

BLOOD BROTHERS

by Richard Chizmar

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ONE

I GRABBED THE PHONE ON THE SECOND RING AND CLEARED MY throat, but before I could wake up my mouth enough to speak, there came a man's voice: "*Hank?*"

"Uh, huh."

"It's me...Bill."

The words hit me like a punch to the gut. I jerked upright in the bed, head dizzy, feet kicking at a tangle of blankets.

"Jesus, Billy, I didn't recog — "

"I know, I know...it's been a long time."

We both knew the harsh truth of that simple statement and we let the next thirty seconds pass in silence. Finally, I took a deep breath and said, "So I guess you're out, huh? They let you out early."

I listened as he took a deep breath of his own. Then another. When he finally spoke, he sounded scared: "*Hank, listen...I'm in some trouble. I need you to —* "

"Jesus Christ, Billy! You busted out, didn't you? You fucking-a busted out!"

My voice was louder now, almost hysterical, and Sarah lifted her head from the pillow and mumbled, "What's wrong? Who is it, honey?"

I moved the phone away from my face and whispered, "It's no one, sweetheart. Go back to sleep. I'll tell you in the morning."

She sighed in the darkness and rested her head back on the pillow.

"Hey, you still there? Dammit, Hank, don't hang up!"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm here," I said.

"I really need your help, big brother. You know I never woulda called if ..."

"Where are you?"

"Close...real close."

"Jesus."

"Can you come?"

"Jesus, Billy. What am I gonna tell Sarah?"

"Tell her it's work. Tell her it's an old friend. Hell, I don't know, tell her whatever you have to."

"Where?"

"The old wooden bridge at Hanson Creek."

"When?"

"As soon as you can get there."

I looked at the glowing red numbers on the alarm clock -- 5:37.

"I can be there by six-fifteen."

The line went dead.

TWO

I SLIPPED THE PHONE BACK ONTO ITS CRADLE AND JUST SAT THERE for a couple of minutes, rubbing my temple with the palm of my hand. It was a habit I'd picked up from my father, and it was a good thing Sarah was still sleeping; she hated when I did it, said it made me look like a tired old man.

She was like that, always telling me to stay positive, to keep my chin up, not to let life beat me down so much. She was one in a million, that's for damn sure. A hundred smiles a day, and not one of them halfway or phony.

Sitting there in the darkness, thinking of her that way, I surprised myself and managed something that almost resembled a smile.

But the thought went away, and I closed my eyes, and it seemed like a very long time was passing, me just sitting there in the bed like a child afraid of the dark or the boogeyman hiding in the bottom of the closet. Suddenly — and after all this time — there I was thinking so many of the same old thoughts. Anger, frustration, guilt, fear — all of it rushing back at me in a tornado of red-hot emotion...

So I just sat there and hugged myself and felt miserable and lost and lonely and it seemed like a very long time, but when I opened my eyes and looked up at the clock, I saw that not even five minutes had passed.

I dressed quietly in the cold darkness. Back in the far corner of the bedroom. I didn't dare risk opening the dresser drawers and waking Sarah, so I slipped on a pair of wrinkled jeans and a long sleeve t-shirt from the dirty laundry hamper. The shirt smelled faintly of gasoline and sweat.

After checking on Sarah, I tiptoed down the hallway and poked my head into the girls' room for a quick peek, then went downstairs. I washed my face in the guest bathroom and did my business but didn't flush. For just a second, I thought about coffee — something to help clear my head — but decided against it. Too much hassle. Not enough time.

After several minutes of breathless searching, I found the car keys on the kitchen counter. I slipped on a jacket and headed for the garage.

Upstairs, in the bedroom, Sarah rolled over and began lightly snoring. The alarm clock read 5:49.