

## 7: Day Six - Timber

"Rock on!" Zell pointed at the train schedule as he looked over at me. "There's a train leaving in five minutes."

I set the magazine down and made my way beside him to look up at the schedule. "Oh my gosh. That'll leave us three hours to hang out in Timber before catching the next one. Perfect."

Zell grinned. Then he faced the window and knocked on the glass to get the guy's attention. "Yo. We need a ticket to Timber."

I reached into my inner jacket pocket to pull out my share, but Zell didn't turn to get it. He didn't even notice the action. He just paid full price and gave the guy a "Thanks, dude" before looking over at me and motioning toward the train station with a jerk of his head as he put the ticket and his wallet in a safe place.

I retracted my hand from my jacket pocket and swallowed hard as I sent him a timid smile. *Sally, don't.* I gave myself a nod and ascended the stairs into the station.

"Timber, sir?"

Zell nodded as he showed his ticket to the conductor, who motioned to the train directly in front of us. Zell smiled his thanks and then gestured for me to board first. I did with another swallow and another scold to stop making mountains out of molehills. *His mother brought him up right, is all.*

"I wonder if the SeeD cabin is available?" Zell asked as he passed me to use the ticket to unlock the door. The computer accepted the ticket, so Zell tucked it back into his wallet as he again motioned for me to go first. "You ever been in a SeeD train cabin before?"

I shook my head and entered the hallway of the train car.

"They're pretty cool. Come on. I'll show you." He proceeded to the next cabin, motioning inside once the door opened. "Check it out."

I entered, opening my eyes wide at the lush carpet, the cushy couches, and everything else that was too incredible to believe. "Oh my gosh."

"Sweet, huh?" Zell sat, settling into one of the couches as he spread his arms along the back. "One of the perks of being a SeeD." He placed his ankle onto his knee. "Try it out."

I worried the inside of my lower lip as I self-consciously shrugged out of my jacket. Then I made my way to the other couch and sat down, setting my jacket carefully to my left.

Zell continued to watch me with a smile. "Do it. You know you want to."

I met his gaze. "Do what?"

Zell's smile widened to his ever-familiar grin. "Come on, Meg. You know."

I flushed, but my determination to play innocent didn't waver. I shook my head. "No, I don't. What are you talking about?" *Sit next to you and hold your hand? Darn right I want to!*

Zell scoffed and stood, moving - to my horror - to sit beside me after moving my jacket. "Come on. No one's watching. Do it. It'll make you feel better."

I clenched my hands in my lap and stared at them. "No. I-I can't."

"Fine. I'll do it for you."

I closed my eyes, waiting with bated breath for his hand to hold mine- then the seat suddenly began to move. My eyes opened sharply, and I looked to my left. Zell was bouncing on the couch - while seated - two, three, four times before he stopped.

He looked over at me and wiggled his eyebrows. "See? No alarms or sirens or security barging in. Now you do it."

I giggled, both with relief and adoration, and surrendered to his insistence to give a couple self-conscious bounces. He was right. It was fun.

"Don't you feel better?" Zell asked, laughing.

I giggled again and nodded. "Makes me feel about four years old."

Zell lounged back and, just as they had before, his arms spread out across the back of the couch. He stretched his legs out in front of him as he released a deep breath. "Man. It seems like a million years since I've been here."

I so wanted to curl up beside him, resting my head against him and closing my eyes as I listened to his voice as he reminisced... I looked away and carefully scooted a little further back into the couch, very aware of his arm directly behind me. "I bet it does. A lot's happened since then."

"Tell me about it. I'm an Instructor!" He laughed. "Never thought it'd happen."

I looked over at him. "How come?" He was such a good one. A natural teacher.

"It was taking too long to get to SeeD," Zell said, and the smile faded from his face. "Quis'd been an Instructor for a year already by the time I took my field exam."

My throat tightened, and I felt the tell-tale burning in my eyes. I'd never seen him look that way before. *Do I want him to keep going? Or do I want to cheer him up?* I wanted to do both. I wanted to take his pain and make him smile. "You want to talk about it?" I asked quietly, and I was afraid the question would make him push it away and move to something more fun.

"Don't know," he said with a shrug. "Didn't know it bothered me. Don't know why it does. I mean, I'm a SeeD now. Been an Instructor for almost three years. What does it matter how long it took?"

