Solitaire

by GreenWoman

Summary

Be good, and you will be lonesome.

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

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"Back toward the turn of the century, you know, Mark Twain took a trip around the world on a steamship and he wrote a book called 'Following the Equator.' And the opening page has a dedication that says, 'Be good, and you will be lonesome'." ~ Jimmy Buffett

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Now in the far off regions the foreign legion
Keeps the thieves and the predators at bay
While closer to home some bad boys still roam
The streets aren't safe so give it one more day
One more day
One more day

Be good and you will be lonesome
Be lonesome and you will be free
Live a lie and you will live to regret it
That's what living is to me
That's what living is to me

THAT'S WHAT LIVING IS TO ME ~ Jimmy Buffett

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Ezra leaned back in the chair, basking in the sunshine, and carefully shuffled the deck of cards. Although his right arm was healing and the dexterity was finally returning to his fingers, he still lacked his normal grace in manipulating the deck. Concentrating, he slowly dealt out a round of solitaire on the tabletop and squinted as the sun reflected off the white faces of the numbered squares of cardboard. He peeled three cards off the pile of remainders, turned them over, and considered his options.

His options ... Ezra Standish had more to consider than a mere choice of which cards to play. Such as wondering if perhaps the time had come for him to find another game, in another town.

The sound of boots on the wooden stairway leading to Nathan's balcony drew his eyes up, and he nodded at his visitor.

"Black three on red four."

"Thank you, Mr. Dunne." Ezra sighed; he'd been unable to play a single uninterrupted game of solitaire during his recuperation. "How is Miss Wells?"

"She's fine. Here ... Mrs. Potter sent up some of that coffee you like. How're you doin'?"

"Fine. Please offer my thanks to Mrs. Potter."

"I will. See ya later."

"Good day, Mr. Dunne."

JD headed back down the stairs, and Ezra returned to his game. He played the three on the four, uncovered a red six and placed it on a black seven, and dealt out three more cards. The door behind him swung open on creaky hinges.

"You put that red nine on that black ten and you got yourself an ace, Ezra."

"I see that."

"I got to go down and see to Casey. Don't you be gettin' no ideas about goin' nowhere."

"Of course not." Ezra sighed. This was the first time that Nathan had allowed him to come out onto the balcony and sit in the sunshine, and Ezra did not intend to jeopardize his parole.

"Okay. I'll be back soon. Black five on red six."

"Indeed. Be on your way, Mr. Jackson."

Nathan clapped a hand on the gambler's shoulder and headed off down the stairs.

Ezra played the five on the six, turned over three more cards, and found himself without a move. He closed his eyes and leaned back in the sun, enjoying the heat soaking into his injured arm, and let his thoughts drift back over the events of the past two weeks.

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The man in the black suit who strolled into the saloon that lazy weekday afternoon drew Ezra's immediate attention. The stranger went straight to the card table in the back corner, took the chair facing the door and scanned the room. It was Ezra's usual place, and the younger gambler didn't like the fact that this man had helped himself to the position of advantage. He was also annoyed
by the man's carriage, by his easy manner and condescending tone as he accepted Ezra's invitation to a game. His attitude was a clear indication that the stranger was used to winning. But Ezra, who occasionally worried that his time in Four Corners had made him soft and dulled his skills, welcomed a challenge.

It went well for him, at least at the beginning. The first two hands fell to Ezra, without his having to use artifice. The man was good, but arrogant and drinking too much, while Ezra played with his usual focus. His opponent did not seem unduly disturbed by his losses at first, but when the fifth round brought the pot again to Ezra's side of the table, irritation began to show in the stranger's gray eyes. Ezra noticed the change in attitude and kept an eye on the man's body language as well as tracking the cards. The other player's attention was fully on the game now, and the contest changed from an idle afternoon's encounter to a duel. Standish did not intend to lose, and began to use some of his old tricks to stay ahead. But as he dealt a new hand, the prickling at the back of his neck made him begin to think it might have been wiser to fold and leave the saloon.

In the end, the stranger made the choice for him. "Fold." His voice was bitter, but Ezra nodded as if he had not noticed.

"Thank you, sir, for a stimulating competition," he said cordially as he reached for the coins resting on the green baize. His eyes on his winnings, Ezra relaxed his guard for a moment, and the stranger did not miss the young man's momentary distraction; in an eyelink he'd shoved his chair back and drawn his gun.

Ezra moved instinctively and his Derringer leapt into his hand in a mirror image of the other's draw. The shots sounded as a single clap of thunder, and gunsmoke clouded the air above the table.

Close, thought Ezra, but he'd escaped being hit. He stood and peered through the haze, gun still in hand, studying the still form on the barroom floor. Experience had long ago taught him that a man down was not necessarily a man out, and the body on the floor could still be a danger.

"Madre de Dios."

He heard Inez' strained voice, heard Larabee's shocked exclamation and the hasty scuffle of boots on the hardwood planks behind him, but Ezra did not lift his eyes as he circled the table and nudged the black-clad corpse with the toe of his boot. It wasn't until he was certain that the man was dead that he looked up and followed Inez' horrified gaze. Suddenly, the Derringer was too heavy to hold; Ezra's arm dropped limply to his side, and the little gun clattered to the plank floor. "Dear Lord," he whispered.

Chris Larabee knelt just inside the batwing doors, holding Mary Travis in his arms. Nathan was reaching for her face, and Ezra's heart froze at the sight of the blood that streaked her pale cheek. Larabee looked up at him, and his eyes were ablaze with fear and anger. "You bastard," he said.

"I never--"

Suddenly Vin was standing before him, and the fury in the man's face caused Ezra to step backward; he tripped over the outstretched arm of the man he'd just killed, stumbled and would have fallen if Josiah hadn't come out of nowhere to grab him. Suddenly dizzy, Ezra leaned heavily on the preacher's supporting arms. "Nathan?" His voice was thick with fear.

"Don't know," muttered the healer. Mary made a small sound of pain at Nathan's touch, and Ezra flinched.
"Damn you, Standish." Larabee's voice held desperate worry, and a fury barely controlled. And then he said the words that stunned the already reeling gambler. Words that Ezra had long expected, yet had come to hope that he'd never hear. But the finality in Chris' tone was absolute.

"Damn you ... get the hell out of here."

And so he did.

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The next morning dawned chilly, damp and dreary. Ezra stirred stiffly on the boardwalk bench. He'd spent the night there, lost in the shadows and his own thoughts, waiting for someone to come down the stairs that led to Nathan's room. Waiting for news.

It came with the healer himself. His tread on the steps was heavy, betraying his weariness, and he rubbed his eyes with his hands. Ezra reached out and took him by the arm and Nathan started at the touch, then frowned. But he could see the question in the gambler's green eyes and answered it before it could be voiced.

"We're lucky ... bullet hit the doorframe and sent some splinters into her. Cut her up pretty bad, but she'll be okay. No thanks to you."

"Thank god," Ezra said shakily, dropping his head. His mind had seized the words "we're lucky" and held onto them; it was a moment before he comprehended the rest. Ezra looked up again and the healer was stunned when he met the gambler's eyes; there was more emotion there than Nathan had ever seen. "Surely you don't mean to imply--"

"I ain't implyin' nothin'," snapped Nathan, too angry to care about what Ezra's expression revealed. "I'm tellin' you straight out ... I'm layin' this at your door. And so is Chris."

"I didn't shoot her, Nathan." The gambler's voice was suddenly flat, devoid of feeling, his face cold and impassive.

"Weren't for you pissin' that man off with your fancy dealin', wouldn't have been no gunfight. And Mrs. Travis wouldn't have got hurt."

It took a moment for Ezra to find his voice and ask what he suddenly, desperately needed to know. "Does she blame me for this, too?" he whispered.

"She's too much of a lady to say that," said Nathan. He turned away from Ezra, dismissing him as if he were no longer there. The gambler slumped back against the rough wooden clapboards of the wall behind him. The world disappeared, and he barely heard the healer's voice when Nathan spoke again.

"Hey, Vin," Jackson said wearily.

"Nathan. How is she?"

"Okay ... she'll be okay." Ezra heard the soft sigh of the tracker's relief. "Got a favor to ask of you," Nathan continued. "Wire the Judge for me? Tell him to keep Billy there for another week. The boy was due in on the stage on Tuesday, but he don't need to see his momma like this, and she ain't able to care for him just now."

"Will do. Can I see her and Chris later?"

"Sure. I'm gonna go get some breakfast. If you could spell Chris sittin' with her, I'd be grateful.
We've been up all night."

"You got it."

Vin started for the telegraph office, and Nathan for the hotel. They brushed past Ezra without a word, as if the man in the red coat were invisible. A long, shuddering sigh whispered between the gambler's lips; shakily, he pushed away from the wall and headed for his room over the saloon. He had some packing to do.

