

BURY ANOTHER HATCHET

The custom of burying the hatchet originated with the American Indians. Hatchets were literally and ceremoniously buried by the chiefs when opposing tribes came to a peace agreement.

Bill's heart pounded like a jackhammer ripping into a concrete sidewalk. His trembling hands fumbled with his cell phone. What was he going to tell her? His stomach gurgled and churned knowing he could not undo what had just happened. He defiantly held back the urge to vomit. Ricki would know what to do. Ricki always knew what to do. It was her responsibility as the big sister.

Life was so much easier when she lived only two blocks away. Damn her for moving to San Jose and marrying that Elliot guy—a button-down bean counter. He didn't even belch after a loaded chlidog. It would take her two hours to get to Sacramento from there—if the traffic was good. Bill's cloudy head and his misty eyes had cleared just enough to hit her name on his cell. He needed her now.

He plopped his short two-hundred and thirty-pound frame onto the couch. He couldn't sit. Stood up, but his shaking knees were uncooperative. Just move. He paced feverishly in circles while the number rang—desperate to hear her voice. At only two years older, she was always the adult. Although the exact words were never spoken, they both knew she was the sensible one. It seemed like an eternity between the first and second rings. *Answer your damn phone Ricki!*

Ricki knew it was her little brother when the phone rang. It was Thursday. They talked every Thursday—usually about this time of day when Bill got home from work and Elliot was playing racquetball. She had at least an hour of free time. World problems were strategically analyzed and summarily solved. Sometimes an hour wasn't enough. Elliot would bring home Chinese. She had no idea this would be the shortest call they ever had. "Hello..." she said cheerfully.

Her familiar voice was the fresh jolt of energy he needed. Bill's mind was racing now. He didn't know where to start. "I can't believe it Ricki—I just can't believe it!" Bill burst out. His voice was cracking—almost shouting—almost crying.

"What is it? What's wrong?" Ricki pressured anxiously. She could hear him wheezing and panting in the phone. She had heard him upset before, but not like this. He sounded like he was having an asthma attack. Bill didn't have asthma.

"I'm just fuming. I'm so damned mad I can't see straight." Bill stopped pacing for a moment. He needed to focus. His head was pounding and getting mushy again. Ten thousand words raced through his mind, all trying to get out at once. But not even one could find its way to his lips.

"Okay, you've got to relax. Tell me what happened." Ricki had never heard him this distraught before. Bill was over forty now. Did he really need to tell his big sister everything? Yes! She was his sounding board—his leaning post—his confidant. And he was hers. They shared a crying hour when his first wife, Cathy divorced him. He was absolutely certain it was the end of the world. Bill replaced Cathy with Claire. Claire left abruptly when she found out about Carol, the pole dancer.

When Carol became number three, Bill was absolutely certain that she was the proverbial charm he had hoped for. Carol was different. She was blond. What could go wrong? Bill was totally smitten by her long legs. Ricki had to interrupt his inelegant leg stories too many times. Yes, she knew Carol was a former pole dancer. Yes, she knew Carol didn't wear a bra. Yes, she did know where those legs ended. Bill sometimes forgot Ricki was his sister and not one of the guys.

Hearing Ricki's voice had its usual calming effect. She was his life raft in his stormy sea of misery. Bill finally sat. His breathing was still short and rapid. He needed to tell his sister what happened. Carol could be such a stupid bitch sometimes. Stupid—stupid bitch. He wanted to pour out an endless stream of obscenities, but he knew Ricki abhorred that kind of language. He respected that—most of the time. The words stuck and burned in his throat like the dragon roll sushi heartburn he had last Friday.

“Take a deep breath, Bill.” Ricki was growing more anxious by the second. Something was terribly wrong. She remembered a recent conversation she had with Elliot. Being the bean-counting nerd, he can sometimes be, he suggested the Bill shy away from girls whose names started with the letter “C” and try an “A” or “B” to improve his grade. Maybe an Amy or a Betty. Ricki, although amused, thought they might keep that to themselves.

Bill wiped the sweat from his forehead. After the recommended deep breath—and then another, he finally started his story. “Okay—I'm coming home from work today, a little earlier than usual. I really needed to leave early, it was a bad day. I had enough. First, the plumber called in sick. Then, the sheetrock delivery was late, and I had guys sitting around waiting. They still get paid even if they're sitting around, and they take too much joy reminding me of that. You know—it's the usual construction stuff. These things happen all the time. All that's

bad enough. It's not like I'm expecting Carol to have dinner on the table when I get home. I know better. You know what I mean."

"I know," Ricki replied. She was glad to hear some composure return to his voice. "That poor girl couldn't boil an egg without breaking a dish or spilling water."

"Yeah! I finally had to tell her to just stay away from the stove."

"Maybe she couldn't cook, but she could whip up some insane melodrama on a moment's notice."

"No shit! Wait until you hear what she did." Bill's words were flowing now.

"Go ahead, I'm ready."

"Okay, as I get home and pull in the driveway, Ray from across the street catches me and wants to know if I can pay him back some of the money that we've borrowed. He says he's a little short this week. I say, 'We've borrowed? What the hell are you talking about? What money?' He looks at me kinda' funny, like, 'Don't you know?' He tells me that Carol has been borrowing money, for weeks or months, maybe longer, hell—I don't know. My arms are in the air—I'm flailing like a maniac. He said it sounded like I was speaking in tongues."

