

The Last Straw
Valerie Mikles

CHAPTER 1

The Alliance had just near covered the calendar with holidays to celebrate their great selves and Mal had no shame in using each and every one to start a brawl. He sat in a quiet corner of a bar on Persephone, having a drink with Jayne and Zoë, surveying the crowd for opportunities while losing miserably at a game of Mahjong. At the moment, the bar seemed disappointingly tame and under-enthusiastic about the holiday. He'd give it another twenty minutes and hop over to the next one. They needed to be off world within the hour and Mal wanted to get a decent fist fight in beforehand.

"Another round?" he asked, gathering the circle of empty mugs and heading for the bar. Zoë merely nodded and Jayne reclined, gnawing on an unlit cigar, complaining about the new policy against lighting up inside public establishments. A belly-dancer shimmied past Mal as he stood and wove his way through the sea of people. The bar was crowded, but not so much that the bartender didn't recognize a paying customer when he saw one. He refilled Mal's three empty mugs immediately, appreciating the cash upfront. Mal had learned long ago never to open a tab if one intends to leave quickly. He nearly dropped the third mug as a sweet, weary voice beckoned the barkeep.

"Excuse me. I'm looking for a Mr. Jayne Cobb. I was told he might be drinking in here."

Mal's head whirled around in time to see the bartender shrug and the girl turn around to face the crowd. She couldn't have been much older than Simon or much taller than Inara. Her dark hair fell in coarse waves down to her shoulders and her olive-drab coat hung loosely on her frame. She was a mixture of exotic features and well-kept clothing, but with the drooping demeanor of someone who's been on a long journey. Her face was plain and her eyes clear as the sea, scanning the room for her quarry.

Quickly, Mal ducked toward the back table to warn the others, wishing they'd chosen a spot closer to the exit. Unfortunately, the girl had noticed him and was half a step behind him when he slid into the booth.

"Mr. Cobb?"

It could never be said that Jayne was fair-skinned, having earned his leathery tan from hours of back-breaking labor on a dozen dusty worlds. But as Jayne's stricken gaze fell on the girl, Mal saw the blood drain so completely from the merc's face that he looked albino.

"No, miss. Malcolm Reynolds," Mal cut in quickly, reaching out a hand to shake hers. He was about to turn her away, but something about those piercing blue eyes seemed so startlingly familiar that he leaned to the left instead, revealing the crouching, ashen Jayne. "That's him right there."

In the space of a breath, Jayne drowned his drink and squared his shoulders.

"Mr. Cobb?"

"Girl, you don't have to call me that."

"Yes, sir."

Mal started. This girl had called Jayne 'sir'!

"Why are you here?"

“Serenity always comes through Persephone this time of year. I only had to wait three weeks, and here you are.”

“Well, you shouldn’t be travelin’ these parts alone. It’s dangerous for womenfolk, doin’ that.”

Zoë shot a stern glare across the table, but Mal was sure neither of the pair had caught it. The two seemed enraptured in their own alternate reality in which Jayne was called ‘sir’ and Mal felt so much the intruder he had half a mind to crawl under the table.

“I needed to find you. You wouldn’t answer my waves.”

“Why wouldn’t you answer her waves, Jayne?” Mal goaded, wanting to shift back into the real world, garnering confidence from his drink.

“Just didn’t get around to it is all. So speak your peace, girl. What is it you’ve been waitin’ three weeks here to tell me? Ain’t you got some place better to be?”

The girl sighed, sparing a glance for Mal and Zoë, clearly wishing to have this conversation alone. “Not anymore.”

Her voice shook only a little, but Jayne’s breath became downright ragged. His face went from lily white to practically translucent. Mal had seen ghosts with more color and he knew that if Jayne hadn’t already been sitting, he’d have collapsed. Though Jayne had stood through violent assaults, clubbings, gunshot wounds, stab wounds, and almost every other kind of physical attack, this single bit of news brought the hefty man to his knees and still sinking from there.

Jayne’s eyes fixated on his empty mug a moment, then he reached across the table for Zoë’s and downed the entire beer. The move did little for his color aside from add an asphyxiated flush to his cheeks. Mal wrapped his hands protectively around his mug in case Jayne reached that way, but the merc had two hands on the table and was fighting for breath. When he’d steadied himself, he pushed back his chair, squeezed around Mal, and took the girl by the arm.

“Scuse me while I handle this.”

Mal craned his neck watching them go, noticing Jayne stop by the bar for a very stiff shot of something. When he turned back to the table, Zoë had slid his glass in front of herself and was nursing the drink calmly.

“Relative you think?” Mal wondered.

“Or old friend.”

“Jayne don’t seem the type to leave old friends lying around.”

“Simon don’t seem the type to break into an Alliance facility.”

“Point taken,” Mal agreed, stealing the drink from Zoë and sipping it.

Jayne returned with the girl a few moments later, looking even more stressed and if possible, more pale. His face was beaded with sweat, but his voice was calmed by liquor.

“Can the girl come with us?”

As a rule, Mal didn’t take on passengers anymore, and that was a policy that (up until now) Jayne whole-heartedly supported.

“Are you payin’ her fare?” Mal countered, earning swift kick from Zoë under the table.

“I can pay my own fare,” the girl interrupted, then turned to Jayne. “Twenty minutes at the docks?”

He nodded distantly and she took her leave. Jayne towered next to the table, looking ready to tip over like a piece of lumber. Unconsciously, he swiped the last beer from Mal's hand and finished it in a single gulp.

"Have another," Mal invited, sarcastically.

The color was returning to Jayne's face and the burly mercenary unexpectedly broke out in a loud roar, turned, and hit the first man that crossed his path. The victim went flying across the room, crashing into a table, immediately inviting three other men into the dispute. Jayne hardly noticed as two men jumped him from the side, brushing them off like dust from his boots and throwing himself onto three others. Mal stood quickly, getting out of the corner and headed for the open room to fight. This wasn't exactly the brawl he'd been looking for and given the glazed killer-look in Jayne's eyes, it wasn't likely to go the way he planned.

"Jayne," Mal hollered, unsure if he should be fighting the other patrons or wrestling Jayne out of the bar. The man had clearly been possessed by a Herculean spirit, engaging ten men and letting none hit him. Mal wasn't sure he wanted to be one of those men. With his attention diverted, Mal became an easy target and his head reeled as someone boxed his ears. Turning quickly to retaliate, Mal began a series of swift kicks and punches, and soon realized that he himself was fighting ten men. When he noticed Jayne fly through the window and Zoë duck out the door, he quickly followed them to the street. He was nearly plowed over by Jayne trying to get back in and finish the fight, but between himself and Zoë, they were able to restrain the crazed mercenary.

Zoë kicked Jayne's knees from behind, forcing him into Mal, and Mal tumbled backward, taking them into a roll that got them out of the door way. The fight had not followed them out as yet, but by Jayne's look, the demons had. Mal let out a yelp, ducking a punch and rolling free. He stood up quickly, but surprisingly, Jayne stayed down.

"Jayne?" Zoë asked softly, tiptoeing over and nudging the man with her boot. His glassy eyes stared vacantly sideways, his body drenched with sweat and blood. Every breath seemed to take extraordinary effort from his hair to his boots. They stood in tense silence for nearly a minute, just watching Jayne breathe the dusty air and bleed on the road. Finally, the man rolled onto his knees and spit the blood from his mouth, acclimatizing himself to the upright position.

"Jayne?"

"Yeah, Mal?"

"Lets get back to the ship."

Jayne nodded, standing gingerly, his eyes never leaving the ground. Mal kept a wary eye on the man as they journeyed back, hoping for that spark of good humor that usually fell out of Jayne post-ass-kicking, but it never came.

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Inara had delayed her return to Serenity for as long as possible, but half a day did little to heal her wounds. If anything, the swelling around her eye had gotten worse. Her cheek was throbbing, begging her to replace the icepack she'd had on it earlier. Her hands still quaked. She'd thought about going to a local clinic, but on this world world, a

companion couldn't enter such a place without stirring a buzz. The cut on her head wasn't deep enough to require stitches anyway.

With trembling hands, she drank ice water, trying to replenish her lost tears. The cool drink invaded her body, sharply etching its path through her esophagus, making her shiver. The cup clattered against the saucer as she set it down again and debated what to do next. Her shuttle was a sty, the curtains torn and tossed, the tables swept clean, the altar and incense tipped onto the carpet. It had been a miracle she'd found a cup that wasn't broken.

The room looked as violated as she felt. She'd spent the last two hours weeping, trying to get his touch off her body, his scent out of her mind. Soft-hands of the well-moneyed. Expensive cologne. Fists like iron. Sticky drool, salty sweat, hot semen. Her body shuddered involuntarily.

A soft beep from the cockpit indicated Serenity was calling. She couldn't hide here any longer. She needed to return. On shaky legs, she stumbled to the cockpit, one hand on the wall for support. She ached from neck to knees. Deep breaths. Deep, calming breaths.

"Serenity, this is Shuttle One, I'm on my way."

"Inara," Wash answered jovially. "We were starting to worry."

Could he hear her voice shaking? No. She was being paranoid.

The shuttle rumbled as she lifted off from her hiding spot in the crater, heading for the Eavesdown docks. Inara swallowed the bile arising from sudden motion sickness and pressed on. Not long now. But Serenity would not be the safe, comforting harbor she wanted. Not today. The unthinkable had occurred. A monster had slipped through her carefully honed client screening. In all her years, only a handful had succeeded – creeps and perverts, some capable of violence. But she'd always managed to escape before things got out of hand. She was clever, strong, and stealthy. He had incapacitated her quickly and took pleasure in bringing such a self-assured woman to her knees.

She only contacted Serenity once more when docking, and stayed in her shuttle with the door locked while the ship broke atmo. The crew was accustomed to letting her be, but in a few days (less if she was unlucky), they'd begin to wonder. For now, it didn't matter. Her bed slashed at odd angles, Inara settled on the floor, pulled one of the fallen curtains over body, and cried herself to sleep.

~

Mal wasn't surprised when Inara didn't show up for dinner. A client that could convince Inara to stay an extra half-day could probably also wear her out. Still it irked him. He abhorred her profession, and the fact that it kept her from sharing a meal with them was like salt in an open wound. Mal looked from her empty chair to Jayne's.

Jayne, on the other hand, was not exactly known for missing meals unless Mal sent him away from the table. Even the one time he had the stomach flu, he'd shown up, setting a bucket by his chair 'just in case.' But something about the new passenger had rocked him to silence. When they had returned to the ship, Jayne walked straight to his bunk, climbed in, and locked the door, leaving Mal and Zoë alone to stow their fresh supplies. It had been Jayne's turn to cook, but Zoë had taken the slack when he failed to emerge from his bunk. Kaylee had knocked a few times to tell him supper was ready, but

there was no response. Mal figured that Jayne may have drunk himself into a coma and decided that if he didn't hear the tell-tale signs of a midnight snacker later that evening, he'd make sure the Doc looked in on Jayne in the morning.

As for the new passenger – she'd introduced herself as Ms. Smith – she was hiding out in the room Zoë had set up for her in the passenger dormitories. She'd come in and made a plate for herself before the rest had gathered, and had since remained elusive. Kaylee was dying from the mystery, smiling, and putting forth the most unreasonable of hypotheses.

“Aren't you the least bit curious about her?” Kaylee prodded Mal.

“So long she's paying fare and not bringing undue trouble, I don't care who she is,” Mal answered crisply.

“That last qualifier is new isn't it?” Simon jested.

“There's a balance between trouble and usefulness,” Wash quipped philosophically.

“Right,” Simon agreed, holding up two hands as a scale. “Harboring Alliance fugitives... having a doctor.”

“I think you're on to something,” Wash laughed, and the others joined in.

Mal was only half listening, half sucking down the ginger noodle concoction in front of him. He flinched when he felt River's hand on his elbow.

“Hurt. Wings broken,” River whispered quietly, as if directly addressing his thoughts. “You have to watch for her. She'll fly away.”

Mal pulled his arm away from the creepy girl and resumed eating, deliberately ignoring the senseless words. River watched him a moment, then rejoined the conversation, laughing and carrying on like a normal girl. What had she said? Was something wrong with the ship?

~

Mal had Kaylee check the engine and she assured him that everything was as it should be. Either River's words meant something else or meant nothing at all... and he was hoping for the latter. As the night wore on and the halls fell silent, Mal lingered in the bridge, letting Wash off early for the night, listening for the sound of Jayne emerging from his bunk for a midnight snack. Once he heard that, he'd know the man was okay, and he would get some sleep.

He passed the time working his way through Serenity's books – not the real ones, but the fake ones they kept around for Alliance inspections. It was important to hover just close enough to the poverty line so that the special groups didn't hound you and the government didn't require taxes, and it was a difficult position to fake. The task had become significantly easier since he'd explained it to River one day, and she often penciled helpful notes in the margins of the ledger. Mal's eyelids were taking on the familiar weight of exhaustion and he yawned loudly, closing the book with a thump.

Then he heard another thump.

Then a loud clamoring and the sound of metal being ripped from metal.

Mal pounded down the stairs toward the crew quarters and the loud crashing sounds emerging from Jayne's bunk. The man was alive, but clearly not seeking a midnight snack.

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CHAPTER 2

Zoë had been sleeping when she heard the ruckus, but immediately sprang from bed, pulling on whatever clothing was near, and listening for gunshots before climbing out of the bunk. Wash and Kaylee peeked curious heads into the hallway, and Mal was at the door to Jayne's bunk, trying to signal the override on the door locks.

"H-3-5-7," Kaylee called and within seconds Mal had kicked open the hatch and was peering hesitantly down the ladder. Jayne was hollering a storm, pounding a chair against the outside wall, denting the hull plate, causing pieces of the chair to go flying. Zoë and Mal hardly exchanged a glance before springing into action. Zoë went in first, yanking the chair free of Jayne's grasp while Mal caught him from behind, pulling him into a choke hold and shouting his name. Jayne rammed Mal into the wall, then shoved him sideways and Zoë went in again, catching Jayne in the side, causing him to double over. Turning his attack to Zoë, Mal was able to get behind the distraught man and trapped him with a debilitating hit to a cluster of nerves near the small of his back.

Zoë caught Jayne as he pitched forward and lowered him onto the bed. The bed, as it happened, was nearby, having been ripped off the wall and tossed unceremoniously into the middle of the room. Seething through a black eye, Mal knelt beside Jayne and glared.

"What has gotten into you?" Mal demanded.

Jayne's eyes clouded again, looking at the wall. Zoë wasn't sure he could talk even if he wanted to.

"Ain't no excuse for this kind of behavior," Mal growled. "You are getting off at the next stop."

"I can finish the job," Jayne panted, his eyes meeting Mal's desperately.

"There's no place for a loose cannon on this job. Ain't no excuse for this."

Zoë watched, stunned, as Mal turned and climbed up the ladder, leaving Jayne and the room in disarray. She heard him order the others back to sleep, and turned to Jayne again.

"What's going on, Jayne?"

The man just lay there, face flushed from exertion, and blinked slowly.

"I'm out."

He seemed more stunned than anything, and Zoë knew she could talk Mal out of this threat in the morning. Crazy or not, they needed the third gun hand on this job. Hopefully, in two weeks, the merc would be a little less nuts. She hit the comm on the wall, summoning the doctor, and looked again at Jayne.

"What's eating you?" she murmured, but his eyes were closed.

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An hour later, Simon climbed out of Jayne's bunk and massaged his temple wearily. Zoë had stayed with him the whole time in case Jayne became violent, but the man was about as lively as road kill. He hadn't managed to get a single response ... not

even an annoyed swat as Jayne was prone to doing whenever he cleaned a cut. He'd renege on the sedative because Jayne had fallen asleep half way through the examination. Mostly cuts and bruises. Given the way the room was torn up, Simon guessed a few strained muscles, but none that Jayne would complain about.

When he came out, Mal was sitting on the bottom stair at the end of the hall, and Kaylee slouched on the floor outside her bunk. She reached up to Simon and their hands connected briefly before Mal interrupted by clearing his throat.

"No sedative," Simon said in response to Mal's unasked question, before giving Kaylee's hand one last squeeze and heading for his own bunk to sleep. As he passed through the galley, he could've sworn he saw a ghost disappearing around the corner, and he wondered briefly if River had awoken, though she wasn't prone to running from him... Perhaps it was their new passenger.

