Other Hearts

by GreenWoman

Summary

This story takes place in the TM7/ATF alternate universe.

This story was originally written as an individual scene for a collaborative tale. But the storyline changed and the scene didn't make the final draft; it lay untouched for over a year, until a recent challenge on another list brought it to mind. The challenge required, among other things, that Ezra speak the words, "So shines a good deed in a weary world." That line, and the old truism "no good deed goes unpunished," inspired me to rewrite the original scene into this story.

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

08/23/2001

Synchronized with the rising moon
Even with the evening star
They were true love written in stone
They were never alone
They were never that far apart

And we who couldn't bear to believe they might make it
We got to close our eyes
Cut up our losses into doable doses
Ration our tears and sighs

NEVER DIE YOUNG ~ James Taylor
He knew where Vin would go.

Not to Inez's saloon. They would all be there, including the man Vin wanted so desperately to avoid. And they would all have something to say, except the man Vin so desperately needed to have words with.

Ezra knew where Vin would go. Standish parked his Jag in the shadowed lot out back, between the beater van that belonged to the owner of the tiny neighborhood bar in Purgatorio and the '58 Harley Duo-Glide that had brought Vin Tanner to it. Ezra locked the car and set the alarm, hoping that the bike owner's reputation would somehow also protect the health and safety of his Jaguar. Turning his mind to the task at hand, Ezra opened the back door of the rundown building, wincing at the squeak of the hinges, and made his way down the dingy hall, past the restrooms and the kitchen. He pushed through a lopsided pair of batwing doors and scanned the dark interior with narrowed eyes.

There. The first booth out from the kitchen. Where he could see both front and back doors in the mirror behind the bar. Where the shadows hid him. Where no one would find him.

Unless that someone knew where to look.

Dull blue eyes registered no surprise when Ezra slid into the booth. Vin's eyes were registering hardly anything at all, and Standish felt his gut tighten with concern. Ezra realized that Vin was more drunk than he had ever seen the young man. Dangerous, in a place like this ... even for Vin Tanner.

"Vin."

"Fuck off, Ezra." The tone was casual, offhanded.

"The only way out is through, Vin."

"I said fuck off."

Ezra sighed. Perhaps this was a fool's errand. Standish wasn't even really sure why he'd undertaken it. Ezra was a loner; he had been all his life, and was determined to remain so. He didn't meddle in the affairs of others. Such meddling was usually discourteous, often imprudent, and always messy.

But Chris Larabee and Vin Tanner had come to mean a great deal to Ezra since he'd joined Larabee's ATF team. Ezra had watched as the bond between Chris and Vin changed from friendship into something deeper, stronger; and as were the other team members, so too was Ezra quietly protective of the two men's relationship. The outsider had found himself drawing a strange sort of comfort from simply observing them; as if while standing only in the shadows surrounding a campfire, he was still warmed by it. And if, from time to time, an ember from their fire sparked his own heart and flared into a bit of hope, and conjured thoughts of a tall man with flashing blue eyes and an easy smile ... well, Ezra reasoned, he could warm his hands over that small flame for a moment or two before it died into ash, and no harm done to anyone but himself.

So as that vicarious warmth had chilled over the past weeks, Ezra had watched, and worried. It had started ... or perhaps, begun to end ... with the appearance of an associate from Vin's past. A grudge, an ambush, and a bullet in the wrong target ... and while Chris Larabee had escaped with only a grazed arm, Vin Tanner had suffered a deep wound; one that no trip to an emergency room could heal. Standish had watched the bond between the two men grow tenuous and testy as Vin
withdrew into himself, and his instincts told him that the withdrawal was caused by more than the fear they had all felt for Chris' life. There was something else ... Ezra couldn't quite put his finger on it, but he could feel it in his gut, under his skin.

Ezra shifted in his seat and looked at Vin more closely. The young man's head hung low, bent over the glass of whiskey, and a half-empty bottle sat on the table; another sign, in a man usually content with a beer or two, that Vin was hurting. His eyes were shadowed by his hair and the darkness of the bar, but Ezra could feel the pain radiating from him, as he had always before felt the warmth.

This task would require more than the southerner was accustomed to giving, but he would do his best. Ezra wanted that warmth back, if only for his own sake. He reached out across the table, hesitated, then closed his fingers around Vin's forearm. Tanner tried to pull away, but Ezra did not allow it. He tugged at the wrist and held it up so that the young man's hand was the focus of both their gazes.