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It was a long, solitary ride west out of town, and that suited Ezra Standish just fine. The bright Indian summer sun offered a welcome heat after the evening's frost. The warmth soaked into the red of his jacket, but did not touch his heart.

He'd paused for a moment where the road reached the top of the hills surrounding Four Corners, offering to those leaving it their last view of the town. Ezra felt his heart tighten. How many times in the last year since Orrin Travis and Chris Larabee had changed his life had Ezra crossed this rise and looked down at Four Corners with the word "home" in his thoughts? He didn't know; he couldn't recall when he'd begun to associate that term with the small crossroads. But Ezra knew he'd never forget this moment, when that association was severed forever. He turned his back and continued on into exile.

A few miles further down the road Ezra turned onto the track that led to Nettie Wells' ranch, thinking to water Chance and fill his canteen before he undertook the long dry ride to Eagle Bend. His first thought upon spotting the ten horses and two pack mules tied to Nettie Wells' fence was bad luck. Ezra didn't recognize the stock, which meant the visitors were strangers not only to him, but probably to Nettie as well. As he drew closer and was able to study the rigs on the hard-ridden animals, his eyes narrowed; the riders had been on the trail a long time, and they expected trouble on the way and when they reached their destination. Men paying a social call usually left their rifles in their saddle scabbards. Every long leather pocket tied to these saddles was empty.

Ezra's gut tightened. Something was wrong here ... very wrong. If he rode in, he'd be in the middle of it. But Nettie and Casey Wells were already in the middle of it. And then a scream from inside the farmhouse, high and angry and laced with fear, erased what small spark of indecision might have held him back. Casey Wells. Ezra felt his heart jump ... nothing for it now but to ride in and find out what was happening. And hopefully, put an end to it. Although the odds didn't seem to be in his favor.

Dammit, Ezra ... why the hell do things like this keep happening to you? he asked himself as he rode up to the fence and dismounted.

His horse exchanged greetings with the others as Ezra walked through the gate and into the yard. Surreptitiously he checked his armory; shoulder rig with the Colt Richards conversion, Derringer up his sleeve, knife in his boot, and his big Remington sitting comfortably on his hip. But Ezra had a feeling that they would do him little good against odds of ten to one.

Good thing I'm smarter than I look ... I can at least count upon the advantage of surprise, he thought wryly as he walked up to the porch.

The burly fellow standing on the weathered boards of Nettie's front porch leveled a shiny new Winchester at Ezra's chest. "Your business, stranger?" he growled.

"Just stopping to water my horse, friend," said Ezra easily, holding his hands at his hips, close to his gunbelt but with palms forward in a gesture of "no harm." Casey screamed again and Ezra
heard Nettie's voice, angry but faint. It took all his will to hold his poker face. "Am I interrupting a party?" he asked, a nod of his head indicating the front door behind his interrogator. The man laughed humorlessly.

"Yeah. A party. A private party."

Another cry from inside. "NO! Nooo...."

Ezra rested his hand lightly on his Remington. "But I brought my invitation," he said, eyes glittering.

The man on the porch hesitated, then called over his shoulder. "Hey, Cantreau! Got a feller out here who wants to join us. Sez he's 'invited.'" The last word was delivered with a sneer.

The door opened, and Ezra sucked in his breath.

"Well, well. Jameson Cantreau. How small this world does seem."

Ezra faced a tall man, heavily built, gray-haired and dressed in an open white shirt and expensive but badly tailored pants with suspenders down and hanging to his knees. He slipped his thumbs into the waistband of his pants and regarded with interest the slight young gambler standing in the yard. "Ezra Standish. You ain't dead yet?"

"Not for lack of effort on the part of the gods of chance, sir," replied Ezra. "I see you have not yet boated across the Styx either."

Cantreau rolled his eyes. "Jeezus, Standish, I always hated it when you talked like that. What the hell are you doing here? I heard you were riding with the law in that pissant town down the road. Couldn't believe it, though. Who'd put a rattlesnake in their back pocket on purpose?"

Ezra thought fast, and suddenly decided that the misfortune of his dismissal by Chris Larabee might have a silver lining after all.

"Actually, it was true. I had a choice ... throw other miscreants in jail, or take up residence there myself. Naturally, I decided that maintaining my own freedom transcended the institution of honor among thieves." His eyes noticed the posture of the rifleman, who'd relaxed when he realized his boss knew this fancy-dressed interloper, but tensed up again when it seemed that Ezra might represent the law.

Cantreau's manner changed subtly too. "How the mighty have fallen," he said carefully. "Your mother know about this new line of work? She must be mighty disappointed in you."

"She was, but no longer. As of this morning, I am once again free to wander from one side of the law to the other without conscience."

"Talk straight, Standish."

Ezra sighed patiently. "I had a difference of opinion with the gentleman who fancies himself the leader of the ragtag group of lawmen in that town. I have taken my leave of him, of the position, and of the village."

A roar of laughter burst from the big man on the porch. "That's the Ezra I used to know! So what brings you here?"

"Just stopping to water my horse. And you?"
"Same thing. But we got a little spitfire here who's giving us something to play with before we get on with our business."

"Which is?"

"Something you might be able to help with, actually." Cantreau gestured Ezra to join him on the porch. "We're looking for your ex-associates, Larabee and his friends. Got a contract on him, and a wanted man who rides with him. On you, too ... but that could change. Come on in."

Ezra steeled himself, mounted the porch steps and walked through the door. Once inside, it was all he could do to keep himself collected and not betray his improvised charade.

Casey sat on Nettie Wells' mother's chair, held there by two men. Her flannel shirt had been torn open, exposing her camisole and the swell of her young breasts. Ezra was thankful to see that her dungarees were still in place, but he could see that she had been severely beaten. She was crying, but softly, and appeared dazed. Tied to another chair, blood seeping from a purple bruise on her right cheek, was Nettie. "Standish," the old woman said, hope in her eyes ... a hope that faded as Ezra turned his back on her and nodded at Casey.

"A bit young for you, isn't she, Cantreau?" he said, smiling.

"Never too young for me, Ezra," Cantreau laughed, walking over to the girl and lifting her bruised chin in his rough hand. He trailed his callused fingers back to her ear and down her neck, then gathered the tattered remnants of her blouse in his fist and jerked down roughly, tearing the material and exposing her shoulder and upper breast. Casey gasped and turned away, trembling. She choked back a sob as his fingers stroked her collarbone. "Want to get in line?" the man asked in a husky voice, his eyes riveted on the young girl's body.

Ezra tried to master his disgust and anger, and thought fast. "No thanks," he said. "I've already been shot at this morning, and I'd like to move on before it happens again."

Cantreau looked up, his attention once again on Ezra. "Meanin'?"

"Meaning that my six former compatriots are not far behind me, and I have no wish to dally and allow them to close the distance between their pistols and my back." Ezra touched his finger to his hatbrim, and turned as if to leave. "Have fun with your ... toy ... and give the boys my regards when they arrive. If you have the chance."

He took a step toward the door, hoping the bait had been taken. It had.

"Hell, there's only six of 'em, right?" The voice was confident, but there was an unease beneath the bluster.

Ezra smiled to himself, and looked back over his shoulder. "Six, yes. But haven't you wondered why your contractor hired ten of you to take care of this job? I know you, Cantreau. You don't come cheap ... and neither do these fellows, I'll wager. No one spends money like that unless they feel it's necessary. Chris Larabee alone would make it so ... and Vin Tanner and the rest only augment the threat. I'd say the odds are more even than they appear. If I were you...." He shrugged. "But then, I don't have the time to discuss it. Good luck, my friend." He took another step toward the door.

"Wait," said Cantreau. He gave Ezra a piercing look, a test that Ezra appeared to pass. "Bring the girl," he snapped to one of his men. "We're leaving. We can continue our little party after we make camp at the Keyhole."

"But boss--"
"Do it!" the big man snapped, buttoning his shirt and pulling his suspenders into place. "If Standish is worried, we should think twice. Put her on one of the mules, and lets ride. Ezra," he said, turning his attention back to the gambler, "you interested in joining this little party? We're getting a dollar a day, the bounty on Tanner, and a bonus on Larabee. Dead or alive."

"Who's hired you?" asked Ezra.

"We can talk about that later. You in?" Cantreau asked again.

Ezra nodded. "Decent money. Sure, I'm in."

"Come on then." He strapped on his gunbelt. "I'll fill you in while we ride." Cantreau drew his pistol, checked the chambers, and lifted the barrel in the direction of Nettie Wells. The old woman glared at him defiantly.

"I wouldn't," said Ezra.

Cantreau frowned at the gambler. "Standish, you ain't still soft on women, are you? It's why I threw you outta my gang. That girl in Bridgeville...."

