

The Bonus

Jared Wilson didn't have to step outside to know his front tire had finally gone flat. The old stake truck had been pulling to the left for the past two miles. He was hoping it would hold until reaching the milling town ahead, but it hadn't and now they were stuck on the mountain, the promised bonus for early delivery of his load fading with the late afternoon sun.

Wilson looked over at the child beside him and wondered if he hadn't made a mistake bringing her along. The small dog curled up in her lap met his gaze but didn't move, neither of them wanting to wake her.

Wilson climbed from the cab, shutting the door gently so as not to disturb his daughter, and shivered as he stepped onto the gravel road. His thin jacket served him well down in the desert, but it provided little protection up here in tall pine country.

He leaned against the radiator and quickly decided he had few options. Without a spare he could stay with the truck and hope someone would come along, which seemed unlikely since he hadn't seen anyone heading in either direction for the past hour, or he could hoof it into town. The road sign about a mile-and-a-half back read three miles to Indian Spring.

“Wake up, Maisy,” he said rocking her gently.

The child’s eyes squinted open. “Are we there?” she said in a soft, dreamy voice.

“No, sweetheart. We got us a flat tire and need to walk a bit. You sit tight and I’ll come round and get you,” he said, scooping up the two remaining stale cheese sandwiches and stuffing them in his pocket.

Wilson walked around the cab and opened the door, being careful to support his daughter with one hand. “You gotta move over,” he told the dog, easing him from her lap with the other. Then, wrapping Maisy in the frayed horse blanket covering her seat, he cradled her in his arms and stepped off the running board.

“Your turn, Sandy. Come on down now.” The dog moved to the edge of the seat, paused and sniffed the mountain air. “Let’s go, Sandy. It’s okay,” Wilson said.

If Wilson feared Sandy would run off, he needn’t have. The dog inched to the side of the road, peered into the darkening forest and backed up against Wilson’s leg.

“Nothing to be scared of so long as we stay together,” he said. Then adjusting his grip of the child, he said, “Okay, let’s go.”

Maisy, still groggy, tightened an arm around his neck and nestled her head into his bony shoulder while Sandy trailed close behind.

They had gone about a half mile when a logger heading in their direction stopped and offered a lift. “That your rig, back there, friend?” he asked once they had settled in, Maisy on Wilson’s lap, the dog on the floor between his legs.

He nodded. “Thought I’d make it to town before the tire gave out.”

“No need to fret. Jake’ll have you up and running in no time.”

“That’s good. I need to get to the lumber camp by morning.”

“What’re you hauling?”

“Generator. They promised a bonus if I deliver it by ten.”

The driver nodded and pressed the pedal. At the edge of town, he pointed down the main street to a low-roofed building fronted by two gas pumps and a red neon window sign proclaiming *Eats*. “That’ll be Jake’s,” he said. “I’ll drop you there.”

“Thanks mighty,” Wilson said when he stepped down.

“Happy to oblige.”

Jake’s was a combination filling station, diner, general store and post office.

Maisy’s eyes popped open as the truck pulled away. Sliding down from her father’s grasp, she looked around and said, “We gonna eat?”

“In a minute, Pumpkin. First, we see about the truck.”

The garage was dark. The only light came from the diner. They entered and stood together by the door, Sandy between them.

“Tell me where I can find Jake, ma’am?” he asked the stout woman behind the counter.

“Ain’t here,” she said. “Probably back in an hour. Maybe sooner, maybe later. Hard to tell with Jake.”

It was the *later* that troubled Wilson. If Jake returned within the hour and they got the wheel back here for the patch, he stood a good chance of making the deadline. Any later, and he’d likely lose the promised bonus. He looked up at the clock. It was nearly six thirty. “How long to the lumber camp?” he asked.

“Which one?”

“Armstrong’s.”

“Whatya figure, Sam, about nine hours?” she asked one of the two men at the counter.