Simon quickened his step curiously, coming out to the catwalk that led toward the cargo bay. No one was running down the stairs. He heard the door to Inara's shuttle click shut – a deafening sound in the silence of ship's night. Inara wasn't prone to running either. Intrigued, he walked over and knocked on the door.

No answer.

"Inara?" He knocked again. He knew she was awake, and now he knew she was hiding. Simon couldn't explain the unsettling twitter in his stomach, but he couldn't ignore it. As softly as possible, he slid open the door to Inara's shuttle and froze.

The scene was not all that dissimilar from the one he'd just left in Jayne's bunk. Dim lights from the shuttles inbuilt system cast an eerie, wraithlike feel about the torn and tattered room. The soft lamps that usually lit the space and the deep red curtains that gave it color were violently ripped from the wall and tossed carelessly on the floor. A single red spread covered the tilted mattress which appeared deflated in the middle.

"Inara?" Simon called softly, not seeing the woman. He tread carefully, worried that she might be in any one of the heaps of fabric strewn about. Instinctively, he began straightening as he searched, righting her altar, resetting the statuettes on the table, collecting the broken tea-cups.

"Are you hurt?" Simon asked, directing the question to the room-at-large.

He found her, quivering under a curtain, feigning sleep, a gash across her swollen face. He pulled the fabric away, finding her huddled in a light dressing gown. Carefully, he raised the sleeve, then the lower hem, and finally pushed it lightly off her shoulder. Her body was covered with welts, bruises, and cuts, her eyes pressed shut as she wrapped her arms tightly across her chest.

"You are hurt," he whispered, horrified.

"My bed is broken."

"Seems to be going around," Simon agreed sardonically.

"Don't come in," Inara murmured, sitting up and edging away from him. "Don't see me like this."

"Inara, let me help," Simon pleaded quietly, reaching out a hand.

"I can't go out there."

"You don't have to go to the Infirmary. We can do this here. If you let me help, you'll heal much quicker."

Inara met his eyes, her own sunk in hopelessness. Simon was suddenly hit with the same wave of sorrow he'd felt when he first found River broken by the Alliance. Only now, as he looked at Inara, he knew he could at least help a little.

"No more."

"No more what, Inara?" Simon asked, inching close to her as he squatted on the floor next to her, trying to get a good look at the cut on her face.

"No more clients."

~

Kaylee waited until the others had gone to sleep before tipping open the hatch to Jayne's bunk and climbing down. The first thing she noticed was that the bed was no longer attached to the wall and that the gun rack was hanging at an odd angle. A green turtle that Jayne had won at a county fair awhile back was torn headless, the stuffing strewn about the room. Kaylee picked up the discarded body, found the head, and looked over to Jayne. His dislocated bed frame lay unevenly on a pile of laundry in the middle of the floor. Jayne's back was to her, facing a large dent on the opposite wall where he'd been beating the hull with a chair. Secondary electrical relays and a few plumbing pipes went through that wall. She'd check it out in the morning.

Tucking the decapitated turtle under one arm, Kaylee tried to re-hang the gun rack so it didn't rattle so much with the ship.

"Jayne?" Kaylee tried tentatively, but he kept his back to her. "Did the girls do somethin' wrong?"

"Come again?"

"It's just you've slept next to 'em ever since I knew ya. Think it might've been easier to move the gun rack than the bed."

Jayne grunted and kept his back turned. "This ain't funny, Kaylee."

Kaylee circled the room slowly, hoping to get a look at his face. When she came around, she saw the knife in his hand, a few tentative cuts across his palm. Her heart quickened fearfully at the sight of the blood.

"Jayne, hand over the knife," she ordered firmly, her voice quivering.

"Kaylee, leave."

"I ain't leavin' you alone. Not tonight. Now hand over the knife and tell me what's driven you so Reaver that you started cuttin' on yourself."

She saw Jayne flinch at the word 'Reaver', but the insult had the desired effect. Jayne looked at his sliced hand, then balled it into a fist and handed over the knife. Kaylee took the blade, finding it heavier than she expected, and looked around for a place to hide it, but finally had to settle for just out of reach.

"Mal kicked me off the ship."

"That ain't why you cut your hand, though."

"No. He —"

Jayne stopped, his voice hitching on some lump of grief he didn't want to share. Kaylee knelt beside him, stroking his cheek consolingly. "Just say it, Jayne. Whatever it is, say it."

Jayne met her eyes briefly, then looked away, swallowing hard. "Go away, girl."

He rolled over on the bed, but seeing as it was now in the center of the floor, had no wall to put between them. Kaylee stood patiently and walked around to the other side of the bed, then she knelt down and stroked his face again, racking her brain as to what she could do to get him to open up. Jayne kept his eyes firmly closed, his arms wrapped around himself, and his mouth shut. He wasn't talking, but at least he wasn't pushing her away.

"If you tell me, I'll let you touch my boobs."

"Really?" That got a curious eye peaked open and looking at her.

"If that's what it takes."

Jayne considered her with pursed lips, hesitating. Kaylee couldn't decide if she wanted him to take her up on the offer or not, but she'd put it out there and she'd do what it took. Someone had to find out why Jayne had decapitated an innocent, stuffed turtle, and the Captain sure as hell wasn't up to the challenge.

"I don't really want..." Jayne began dismissively, and Kaylee thought she'd lost. "I can't – not to... My mother is dead."

He blurted it out so suddenly, Kaylee couldn't keep her jaw from dropping. Jayne seemed shocked by the revelation himself, as if it hadn't been true until he spoke it then and there. Her heart going out, she rushed to Jayne, replacing the pillow that was at his head and gathering him in her arms. He scooted towards her, wrapping his arms around her, and crying on her lap. Kaylee bent her body protectively around him, mildly aware of the blood he was smearing on her clothes as he hugged her tight. But she couldn't care about that now. She just held him, sharing his grief.

Jayne choked the tears back quickly, but didn't let go of Kaylee. His voice came strained and grieved, floating from the space between them like a confession. "She wanted me to come; kept sendin' waves. I kept thinkin' after the next job, after the next big take. Didn't want to miss a share of somethin' big because I was off visitin' my family."

"Oh, honey," Kaylee moaned, feeling tears burning her eyes.

"She was sick for awhile. She knew she was goin'. I just wish I'd come home when she'd asked."

"Jayne, there's nothin' you could've done."

"I could've been there."

Kaylee kept quiet, having no idea how to respond to that guilt. She held him awhile longer, waiting till his grip on her loosened before moving. Carefully, she extracted herself from the embrace, nursing the cuts on Jayne's hand with the bed sheet briefly before heading to the ladder.

"Where you goin'?"

"Just gettin' some bandages and stuff to clean your hand. You ain't leavin' a bloody palm print on my chest."

Jayne heaved, frustrated. "Kaylee, I ain't gonna... you don't – just don't tell anyone I cried. I'll trade ya boobs for that."

Kaylee smiled, biting her lip, amused at Jayne's attempt to hide a gentleman streak behind a macho image. "Can I at least explain about your mother or are you gonna do that in the morning?"

Jayne shrugged, tracing the still-bleeding cuts on his hand. "Just don't tell anyone you saw me cry."

~

Mal caught Kaylee as she was returning to the passenger dorms, bandages in hand, and kicking open the door to Jayne's bunk.

"What are you doin'?" he demanded, clearly alarmed by the blood Jayne had smeared on her clothing. Kaylee met his eye firmly, not wanting to argue.

"I can't leave him alone tonight, Captain."

"It ain't safe down there," Mal persisted, grabbing her elbow sharply. "It's one thing startin' a brawl in a bar but tearing your own space apart. Ain't no reason for that."

"What did you do when your mother died?" Kaylee countered calmly.

"I – His mother?"

Kaylee nodded and felt Mal's grip on her arm loosen. His eyes vanished briefly to some point in the past, but he came back just as quickly.

"That's a damn good excuse."

"I just – he shouldn't be alone tonight."

Mal released her with a nod, then motioned at the bandages in her hand. "What's that? Thought the Doc saw to him."

Kaylee looked at the collection of first aid supplies, wondering how much she should tell Mal, not knowing how to protect Jayne's dignity. Finally she answered with the same question as before. "What did you do when your mother died?"

Mal inhaled sharply and she knew he understood. He nodded, backing away. "You leave that hatch open while you're in there. I'll leave mine open, and you holler if he tries anything. You hear?"

Kaylee nodded slowly. "I'll holler."

~

As his feet took him into his bunk, Mal's mind climbed into the past, Kaylee's words still echoing. "What did you do when your mother died?" The answer was simple: he'd died too. Died again, that is, because he'd already died once before a few months earlier in Serenity Valley. When Mal's boots hit the floor, he punched the wall behind the ladder, cursing the grief that had suddenly let loose in his heart. He hated thinking of his momma's death. If he could help it, he only thought of her alive. He was like to rip his own bed off the wall if he did much different.

Mal fell to his knees at the foot of the bed, reaching for a memory box filled with letters. Every day he'd been at war, his momma had written him a letter, and Mal had kept every single one. He could still hear her whispers and see the curves of her face through the cursive lettering, sometimes encouraging him in his cause, sometimes writing out her prayers for him, most times just telling him to make it safely home. That was an order he'd followed.

Shadow was in drought when he'd returned. It had taken months to be released from Serenity Valley, then months more to be released by the Alliance. He'd received his discharge papers, but had one last order to follow. "Come home safe."

His first concern arose when he didn't hear the familiar sounds of cattle as he entered the estate. The fence had been trampled at one point and someone had thrown a

rock through the second story window of the main house. With no one around, he climbed in through his traditional sneak-out window in the first-floor guest room. He'd come safe, but home was no longer there.

He found out later that she'd died the very day the Independents fell at Serenity Valley. Her prayers for him had ceased the same day he watched his angels flying away from him. If he still believed in God, he'd have thought that meant something. One of the ranch foremen had tracked him down and given him a stack of letters – all the ones he'd written to her. Mal had sat in the dirt under his favorite childhood climbing tree and read them all one-by-one, spilling his own tears right next to his momma's. In the middle of the mix was a letter Zoë had sent her. Mal remembered asking her to write it.

"...I was stranded in the kill zone, encompassed by enemy fire, my men all dead or dying. The mortars rained down, but I was injured and could not move my legs. I was sure that moment would be my last. As if from nowhere, your son appeared beside me and carried me to safety. When he went back for others, he was captured. He asked me to write to you if he fell, and though he has not fallen, he cannot write. I thought you should know..."

Every time Mal read that letter, his breath caught. Zoë hadn't been the only one he'd saved that day. She wasn't the only one he'd asked to write, but she was the only one who did. She was the only reason his momma knew why his letters had ceased for a season. And when they'd all parted ways after the war and gone to their respective homes, Zoë went briefly to her family, and then she came to Shadow for Mal. She'd heard about his momma's death. He never called her or asked her to come, she was just there. And she hadn't left his side since.

Zoë had slept beside him in the dirt under that tree on his momma's ranch for a week. She helped him settle all the family accounts, walked with him to the cemetery every day, and placed a hand on his shoulder while he mourned. When it became apparent that he would grieve so long as he was there, she booked them both passage off Shadow and took him away from that world. Brought him to the place where he found Serenity.

Mal sucked in the cold ship air, letting it drive away the heat on his face. Carefully, he tucked the letters back into the box and slid it under the bed. He kept trying to think of what he'd say to Jayne in the morning. Kept trying to think of the crew. But as he lay heavily on his bunk, his mind was filled only with the words of his own momma. "Come home safe."

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CHAPTER 3

Jayne woke up feeling completely exhausted, but too famished to sleep a moment longer. Kaylee was curled around his head, breathing softly, offering warmth and comfort even in her sleep. Stretching his sore muscles, Jayne sat up on the lopsided bed frame, carefully arranging Kaylee on the mattress before covering her with a blanket and leaving her to sleep. It felt, for the moment, that he was leaving his grief lying in the bed next to Kaylee, but her heart and cheer seemed capable of standing against that monster – at least long enough for him to get some chow.

When he climbed out of the bunk, he could smell someone already up and cooking. He briefly wished it was Book there, preparing a meal, ready with words of wisdom and comfort. But Book had left the ship a few weeks ago, and he had no sounding board for his grief. He stumbled into the galley, rubbing his eyes, nearly tripping over his own feet when he saw their new passenger behind the stove. He shook his head in amazement, wondering that he hardly recognized her aside from the striking similarity to her mother.

“Hey, girl, whatcha doin’?” he asked, more curious if she was going to share than anything else.

“Good morning, Mr. Cobb,” she replied coldly, but handed him a plate anyway. Some form of scrambled eggs and grits, though the color was off because she was using protein supplements. “Just making myself useful.”

“You don’t have to call me that.”

“I know,” she smirked, snidely.

“How’d you get the money?” Jayne asked, sitting at the table shoveling the food into his mouth.

“What money?”

“The money to get to Persephone? Where’d you get it?”

“You don’t think we survived all this time on that pittance you’ve been sending do you?”

Jayne felt the sting of the insult, and stopped chewing only briefly. “Girl, if you don’t want my charity, why are you here?”

She closed her eyes, seething. “Can’t you even speak my name?!”

“Fine! Mattie! Ya happy now?” Jayne bellowed, standing up so quickly his chair tipped over.

“Oh, yeah, Cobb. That makes everything better,” she snapped. Quickly, she prepared a plate for herself, and stalked back to the passenger dorms before anyone else woke up. Jayne righted his chair and started eating again.

~

Inara lay awake on the couch, her body soothed by Simon’s medicine. He’d carefully sealed the gash on her forehead so that it wouldn’t scar, and left her with a few icepacks for her eye. It still ached every time she blinked, but the swelling had gone down enough that it was hardly noticeable with the right make-up. She gazed forlornly at the exposed metal walls. Her client – attacker – had done the work of taking the tapestries down for her, though not in the manner she had hoped. It seemed she’d be leaving Serenity with a few less personal items than she originally intended, but she tried to dismiss it as some divine force making her leave this life behind. She closed her eyes, pretending to sleep, as the shuttle door slid open. She expected Simon, but was greeted by the familiar, heavy gait of Mal.

“Wo de ma,” he whispered, and she tried not to cringe. He would have found out sooner or later, but she’d hoped it would be later. Long after she’d left. He always criticized her work, and she would not tolerate that gloating smirk in his eyes as he said ‘I told you so.’ She could smell him as he knelt beside her, casting a shadow across her closed lids.

“Nara,” he whispered. His hand was by her face, catching her tears, but she could not feel him. She pressed her eyes tightly, squeezing out the tears, damning her pride, and wanting to fall into his arms just this once. She reached out to touch him, but he wasn’t there. Startled, her eyes shot open and she nearly fell off the couch for reaching. Mal wasn’t there... A dream. The shuttle was empty.

“Nara?” Kaylee’s voice floated through the shuttle door, accompanied by a soft knock. Blinking away the dream, Inara ran quickly to the mirror, powdering quickly over her bruises, then adding a veil for the sake of her own sanity. The make-up stung in her still-fresh cuts. By the time she made it to the door, Kaylee had stopped knocking, and when she looked out the hatch, she could see the mechanic walking sadly away.

Inara checked herself again, tying her robe shut, and slid open the door.

“Kaylee?”

The girl turned, offering a cheerful smile, a plate of breakfast-looking food in her hand. Inara involuntarily touched her empty stomach and felt her mouth water.

“Hey, ‘Nara. Didn’t mean to interrupt your prayin’.”

“Oh, you –” Inara broke off, realizing she had almost invited Kaylee into the wrecked shuttle. “Is that for me?”

Kaylee approached again, offering the tray that was in her hands. “Thought you might like some breakfast. You okay?”

“This last client,” Inara chuckled dismissively. “He was a bit more than I expected.”

“Oh,” Kaylee nodded, believing the lie that Inara had implied. Inara looked guiltily at the plate of food Kaylee had given her, wondering if her young friend could handle the truth. Wondering if she was ready to tell it. Kaylee must have sensed her discomfort, because she pointed vaguely over her shoulder.

“I have to get back...”

“Oh, of course.”

“Enjoy your breakfast.”

