

Sixteen

~ *The Final Mission* ~

Eryn Dwyre spoke first. “You do realize that you had been accepted as a Senior? In fact, I planned on scheduling your Exam Qualifier.”

“Sally.” Quistis’ determined expression of sparkling blue couldn’t even make me lower my resolve. “Sally, you’re one of the highest rated candidates since taking those quizzes and exams that Marshal scheduled.”

I twitched without meaning to and balled my hands into fists. “Thank you,” I said, my tone controlled and steady. “I appreciate what that means, but I think it best I finalize my recovery with my parents in Timber.” It was as far away as I could get at the moment.

Squall raised a hand, and the action caused both Eryn and Quistis to clench their jaws as they wrestled with their own certainties. “How about a compromise?” he said. “I could approve a medical leave of absence with the doctors. You would keep your status as candidate, your placement, and your qualification for an Exam Qualifier as soon as you’re ready to return.”

Swallowing back the tightness in my throat, I shook my head. “Thank you, Commander, but no. I’m not in peak physical condition anymore. I wouldn’t pass the physical requirements, which are hard enough when not injured. Dr. Kadowaki says that even with intense physical therapy treatment, it will be at least six months before I’m even close to my previous performance level. I believe it best I terminate.”

And terminating something that had become my life shouldn’t have sounded like it didn’t matter.

“I strongly disagree, Sally,” Eryn said. “It wouldn’t be best for anyone involved!”

“Eryn.” Squall sent her a warning glance before focusing yet again on my stoic expression. “Sally, can we speak freely for a moment? Off the record?”

A part of me hesitated, but I forced a nod.

“What about a transfer?”

I blinked. “I don’t know what you mean.”

Squall shifted his focus to Eryn. “It was your baby. You want to tell her now?”

“*Please.*” Eryn shifted her focus on me, and a twinkle of mischief sparkled in her emerald gaze. “A little chocobo may have told me of your aspirations towards security. I could transfer you to Galbadia Garden. You can be close to your family while you finish your candidacy.” She seemed to

glance towards her door, towards the hallway, “I’ve seen your recent test scores, as well as those from before the accident. An eventual position in Galbadia security isn’t out of the question.”

I didn’t respond. I just couldn’t let myself think about that.

“I would so hate to see your career derailed because of one incident here,” Eryn continued. She cast Squall and Quistis a sidelong glance at my continued silence. “You have so much potential.”

But Garden was Garden.... I shook my head. “Thank you, but....” I shook my head again. “I just need to be done,” I whispered. What else could I do? I had to leave him behind.

“But—”

“Sally,” Squall interrupted, drawing my gaze, “if I could place you in the private sector in a position that works closely with Garden sometimes... would you take the position?”

My only response for a long moment was a solitary blink. Then my mind slowly began to digest. Could it really be that simple?

“We’ve had a lot of inquiries and requests for our security-trained personnel,” Squall admitted. “From your test scores, you would qualify... with a little paperwork help from Eryn and Quistis. Just last week I received a request for someone with high-level computer skills able to do top security clearance investigative research.”

A second chance at my dream...? “I... I hadn’t even considered the private sector.” What did I really have to lose? It was like running away, without actually running. “All right. I... I can at least look at the position write-up.”

“Excellent!” Eryn and Quistis touted as one.

Squall’s expression relaxed. “Just let me know when you plan on leaving and I’ll make certain you have the documents before then.”

“I will.” I turned to return to the infirmary, pausing long enough to offer a small smile and a, “Thank you.”

It felt good to have something to look forward to; to have hope again. Yes, I was leaving Garden, but... I wasn’t leaving Garden completely. I would still be working with them. Still be in contact with them. Still... still have a part of them with me. Still have a little part of my other self.

Both of them.

I stepped into the infirmary— and did an immediate about-face. Instead, I made my way to the dorms, to my dorm room, and pulled a suitcase from my closet.