"Millennia ago," the southerner began, "in the shallows of some tidal pool at the edge of the sea that wrapped our planet in those days, lightning struck. Or so they say. And life began."

Vin said nothing, but his pulse quickened beneath Ezra's fingers. Standish tightened his grip.

"A miracle ... that static electricity and sea water and elements enough to barely fill a common measuring cup, combined to create flesh and blood. A miracle that we creatures of chance and chemistry, as individual and unique as snowflakes or fingerprints, exist and function at all. Yet we do. And another miracle, that from time to time we discover, among the masses who walk this planet, other souls whose electricity reaches out and connects with our own. When that primordial lightning strike is echoed in the present, it flies in the face of whatever gods there may be to ignore such a gift."

Vin jerked his wrist from Ezra's grasp and glared at him. "You goin' somewhere with this?" he drawled. "Remember what a dumb shit I am, Ez ... you got to talk simple to me."

"Yes, I am going somewhere with this. And yes, you are a dumb shit, Vin, if you're going to walk away from Chris Larabee."

"Am I, Ez?" the Texan said bitterly. The harsh words sparked a blaze of self-recrimination that pierced the opacity of grief and drink veiling Vin's eyes. Seeing it broke Ezra's heart. "Maybe it's the only smart thing I've ever done," Vin murmured. "I reckon s'way too late to save our friendship..." the blue eyes clouded over again "... but maybe not too late to save his life."

"Why would you want to do that?"

Of all the things that Vin Tanner's drunken mind might have expected to hear, that non-sequiter caught him by surprise. Too astonished to fence with his inquisitor, he blurted out the truth.

"Because if he's dead, I might as well be."

Ezra sighed. "And you don't think he feels the same way?"

Vin dropped his head. Ezra decided reluctantly that some brutality was called for. He lightened his voice, assuming a tone that he might have used had he been casually speculating about the weather.

"I see. Well, it might not hurt him quite so much this time, having been through it before," he mused. "Let's see ... what has it been? Three years since his family was killed? Or four?" He gazed at the ceiling for a moment as if counting back, then shook his head. "I'll have to check with
Mr. Wilmington. At any rate ... cut his recuperation period in half, say two years or so, since he’ll only be losing one person this time, instead of two. Perhaps eliminate another six months because he's now familiar with the grieving process."

Vin was looking at him now, anger in his eyes. Ezra continued, his voice harsher.

"Hopefully, if Buck works very, very hard and takes a great deal of abuse, and if Mr. Larabee's karma is good enough to eventually steer another soul like you across his path...." Ezra sighed and shook his head regretfully. "No, forget that last thought. Too many people go through life without ever finding even *one* special person. Chris Larabee has already had two ... three, counting his son. I suspect that after you're gone, he'll--"

The heavy glass tumbler containing Vin's whiskey went flying off the table to crash on the sawdust-covered floor. "Goddammit, Ezra, leave me the hell alone!"

"Can't do that, Vin," said Ezra sadly.

"Why not?"

The southerner sighed. "Because I owe you. I owe you both."

"I don't need this fuckin' payback," Vin snarled, "and as for Chris...." He slid from the booth and stood unsteadily, holding onto the leather seat back for balance. "If you won't leave me, I'll find somebody who will."

Ezra almost laughed. "Now you're beginning to sound like Mr. Larabee," he said, leaving his own seat to stand in front of Vin. "You two were definitely made for each other."

"Go to hell, Ezra," Vin whispered.

Ezra thought of Buck Wilmington, knew that Vin would not remember his words in the morning, and so spoke honestly.

"Already there, Vin."

Then Vin's knees buckled, but Ezra was ready; he caught the young man as he fell, deftly slipped one arm beneath Vin's shoulders, and guided his semi-conscious friend toward the back door. As he passed the kitchen, Ezra spoke in broken Spanish to a young man he knew to be one of the owner's sons.

"*His bike ... you'll keep it safe?*"

The boy nodded. Ezra steered Vin out the back and to his Jag, unlocked the vehicle and settled his friend in the front seat, then closed the door. He rested his arms on the hood and looked up at the stars.

"If I have a reward on this earth, please let it be that he does not throw up in my car," he whispered.

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"On the house."

Ezra, lost in contemplation of the scratches and graffiti marring the polished surface of the bar, looked up at the flute of champagne and then into warm brown eyes.
"Thank you, Inez," he said. "But I don't know why--"

Her eyes pulled his own along with them as Inez glanced into a corner of the room where two men shared a table. As she and Ezra watched, Chris spoke quietly, and Vin nodded. Their eyes were warm, their bodies at ease; their hands rested close together on the tabletop.

