

# My Brother's Keeper

A full-length play in one act

by John Scavone

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**Characters** (in order of appearance)

Reverend Brian Edmonds, mid 40's

Adam Edmonds, MD, his brother, two years older

**Setting:** The living/reception room of Brian's residence on the grounds of his church. The front door of the house opens directly into the room, and there is a picture window with partially drawn curtains. Decoration is sparse, the furniture plain, though neither cheap nor worn. At the window is a pair of comfortable chairs with a lamp table between them. On one wall is a large bookcase containing theology, philosophy and fiction. There is also a dining table which serves as a meeting table and has several chairs around it. On the table are pamphlets, note pads and pencils, a volume or two from the shelves. A hallway leads off to other rooms of the house.

**Time:** Night; the present.

## My Brother's Keeper

*At rise, the doorbell rings. A pause, followed by more insistent ringing. Brian enters from the hallway.*

BRIAN

I'm coming, give me a chance!  
*(opens the door)*  
Adam! What are you doing here?

ADAM

Please, Brian, may I come in?

BRIAN

Of course, do. I'm sorry, I'm just a little surprised. As often as I've been out to your place, you've never once set—are you alright?

ADAM

I couldn't stay there anymore, and I couldn't think of anyplace else to go.

BRIAN

Couldn't stay where?

ADAM

The house, anywhere.

BRIAN

What are you talking about? Sit down, sit.

ADAM

*(referring to the table)*

I'm not interrupting something, am I? It looks like you're set up for some kind of meeting.

BRIAN

No, my high school Bible study class meets on Tuesday evenings, they just left. You look like you need a drink.

ADAM

Yes.

BRIAN

I keep a bottle of brandy in the kitchen.

*Brian exits down the hall. Adam paces, checking out his surroundings. Brian returns with a bottle and glass, pours out a short drink.*

Thanks.

ADAM

*He belts it down.*

Another?

BRIAN

Please.

ADAM

*He belts it down, holds out the glass.*

More?

BRIAN

One more. It's medicine, I am a physician.

ADAM

Sip this one.

BRIAN

Don't worry, I won't overdose myself.

ADAM

*He belts it down, hands the glass back.*

Now sit down and tell me what's happened.

BRIAN

Everything has happened.

ADAM

Something has. You don't just show up here, and you look a mess.

BRIAN

Do I? I'm— I've been— out, I've been—

ADAM

BRIAN

Where? Where have you been?

ADAM

Home, the hospital, where haven't I? It's— it's Carolyn, she—

BRIAN

She's sick?

ADAM

She—

BRIAN

What, for God's sake?

ADAM

She's gone, Brian.

BRIAN

Gone? She left you?

ADAM

She left all of us.

BRIAN

You don't mean— how? When?

*(hugs Adam)*

You poor man. Brother, I am so sorry. Please sit down. Here, another drink, you must be just— I'm so sorry. Wonderful woman, she was such a— wonderful— you must be— I'm babbling, I don't know what to say, I'm in shock. Carolyn.

ADAM

Carolyn.

BRIAN

The kids, how are they taking it? Where are they?

ADAM

I called her parents, told them she'd been taken ill, asked them to pick the kids up at school while I— stayed with her. They still don't know the truth, I don't know how I'm going to tell them. And the kids, they're eight and five years old, what can I possibly say to them? I couldn't have them— be around them, have to pretend life goes on. It doesn't, everything's changed, and the kids would only have— I kept seeing her everywhere, then pictured their faces, I couldn't

help myself. Michael and Sarah both look like her, have you noticed that? I had to get away from that house. That's why I came here.

BRIAN

I'm glad you did.

ADAM

I know it's selfish. You must think I'm a horrible father.

BRIAN

I can't judge that about you, Adam. I don't know what it is to be a father, nor a husband. I don't know what it is to have lost someone so close.

ADAM

You don't, no.

