

A Brand New Sky To Hang The Stars Upon By Scribblesinink

"I'll lend you my lucky tie...." Freddy's words of encouragement faded in the rising thunder in Jake's ears. A wave of dizziness washed over him, the world going black for a second, and he squeezed his eyes shut against the sensation, dimly thinking that drinking on an empty stomach probably wasn't the smartest thing.

As quickly as it had come on, the vertigo ceased. Jake opened his eyes again, fully expecting to find Freddy's half-concerned, half-amused gaze on him, and to hear him make some lame joke about Jake not being able to hold his liquor. Instead, the face Jake saw across from him was... "Bill?"

Bill merely smirked.

This wasn't Anna's place, either.... Swiveling his head around to take in his surroundings, Jake realized with a start that, while this most definitely wasn't the beach bar where he'd been drinking a Corona, he still recognized his surroundings: Bailey's. The mechanical bull was gone, but there was no mistake; even in the dim light of a few smelly oil lamps (*oil lamps?*) he knew the bar and the green-benched booths and the platforms with the tables. And if he'd still had any doubts, he only needed to look at the furthest window—startled, Jake discovered some of the gloom came from the rest of the windows being boarded up—and see the words painted there in reverse: *Bailey's, hot food, cold drinks*.

"What...?" Jake croaked. "How...?" He snapped his mouth shut, thinking he didn't even know what question to ask. And damned if Bill wasn't just sitting there, a self-satisfied half-smile playing around his lips.

Jake looked down at the table and shook his head in an attempt to clear it; he had to be dreaming or something. But Bailey's was still there when he lifted his head again on hearing the door open. A woman came rushing in.

"Did it—? Oh." She slowed down when she caught sight of him. "Jake...."

Jake's furrowed his brow; he didn't recognize her. And though he'd often heard his name spoken in that disappointed tone, it had never before been mingled with such cautious relief and joy.

"I guess it didn't..." Again, her voice faltered, while she scrutinized him more carefully, her eyes narrowing. Jake shifted uncomfortably under her sharp gaze, remembering he'd still needed to get his hair cut in preparation for the job interview. "...work," she finished,

sounding dubious.

Jake stared back at her, racking his brain to try and remember where he might have seen her before. Since she obviously knew who he was. She was pretty, with brown hair and bright, intelligent eyes, even if she looked a little haggard, like she hadn't slept much. But much as he tried, he couldn't put a name to her face. "Do I know you?"

Hurt flashed across her features, before she masked it. Jake felt a stab of guilt, even if he had no idea what he was supposed to be guilty of.

"I guess not...." She blew out a breath and offered up her hand. "Heather."

He took the hand. It was warm in his palm. "Jake." He shot her a lopsided grin. "But you already know that." She nodded, smiling faintly.

With the introductions done, Jake pulled his attention back to his current predicament. "So," he turned to look from Heather to Bill and back, "anyone care to tell me what's going on?" Heather and Bill seemed calm enough, so even though he appeared to be missing a large chunk of his memory, he forced himself to keep his panic at bay. Best figure out first what was what.

Heather's gaze flicked over to Bill. The deputy shrugged. "Not my story to tell." He laughed and leaned toward Jake, lowering his voice. "Don't worry, it shouldn't last long." And with those mysterious words, and a noise that sounded like wings flapping, he was gone.

Jake gaped at the spot where Bill had sat less than a heartbeat ago. "How...?" he gasped. He twisted to look at Heather, but the stunned expression on her face as her eyes met his told him not to expect any explanations from her.

"I didn't know he could do that," she muttered, half to herself.

Jake snorted. "I need a drink." He grabbed the bottle Bill had left on the table, but it was empty. Peering over at the bar, Jake discovered it looked abandoned, the rack almost entirely empty of stock.

"Good idea." Heather gave him a nod and disappeared behind the bar, returning a minute later with two glasses and a jar filled with clear liquid.

"What's that?" Jake dipped his head to indicate the jar.

"Moonshine." She shot him a look he couldn't quite decipher and poured two fingers of

the stuff into each glass. "Don't worry, we got past the kerosene stage eight months ago."

