

## Times Like These

By Scribblesinink

"Hawkins." Jake rapped his knuckles against the door, wincing at how loud the sound seemed in the quiet of the night. "Hawkins!" He tried to keep his voice low, so as not to wake the entire building, but still make it high-pitched enough it would travel through the door and wake the man he hoped was sleeping inside.

*What if he's not there?* a cruel voice whispered in the back of Jake's mind. He silenced it; this was the first place to start—no, the *only* place to start if he was to have any hope of succeeding in what he'd come here to do. Second-guessing wouldn't help him one bit.

Again, he knocked on the door. With a soft click, another door, further down the hallway, inched open, and a gray head, hair rolled tight in curlers, peered around the frame, eyeing Jake suspiciously.

"Sorry." He gave the old woman a shrug. "It's an emergency. Matter of life and death." She shook her head disapprovingly, her curlers quivering, and closed the door again without a word. Jake hoped she wasn't going to call the police. If only he could explain to her that it really *was* an emergency: if he didn't find Hawkins, she'd be dead soon, evaporated along with the rest of Washington DC.

He raised his hand, ready to pound a bit harder. Before he could knock again, the door swung open and a hand like a vise clamped around his wrist. "Hawk—."

Next thing Jake knew, he was on his back on a hardwood floor, the black hole of a handgun's bore a mere inch from his nose. *This is familiar*, he had time to think, half-amused and half-startled, before Hawkins hissed, "Who are you?" His eyes glittered suspiciously behind the gun, the rest of his face hidden in shadows. "What do you want?" The muzzle never wavered as he spoke, even while his other hand patted Jake down expertly, quickly finding the Beretta stashed in his belt, and the knife in his pocket. With a quick flick, Hawkins slid both halfway across the room, out of Jake's reach. "Well?"

Jake started to reply, but Hawkins flipped him over onto his belly, snapping tight handcuffs around Jake's wrists before he could draw another breath. Then Hawkins hauled him to his feet and slammed him down on a dining chair with such force that Jake's teeth clacked together.

"If you'd let me get a word in...." Jake complained.

The gun clicked as Hawkins cocked it. "Okay, okay...!"

Jake reminded himself that this Hawkins was not quite the same man as the one he knew from Jericho. He'd have to tread carefully, or he'd end up dead before he could do what he'd come to do. And then it'd all be for nothing. "What's today's date?"

"What?" For a moment, even Hawkins sounded taken aback.

"The date! What's today's date?"

Hawkins straightened, raising the gun. "I don't have time for games."

"Please, Hawkins! Just tell me the date."

Hawkins hesitated a moment more. "September twentieth." He flicked a glance at the clock on the wall that was ticking the seconds away. "Twenty-first, to be precise."

*Dammit.* Jake scrunched his eyes closed for a moment. Four days. Four days to convince Hawkins of the crazy truth he had to tell him, expose Valente, stop John Smith from setting off the twenty-three bombs that had killed millions. He'd hoped he'd have more time.

"Where's Sarah?" Jake peered around the room but saw no sign of the woman. Wouldn't she have shown up by now, woken by the noise, if she'd been around? "Your partner. Is she here?"

"Why would—? No."

"Good." Jake let out a sigh of relief. That was something, at least. If she learned who he was or why he was here.... "You can't trust her."

Hawkins huffed out a breath. "I never trust anyone." He dragged another chair over, turning it around before he sat down. He rested the hand holding the gun on the chair back. "And that's all the information you're gonna get out of me. Now it's time for you to tell me a few things."

Jake gave a rueful chuckle. "You're not gonna like what I have to tell you."

"I'll be the judge of that." Hawkins gestured with the gun. "Start talking."

Jake took a moment to gather his thoughts. "My name's Jake Green. I'm from Jericho, Kansas." Something flashed behind Hawkins' eyes, and Jake knew he'd gotten his interest

now. "Yes, that Jericho. The town where you bought a safehouse. Paid for in cash." He drew another breath. "Your mission will fail, Hawkins. Those bombs you're tracking? Twenty-three of them will go off in four days' time."

It was hard to make out Hawkins' features, lit only by the dim glow of the laptop sitting on the table, switched on but turned so Jake couldn't see what was on the screen. Despite the gloom, though, Jake thought he detected a flash of doubt crossing Hawkins' face. If he hadn't worked with the man so closely over the last months, he would've missed it entirely.

"What are you talking about?" Jake had to admire Hawkins' poker face.

"You know what I'm talking about." He met Hawkins' gaze stare for stare. "I know all about the bombs—because you told me. Because I *lived* it. And if you don't listen to me, it'll all happen again." And he would've given up everything—*Heather!*—for nothing....

His thoughts went back to those last hours in Jericho. When Bill had first suggested the idea, everyone thought it was badly-timed black humor. A bad joke, aimed to make fun of the world's misery. "Excuse me?" Beck had asked, ever so politely, while Emily—putting succinct voice to what they were all thinking—had exclaimed, "You're insane!"