BRIAN

Was she sick? We had lunch only a few days ago, she seemed fine, herself. It must have happened suddenly.

ADAM

Suddenly, yes.

BRIAN

No warning?

ADAM

Nothing I saw. I should have. I honestly had no idea it was possible. There are things inside that a person doesn't recognize, and when he does— can I have another drink?

*Brian pours one for him, then exits for another glass. He returns and pours one for himself.*

ADAM

I wouldn't have thought you'd keep liquor in the house, a good Christian minister.

BRIAN

I'm human enough. I like a glass of brandy now and then, even like a good cigar with it. I don't have any of those right now, or I'd offer you one.

ADAM

Wouldn't take it. Smoking's bad for you.

BRIAN

One or two a week isn't so terrible. After all, God put tobacco on Earth, why else if not for our use? And someone taught monks to make brandy. A matter of how and when you use them.

ADAM

Is that justification or forgiveness? Or are those two things the same?

BRIAN

In some ways, maybe they are. Men are a weak species.

ADAM

We can't really control that, can we?

BRIAN

We can try. We don't always succeed.

ADAM

And when we fail, that's sin?

BRIAN

Sin and weakness are a ways apart. As I said, a matter of how and when. What is it, Adam? Tell me.

ADAM

I will, I will. Let me settle down first, I'm still too- I just didn't know where else to go.

BRIAN

You said that.

ADAM

So this is where you live.

BRIAN

Humble but home.

ADAM

Conveniently next door to the church. Comfortable enough, I suppose, a little lonely, kind of spare. About what I'd expect.

BRIAN

It suits me. It's the way we grew up, isn't it? Comfortable was enough, we didn't need anything more than we had. I still don't. You can't take it with you.

ADAM

But in adulthood I've discovered having it while you're here is enjoyable. There are finer things in life. Don't you ever want to taste them, feel them, see how they look on you?

BRIAN

I find enjoyment elsewhere. Simplicity cuts down on my worries.

ADAM

No doubt.

BRIAN

What do all your possessions really do for you? A huge house, fancy cars, a boat with your own name on the back, do they make you a better doctor? Isn't there more real joy in curing people of their ailments? Isn't that why you became a doctor?

ADAM

My possessions say something about me, they say I'm a damn good doctor, one of the best. Respect, I'm respected, people look to me to lead them.

BRIAN

Because of what you own?

ADAM

Because of what it represents.

BRIAN

But do you respect yourself?

ADAM

Yes! I'm not perfect, but yes. I can afford what I have, and I've worked hard for it, I deserve it.

BRIAN

I apologize, I didn't mean to sound like I'm attacking your way of life. It's different than mine, that's all. Most people would choose yours if they could have it.



ADAM

Most people can't. They're probably a lot better off than I am.

BRIAN

What happened to Carolyn? Can you please tell me?

ADAM

Life happened. Life and death, they're the same, aren't they? Death is a part of life. As a surgeon, I know that. Sometimes there's no cure, no stopping the disease, death comes when and how it wants. I don't choose it, I didn't, I swear I didn't. It came, and I couldn't stop it.

BRIAN

You're mortal, like the rest of us.

ADAM

Mortal, that's a hell of a good excuse. Pardon my language. Isn't this a dining room table? Don't you have a dining room in this place?

BRIAN

Yes, but rather than buy another table, I moved this one out here for meetings and study groups, pre-marital counseling, things like that. The parish has a tight budget. I eat meals in the kitchen.

ADAM

*(picks up a pamphlet)*

Human Sexuality. Ooh, pictures. Amazing they can fit the whole story into so few pages.

BRIAN

The kids are supposed to take these home with them, but I don't force them, so they don't. They never take any notes, either. Why should they? They already know more about sex than I do.

ADAM

Didn't you say this was a Bible study class?

BRIAN

I don't just make them read the stories, I try to use the Bible to— stop it Adam, you didn't come here to talk about my ministry! What happened to Carolyn?