She offered him one of the glasses. Hesitating only slightly, Jake took it. "Where's Mary?"

Heather shrugged. "Off with Eric to see your mother, I think."

Jake blinked. "With Eric?"

Heather gave him another of those startled looks, before she smiled sadly. "That's right, you wouldn't know."

"So, tell me." There were so many questions he wanted to ask her, he didn't know where to start. To buy himself some time, he took a cautious sip from the drink, discovering it wasn't half bad.

Heather slipped into the booth across from him. "It's a long story." She toyed with her own glass, not meeting his eye. "Oh God, you're gonna think I'm crazy."

Jake huffed a quick laugh. "Trust me, I already think something's very off. One minute I'm in San Diego, the next I find myself back in Jericho. So don't worry about what I'll think; just humor me."

She nodded. "You—," she hesitated before shyly glancing up at him, "—time-traveled."

"What?" Despite his reassurances, that had to be the craziest explanation he'd ever heard. "That's insane."

Heather flushed. "I know."

"If it's true...." He thought a moment. "What date is today?"

Heather gave him another look. "August 31, 2007."

Jake started laughing, but the laughter quickly died in his throat when he found her expression remained serious, and even a little sympathetic. But she had to be wrong! His rent was due by the end of next week, and if he didn't land that pilot's job with Saber Airlines, he'd be screwed.

"I'm sorry, but it's true." Heather's voice was gentle, as she reached out and briefly put a hand on his wrist. He discovered he quite liked it, and felt a pang of disappointment when she caught herself and pulled her hand back.

She cleared her throat. "Bill, or I guess I should say Gabriel, since he said that was his name," she gave a vague wave toward the spot Bill had been sitting in when Jake first opened his eyes, "swapped you for... for our Jake, I guess. He said it's because there can only be one of you in each time line."

Jake shook his head wryly again. If she hadn't sounded so earnest, he'd have started looking for the hidden camera a while back. As it was, no matter how crazy the things she was telling him were, he found himself believing her.

"How...?" Jake stopped himself. He'd dearly like to know how Bill (Gabriel?) had done what he'd claimed to have done, but was it really the most important question? "Why?" he decided to ask instead.

"To stop the bombs." She spoke so quietly Jake had to strain to make out the words.

He drew down his brows in confusion. "What bombs?"

"On September 25, 2006, nuclear bombs went off in twenty-three American cities. Millions of people died."

Jake stared across the table at her, shocked into silence. Nukes? On American soil? Who would do such a thing?

She'd spoken tonelessly, as if reading from a news report, which convinced him she was telling the truth more than any display of emotion could have done. The only outward sign of her distress was the way she chucked back the entire contents of her glass in one gulp, before adding, "Jake volunteered to go back and try to find the only man who could stop them." Her eyes glimmered with tears, and Jake assumed it was from the burn of the hard liquor going down her throat.

He frowned as the implications of her words slowly sank in. *So you decided to swap me from my life without even consulting me?* he wanted to ask, but the words refused to leave his lips. It was obvious from the even, distant way Heather spoke when she told him what they'd done that she believed the price wasn't too steep: his life, for that of millions of others.

He snorted to himself, throwing back the last of his own drink before reaching for the jar again. He couldn't disagree with her. He was an at-rock-bottom, penniless screw-up. How could he ever measure up against all those millions of Americans? He swallowed down the bitterness. "How will we know it worked?"

The grateful look Heather gave him made him glad he hadn't voiced his objections. "I

don't know." She shrugged. "I guess if our Jake's successful, this time line sort of... stops. I suppose we'll know when—."

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One would expect the disappearance of a time line to be a bit more spectacular. But as it was, there were no flashing bright lights, no explosions, not even a *poof*. Just, one moment Heather was sitting in Bailey's with Jake, explaining how he got there. The next instant, there was nothing. Not even a void where they'd been. It was as if Heather, Jake and Bailey's had never even existed.

Far off in the dark among universes, only Bill's muted laughter echoed, along with a quiet mutter of, "Mission accomplished." With the sound of a brief flutter of feathers, even that faded.

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