"For what it's worth," I said softly, "you're a really good Instructor. I've watched a lot of your classes in the Training Center." Zell looked over at me, still with that same serious expression, and I couldn't believe I had confessed that. "That's probably why I did so good in the Fire Cavern. What you taught stuck."

Zell smiled before reaching over to give my ponytail a gentle tug. "Thanks, Meg. I'm not saying I'm a bad Instructor. They'd tell me if I was."

I smiled softly, still holding his gaze. "Good." *Maybe I can tell him on our way back from Timber?*

"And how long've you been watching my classes? I should charge extra tuition."

I flushed and looked away. "It's the only place close to the library where I can get fresh air." I cleared my throat. "Your classes are always fun to watch, too." I changed my gaze to my hands and picked at a non-existent hangnail. "If they weren't so full all the time, I probably would have signed up." Yeah, right.

Zell gave my ponytail another gentle tug. "You should've asked. I woulda made room for you."

*Yeah, you probably would.* I smiled, sending him a brief glance. "Thanks." Maybe I will.

"Hey, no prob. What're friends for?"

"Yeah," I said with a slight sigh. There was yet another tug on my ponytail. I looked over at his smiling face. "What?"

"No stressing, Meg. Remember?"

Giggling, I leaned back, forcing myself not to straighten again when I felt both the warmth of his arm near my neck and when my ponytail brushed against the same arm. *Relax, Sally.* "Okay, okay. If you're bound and determined to take away all my fun, who am I to stop you?"

Zell laughed, retracting his right arm as he placed his right ankle on his left knee. "Well if you'd tell me what has you so stressed, we could work it out and there wouldn't be a problem."

I forced the smile to stay in place as I crossed my arms and legs. "Yeah, but then you'd be stressed and we wouldn't have any fun at all." That was the nearest thing to the truth I could say.

"I guess, but you're the one supposed to be celebrating here."

I looked over at him, and this time my smile was genuine. "I am celebrating, Zell.

Really."

Zell's smile faded to a serious expression that I couldn't tell was fake or real. He pointed at me. "Okay, but if you keep moping I'm going to take steps."

I leaned back from his finger with slightly parted lips. "Steps? What kind of steps?" I asked slowly.

He wiggled his eyebrows at me.

I uncrossed my arms and legs to push slowly away from him. "I don't like that look in your eye." It looked exactly like the look my brother would give me before- *Tickle Wars!* I stood sharply. "No!"

Zell gave a maniacal chuckle as he watched me with slowly crossed arms. "Then stop stressing."

I gave several slight nods as I warily watched him, a reluctant smile tickling my lips and, eventually, the expression in my eyes. "No stressing."

"I'm not warning you again."

"Okay."

"I'm serious. Next time... I take steps."

I put my hands and arms away from me with a wide-eyed gaze of innocence. "Look. This is me not stressing."

Zell laughed, and then he uncrossed his legs and arms and stood. "Come on, let's take a look outside. Selph says it's pretty awesome."

He passed me out the door of the cabin. I followed, standing beside him as we watched the passing scenery. I rested my arms against the window sill and released a deep breath as I smiled out the window. A slightly twisted part of me was tempted to obviously stress just so that he would 'take steps'.

My smile widened. That wasn't me, but it was kind of fun to think it could be.

"There. Was that so hard?"

I looked over at him with a puzzled expression. "Huh?"

Zell rested his arms on the window sill too as he gave a shake of his head. "You're starting to relax."

I giggled and gave him a firm nudge. "With you threatening to 'take steps'? Why wouldn't I?"

Zell nudged back with a grin. "With that 'Booya' thing you did before?" he asked. "Who's to say you wouldn't test me to see if I was serious? Actually, I was kinda hoping you would."

My mouth dropped open as I stared at him.

He laughed this time, lowering his head and gaze as he adjusted his position. "Got you with that one, didn't I?"

But it'd been more than that. He'd totally floored me. "Y-You wanted me to..." I flushed red and looked away. "I... I c-can't believe you s-said that."

"Why?" Zell gave me a nudge. "Ah ah ah. Cut loose, Meg. Remember? Come on." He nudged me again. "Come on," he said again. "Give it a shot."

*Give it a shot? Give what a shot? Flirt like I want to? Say nutty things that make you smile and make me feel like an idiot, even while they make me feel glorious because you're laughing?* I clenched my hands into fists and adjusted my footing. "I-I'm not very good at teasing," I said quietly.