Inez smiled at Ezra. "Yes you do," she said and turned away, busy again at her work, unapproachable. Ezra looked back at the flute and watched as the bubbles danced to the surface of the pale liquid, but did not take the glass in hand.

"Never seen you turn down champagne, Ez."

He stiffened slightly and centered himself. He should have known that peace would elude him here, but he had come to Inez's saloon nonetheless. He had needed to see Chris and Vin together, had needed to see that love....

"What do you want, Mr. Sanchez?" he asked with gruff disinterest of the tall man standing at his shoulder.

"Same as Inez," the deep voice soothed. "To say thank you."

"Inez is delusional. So are you."

"'So shines a good deed in a weary world'," Josiah denied in a soft voice.

"'Those who can't do--'" Ezra replied bitterly, but caught himself before he finished the quote. Abruptly, he pushed the untouched champagne away. He fumbled in his pocket, produced a crumpled bill, and dropped on the bar; it landed in the puddle of condensation left by the flute and unfurled slowly in the moisture. Ezra slid from the stool and straightened his suit coat with a shrug. "Good night, Mr. Sanchez."

Josiah sighed, unoffended. He'd long suspected that Ezra's personal walls kept more inside than out; tonight, it seemed, some deep pain had loosed reckless words, and revealed a secret. Sorrowfully, he watched Ezra walk away, then caught his breath as Buck Wilmington walked in the door, J.D. Dunne and Nathan Jackson right behind. Laughter and good will seemed to radiate from the big man as he shook the rain from his coat, and his cheerful grin broadened noticeably when he saw Ezra.

"Ez!" He reached out and dropped an arm around Ezra's shoulder; Josiah could see Standish flinch from across the room, but Buck didn't notice it. "Where are you goin'? You can't leave ... I want to buy you a drink. Hell, we *all* want to buy you drinks!" Behind him, J.D. smiled and nodded in agreement.

"I can't think what for," Ezra replied coolly.

"What *for*?" Buck grinned and pulled the young man into his side, missing the melancholy look that flashed across Ezra's face. "What the hell do you think? Look at them two!" He nodded toward the corner table where Chris and Vin sat together. "You done good, Ezra," he said warmly.

"I can't imagine how you came to discover what you think you know, but I assure you that you are entirely mistaken," was Ezra's quiet reply. "And I'm sorry, but I must be leaving. Good night." He shrugged Buck's arm gracefully but decisively from his shoulders, slipped like quicksilver between J.D. and Nathan, and disappeared through the door into the stormy night.

J.D. ducked through the door after him, calling his name, but soon reappeared wearing an
expression of bewildered disappointment. Nathan scowled and shook his head, then took J.D. by
the arm and steered him toward the bar. After a moment Buck drifted along behind them. Josiah
offered the chair vacated by Ezra and Buck took it, but his eyes returned to the rain-spattered glass
of the front door and the darkness outside. Bemusement and hurt showed plainly on his open face.
"Ez?" he murmured, absently, to no one.

Josiah followed his gaze, and smiled to himself. Maude Vanderbilt Standish Windsor Simpson
Talesian Rosenbaum von Hauken often said, "Behind every closed door lies a golden
opportunity." Perhaps....

"Buck, do you believe that one good turn deserves another?"

"Huh?" Buck blinked. "Uh, yeah. I guess." His eyes were still on the front door.

"I do too," said Josiah. He put one big hand on Buck's shoulder, and gestured toward Inez with
another. "Let me buy you a beer."

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By midnight, most of Inez's Friday evening crowd had left. Only Josiah and Buck remained at the
bar, Josiah finishing his third beer while Buck was still toying with his second.

"So that's the way of it, Josiah?" he asked softly.

"It is, brother Buck."

"Ah." Buck set the bottle down and traced one long finger through the beads of water on the bar,
pulling the moisture into the shape of a letter. E. "And I never saw it...."

"And now?"

Blue eyes met gray ones, and Buck smiled slightly. "I know folks think I'm one horny
tumbleweed, happy just rollin' 'round with the wind. But I've been caught up on a fence before,
Josiah. And I liked it."

"Chris?"

Buck nodded. "When we were young, for the newness, and the joy of it. And then ... after Sarah
... but then, it was for friendship. Because he needed someone, and I've always been there for him.
And then...."

