In the Arms of Dark Angels

by GreenWoman

Summary

Ezra draws an unexpected winning hand, from an even more unexpected source.

This story was written in response to the "No-Owie" challenge (how to write hurt/comfort without physically hurting anyone) on the TM7 Fic list. My thanks to my beta-readers, Zarina and Amy, and to all who helped answer my questions.

With thanks and apologies to Walter Mirisch, John Watson, Trilogy Productions, CBS, and Sarah McLachlan, and proceeding under the assumption that forgiveness is easier to ask than permission....

03/04/1999

You spend all your time waiting
For that second chance
For a break that will make it okay
There's always some reason
To feel not good enough
And it's hard at the end of the day
I need some distraction
Oh, beautiful release
Memory seeps from my veins
Let me be empty
Well, weightless and maybe
I'll find some peace tonight

ANGEL ~ by Sarah McLachlan

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Ezra Standish stepped out of the saloon doors into a quiet Four Corners night. A cricket beneath the boardwalk sang an unsteady tune. The street fires were dying ... it was very late. And it had been a very good night at the table; a sizeable amount of money had crossed the green baize in his direction. He breathed deeply of night air and mesquite smoke, and smiled. Another night like this might be a while in coming, but come it would. And when it did, he'd have the long-anticipated pleasure of telegraphing Maude in St. Louis, informing her that he was able to buy her out. The saloon he stood in front of would be his again.

Ezra looked up at the full moon, a disk of pure white in the black, starry sky. Taking his flask from the inside pocket of his coat, he unscrewed the top and took a long, deep pull. The fine whiskey burned bittersweet in his throat, banishing the taste of the lesser fare he'd been sipping at the table all night. Ever on guard, he directed his gaze up and down the main street, studying the shadows. Lantern light flickering low in the window of the jail caught his eye. JD Dunne was up late, probably rereading the new dime novel that had come in the mail last week. That boy ... no longer green in a gunfight but fast, dependable, level-headed ... yet still given to the ways of youth. Dime novels. Fancy twirling of his guns. And all red-faced and tanglefooted when that girl Casey was around. Ezra wondered wryly if he himself ever been that young. He didn't think so ... life with Maude had never lent itself to indulgence in the light-hearted pursuits of youth.

Ezra's mood sobered. Maude would surely balk at selling the saloon back to him once she discovered that he was ignoring her strictest lesson. For the second time.

"Who else's money was I supposed to use?"

"Somebody else's. Anybody else's. Ezra, rule number one: never run a deal on your own money! Good lord ... I thought I taught you better than that!"

And she had. Maude had taught him well. Never trust anyone, never stay anywhere too long, never hold on to anything. She hadn't understood that the Standish Tavern was more than a deal to Ezra. He'd tried to explain to her, but it was hard ... hell, it had been hard to explain even to himself. He'd always dreamed of owning a gambling establishment, but had rarely allowed himself to consider all that proprietorship would change in his life. No longer living on the road, no longer sleeping in his clothes, no longer keeping the hotel window open and the Derringer under his pillow. How could he make Maude understand how much he wanted to leave that life behind, when he was vaguely ashamed of admitting it even to himself?

"Now, now, Mother ... I've got the town believing that they can trust me to protect them from people like you. Hell, from people like me."

"I thought that protection job was just a front...."

"Well, of course it is." Had he known then that he was lying, even to himself?

Ezra slipped the flask back into his jacket, and felt the comforting swell of the money in his inner vest pocket. A twinge of guilt stung him. His mother had done what she thought was best for her son, and he ought not to think ill of her. In truth, he rarely did. Because of Maude, Ezra was very good at his profession, and usually enjoyed success independent of fortune's whimsy in favoring him. Conscientiously, he never neglected to practice, keeping his skills honed by continuing to use all his tricks. Even during this odd flirtation with peacekeeping. Even when playing with his friends.

Friends? When did I start thinking of them as friends?

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So tired of the straight line
And everywhere you turn
Are vultures and thieves at your back
And the storm keeps on twisting
You keep on building the lies
That you make up for all that you lack

Certainly not at the beginning. Ezra's desertion from that first fight had not been easily forgotten by the others ... it tainted the respect his return to help had earned him with a wariness, a lack of trust, an expectation of future undependability. Even though he'd acquitted himself well in the months and the fights that had followed, Ezra had been well aware of his status as outsider in the partnership, and had carefully continued riding his personal fences, keeping them mended and unbroken.

