

9: Day Seven

I smacked off the alarm and rolled onto my back to stare at the ceiling. Today was the day. *You're going to do it, Sally. No stress. No worry. Just three simple words: 'I like you'.* It wouldn't be easy, I knew that, but it'd be worth it just the same. I needed to be honest with him. He deserved it. I deserved it.

"Up, up, up, Sally," I mumbled.

I sat up, rubbing my face and eyes before kicking my legs out from under the blankets and dangling them over the side of the bed. I gripped the fitted sheet... and then I took in a deep breath, released it in a quick puff, and pushed myself up from the bed. *It's time.*

I showered - body gel and loofa and everything - and dressed, towel-drying my hair before putting it back into braids. Then I headed out of the dormitory to make my way to the Training Center. Every once and a while I looked around for Zell, but he must have already been inside. There wasn't going to be any 'Yo, Meg' that morning. Well, at least not until I got to the Training Center.

I released a deep breath. *Okay, Sally. Are you going to tell him before or after you start the lesson?* I wanted to say it after, which meant that I should definitely do it before. I gave another nod. *I can do this. I'll be more embarrassed than ever before, but I can do it.* I stepped into the main entry of the Training Center to find Zell sitting on my stone with an intense look on his face. *Could you look any more adorable?*

No.

"Good morning, Zell," I greeted softly.

Zell looked up sharply, and then his intense expression melted into a smile.

"Morning." He stood. "You ready to get to work?"

I nodded as I came to stand across from him. "Yes." I gestured around us. "Are we going to do it here first? Until I get the hang of it?"

"You got it." Zell cleared his throat and rubbed at his tattoo.

My stomach lurched and twisted. "Zell?"

Zell looked up; his hand lowered. He tipped his head in a nod of 'Yeah?'

"Are... It's just... Are you okay?"

"Me?" he asked, surprised. "Yeah sure. Why?"

"I-I don't know. You seem... I don't know. You look..." I shrugged.

Zell made a face and then instantly grinned at me. "Don't sweat it. Come on. Let's get busy."

He moved away from the stone and started talking about the move we were going to work on, what it was called, how it was done, and what was important to pay attention to. All I felt and focused on, though, was my stomach tightening up and my face going hot. I knew the time had come.

"Can we talk for a second first?" I knew I'd interrupted, but I had to get it over with.

"Sure." Zell took a step closer and crossed his arms. "Sup?"

"Um..." I bit my lower lip, rubbing my palms on the sides of my sweatpants. What's the best way to lead in to something like this? "Give me a second," I said softly. "This is hard for me." *Hey. That was good. Let him know you're really trying.*

"Sure, Sally. Take all the time you need."

I sent him a brief glance and immediately regretted it. Zell's expression was serious, concerned, and intensely watching. I swallowed hard, lowering my eyes to the shoes on my feet as I clenched and unclenched my hands. I cleared my throat. "Zell, I..." *Come on, Sally.* "Zell, I... I really..." *Oh brother.* I could feel tears of frustration threaten. "Zell..."

Zell gave my arm a gentle squeeze. "Well, you got my name down pat," he said in

a laughing tone. Then he crossed his arms again. "I ain't gonna bite you."

I gave a slight nod. Then I forced myself to raise my eyes to meet his. I tightly clenched my hands, so hard it hurt, and then said "Zell, I really, really--"

"You're dead, Dincht."

I inwardly groaned as I turned, Zell's expression lost to me as I saw Instructor Trepe head toward us with an expression of rage. *Uh-oh. The prank!* I looked back over at Zell. His expression wavered between laughter and uncertainty. "What did you do?" I whispered.

"And look, it's the little conspirer herself right next to him," Quistis continued.

I gave a blink of shock and looked over at her again. "What?"

Quistis' cheeks were flushed in anger as her eyes sparked. "Don't play innocent. I don't buy it."

"Quis, lay off," Zell said in a firm voice. "Sally had nothing to do with it."