"He found Vin."

"He found Vin." Buck sipped at his neglected longneck. "I like Vin. He's a good man. Good for
Chris, and Chris is good for him. I'm glad for 'em both."

"And you?"

"I went back to rollin', and was content. But Ezra ... Ez...." His voice trailed off and his blue eyes
drifted again toward the door.

"A barbed wire fence, if I ever saw one," Josiah said.

"It's true," agreed Buck.

"Hard to lay a hand on."
"Yeah."

"Snarls and whips back on you when you least expect it."

"Oh yeah."

"Drive careful in this rain, Buck."

"I will, Josiah. And thanks."

"One good turn deserves another."

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The rain was coming down in a gray wall. Buck braked carefully at the stop sign and read the street name in a flash of lightning; feathering the gas pedal he turned left through deep water and counted down the addresses as he passed them. He braked again, cut the engine, and peered through the rain. It was past one o'clock in the morning, but luck was with him.

The lights in the townhouse were on.

Buck splashed up the sidewalk at a trot, but was still soaked when he reached the door. He scuffed his boots on the wet doormat, shook the water out of his dark hair, wiped his hands on his soaked-through jeans, and pressed the doorbell. Waited. And pressed it again.

A shadow appeared behind the frosted glass ... dark and blurred at the edges, not unlike Buck had always perceived Ezra to be behind the crisp and colorful exterior he presented to the world. The shadow stood still behind the door, as if hesitating, and then Buck heard the sound of a deadbolt being turned and the door swung open.

Black sweat pants. Black tee shirt. Pale skin made more pale by the black clothing. Green eyes, set off by black circles beneath them. And in those eyes, glimpsed in a flash of lightning, surprise ... and hope?

And then the lightning was gone, and Ezra became again a dark, blurred form.

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*Buck. Oh god.*

Ezra took in the wide blue eyes, the half-smile, the soaking clothes, and wished briefly and fervently that he hadn't indulged in as much brandy as he had. Trying to kill the pain ... the same pain that now stood wet and shivering on his doormat.

*Go away!* he screamed.

"Come in," he said.

Buck shuffled almost apologetically and wiped his wet boots again on the saturated doormat, looked up with a "well, that was stupid, wasn't it?" expression, and stepped inside. Ezra almost smiled, then caught himself. He was weary, he was heartsore, and he was slightly drunk, but that was no excuse for being careless. He couldn't afford carelessness; not on the job, and not in his personal life either.

"Don't sit down," he warned, and headed to the bathroom for towels.

Buck was still standing damp and obedient on the tile of the foyer when Ezra returned, carrying
two royal blue bath towels. Wordlessly he handed them to his guest and then went into the kitchen. He'd already prepped the coffeemaker for the next morning, and had only to override the timer. While the machine did its work, he put two stoneware mugs and a sugar bowl on the counter; a small carton of cream was retrieved from the refrigerator and set down next to them. By the time Buck appeared in the doorway of the kitchen the coffee was dripping.

He'd shed his shirt, boots and socks, and had one towel draped across his bare shoulders; the other he was using to dry his hair. He'd left the wet jeans on, Ezra noticed with grateful regret.

"Coffee?"

"Thanks."

Ezra poured the first cup, thick and strong and fragrant, and handed it to Buck, who let the second towel join the first and took the mug with an appreciative expression. Ezra poured his own cup and regarded his guest with practiced reserve. He was not accustomed to being at a loss for words.

Buck wasn't either.

"You want to know how I knew?"

Buck leaned casually against the kitchen counter, sipping his coffee, and Ezra had the uneasy feeling that Buck had control of the situation. He blinked, thought hard, grasped Buck's meaning and decided to pretend he hadn't.

"I beg your pardon?"

"How I knew that you'd talked to Vin ... fixed what was wrong between him and Chris. I know because I saw you haulin' Vin's sorry ass up to Chris' door that night."

"You did?" Ezra could think of nothing more clever to say.

"I did. Saw him take a couple swings at you, too ... good thing for both of you that he was drunk as he was." Buck grinned.

Ezra did not. "Why were you there?"

"To look in on Chris. The man's my friend, and he was hurting."

Ezra nodded. This he could believe; it was Buck's way. Ezra had never known anyone as loyal and caring. It was the very reason he--

"Why'd you do it, Ez?"

"Do what?"

"Go after Vin? Help him and Chris mend things?"