Zell released a quick breath, leaning harder into the window sill as he lowered his head again. He gave it a shake. "Don't sell yourself short, Meg. Just because you're shy doesn't mean you can't be a nut." He looked over at me. "Just go with it. Okay?"

I took in a slow breath, releasing it just as slowly before hesitantly looking over at him. I met his eyes before giving a slight nod and a timid smile. "Okay." Zell, I like you so much it hurts... I blinked and moved my eyes back to the scenery outside. "Nuts are dense, aren't they?"

"Huh?"

"Nuts." I looked back over at him, and I felt a little of the tension release when our eyes met. "They're dense. Right?"

Zell rubbed the back of his neck as he stared at his other hand resting on the window sill. "Well, I guess so. What with their shell... Yeah. I guess so."

I smiled slightly before looking back out the window. "Cool. Then we're both nuts. And being nuts in pairs is better than being one by yourself, right?"

Zell laughed, giving me a slight push. I leaned against the window sill and sent him a sidelong glance accompanied with a giggle. "Yeah, I guess so," he admitted. "But don't think you can call me a nut without me getting even."

I gave a shrug. "Take your best shot." *Please, oh, please...* I forced my hands to unclench and let the circulation return to my fingers. *Just don't think about what you're doing, Sally.* But I believe I'd given up thinking way more than a few seconds ago.

Zell crossed his arms as he raised an eyebrow. He leaned against the wall, gauging my expression. I still stared out the window. "A dare, huh?"

*Is it?* I guess it was. I was daring myself to be outgoing with this one person. A person that I trusted. A person that I really liked. A person that I wanted to be myself with. "Sure."

"Well," he said slowly. Zell adjusted his crossed arms. "Normally I wouldn't pass up a dare, but..."

"But what?" I asked with a glance toward him.

Zell's expression drifted between amusement and something I didn't know what to call. He chuckled. "I don't know. Something tells me I'd regret it."

"Oh. You don't like to lose." I nearly laughed aloud. I couldn't believe I'd risen to the challenge of teasing Zell Dincht.

"I didn't say that," he protested.

"Uh-huh." I knew my tone of voice clearly said 'sure you didn't.'

"Fine. You're on."

I faced him then, still internally shocked to be going along with that twisted part of me and its plan... plot... ploy- whatever it was. "I bet you can't get me to laugh before I get you to laugh." Internally I shook my head at myself. *This is sad, Sally. Really and truly sad.*

Zell adjusted his crossed arms as he gauged my face. "Hmm." He studied me a moment more before speaking. "What're the stakes?"

*Oh now you're in for it.* I shook my head. "Nothing. Just respect... or whatever." *Oh brother.*

Zell absently rubbed at his tattoo, something I'd noticed he did when he was debating with himself, and pursed his lips as he pushed them to the right side of his mouth. "Seems harmless enough... I guess."

I turned away. "You don't have to play. I understand if you don't think you can do it." *Oh now that was low.*

Zell slightly smiled. "Okay, okay. Anything goes?"

That made my throat tighten. *Uh-oh. What did I just get myself into?* I faced him. "Within reason."

"Reason? What kind of reason?"

I smiled this time. "No tying me to a chair and tickling my feet."

His face fell in feigned disappointment as he slumped his shoulders and snapped his fingers. "Nuts."

I laughed.

He straightened and grinned. "I won."

My mouth dropped open. Then I smacked him on the arm with a "Hey, no fair!"

"What?" he asked with raised arms and shoulders. "I got you to laugh, didn't I?"

I laughed again as I gave him a firm push. "Cheater. I wasn't even ready yet."

"Hey. That's not my fault," he said, steadying himself as he laughed.

I stuck my tongue out at him. Zell reached out for it, but I veered away with a squeal and ducked inside our cabin just as the conductor announced our arrival in Timber.

"Yeah, you better move fast," he said just as the door closed.

I giggled, amazed at what I was doing, and grabbed my jacket and his. When I opened the door that led out into the hall, I jammed his jacket into his chest. "Here."

Zell took the jacket with a grin. "Relax while you can. I'll get you later."

I sent him an innocent look. "But I didn't do anything. I've been here the entire time." It was so much easier to play around with him than I thought it would be. Telling him how much I cared would be the issue. I knew it. But I also knew that I would tell him.

Zell laughed. "Yeah. Sure." He made a motion to the exit with his head. "Come on. Get a move on."

I shrugged into my jacket, hearing Zell do the same thing behind me, and left the corridor to go into the last car on the train. We waited for it to stop, and then we exited the train to stand momentarily on the Timber Train Station platform. I looked around with a slight smile.

