

# A Sock's Tale

by Tanaqui

"Jake?"

Jake looked up from trying to fix his mom's coffee machine. Quite a few things had stopped working after the bombs, either from the surges when they lost power and got it back again or the pulse that had cut it off for good. Now the army had restored main power to their house, he was trying to figure out which appliances could be saved.

"What are these?" His mom was holding up a pair of socks. She'd plopped a bundle of clothes down on the far end of the dining table. Glancing at the pile, Jake realized cleaning out his closets was today's way of dealing with her grief at Dad's death. Well, he guessed she couldn't vacuum the house *again*. He looked back at the pieces of the coffee machine in front of him: not that he wasn't doing much the same.

"Jake?" His mom waggled the socks at him and he took another look. One of them had a yellow and red splotch on the toe. "What were you thinking?" She stuck a hand inside the offending item and spread her fingers to better show off the inexpert darn.

Jake stared at the socks, not really seeing them any more, seeing another time and place, hearing a quiet chuckle, remembering....

"Jake?" His mother's voice was softer, closer to. He jumped as she touched his shoulder.

Jake swallowed. "Heather," he croaked. He held out his hand and his mom let him pull the sock off her fingers. "I was round her house the day before we went to Black Jack, and she saw...." His voice tailed off as he looked down at the sock.

"Well, we'll just keep that pair then, shall we?" his mom said briskly, and yet not at all unkindly, handing him the sock's mate.

Jake nodded silently, holding the socks in his hands for a while after his mom bustled out with the rest of the clothes. Then he carefully balled the socks, making sure the smiley face was still visible, and carried them back upstairs.

oOo

Jake breathed in the familiar scent of the town house as he quietly closed the front door behind him. Feeling like an intruder, though his mom knew he was here and had made sure the house would be empty, he climbed the stairs and headed for the room he'd shared with Emily.

Ignoring the signs of her scattered around the room—make-up on the dresser, clothes in the closet—he quickly pulled out jeans and shirts and threw them into the holdall he'd brought. When he'd hastily packed two weeks ago, he'd thought he'd be gone for just a few days. That he'd spend a while out at the

ranch house and get his head straight and be back. But, somehow, it hadn't worked out that way. And then the jeans he'd been wearing when he'd crashed the cropduster had gotten covered in avgas and hydraulic fluid and god knows what else, and the state of his wardrobe had become a bit of a problem.

He noted absently that his mom must have put his winter clothes in storage. Probably when she'd been frantically cleaning after his dad died. Not that he'd need them for a few a months, and by then he and Em would surely have sorted things out.

Turning to the dresser, he began sweeping out underwear in untidy handfuls and stuffing it into the top of the bag. Reaching into the back of the drawer to check he'd not left anything behind, his hand closed on a balled-up pair of socks that had worked their way into a corner. Pulling them out, he saw gray and yellow and red.

Jake let out a snort of laughter. The darn didn't look any better with the passage of time or the knowledge that Heather was alive—though he'd nearly sent her to her death again when he'd dragged her into Hawkins' plot. His heart clenched as he thought about how much she'd braved for the town. About how much she was still doing for Jericho, and how much crap she'd put up with from him because of it: deep in his heart, he knew she was right about letting Beck help them, though his hands still curled into fists every time he saw the major, and he couldn't help getting in a dig every chance that came. And Heather had been the only one not to yell at him after he crashed the cropduster.

He smiled at the memory, smiled down at the socks. Sure, he had plenty more pairs now, and these were winter wool, and hadn't exactly proved comfortable even for the short distance walking back from Heather's after she'd fixed them. And yet...

With another snort, Jake tossed the socks into the top of the holdall and zipped it closed. Taking a last look around the room, his gaze skittering past Emily's things, he softly closed the door behind him and headed downstairs.

oOo

Heather stood on tiptoe to snag the final few items from the drying racks; Jake had hung them almost out of her reach when he'd emptied the washer. Carrying the pile of clothes to the kitchen, she began sorting them, matching socks into pairs.

She noticed, as she turned over the tops of a pair belonging to Jake so they'd stay together, that the toes were rubbed thin, almost through. Looked like Jake was still hard on socks.

Her throat tightened at the memory of her demanding his sock—of how embarrassed he'd been to be caught with a hole—and how he'd grinned up at her when he'd seen the repair she'd made. That had been the day before they went to Black Jack and met up with Ted and Russell and Mike, before she'd headed off to New Bern....

Giving herself a little shake, Heather pushed the memories away and carried on methodically putting socks with their mates. She found another pair of Jake's that seemed close to developing a hole. Well, at least now that things were back to normal, or what passed for normal these days, there was no need for her to inflict another amateurish repair on him; he could just pop into town and buy some more.

She put aside the worn socks—they were different colors, so the good ones didn't even make a matched

pair—and bundled the rest into her arms. As she carried them upstairs to put away, she decided she should check for any more socks that were on their way out, so she could let Jake know how many new ones to buy.

Dumping the clean socks on the bed, she opened the dresser drawer and began working her way through the ones lurking in the depths. As she'd suspected, a fair few of them were in poor condition, which was why they'd ended up pushed to the back.

A flash of yellow caught her eye as she pulled out a pair of balled-up gray socks. Turning them in her hand, her breath caught in her throat. She backed up a step and sat down heavily on the bed, blinking down disbelievingly at, well, at *those* socks, with her crude repair smiling up at her in yellow and red wool.