“Right,” Inara said, disappointment sweeping over her. The moment had passed and now she was left again to face this alone. “Kaylee?”

Kaylee turned, all ears.

Inara hesitated, looking back into her shuttle, her resolve crumbling at the sight of it. Finally she said, “Come back later?”

Kaylee smiled broadly, radiating comfort and hope. “Sure.”

~

Mattie’s words cut like a knife, but Jayne refused to force them from his mind. He let them play like a broken record in his head, interrupted only occasionally by Mal’s icy ultimatum, ‘you’re getting off at the next stop.’ He could blame those two for his pain. He could let them fuel his anger. As long as they were at the front of his mind, he wouldn’t think about...

Jayne tipped his dislocated bed frame, gathering the clothing pinned underneath and stuffing it in a duffel. He kicked the head of his decapitated turtle across the room, then kicked his fallen chair. Then he righted the chair, pounded his head once against the wall, and found a new trunk to start stuffing things into.

He ignored the clink of boot steps coming down the ladder, expecting Kaylee to come try and cheer him up again. Jayne kept his back turned, not sure he could take any amount of cheering, so he was surprised to hear Mal speak.

“You’re packing?”

Gorram hun dan sounded surprised! Jayne angrily gathered his mismatched socks into one pile. “You told me to.”

“That was before I know about your Momma. Which, by the way, is somethin’ you shoulda told me.”

Jayne growled at Mal’s mention of his mother, treating it like casual business. He closed the wound, numbing it with the firm reprimand Mal had given the night before.

“Does it make a difference? You don’t need a loose cannon on this job and I can’t spend coin if I’m dead.”

“Everyone sits out one job or another.”

“I ain’t everyone.”

Jayne stopped his prowl about the room, picking up the body of the turtle and gathering the stuffing from the floor, trying to repair the poor critter. His fingers brushed over the singed bit on its foot sewn over with black thread.

“If you wanna leave, fine. But if it makes a difference, I ain’t tellin’ you to go anymore.”

Jayne nodded slowly, mad that Mal was taking away one of the things he was trying to be angry about. Without good anger, he’d just have to go and press weights till his muscles gave out and find some way to wear himself senseless. Mal was waiting, giving a little consideration on account of his mother, so Jayne afforded his mother a brief thought as well, and fought to control his voice. “Can we stop by Greenleaf at some point ... I just wanna see her.”

“I’ll tell Wash to work it in,” Mal assured, turning to climb out. “Before the next job.”

Jayne sighed in exhaustion and surveyed his half-packed room, disheveled as it was, suddenly wanting a nap. Would Mal treat him like an invalid now? Make him sit out the job? He needed to pull himself together. “Can you help me get this bed back on the wall?”

“You yanked it off. You fix it or it comes out of your cut.”

Jayne chuckled lightly as Mal disappeared through the hatch. Nope. Things were just the same.

~

River leaned on the railing over the catwalk, one heel balanced on the ledge, in a position she’d seen Mal adopt a hundred times over. She laughed mischievously, knowing the posture would baffle Simon when he came up the stairs. Then she sighed, grateful that she was feeling well enough to ruffle her brother with this joke.

Kaylee brushed past her on the way to the engine room, playfully trying to bump her off balance and River bumped back, a smile curling on her lips. Inara was hurting, but Simon knew, so River didn’t worry. Kaylee might know soon, too, if Inara’s courage held out.

The new passenger stepped into the cargo bay and started adjusting the weights on Jayne's bench press. River had done that once and Jayne was furious with her. But then, River had hidden the weights in various places around the ship and set up a scavenger hunt, and half of the twenty-pounds had been inadvertently jettisoned with the garbage because Jayne had taken too long in finding them. River had since learned not to hide things in places where they were easily spaced, although it was on occasion hilarious. The new passenger didn't seem intent on setting up such a game.

Jayne had called her Mattie, but only in saying she was the one who made the breakfast. Otherwise, he'd been very tight-lipped about her. Even in his head. Mattie was pressing weights furiously and River had to wonder at the anger bleeding out of her. River almost didn't notice Simon tripping over his feet when he came up the stairs.

"River?" her brother asked tentatively, his eyes clouded with concern. "Are you okay?"

"Why would you ask that?" she teased, swinging her head in the most Mal-like fashion she could and adopting his accent.

"It's just..." Simon stammered to a halt, unable to justify his concern.

"Would you rather I lay on the floor?"

Simon's mouth flapped a little more, one finger itching his ear, flummoxed. Something as simple as posture and it had him confounded. River sprang toward him, lightly kissing him on the cheek, before skipping off to the engine room to follow Kaylee. She looked back in time to see Simon disappear into Inara's shuttle, still scratching his head. Some days, it was just too easy.

~

Jayne found Mattie pressing weights, doused with sweat, face red. She gasped with every press, heaving the bar overhead and shaking as she lowered it. Wordlessly, he came up behind the bench, spotting her more out of habit than anything else, wishing like hell she'd get off and let him do a few reps. His anger burned at the thought of all those hard-earned credits he'd sent home and Mattie's insinuation that it wasn't enough. Why had his mother said nothing?

Mattie's elbow buckled and Jayne caught the bar easily before it fell on her. She didn't even offer a thank you. Just hauled herself up on the straps Jayne used for chin-ups, threaded her spindly legs through, and started doing inverted crunches. Knowing she could just hang if her body failed her, Jayne started adding weight to the bar for himself.

"You care if I tell them who you are?" he asked, not meeting her eye.

"Can you trust them?"

"Every day, with my life."

Mattie stopped crunching and hung upside down, her hands crossed on opposite shoulders. It was a strange way to meet someone's eye, but then their relationship had never been normal. "They're like family to you, then?"

"Girl, I got no family," Jayne said darkly, starting his first set with more weight than he should, hoping the anguish would sweat out through his pores. Mattie's voice fell on him like a chilling apparition.

"Then what am I?"

~

Wash loved when Zoë leaned against him as he worked, and loved even more when she didn't back away as soon as Mal entered the room. Mattie's breakfast had put everyone in a fine mood, and it was all Wash could do not to lock the door to the cockpit and make love to his wife right then and there. She leaned against the back of his chair, one finger teasing the hairs on the back of his neck, breathing hotly in his ear. And when Mal entered, she snaked an arm possessively around his neck, letting Mal know he'd have to fight for either of their attentions.

"Any word from Boros?" Mal asked, ignoring their rapture with each other.

"No," Wash answered, keeping one hand on Zoë, while the other checked the board. "Are you expecting word?"

"Just the usual 'plan's gone south' wave. This is Mingo and Fanty."

"Their jobs usually go south after we're in," Zoë commented, omitting the usual 'sir' she placed at the end of every sentence directed toward Mal. Wash could tell she wanted Mal to leave soon, but the Captain wasn't taking that hint.

"Right."

"Can't we work for someone more stable?" Wash complained.

"We work for them that pay us. They got another job waitin' soon as this one's done. Let's not make them wait so long they find someone else."

"I'm going as fast as Kaylee lets me. Can't complain if work comes faster."

"Speaking of, sir, our new passenger is keepin' herself all manner of busy today." Zoë straightened as she spoke, and Wash was more than a little disappointed.

"That was a fine meal she made. Almost as good as the Captain's wife," Wash carped bitterly.

"Not what I mean," Zoë replied, her tone becoming more businesslike, but she placed a hand on Wash's shoulder to let him know she heard his disappointment. "I've seen her just about every place bridge to bay, screwing in light bulbs and scrubbing old stains."

"So she's OCD, so what? This ship could use a detailing."

"You calling my boat a dump?" Mal challenged.

"Well..." Wash trailed off, feeling trapped.

"Of course not, sir. Did Jayne say how he knew her?"

"No, but she's definitely a Cobb. You see it in her eyes."

"I don't trust her, sir."

"I was sleepin' with one eye open, myself."

~

Mal had noticed Mattie puttering about his boat, but hadn't been concerned about it until Zoë brought it up, and now it irked him. Normally, he'd ignore any paying passenger not causing a fuss, but that policy had worked against him a few too many times, and next meal, he planned to remind her the boundaries of where she was permitted. Next meal. Two hours from now. Time enough to get in a load of laundry.

Mal shouldered his laundry bag and made his way to the machine on the lower level. Between energy and water concerns, he generally held off on the luxury, but the

month had passed and his clothes had been worn enough to develop the kind of odor that made Inara's nose turn. And if there was one thing he wouldn't abide, it was Inara turning her nose at him. What would he do when she left?

As he came down the hall, he heard the familiar chink of tools against water pipes and groaned that Kaylee was fixing the machine again. Damn thing had been leaking something fierce a few weeks ago and Kaylee had only managed a temporary fix. Maybe she was almost done. He wasn't at all pleased to see Mattie propped up on her elbows, half-buried behind the machine that had been pulled a good two feet from the wall it was supposed to be attached to.

"Ma'am, I'd sure like to know what you're doin'," Mal opened, a mild threat underlying his tone.

Mattie spared him a glance, brushing lint and raven-black hair from her face. "Making myself useful."

"No need for that since you're already paying fare."

The girl nodded, blue eyes adopting that same superior look he'd wanted to knock off Simon's face on more than one occasion. If she was a Cobb, she couldn't be that close to Jayne. She was far too refined.

Mattie seemed nonplussed by his threats, answering coolly, "Once I fix this, your water usage will be fifteen percent more efficient. Besides, I don't know if I can sit here for a week and not work. If it troubles you, I can deduct the labor from my fare."

"I didn't say that. Just seems you're troublin' yourself to fix things in areas you oughtn't be."

"I shouldn't be near the laundry?" There was Jayne's gullible misunderstanding.

"You shouldn't be behind the washer. Stick to the passenger dorms and the dining area."

"But the free weights are in the cargo bay." And Jayne's single-mindedness.

"Passenger dorms and dining area," Mal said firmly. "Anywhere else, get an escort. And no more fixin' things on the ship, 'less you talk to me or Kaylee."

"Yes, sir. Should I finish this?"

"I'd appreciate it," Mal answered tersely, shifting his laundry bag and heading upstairs. Sir? She'd 'sir'ed him. For some reason, that didn't sound settling coming from anyone but Zoë. For some reason, it also made him feel he'd wrongly chastised her for trying to be helpful. Strange, confounding girl.

~

CHAPTER 4

When Inara didn't show up for lunch, Kaylee decided to use the excuse to stop by her shuttle again. Inara had asked her to come back later after all. As soon as she entered the shuttle, Kaylee knew something was off. The room was filled with the scent of soothing lavender, but the walls that were once covered with curtains and tapestries were stripped bare. Most of the fabric was folded neatly on the bed and a few trunks stood open, half full. Inara sat at the vanity, powdering over the puffiness of her tear-reddened eyes. Tentatively, Kaylee came forward, placing a hand on the older woman's shoulder.

Inara cringed and turned quickly, covering the reaction by standing up and preparing some tea.

“Nara, what is this?” Kaylee asked, frightened to hear the answer, her mind racing, filled with a thousand thoughts.

Inara sat down on the couch, motioning Kaylee to sit too. “I wanted to tell you, before you found out some other way... I’m leaving Serenity.”

“You’re leaving?” Kaylee repeated incredulously, jumping to her feet again, her heart overwhelmed with dread and disbelief. “When? Where?”

“I haven’t confirmed it yet,” Inara answered. “I’ve sent out a few waves. I’m waiting to hear back.”

“But why?” Kaylee cried, falling to her knees before Inara, her pleading eyes searching for answers. “It’s the Captain ain’t it? He said something. He did something?! Oh, Nara, he didn’t mean it!”

“No, it’s ... well, maybe a little, but this last client... I just need to stop doing this for awhile.”

“Well, can’t you take your sabbatical here?” Kaylee asked hopefully. Inara smiled endearingly, taking Kaylee’s hands, pulling her up off her knees and bringing her to the couch instead. Once Kaylee was there, she could see Inara trembling, looking ghastly in the harsh shuttle light. No more fancy oils, no more relaxing nights having her hair played at. She was losing her big sister. Kaylee went in for a hug and felt Inara flinch again, so she pulled back.

“What is it?” she asked Inara, tearfully concerned. It wasn’t like Inara to shirk physical contact.

“I’m just a little sensitive... this last client...”

That was the second time she’d brought him up and stopped. “Was he rough?”

“A little,” Inara smiled, ducking her head dismissively. “I really can’t discuss it. Guild rules.”

“So take a break if you need it,” Kaylee whispered softly, holding both of Inara’s hands in hers. “Take it here. No reason to leave.”

“Kaylee, I –” Inara started, but didn’t know where to go. She hugged Kaylee consolingly, desperately clinging to composure. “I’ll miss you.”

~

The euphoric effect of the morning workout waned and as afternoon crept by, Jayne felt himself drawn to the cargo bay again. Mattie looked out from the hallway, glowering, arms folded, steam rising from her head. Jayne ignored her, finding a free-weight and starting a bicep curl. He could feel her angry eyes on him and before he knew it, she was running towards him.

The spar was not something he’d intended, but he had enough pent up frustration to meet it. She caught him by the waist, forcing a grunt as he fell backwards, dropping the free-weight on the floor. Taking her into a role, Jayne twisted her arm, but she was spry and apparently double-jointed, twisting free effortlessly. Mattie threw a punch, catching him squarely in the jaw, then pulled him into a sleeper hold. He flipped her easily.

The world as he knew it ceased to exist. There was only this fight, this moment, fueled with the anger of his entire past. Of his mother’s death, of his wife’s death, of his

daughter alive... Mattie bit his arm and ripped at the bandages Kaylee had placed on his hand the night before. So much rage. He couldn't control her. Never could.

His mother's body fell before his eyes, covered in blood, hand reaching out, begging him to come home. Come home before she was gone forever. Pennies over her eyes. Lowered into the ground. She was gone, never coming back. And she'd died alone. Forgive me, mother! Forgive me!

Roaring with rage, Jayne tossed Mattie against the wall. Before he could be concerned for her, she rolled and sprang, launching herself at him, letting loose a shriek of her own. He'd left her. Never expected her to come looking for him. Not after what he'd done to her. Not after her mother died.

Slam! Jayne was caught at the knees and buckled to the ground, his head splitting on a bulkhead, his shoulder wrenched as she held his arm while he fell. Jayne turned and kicked her away, using the force of both legs. He gasped for breath; she tackled him again. Tackle, roll, hit, wrench, slam. Mother, forgive me!

She took Mattie from him, held her, begged to know what had happened. Why was she broken? Where are you going? Baby girl, head buried in grandma's shoulder. Would she ever remember him as anything but a monster?

Jayne leaned heavily against the bulkhead on the side of the cargo bay, swaying in and out of consciousness, unsure of how he arrived in this particular position. Mattie's head was in his lap, her eyes closed, her body slowly relaxing as Jayne stroked her coarse, black hair. Breathing. In. Out.

In.

Out.

Brushing a sweat-soaked lock from her forehead, he looked at his little girl, giving a short tug at the sleeve of her camisole so it didn't show quite so much cleavage. Tenderly, he touched the bruise on her cheek.

"Hope I didn't hurt you too much."

"I think you sprained my wrist," she answered. Jayne's brow furrowed with guilt.

"And I think you wrenched my shoulder. Suppose we should find the Doc?"

"Not just yet."

Jayne's head fell back, absorbing the peace of the moment, her words like aloe on the burn of his anger. What magical stillness the moment had. He couldn't explain. But he never wanted it to end.

~

Mal was on his way to the bridge when he noticed Inara on the high catwalk, leaning against the wall, looking as though she'd rather be alone. And he would have left her alone, had it not been the first time he'd seen her in days. She ducked her head when he came toward her, but he could see her eyes were red and puffy, as though she'd been crying.

"I see you told Kaylee 'bout you leavin'," Mal opened softly, leaning casually on the wall next to her. Kaylee had been pounding, teary-eyed at the engine, not speaking to him for the last half hour, even when he offered her a budget for new parts. Inara didn't seem too talkative either. He spared her a glance, and she looked like she was fighting for composure underneath her veil. "You alright?"

“Fine. I’m just...” She trailed off, touching her lip with the back of her hand. Was she shaking?

“You haven’t ventured out much lately.”

“I’ve been packing,” she dismissed. “Taking things down.”