"You think I was born yesterday? The library terminal was the one used to send the e-mail. I checked."

E-mail? I looked over at Zell again, but his frown distracted me.

"I can't believe you hacked the system just to do this to me!"

"Do what?" Zell asked as he lowered his arms to his sides. "Geez, Quis! What the hell's wrong with what I did? It got you over there, didn't it? It got you two talking, didn't it?"

"No, it didn't. You know why?" Quistis asked, fists on hips. "I didn't go. I knew something was fishy the minute I saw the grammar. Squall was never that bad in English class. That's when I checked the sending info on the assignment email, and that was when I saw it was sent from the library terminal."

"Quis--"

"Save it," Quistis snapped with a harsh motion of her hand, "and butt out of my life. Just worry about your own problems," and she finished the statement with a couple finger

jabs to his chest.

"I can't help it if I'm worried about a couple of my friends," Zell retorted, still glaring.

I blinked. I'd never seen him glare before.

Quistis scoffed. "Worried? Ha! You're just in it for the laughs. And you." She turned on me. I took a startled step backward. "Keep a better security lock on your terminal, Miss Regal, so that not every schmuck can walk in off the street and get into the Network."

Zell took a step forward, capturing Quistis' attention when he moved between me and her. "Quis, back off. It was all me."

"Yeah, and I suppose the whole thing yesterday was you, too?"

"What're you talking about?"

Quistis made a disgusted face. "You really are dense, aren't you?"

I scowled and stepped out from behind Zell. "He is not," I retorted.

Quistis pelted my assurance with that flashing gaze, but I held it. "Oh, and this from the one who's been stalking him for three years but won't say she's secretly in love with him? Yeah. That's rich."

I paled.

Zell's arms went quickly to his sides as he took a startled step backward. "Wha-?"

Quistis scoffed again. "Worry about your own love-life before butting into mine, Dincht." She stalked off.

I felt the cascade of tears gather in my eyes, but I fought them back. The hand of dread that closed around my throat was going to be a little tougher to get rid of. Especially when Zell turned to face me. I couldn't meet his eyes, so I kept them on the ground as I wrung my hands.

Zell leaned slightly forward. "Sally?"

My eyes misted. *The whole thing's ruined.* "Y-Yeah?"

"You... You like me?"

"...I-I like you." *It wasn't supposed to go this way...*

"'Like' as in..."

I sniffed, wiping my nose with my sleeve. "As in crush. As in 'girlfriend / boyfriend'. As in an amorous infatuation," I choked out.

"Really?"

The tone in Zell's voice made it sound like he'd never thought it possible for a girl to feel that way. I wiped at my eyes and nose and face with my hands when I felt the tears start to escape my tattered hold. I nodded, still not able to lift my gaze from my feet. "You're so cute and good and I love the way you try to be nice to everyone, even Seifer, and how you help everyone before they even ask..."

I covered my face with my hands. *You have to say it all, Sally!* I lowered my hands to finally look up at him. He'd straightened again, leaning slightly back as he watched me with an expression of shock. "I've liked you since that time I saw you in class when I was 16..." And I had to admit that even though I sounded really pathetic, the confession must have lifted about five tons from my shoulders.

Zell looked this way and that, as if he were trying to find someone to rescue him, and then he leaned forward again. "Why didn't you say something sooner?"

"Sooner?" I choked out as I wiped more tears from my face. "Me? I didn't even want to ask you for help on the Fire Cavern, remember? I freaked when I thought I couldn't get you hot dogs. I-I couldn't even get m-myself to tease you at first..." My voice broke.

Zell moved forward, putting his hands out in front of him in an almost pleading gesture. "Sally, come on. Don't cry. It's okay."

I backed up. "No, it's not." My voice hiccupped with tears.

Zell stayed where he was, lowering his arms to his sides. "Sure it is. So you're shy. It's not a crime. At least you told me, right?"