"What you mistook for my 'gallantry' in Bridgeville was merely my attempt to save us all from your shortsightedness," said Ezra. "If you recall, we rode hard for three days after you killed her, and her husband and his friends still caught up with us and took out two of our associates. And you're about to make a similar mistake now." He nodded toward Casey. "The young lady here is the sweetheart of the sheriff of Four Corners. Her aunt is a close friend of the six men who guard the town. My suggestion would be to use the girl to lure Larabee, Tanner and their friends into a position of your own choosing, and leave the old woman here to deliver that message."

Flinty eyes fixed on Ezra, and the gambler knew he was once again being assessed carefully. The older man finally nodded. "You're smart, Standish," he said, lowering his gun. "But she knows where we're makin' camp ... I don't much like that."

"We outnumber them by five ... and we have a hostage." Ezra smiled easily, and walked over to Nettie. Casually, he pulled his knife from his boot and sliced the ropes that bound the old woman to the chair. "Tell Mr. Dunne that if he wants to see his lady friend again, he'll meet up with us at noon tomorrow at the watering hole a mile south of the Keyhole. We'll exchange her for Larabee and Tanner. Tell them to leave the others behind."

Nettie searched Ezra's face for a sign that there was something more to his words, something that promised Casey's safety and a card up his sleeve, but the gambler remained inscrutable. For his hastily devised plan to work, Ezra knew that everyone, including Nettie Wells, must believe that he was truly divorced from his companions. It pained him to realize that no one was likely to doubt it; an assumption reinforced when Nettie lived up to Ezra's bleak expectations.

"Well, fancy man," she snapped, rubbing her wrists, "I thought I'd misjudged you. Guess my first impression was right, after all."

Ezra smiled grimly. "Inform Mr. Larabee that he and I shall settle our personal differences tomorrow at the watering hole."

The old woman turned away from him, struggling to her feet as she saw her niece being dragged toward the door of the small cabin. "Casey," she whispered, and there was a pleading note in her voice. Ezra pushed her roughly back into her chair.

"Miss Wells' safety depends upon Mr. Dunne and his associates and their compliance with our
request," he said coldly. "Take care that you make that clear to Mr. Larabee and Mr. Tanner as well."

"You'd best remember that your own life depends on the same thing, fancy man," she spat at him.

Ezra laughed lightly. "Good day," he said. He tipped his hat and followed Cantreau out the door, his heart tight with fear, his mind racing.

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"Buck, ain't there anything we can do?" asked JD, looking with hopeful eyes across the barroom table at the big man who he still thought could solve almost any problem. "Chris didn't really mean what he said, did he?"

"He sound like he was kidding, boy?" said Nathan coldly.

"It wasn't Ezra's fault," JD said, his voice tight with conviction. "It ain't fair for Chris to send him away."

Buck laid a hand on JD's arm and squeezed it. "Chris sets a lot of store in Mrs. Travis, JD," he said. "Scared him to death to see her hurt. Brought some real bad memories to mind. For me, too," he added softly, toying with his beer glass.

"But it wasn't Ezra's fault!" JD said again.

"Give 'em some time, kid. It may blow over."

"It ain't gonna blow over, Buck," said JD unhappily. "Ezra rode out this mornin'. I tried to talk to him, but he just tipped his hat at me and rode away. He smiled, but he wasn't really smilin'. I don't think he wanted to leave." He turned to look at Josiah. "Josiah, Chris'll listen to you, won't he?"

"Doubt it, son," said the preacher sadly. "He might listen to Vin."

"Vin's damn near as mad as Chris is," said Nathan.

"So are you," said JD. "And it ain't right, Nathan. None of you are bein' fair!" The boy sprang to his feet and grabbed his hat, jamming it over his unruly hair with a fierce determination. "I'm gonna go talk to Chris myself!" He took a step toward the door, but Buck's big hand grabbed the tail of his coat and yanked him back.

"Let it be," he said sadly.

"But Buck...."

With the toe of his boot, Buck pulled JD's chair out from the table; a firm tug abruptly sat the boy back down. "Let it be, JD," he said again. "You can't fix this one. Don't seem like nobody can. I've seen Chris like this before." A shadow of sorrowful memory passed behind his blue eyes.

Suddenly deflated, JD put both elbows on the table and dropped his chin into his hands. "It just ain't fair," he repeated sadly. "All the times Ezra's come through for us ... he don't deserve this."

Josiah Sanchez looked at the mournful youth and sighed to himself. In his mind's eye he could see all too clearly another young man, as clever and hardened and guarded as JD was not, yet equally in need of the home and family that the seven provided. Josiah did not wish to see their numbers reduced to six. He drained his beer, got to his feet, and went looking for Vin Tanner.
While not superstitious, Ezra did believe in luck. It was the primary underpinning to the philosophy of his lifestyle. Luck was like the weather; it could not be influenced, but one could not afford to ignore its existence. Bad luck was only the absence of good fortune, an optimist might say, but Ezra was not by nature an optimist. He had long believed that if one expected the worst, one was always prepared; and if the best should on occasion manifest itself, one could then enjoy the pleasant surprise.

So far on this excursion, his luck had held. The ride to the Keyhole had been uneventful. He'd engaged Cantreau in conversation and learned, not surprisingly, that the contract on the seven lawmen had been taken out by the Cattlemen's Association. He also knew that Cantreau had plans to collect twice on Vin Tanner, not only from Stewart James but on the Tascosa warrant as well.

Good luck could be accepted and appreciated and have no further thought given to it; Ezra's full attention was riveted on how to deal with the bad that he knew was coming. He shot a surreptitious look at Casey Wells, who had been tied to one of the pack mules and left unmolested for the ride to the Keyhole. She rode slumped over, her head hung down, silent and oblivious. A fiery red sunburn blistered her left shoulder where Cantreau had torn her shirt from her neck to her elbow and left her fair skin exposed. Ezra knew that Casey's reprieve would certainly end once the group had arrived at the Keyhole and made camp. He was at a loss as to how to keep her from suffering at the hands of her abductors without getting her, and himself, killed. And he had other problems as well.

Standish had no reason to believe that anyone was out looking for him with intent other than finding Casey and taking vengeance upon the gambler for what surely must appear to be his participation in her abduction and torment. Once Nettie Wells made it into town and told her story, Ezra feared that even JD, who he might have hoped would retain some faith in his character, would assume the worst of him. It was only a matter of time before the six gunmen who had once been his colleagues would show up with guns drawn and tempers high. And Ezra would be just as much a target as the men he now rode with.

And there were worse things to contemplate. A lance of pure pain shot through the gambler's heart at the thought that Mary Travis, a woman who he deeply admired, albeit in secrecy, now thought the worst of him. As would her son Billy, who had come close to being orphaned by the series of events his actions had set in motion. It hurt more than he could bear.

Ezra was little pleased with his good luck, and obsessed with the bad. He considered his situation and his options and decided that the best he could hope for was to try to keep Casey safe, somehow bring ruin to Cantreau's plans and, if he was lucky, catch a bullet in his wounded heart before it was all over.

Vin Tanner's mood at that moment was equally bitter.

Had it been up to him, he'd never have been on this fool's errand in the first place. Tanner had never much cared for Ezra Standish. He hadn't been impressed with the southerner at their first meeting, and Ezra had doggedly reinforced Vin's low opinion since then; the desertion at the Seminole village, the business with Guy Royale and Nettie Wells, the incident with Chanu, and a dozen other missteps had created a track that led to suspicion and mistrust in Vin's eyes. Then things had gotten personal. Vin still burned with embarrassment when he thought of how Ezra had treated him when he'd gone to the southerner for help with his poem.

Embarrassment was overwhelmed with anger, now that Ezra had put the two people Vin most
loved in the world in jeopardy. Chris Larabee had become a brother to Vin. And Vin loved Mary Travis too ... not only for the woman that she was and for the friend that she had become to him, but because of what she had come to mean to Chris Larabee. Fear had gripped Vin's heart when he saw the agony in Chris Larabee's eyes as the gunfighter crouched on the saloon floor cradling Mary in his arms. It was a gut-wrenching fear that fed violent anger of a depth that the tracker hadn't felt for years. He'd been ready to kill Standish right then, and only the look of warning from Josiah Sanchez as he held the faltering southerner had caused Vin to back off.

Still, Vin had refused Josiah when the preacher had sought him out and asked him to find Standish and bring the gambler back to Four Corners. He'd refused Inez Roscios as well, when she'd come to him with tearful, pleading eyes and asked the same thing. He'd even turned down JD Dunne, even though there was almost nothing that Vin could deny the boy. Vin would have been content to let Ezra ride off to hell, alone and un lamented, but for the plea of the one person in Vin's life that he could refuse nothing.

He didn't know who'd told her what had happened, but it really didn't matter. Mary Travis asked him to find Ezra Standish and bring him back to Four Corners. And regardless of how Vin Tanner felt about that request, he would have followed Ezra into hell to fulfill it. However, he told himself, if Ezra happened to get a bit roughed up on the way home, well ... he'd never promised anyone that he wouldn't let the gambler know how he felt about what had happened.