“You decided on a place then?”

“A Training House on Kerry. I’d be teaching.”

“Last client must’ve worked you pretty hard to drive you out of field work,” Mal joked, hoping to illicit that stern glare that would assure him she was okay. He didn’t get it. A brief flash of horror crossed her eyes, but she masked it quickly, mustering up an expressionless breath for composure.

“You sure –?” Concerned, he reached out to put a hand on her shoulder, but she flinched and retracted like he’d touched her with a hot brand. She always retracted when he touched her, but never like this. So surprised he couldn’t finish his sentence, he just stared at her.

“I have,” she started softly, backing toward her shuttle, as though he had the plague. “... a wave I need to send.”

Mal stayed frozen in surprise for a few moments, then headed for the bridge deciding to eavesdrop on whatever wave she may be sending, on the off chance it wasn’t just an excuse. If it was, maybe he’d go to her shuttle and check on her... maybe. He sent Wash on a break, hoping that would buy him some amount of time. When he tapped into Inara’s conversation, it was mostly small talk, and he listened vaguely, feeling guilty, but mostly soaking in the sound of her voice. He shouldn’t be listening in on this. Wasn’t interesting. Weren’t any of his –

He froze, hearing the words ‘black mark’ fall from Inara’s lips. Immediately remembering Atherton, he felt a stab of pain in his side at the memory. The world fell away as he listened intently and Inara described in detail what had taken place on the world they’d just left. Watching her become unmasked, he realized that what he’d mistook for tear-reddened eyes was an actual injury and he felt like an ass for the comment he’d made about her last client. When the conversation ended, he stared at the empty screen in shock. After a few minutes passed, heartbeats, and heavy breathing, anger started to rise, his face was red, and his body sprang from the chair, pacing the small room, looking for something to punch.

“Mal? Is something wrong?” Wash asked, coming into the room with a handful of food snacks.

“Yes,” Mal growled, gripping the console, trying to see through the bleeding red anger. “Do we have time to swing back to Persephone?”

Wash laughed incredulously. “Did you forget something?”

“There’s someone I owe an unkind pummeling.”

“Our plans get us back there in about a month,” Wash offered, keeping his distance.

“Don’t want to wait that long to settle this debt.”

“Mal, it’s just a fist in the face. How does that sour?”

Mal suddenly leapt, pushing Wash against the wall, eyes on fire, ready to kill. Wash hardly flinched. Since Zoë, he’d rarely found Mal threatening.

“If I turn around, we lose this job,” Wash explained matter-of-factly. “But if it’s that important...”

“No. Do the job. I’ll find another way.”

The moment was over. The fire left Mal’s eyes and he released Wash’s collar. Wash smoothed his shirt and took his seat. Zoë came in as Mal stalked out.

“Captain,” she began, but he brushed past her. When she started to follow, Wash grabbed her arm and shook his head.

~

Simon wasn’t surprised when Mattie was just as poor a patient as Jayne. She groused as he applied the splint to her hand, then stalked out the moment he turned to treat Jayne’s shoulder. River sat on the side bed, one leg dangling over the edge as she watched him work.

“How are you two related?” Simon asked.

Jayne didn’t answer. He just stared out the door, giving only the slightest grunt as Simon tested the range of motion of his injured shoulder.

“Daughter,” River said softly, earning a stiff glare from Jayne.

“She’s you’re daughter?” Simon repeated, as if that explained everything.

“You don’t sound surprised,” Jayne grumbled.

“I guess I’m not.”

“We that much alike?” he asked. Simon was surprised by the soft vulnerability in Jayne’s question.

“Spitting image,” River smiled warmly. Jayne looked at her, and then looked through the door Mattie had just walked out, shaking his head.

“Strange... all I see is her mother.”

“What happened to her?”

“Hmm?”

“Her mother,” Simon prompted, but Jayne had closed off again, that hint of humanism falling from his face, that annoyed sneer rising on his lips.

“Died,” River spoke up ominously. “Shuttle accident. Mattie was two.”

“I’m sorry, Jayne.”

“You didn’t – ” Jayne shrugged, then winced as Simon put pressure on the rotator cuff. “Ai ya!”

“You were pretty young when you had her, then?”

“Sixteen,” River answered quickly, leaning forward, swinging both legs over the side of the counter.

“Shove it, Crazy!”

“Sixteen?” Simon ignored Jayne’s violent outburst, turning sardonically to his records. “Then one of you is lying about your age.”

“Look who you’re talkin’ at, Doc.”

“So probably both?”

Jayne shrugged Simon off and stalked out of the room, determining that he would make his own prescription for healing. He bumped shoulders with Mal in the corridor and let loose a string of curses as he headed up the stairs. Mal entered the Infirmary, looking ready to hit someone, and Simon briefly wished he’d opted for Jayne. River cringed a little as Mal paced and Simon went to place a hand on his sister’s shoulder. Mal was

touching all the drawer handles, itching to tear someone's limbs off, but was forced to settle with words.

"Captain?" Simon prompted. The sound seemed to force Mal's energy into rational thought and he visibly calmed.

"Hey Doc, would you mind checking in on Inara?"

"I can," Simon answered cautiously, wondering if Mal knew something of what happened. Inara had made it clear to him that she had no intention of telling the crew.

"Why do you ask?"

"She hasn't been out much since the last client."

"I have noticed. I can look in on her."

Mal lingered, fidgeting as Simon busied himself straightening the Infirmary.

"Sooner would be better," Mal managed, clearly upset.

"Is there something aside from antisocial behavior that has prompted this?"

Simon pressed.

"Yes, I..." Mal trailed off, and Simon became more certain that he did know what had happened to Inara. "It's not something I'm at liberty to disclose. Has she come to you?"

"That's not something I'm at liberty to disclose. But I will look in on her," Simon responded coolly, and started toward the shuttle. He paused a moment, holding his breath, wanting desperately to know what the Captain knew... or at least, wanting the comfort of knowing Inara had finally opened up to someone. "Captain, if she's spoken to you, then it's your help she wants. Not mine."

~

Kaylee had pounded out the dent in his wall and helped him bracket the bed back into place. Once that was together, Jayne started cleaning and straightening the rest of the room, setting all the guns right in their holds, making the bed, tucking the corners in neat, stacking all the laundry in a single pile. That evening, Jayne massaged his sore shoulder, figuring he'd hit Mattie and the Doc in a single trip downstairs. His workouts would start getting a little lopsided so long as his left shoulder was out.

Mattie seemed fine after their match in the cargo bay. Just fine. So long as he only saw her for the woman she was now, and not the little girl she'd been, he could imagine... He didn't want to remember that past. Didn't want to remember the day he left her. Didn't want to remember how he used to hold her and sing her to sleep. Jayne wasn't good with kids. Wasn't good with people. Needed to keep them all at arm's length. That's where they were safest. Just out of reach of his fist.

When he knocked on Mattie's door, she quickly signed off the cortex and turned to face him. Did she look guilty? Jayne hadn't known her long enough to read her properly. She was probably just surprised to see him.

"Hey, Mattie, I wanted to say goodnight."

She stood quickly, shoving her handheld cortex-linking-device-thingy under her pillow as she approached him. The move made him all manner of suspicious.

"Goodnight then."

"Who you talkin' to?" he asked.

“No one.” She started to close the door, but he stopped her. The move shot a throbbing ache through his shoulder, but Jayne wouldn’t abide being lied to.

“What are you up to?” he pressed, threateningly.

“I’m handling the estate,” she said smoothly, walking away from the door as though she’d already closed it. “Something you couldn’t be bothered with.”

She’d turned into ice again, her words biting at his already fragile and frayed emotions. Jayne felt his chest tighten, looking for a fresh fight to cover the grief.

“What estate? What about it?”

“Certain items. The house. The furniture.”

“You’re selling my house?!”

“It’s not yours,” she retorted coolly. “Besides, neither of us are returning to that gou shi world.”

“I am. Few weeks time, the Captain is stopping me by there. What needs handling?”

“There’s nothing there,” she carped and Jayne grabbed her by the elbow.

“There’s my mother. What’d you do? Wrap her in a sheet and roll her body in the lake?”

She slapped him so hard across the face he saw stars. “How dare you!” Mattie nearly screamed. “She asked you to come, and you didn’t. You didn’t even come to say good-bye to her!”

“I didn’t know she was dyin’!”

“You didn’t listen! She told you! I told you!”

“Where’s she buried.”

“Not buried. Burned. I released her ashes in low orbit. She said she wanted to be close to you,” Mattie spat, shaking her arm free, and then grumbling, “Though I can’t imagine why.”

Jayne roared and lunged toward her but she reached out swiftly twisting his arm and pinching his injured shoulder. Now instead of just a few stars, his vision was starting to go black as the pain enveloped him. Briefly, he wondered if she hated him enough to kill him, but her voice cut through his swimming consciousness with a sweetness not consistent with her grip on his arm.

“You’ve said your goodnight. Perhaps you should go now.”

~

After his conversation with Mattie, Jayne didn’t feel like sleeping, so he sat in his moon-chair and inventoried his ammo. Keep busy. Don’t think. Keep the fingers moving, focused on little tasks. Don’t think. Don’t.

Kaylee climbed down the ladder to his bunk under the pretense of collecting some tools she’d left behind, but she was armed with needle and thread and set straight to work re-capitating the unfortunate turtle. She sat on the bed, wrinkling the blanket, legs folded, face still red and puffy. She’d broken down crying in the middle of supper for no good reason and looked like she hadn’t stopped since. Jayne figured the only reason she wasn’t crying now was because she was sewing up that gorrām turtle. Keeping busy. Trying not to think on whatever it was that plagued her. But Jayne could use a sob story that wasn’t his own, and he couldn’t stand sitting in silence.

“Why you been cryin’ all day, girl?”

“It’s ... Inara,” Kaylee answered softly, wincing as she inadvertently stuck herself with the needle.

“She got roughed up pretty bad,” Jayne agreed, glad someone had noticed.

“No, she’s...” Kaylee trailed off, looking confused. “Well, I said I wouldn’t say. Why ... do you say she got roughed up?”

Jayne kept silent, realizing that Kaylee hadn’t noticed. He’d seen Inara come out of her shuttle when he and Mattie were sparring, and Jayne had seen enough beaten women to know.

“She wasn’t beat,” Kaylee denied, when Jayne said nothing. “Not Inara. I was lookin’ right at her. She’d have told me.”

“Suppose so,” Jayne dismissed, his mind stewing over what other secret Inara might have spilled.

“So Mattie’s your daughter?” Kaylee brought up, her voice resuming that mysteriously boundless cheer.

Jayne grunted.

“You talked about Mattie before. Guess I just assumed it was your little brother.”

“Who’d name a boy Mattie?” Jayne balked.

“Who’d name a boy Jayne?” Kaylee goaded. Were she a man, Jayne would’ve hit her, but she was Kaylee, so he just grunted and started putting his ammo boxes away. The only thing he really had left were tranqs, which were too civil to be used in normal violence. All the real ammo was pretty much used up.

“Li’l Kaylee, how many nights you fixin’ to sleep here?”

“‘Til I know you’re okay,” she answered simply, finishing the turtle and giving it a hug. Jayne could still see where it had been singed before, the night he first got the thing. Kaylee’s repair was much cleaner than his had been.

“When will that be?”

“Probably when you try somethin’ unseemly,” Kaylee teased, pinching his thigh as a demonstration.

“That’s a dangerous game, girl,” Jayne warned, wishing the conversation would end. Suddenly his mind started spiraling in places he didn’t want to be. “You best leave before I damage you beyond repair.”

“You wouldn’t hurt me, would you Jayne?” she asked innocently. When he didn’t respond, she started to look concerned and batted him with the turtle. “Would you?”

Jayne raked his fingers through his hair and looked ashamedly at his knees, images of a four-year-old Mattie flying through his mind like ghosts through a wall. “No tellin’ what I might do.”

“Jayne?”

Mattie was screaming at him, begging him to stop. Her little face was contorted with fear as she backed away from him. He could see her now, but then, all he saw was his wife, two years dead, and red. Lots of red.

“I didn’t mean to,” Jayne blurted out, his voice urgent and pained. “I didn’t mean to hurt her. Didn’t mean to break her?”

“You mean Mattie? She’s fine. Y’all were just sparring.”

Kaylee didn't understand. She was caught in the present. In that afternoon. But Jayne could feel the past coming back to haunt him. The cold air. The panic. Desperately, he tried to explain. "She's fine now. Now she can fight back."

"Jayne, talk sense."

"She hates me," Jayne moaned, clawing his scalp, trying to pull out the convicting eyes of his baby girl. "I see it in her face."

"Maybe she's angry, but she doesn't –"

"Hates me for leavin' her, but I had to. I couldn't..."

Kaylee stayed quiet a moment, realizing that Jayne wasn't hearing anything. Finally she reached out a hand, bridging the space between them and touched his knee. "It's okay."

Not this memory! Please, send it away. Keep silent. Don't talk. Don't speak it to truth. Don't –

"What kind of man beats his own kid?" Jayne started to shake with self-revulsion, desperately trying to banish the memory. "Can listen to her cryin' for mercy and can't stop himself. I was just so blind-angry 'bout her mom, but it ain't no excuse. My mother was the only safe place I could think to take her."

He remembered how panicked he became when he came to his senses and saw his baby girl crying, clutching a broken arm. But her eyes weren't accusing him, they were begging him for help. He'd grabbed her quickly, rushing her to safety, handing her over to his mother.

"Please, mother, take her."

"Jayne, what happened?"

"Mother, she's not safe with me. What if...? I can't do this to her."

"Then don't, Jayne –" she began, but he'd run upstairs to his childhood room and locked the door.

"You did right, Jayne," Kaylee's whisper cut through the horror. "You kept her safe."

"Ain't safe for her here. And I'm fresh out of mothers." Jayne couldn't help it. The grief for his mother poured over the pain of the memory, and for the second time in two days, Kaylee was watching him cry. Somehow, he didn't find that too humiliating. Kaylee tugged on his hand, bringing him next to her on the bed so she could give him a hug. Fresh tears fell off Kaylee's face, tickling the back of Jayne's neck, as she cried with him.

"All I done to forget. To drown her screams, but I still hear her. She ain't safe here."

~

CHAPTER 5

Mal found Inara fixing tea for herself in the early morning hours, probably hoping to steal some food before anyone else stirred. Her face had the tranquil glow of a woman who'd spent the last hour in prayer, and Mal could make out a faint smile on her lips.

"Mornin'," Mal greeted cautiously, pulling out a cup so he could share in the tea she was making.

“Hello, Mal.” She kept her eyes averted.

“Sorry about what I said yesterday. About ...” Mal dropped his head abashedly, wiping out the empty cup with his finger. “I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“You wanted to rile me,” she countered.

“I –,” he began, almost suckered by her bait. But he didn’t want to fight her. “Not like that. That’s quite a cut you got there. Painted over it pretty thick.”

“You can see?” she asked, touching her forehead self-consciously. Mal suddenly wished he hadn’t mentioned it.

“I hit it when I was taking down some of the tapestries,” Inara lied.

“You don’t have to do that.”

“Mal, I can’t –”

“I mean ...” She thought he was asking her to stay! “I can get Jayne to help you with the heavy stuff.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Inara smiled in her coy, condescending way. She poured the tea, then looked at him graciously, and he felt the anger rise as he made out the ridge of her well-concealed cut and black eye.

“Nara, I’m sorry for what I said earlier.”

“You said that already.”

“Right. I just...” Mal wanted to tell her he knew what had happened. Wanted to tell her he would kill that man if they ever met face to face. He wanted to tell her not to leave. He wanted to say a billion things, but instead he just sipped his tea and backed out of the room like a coward.

“I got a few things to get done before lunch. You joinin’ us today?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Mattie’s preparing something fun. I swear if we had the coin, I’d bring her on as ship’s cook. Always wanted a cook.”

Inara smiled hopefully at him as he left. “Maybe.”

~

Inara sat at the dining room table, relishing the smells bubbling over from Mattie’s three-pot meal. Whatever she was making, it smelled almost as good as fresh food. Mattie stirred with two hands, favoring her splinted one, one of Jayne’s t-shirts thrown over her clothes like an apron. Her black hair was in pigtails, throwing her bruised jaw into sharp relief, but her pink lips and blue eyes were all smiles. She tasted a red sauce in one of the pots, then turned the heat low and set it to simmer.