"How long since you been home?" Zell asked.

"A few months." I met his gaze. "It's nice to be back."

"I bet." He motioned ahead. "Come on. Let's go say 'hi' to your folks."

I nodded and moved toward the exit. "They're going to be shocked. I always send an email before I come."

"Yeah? Well surprises are more fun."

"No arguments there."

We descended the steps from the station and turned immediately right. We entered the pet shop, the door making a melodious jingle of welcome when we did.

"Be right there."

'My mom' I mouthed to Zell.

He nodded with a grin as he stuffed his hands in his pockets. We moved to the counter and waited. Zell leaned against it to look around at the magazines and pet paraphernalia categorized and organized around the shop.

"Sally!"

I smiled, stepping into my mom's open-armed embrace. "Hi, mom. Surprise."

She held me out at arm's length as her smiling blue eyes met my brown ones. "What in the world brought you all the way out here?"

I gestured over my shoulder with a hand. "Mom, this is Zell Dincht. He's one... He's..."

"I'm a friend," he finished as he stepped forward and stuck out a hand. Zell gripped my mom's and gave her his most charming smile.

"Nice to meet you, Zell." Then mom looked over at me with an unasked question, which I ignored, and the voiced one which I knew I'd have to answer. "Will you be able to stay long enough for dinner?"

"Sorry, mom. We've only got three hours before the next train leaves."

"We stopped by to tell you that Sally passed the Fire Cavern with flying colors," Zell said as he again leaned against the counter. My mom raised her eyes to meet Zell's gaze. "Beat Squall's score, too. That's good. Real good."

My mom wrapped me up in another hug. "Good for you, Sally. I knew you could do it."

Warm fuzzies had a field day. "Thanks, mom." I pulled back. "Where's Dad?"

"Sick puppy. Had to take some medicine out for the little guy."

"It's not bad, is it?"

She shook her head. "No. I think he just ate something that didn't agree with his tummy."

"Poor little squirt," I said with a slight pout.

The door of the shop opened and closed, the bell ringing another cheery tune, and my mom gave me a regretful look. "Come and spend a little time here for lunch, Sally. Okay? I'll close the shop for an hour."

"Okay, mom."

She looked to Zell, reaching out to take his offered hand again. "And it was nice to meet you, Zell. You're to come, too."

Zell grinned. "Don't mind if I do. I'm getting hungry."

My mom laughed, and then she left to help the family that had come in. I turned toward Zell to give him a smile as I leaned against the counter beside him. "She's offering food. Mom must like you."

Zell gave me a serious look. "Moms always like me. I'm adorable."

I giggled as I shook my head. Yes, you are. Painfully so. "Come on then, Mr. Adorable. Let's go see if Zone's in town."

He followed me from the shop to the platform directly across from the stairs leading to the train station. "We could wait here, I guess," he offered.

"Not very exciting, especially since we don't know if they're even still here." I looked around. "Then again, if Watts and Zone are here, the best way to get them to notice us would be to sit and wait for them. Right?"

"Sounds as good a plan as any."

"Again, not very exciting."

"Hey, after Sorceresses and Seifer and saving the world, a little boredom's fine with me," Zell said with a smile. He ascended the stairs of the platform to sit on the far side where the train parked. I followed behind and sat beside him, adjusting my hands in my pockets as we dangled our legs over the side.

"Yeah. Excitement's overrated." I released a deep breath only to find a smile permanently fixed on my lips. I looked over at Zell and, after a moment, he met my eyes

and smiled, too. "Thanks, Zell, for suggesting this. It'll be nice to spend some time with mom and dad, if he gets back in time."

He gave me a nudge. "Hey. No prob."

*You have no idea what a problem I have.* But the expectation to tell him how I felt was beginning to become a kind of addiction. Sick soul that I was, I liked it. "If my dad gets back before we have to leave, he'll more than likely want to throw the ball around with you."

"An athlete? Way cool," Zell exclaimed. He punched his flat hand with a fist. "I've been wanting a chance to play something forever."

I laughed. "What's the matter? Don't your friends play with you?"

Zell made the most adorable pouty face as he shook his head and slumped his shoulders a bit. "They say I don't play fair."

My thoughts and heart did so many things at once that I think it dredged up some unknown courage. Next thing I knew, my hand had gone to his back to give him a collection of encouraging rubs as I tilted my head to watch his profile. "Aw. Well then maybe my dad and I will play with you a bit before we head back. Okay?"