Vin followed Standish out of town, down the road that JD said the man had taken. Being in no hurry, he decided to take a small detour and visit Nettie Wells. Vin never missed a chance to stop by the old woman's place and check up on anything she might need doing. He figured to water his horse, get a cup of coffee and a biscuit or two or a piece of pie, and have a few quiet words with her to settle his mood before he continued on his journey. He was more than a little angry when the track that led to the Wells ranch told him that Ezra had come this way too. That man had nerve going to Nettie for help along the road, when she wouldn't even have her ranch if Vin hadn't forced the gambler to loan her the money to ransom the mortgage from Guy Royale.

Vin's anger turned to concern when he reined Peso up at Nettie Wells' gate and read the rest of the tale that the ground had to tell. Several shod horses and a couple of pack animals had been tied to the fence. The hair on the back of his neck stood up. There was nothing in the tracks that said "trouble" aloud, but the autumn breeze whispered it into Vin's heart. Quickly he swung down off Peso, drew his mare's leg, and headed for the house.

"Nettie! Nettie Wells! Casey!"

Nettie met him at the door, her Spencer in her hand, a bandage around her head, and anguish in her eyes. "Vin Tanner," she whispered, and let the gun fall to her side. The young man took the stairs in two long strides and crossed the porch in a third, holstered his gun and took her shoulders in his hands. She allowed it, leaning against him, and that show of dependency scared Vin to death. Gently, he turned the old woman around and steered her inside. Once she was seated at her kitchen table, Vin pumped some water, grabbed a clean towel, and began to see to her head wound.

"Now, Miss Nettie, tell me what happened here," he demanded softly.

Nettie did, and when she was done, Vin was cold fury in a buckskin jacket. He went out to the barn and hitched Nettie's team to her buckboard, helped the old woman up, and sent her on her way to town with a message for the men he rode with. He watered Peso and fed him two dried apples from Nettie's root cellar, and stuffed a few more, along with some hardtack, into his saddlebags. He watered the stock, fed the chickens, and shut up the house.

Then he swung up on Peso and rode off in the direction that Nettie Wells had pointed out. And he
swore that before night fell, Ezra Standish would wish he'd never set foot in Four Corners.

"Mr. Larabee, you can't seriously believe--"

"You questionin' Nettie Wells?"

Larabee's voice was flat, his jaw clenched, and his hands moved quickly from cinch to stirrup to scabbard with harsh economy. Behind him, four other men readied their horses and tried to listen to the conversation without appearing to. It became easier as the argument escalated and voices and tempers rose.

"No ... but there must be some misunderstanding. I can't believe that Mr. Standish would do such a thing."

Chris swung his head to glare at Mary across the saddle seat, and she inadvertently took a step back. He saw, and made a visible effort to control his anger. "Nathan told you to stay home and rest for a few days, didn't he?" he said firmly.

Mary unconsciously lifted a hand to the bandage that circled the crown of her head. "You're still angry at him over this, aren't you? It wasn't his fault ... and you had no right to tell him to leave."

She was becoming as angry as he was.

"I had every right."

"Why?"

"It wouldn't have happened if--"

"How dare you." The calm tone cut him off as effectively as if she had slapped him. "It might not have happened, if he hadn't been involved in a poker game. And if I hadn't chosen that moment to walk past the saloon door. But if you'd like to play at 'what if,' Mr. Larabee, we can. 'What if' Ezra hadn't been there to help get you out of that prison camp? 'What if' he hadn't been there to help you get me out of Wickestown? 'What if'--"

"'Ezra'? What happened to 'Mr. Standish'?" It was another mistake, and Chris knew it the minute he said it.

"What happened to Mr. Standish, indeed, Mr. Larabee?" she answered coldly, ignoring his implication. "That's exactly what I expect you to find out. Find him, and bring him back here, so he can explain it to us both."

The Keyhole was a narrow cleft in the bluffs that led to a small box canyon fed by an artesian spring. It was a well-known landmark locally and a favorite camping spot, particularly with those on the run; while too small to provide security for a party the size of Jameson Cantreau's, its water source and defensibility provided by the arching cliffs that flanked it still made it an attractive place to make camp. Less than a mile distant, the underground river that filled the spring returned to ground level and fed a small pond surrounded by sheltering cottonwoods. The watering hole would be the rendezvous point, the place of exchange where Casey's life would be bartered for those of Chris Larabee and Vin Tanner.

At least, that had been Ezra's hastily devised plan. He'd pulled off the beginning, and he knew the end he desired. But the devil was in the details ... details which he had yet to devise. And his time
for coming up with those details was growing short.

Cantreau reined his horse up and looked around him, assessing the lay of the land with the practiced eye of a man who'd needed the security of such a spot many times before. "Good choice, Standish. I've heard about this place, but never been here." He raised his voice and began issuing commands to his gang. "Make camp, boys. I want to keep a couple of horses saddled for patrol. The old woman may tell 'em where we are," he glanced at Ezra and frowned, "but I don't think they'll be botherin' us as long as we have the girl."

The man leading the packhorse carrying Casey drew closer. "What you want done with her, Cantreau?" he asked, indicating the semi-conscious girl with a jerk of his head. "She ain't gonna be no fun now."

Cantreau looked at the teenager slumped over the mule's withers. Her hair hung limply from her bowed head, dirty and damp with sweat. The blistered sunburn on her shoulder was weeping down her reddened arm. She seemed oblivious to anything going on around her.

"Why don't you let me see to her, Cantreau?" suggested Ezra.

"Why should I?" Blatant suspicion flared in the gang leader's eyes and Ezra, knowing he was at risk, thought fast.

"Because I've got a few things in my saddlebag that I 'liberated' from the town healer before I left," he said easily. "And because I'd rather do that than get my hands dirty setting up camp. You might recall that I never cared for that part of our adventures together." Ezra made a bit of a show of dusting off the sleeves of his red coat and hoped he hadn't overplayed his hand.

Cantreau burst out laughing. "Shit, Ezra, you never were much good on the trail. I 'member that time on the way to Yellow Springs, when you were pickin' up wood for the fire and damn near picked up a rattler that you thought was kindlin'! Shit, you jumped higher than a jackrabbit!"

Ezra grinned. "It was only professional courtesy that spared me from that snake."

Cantreau laughed even harder. "Jeez, Ezra, it really is good to have you around again. If nothin' else, you're good for a laugh. Take the girl ... put her on a bedroll near the horses, and see if you can get her cleaned up and some spunk back into her. She might yet be a bit o' fun for us." He looked over Ezra's shoulder at the men stringing up the remuda line. "Dammit, Pat, don't be puttin' them horses out in the open like that! I want 'em closer to the Keyhole. And keep yours saddled ... I want you, Whitehead and Hammett to ride out to that waterhole tonight and check it out, then report back to me." The gang leader looked at Ezra with narrowed eyes "Not that I don't trust you, Standish ... just can't be too careful these days."

Ezra breathed deeply, and turned back to the man holding the lead line for the mule Casey rode. "I'll take that, friend," he said, reaching out. The man shrugged and turned it over; Ezra clucked to his horse and headed for the end of the picket line furthest from the cliffs. With luck, if he held back a bit, his horse and the mule would be tied on the outside of the line, leaving them more accessible later that night, should an opportunity to flee arise. Ezra sincerely hoped it would. He was walking a fine line with Cantreau; in spite of the man's hearty laugh, he could see the suspicion in the gang leader's eyes. And it would have to be tonight if he was to make his break, before the rescuers that he was certain Nettie had set on their trail had a chance to arrive. Ezra had no illusions that he would be spared by the irate men who had once been his comrades in arms.

Ezra's luck held when it came to the horses, and his big gelding Chance and the pack mule were tied at the outside end of the remuda line. Ezra unsaddled his horse, dropped his rig on the ground and slipped his saddlebags over his shoulder, then turned to Casey. She seemed unaware of who
he was or even that he was there until he reached up to help her from the mule. At his touch, she cried out softly and shied away. He caught her chin in his hand and turned her eyes to him. "Casey darlin', it's Ezra," he whispered.

She blinked. "Ezra?"

He looked over his shoulder and cursed silently; Cantreau was watching him. "I'm sorry, girl, but appearances matter," he said, as he grabbed her arms and yanked her roughly from the mule. Casey cried out when he touched her burned arm, but she didn't struggle much as he dragged her to his saddle and forced her to the ground. She sat unmoving on his saddleblanket, listless again. Ezra stole another glance at Cantreau and saw that the outlaw's eyes were still trained on him. He nodded affably at the man and reached for his canteen; unscrewing the top, he drank deeply himself, then bent over and held it to Casey's blistered lips. She drank too fast and choked, and he took the water away and whispered softly to her.