“More like ten. Roads took a lickin’ this past storm. Wouldn’t want to go more than fifteen miles an hour in places. Twenty tops.”

“Anyone else around who can help me with my truck?”

“What’s the problem?” the woman asked.

“Flat tire.”

She shook her head. “’Fraid not. Care for something while you wait?”

Wilson looked down at his daughter. Their last meal was several hours ago, each eating a cheese sandwich, leaving just the two he had stuffed in his pocket. “Maybe coffee, and milk for the girl.”

“Take a seat and I’ll bring ’em over.”

“Where’s your truck?” the other man asked.

“East about a mile and half.”

He nodded. “Happens a lot on these half washed out roads. Lotsa folks don’t often make it that far. But Jake’ll have you up and running. Right, Sam?”

“Yep. Not much Jake can’t fix.”

The woman delivered the coffee and milk. “How ’bout the dog?” she asked. “Looks like he might like something to chew on.”

“That’s Sandy,” Maisy said, rubbing the scrawny dog’s ear. “Named him after Little Orphan Annie’s dog.”

“He’s fine lookin’. Well behaved. I might have a bone in the back, if it’s okay with your pa.”

Wilson lowered his cup and smiled. “He’d like that, ma’am.”

“I’ll see what I can round up,” she said and retreated to the kitchen. When she returned with a good-sized meat bone, Wilson and Maisy were finishing the last of their sandwiches.

“Care for anything else?” she asked.

“What’d I owe for the milk, coffee and bone?” Wilson asked. And when she said milk and coffee would be fifteen cents, no charge for the bone, he lowered his voice and, rubbing his stubble, asked, “How much for a slice of that there pie?”

The woman eyed his frayed jacket and worn shoes. “It’s days-old.”

“No it ain’t,” one of the men said, earning him an instant scowl.

“Is too. Pulled it out of the oven myself.” Then turning to Wilson, “I’d feel guilty charging more than a nickel.”

Wilson looked across the table. “You up for a piece of days-old pie, Maisy?”

The girl’s face lit up. “Sure am.”

“Well, then, we’ll have a piece, ma’am.”

She returned carrying two plates, setting one down before each of them.

“I apologize, ma’am,” Wilson said, pushing his away. “I just meant the one for the girl.”

“I know what you meant. Hers is on the house.”

Wilson clearly didn’t know what to make of the gesture, until prompted.

“Go on. Eat up. Can’t be havin’ stale pie hangin’ around for the flies to get at.”

“I suppose not,” he said. “Thank you.” If there was a fly around, he didn’t see one.

“Where y’all from?” she asked.

“Other side of the flatlands. Old mining town of Lake Ridge. Don’t know why they call it that. No sign of a lake within miles. Might’ve been at one time, but no one I know remembers it.”

“How ’bout you? You ever seen a lake around those parts?” she asked Maisy, whose cheeks were stuffed with pie, while shooting Wilson a playful wink.

Maisy chewed some, took a sip of milk and swallowed. “No ma’am. Just a dry riverbed through town that fills when it rains, but no lake.”

“More coffee?” she asked. And when Wilson declined, she said, “No charge for refills.” Before he could answer she retrieved the coffee pot and another glass of milk while the two men at the counter exchanged glances.

When they had finished, she cleared the table and slid in beside Maisy. “So tell me,” she said, “how’d you get such a pretty name?”

The girl smiled. “Was my mama’s.”

“Ain’t hers no more?”

The smile faded. “She passed.”

The woman nodded. “And how is it you ain’t back in Lake Ridge with your friends?”

“Twas my idea,” Wilson said. “Her birthday being tomorrow, thought we might spend it together.”

Maisy grinned. “I’ll be getting a surprise when we get home. Right?”

“Sure enough,” her father said.

“How old will you be tomorrow?” the woman asked.

Maisy raised herself in her seat, squared her thin shoulders, and replied, “Seven.”