“That smells wonderful,” Inara said warmly, sipping her wine, briefly forgetting her pain and feeling lavish. She’d opened the bottle the night before because she was upset, but had decided to share it with the others at the meal once she’d caught the scent of Mattie’s cooking. It would compliment nicely.

“What is it?”

“A surprise,” Mattie answered, a mischievous twinkle in her eye. “Well, it’s the same protein you always have, but it’ll taste surprising.”

“Where did you learn to cook?”

“My gramma. You?”

“My mother taught me a few dishes when I was younger, but most of what I know I learned at the Academy. They don’t really have a course in protein mash.”

Mattie laughed. “It’s all seasoning and substitution. Your spice cabinet is running bare.”

“I’m sure it hasn’t been properly stocked since the Shepherd left. He always knew what to buy.”

“Shepherd?” Mattie repeated, yanking one of the larger pots off the stove before it bubbled over. “The Captain doesn’t seem the type to have a Shepherd on board.”

“He isn’t really,” Inara agreed, looking wistfully at her wine. “Mal gave up his faith long ago. He wants to forget most days. He wants... Actually, I’m not sure what he wants. I wish he’d just come out and say it.”

“Perhaps he doesn’t know himself,” Mattie suggested, stirring the sauce again.

“Then I wish he’d say he was confused and let me set him straight. He can be so stubborn.”

“Why do you care so much?”

“Because I –” Inara stopped, realizing she’d almost confessed her love for Mal to a stranger, when she’d hardly had the strength to confess it to herself. She looked at Mattie who simply nodded conspiratorially and focused on her cooking. Inara sipped her wine, searching for the professional mask she always wore. When had that fallen off?

“You have no idea the trust you engender,” Inara admired.

Mattie shrugged. “Everyone trusts the chef. The trade of food for secrets is as old as the ‘verse.”

“Is that why you cook?” Inara grinned.

Mattie shook her head. “No. I cook because whoever prepared the meal the first night I was here... Well, I suppose I shouldn’t speak ill of your friends.”

Inara realized she was laughing more than she had in days, and it wasn’t just the wine. “It’s okay to speak ill of their cooking. I’ve tasted it myself.”

“Have you told the Captain what happened?”

Inara’s smile vanished. “What do you mean?”

Mattie didn’t speak, but motioned around her face. Inara’s eyes went straight to the red liquid in her glass.

“You can see that?” she whispered, horrified.

“Not so much today, but I did yesterday,” she confessed. “Why wouldn’t you tell him?”

Inara took a longer gulp of her wine. “Oh, he’d hasten to my rescue, turn the ship around, hunt down that man, and kill him.”

“Everyone has their own sense of justice I suppose.”

“I suppose. His is simply too long removed from civilization.” Inara crinkled her brow, and winced as the skin folded around the aged cuts and bruises. “Perhaps I am too, because a part of me wants to tell him just so he’ll do it.”

~

River nailed her sheet to the wall to get it at a better angle. She needed paint. Charcoal. Grease. Just sketch for now. A shadow had fallen on Serenity. Shadows, obstacles, walls. River drew the wall, being careful not to draw *on* the wall because Mal

had yelled at her last time. Trust but no support. Barriers to protect that leave everyone in a cell, alone, free to be poked, prodded, and played at. River snagged at the sheet, pulling a thread that upset the whole length of the fabric.

“Don’t you see,” she explained urgently to the people in her picture. “When one is hurt, it affects you all. Don’t you see?”

“River?”

She ducked her head, clamping her mouth shut. Simon was calmly weaving through the barriers. He saw it all. Helped. Healed. Protected. River wove a blue ribbon across the drawing, connecting the isolated cells, passing through the barriers.

“What is this?” Simon asked, coming up beside her. His hand on her shoulder always sang the cool relief of comfort.

“Secrets,” River answered, her eyes surveying the painful image of her world. Simon considered too, but didn’t understand it.

“There are a few going around,” Simon agreed. He was thinking of Inara. River considered the secret that Inara kept. The fact that so many others knew, but would never tell her that they did. She started drawing leaks between the walls and barriers on her cells, then burying them under black. But that wasn’t the secret that plagued her.

River’s mind wandered around Mattie, closed and shadowed to her. What did she hide that had not yet been revealed? She wore a mask, but so did most everyone in the crew. Everyone but Kaylee. River always liked being with Kaylee because her inside always matched her outside – genuine and loving. Jayne always wanted to be strong. Mal wanted to be untouchable. Simon wanted to be proper. Inara wanted to be courtly. Mattie wanted to be... it was difficult to know. Cognizant perhaps. She revealed only what was necessary to learn what she wanted, and had great return for her efforts. She knew too much, but kept too much hidden. It made River wary.

“Too many secrets,” River told Simon, but he didn’t understand.

“I know,” Simon lamented. “It’s just not my place to share.”

~

Zoë found Mal stewing by the supply closet, counting the number of spare light bulbs, mop heads, and scrubbers. As he went through the shelves, he made modifications and notes on a shopping list he’d prepared previously.

“Problem, sir?”

Mal threw down a tub of dish rags with more force than he needed to, and rubbed his forehead tiredly. “Just tryin’ to whittle down the list.”

“Does this have anything to do with the 300 credits missin’ from the ship’s account?” Zoë challenged, cutting straight to the chase of why she’d come looking for him. Zoë always kept herself apprised of Mal’s book keeping, both legit and forged, for occasions when he spent extended time in the Infirmary.

“Money’s tight. Can’t be wasteful.”

“That money was for Serenity, sir.”

Mal glared at her, but Zoë didn’t back down. The Captain had always been an honest man, even in dishonest dealings, and she felt she had a right to know.

“It went to Serenity,” Mal growled icily. “Protecting the crew.”

Zoë crinkled her brow at first, then felt a light go on in her understanding and her breath caught. “Is this about Inara?”

“What about her?”

“You’d know better than I, sir,” Zoë answered cautiously. In truth, all she really knew was that something was not right.

“Imagine I would,” Mal agreed darkly. Zoë breathed a little easier believing that Inara had confided in Mal and that Mal had dealt with the situation in some manner involving 300 credits... and no telling how much of his personal take. It was a small price to pay for a crew mate, and she’d probably have done the same.

“You suppose that’s why she’s leaving?” Zoë wondered. Inara had announced the decision just after supper, and now it seemed a little less surprising.

“No,” Mal answered firmly. “She was plannin’ on that long before. This may have bumped up her plans a bit. Client comin’ after her like that... may just’ve been the last straw.”

Zoë nodded silently, reeling at Mal’s unintended revelation. She hadn’t realized it was a client who’d hurt Inara. Numbly, she left Mal to his work and made her way to the cockpit.

~

Mal was weary, but kept working anyway. He felt as though he’d just witnessed twenty unjust executions and watched the killer get off scott free. He came out of the supply closet, past the armory, to the catwalks. The door to Inara’s shuttle was closed, but not locked. His breath quickened, and he strode toward the shuttle, but then veered away at the last moment, and headed downstairs. Now was not the time to barge in.

Jayne was in the cargo bay, doing chin-ups, radiating sweat and body odor. Every heft came with a grunt, his shirt soaked with sweat. As Mal rounded the bend, Jayne dropped to the floor, then fell to one knee, reaching for a water bottle.

“Jayne.”

“Mal.”

“You been keepin’ yourself busier than a one-legged monkey in a butt-kicking contest.”

“You’re one to speak,” Jayne retorted, his voice low and heavy, his eyes still looking at the ground as if he were too dizzy to lift them.

“I suppose.” Mal hadn’t been anticipating a conversation, but the question fell out of him. Maybe it was just his way of expressing sympathy for Jayne’s mother. Maybe it was something else. “How’s your girl?”

“She’s nothin’ of mine.”

Mal paused, considering Jayne carefully. Burly, strong, panting, and knelt on the floor of the bay. “You don’t believe that.”

“You can’t know my mind,” Jayne snapped, his eyes finally meeting Mal’s with fire.

“I know you sent money back to help her. Don’t do that for someone who’s nothin’ to you.”

“Don’t know that it did a damn thing, by the way she talks.”

Mal nodded, understanding Mattie's belligerence. "She's just an angry girl who's lost the only parent she ever knew."

Jayne closed his eyes, his chin falling on his chest, breathing heavy. Mal started to leave, but turned when he heard Jayne stand, worried that he'd inadvertently started a fight. Jayne hadn't cocked his fist though. His face was alive with realization and deep thought – an expression Mal found somewhat troublesome.

"Devious little huai ren!" Jayne cried reproachfully. "She's been playin' me the whole time!"

~

It had been a long while since they'd stopped on Boros and the Black wafted through the view, most of the fainter stars washed out by the lights in the cockpit. The course was so simple, the ship could fly itself at this point, and if it weren't for the moping crew, Wash might have ventured out to start a game of horseshoes or something. Ever since Inara had announced she was leaving, anyone who had any cheer left in them had found cause to lose it. Wash was fighting a bit of heartache over the eminent departure as well. Shepherd Book leaving was hard enough. What would happen when two people were gone from the crew?

Having run out of news to surf through on the cortex and grown tired of the toys he kept near the console, Wash settled for a quick game of solitaire with a worn out deck of cards. A few failed games later, Zoë entered the bridge with a snack and a dour frown. Wash accepted the food with a smile, and squeezed her hand encouragingly, but she didn't perk up. Apparently her confrontation with Mal had not gone as smoothly as she'd planned. Wash only half-listened at first, expecting a brief rant about the Captain, and was surprised when Zoë spoke of Inara instead. Zoë was convinced that Inara was leaving because of something her last client had done to her, whereas Wash was convinced it was something the Captain had done to her. Either way, it seemed the Companion's plight was the reason for Zoë's mood, not the Captain and the missing money.

"Why don't you talk with her?" Wash asked Zoë, reaching out to rub her forearm soothingly. Zoë leaned against the console facing him, but not meeting his eye.

"Women don't talk about these things."

"Oh, come on, honey," Wash barked, patting her slightly. "Women talk about everything. I once dated this girl –"

"That's different Wash. Inara was hurt by a man; and it's worse than I first thought."

"All the more reason to talk to her."

Zoë swallowed to stall, and stared at Wash's hand on hers, brooding. "She's already spoken to the Captain."

"You're sure?"

"He seemed to know more of what happened," Zoë said, her brown eyes finally meeting his. Wash offered his best indulgent smile.

"No offense, sweetie, but Mal is a rubbernecking snoop. I don't think Inara has said anything."

“So you talk to her,” Zoë challenged, standing up to leave. Wash grabbed her arm, pulling her into his lap.

“Alright,” he agreed firmly. “I will. She deserves to know we all know something. Or that we all suspect she’s hiding it.”

Zoë sat stiffly on his lap, watching his face. “You ain’t movin’.”

He kissed her neck and wrapped his arms around her. He was glad when she leaned into him. “I’ve got a beautiful woman in my lap. Inara will understand.”

“Chicken,” Zoë teased softly, nibbling his lower lip. Wash groaned in pleasure.

“Is that what I taste like?”

“Mmm...” she agreed, kissing her way around his neck, then resting on his shoulder. He could feel the tension leaving her body as she relaxed in his arms.

“Fine,” she finally whispered, her voice airy. “I’ll talk to her before we hit Boros.”

“That gives us a few days then. Boros should be just turning disc-like in our view by now.”

Zoë turned in his lap, her eyes looking lazily through the window. “Where?”

“Well, right...” Wash leaned around her to point, but he couldn’t find the point he was looking for. “Hmm, that’s funny.”

A little concerned, he reached around her checking the navigation computer and the course settings. Then he checked the engine and thruster controls. He flipped a few switches and checked the nav system again. His heart quickening, he laughed uncomfortably, which caused Zoë to scoot off his lap.

“Where’s the planet?” he joked lightly.

Zoë was on her feet, scrutinizing the sky. “Shouldn’t we be facing the Pleiades?”

“Should,” Wash agreed. According to the computer, they were. Slowly, he pitched the ship, and almost immediately found the desired constellation and planet.

“Here we are,” he remarked, holding the controls a moment, then resetting the course. He checked the fly wire. Checked the nav circuits. And slowly, the ship turned itself back to its previous destination.

“Now that is weird,” he mused, adjusting the course again.

“Captain to the bridge,” Zoë said sternly into the PA before switching to a different channel. “Kaylee can you check the nav circuits?”

The sky shifted again in their view as Wash changed course. All the while the nav computer seemed to think they were pointed in the same direction. Wash slammed his fist against the lying computer and shut down the engine, reaching behind him for the old-fashioned paper maps as their momentum kept them going in the wrong direction.

“Where are we headed?” Zoë asked.

Wash shook his head, turning off the main lights so he could see more of the stars. “Off the map.

~

CHAPTER 6

Jayne stormed from the cargo bay to the passenger dorms, his mind in a whirl, looking to kick some serious gou shi out of Mattie. He burst through the door to her

room, panting angrily, staring her down. She was on the bed, leaning half-upright against the wall, her legs calmly crossed at the ankle, her comm supported by both hands. She considered him with a placid frown, raising one eyebrow, making no move to hide the device. For a moment, Jayne considered the possibility that he was wrong.

“More estate issues,” he challenged, gripping the door frame so tightly it cracked.

She smirked disrespectfully. “Coming to say good night again?”

Snidely, she slid the device under her pillow, swung her feet around the side of the bed, and walked toward the door, ready to crowd him out of the space.

“I came to see who you been talkin’ to,” he growled, stepping around her easily and snatching the handheld. She didn’t even try to stop him; she just leaned haughtily against the door frame.

Either the device was encrypted or she’d done nothing but play games on the thing since she’d come on board. Jayne waved the device at her angrily. “Rule number one! Go radio silent as soon as the job starts!”

“Rule number one?” she laughed, loftily, sauntering in and taking the device.

“Are you trying to teach me about crime, Mr. Cobb?”

“I am trying to save your life, girl.”

She stepped even closer to him, invading his personal space, but he refused to back up. Her voice was low and sure. “I don’t need you to save me. I know what I’m doing.”

He couldn’t help but sneer at her arrogance. “Don’t lie to me, girl. I will find out what you’re up to and I will stop you,” he promised seriously, placing emphasis on each word. They were almost nose to nose now, and Jayne took advantage of the short distance. He grabbed the comm from her hand and with a quick swing, smashed it against the floor. Mattie quickly masked the concern and fear that swept across her face with a look of annoyance.

“That was... rude,” she sniped as evenly as possible, her eyes flickering between Jayne and the damaged device.

“Tell me the truth,” Jayne demanded. She considered him briefly, not wanting to be smashed in the same manner as the handheld. He grabbed her collar, but she brushed him off.

“Hands off,” she ordered, her words stronger than she felt. Jayne could tell she was trying to keep her voice from shaking. He maneuvered craftily to keep himself between her and the door.

“You need to leave this room to finish your job,” he threatened. “You ain’t leavin’ till I know what you know.”

“Would you let me finish the job if I told you?” she asked.

“Fools errand, a girl like you takin’ work alone,” Jayne countered. He hadn’t thought that far ahead yet.

“What if I cut you in?”

There, she’d broken rule number two. Or maybe that one was rule number one. But then, they should all be rule number one, because breaking any of them could get you killed. Jayne reigned in his tongue and listened, vowing that whatever the damage, he’d keep her safe.

~

Kaylee bit her lip as the navigation computer continued to lie to her. The computer was convinced they were facing Boros and even offered a nice chart with all the stars they should be facing, but it would not be convinced of the fact that the stars outside their window were the wrong ones. Software had never been her strong point, but whatever the software was doing, it was affecting the hardware as well, and that was her problem. It didn't help that Mal was berating Wash in the background.

"I didn't notice at first because there were just small tweaks to the nav guide," Wash explained. "We're to the point now where the stars are just not what they should be. According to the computer, we're still headed for Boros."

"And according to the stars?" Mal sighed.

Wash shrugged. "Somewhere closer to Santos. Another half-hour and I'd have seen it turn disc-like and made a beeline, being none the wiser ... until we got close enough to hear the local chatter."