I stared at Zack’s little, red sports coupe for a tense moment before shifting my gaze back to

Garden. Zack finished clunking my luggage and boxes into the back seat and what smidge of trunk the roadster had and then clicked the lid shut. The click elicited a twitch, but I couldn't draw my burning gaze from the blue beauty of Balamb Garden against the late morning sky. Everyone needed a time to truly understand who they were; that time was mine now, and Garden wouldn't help me find that.

Marshal. Zell. Eryn. Quistis. Seifer. They stood as monumental walls against me. This was me climbing over to the other side.

"You need to go in and say 'good-bye', Munch?"

"I..." I really did, but I there dwelt a fear I wouldn't go if I met a certain pair of laughing blue eyes.

"There's a report I have yet to turn into Lt. Cmdr. Fujin in Security." Zack rest a warm hand on my shoulder. "Come on in and take a last look. A final curtain call, as it were." He tugged Mr. Huggles and Bon-Bon from my fierce grip and tossed them into the back seat of the roadster. Then he wrapped an arm me and guided me back inside.

My steps dragged against the pavement as I fought back the stinging in my eyes and the burning in my throat. Conflict raged within while a part of me wished long and hard for one last look at Zell, the love of my non-existent life... fighting against the other part of me which longed for mental and emotional peace.

The announcement of hot dogs in the cafeteria blared, causing a hiccup. My teeth clamped hard on my lower lip, and the warm taste of blood on my tongue jerked my attention back from its hazardous decline to memories.

We stepped onto the elevator and waited in tense silence as the doors purred closed. When the lift careened to the lower levels, the tender hold on my calm began to fray. I grabbed Zack's hand and squeezed until my fingers hurt. He returned my frantic grip with one calm and steady. It helped me breathe through the tears that hung in my throat.

How many years of a life that no longer existed...? I didn't want to remember anymore. Done. It was done. I was done. Starting over would be the best decision I had made, even if my heart and mind didn't acknowledge that at this moment in time.

The doors of the lift opened in mocking swiftness and Zack stepped off. My own lagging step caused a tug on his hand, but he didn't look back. His warm hold of my now cold fingers continued and I meekly followed, the memories at each corner of the office hitting me in the back of the brain and causing a flinch at every other step.

I suppose the memories could have been used as motivation to succeed... for a different kind of

person. One that could take life by the horns and wrestle their perfect destiny from that fight. But I wasn't Janine.

Janine wasn't—

Come on, Sally! Quit with the melodramatics!

I could still find my destiny. That search only required me to unplug. To scurry up and over the wall and see what waited on the other side. I couldn't let depression keep me from life. If I did, I would never be happy... not like I had been. Memories of that happiness rolled over me like a euphoric drug and I experienced a tingle from my head to my toes.

Yes. I wanted to be happy. I *would* be happy.

So, I had to go to where the happiness waited.

"You all right?" Zack asked in a low tone.

My nod followed a considerable pause as I released his hand.

"Wait here. Turning in this report shouldn't take much longer than..." He checked his watch as he plotted. "Five minutes?"

Then he bequeathed my shoulder with another fond squeeze and entered Fujin's office that preceded the row of cells that ran deeper into the security center— My gaze focused on Marshal and my throat bucked. Gulping back the tears, my steps fought the forward request I made of them. When they complied, the scuff of shoe on metal flooring caused a squeak that reverberated down the corridor and beckoned to Marshal's attention.

His tired gaze lifted from the floor and met mine.

I choked back a sob and swiped away a rebelling tear as I came to stand outside the clear acrylic of his cell door. "...hi..."

Marshal stood, the action tilting my head back. Only one step took him to the cell door; only six inches apart from me.... "Hey, Sally," he said, and his gruff tone grabbed more tears from my eyes. "You're going."

A statement. A sad truth. One that I could see in his eyes. He didn't want me to go either, but he knew it was best. Of course, that didn't make it any easier, but it had to be done. It was just one of those things.

I nodded. *Just shoot me now*, I wanted to yell. But banging on the door demanding something he couldn't provide wouldn't help anyone. It would only make me look like an idiot and make him feel worse.

"Timber?" Marshal asked.