Ezra turned away and pretended to be doing something with the coffeemaker. "Job security," he said coolly. "If Larabee falls apart, the team falls apart. And if the team falls apart, I need to go looking for a job."

"You look ready to anyway." Buck's gaze drifted across the counter and into the living room. Moving boxes lined the walls, neatly labeled, still sealed. "You ain't never moved in, Ezra," he said softly, sadly.
Ezra kept his back to the man. The question had to be asked. "Why are you here, Buck?"

"To look in on you. I don't know you as well as I know Chris, but I know you're hurting like he was. And I don't like to see my friends hurting." There was a soft rustle of cloth, and the sound of wet denim chafing against itself. And then Ezra felt hands on his shoulders, warm and sturdy. "To tell you the truth," he heard Buck say, "I've been hurting, too."

Ezra struggled for composure. He couldn't stop the shiver that went through him, but managed to keep his voice even. Bitter disbelief helped.

"I do believe I've used up all my altruism in the assistance of others, Mr. Wilmington," he said evenly. "There is nothing left for you to draw upon. You'd best be on your way."

The hands stayed on his shoulders, firm but gentle, resisting Ezra's attempt to move away. "I ain't here to take, Ez," a soft voice whispered. "I'm here to give."

And the hands turned him, and the alcohol and the despair in Ezra made him follow them to face Buck. Blue eyes smiled down at him, and the face that framed them moved in close. "Carin' don't mean you're weak, Ez ... it don't mean that you're losin' anything, or that you're in danger."

"You're a fool, Buck Wilmington," Ezra grated.

"Maybe so," Buck agreed easily. "But I'm *your* fool, Ezra Standish. And that's what I came here tonight to tell you."

A kiss, warm and firm as the grip on his shoulders, pressed itself to Ezra's temple, and then another took his mouth. And then the absence of warmth made Ezra shiver as both hands and lips released him.

"I know my way out, Ez," he said. "And now you know your way in. Door's always open. Your back's always covered, whether you think you need it or not. You're safe, whether you believe it or not. You ain't alone in this thing any more."

Buck smiled again, a smile full of warmth and promise, and then turned and walked away. Ezra heard the front door open and close.

He stood there, alone in his kitchen, and listened to the faint sounds of metal contracting as the burner on the coffeemaker cooled, and wondered why the places where Buck's skin had touched his own were still burning. And why his heart felt warm.

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Josiah felt a strange sense of deja vu as he settled on a stool at Inez's bar. The Friday night crowd was noisy, as it had been the week before. Rain was falling again, as it had been seven days ago. Chris and Vin sat at their table in the corner, chairs drawn close to each other, heads bent together, hands and elbows almost touching.

And Ezra Standish sat alone at the bar.

*Yep,* thought Josiah. *Deju vu all over again.*

The bell over the front door rattled and Josiah watched as Buck Wilmington walked in out of the rain and shook like a big dog, sending rainwater flying. He strolled across the room, nodding easily at Josiah, smiling broadly at Inez, bending over to plant a light kiss on the cheek of a favorite waitress. Josiah felt a pang of regret. He glanced at the solitary southerner sitting a few stools away, thought back on the beers he'd shared with Wilmington the week before, and wished fervently that he'd kept his mouth shut.
He watched Buck walk up to the bar to stand behind Ezra and lay his hands on Ezra's shoulders, then lean forward and say something in a low voice. A gesture that any man might make to a friend. Ezra's head came up, and Josiah waited for the storm to break.

But Ezra's face was open, his smile genuine, his eyes warm and welcoming. He turned and slid off the barstool to stand beside Buck and murmured a reply to whatever the bigger man had said. Together they walked toward an open table against the wall, Buck's hand on Ezra's shoulder, Ezra holding his own drink and a beer that Josiah suddenly realized had been sitting untouched in front of the southerner for a while. Buck hooked a chair with his boot and pulled it away from the table; Ezra sat and pulled out another chair, which Buck claimed. He took the offered beer from Ezra's hand, and they both smiled when their fingers came together over the glass bottle.

A flash of lightning strobed outside, and Josiah grinned and tipped his own drink in a toast to no one in particular. Perhaps, now and then, a good deed did go unpunished.

~ ~ ~

Oh, hold them up, hold them up  
Never do let them fall  
Prey to the dust and the rust and the ruin  
That names us and claims us and shames us all

Oh, yes, other hearts were broken  
Yeah, other dreams ran dry  
But our golden ones sail on, sail on  
To another land beneath another sky

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