ADAM

Gone, just like that.

BRIAN

Dear God, so young.

ADAM

I called nine-one-one, as soon as I saw. The EMTs came, they knew right away it was no use. They covered her and took her out, I just— I— I left.

BRIAN

You didn't go with them?

ADAM

I couldn't. I had to walk, think, try to understand what had happened. I walked from one end of town to the other, and finally came here.

BRIAN

You must be exhausted, please sit down. Was it her heart?

ADAM

No, I could have done something about that, could have saved her somehow.

BRIAN

Then, what?

ADAM

*(studying the bookshelves)*

Still love to read, don't you?

BRIAN

Adam, will you—

ADAM

Thomas Aquinas, naturally. Wait, wasn't he a Catholic?

BRIAN

I like to keep up with the competition.

ADAM

Plato, too.

BRIAN

It's from a college course I took. Will you please sit down?

ADAM

Hemingway?

BRIAN

I have some Steinbeck, Dickens and Tolstoy, what's the damn difference?

ADAM

You don't have to jump on me, I was making conversation.

BRIAN

I'm sorry, but at a time like this, my reading habits—

ADAM

I should read more. I read a lot, I read all the time, medical journals, I can barely keep up with all the latest—I don't know, Bri, I'm tired, mentally. I can't relax, never could, I don't know how. When I think I'm relaxing, I'm not. I lock myself away from the kids and tv, it doesn't matter, I don't give myself any quiet. I'm planning what I have to do, thinking who I have to see, what I need for— I don't know. I never sit down with a book and lose myself.

BRIAN

You must have some means of getting away from it all. Golf, you play golf.

ADAM

All doctors play golf. It's partly about business, partly about belonging to the most exclusive club, which I do.

BRIAN

The status, that's you all over. Like when we were kids, and you would—

ADAM

Don't start preaching at me.

BRIAN

Not preaching, just pointing out—

ADAM

You're preaching, with your holier than me attitude.

BRIAN

I've never said that!

ADAM

You don't have to, it shows on your face, I recognize it.

BRIAN

Who do you think you are to tell me— no, what the hell is wrong with me? Forgive me, Adam, I know you must— Carolyn. Have you arranged the service? Would you like to hold it here, have me speak?

ADAM

No.

BRIAN

Alright. Just wanted to make the offer.

ADAM

I meant no, I haven't arranged the service. Autopsy is automatic with an unexplained death, she hasn't been released yet.

BRIAN

You still don't know what took her?

ADAM

It's— complicated.

BRIAN

Don't you want to sit down? Here, have another drink.

ADAM

Will you join me?

BRIAN

I don't think so. I usually don't have more than one.

ADAM

Moderation.

BRIAN

In all things, if possible. It's best.

ADAM

And when moderation isn't possible?

BRIAN

What is it? What have you done?

ADAM

A lot, I've done a lot. Please, Brian, loosen your rule. I don't want to drink alone.

BRIAN

Sure.

ADAM

*(picks up a framed photograph)*

Mom and Dad, the picture they gave us so we wouldn't forget them after they died.

BRIAN

As if we could. They were so proud of you.

ADAM

You, too.

BRIAN

I know they were. I did used to wonder, though, if they weren't a little bit disappointed in my choice of profession, especially Dad. He wasn't very religious, and I didn't make the splash you did.

ADAM

They'd have liked it if you had married and given them a couple more grandchildren, but other than that— why haven't you?

BRIAN

Married?

ADAM

I've often wanted to ask you. Isn't a minister expected to marry by your age? Do you have relationships with women, do you date?

BRIAN

Yes, not that it's any of your business, I've had relationships. Never worked out, I haven't found the right person yet, someone like—

ADAM

Carolyn.

BRIAN

Your wife.

ADAM

Your diploma. Doctor of Divinity, I didn't realize we share a title. Sorry I couldn't make it to your graduation, in case I never told you.