The woman had thought her younger, but wasn't surprised. Just about all the youngsters passing through were undersized for their age. It had been that way going on seven years since the crash.

Meanwhile, Wilson's gaze kept going between the clock and the street.

An older couple came in and took a booth beside Wilson's, and before long they were talking together. The couple said they knew of Lake Ridge, had passed through it several years ago coming west. They confirmed it wasn't much of a town, more of a waystation, to which Wilson agreed.

Unlike Wilson, who was growing noticeably anxious, Maisy came alive with the attention from the others. She had become quite a magpie, he thought, entertaining them with tales of the desert mining community and, with a little encouragement, an old miners' ditty she'd learned in school. Sandy, meanwhile, having gnawed the bone clean, was curled up at Maisy's feet.

As the hour neared seven, Wilson strode outside, searching the quiet street. When he returned, he approached the woman behind the counter and asked, "Any chance of contacting Jake?"

She smiled and said, "Ain't no telephone where Jake's at. But I reckon it shouldn't be long now."

Sure enough, less than ten minutes later headlights bounced across the window and they heard the door of a pickup truck. "That'll be Jake," the two men said in unison. Wilson jumped up, then paused when the door swung open. Seeing a woman, he turned toward the street, expecting Jake behind her.

"Jake, this here fella needs your help real bad," the man at the counter said with a wide grin while pointing to Wilson.

"Well, that's what we're here for," she said, and strolled over. She had a warm glow to her cheeks and an easy smile. She was taller and huskier than Wilson,

with broad shoulders and a grip that encircled his when they shook hands. “Pleased to meet you. What’s the problem?”

“Tire went out east about a mile and a half. I need to get back on the road as soon as possible.”

“Gotta be at the Armstrong camp by ten in the morning,” the man at the counter offered.

Jake gazed at the clock. “Doesn’t give us much time. I’ll throw some tools in the truck and we’ll go have a looksee.”

“Don’t you want something?” asked the woman behind the counter. “You ain’t ate since morning.”

“Had a bite up at the Jones’,” she replied. “Besides, you heard the fella, we don’t have time to lollygag. Come on,” she said to Wilson, motioning him to follow. “Oh, yeah,” she said, turning back. “It’s a girl. A tad over four pounds. Everyone’s doin’ fine.”

As Jake headed out, Wilson looked back at Maisy and Sandy. “Would it be all right if they stayed put till we get the truck moving?” he asked the woman behind the counter.

She nodded. “You go right ahead.”

Wilson thanked her and hurried outside, where Jake was tucking into a pair of bib overalls.

“I wasn’t expecting a woman,” he confessed as they drove out of town.

“Don’t blame you. The name don’t conjure up female images,” she said, before explaining, “Jake was my husband. I’ve been running things since he passed, and didn’t see any call to change the name. One day a stranger came around and asked if I was Jake. That tickled folks and they’ve been calling me that since.”

“And you don’t mind?”

She looked at him and smiled. “Heck no. He was a gentle soul. Went outta his way to help folks. I’m proud to carry it and to keep the business going just like he would.”

“Looks like you got your hands full, what with the diner, post office, filling station and taxi service,” Wilson said.

Jake laughed. “Taxi service? Where’d you get that notion?”

“When you mentioned the newborn back there, I guessed you drove the doctor out to the house.”

Another laugh. “We don’t have a doctor up here. Closest one’s where you’re headed, down at the lumber camp. I fill in as midwife.”

When they reached Wilson’s truck, Jake retrieved her jack, while Wilson shoved large rocks beneath the tires.

“We’ll have this critter fixed in no time,” she said, thumping the tire with her fist. After pulling it off, she looked it over and said, “You really shouldn’t be riding on this.”

Wilson nodded. “This job’ll take care of that.”

Together, they hoisted the tire into her truck, secured it and headed back.