I sniffed and covered my face again to keep from seeing his eyes. "Just tell me and get it over with. Please."

"Tell you what? That I like you, too? That I think you're cool? That I wanna go out more?"

"That's not funny," I sobbed.

"Who says I'm joking?"

I sucked in my breath and blinked, slowly lowering my hands from my face. His eyes were clear and honest. No grin. Just a serious expression. "What?" I choked out as a wave of dizziness began to threaten.

Then the grin came, making his eyes twinkle. "What d'ya mean 'what'? Dontcha think a guy like me would wanna date a girl like you?"

"N-No." The wave started to rise, and I brought a hand up to my forehead as my footing wobbled. "I-I don't feel so good."

"Geez. You better sit down." Zell took a gentle hold of my arm to help me sit on my stone rather than fall. Then he sat close beside me with a hand on my back to make sure I didn't topple. "Just take it easy. Breathe. Okay. There ya go."

I closed my eyes. *I made the confession of a lifetime... and he likes me too? Zell wants to go out with me? Do things like that happen?* I opened my eyes to the view of his knee beside mine. *I think I'm going to hurl.*

Zell's free hand suddenly started searching the pocket of his hooded sweatshirt. "Maybe you need to eat something. I think I have a candy bar- yeah. Here it is." He held out a candy bar with peanuts and nougat and caramel. "Try and eat a little of this."

My stomach lurched. I shook my head again. "I'm not hungry," I mumbled. The world started to spin a little less.

"You sure?"

I gave a slight nod.

Zell tucked the candy bar away. Then he gave my back a couple of rubs. I closed my eyes again. *This can't be happening.*

"Guess I need to practice on that part a little," he said. I could hear the smile in his voice. "Oh well. I did better than Quis did with Zone, or with Squall. Heh heh heh," he chuckled. "Now that was funny. I know I wasn't there, but Squall tells a pretty good story. I can almost see the whole sad little thing."

Somehow I could feel him look over at me, but my mind was stuck on that one glorious phrase. *'Dontcha think a guy like me would wanna date a girl like you?'* I had no idea. I hadn't wanted to hope. Who likes having their fantasies ripped from them like that? I know I certainly didn't.

"Sally, are you gonna be okay?"

It was the first time in the world I'd heard my name said like that. What made it so much better was that I knew who'd said it, I knew I wasn't dreaming, and I knew I'd finally told him. I gave a slight nod as I wiped away another tear. "I'll be fine," I whispered.

Zell gave my back another gentle rub, followed by several more. "Sorry about all this," he said. "I was gonna say something yesterday, but I wanted to talk to ma first, her being a girl and all. Wanted to make sure I wasn't nuts."

This time I looked over at him, my stomach and heart competing with flips and leaps of joy and disbelief. "Nuts? How could I not like you? You're... you're... you're Zell!"

Zell's ears flushed pink as he chuckled, momentarily meeting my eyes. "I know I'm not the best with girls, Sally." He shrugged and glanced toward me again. "I just take things too slow, I guess. You know? Take things as they go."

"B-But..." My eyes continued to watch his profile once he'd looked away again. "B-But you're not too slow," I said in a choked voice. "Zell," I hiccupped through my tears, "you're just right for me. I would've never said anything if you hadn't... if you hadn't kept fooling around and being the way you are. I-I never t-take things as they go. I always think

t-too much. You made me do this."

Zell sent me occasional glances. "And you did good, Meg. I've had a lot of fun the past few days, cutting loose and being myself. Knowing I wasn't gonna catch any flak because of it. It's different when I hang out with Selph or whoever."

Zell's hand began to continually massage my back. Tension vanished, and I thought my eyes were going to permanently roll back into my head.

"It was kinda weird at first," he admitted.

I examined his profile, noticing that his left hand was up by his face. "Weird?"

"Well... yeah. Because it doesn't feel weird."

I frowned slightly. "I'm confused."