Kaylee sighed, frustrated, and disconnected the nav guide, auto-pilot, and any other kind of fly-assist software they had. She and Wash would have to isolate and test the system independently to see if the false signal was coming through here. It was possible this system was completely clean and a signal modifier was somewhere else on board. Scrunching her nose, she emerged from under the console, trying to decide how best to start.

"Kaylee, what's the story?" Mal asked as soon as her eyes were visible.

"We should be able to fly manual again," she reported. "Very manual. Meanin' someone's hand constantly on the controls."

"We can do that," Mal nodded.

"So long as the problem is contained in the software here," Kaylee qualified quickly.

"Which we aren't sure it is," Wash contributed. Mal frowned.

"If it ain't here?"

"Then the signal is gettin' screwed up somewhere else along the way, and it's a bigger problem than ghost software."

"Won't take more than a few hours flying to determine that," Wash said.

"Okay," Mal nodded. "Start the engine, get us back going to Boros."

"And if it won't let me?" Wash asked.

"We don't have the food or fuel to fight this thing. If it becomes apparent we're wasting, we'll set down on Santos restock, and fix the problem there."

"If we have enough control to land," Kaylee murmured. Mal touched her cheek, lifting her eyes to meet his own.

"Tell me what you need, Li'l Kaylee, and we'll fix this."

"Sir," Zoë interrupted. "Someone's sendin' a wave from Shuttle 2."

"To Santos?"

"The shuttles have independent systems. Why would it bounce through the computer here?" Wash wondered.

"Long distance," Kaylee answered quickly.

"Who and where, Zoë," Mal ordered, his voice low and heavy.

~

Jayne walked up the stairs into the galley, hoping he would run into someone along the way, but he could hear them all on the bridge talking. By their tone, he had a feeling they already suspected something was wrong, and that might work in his favor. Mattie had screwed herself royal, but there was no convincing her of that. And telling Mal directly wasn't going to fix it.

He wished desperately that Book were still on board. He could've told the preacher, and then someone would've had his back when things went awry. Mal would throw him out the airlock, Zoë would defer him to Mal, Simon was ... not the kind of man to second you in a gun fight.

Loudly, Jayne banged through the cabinets, making himself a sandwich and hoping someone would come tell him to shut-up, but they seemed preoccupied with whatever problem they'd found. He couldn't tell them anyhow. This was his fault. He'd brought Mattie on board.

Quietly, he crept back to the cargo bay and into Shuttle 2, using the link to the cortex. He wanted to talk to Book, so he'd talk to Book. If everyone on the bridge was being their normal selves, they'd be curious enough to eavesdrop. Crossing his fingers, he sent out the call and waited.

Book appeared on the screen a few moments later, looking pleasantly calm. He'd done something funny to his hair, possibly because he was in a town where there were actually folks who would do fancy things like that for you. He greeted Jayne warmly and after a few moments small talk, Jayne explained about his mother dying and the appearance of his estranged daughter. Fortunately, he'd already told Book a fair bit about Mattie the year before, when he'd gotten word she was sick. It was easy for him to talk to Book, to see him smile, and to hear his sage advice.

"If she don't get this boat to Santos in two days time, they'll hunt her down and kill her," Jayne groaned as he conveyed the current situation.

"That isn't where you're headed I take it," Book surmised.

Jayne shook his head, leaning back in the chair.

"And when you get there?"

"They take the ship and the crew."

"And you agreed?"

"Said she'd cut me in, fifty-fifty. That's 3k-platinum each."

Book let out a slow whistle. "That's a hefty sum of money."

"Yeah. If only it were real."

"What do you mean?"

Jayne smirked easily. "I double-crossed enough people to know. She means to double-cross me."

"So why not call her bluff?"

"Started thinking about who she's dealin' with," Jayne shrugged. "They ain't gonna let her off and they certainly ain't gonna let me off. I know she's in somethin' over her head. I just wanna be there when she's the one getting' stabbed in the back. Think if I am, she won't get stabbed dead."

"Why not talk to Mal?"

Jayne shifted uncomfortably. He knew he should trust the Captain; he did so all the time. But he hesitated at the thought of confiding something like this. "I already promised him she'd be no trouble."

~

Mal stared slack-jawed at the vid, suddenly aware that the bridge had gone very quiet. He wasn't sure if he was more shocked by the conversation he'd overheard or the fact that Jayne had set still for two full minutes while Book said a prayer over him. At times, he was certain that Jayne was trying to meet his eye, not Book's. Damn merc certainly had a knack for underhandedness, and clearly had no intention of speaking direct on the subject.

"That explains that," Wash huffed, breaking the silence.

Silently, Kaylee headed out of the room.

"Kaylee, where you goin'?" Mal said softly, still trying to organize his thoughts into coherence.

"Problem's not in the nav guide, Captain," she answered wearily. "Mattie's had her hands all up and down Serenity. Alls I gotta do is fine the spot she's modifyin' the signal from... and hope there's only one."

"How long will that take?"

"If I'm lucky, an hour. If not, two or three weeks."

"Let's hope you're lucky then." Mal nodded curtly, dismissing Kaylee. "Wash, shut her down. We don't move again 'til we have to."

"Sir, it may be best to keep movin'," Zoë countered.

"You heard what he said. There seems to be some unfriendly folks who want to collect us on Santos."

"I did hear that, sir. I also heard that if we aren't there in two days, they'd hunt us down."

"Hunt Mattie down," Mal corrected.

"We ain't fit for runnin', sir. And we can't drop the girl 'til we hit dirt."

"Can and will. The airlock still works right Wash?"

"It does," Wash said, protest and criticism lacing his voice. "But even if you drop her out the back, that doesn't help us escape when whoever this is comes to check."

Mal closed his eyes, replaying Jayne's conversation with Book. He needed more information but had no way to ask Jayne without Mattie knowing she'd been played and he needed the girl to keep to her own plan. Much as he didn't like her now, he wasn't prone to killing his crew or their family.

"How long 'til we hit Santos?"

"Mid-day tomorrow. It would be nice to have attitude control before we land."

"What's the plan, sir?"

Without answering, Mal turned and headed out, hearing Wash flap his mouth flabbergasted.

"Mal, get back here! We're scheming!"

"I know. I'm goin' straight to the horse's mouth," Mal offered by way of explanation. If Jayne bullied an answer out of the girl and still felt lied to, perhaps Mal

could bully her and get a better lie. Hopefully between the two, there'd be enough truth for a plan.

~

Inara sat in the galley across the table from Mattie as Mal leaned against the back of the chair at the head of the table. Mal had pulled her from her shuttle in the middle of the day with little explanation other than 'watch Mattie.' She sat straight in her chair, sipping tea, trying to put forth the appearance that such events were commonplace, keeping one eye on Mattie as the girl faced Mal intently.

"I brung y'all here, since y'all's schedules are affected by this," Mal began evenly, using that smooth voice he told white lies with. "Seems we have a problem with our nav guide and we've been aimed more in the vicinity of Santos than Boros."

Inara's eyes flashed toward Mal, momentarily alarmed by the revelation. If Mattie had shown any alarm, she'd missed it.

"I noticed the ship stopped," Mattie mentioned, concerned.

"We did a moment, but I figure it's best to keep headin' where the ship wants and get ourselves in the vicinity of help. Hopin' we'll have gotten the control we need to land."

"Hopin'?" Inara repeated, unable to process what was being said.

Mal shot her a look and she cast her eyes toward her tea. Taking a sip, she glanced over the rim at Mattie, who seemed to have relaxed subtly.

"When will we make it to Boros?" Inara asked, suddenly wondering if Mal was stalling her departure intentionally.

"Not more than a few days late. We stop just long enough to fix this."

Inara nodded, standing to leave. Mattie stood as well.

"I suppose I should start revising my plans," Inara said courteously.

Mal gave them a nod of dismissal and headed back toward the bridge. Inara paced Mattie until they hit the catwalk, and then decided to challenge the girl.

"You don't seem surprised by this detour."

Mattie raised her eyebrows, shifting her posture to stand straighter. "Should I have expected aptitude?"

Inara bristled slightly on Mal's behalf, then covered it. "I suppose this ship has its faults. What's on Santos?"

"Why do you assume this is my doing?" Mattie barked rhetorically, heading down stairs. Inara paused briefly, remembering how well Mattie had matched Jayne in a fight. Biting her lip, she lifted her skirt so as not to trip and followed Mattie anyway.

"So it's not your doing," Inara pressed apologetically. "But you do know something don't you?"

There was a flash of concern in the girl's eyes, and Inara smirked inwardly. She was getting close and the game was empowering.

"There's nothing to know," Mattie said quietly, her face turning to stone. Inara grabbed her elbow, pulling her into the nearest closet. In the dim light, it was hard to see more than a few glints of light off the moisture in her eyes.

"Please," Inara pleaded, using her recent trauma to well up some fake tears. "I can't go down with this crew. What do you know?"

Mattie ducked her head, pressing her lips together. She was drawing some tears of her own – amateur, but Inara had to admire her skill.

“It’s not me,” Mattie wept urgently, her head shaking. “He planned this from the beginning. He set up that whole fight in the bar and forced me to go along.”

“What do you mean?”

“He means to sell you all out when we land. I don’t know any more than that, I swear.”

“What about you?”

“I don’t know,” she cried, fingering her injured wrist. “I think he means to sell me too.”

Inara reached out and pulled Mattie into a hug, letting the poor girl cry on her shoulder. Despite the web of lies, the tears she’s summoned were real enough to inspire pity. And with a little bit of training, the girl would make an excellent companion. She certainly had the potential.

~

Mal knocked on the door to Inara’s shuttle and was pleased when she invited him in. The space looked bare and heartless without all of Inara’s things draped about. Somehow, though they were the same, with its walls exposed, this shuttle wasn’t nearly as homey as shuttle 2. That would take work. Inara sat in front of the mirror, fine tuning the concealer over her injuries, looking radiant and more confident than Mal had seen her in days.

“Did you learn anything?” he asked.

Inara didn’t turn from the mirror. “She says Jayne intends to betray you and that he forced her into the plan back on Persephone.”

“No more details?”

“Nothing clear. I think they’re going to meet whoever this is before they hand you over.”

“So if Jayne asks to run some errands in the morning,” Mal finished, plopping down on the couch, surveying the filled trunks.

Inara finally turned toward him, her eyes filling with unsettling emotion. Mal shifted uncomfortably, not wanting her to speak, but wanting to know what she would say. Finally, she swallowed whatever uncomfortable thought had come up and a wavering smile crossed her lips.

“I guess this is one more day I get to spend on the ship.”

“You could book passage from Santos,” Mal shrugged, then kicked himself. A cloud fell across Inara’s features, and Mal stood, wishing she still had knick-knacks out for him to fiddle with.

“I suppose I could.”

“I can get you direct to the Training House if you want.”

“After Boros.”

“And Greenleaf,” Mal said. “Promised Jayne he could see his Ma’s grave.”

“And how long will that take?”

“Can’t rightly say. How long is this smell goin’ ta last?”

Inara’s brow furrowed, her mouth starting to flap in disbelief. “The incense?”

“Suppose I should air out the shuttle before I try renting it again.”

“You may want to rent it out before the scent fades,” Inara suggested sharply, standing and directing him toward the door. “I imagine you’ll have a hard time of it if it smells as foul as the rest of the ship.”

“Hey now,” Mal protested, letting her push him out the door.

“Goodnight, Mal.”

“My boat does not smell foul!” Mal cried to the closed door, peaking though the window. Huffily, he turned, a small smirk creeping out of his heart. His Inara was back and in form. He jumped only a little when he saw River peaking from behind the bulkhead, her purple sweater crying for mending.

“It’s only him she hates,” River told Mal, her voice clear and urgent as if the revelation were the most important thing she’d ever said. “Only him.”

Mal leaned slightly against the closed shuttle door, not wanting to think about Inara. “I hate him too.”

River’s brow furrowed, her eyes flickering, following Mal’s thoughts, then returning to her own. “She doesn’t want to go.”

“It’s her choice, ain’t it?”

“She’ll regret it later,” River assured, biting her lip. “If she lives through it.”

“Leavin’ this ship never killed no one,” Mal answered, standing up straighter and heading to the engine room.

“Don’t let her go,” River pleaded as Mal turned his back and headed down the stair. She didn’t follow, she just met his eyes once more as she leaned over the top railing looking down at him. “She takes him to his death.”

Mal stopped walking, briefly leaving his senses to consider that her meaning might be different than what he first thought, but when he looked up, River had already flitted off.

~

CHAPTER 7

Jayne collected three pistols, his knife, and a stack of rounds before climbing out of his bunk the next morning. He and Kaylee had stayed up half the night casting rounds with a blow torch. He didn’t figure Mattie would let him stock up on ammo and even so, didn’t trust her to know where all his metal was strapped. It was the kind of distrust Jayne was accustomed to giving and receiving from everyone in the ‘verse – except the crew of Serenity. Still, it was hard to feel like crap about the gou cao de situation with Kaylee sittin’ across from him all night, firing a blow torch, joking about a time she singed off her own eyebrows. Jayne felt sorry for Kaylee as she slept soundly, curled up in his chair, keeping quiet vigil lest the grief overtake him again.

Carefully, he slid the bowie knife out of Kaylee’s protective hands and into the sheath tucked in his boot. He could still see the fading cuts on his hand, though Kaylee’s loving bandage had long since fallen off. She didn’t care that he slept next to the guns, but she didn’t trust him with the knife. Not in the evenings.

Kaylee stirred when she felt him take the knife, her hazel eyes opening, her hand quickly reaching to still his arm.

“It’s morning,” Jayne assured quietly, pulling a blanket over her as she relaxed again and closed her eyes. He didn’t need her there helpin’ him through the nights no more, coating his blankets with the smell of peach-scented lotion. Tonight, he’d tell her to sleep in her own bunk. Tonight.

Jayne found Mattie in the galley, preparing breakfast as had become her habit, though today the food was quick and practical, her eyes constantly and nervously jumping about the room. Finding some bowls, Jayne took a helping of the tasteless gruel, giving only half-thought to the worry that this unsavory meal might be his last.

“You don’t have to do this,” Jayne said quietly as she picked at the meal.

Mattie’s soft blue eyes suddenly locked on his, hardening to steel, and she sneered. “Are you getting cold feet?”

“Just givin’ you an out.”

She smirked haughtily, sitting straighter and falling silent as the others filed in for the morning meal. River circled them, watching eerily as Simon pulled out some more bowls and ladled out the meal.

“What’s this?” Mal asked disappointed by what he saw in the pot.

“You’re out of spices,” Mattie said.

“Hey, Moonbrain, away from the knives,” Jayne hollered, catching sight of River. Simon dropped the bowl he was holding, grabbing hold of River’s shoulders and steering her to the table.

“Don’t let her go,” River requested of Simon and everyone ignored her.

“I can buy some fresh spices,” Mattie volunteered and Mal cast an uneasy eye on her.

“That’s awful kind, miss, but we’re plannin’ on leavin’ in less than an hour,” Mal answered evenly. “Soon as this is fixed.”

“An hour seems optimistic, Captain,” she replied cuttingly. “But I can be back within that time if you wish.”

“I imagine you can.”

“I’ll go with ‘er,” Jayne volunteered.

“You got business in town?”

Jayne drew his gun. “I damaged the lug using handloads. Thought I might find a ‘smith with quick hands.”

Mal looked hard at Jayne and Jayne could not for the life of him read the look.

“Fine, don’t be too long,” Mal said and Mattie stood almost immediately. Jayne swallowed hard, determined to finish his food before he left, unable to shake the deep foreboding he felt, hoping his lie about the gun hadn’t been too transparent.

~

Inara stayed aloft in the catwalk as the crew bustled about doing whatever crazy thing Mal had in mind that was sure to delay their arrival on Boros indefinitely. Kaylee and River had stopped by yesterday to visit while she packed, Kaylee with a capture wanting to preserved the moment for posterity. When River had leaned until her nose was inches from the bed, Inara was certain the girl had noticed the damaged mattress underneath and could only pray she kept quiet. Inara wasn’t sure if everyone knew or if no one did, but she never wanted to tell any of them. She kept thinking of all the young

women she'd counseled in similar situations, tried to give comfort to, and encouraged to prosecute to the fullest extent of the law. Easier said than done, she realized.