When had that changed?

In some ways, it hadn't. Vin Tanner still regarded him with distrust, although a grudging respect had finally come to be shared between them. Such was also the relationship between Ezra and the healer, Nathan Jackson. The gambler recognized it as a pact between men who had come to respect each others' skills ... skills not always understood nor even necessarily admired, but proven equally essential to the survival of all.

Things had gone better with the others. Genial, easy-going Buck Wilmington had been quickly won over and so, inevitably, had been young JD, who followed Buck's lead in all things. Buck seemed to like the gambler and regarded his card sharking as more of a challenge than a cheat, while JD looked upon it with awe and constantly questioned Ezra about his methods without ever seeming to resent losing his money to deception. With characteristic serenity, Josiah Sanchez had accepted Ezra from the beginning, expecting nothing from him and holding nothing against him.

Then there was Chris Larabee. And Mary Travis.

Ezra stepped off the boardwalk, using the moonlight and the waning glow of the street fires to light his way to the hotel. Passing the boarding house where Larabee had rooms, he glanced up, but the windows on the second floor were dark.

Chris was out of town ... riding with Vin and Buck, on the trail of three men who'd tried to rob the Four Corners Bank. The holdup had been foiled, but in the fray that had erupted when the town's seven protectors attempted to apprehend the robbers, Mrs. Travis had been grazed by a stray bullet. Mary hadn't been seriously hurt, but Ezra had had no way of knowing that when he saw her go down. Abandoning his cover inside the door of the mercantile, he'd raced across the street to vault a hitching rail and fling himself across her body. Larabee, of the same mind, almost collided with him, and they'd agreed wordlessly on a plan ... Larabee had holstered his Peacemaker and swept the woman into his arms, carrying her to safety behind the shield of Ezra's blazing Remington.

It had been a reinforcement of the unexpected bond between the two men, a bond unheralded by the shaky beginnings of their association. After the fight at the Seminole village, Chris had sternly charged Ezra to never run out on him again. The touch of the gambler's finger to his hatbrim had been taken at face value by the leader of the seven. Stunned at such trust, qualified though it was, from a man so otherwise embittered to the world, Ezra had held to that promise as he had to no other. And over time, another bond had arisen between the gunfighter and the gambler, neither referred to nor acknowledged, but powerful enough to override their individual differences ... their unspoken covenant that nothing in Four Corners was more important than the lives of Mary Travis.
and her son.

No rivalry of the heart lay between the two men. Ezra did not begrudge Larabee the happiness he saw growing between Chris and Mary. He knew that Chris cared for the widow and her son because they represented all that he had lost and hoped to have again someday, while to Ezra they were a symbol of all he longed for but never expected to be his. The gambler had looked on with wistful gratification as the two wounded people had begun to heal each other and grow close. Ezra understood ghosts; watching those that tormented Chris and Mary slowly lose their hold on the couple and fade into the past where they belonged had, in some odd fashion, helped Ezra to exorcise a few of his own melancholy shades.

A mesquite branch popped in the embers of a dying street fire, interrupting his reverie. Ezra shook his head to clear it. The damned full moon....

Maude was right. He was being foolish, buying that rundown saloon, trying to make a dream come true. Four Corners wasn't his home ... Ezra Standish had never had a home, and likely never would.

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It don't make no difference
Escape one last time
It's easier to believe
In this sweet madness
All this glorious sadness
It brings me to my knees

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The hotel lobby was dark, and the threadbare carpet hushed Ezra's footfalls as he mounted the stairs. Silently he walked down the hall, pulled his key from his watch pocket and turned it in the keyhole. With a soft click, the door swung open and he stepped into the dark and stuffy room. Moving without hesitation in the dark, Ezra went to the window and opened it, letting in the evening breeze, before lighting the oil lamp on his dresser and turning the wick down low. Soft light reflected in the old mirror lit the room with a muted glow.

Ezra removed his hat and jacket and hung them on the wooden butler next to the dresser. Then his guns ... the belt around his hips and the shoulder holster were unbuckled and laid carefully on the bedspread. He loosened the buckles on his forearm and slid the Derringer rig over his hand, laying it on the dresser, then shed his tie, vest and shirt. Ezra looked reflectively at the red marks that the buckles always left on his skin, even beneath the cloth, and remembered when he'd first acquired the sleeve rig. It had been a prize won in a poker game that had gone his way one long night in Natchez-Under-the-Hill. Since then, the small double-barreled pistol had often been his back-up luck when chance and skill had failed him ... when he removed it, he felt like an amputee who could still sense a lost limb attached to his body.