Ricki gasped. Bill's voice was wavering between sorrowful and panic.

"Then he tells me I'm into him for five hundred bucks now. He said he was pretty sure my head spun completely around. Then I find out she's been up and down the whole damn street. She told John and Linda next door that my boss cheated me out of some pay one week and we were going to have our lights turned off. She did that twice! I'm into them for another four hundred. She told another neighbor that I'd been sick and missed some work, so we couldn't pay the gas bill. I don't know how she got away with that one since my car leaves the driveway every day.

“Over two grand I find out—she borrows some from one, pays some back to another and keeps some. And then does it all over again. I don’t know how many times. She’s into almost every neighbor up and down the street. She’s even into the cat lady on the corner for one-fifty.”

Ricki gasped again. “I didn’t think anybody talked to her. Doesn’t she have about twenty cats?”

“Rumor has it closer to thirty. I don’t know what to do Sis! I give Carol enough money for the house every month. What the hell is she doing with all of it?”

“I remember one time she came home with that Elvis portrait,” Ricki said. “It was for your birthday—wasn’t it something she found at a yard sale?”

“She said it was on velvet, or something like that—claimed it was an original. She was proud of that. I haven’t seen it in a couple of years now.”

“That girl loves yard sales.”

“Who knows what the hell she has going on? And then there are all those damned shoes. She’s got hundreds of them!”

“I know, even Elliot said Carol never met a shoe sale she didn’t like.”

I don’t know where the hell I’m going to get two thousand dollars. I can’t even look at my neighbors anymore.”

“I just can’t imagine, Bill. This is all just too crazy.” Ricki recalled a story that she thought might cheer up her little brother, if only for a moment. He really needed that now. “I remember when I came to help you clean the house one Saturday. You and I swept, dusted, vacuumed and scrubbed everything in sight, and she spent the entire day reorganizing the junk drawer.”

“Yeah, I remember. I don’t know what I’m going to do now...” Bill’s voice trailed off.

“Why Bill? What do you mean? It’s only money.”

Bill let out a deep sigh. He fell back into the couch. Talking to his sister let him forget for a few minutes what had happened. “Well, I come storming into the house. I’m pissed! Really pissed! I’m looking for her. I find her in the kitchen doing something—I don’t know what. It’s not cooking or cleaning, that’s for sure. I think she was looking for something in the junk drawer. She’s got her head phones on. She doesn’t even know I’m there. I couldn’t say anything. My mouth opened, but I couldn’t get out one word. I needed air, so I go out to the back yard.”

Ricki waited impatiently for him to continue.

“Okay. It takes me a couple of minutes. I gather my wits; I think, okay, we can get through this too. I’m going to bury the hatchet. I just stood there for the longest time. I looked around the back yard.” Bill took a long pause. “I’ve been there too many times Ricki—too many times. There are so many hatchets already out there. I look under the magnolia tree and there’s no room for another hatchet there. I look over by the tool shed—nope, not there either. I think I can actually see all those holes where I buried those other hatchets; the bad cooking, the burnt pans, the maxed-out credit cards, she can’t pick up shit, can’t clean anything—and there are all those damn shoes she keeps buying. There must be a hundred hatchets out there—and now this—all this money.” Bill’s voice reached a higher pitch again.

“It’s only money Bill!” Ricki sternly reminded her little brother.

“B-but...,” he stammered.

“You really need to calm down,” Ricki demanded. She decided right then as soon as Elliot got home they would get in the car and go over there before something bad happened. Bill

would just have to hold it together for a couple of hours. She would talk him through this. He would be okay.

“And then I...,” Bill’s shaky voice trailed off. He started pacing again.

“Then what Bill? What did you do? Don’t tell me you’ve done something stupid. You didn’t do something stupid, did you?”

“I think I killed her Ricki.” His heart raced even faster now. The sweat returned to his forehead.

“What!” Ricki shouted in decibels so piercing it scared her.

“I just couldn’t take it anymore. Dad left his old Beretta for me last time he was here. It’s just a little gun—I don’t know what it is. Well—I get it from my nightstand and the next thing I know I’m in the kitchen doorway. She’s still standing there. Her back was to me—doing something—I don’t know what. I pointed it at her. All I could think, was ‘Stupid Bitch.’ It just went off. I didn’t even know it was loaded.”

“No—you didn’t,” Ricki’s voice grew fearful.

“I shot her Ricki. Twice. Shit! I’m still shaking.”

“Is she...?” Ricki bit her lip. She couldn’t bring herself to say it.”

“I don’t know. I saw blood.”

It was a moment before Ricki could speak. Ricki shouted into the phone, “Do I hear sirens?”

Bill stopped in his tracks when he heard the whining screams of the emergency vehicles; then the unwelcome pounding at the door. He ran to the kitchen. *Somebody must have heard the shots and called 911.*

“Bill,” Ricki frantically shouted into the phone. “Bill, don’t hang up!” Ricki could hear shouting at the door.

“Oh, Shit Ricki! She’s trying to sit up. Damn! I never was a very good shot.”

Bill knew what he had to do. He felt the hard steel of the Barretta that he had stuffed into his cargo shorts. He looked into Carol’s sad, pleading eyes and panic rippled through his soul. He hurriedly pulled the gun from his right-hand pocket and hesitated a moment. Then he carefully laid it on the kitchen table and immediately fell to his knees sobbing as the door burst open.

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