"Stay with me, Casey," he murmured. "I promise I'll get you out of here and back to JD." Casey coughed and looked up at him, and Ezra winked at her, relieved to see her rally at the gesture. He lay the canteen aside, reached out and harshly tore the girl's blouse all the way to her waist, exposing the sunburn. Casey gasped but held still. Ezra rummaged in his saddlebags for the ointment that Nathan had once given him after his own fair skin had burned on a long ride. Scooping a generous amount on his fingertips, he roughly smeared it on Casey's burns. She flinched again but submitted to his rough handling, whimpering slightly. "Sorry, darlin' girl," Ezra whispered again, hating what he was being forced to do, but hating still more the thought of what might happen to her ... to both of them ... if he betrayed his concern for the teenager.

Finally, it was done. He wiped his hands on the tatters of Casey's shirt and reached for his bedroll, untied it, unfolded a blanket and pushed Casey down on it. Using the rope from the bedroll, he tied the girl's still-bound hands to the horn of his saddle. "Don't worry," he whispered to her, then he got up, turned his back on her, and walked toward the newly lit fire. A pot of beans was already laid out on the rock circling the pit.

"She's taken care of, Cantreau," he said as he joined the group of men sitting around the fire. "I'm afraid that she won't be of much value as entertainment." He shrugged. "But then, the bounty she'll bring y'all tomorrow will no doubt buy you some more enjoyable partners in Tascosa."

Cantreau nodded, but a sharp look reminded Ezra of his tenuous credibility. "You're right, Standish," he said. "We'll keep our minds on the bigger fish. Now, tell them fellows where to find that watering hole, then set down here and show me what you got in mind for tomorrow."

Ezra settled down on the log next to the gang leader, picked up a stick, and began to draw in the dust next to the fire.

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Vin Tanner shifted his body, trying to find a more comfortable meeting between his belly and the shale shingles that made up the crest of the low rise on which he sprawled. The sun was setting, and he knew that the moment when the evening glare would afford him the only advantage that one man against many could count on was coming soon. Vin rubbed the brass of his spyglass with dirt to dull the shine and lifted it to his eyes. The gang was settling in for the evening, but he noted that two horses remained saddled and ready, and gunbelts and rifles remained close at hand to the men below.

He'd also seen Ezra, whose red coat made him easy to pick out even without the telescopic glass. And what he'd seen had made his blood boil. He'd watched as the gambler manhandled young Casey Wells, tore her clothes, roughly tended to her sunburn, and then left her lying on the hard
ground, bound to his saddle. There was no doubt in Vin's mind that Ezra had gone back to his old ways. Never mind that Vin had never had a clear picture of what those old ways were; none of the men had shared many details about their pasts. But Nettie had said that the gang leader knew Standish, and now the gambler and the gang boss sat together by the fire, thick as thieves, as Ezra traced maps in the dirt with a stick and the other man nodded in agreement with whatever Standish was telling him.

Vin lowered the spyglass and looked back over his shoulder, gauging the sun's level. One against eight, counting Standish... bad odds. But there was no time to get the others, no time to warn them, and Vin would put his own life on the line for Casey without a second thought. Perhaps he could use the horses....

Vin pulled his Winchester and checked it over. These shots would have to count.

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The sun was directly in Ezra's eyes, and he'd just raised his hand to shade his vision when the first shot rang out, and all hell broke loose.

"What the hell...?"

"Jeezus!"

"Damn!"

Shots followed in staggered but steady progression, flying invisible out of the sun and finding their marks with deadly precision. One hit the rope holding the tethers of the remuda, slicing it cleanly and slamming into the ground next to Ezra's horse Chance. The gelding reared and sent his fellows into a panic of kicking and milling before they began to stampede through the camp.

"Get the horses!"

"Ugh...."

Next to Ezra, Cantreau slumped over, a bullet in his shoulder. The gambler had already scrambled to his feet. Casey was his only coherent thought, and he crawled on all fours toward the girl who huddled, trembling, on the blanket next to his bedroll. As he reached out for her he felt a tremendous blow to his right forearm. The Derringer was flung from his sleeve by the impact of a bullet slamming into the launch rig; the frame bent from the force, crushed into his arm, and Ezra grunted in pain. He wasn't sure if the sickening sound he heard was metal slamming into metal or the bones of his arm shattering, but all that mattered was that his right arm was now useless. He flung himself on top of Casey, protecting her as best he could with his body, while he fumbled with his left hand inside his coat for the Colt conversion secreted there.

He didn't know who was firing, and neither did he care... the whole world was his foe now. All Ezra cared about was that it was his best chance to get Casey out of this hellish situation, and he meant to take it. He rolled onto his back, hooked his right hand in his belt to hold his injured arm in place, and began firing at the men still standing. Fortunately for him, gunsmoke mixed with the dust glowing in the haze of the setting sun hid his betrayal from the panicked gang, and he managed to make four of his five shots count before the hammer clicked on the empty cylinder. Ezra dropped the gun and reached desperately for the Remington on his hip.

Suddenly, the madness stopped as quickly as it had begun. Ezra looked around... there was no one left standing in the camp. The adrenaline deserted him abruptly and he lay breathless and limp with pain, Casey still beneath him, panting and trying to collect himself. And wondering why he
too wasn't dead.

The answer came ambling into camp through the swirl of dust and gunsmoke. Vin Tanner. Ezra saw the mare's leg trained on him, and dropped his gun in the dirt. He stretched his good arm away from his body.

"Mr. Tanner. That impeccable timing, once again. How do you manage?"

Vin did not smile. "Get away from her," he said.

So that's the way it is, thought Ezra. Of course. Masking his bitter surmise with an acquiescent smile, Ezra drew his legs up under him and tried to stand. Vin did not offer a hand, and Ezra could not get to his feet alone, so he settled for rolling away from the girl, taking care to leave a safe distance between himself and the revolver that he'd forfeited.

Vin glared at him, and knelt next to the silent girl. "Casey?" he said softly, reaching out. She flinched away. "Casey? It's Vin." He touched her cheek, but she flinched again, and turned her unfocused eyes to the horizon, away from the man who was trying to reach her. Careless with worry and anger, Vin turned to glare at Ezra. "Standish, you bastard...."

Ezra saw the movement out of the corner of his eye and called Vin's name even as he lunged for the Remington lying in the dirt. He landed hard on his bad arm but his hand got the gun, brought it up and delivered a bullet into the broad chest of Jameson Cantreau.

Not until he saw the brilliant red stain seeping across the man's chest and decided that the gang leader was well and truly dead, did Ezra turn back to Vin and Casey and see that he had not been fast enough. Vin had dropped to his knees and, as Ezra turned to look, the tracker fell forward onto the girl.

Damn! Ezra dropped his gun again, crawled over to the two and, using his one good arm, gently rolled Vin onto his back. Tanner gasped; semi-conscious and struggling back to full awareness, he managed to make a fist and take a weak swing at Ezra who, wounded himself, still managed to dodge it easily. Ezra caught the tracker's wrist with his good hand and Vin winced in pain.

"Mr. Tanner," he said, breathing heavily, "please ... you must trust me, at least in the short term. If you do otherwise, the two of us and this young innocent have everything to lose. Do you understand me?"

Vin, panting himself and fighting the agony of his wound, fell back to the ground and glared up at Ezra. "I ain't never understood you, you low-life ... and I don't now. What the hell ... do you care ... about what happens to us?"

The words stung, coming from a man at whose side Ezra had ridden and fought. The southerner closed his eyes for a moment, summoned from deep within him the stoicism that had always served him well, and fixed steadfast eyes on Vin's pain-clouded ones. "I care more than you will ever believe, Mr. Tanner. For reasons you will apparently never understand. But I assure you, I intend to do all I can to return you and Miss Wells to Four Corners safe, if not sound. Assist me if you can ... it will increase our probability of success if you do. I ask you, for Casey's sake."

Anger still burned hot in Vin's eyes, but he nodded. "This don't let you off the hook, Standish," he warned. "None of us would be here if it weren't for you."

"We can share our mutual regrets about the past few days at a later time," the gambler replied. "Just now, we have to ready you and Miss Wells for travel, and depart this place before the remaining members of the gang return. The stock has been run off by the gun battle. Where is
"Over the ridge yonder. Ground-tied. I'll get him...." Vin tried to rise but fell back with another groan, suddenly weak from the exertion of throwing his considerable anger at his one-time partner.

"Be still," said Ezra. The deal was his again, whether or not he wanted or deserved it. He would do his best, and to hell with the cards that fell to him and the fate they might bring.