Upon arriving at the garage, Wilson peered into the diner. Maisy and the others were playing some animated game that had the child in stiches and the others laughing with her. Friends back home had counseled against taking her across the mountains so soon after the long winter. Melting ice and snow tended to overflow creek beds, they warned, loosening rocks and boulders and washing out sections of road. Better she remain with them, they insisted. But he saw it differently. He couldn’t leave the girl behind on her birthday, not this first birthday without her mother. She needed to be with him, he told them.

When Wilson joined Jake in the garage she cautioned again against patching the tire. “There’s one in back’ll fit your rig. Ain’t new, but it’s got plenty more miles on it than this one.”

“What’ll it run?” he asked.

“You can have it for six dollars.”

Wilson didn’t have to look in his wallet to know he didn’t have the six dollars, nor did he want Jake knowing it either. He’d have it tomorrow, though, plus more than enough for a whole new set of tires. That is, if he made it in time to get the bonus. Eyeing the tire as if considering her offer, he said, “I’ll replace it on the way back.”

“I’ll stand you for it,” she said. “You can pay after delivering your load.”

“That’s kind of you, ma’am, but I just as soon pay my own way.”

Jake shook her head. There was no getting around a man’s pride. She had seen it time and again since the crash. Able-bodied folks who’d just as soon do without than accept what they perceived as charity.

With the tire repaired and Wilson’s truck idling out front, he entered the diner and found Maisy resting her head on the table, her eyes half closed.

“She got plum wore out,” the woman behind the counter said with a chuckle. “One minute she’s going full speed, next she’s tuckered. You got one sweet child there, mister.”

“I’ve been blessed,” he said. “How much do I owe for everything?” Wilson asked.

“It’s like I said, twenty cents. Fifteen for the coffee and milk and five for the pie.”

“What about that?” he said, nodding at the half eaten bowl of chili on the table.

“She hardly touched it.”

“Still, right is right.”

“That’d be ten cents, then.”

Wilson dug in his pocket and, counting out thirty-five cents, set the coins on the counter. “That’s for your kindness, ma’am,” he said pushing the extra nickel toward her. He was about to retrieve his daughter and Sandy when he paused and turned. “Is it be possible to have a birthday cake for her on the return trip?” he whispered, adding, “I’ll pay in advance.” In the next instant, he was pulling a faded dollar bill from his wallet and placing it on the counter. “Will that do?”

“It’ll more than do,” the woman said, returning two quarters. “Fifty cents is all.”

Wilson scooped up the change. Then looking around, he said to the others, “It’d be real nice if you saw fit to join us.”

“You bet,” the couple replied. The men nodded.

“What’s her preference, vanilla or chocolate?” asked Jake, who had come in and was by the door wiping her hands with a rag.

Wilson smiled. “She’s partial to chocolate.”

“We might even rustle up some balloons,” she said.

“That’d be swell.”

After settling Maisy in the cab and wrapping the blanket around her, and depositing Sandy on the seat beside her, Wilson went and thanked Jake for her help. “I won’t say a word about the cake,” he told her. “It’ll be a surprise.”

“We’ll do it up right,” she assured him.

Maisy’s chocolate cake with seven candles was on the counter promptly at six, a full hour before they expected Wilson, who had telephoned from the

camp earlier that morning saying he had delivered the generator shortly after eight o'clock without a hitch, and anticipated being back in Indian Spring by seven that evening.

By ten o'clock Jake's coffee sat cold and untouched before her. The others had gone home. The ice cream was back in the freezer and the cake put away. The woman behind the counter gathered the balloons in silence, then took down the hand-lettered *Happy Birthday* poster.

The news reached them the following afternoon, when a logger rolled in and told them about the flatbed that missed a turn and went over the side sometime the previous day. He said it wasn't till after daybreak someone came along and spotted the twisted wreck, and a rescue crew was sent down.

"A man and a little girl," he said. "Both dead."

The end.