Again, my response resulted in a simple nod.

“Your brother taking you home?”

“I’m staying with him,” I said, and my voice strained against the burn of the tears. *Are you going to ask me to stay? Please don’t ask me to stay, Marshal.* But maybe that was the one thing I wanted him to do? A tear escaped and my hand swiped it away.

The action wasn’t quick enough. Marshal winced.

“You know I can’t say it,” he said. His tone ground like gravel against my ears.

“I know,” I whispered.

“It will be good for you.”

My focus lowered to the brushed metal flooring. “I know....”

“Sally....” He cleared his throat and scrubbed at the back of his neck. “Your brother is waiting.”

My body leaned toward the acrylic door but I forced it to turn and walk away, my form rigid and my steps more staggers than anything. Marshal hissed an expletive moments before smashing a fist against the wall of his cell. The dull thud caused a flinch and a hiccup of tears. I fisted my hands at my sides and pushed my feet forward, all the while muttering “I’m not leaving him forever” like a mantra.

It had to be done: leaving. I guess, in my naivety, I hoped it wouldn’t hurt like my heart being ripped out of the back of my head.

“I’ll catch you on the up-side, Sally,” Marshal called.

I bolted to the lift as the tears broke through the icy wall of my pseudo-calm.



Zell released a quick breath, scrubbing at his scalp as he stared at the toes of his dress-shoes, his feet propped up on the desk in his classroom. His last class of the day had left a few minutes before, left in their wake a stack of homework to grade... but he couldn’t focus. Tapping his red pen on the stack of essays, he kept hearing a million different things that kept making him wonder a million others.

Frowning, Zell tossed down the pen and interlaced his fingers upon his head.

The door purred open, drawing his focus and a surprised blink. “Hey, Eryn. S’up?”

“Formality. I need you to sign off on this release for a termination of enrollment. You were the physical therapist, so Dr. Kadowaki needs your signature for the records to be released to the next treating therapist.”

“Oh sure thing.” Zell straightened, pulling his feet down from the desk as he accepted the form

from her and gathered his black pen from his keyboard - red was forbidden on medical forms. "Termination, eh?" he said as he skimmed the form for the place to sign. "That's too ba-" Zell brought the paper closer, eyes widening. He looked up at Eryn. "You serious? Sally?"

Eryn nodded, regret darkening her emerald gaze as she crossed her arms. "I'm afraid so. I tried to offer her a medical leave of absence, but she was adamant. She's going to finish her recovery with her parents in Timber and isn't interested in returning to Garden afterward."

"But she can't!"

"I know. That's what I told her, but she feels it's what's best, considering her physical aptitude after the accident. Dr. Levinne and Dr. Kadowaki agree, unfortunately. I had hoped they would persuade her otherwise." Eryn shook her head as she released a quiet sigh. "I was looking forward to observing her performance on the Field Exam. In fact, I was tempted more than once to bring her onboard the investigative end of Seifer's disappearance. Based solely on her scores, her qualifications would have been more than adequate." Eryn swore. "Now the private sector gets her. Damn it."

"Dude..." Zell stared at the form while shaking his head. "This can't be happening." He looked up. "When does she leave?"

"She left before lunch break. Her elder brother came for her."

Zell lowered his forehead to the table with a **thump**.



"This is going to be a veritable adventure," Zack said as he pulled my luggage free. "Baby sis staying with big brother. Will wonders never cease."

I stared up at Zack's house with the same blank look I'd worn the entire trip from Balamb Garden. Lowering my gaze to my backpack as I dug it out of the coupe, I mumbled something incoherent, knowing that I wouldn't convince either of us of anything.

"Oh come on, Munch. You don't have to sound miserable."

"...sorry."

Zack unlocked the front door of his two story home and then ushered me inside. "Home sweet home." Flipping on the front hall light, he motioned to the second story stairs. "Your room is the second door on the left. Make yourself at home while I put a roast in the microwave. Dinner will be ready in 45 minutes."