He'd kept them. He'd—Heather shook her head. No, he'd done more than that. He'd been living at his parents' place when she'd mended the sock; he hadn't moved out to the ranch until after he'd gotten back from Texas. Which meant he'd brought the socks with him, knowing they'd been darned: the way they were rolled up, it was impossible to miss that smiley face. And it wasn't as if he wouldn't have been able to buy new socks at that point: she clearly remembered him dressed in quite a lot of obviously new things after she'd gotten back to Jericho, because they were such a sharp contrast to the ragtag collection of old clothes he'd worn right after the bombs went off.

No. He'd kept the socks. He'd carried them with him to the ranch house. Just like he'd kept the fax she'd sent him in Texas. "Oh, Jake!" Heather closed her eyes for a moment, her laughter hitching in her throat.

Still smiling to herself, she got up and added the darned socks to the pile to go back in the drawer. No need to let Jake know she'd found them; it was enough to know they were there.

oOo

Jake shivered as he fumbled for his house keys, Heather at his side as they headed for the steps. Although they'd had a fine, bright day for it, a chilly breeze had picked up after nightfall.

He gave Heather a sideways glance. "Should I carry—?"

"Let's just get inside." She rubbed briskly at her arm with her free hand, and he guessed the thin material of her jacket wasn't much protection against the wind. She laughed. "Besides, I think it's a little late for that particular custom, don't you?"

Once inside, and with the door shut against the cold, he turned to her and smiled shyly at her. "Welcome home, Mrs Green."

She grinned back at him. "I think that's going to take a bit of getting—oh!" She let out a small squeak as he swooped on her and picked her up.

"But I do think I should carry you upstairs," he smirked, settling her more comfortably in his arms.

She nodded at him, cupping his cheek with her hand and drawing his lips down onto hers for a brief kiss.

After he set her down in the bedroom, they kissed for a long time, her arms twined around his neck and his around her waist. It shouldn't have felt different and yet it did, now they were husband and wife. After a while, she began to back them towards the bed, and he felt her step out of her heels. He realized he couldn't get rid of his own shoes so easily. Breaking the kiss, he pulled away a little. He gestured down at his feet. "I need to...."

"Let me." She twirled him around and, sitting him on the bed, knelt in front of him. He looked down at her as she worked on his shoelaces, wondering how she'd react when she pulled off the second shoe and found—

"Oh!" She went on looking down at his foot, her hand cradling his heel, before she finally set the shoe aside. He couldn't quite tell what she was thinking, her expression hidden by her hair falling forward. He tried experimentally wriggling his toes, feeling the rough wool of the darn rubbing against his skin.

That elicited a chuckle, the response he'd been hoping for. She put his foot down and sat back on her heels, tilting her face up to him. A faint flush had crept over her cheeks, but she was smiling. "No wonder you seemed so uncomfortable when we were dancing!"

"Yeah." He laughed. He'd been aware of the woolen lump inside his tight dress shoes the whole day—but it had been a good thing to be reminded of. He offered Heather a slight shrug. "They seemed like the right thing to wear."

"Uh-huh."

Something about her expression sparked a suspicion. "You knew I still had them?"

She nodded, her flush deepening. "I found them a couple of months after we... after I moved in." She knelt again, so that she could take his face between her hands and hold his gaze. "I love you, Jake Green. Even though you *are* an idiot."

He slid his hands around her waist and drew her to him. "And a very lucky man," he murmured against her lips.

oOo

Jake snapped together the last popper on JJ's babygro and rearranged his son's clothes over the top. "There. All done!" He once again pretended to steal JJ's nose, capturing it between his index and middle fingers, the way he'd done every time JJ had threatened to start grizzling while his father changed his diaper. The gesture produced the expected chuckle from JJ.

With the old diaper bagged for the trash, Jake stretched himself on the bed, propped on one elbow, and began tickling JJ's stomach. "I'm coming to get you!" he threatened, snapping his thumb against his fingers like a beak as he swooped his hand down from above. JJ squirmed and giggled, kicking his legs.

*I could get a sock and make it talk*, Jake thought, pulling his hand back and preparing to dive in again. *I* —. He paused, his hand hovering just above JJ's stomach, as he remembered that, somewhere, there should be the perfect sock....

He was brought out of his thoughts by JJ grabbing on to his finger, an annoyed look creasing his small face.

"Hey, sorry, buddy." Jake tickled JJ again, making him laugh, before he pushed up off the bed. "Don't go anywhere," he ordered JJ with a wag of the finger, before he turned and began rooting through the dresser drawer until he found what he was looking for.

Turning back, he saw JJ was watching him. "Yeah, your old dad's cracked, huh?"

Carefully arranging the sock over his hand, he joined JJ on the bed again and held his hand over JJ's stomach, his wrist bent and his fist curled so that his fingertips were hidden from JJ's view.

"I want to introduce you to someone very important," he told JJ in a serious tone.

JJ gave him a slightly confused look.

"This," Jake straightened his wrist so that the sockpuppet appeared to lift his head, "is Mr Sock. He's the most important sock in the whole world."

JJ focused on the sock, his gaze slightly cross-eyed. Jake moved his wrist from side to side, so it looked like the sockpuppet was shaking its head.

"Yes you are." Jake told the sockpuppet, making it look at him, before he made it look back at JJ. "And do you know why?"

JJ reached out and batted one of the red eyes stitched in the yellow face.

A sound from behind Jake made him glance over his shoulder. Heather was standing in the door, her hand over her mouth, clearly trying not to laugh.

Jake suppressed a grin of his own and turned back to JJ. "I think your mom wants to know why, too. You see, long, long ago, before you were born, Mr Sock was just an ordinary sock...."

He felt the bed dip as Heather came to sit behind him and, a moment later, her hand gently stroking his hair, while he went on telling their son the story of how they came to be a family.

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