He left Vin lying dazed in the dusty grass and turned to Casey Wells. The girl was huddled on the blanket where the crush of Vin's body had pushed her down, her hands still tied, her face pale and blank, her eyes squeezed tight shut. Ezra crawled over to her and dropped his good hand on her shoulder. "It's me, Casey," he said softly. "It's Ezra." She drew back but he moved with her, keeping the contact, letting her feel the presence of another. After a moment she lay still, unmoving. Ezra drew his knife from his boot and slipped the blade between her bound wrists, severing the harsh ropes. Her hands fell limply to her sides. Painfully, Ezra reached for the canteen and awkwardly tugged his tie from his neck. He opened the canteen one-handed, dampened the fine cloth, and gently began to wash Casey's sunburned and dirt-smudged face. And he spoke to her, in the low soft drawl that he often used with children, or with his horse.

"There now, Casey darlin', it's all over. You're lookin' much better now ... I know that hurts, and we're gonna take care of that ... there, there ... now, can you open those pretty eyes and tell me you're feelin' better?"

She stirred and did open her eyes, but there was no recognition there. "JD?" she murmured.

"No, darlin', it's Ezra. Remember? Now don't you fret, I'm going to get you back to JD as fast as ever I can. But I'm going to need your help, darlin'. Look at me ... it's Ezra, remember?"

"Ezra...." She blinked and looked at him with eyes that slowly became lucid. "Ezra...." she said again, and suddenly alarm twisted her face and she sat up, looking about her in panic. She reached for him and grabbed his broken arm and he couldn't choke back the cry of pain. It seemed to center her; she looked down and realized she'd hurt him, and looked back into his face. Ezra breathed deeply in relief when he saw that the girl was finally back behind her eyes.

"Oh, Ezra," she said, "I'm sorry." She looked around her, and her panic returned, but he could see her take control of it. Then her gaze found the crumpled body of Vin Tanner. "Vin!"

Ezra held her shoulder with his good hand. "He's all right ... he'll be all right. But Casey darlin', I need you to help me get him out of here. Can you help me?"

She looked up at Ezra and his gut twisted at the trust he saw there. "What do you want me to do?" she asked, a tremor in her voice but her chin up and determined.

"Good girl," he said, and dabbed her nose with the dampened tie. She smiled at him, and his heart lightened a bit.

"Now," he said, keeping his voice calm, "we need to leave here as soon as possible. Vin's horse Peso is up over that ridge." He indicated the rise from which Vin had come. "Can you go fetch him for us while I tend to Mr. Tanner? You know Peso, and he knows you ... you go tell him everything is all right, and that we need his help to get Mr. Tanner to safety."

Casey readily responded to Ezra's casual banter and easy manner. "Sure, Ezra." She regarded him seriously, and reached out one hand, but stopped short of touching him as she remembered herself. "Are you all right?" she asked.
"I'm fine, my dear," he reassured her with his best facsimile of a smile. "Just help me out of my coat, if you will." She nodded and did so, as gently as possible. "Thank you. Now put this on, and off you go. By the time you and Peso return, I'll have Mr. Tanner ready to ride."

Casey looked intently at him, and for a moment Ezra was afraid she could see the truth; but if she did, she granted him the necessity of the ruse. She got to her feet and slipped the coat on over the tatters of her blouse, then set off for the ridge, shoulders squared and her eyes straight ahead. She did not look back.

Ezra was immeasurably grateful, as he was reduced again to crawling over to where Vin Tanner lay, the canteen slung over one shoulder and the damp cravat tucked into his vest. Upon reaching the semi-conscious man, he pulled the bloodstained leather jacket open, trying to ignore Vin's soft moans, and searched beneath the gingham shirt. It was all too easy to find the spot where Cantreau's bullet had done its damage. Ezra let out a breath of relief when he found both an entrance and an exit wound, low down on the outside of Vin's right shoulder, beneath his arm, where muscles had been torn but no bones or vital organs had been injured. Ezra set to work and washed the wound thoroughly, pressing his dampened tie against the tracker's back and covering the front with Vin's neckerchief. He had nothing with which to secure the bandages in place, and couldn't do any more with his arm broken; that would have to wait for Casey. Vin groaned again, and Ezra spilled the last of the water onto his forehead, using his hand to spread it over the tracker's twisted face. Vin's eyes blinked open and focused on Ezra.

"Mr. Tanner, lie still. Casey has gone to fetch Peso, and we'll be on our way shortly. You need to rest until she returns."

"How the hell...."

"I fear you were too busy condemning me to pay attention to the fact that one of my associates was not fully disabled."

"Your 'associates'? So you were in cahoots with them."

"Only because I could think of no other way to help Miss Wells."

"Yeah, I saw how you were 'helpin' her." Vin tried to move and grimaced in pain. Ezra put out a hand to steady him, but Vin shrugged it off.

Ezra sighed. "Believe what you will, Mr. Tanner. It hardly matters anyway. I have no doubt that you have captured and turned over other innocent men during your illustrious career as a bounty hunter."

"Wasn't my job to judge them men, Ezra. Only to bring 'em in."

"Indeed. How fortunate for you that Chris Larabee and the rest of the men with whom you ride were inclined to be a bit more open-minded in the matter of you and Eli Joe," Ezra said dryly. Vin's eyes widened, but Ezra pushed on. "Now be still, and save your strength. We must work together to return Miss Wells safely to Four Corners. After that, you and the others may do with me as you see fit."

Vin's eyes narrowed, and his anger seemed to abate for a moment. "What's your angle in this, Ezra?" he asked.

Ezra considered the question for a moment, then decided that he was too tired and hurt and hopeless to gild the brutal truth.

"I have nothing to gain, Mr. Tanner," he said dully, "nor anything to lose." Turning away, he
blinked into the dusk and saw Casey walking slowly toward the camp, leading Peso. Ezra turned his back on Vin and crawled back to his bedroll to gather those things that they would need on the trail.

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The coffee was bitter, but not as bitter as the cold, or the ache of his broken arm, or the worry over the girl, and the man. And none of those things were as bitter as Ezra's heart.

Disturbed by dark dreams, Casey twisted and murmured in her sleep. She moved closer to the still form of Vin Tanner, trying to pull the thin blanket tighter around them both. Ezra dumped the lukewarm coffee dregs in the dust and set down the graniteware mug. He shrugged off the equally thin blanket he'd been huddled in and added its sparse warmth to the one already draped over the two sleeping people. Vin moaned softly and Ezra knelt next to him, put the back of his hand to the damp forehead, and frowned at the heat he felt there.

How had he managed to play this hand so badly? The ruse had been his last best hope when things had gone downhill. Now he found himself in the heart of the malpais, on a frigid autumn night, with a broken arm, a lame horse, a sick girl, and a dying friend.

Friend? No ... a man he never should have thought of as a friend. And who didn't think of him as one.

Now Ezra sat, shivering in the cold of the high desert night, miles from Four Corners. They'd managed to avoid the three remaining members of Cantreau's band, but at the cost of avoiding the watering hole and the chance of discovery and rescue by those who Ezra assumed were looking for Casey and Vin.

In his lucid moments, Vin had directed Ezra into the desert, the shortest route back to town and the one least likely to leave tracks for the remaining gang members to follow, but also the way most fraught with privation and peril. Two nights had been spent on the move, broken by a brief rest during the day beneath a cottonwood that sheltered a tiny spring. Vin had ridden Peso, hunched over in the saddle while Casey led the horse and Ezra walked alongside, holding onto a stirrup and depending on Peso's strength to keep him on his feet and moving forward. Their progress had been slow but steady until, as Ezra had suspected it eventually would, their luck had finally run out. Weary, and moving slowly by the light of a half moon, Peso had misstepped and taken Vin and Ezra to the ground with him. The horse righted himself but his knees were badly scraped and he favored his left front leg.

They'd had no choice but to stop. Vin's wound had broken open in the fall and begun to bleed again. That, coupled with the fever which had fallen upon him before the accident, had rendered him unconscious or delirious by turns. Casey, while willing and determined to be of help, was also ill with sunburn and deprivation and the memories of the torment she had undergone at the hands of Cantreau and his gang. Feverish and in agony himself from the swelling of his broken arm in the leather straps of the Derringer rig, Ezra had still done his best to make Vin as comfortable as he could while Casey tended to Peso. They'd shared some jerky and dried fruit and weak coffee, then the girl had crawled into the single bedroll next to Vin and the two had slept, leaving Ezra to take the first watch.

The southerner did not wake them when the watch was over, unable to sleep and preferring to be left alone with his own dark thoughts. If they pushed Peso, even though the horse was lame, he hoped that they could make Four Corners by noon. He feared that Vin might die before then, and Ezra had doubts about his own ability to go the entire distance; even if they did make it to town, the gambler figured the odds were that he would be shot on sight before ever having a chance to explain himself. But Casey would be safely returned to her aunt, and the young man to whom she
meant so much. That would be victory enough, even if Ezra did not live to see it.