Bill—no, not Bill, but a creature that claimed its name was Gabriel, like the angel, and using Bill's body to communicate—had merely given them a scathing look. Then it *showed* them things.... Showed them.... Jake's mind shied away from the memories. He focused instead on the moment when the real world had returned. and they'd found themselves once again in the sheriff's office in City Hall, in the middle of discussing how to keep Hoffman from rolling over Jericho.

Jake had glanced sideways at Heather, her fingers clasped in his, thinking how amazing it was to hold her hand like that. How incredible that she still wanted to be with him: the fool who'd spent the good part of a year not realizing how much he loved her. That she could still love him, after he'd let her go to New Bern to suffer God knows what, and even after he'd shackled up with Em again. At least he'd had the good sense to quickly realize what an enormous mistake that was.... But it had still taken nearly losing her to Constantino a second time to pull the scales from his eyes and really *see*.

Even then he'd hesitated to let her know, unsure how his confession would be received. He kept telling himself the timing was bad, and they were better off just being friends. Until one night, while they were sneaking back through Hoffman's lines, Chavez had told him to stop being an idiot, reminding him that life was short and regret would last forever.

So he'd finally gotten his courage together and told Heather he was in love with her.... And then he'd kissed her, and she'd kissed him back, and he hadn't wanted to let go until they both ran out of air.

A week later, Bill—Gabriel—had come up with his crazy plan.

"Why?" Jake had asked. "If what you say is true, why would you bother?"

Bill had shrugged. "The apocalypse wasn't supposed to happen like this. But one of you can change it. Reset things, so they're back on course." He'd headed over to the door, smirking, "Why don't I let you discuss it among yourselves? I'll be in Bailey's."

As soon as the door fell shut behind him, the room broke into a cacophony of voices, everyone talking at once: claiming Bill had gone insane, and it wasn't possible, but what if it was, and if they could stop the bombs, who would they best send?

Jake had kept quiet for most of the conversation, Heather's hand warm in his as she'd tightened her grip. He hadn't needed to look at her to know she was thinking the same thing he was: if it could be done, if this Gabriel could really send someone back in time to stop the attacks, it would be him. Always the first one into the fire.

Once everyone else came to the same conclusion, all eyes turned to him briefly, before the others had slipped out of the room quietly, until only he and Heather were left.

She'd been so strong, as he'd gazed down at her miserably, and she'd reached up to cup his cheek. "Heather...." She'd shaken her head, her face pale and her eyes gleaming with tears, but she'd smiled.

"How could we not do this?" Her voice had hitched. "All these people... are we more important than them?"

He'd pulled her to his chest, holding her the way a drowning man might hold on to a lifebuoy, wanting to never let go of her, until she'd gently extricated herself from his grip. "I love you, Jake. Now go. Before I lose my courage."

Jake still couldn't quite remember how he'd made it to Bailey's, his own tears half blinding him. Instinct, he supposed, or habit. He'd found Bailey's empty, except for Bill sitting in one of the booths with Mary's last bottle of scotch in front of him.

Jake had cleared his throat. "I'll do it." His voice had been hoarse. "I'll go back, if you can really make that happen."

It still sounded crazy now, even to him, as he told Hawkins everything. But he'd seen the proof, outside. The White House, Capitol Hill, the Monument: they were all still there, undamaged. Whatever Gabriel was, he wasn't a liar.

"Okay...." Hawkins seemed like a man waking from a bad dream once Jake finished recounting his story for a third time, each time answering different questions. He rounded Jake's chair; an instant later the cuffs fell off Jake's wrists. Jake rubbed his arms where the metal had dug into his flesh, while he silently cheered in triumph. *I did it!* He wished Heather was there to see.

"Okay...." Hawkins holstered his gun. "So, who can we trust?"

"Chavez. Cheung." Jake didn't know much about the rest of Hawkins' team. "Maybe Victor Miller."

"And we only have four days?" Jake nodded at Hawkins, giving him the confirmation he sought. "Let's get to work, then."

As Jake followed Hawkins around the table to where the laptop hummed patiently, he thought again about the woman he'd left behind in the future. He missed her so badly that it was like a physical ache deep inside. But Heather had been right: if he and Hawkins were successful, they'd save millions of people. They'd save Dad, and Bonnie, and so many others in Jericho.... The choice, hard as it had been, had not really been a choice at all.

Maybe, Jake thought, peering over Hawkins' shoulder at the data on the screen, when all this was over, he could go home and find—No. Best not. In this world, without the bombs, he would be nothing but Mayor Green's no-good son, with a shady past and no future. No way would an innocent third-grade teacher who drank light beer and enjoyed crossword puzzles want to get involved with the likes of *him*.

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