Zell lifted his head with a grin, but we heard a shout from behind before he could say anything. We both looked.

"Yo, Zone!" Zell greeted as he leaped to his feet.

I followed suit more slowly, embarrassed that my enjoyment of our situation had been seen and interrupted. The boys exchanged firm shakes and slugs to the arm.

"What're you doing here?" Zone asked as he looked from Zell to me.

He didn't recognize me. Of course, it'd been a while since we'd seen each other.

"We're plotting," Zell said with a mischievous smile. He made a gesture over his shoulder at me. "Sally and me wanna get a good prank going on Quistis. We're hoping you'd help."

"Quistis?" Zone's ears tinged pink. "Nah. Leave me out if it."

"Aw come on," Zell pressed. "It'll be a great excuse for you to chill and come with us to Garden."

Zone shook his head. "I'm telling you I don't wanna be involved."

Zell slugged Zone on the arm again with a wide grin. "Come on, man. You're wild about her, so you might as well do what you've wanted to do and go along with it. I'll be sure to tell her you wanted nothing to do with it. I'll tell her I forced you on pain of death."

The flush of Zone's ears spread to his face. I decided to come to his rescue. I put a hand on Zell's arm, grabbing his attention. "Zell, if he doesn't want to do it, we shouldn't force him. We can do a different prank." Or none at all. Quistis mad wasn't exactly a very healthy sight.

Zell made a face. "Tch!" He changed his gaze back to Zone and stretched out his arms. "Come on, dude. What's the big deal? We're just going to plot a little date between you two and not tell her. Then we're gonna make her show up in the cafeteria, where you'll be with the candlelight dinner, and have a big--"

"Are you nuts?" Zone interrupted with wide eyes. He winced and wrapped his arms around his middle. "Ow-ow-ow... Man!" He straightened after another second or two to give Zell a nearly terrified look. "No way. Forget it."

"Why? It'll be a riot. Can you imagine the look on her face when she sees all--"

"Forget it," Zone insisted again.

Zell crossed his arms and glared. "Geez. What a wuss."

"Zell," I whispered, giving him a slight shove. *Great. Is that what he's going to call me when I finally tell him?* "Come on. Give him a break."

Zell lowered his arms to his sides after giving me a sidelong glance, and then he sent Zone another friendly slug on the arm. "Sorry, dude. Of course you don't hafta do it. I just thought it would be kinda funny."

"Having her hate me the rest of her life? Yeah. A riot."

Zell reluctantly smiled. "Yeah. I guess she would, wouldn't she? Oh well. I'll just figure something else out." "Fine. Just leave me out of it."

Zell shook his head. "You've really got to send her an email or something, Zone. Sheesh. She's never gonna know unless you say something."

My face flushed, and I looked down at the ground. *Listen to him, Sally.*

"I know, I know," Zone said as he ran a hand through his black hair. "I just... She's just so... gorgeous."

Zell made a face. "Yeah. Whatever." He looked over at me. "How much time before lunch? We got time to hang out at the pub with Zone?"

I self-consciously cleared my throat as I looked down at my watch. "Yeah. We've got about an hour."

"Cool." Zell changed his gaze back to Zone, tugging his arm as we started toward the pub. "Come on, dude. Let's drown your worries in soda and chips."

Zone reluctantly smiled as he followed beside us. I didn't hear much of Zone and Zell's conversation on the way to the pub, or even in the pub. I was busy trying to orchestrate how to tell Zell the way I felt without having him call me a wuss. I inwardly groaned and shook my head. *I should've told him when I had the chance.*

I felt a tug on my ponytail and looked up. Zell gave me a warning look as Zone droned on about Quistis and her wonders of mind and body and a bunch of other things. Then Zell pointed a finger at me with an 'I'll take steps' expression.

I leaned against the counter of the bar with a timid smile. My expression clearly said 'Sorry.'

Zell gave my chin a gentle cuff before looking back over at Zone. I fought back the warm fuzzies. *You really think he's going to call you a wuss, Sally? He'd be too shocked and amazed that you got over your shyness, stepped out of your shell, and actually told him!* He'd

probably agree to go out with me once just to celebrate, and I absolutely refused to worry about anything else that could happen after that.

After all, Zell was still threatening to 'take steps'.