Half-heartedly nodding, I trudged up the stairs to my new room, sitting slowly onto the bed as my backpack **flumped** onto the floor between my legs. I stared down at it with a blank stare, trying not to remember Zell and my day together in Timber with my parents. Trying not to

remember the lunches we'd had together. Dinners. Timber wolves games. Combat King tours. TV show screenings—I threw myself back onto the bed, propped up against the pillows, and turned on the television hanging from the opposite wall.

The phone rang.

Picking up the handset to my left, I beeped it on and said "Hello," without much interest as I stared at the anchorman and anchorwoman reporting some type of weapons leak at the Galbadian missile base (newly built at a different location).

A throat cleared moments before a recognizable voice said, "Hi. Uh... Sally?"

Gasping, I dropped the phone and just stared at it, eyes wide. "...Zell...?" I vaguely heard a 'Hello? Sally? You there?' moments before I scrambled for the phone and held it to my ear with trembling hands. "H-H-Hello?"

He cleared his throat again. "Cool. Uh..." And again. "Watcha doin'?"

"Nothing," I said, closing my eyes to listen to his breathing while scolding myself for doing it.

"Cool. Uh... You got a second to talk?"

But the last time I had done that, I had told him the one secret I should have kept. "Sure."

"Um... er..." Zell released a quick breath. "I'm sorry about the other day, I just... I kinda, well, erm..."

"It's alright," I whispered. *I should have known better than to make that confession.* "Don't worry about it." *Neither of us were ready for it.* Not really. Probably never would be now.

"Oh. But didn't you. Um... I mean..." Then he muttered 'Geez, Dincht...' before blurting "Did you quit because of me?"

"No. I... I didn't." *I have to find a new Sally Regal. That wouldn't happen there. I would keep remembering... her, and you deserve your life.* I deserved mine, too.

"Then how come? I thought you wanted to be SeeD. All those stories... I thought you really wanted it."

I do, but... "It doesn't want me, Zell." And it felt wonderful to say his name again. "I've had too many accidents," I reminded. "My back has been bothering me some, and I don't think my muscle endurance is up to par anymore. And my knee? If it gave right in the middle of a mission? Zell, it could jeopardize lives."

"There's plenty you could do without going in the field. Come on! You know that!"

And a part of me wanted to say 'yes'. To believe that he wanted me there at Garden because *he* wanted me at Garden. Because he missed me.... But I had to find a new 'me.' No... no, I had to find the

real 'me'. "I'm done, Zell." *I'm sorry, but it's better this way.* The relief from confessing the 'I'm done' proved that as true.

"But... But what about... Dude! This sucks! You're SeeD, Sally. You know you are!"

I was once. But that was a different daydream. Covering my eyes with a hand, I bit my lip as I struggled with my decision. Trying to remember, again, why I was doing this. Why I was cutting this part of myself out. I loved my life as SeeD. Making a difference. Changing the world a little bit at a time. Making people safe... I loved it so much... *You've got a different way of helping them now, Sally. You can't hold onto the past just for him. He isn't the same as you remember. No one is.*

That was what I was trying to find: The way beyond a non-existent past.

"Sally?" And his voice rang concerned. "Sally? You okay?"

Nodding, I wiped the tears from my eyes and sniffed, swallowing hard before talking. "I'm OK."

"Aw man. You're cryin'."

I heard him mutter under his breath, mostly 'Geez, Dincht. Watcha thinkin!' that brought a smile. "I'm not crying, Zell. I just... I just..."

"You just don't want to quit," he pressed. "Come on, Sal. Don't do this. You're going to regret it, mega."

But at that moment the only thing I regretted was waking up. "I feel it's the right thing to do."

"Sally... Sally, don't do it."

Why, Zell? Why shouldn't I? Sally Dincht wanted him to say what Sally Regal knew he never would.

"Please?"

Tightening my hand on the phone, eyes still closed, I choked out, "I've got to," and then clicked off, clutching the handset in a white-knuckled grip as the tears dripped from my cheeks to my arm. "For both of us."

An 'us' that had never existed.

The End