Ezra stripped the rest of his clothes off and folded them neatly on the seat of the butler, except for the vest, which joined his guns on the bed. Pouring water from the ceramic pitcher into the basin on his dresser, he soaped a soft towel and washed himself, the cool breeze from the open window raising small goosebumps on his damp skin. Cleansed and still naked, Ezra sat wearily on the bed next to his guns, reached for his vest, and removed the thick fold of the night's winnings from the inside pocket. In the dim lamplight he counted out the greenbacks. A satisfied smile tugged at his mouth when he unfolded the century note, a rare sight in these parts ... although he had often won into three figures before, it had been a while since Ezra had seen a single bill worth that much.
Pulling his Remington from its holster, he rotated the cylinder to the chamber that all experienced
gunmen kept empty beneath the hammer to avoid accidental misfirings. A hint of green was
visible, even in the dim light. Ezra carefully worried his "getaway money" from its hiding place. It
had always been a point of pride to carry a more worthy bill than the traditional twenty that many
gamblers, drovers, and other drifters often kept there, but it had been a while since Ezra had been
able to indulge that personal standard. Twisting the hundred into a tight roll, he slipped it into the
empty chamber and snapped the cylinder back into place.

'Getaway money.' Maybe a getaway is what I need, after all. Even without another win, there was
enough to get him to San Francisco, and a new start. His promise to Chris Larabee and the rest of
the seven tugged at Ezra's conscience. Well, it won't be the first time I've broken my word, he
mused regretfully. They'll think I left because I don't care ... rather ironic to consider that it's
because I'm beginning to care entirely too much.

Leaving the larger bills on the bed to be stowed safely with the rest of his savings, Ezra made a
tidy fold of smaller denominations and reached for his vest again to slip his working money back
into the inner pocket. He stopped in surprise as his fingertips touched stiff paper, then
remembered....

"Mr. Standish! Mr. Standish!"

He'd been sitting in a chair on the boardwalk in front of the hotel that morning, sipping his chicory
coffee, when young Billy Travis had called his name. The boy had climbed the boardwalk steps
one by one to stand in front of the gambler, breathless and excited. "Mr. Standish, these are for
you."

A slightly grubby hand offered four pieces of cardboard with the initials ES carefully, if
awkwardly, emblazoned on the backs in colored wax. Ezra turned them over and found he was
holding four aces.

"Remember when you taught me all those card tricks, Mr. Standish? You told me that the ones ...
the 'aces'," Billy pronounced the new word with pride, "were the most important cards. So I made
these for you. Now you'll always have them when you need them."

Ezra was without words.

"Billy!" Mrs. Travis, flushed and a bit breathless herself, caught up with her son and took his hand
in hers. "I told you never to cross the street without me!" She smiled apologetically at Ezra. "I'm
sorry if he's been bothering you, Mr. Standish."

"No bother at all, ma'am." The strange lump in Ezra's throat made speech difficult. He looked at
Billy and managed a smile. "Thank you, Master Travis. That was very thoughtful of you."

"You're welcome, Mr. Standish. Now you won't ever have to lose again."

Mary had looked curiously at the cards in Ezra's hand, and then at the gambler's face. Suddenly,
her blue eyes sparkled, and she smiled as if at a sweet secret unexpectedly revealed. "Good day,
Mr. Standish," she had said gently, before leading Billy away.

Now, in the silent darkness of his spare hotel room, Ezra Standish found himself holding enough
money to take him to San Francisco in one hand, and four hand-made aces in the other. Fortune
had often confronted him with strange choices, but few stranger than this one. After a moment, he
tucked both the money, and the cards, in his vest pocket.

Maybe he'd stay here after all. Four Corners needed its angels, dark angels though they were, and
he'd earned the right to ride with them.

And maybe the boy was right ... maybe he wouldn't have to lose again.

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In the arms of the angel
Fly away from here
From this dark, cold hotel room
And the endlessness that you fear
You are pulled from the wreckage
Of your silent reverie
In the arms of the angel
May you find some comfort here
You're in the arms of the angel
May you find some comfort here.

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