

We ordered breaded fish, homemade fries, homemade sauce, milkshakes, and a plate of pickles and olives. Not a very healthy breakfast, but who cared?

Then Zell pointed at me with a serious expression. "What was the big idea freakin' me out before the whole 'Booya' thing?"

My fantasy bubble popped, crashing me to the ground. "S-Sorry," I stammered as I lowered my gaze to the table-top. I picked at the tablecloth.

"Meg..." Zell released a quick breath. "Sally. I'm teasing. Chill."

I lowered my head, still picking at the tablecloth as I sent him a glance. "I've never been very good at knowing when someone's joking and when they're serious."

"Outside Garden..." Zell tossed a sugar packet at me. It ricocheted off my nose to topple onto the table. "I'm never serious."

I giggled and picked the sugar packet up from the table to chuck it back at him. He caught it. "That's good to know."

Zell tossed the sugar packet behind his back to hit it with his other hand, sending it plopping directly into my water. We repressed howls of laughter as I fished it out and hid it under my napkin, looking this way and that for any sign of witnesses.

"Being serious all the time just causes more problems," he continued with a slight

smile as he lounged back in his chair. "I mean, I saw what it did to Squall - tore him up inside - and decided I didn't want that." Zell crossed his arms as he stretched his legs out in front of him. He met my gaze. "I'm not saying life's a joke waiting to happen. It's just not worth stressing over. Sure there's stuff that needs serious attention, like when we had to fight Galbadia Garden, or when we had to Assassinate the Sorceress, or things like that. But life is different." Zell shrugged, moving his gaze to his water glass. He uncrossed his arms and reached out to slowly rotate it. "Make every day count. That's my philosophy."

I felt as if I'd been inducted into a 'Zell Only' room. My soul soared. "I know the others at Garden really appreciate it. I know I do. It helps me laugh. It reminds me to laugh." *Wow. Did I just say that?*

Zell grinned as he raised his eyes. "Tell that to Quis next time you see her. She says I'm too dense to really understand what's going on and that's why I'm joking around."

I waved a hand with a wrinkle of my nose, moving my water glass to wipe up the water ring. "It seems to me she needs to take your philosophy to heart, like Commander Squall has."

Zell laughed. "She's just sore because Squall and Rinoa are working out. She didn't think it would last a month, what with the two being so different."

I blinked over at Zell. "What?"

"Quis' sweet on Squall, but I know she'd deny it," he told me. "She needs to get over it and go out with Zone. Geez. The guy's got it bad."

"Zone? From the Owls?"

Zell nodded. "Yeah. You know 'im?"

"Not very well, but enough." I giggled, sitting forward in my chair to rest my arms on the table. "We should plot a set-up."

Zell laughed. "Quis'd kill me, of course I'd do it anyway just to see the look on her face."

The waiter came with our order, so Zell and I sat up as they set the plates in proper order.

"We should do it," Zell told me suddenly. "Why don't we look him up while we're in Timber today?"

I giggled again and promptly shook my head. "Zell... I don't think--"

"How come? It'd be fun."

I adjusted my plate in front of me, spreading the homemade sauce onto the fish. "Because..."

He dipped his fries in his sauce and then pointed at me with them. "See? You know it'd be fun. Admit it. Setting her up on a blind date that she doesn't even know about? A perfect prank."

I sent him a couple glances. He met each one, and his smile widened each time. "Okay," I admitted with a laugh. "I admit it."

"Oh yeah," he exulted. "We're gonna get Quis good."

I smiled while giving a shake of my head, but I looked forward to the prospect of conspiring with Zell on anything.