Zell lowered his hand from his tattoo to look over at me with an expression of seriousness. "I thought liking a girl would be... different. But I like you just as much now as I did yesterday morning... okay, so maybe more." Zell smiled. "And here I am hoping we can keep working out together, keep hopping the train to Timber every once and a while to play ball with your dad once I finally meet him, and hang out and laugh at each other's stupid stories."

I blinked. "That's good, right?" *Is he really saying all this to me?*

Zell grinned. "Damn straight. You're a riot." Then his grin faded to just a whisper of a smile. "You're really cool, Sally. All deep and brainy, but a lot of fun, too."

I flushed and looked away. "I'm sorry it took me so long to get up the nerve—"

"Hey. Don't sweat it. I probably woulda freaked if you'd said it back then."

"But still..." I lowered my head slightly as my cheeks burned hotter. "It sounds pathetic."

"No, it doesn't. Sally." I met his gaze, and he continued, "it sounds kinda determined to me. I like that." Zell tugged gently on my braid before wrapping his arm around my shoulders and drawing me closer. "Really, Meg. It's cool. Don't sweat it."

I wilted into the circle of that arm with a sigh. *Finally....* "This is why I like you," I whispered. "You're so sweet."

Zell laughed. "Yeah? Well, I really like you, too, but I gotta say I never thought a girl would get me, what with all the girls always givin' me dirty looks."

"I've always 'got' you," I whispered. I swallowed hard before hesitantly wrapping an arm around him. It felt nice. Of course, everything about Zell felt nice. "And I won't ever give you dirty looks," I finished.

"It's okay if you do. I don't mind." Zell looked over at me, meeting my silly smile. He grinned. "Come on. Let's take a walk around the Training Center. Wanna make sure you're not gonna pass out on the way to class."

"Okay."

"Take it slow. I'll be right here making sure you don't tumble." The arm around my shoulders scooted around my waist as the other hand went to hold my left and keep me steady. "There ya go," he said. "Take it slow."

The dizziness faded and, sad little fool that I am, I was sad to see it go. "I'm feeling better," I said quietly, and I don't know why I felt I had to confess.

"Yeah, well, I wanna make sure."

So his arm stayed put. "Okay. Fine with me."

Zell laughed and I giggled. Then he sent me a glance. "You doing okay?"

I nodded. "But... Could... Could you keep holding me like this." I flushed bright red, meeting a sidelong glance. "It feels really... nice."

Zell's responding smile was nice, too. "Sure." His eyes twinkled with that bit of mischievous spirit I'd seen so many times before. "Now I know why you asked me to do the 'Booya' on you yesterday. You were gonna tell me then, huh?"

I lowered my gaze to the ground and giggled. "Yes, only... I used up all my courage."

Zell laughed and gave me another squeeze. "I thought I was gonna get flipped or something."

"And you got kissed," I whispered.

He laughed again before grunting "Booya!"

I giggled and gave him a slight push. "Stop."

Zell did. So did I. "You want me to do the 'Booya' on ya now?" he asked, facing me.

I lowered my eyes and gave a slight shake of my head. I hadn't thought my face could get that red or that hot.

"Damn. I've been trying to get you to kiss me again. Remember the whole thing with that knuckle-noogie in Timber?" He chuckled. "Instead, I got punched."

I reluctantly met his gaze. "If I were more like you," and I could feel the red reach my hairline, "I would've kissed you a long time ago." *I think I'm going to melt.*

"Yeah?" Zell crossed his arms in a 'I dare ya' and said "Why don't you?"

I gazed up at him, hoping against hope that I wasn't really still sleeping. That my alarm wasn't going to go off... *There's one way to find out.* I grabbed my courage, shushed the Thrusteavis that fluttered and crashed against my insides, and stood on tiptoes to place a shy kiss on his cheek near his smiling lips. *Wow.* Then I looked up at him. He still smiled.

Then Zell leaned toward me, wiggling his eyebrows with a whispered "Booya."

The End