Zoë was already gone, trailing Jayne and Mattie. Mal was gathering his weapons, getting ready to follow, and was giving last minute orders to Wash. Kaylee breezed through only briefly, tools in hand, trying to trace whatever problem had steered them so far off course.

At the door of the bay, Mal turned back and caught her eye. Inara stood straight immediately. She hadn't realized he knew she was watching. But then, he'd always seemed to have an uncanny knack of finding her in a room, crowded or clear. He nodded only slightly before heading out.

"Hey, 'Nara," Wash called a moment later. "Can you come lock up behind me?"

Furrowing her brow, Inara headed down the stairs as Wash started their new mule. "Where are you going?"

"I'm the designated driver."

~

The early morning sun burned through a layer of fog leaving only the swirling ash from local trash fires. Mattie kept her head ducked, the ash clinging to her hair like snow. The smoke burned Jayne's lungs, but the forceful, autumn breeze carried it away with a few gusts.

Jayne kept pace with his daughter, noticing she continually looked at a device shoved up her sleeve. Had she repaired her handheld? Had she... When had he started calling her daughter again? Had he ever stopped?

"They're gonna want somethin' from us before they hand over the money," Jayne said, diverting his attention to the matter at hand.

"Half up front, half on delivery," she said evenly.

"You okay never seein' that other half?"

"I'll get what I came for," she assured, brushing her hair away from her face.

When her jacket shifted, Jayne saw the gun concealed in her shoulder holster.

Jayne remembered being cocky on his first job, but he also recalled a few more nervous reaches for his gun. Mattie was too sure, meaning she'd gotten a double dose of his arrogance, or she had someone else on world. She looked at the device concealed in her sleeve and Jayne felt his fingers nervously graze the butt of his own gun.

He looked over his shoulder, squinting through the fog and smoke, unable to make out Serenity in the distance any more. Walking backwards, he kept his eye on the horizon, hoping to spot someone following him. He nearly tripped over Mattie when she stopped walking.

"What is it?" Jayne asked her as he bowled over her, catching her elbow before she hit the dirt.

"I could ask you the same question."

"I was – no one's following us."

"You sound disappointed."

Jayne started to answer, but fell silent, following as Mattie continued walking. Occasionally he would glance over his shoulder or look to the sky – not because he was scared. It was possible Mal had written him off and would take off without him. Would

be better anyway. Jayne could handle himself just fine and there was no sense him getting all protective over the crew when his own hide and his daughter's was first on the line. Still ... although he didn't see Serenity flying away, he'd never felt more alone.

~

Mal covered his nose and mouth with his sleeve as a particularly thick plume of smoke blew by, bringing with it the scent of rotted food. A stray cat crossed the road and he found himself momentarily considering superstition and luck. Black cat were supposed to be bad luck, so was a gray cat mediocre? What was the scale? Mediocre luck wouldn't be a far cry above normal and that's about where he felt at the moment. Aside from the misfortune of being abducted my Jayne's wayward child, everything was going according to plan. He could see Zoë before him and hear Wash behind him and at the moment, no one was pointing a gun. Not too shabby.

"Sir," Zoë's voice came over the radio.

"Go ahead."

"We're coming to the edge of town. They either went into the Salty Dog or Charlie's Pool Hall."

"You lost 'em?"

"They share a common door to the main street."

"Hold position. I'm right behind you."

Mal clipped the radio to his belt and started running. The trip from Serenity had been shorter than he expected, which had its pros and cons. Getting back would be easier, but so would having trouble follow.

~

Serenity was always quieter when the others were out on a job. It didn't help, though, that this time they were expecting to be turned over to some unnamed adversary. Such betrayal seemed a Cobb specialty. Simon heard the sound of weeping down the hall and immediately worried for River. He was surprised when he turned the corner and found Kaylee, sitting by a stack of unlaundered placemats and dish rags, head buried in her hands.

"Kaylee, what's wrong?" Simon gushed, kneeling next to her, rubbing her arm consolingly.

"She fixed it," Kaylee sniffled, wiping the tears from her eyes, motioning toward the washer with a wrench. "I didn't even know it was broke."

Simon furrowed his brow, considering the machine wedged quietly in the corner. "It wasn't really."

"No one fixes things like this that don't know the original designs. Like she invented it or somethin'."

"You think she's schooled?" Simon still didn't understand why Kaylee was upset.

"She's done more in a week than I've done all year."

"Oh," Simon said, putting a sympathetic arm around Kaylee's shoulder. "Come on Kaylee, she's just doing odd fixes. She hasn't touched the engine and kept it in repair all year. And she's not confined by Mal's pitiful budget."

Kaylee's head flopped on his shoulder and she gestured to some unseen workings behind the machine. "I never would've thought to do this."

Simon tried not to laugh at Kaylee's distress. "You're young, Kaylee. It's okay to be a genius and have intuition and it's saved us more than once. But you haven't seen everything yet, and that's okay. Now... you've seen this. And you'll know to try it later."

"Easy for you to talk. Someone gets shot and you fix 'em up right as rain every time."

"Well, yes," Simon began slowly. "I'm trained as a trauma surgeon; that's what I do. I can treat things that require surgery, but I can't think of everything. I mean... with River, everything is experimental medicine and I'm always worried that there's something obvious I'm not trying. Something a diagnostic specialist would think of right away."

"You'll figure it out, Simon."

Simon leaned his head to the side to touch Kaylee's, marveling how easy it was for her to encourage him when he'd been trying to encourage her.

"All I'm saying is that maybe Mattie is specialized in repairing laundry machines."

"Or plumbing," Kaylee nodded, lifting her head thoughtfully. Suddenly, she leaned over, gave him a swift kiss on the cheek then sprang to her feet.

"Where are you going?"

"I think I know what she did!"

Stunned, Simon stayed on the floor of the laundry room as Kaylee bound happily away. With a soft sigh, he touched his cheek where she had kissed it.

~

Jayne followed Mattie into the bar and immediately wished they had time for a drink. The joint was deeper than it was wide, the bar on one wall, a few narrow tables on the other, the ceiling low enough to be claustrophobic. At the back was a spiral staircase leading upstairs, presumably to more tables. The walls were lined with mirrors, smeared with fingerprints and condiments. The smell rising from the floor was a mixture of beer, smoke, and dirty mop water. Loud music shrouded the voices of the patrons and the din of moving dishes.

Mattie had been quiet most of the way here and he could read the conflict creeping into the corners of her eyes. Thoughts of his own mother's death snipped threateningly at the edges of his calm. He had to keep his wits about him. Had to, or they could both die. But would that be so bad?

"Why have you stopped?" Her voice snapped him back to reality. It wasn't that icy, condescending voice she'd used earlier. She sounded ... scared.

"We can go back," Jayne offered again.

Mattie set her jaw, her chin quivering slightly, her eyes burning angrily for a brief moment before turning icy cold and expressionless. "I'm not sorry."

"Cobb," a man shouted gruffly from the bottom stair. Both Jayne and Mattie turned sharply. By the way she squared her shoulders, Jayne surmised that Mattie recognized him. A beefy, black man with the sleeves cutoff his t-shirt, and an armful of tattoos to show off. Jayne immediately identified the location of every weapon on the

man's body: two guns, a knife, and something small concealed in the left boot. The way his muscles layered one top of the other, Jayne surmised that his bulk was chemically induced by some form of steroid – which didn't really make him less strong unless he'd overused in some way.

As they followed the man up the staircase, Jayne took one last opportunity to survey the room, and nearly convinced himself that he saw Book in the crowd. How desperate must he have been for a familiar face to see Book?

The upstairs area was divided into two rooms – a parlor area with a few tables, mostly empty, and a private room. A posted sign said “employees only”, but the gruff man tipped open the door, permitted Jayne and Mattie entrance, then closed it behind them. Jayne heard a latch on the door snap. In the back room, they were completely cut off from the music floating in from the downstairs. Three men reclined by a bay window, one of them tapping ashes from his cigarette onto the street below. They all had the threads of businessmen, sleek and dispassionate, but with wear to say they were disreputable at best. The one on the left kept his money in his mouth, his leer painted gold. The one on the right calmly took a seat by the window, resting his elbow on a propped knee, surveying Jayne like a cow for slaughter.

“What's this? A sample?” gold-teeth sneered.

“You got our money?” Jayne demanded as Mattie took a step back.

“Our’?” Cigarette-man repeated, laughing. “Oh, this is priceless.”

Jayne cast a backward glance at his daughter, a sinking feeling in his gut. He'd expected their betrayal and he'd expected hers, but not this early on, and certainly not in conspiracy. She smirked at him, taking his gun, then stepping closer to the quiet one sitting by the window.

“He's all I promised. Now where is my coin?”

Gold-teeth grabbed her by the hair and she yelped. “I'm thinkin' a new deal,” the man seethed in her ear.

Jayne drew his second gun from his boot, but the quiet one raised a hand and the commotion momentarily froze. Taking advantage of the pause, Mattie flipped Gold-teeth, then pointed Jayne's first gun at him.

“I believe we were discussing my money.”

~

Zoë radioed Wash where to wait for them as Mal jogged up beside her. They exchanged hardly a glance before entering the establishment, Zoë taking a quick left into the pool hall, Mal scoping out the bar to the right. The pool hall was noisy with the clacking of cues to balls, the thumps of heavy boots on the floor, and the leaking over of music from the neighboring establishment. The ceiling was double tall and a single door lead out the back of the building. On the upper level of the adjoining wall was a shaded window from which one could look in on the establishment. A bored looking attendant sat behind a low desk, monitoring the violence level in the room and renting out tables. He considered Zoë with disinterested eyes, and when she didn't come immediately towards him, went back to reading his magazine.

Bracing her ears, Zoë crossed the hall to the neighboring establishment, immediately spotting Mal leaning against the bar, drinking whisky out of a dirty glass.

Zoë gave Mal a withering look, then came up beside him and surveyed the room. The space was dark, cramped, and dense with smoke.

“Somethin’ for the lady?” the bartender asked – or nearly shouted to be heard over the noise.

“Perhaps a quiet table upstairs,” Mal answered. The bartender curled his lips disgustingly and motioned toward the spiral staircase.

The upstairs was appreciably quieter and Zoë fought the urge to touch her ringing ears. A few patrons sat down for quiet conversations and Mal led Zoë to a table offering her a chair before he sat. He was playing parts, and she played along. An overworked waitress rushed past and offered them menus before hurrying to another table to take a food order, then another to take money, then dashing off downstairs.

“I didn’t see a back door to this place,” Mal remarked, taking a swig of his drink, then sliding the cup across the table to Zoë. She looked disdainfully at the dirty glass, trying to weigh the merit of the present drink against the probable dysentery later.

“You hear that, sir?” She tensed suddenly at the muffled... it was hard to describe the sound, but it didn’t seem to belong with the noise of a bar. Zoë wondered if Mal tensed in response to her or because he’d heard it too.

“Can’t hear much of anything,” Mal remarked, wiggling his finger in his ear to clear it. Zoë screwed her face and stood, pressing her ear against a door to a back room.

“Excuse me, ma’am, this area’s for staff only,” a gruff, tattooed man told her, coming bodily between her and the door, forcing her back. Zoë could easily see his concealed gun and knew in a moment that through the door was where they wanted to be.

Mal came behind her and they presented the two-to-one intimidation stance, but the tattooed man was suddenly joined by three others. Nodding politely, Mal touched Zoë’s elbow and summoned her back, as if that’s what he’d been planning all along.

“I think you should leave,” the man ordered.

Zoë turned quickly, heading downstairs and Mal followed without a word. They’d find another way in.

~

He thought he’d warned her. Why did Mattie look so surprised when things went to hell in a hand basket? He’d let Mattie take his first gun, just to see if that got them out any easier, but when Cigarette-man started frisking him, he’d decked the guy and reclaimed his favorite pistol. Which in turn led to more hitting and shooting and brawl-ish behavior. Gold-teeth joined in angrily and briefly, both men were turned on Jayne.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Mattie standing by the window next to Quiet Man, who still hadn’t moved. She glared at him disdainfully, but he’d be damned before leaving this place without her. He lunged toward her and was stopped by a jab in his back. Grabbing the first chair within reach, he swung around, catching Gold-teeth in the jaw, dislodging one of the glittering canines.

Mattie connected with a roundhouse punch and Jayne saw stars, trying to stay upright. The floor teased and beckoned, but he did not yield, even as Cigarette jumped on his back and two other men slipped into the room to join the fight. Now it was four men against him, plus Mattie. Quiet Man stayed thankfully still, but Jayne spared as many glances toward him as possible, knowing he was most likely to fire the killing shot.

The melee took a downward turn when a bullet shattered the glass window behind the desk. Instinctively, Jayne hit the deck and grabbed his weapon. All bets were off. He tugged at Mattie's ankles and she finally came toward him. He rolled and kicked Gold-teeth as he stood, pulling Mattie toward the door, but stopped when she yelped and her hand jerked out of his.

Quiet Man had finally stood, getting Mattie in a choke-hold, pressing a gun to her head. The distraction allowed Gold-teeth to snap Jayne in the ribs and the two fell. Mattie flipped Quiet Man over her shoulder and he landed hard on top of Jayne, forcing a grunt, but already rolling the three quickly righted and fought for dominance. Zoë sprang in through the shattered window, cutting her hands on the broken glass, but all business, with her Mare's leg pointed at the men. She shot Cigarette in the head as Jayne pummeled Gold-teeth. Mattie ran for the door, but three more men burst through, led by the gruff, tattooed fellow.

They launched on Jayne, Mattie, and Zoë like a pack of wolves. At some point, Mal appeared and joined the fight. Jayne shot two of the new assailants, trying to figure a way out. The way Zoë was moving, she wasn't expecting to leave the way she came. The battle carried out into the restaurant area, sending patrons flying to the ground. Jayne gave only briefest consideration to the bystanders, keeping his eye on his daughter and his mind on that narrow staircase that was their only means of escape.

Mattie fought for all she was worth, and if he hadn't been so busy trying to keep himself upright, he'd have admired her skill and felt some fatherly pride. The tattooed man charged her with a knife and Jayne launched toward her without thinking. The only reason she could yelp when the blade penetrated was because it went through Jayne's lung instead.

Gasp. Cry. Soundless.

Red.

Black.

Red. Spots.

Gun shots over loud music. Screaming bystanders.

Jayne fell heavily on Mattie and she was so surprised that they tumbled to the ground. Her face white with shock, she found his gun and shot the assailant. Breathing was not so great an option. Jayne could feel the blade piercing through his body with surreal depth.

"Get out," he gasped heavily, unable to lift himself off her.

Red. Black. Red.

Conscious by sheer will, Jayne looked on her face. Just like her mother, except she was confused. Surprised. Probably feeling the same things Jayne had felt when that mudder took a bullet for him. He didn't have the breath to repeat his request, but the way she was shifting, she planned to move.

Using him as a human shield, Mattie dragged Jayne behind a sink, toward a freight elevator. How had she known it was there? He felt a bullet graze his calf and she buckled underneath him as it penetrated her leg.

Red. Black. Red.

The burning sun blinded Jayne as he came to. They were outside. He could only see the dirt on the ground, but he felt strong arms pulling him up, off Mattie's shoulders.

Red. Black. Red.

On his back, in the hover mule. Breeze blowing across his face. Wash looking fuzzy. Mal. Zoë. Mattie! How had he gotten here? He vaguely recalled the morning when he faced the day anticipating solitude and eminent betrayal.

“What are y’all doin’ here?” Jayne choked, barely able to get wind past his vocal chords. There was a strange pain in his lung.

“Watching your back,” Wash answered calmly.

~

CH 8

“Doc!”

“Wash, fire it up,” Mal ordered as soon as the hover mule had come to a stop in the cargo bay.

“Kaylee, tell me we’re free to fly.”

“Free as a bird, Captain.”

“Doc!”

Simon dashed in, stretcher ready. It took all of them to carry Jayne to the Infirmary. Mal backed off, letting Simon and Zoë fall into their natural rhythm, turning his attention to Mattie. She was pressed against the counter in the corner, leg bleeding, moon-eyes fixed on Jayne.