BRIAN

You were in med school, I didn't expect you to come. You didn't miss anything, it wasn't much of a ceremony.

ADAM

Mom wrote me a letter gushing over it. They were very proud of you. They'd be proud of you now.

BRIAN

They loved us both.

ADAM

The last thing Mom said to me was, "Take care of your brother."

BRIAN

The same thing she said to me. Can I do that for you, Adam?

ADAM

That'll be the day.

BRIAN

Why won't you tell me about Carolyn?

ADAM

I've told you as much as I can, I don't know anything else.

BRIAN

You've told me nothing. How did you discover her, what did you do or not do? There are more answers than you're giving me.

ADAM

Goddamn it, I have none to give myself! I go over and over it, and I can't explain, I wish I was able to!

BRIAN

I don't understand.

ADAM

Exactly.

BRIAN

Are you hungry? I can make us a couple sandwiches.

ADAM

Chicken soup.

BRIAN

Huh?

ADAM

That was Mom's cure-all. It wasn't bad medicine, at that. Chicken soup, sandwiches, it's the same idea. Thanks, I'm not. Hungry.

BRIAN

I'm not, either.

ADAM

And you aren't drinking. Come, bottoms up.

BRIAN

Let me nurse it.

ADAM

Every nurse I've known has said the same thing to me at one time or another. Often but not always the best choice.

*Pause.*

BRIAN

I remember the first time I met her. I was home from school, you brought her for the weekend to meet the folks. They practically choked when you suggested you and Carolyn would be sleeping together.

ADAM

They must have known we already had been.

BRIAN

But not under their roof, by God.

ADAM

We didn't, either. It was torture at our age.

BRIAN

We couldn't help but love Carolyn, the daughter and sister we never had.

*He gets the bottle, freshens  
Adam's drink.*

To Carolyn.

ADAM

Carolyn.

BRIAN

It would've been nice to have had a sister, don't you think? That's how she always treated me. But she was something different to you, so you wouldn't know. It was nice, going to a book sale together, or chatting with her on the phone, feeling like she was my sister. She always remembered my birthday, invited me over on holidays.

ADAM

On behalf of us all. The kids love Uncle Brian.

BRIAN

You've been a lucky man. I'll tell you something I bet you don't know. That weekend you brought her home, she was a little— what shall I call it— flirtatious.

ADAM

What?

BRIAN

She was only trying to get me to like her, mussing my hair, squeezing my wrist now and then, it was innocent. It was nice.

ADAM

I suspected you were developing a crush on her. I see I was right.

BRIAN

Fortunately for us, she loved you. To Carolyn.

ADAM

Carolyn.

BRIAN

I'm going to quit, this is more than I'm used to. You help yourself.

ADAM

Thanks, I will.



BRIAN

What's your favorite memory?

ADAM

Of all time?

BRIAN

Of her. Something pleasant you remember about her.

ADAM

Wow, you're putting me on the spot.

BRIAN

It shouldn't be hard for a husband to think about his wife.

ADAM

You can't imagine how hard.

BRIAN

No, I can't. Maybe I'm not the right person to talk to about this.

ADAM

You're the only one I've got, but first I have to understand it myself.

BRIAN

Those answers will come, and if they don't, it's because they're not important. Knowing why won't change anything.

ADAM

It will change a lot, up here.

BRIAN

A doctor loses patients, death is part of life, your words.

ADAM

She wasn't my patient!

BRIAN

All the more reason not to blame yourself. Something happened that was out of your control, accept it.

ADAM

Everything's always in my control, you know that.

BRIAN

Comes from Dad. A good man, but he lived by strict rules.

ADAM

And strictly enforced them.

BRIAN

Grandma once told me he'd had a difficult toilet training.

ADAM

Then so did you and I, because we're the same way. You enforce rules on yourself.

BRIAN

And you?