He looked up and saw the pale shadows of pink and orange touch the horizon. Dawn was coming. Ezra let Casey and Vin sleep as he struggled painfully to his feet and began to gather up the things scattered around the camp.

~~~

A few miles away, five men also waited for sunrise. They'd listened in horror to Nettie Wells' story, saddled up and ridden hard out to the watering hole where they had waited to see if the rendezvous would take place. When no one showed, they'd backtracked the trail to the Keyhole in hopes of intercepting the gang, but had found only the remains of a camp littered with the bodies of the gang members. Ezra's bloodstained saddle and bedroll had been there, and JD had rounded up a few stray horses, including Ezra's gelding Chance. But Peso could not be found and there had been no trace of Casey or Vin, although shell casings on the ground showed that the tracker, or someone with a gun just like his, had been there.

JD, who'd learned a surprising amount from doggedly tagging after Vin, had picked up the trail of a horse and two people leading out of the maze of tracks left behind by the gang's stampeding remuda. The men had followed the faint marks and found a place where the horse had stumbled and gone down. They couldn't be too far ahead, JD thought; the disturbance on the ground and the tracks leading away indicated the horse was lame, and that at least one of the people was hurt. Chris had wanted to push ahead ... they all had ... but it was Josiah who finally pointed out that they needed to rest their horses for at least a short time. So camp had been made by a small spring under a cottonwood tree, where the sign indicated that the people they followed had rested only a few hours before.

Now Chris Larabee sat in the shadows of the campfire, resolutely isolated among the company of men who rode with him. His eyes were fixed on the untouched coffee cup before him but his thoughts reached out into the darkness. Somewhere beyond the ring of light that the campfire provided was a friend. A brother. A man who Chris knew all too well would willingly go up against odds of ten to one ... eleven to one ... to save a girl. Even if he knew he couldn't win. Vin had done it once before, stepping into the dusty street of a small town and placing himself between an angry mob and a black man and blonde woman who needed help. But this time, Chris wasn't there to walk out and stand beside him.

Vin....

The other men huddled around the small fire were equally disconsolate. Firelight painted highlights on the lines of pain and resignation drawn deep into their features. None was more marked than the face of Buck Wilmington, who worried not only for Vin and for Casey, but for Chris Larabee and for JD Dunne as well. Blue eyes usually full of life and humor and optimism now flicked back and forth between his oldest and youngest friends, and his heart twisted in hopeless grief. Buck could see Chris reverting to the bitter ghost that he'd been for so long; and worse, JD was undergoing the same terrible transformation. The young man's eyes glistened with unshed tears as he stared into the fire, and Buck knew that he was worried not only about the girl he refused to admit he cared for, or the tracker who'd taught him so much, but also for a gambler who he refused to lose faith in. At least the kid could still weep ... Chris hadn't wept in years. But all else was the same; the silence, the hardened face, and worst of all, the hollow eyes. JD was too young to have eyes like that, thought Buck.

But now every man sitting around the fire had eyes like that.

When the moon rose, they'd continue on. Chris vowed that he'd find Vin and Casey, and bring them home. And if they found Standish....
He turned his coffee out, into the dust.

~~~

"JD ... JD...."

Ezra had been stowing the few supplies they had left in Vin's saddlebags. He looked up when he heard the faint murmuring of a familiar name. Casey was dreaming ... no, not dreaming, caught in a nightmare.

"JD...."

Ezra got unsteadily to his feet, circled the fire and knelt next to the girl. He reached for her with his good arm, resting a hand lightly on her cheek.

"Casey, it's all right. Wake up."

She flinched violently in her sleep, striking out at him. "No ... NO!"

Ezra caught her wrist and she came up at him, fighting. "Casey--"

He heard the distant report of a pistol, and something hit his head, hard ... then the pain slammed into him and took the light away from his eyes.

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"Chris...."

"I see it, Buck. Hold up ... we'll go the rest of the way on foot."

Dawn painted the horizon line, but in the darkness that still lay on the desert the five riders could see the flickering light of a campfire burning low, at the end of a night's fuel. The men dismounted and dropped their reins, and the horses drifted toward the sparse shrubs to nibble while their riders crept toward the firelight.

A low rise lay between them and the camp, and they went to their knees behind the fringe of scrub that topped the sandy hill and looked down. In the dim light they could see someone moving around the camp. Near the fire was a single bedroll with two figures huddled together beneath the blankets. As Chris and the others watched, one of the figures in the bedroll began to stir. The figure outside the fire's circle came into view and knelt next to the bedroll, reached out and touched the face of the restless sleeper.

Ezra Standish.

As the men registered this fact, they saw the touch become a struggle, and heard a cry.

"No ... NO!"

A girl's voice. One that JD Dunne knew all too well.

"Casey!" he cried out, and before anyone could react they heard the young man's gun fire and saw Ezra fall.

JD jumped to his feet and started down the hillside, leaving his stunned friends still crouched in the dust. Buck was the first to recover and scramble after him, slipping and sliding in the rubble, followed after a moment by Chris, Nathan and Josiah. When they reached the fireside, they were
met by a young woman aiming a pistol at them. Her grip was shaky but her eyes were hard and determined.

"Casey?" JD stopped in his tracks, taken aback at the sight of the girl he'd come to rescue holding him at bay with a gun.

Casey blinked at the five tall silhouettes backlit by the morning sun. Over the past few days so much had gone so wrong, so little had seemed real, that she could not believe her eyes.

"JD?" she whispered.

JD Dunne sank to his knees in front of her.

"Casey...."

The girl let the gun fall to her lap, and the young man reached out and took it from her trembling fingers before he leaned forward and tenderly put his hands on her shoulders. She flinched in pain and his eyes narrowed; he reached for the lapels of Ezra's red jacket and gently pushed it back and down her arms. He sucked his breath in when he saw her bruises and blistered shoulder. "Oh god, Casey." JD suddenly forgot all the shyness, all the uncertainty this girl normally inspired in him; he crept forward and carefully cradled her good shoulder with his arm, drawing her to him. And Casey, herself forgetting the fierce independence and cocky attitude she usually faced him with, sagged gratefully into the young man's embrace.

Only Josiah noticed. Chris and Nathan bent over Vin, still unconscious and unroused by the gunshot. Larabee's face was as ghost-like as the man whom Nathan was feverishly examining; one broad hand cradled Vin's head and the other rested on the unconscious man's shoulder. A few feet away, ignored by the others, Buck crouched at Ezra's side; with shaking hands, he pushed the gambler's hair back and found the wound inflicted by JD's shot. Fortunately, the young man who was almost as fine a sharpshooter as Vin Tanner had missed his aim and sent his bullet high, where it had grazed Ezra's temple instead of burying itself in his heart. Buck breathed a sigh of relief as he drew his bandana from around his neck and tried to staunch the bleeding. "Nathan! I need ya," he said.

"Not now, Buck!"

"That bastard can wait until Vin's been dealt with," said Chris harshly.

Casey stiffened in JD's arms. "No!" she said, her voice thin and strained. "You have to help him!" As if suddenly realizing what had happened, she looked up at JD with wide eyes. "Why did you shoot him?" She pulled away and crawled to Buck's side, reached out and lifted the gambler's head and shoulders awkwardly into her lap. "Oh, Ezra...."

JD stared at her, open-mouthed. Chris looked up from Vin's bloodied body at the girl. Only Buck seemed to comprehend what had happened; his bandana pressed against the ugly gash on Ezra's forehead, he looked down into Casey's eyes.

"He took on the game, didn't he, girl? To save you."

She nodded, and tears streaked her cheeks.

"What happened to Vin?" Chris' voice was quiet, even, but the tension in it was palpable.

"He came into the camp ... one of those ... those men ... wasn't dead yet...."

Ezra stirred in her arms. Casey looked down and said his name softly, and he was still again. JD
looked at her, guilt darkening his brown eyes. "I thought ... I mean, when I saw him grab you and you yelled ... I didn't mean to ... oh damn."

"He promised me he'd get us home safe," the girl whispered.

"Ezra don't make promises lightly," murmured Josiah. He turned his gaze to Chris, reproach in his sad blue eyes.

The gunslinger nodded, and dropped his eyes. "Don't seem so."

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Mary Travis looked down at the sleeping face of Ezra Standish and wondered why, although she knew he was as dangerous as Chris Larabee, she always felt moved to treat him like her son. Ezra moved restlessly on the cot in Nathan's small room and Mary took the damp rag from his forehead, dipped it in the basin of spring water and crushed herbs, wrung it out and replaced it. He turned his head away without waking, and she reached out and put one cool hand on his cheek, pulling his face back and gently bathing it with the cloth.

Next door in Chris Larabee's room, she knew, Vin Tanner slept on the gunfighter's bed. His fever had broken the day before and he was resting comfortably, thanks to Nathan's care. Mary Travis hoped that Chris was finally getting some sleep too as he kept his vigil at Vin's bedside. Across the street, Casey was being tended to by her aunt and Gloria Potter, in a small room above Mrs. Potter's mercantile. Mary smiled slightly at the thought of the young man who'd spent the past two days in a wooden chair on the boardwalk below, refusing to leave even though he knew that Casey was in no danger.