“Up,” Mal ordered, motioning her onto the second bed so he could tend to her wound. He wanted so much to pound her, but that could wait. As Serenity lifted off, sending a wave of freedom through the walls, Mal felt the familiar calm of the Black.

“You and me are gonna have a chat now,” he told Mattie, who still had her blue eyes fixed on Jayne. She turned those frightened-little-girl eyes on him, but Mal had been played too often to feel sympathy. Mattie tensed as the heart-monitor on Jayne flat-lined and Simon charged the defibrillators. Mal took her by the shoulders and led her out of the Infirmary. It was her fault Jayne was there. If she wanted to watch him die, he wasn’t going to give her the satisfaction. If she regretted the choice, he was willing to spare her the front row seat. Mattie followed his lead numbly, not looking back. Mal glanced back only briefly at his unconscious crewman.

“You and me are gonna chat later,” he promised Jayne under his breath. “You better live for it.”

~

Two days later, they were nearly to Boros. Simon found Mal brooding in the galley, cleaning his guns. He had kept Mattie shackled and confined to her room since it had happened, making Zoë bring her meals, because he refused to give the girl more face time. Jayne had been asking to see Mattie since he woke up, but Mal refused to let the girl out for anything. Simon knew Mal meant to toss Mattie from the ship with a few unkind words... and a few unkind bullets if she didn’t go quickly.

“Captain,” Simon began.

“Ain’t gonna happen.”

Simon sighed. “I haven’t even asked.”

“She ain’t gettin’ near him,” Mal declared, setting his gun firmly on the table. Simon was surprised to see the protectiveness in his eyes. He’d seen Mal protective of Kaylee and Inara and even Wash... but Jayne?

“He will get to her.”

“I thought he couldn’t walk.”

Simon grimaced, acknowledging that Jayne was probably the worst patient ever when it came to following doctor’s orders. “I can’t keep giving him drugs to paralyze him just to keep him from her.”

“You can and you will.”

“Just let him see her.”

Mal stood angrily. “You don’t give the orders on this boat.”

“I know, Captain,” Simon said icily, placing disdainful emphasis on the title. “But I implore you, on Jayne’s behalf.”

“See to your work, Doctor. Patch up my man and don’t go makin’ yourself ambassador on his will.”

“Captain –”

“Ain’t gonna happen.”

~

Mal found Inara standing on the catwalk, watching a friendly game of hoop-ball between the crew. Another half day, and she’d be gone. And Mattie would be gone, and Simon would stop harassing him about Jayne. Inara closed her eyes, leaning against the bulk head, listening to the sounds of the game below as if she could absorb happiness from the air. Her bruises were completely faded – Mal noticed how much thinner the layer of paint on her face was. Her lips were painted ruby red, her eyes shaded with soft earth tones.

She tipped forward, slightly off balance, as though she might faint, and Mal instinctively reached out a hand to catch her.

“Whoa, there,” he smiled, catching her sheepish grin as she opened her eyes and looked at him.

“Sorry, I’m just... distracted.”

“Kindly, don’t distract yourself over the railing,” Mal joked, leaning against the top bar, looking back at her.

“I just received word from Persephone. A man I knew was brutally assaulted.”

“Oh,” Mal asked interestedly. He’d arranged to have Inara’s attacker quietly pummeled. He hadn’t expected the news to reach her. “You seem mighty shook up by it. Were you two close?”

“Don’t play with me, Mal,” she criticized, her chin dropping. Were those tears in her eyes? Of all things, Mal hadn’t wanted to bring her more pain.

“He ain’t dead,” Mal offered, lifting her chin. She pressed her lips together until the color nearly disappeared. She took hold of his hand, seeming like she wanted to hold onto it, then, trembling, pushed it away. It was the story of them. Touch, regret, pull away awkwardly.

Unable to resume her composure, Inara fled to her shuttle. Mal watched after her, hoping he’d done the right thing. Sure that he had, but not sure she agreed. Maybe he

hadn't done enough. Maybe he should follow her. But then, that would just complicate things.

~

Mal hadn't made it to his bunk that night. He paced the ship bow to bay, lingering occasionally at the door to Inara's shuttle, then circling again. He was only half-way down the stairs when he heard the clatter in the Infirmary and took off running. Through the window, he could see the center bed was empty and Jayne was lying on the floor face down.

"Jayne," Mal said softly, entering and kneeling beside the burly man. Jayne looked up at him, dazed and confused, like a drunkard who hadn't realized why the floor had smacked him in the face.

"Mal," Jayne's face screwed up in the most pained, desperate look Mal had ever seen on another man. "Let me see her."

"Jayne, she tried to kill you."

"She's my baby," Jayne answered simply, letting Mal help him to sit against the cabinets. "I'll trade you Greenleaf."

Mal started, remembering the promise he'd made to Jayne, to take him to see his mother's grave. He'd never had a kid, but was struck by the fact that Jayne was willing to trade seeing his mother for his daughter. He could feel his heart skipping beats left and right as he considered the powerful force binding Jayne to Mattie. If he said no, he would surely lose Jayne on Boros, whether the merc could walk or not.

"I'll get her," Mal choked, leaving Jayne on the floor.

~

Jayne wasn't sure if he was sleeping or not, but he'd found a pillow for his back. He raked at the fragments of his consciousness, but it was like trying to gather leaves on a blustery day. He nearly gasped when he saw her there, shackled like a prisoner, black hair stringy and hanging loosely around an ice-cold expression. Mal gripped her shoulder firmly, staying by the door as she walked in and knelt next to Jayne stiffly.

Mattie ducked her chin as Jayne reached out a hand to touch her.

"Hey, girl," he breathed, feeling warm life enter him at the sight of her.

"You asked for me."

"I did, girl. We've been through something, you and me, and I wanted to talk."

"I'm sorry."

"No you ain't."

"I tried to kill you."

"I got no grudge."

Mattie screwed her face in disbelief. "You're not going to be all fatherly now are you?"

Jayne laughed as much as he could, rubbing her cheek with his finger. "Wouldn't dream of it. But as one merc to another, thought I'd offer some advice."

Mattie balked at the suggestion, but said nothing, sitting cross-legged on the floor, just painfully out of reach. Jayne dropped his hands to his side, focusing on getting enough air to talk.

“First,” Jayne began, holding up a finger, pulling out Shepherd Book’s best lecture tone as he had never delivered a lecture on his own before. “It’s best to take people where they’re already at. If you’re trying to redirect a ship, no sense doin’ it subtle-like. Take out the crew and hard-wire your destination. Wash ain’t an astronomer, but he knows when the stars are wrong. Second: never offer to cut someone in on a deal. It’s a liability. Best shoot people that get in your way... though I am grateful you didn’t this time.”

Mattie blushed a little, amused at his tirade.

“Third,” Jayne continued.

“How many of these are there?”

“Hush and we’ll see,” Jayne chastised, a glint in his eye. “Third: Don’t trust anyone offering you money till you can see what’s in it for them. If your take is more appealing than theirs, it’s a good bet they’re gonna kill you and take both shares... why are you smiling?”

“Remember when I was little and you’d tell me stories?”

Jayne’s jaw dropped, at a loss for words for a moment. Finally he stammered, “You can’t remember that. You were way little when I did that.”

“I remember I used to call you Dad,” she said, scooting towards him.

“That you did.”

“But not when you were telling stories.” Her smile deepened, her eyes warmly embracing the memory. “Then I’d call you ddddad-dad-dad-dad.”

She rolled her tongue to make the sound, then sang the name like a trumpet fanfare. Jayne laughed heartily, reaching out and pulling her into a hug.

“I’d forgotten that.” He kissed her head as she rested against his shoulder, glad to know that she had some happy memories of her childhood.

“You were all clean-shaven then. Wore a suit to work. Didn’t have as many muscles.”

“Heh,” Jayne grunted.

“Dad,” Mattie began. Jayne reeled. In all the days they’d been traveling, it was the first time he’d called her that and it awakened both fear and joy.

“I don’t think I’m cut out to be a mercenary.”

“Don’t reckon you are,” Jayne agreed, never wanting to let go of her. “You’re too much like your mother.”

“Really?” She lifted her head, her hopeful eyes meeting his.

“Spittin’ image. If she were alive, she’d die of shock seein’ what’s become of me. Then her ghost would kill me for what I done to you. And kill me again if I let you follow my footsteps.”

The two were quiet, Jayne’s lecture on proper mercenary skills forgotten. Mal had ducked out to the lounge, keeping a watchful eye, but giving them a little more privacy. Jayne stroked his daughter’s hair, letting that magical calm fill the room, even as she fiddled with the shackles still on her wrists. Her voice surfaced hesitantly, fearful of breaking the calm.

“So what do I do now?”

~

Mal didn't show up when Inara left the next morning. The rest of the crew crowded into her shuttle offering tearful good-byes. It was agreed that Wash would fly her to the spaceport so she didn't need to hire a porter to move her things. Jayne and Mattie were to accompany them into town. Simon protested every bit of Jayne's movement, but the merc would die before being parted from Mattie... at least for the moment.

Inara waited and watched, but Mal did not emerge from his bunk. She considered going to find him, but to what purpose? It would just be another awkward moment between him. She wanted him to wrap her in his arms and tell her not to go. Even if he didn't wrap her in his arms, just saying something would be better than saying nothing. Tears filled her eyes as Kaylee hugged her one last time.

"You better leave before you miss your transport."

Inara nodded, reluctantly stepping onto the shuttle, ordering Wash to take off. Jayne was already laying flat on the floor saying he'd be up as soon as the world stopped turning so fast. Mattie held his hand and looked on soothingly.

"I can do that, Wash," Inara said quickly, reaching for the controls. He waved her away.

"Just sit back and enjoy the ride, Inara. Besides, Mal says you're not insured anymore."

Inara winced at the joke, wishing Mal had had the guts to come say good bye, and tell her himself. She sat cordially, wistfully soaking in the sound of the shuttle moving around her.

"Do you have a destination in mind?" Inara asked Mattie by way of small talk.

Mattie shrugged, helping Jayne to sit. "Some place I can find work. I'm not sure what I'd be good at."

"You seemed pretty keen on sabotaging the mechanics," Wash piped up.

"I'd die of boredom," Mattie shrugged.

"Cooking?" Jayne smiled.

"Perhaps you could be a companion," Inara suggested, remembering Mattie's shrewd skills in manipulation.

"Jian ta de gua," Jayne said immediately, surprising Inara, but Mattie looked intrigued.

"Don't companions start training at an early age?"

"Most do," Inara agreed. "Perhaps you could come to the Training House with me."

"No," Jayne insisted. "No way."

Wash balked, "Says the man who –"

"You best not finish that thought, Little Man," Jayne threatened.

"It's a perfectly respectable career," Inara defended.

Jayne growled, but Mattie placed a calming hand on his arm.

"I won't do it, Dad," she told him, then turned to Inara. "But maybe I could go with you. I'm sure there are many other jobs there in which I could be useful."

Inara considered her carefully, wondering if perhaps her assurances to Jayne were entirely false and said only to calm him. If so, the woman would make a very fine companion indeed.

~

It was another sleepless night for Mal. He paced his bunk until the confined space drove him mad. Then he paced the bridge, empty since Wash had long since retired for the evening. Then through the galley, because it had been so long since dinner, his stomach was rumbling again. He didn't stop at the catwalk, but headed straight through the cargo bay. Jayne had been returned to the Infirmary, and for the first time in days, had not tried to crawl out. The monitors beeped softly, humming a tune of recovery. River's room was open and empty, probably because she'd crawled into Simon's. She often did that if she'd been sick during the day.

He finally paced back through the cargo bay, looking up the stairs to the airlock to Inara's shuttle – Shuttle 1. Inara was gone. The shuttle wasn't hers. It was his. His. He could go in if he wanted. Didn't have to knock. Wouldn't be disturbin' no one. Not even if he slept there on the floor, soaking in her scent. Not even.

Resolutely, he strode up the stairs, his boots falling heavily on the metal deck plate. This was his ship and he could do whatever the hell he wanted. With only the slightest hesitation, he slid open the door to the shuttle. A wave of incense and the scent of Inara rushed over him. For a moment, he just closed his eyes and breathed, imagining that her fine red tapestries were still hung and the soft couch was still there. 'Why did you go?' The question burned through his thoughts. If ever the moment came, he'd ask her.

He walked into the room, keeping his eyes closed so he could pretend all of Inara's things were still there. He knew the layout by heart. The small table with all the breakable statues was just three steps in on the left. Turn right, and there's the bed. How many men had slept in that bed? In truth, he was glad it was gone.

Slowly, he opened his eyes, letting the emptiness greet him. Simple. Uncomplicated. All his. Except...

In the shadow on the far side, he saw a trunk. Mid-sized, but probably just missed in the shuffle. Inara had so many fineries, it'd be awhile before she even noticed it missing. Perhaps he'd send her a wave in the morning and let her know she'd left it. Perhaps.

He turned his head, unable to look at anything that reminded him of her. Feelings swirled through his heart, unwelcome, but unrelenting. Firmly, he strode to the door, placing a hand on the frame to gather resolve from the cool hard walls. He made it half-way to his bunk, the image of the trunk burning a hole in his mind. Curiosity plagued him. What if she'd left it on purpose, just to tease him? He wouldn't succumb to her trick. Climbing down the ladder to his bunk, he shook his head, laughing at how she managed to use her wiles even at so great a distance. He liked that she wasn't afraid to fight dirty.

He laid in his bed for hours, thinking on Inara and that small part of her that called him from Shuttle 1. Finally, unable to take the temptation, he darted back to the shuttle, knelt next to the trunk, and as excitedly as a child at Christmas, he peaked inside.

~

EPILOGUE

Jayne clutched the rose in his hands, feeling the callous nubs where the thorns had been sheered off. Kaylee had dragged him to the florist that morning, insisting he get flowers for his mother's grave. She didn't truly have one. Because of money concerns, she'd been cremated and released into the wind long before Jayne had ever arrived. He could only hope to stand by her garden and catch her presence in the breeze.

He had passed a dozen fancy-named swirls of floral color before coming to the refrigerator with the roses inside. When Jayne was a boy, his father had always bought red roses for his mother, but somehow those didn't seem appropriate now. He was about to move on when he saw the rose he wanted in a cluster of hybrids.

Its peach and yellow petals looked like a raging fire, tipped with crimson. It reminded him of engine trails, passion, and his mother. His knees went weak on seeing the flower, as if he were looking at a customized slug-launcher or a gift basket with a year's supply of rounds. Forgetting Kaylee, he'd purchased the rose and made a bee-line for the garden to give it to his mother. Kneeling by a small head-stone he'd placed by the tomato plants, he placed the flower in a vase of water and planted it in the ground so it would stay upright.

He'd knelt in this garden when Mattie's mother died. The night he'd handed Mattie over to his mother, he'd looked at himself, and saw a monster. He'd spent the last twenty years of his life running from that night. But had he escaped the monster or become it? After his wife was killed, Jayne didn't think he could die any more than he already had that day. He'd died to that middle-class, clean-shaven, monogamous life. He had died to honesty and feelings and love. There was no joy in him and no grief. Only numbness.

Jayne touched the rough edges where he'd carved his mother's name into the stone. He lifted his head to the wind, knowing that somewhere in the breeze were the ashes of his mother... and from years before, his wife. How could he have let Mattie face this alone?

~

The midday sun warmed the air and Mal came up behind Jayne. They'd been near two weeks on Greenleaf and the merc had slept on the front porch of his mother's old house every night. The new owners had been forgiving on account of the pistol strapped to Jayne's hip. The shadows disappeared underfoot and Mal found Jayne kneeling in the dirt, facing the unripe tomato plant, staring alternately at the engraved stone and the open air. The man had fallen into numb routine, no longer feeling grief, but just living it. The rose he'd bought when he arrived was beginning to wither and fade, trying to tell them that the season of grief had ended for now.

Standing a fair distance off, Mal caught Jayne's eye and it seemed as though a resigned, dutiful part of the merc awoke. Jayne stood slowly, adjusting his utility belt and holster – he seemed to carry so much more these days. Without looking back and without words, Jayne came to Mal's side and the two of them returned to Serenity. Just as Zoë

had done for him all those years ago, today Mal was leading Jayne away from his grief and at the same time, bringing him home.

~