ADAM

Me?

BRIAN

Do you enforce rules on yourself?

ADAM

Undoubtedly I do.

BRIAN

Such as?

ADAM

Such as— such as always be the best.

BRIAN

The best you can.

ADAM

No! The best, in everything, have the best of everything.

BRIAN

You're one of the best physicians around, maybe the best, I haven't been keeping up.

ADAM

On staff at two hospitals, chief of thoracic surgery at one of them, a healthy partnership practice, consultancies around the country, I do pretty well.

BRIAN

And all that accomplishment couldn't save her.

ADAM

*(about to drink, flings the glass)*

No, goddamn it, it couldn't!

*Pause.*

Christ, I'm sorry, Brian.

BRIAN

The brandy is your loss, I only have the one bottle. I'd better clean that up.

ADAM

You? I'm the one who did it.

BRIAN

You're obviously- it's not your fault.

ADAM

You condescending little snot. Leave it for the maid.

BRIAN

I have a housekeeper, not a maid, and I'm not going to leave it for Mrs. Jennings.

*Brian exits for a dish towel and dustpan. Returning, he pushes glass into the pan, mops up the floor.*

ADAM

You'd make a good maid, yourself.

BRIAN

No work is beneath me. I'll vacuum later.

*He exits to dump the pan, returns to Adam pouring another.*

ADAM

I'm using your glass, I figured you wouldn't mind.

BRIAN

No.

ADAM  
Sorry again.

BRIAN  
It's okay, Adam, really.

ADAM  
Forgiveness, of course.

BRIAN  
Is that what you need?

ADAM  
Don't we all?

BRIAN  
Indeed.

ADAM  
Where does it come from?

BRIAN  
It starts in here.

ADAM  
The heart, something I know something about. It's an organ,  
nothing else.

BRIAN  
The philosophical heart.

ADAM  
More things in heaven and earth, Horatio?

BRIAN  
Something like that.

ADAM  
The heart is a pump, it pulls blood in at one end and pushes  
it out the other. A simple vital organ.

BRIAN  
The soul, then. Call it yourself, if you prefer. Forgiveness  
has to start there.

ADAM  
What could you do that would be unforgivable? What would be

the one thing, if you did it, you couldn't forgive?

BRIAN

But if I knew I couldn't forgive myself, I wouldn't commit the sin.

ADAM

Let's say you did, anyway, you heeded Satan's call.

BRIAN

That's not what you did! You failed as a doctor somehow. Sooner or later everyone fails, even the best of us.

ADAM

In how many different ways?

BRIAN

Infinite ways.

ADAM

No, they can be counted.

BRIAN

Count yours.

ADAM

If you'll count yours.

BRIAN

Okay, you've got me. Count your failures with Carolyn. I have nothing to compare.

ADAM

I'm curious about something, Bri. I'd honestly like to have a celibate man's opinion of what a marriage should be.

BRIAN

I'm not celibate.

ADAM

Oh?

BRIAN

Not by rule.

ADAM

By choice.

BRIAN

Not by choice.

ADAM

You choose not to do anything sexual without marriage. You're celibate now, at this minute, by choice.

BRIAN

We prefer the word chaste.

ADAM

Chastity, a virtue.

BRIAN

Was that your sin, an affair?

ADAM

Affairs, and no. Ordinary sins. Granted, still sins, but no. Carolyn and I had that sin in common.

BRIAN

Not Carolyn.

ADAM

I'm pretty sure. She must have, she'd have been a fool not to, and she was no fool.

BRIAN

I don't believe it of her.

ADAM

You don't want to, but you easily believe it of me.

BRIAN

I can't seem to say very much right, can I?

ADAM

The affairs meant nothing to either of us. That's sad, now that I say it out loud.

BRIAN

Did you already miss her before she died?

ADAM

Good question. Maybe we missed each other. I hate to think now of her having missed me. No, she didn't, we didn't.