A murmur from the man on the bed drew her attention back to him. His green eyes were open. "Mrs. Travis...."

Mary smiled down at the gambler. He had drifted in and out of awareness over the past two days, and called her by several names; Mary, Mother, and others she did not recognize. She realized that the formal designation probably meant he was lucid.

"Ezra," she said softly. "How do you feel?"

"Head hurts." He closed his eyes, then opened them wide again. "Casey?"

"She's fine, and so is Vin," Mary reassured him. "If it hadn't been for you, we would have lost them both. We were afraid we had lost you, too."

"Were you?" It was an absent thought; he was already slipping back into sleep, but he rallied and opened his eyes one more time. His eyes were focused on the bandage she still wore around her head, and Mary saw regret and sadness in his expression.

"Mrs. Travis, I--"

"Hush," she said, understanding immediately. "I know it wasn't your fault. I never thought that it was."

He closed his eyes. "You wouldn't ... you...." His voice trailed off, and soon his even breathing told her that he was asleep again. Weary but relieved, Mary leaned back in her chair. She started at the clatter of the doorknob behind her, but relaxed when Josiah stepped into the dimly lit room.

"How is he?" the soft voice asked.
"He woke up, and knew me," she replied, "then went right back to sleep." She stifled a yawn, but he saw it.

"You need some rest too, ma'am," Josiah said. He cupped her elbow in one big hand and helped her to her feet. "I'll stay with him. You go on home."

"Thank you, Josiah," she said, and reached for her shawl. She shrugged into it, and looked down on the sleeping patient. "He's a good man," she said, to herself really, but the preacher overheard it and nodded.

"He's learning."

~~~

Ezra drifted in a half-sleep. The light of the sun streaming in through the open window shone golden through his closed eyelids. He didn't want to sleep, because sleep meant dreaming, and dreams were something he had come to fear. He didn't want to wake, either, because waking meant dealing with the real world, and that real world was not welcoming, nor forgiving. With a few exceptions.

Josiah saw the movement behind the closed eyelids and smiled sadly. Ezra's body was healing; he would soon be ready to return to his room for the balance of his recuperation. But the southerner had suffered other wounds that were still hurting, and even Josiah had no cure for them.

A knock on the door interrupted the preacher's reverie, and Josiah stood and stretched before answering. In the square of bright sunlight defined by the doorframe stood Buck, and behind him JD and Casey and Nettie Wells. "Wonderin' if Ezra is up for a visit?" asked the tall man; his blue eyes crinkled with a smile, but worry showed in them.

"I think it would do him good," nodded Josiah. "Come on in."

Buck walked over to the bed and boomed out, "Hey there, Ez! Wake up ... ya got company!"

Ezra winced and opened his eyes slowly. Buck looked down at him, grinning, but Ezra could see the tall gunman's eyes darting back and forth and his hand, shielded from the people standing behind him, was making an odd fluttering gesture. Ezra's knew he was being signaled, but he hadn't the faintest idea of what Wilmington was trying to tell him. In the next moment, though, he figured it out.

Casey and Nettie Wells stepped out from behind Buck's big frame. At the sight of the girl's face, flush with health behind the fading bruises, her eyes shining and a shy smile on her face, Ezra felt his throat tighten with emotion. "Miss Wells," he managed, and then all he could do was smile back.

She sat down in the bedside chair that Josiah had vacated and reached hesitantly for Ezra's good hand. The words tumbled out of her in a rush that he could barely keep up with. "Oh, Ez, I'm so glad you're feeling better! I was so worried! I wanted to tell you how sorry I am about what happened, and how glad I was that you came out to see us that day! You never come to visit, but I don't know what would have happened if you hadn't been there! I don't know how I can ever thank you for what you did. We're just so lucky that you--"

"Casey," Nettie interrupted her, seeing the glazed look in Ezra's green eyes, "just say 'thank you'."

The girl stopped, mouth open, then grinned broadly and nodded, looking back down at Ezra. She squeezed his hand in hers. "Thank you, Ez."
Ezra pulled her hand to his lips and kissed it. "I am honored to have been of service, my dear," he said.

Casey blushed fiery red and giggled. Nettie regarded the gambler with a thoughtful look.

"Seems I owe you an apology, Mr. Standish," she said finally.

Ezra looked away. "We're fortunate that you took me at face value, Mrs. Wells," he said, "or things might have gone rather more badly than they did."

"True," the old woman answered. "But that don't make me feel no better about it. You put yourself in harm's way to save my niece. Thank you."

"You're welcome." Ezra could think of nothing else to say.

Buck smiled broadly, then looked back over his shoulder and made a short gesture. "OK, kid, your turn," he said.

JD appeared at Buck's elbow, his face a picture of embarrassment, regret and sadness. He opened his mouth as if to speak, closed it, tried again, and then just hung his head. Suddenly Ezra knew what Buck had been trying to tell him. The southerner could see the problem, but the boy rushed in before Standish could say anything.

"Ezra, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to shoot you. I mean, I did mean to shoot you, but I--"

Ezra tried not to laugh. "JD, there is no need to apologize for defending your lady. I am merely grateful that your usually excellent marksmanship failed you on this occasion."

JD shook his head. "Jeez, Ezra, that ain't it. I mean, that's it, or part of it, anyway, but ... but you're my friend. I shoulda known that you were helpin' Casey ... I shoulda never thought anything else. I should have trusted you."

It hurt Ezra to see the anguish on the young man's face, but the words hurt still more. "Trust is earned, JD," he said softly. "Don't feel badly for having doubted me. You were not the only one to do so."

JD let out a long breath. "But Ezra ... you've taught me stuff, stuck up for me, covered my back ... hell, you were the first one to shake my hand when I joined the group. I hope you can see your way clear to thinkin' of me as your friend again."

He held out his hand, and Ezra hesitated for only a moment before he reached out and took it. "I'd be pleased to, Mr. Dunne."

"Thanks, Ezra." JD looked as if the weight of the world had been lifted from his shoulders. "Look, ah ... can we bring you anything?"

"You can't bring him nothin' he's likely to ask you for," warned Nathan, stepping into the sick room. "All of y'all get on out of here. I just finally got Vin to sleep next door, and I don't want y'all wakin' him up. Had enough of his bitchin' today."

"I'll bet," chuckled Buck. "Come on, kids," he said, spreading his arms and herding JD and Casey toward the door, with Nettie following behind. "We got to get Miss Casey here back to Mrs. Potter's or someone's gonna think we kidnapped her." He meant it as a joke, but Ezra still winced. Only Josiah saw it; he met Ezra's eyes and shook his head, but the wounded man simply turned his face away, trying once again to lose himself in the twilight peace of half-sleep.
Ezra had lost four games of solitaire and was working on his fifth. He'd just uncovered the ace of spades and wondered if he should regard it as an omen that his luck had changed, when he heard footsteps climbing the stairs to the balcony. He lay the ace down and played a two and a three on it, then looked up. He'd expected Nathan's return, but was surprised to see Buck, JD and Josiah accompanying him. Behind them trailed Chris Larabee, who nodded at the gambler and then disappeared into his own room, where Vin Tanner still lay recuperating.

Buck leaned over the table and looked at Ezra's solitaire game. "Red seven on black eight," he said.

JD peered over his shoulder. "Yeah," he agreed. "Gives ya a four of spades to put on that ace."

Josiah circled the table. "Got a red ten can go on that black jack, too."

Ezra sighed. "Would you gentlemen like to simply finish the game for me?"

"Nope," said Josiah. "Truth be told, we thought you might be kinda tired of playin' solitaire."

"Yeah," said Buck. "Reckoned a game of poker might be more to your likin'."

"But you'll need some partners," Ezra started at the sound of Chris Larabee's voice. The gunfighter had emerged from his room with a pale and stiff Vin Tanner leaning heavily on his arm.

"How 'bout it, Ez?" asked the tracker. Nathan grabbed a chair and set it in place, and Buck helped Chris ease Vin into it. More chairs were brought from inside Nathan's and Chris' rooms, and soon there were six men sitting around the tiny table, looking expectantly at Ezra.

The gambler was silent for a moment, then cleared his throat.

"Well, poker is more profitable. Particularly when played with the present company." He gathered up the cards, shuffled them with deliberate care, and began to deal.

Buck looked around the table and laughed out loud. "Whaddya know, JD? Seven of a kind!"

"Not likely," said Nathan, reaching for his cards.

"A full house," corrected Josiah.

"A good hand," Vin drawled quietly.

Chris Larabee nodded. "I reckon. What do you think, Ezra?"

The gambler's poker face betrayed him with a smile. "I think that it's getting damned hard to play a game of solitaire around here."

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