Zone was eventually persuaded out of the 'depths of despair' regarding his crush, but Zell didn't push the prank again. I figured he probably already had a better idea for one and he'd fill me in on our way home from Timber. Then my watch beeped the hour, Zell and Zone and I bid each other farewell, and we left him - Zone - in the pub as we made our way back to my parents' pet shop for lunch.

"I've got the perfect prank."

I looked over at him with a wide-eyed expression. I couldn't believe I'd actually called it. "You're kidding."

Zell shook his head as he met my gaze with a mischievous smile and a wiggle of his eyebrows. "Wait until you hear it. It'll be a riot."

I smiled. "I don't think I want to know. I'd rather be an innocent bystander."

"Coward."

I laughed and gave him a push. "I am not a coward."

"Then you'll help me," Zell said as he pushed back.

"And put my life on the line so soon before graduation? I don't think so."

"See? You're a wuss."

My hand lashed out to cuff him upside the head before I realized what I was doing. I stopped walking and shielded my mouth with my hand as I looked over at him with wide eyes. "Zell, I-I'm sorry."

"Tch!" Zell laughed and grabbed my arm to pull me into step beside him. "What? You think I'm china? I'm not gonna break with a little smack like that." He tugged me closer, wrapping an arm around my neck to pull me against him and give me yet another knuckle-rub. "Take that."

"No, not again!" And I couldn't think past the warm fuzzies and floating clouds to get out of it. Instead, I 'attacked' his side with that infamous tickle-wiggle of the fingers. "Leggo!"

Zell flinched away with a laugh, rubbing at his side with a feigned scowl as I straightened my hair. "Hey. That's playing dirty."

I called his scowl and raised with fists on hips. "Whatever. How else was I supposed to get loose?"

He called my fists on hips and raised with a threatening lean forward. "Use your muscles, duh."

I glared, all the while feeling the laughter foam and bubble. His expression was expectant, just as it had been last time... and the urge to give him another kiss rose like a wave- *No*. Instead, I punched him somewhat firmly in the stomach.

"Oof," was his response.

I laughed, holding my middle with my hands as I staggered backward. "You should see your face," I howled as I pointed at him.

His expression was shocked. "Hey. That was a good hit," he said in a serious tone.

My laughter quieted as I smiled at him. "Of course. I had a good teacher."

Zell stepped closer, a soft smile twinkling in his eyes. "It's not just the teacher, Meg. It's you, too."

I flushed, but held his gaze. "Thanks," I voiced softly.

His lips twitched as he continued to stand close, still looking into my eyes. "You're welcome."

*I like it when you're close...* Not only did he smell great, but his presence did something really crazy to how I felt and thought. And I really liked it. I was becoming... addicted to it. *Maybe... Maybe you could just say it now...?*

I grabbed at my courage and softly said, "Zell..." But then I heard his stomach growl

and couldn't stop the giggle. Zell grinned, the soft and somewhat 'serious' mood lost. *Oh well...* I reached out to pat his tummy – what was as firm as a table, of course. "I think I better get you to the shop and feed you before you decide to use me as a snack," I informed, holding his twinkling blue gaze.

*He has such gorgeous eyes....*

Zell grinned. "Cool. Food."

We entered the shop just as my mom was bringing the sign up to hang on the door.

"We're here," I said with a smile as I took the sign from her. Zell took it from me and moved to hang it on the door. "Is Dad back yet?"

Mom shook her head. "I'm sorry, Sally. He won't be back until after your train leaves. There's been an accident."

"What happened?" I asked as Zell came to stand beside me.

"A dog was hit by a car."

I covered my mouth with my hands and gasped "Oh no!"

Zell rested a hand on my shoulder, voicing, "That sucks," under his breath while giving my shoulder a squeeze.

Mom smiled reassuringly. "He said she'll be fine, but he needed to do some minor surgery." Mom motioned for us to come back. "Come on. I've got sandwiches and brownies ready and waiting."

My hands lowered from my mouth as I nodded, wishing Zell could have kept his hand where it was. But I had to follow after her, which meant he had to let go. *...darn it...*

"Bummer about the dog," Zell offered.

"Yeah," I sighed with a glance toward him, "but Dad's the best. She'll be okay."

"And you're not gonna worry, right?"

I sent him a wavering smile. "Right."

Zell smiled back at me and, much to my surprise, encircled my shoulders with an arm to give me a comforting squeeze. "Good."

What I wanted to know was how could I worry when I was having lunch with Zell  
Dincht after the kind of morning I'd already had?