**JAY BENNETT**

*A number of years ago, when I was young and played semi-pro football, I had a teammate who went on to become a star in the pros. We had continued to be close friends all through his career. One night, he called me, in great distress, and asked me to do a favor for him. It meant an awful lot to him and his career. I thought and thought, and then I told him a few days later that I couldn’t do it. This ended our friendship.*

 *Out of this sad experience, I created “My Brother’s Keeper.” Instead of being a friend, I became a brother.*

My Brother’s Keeper *(adapted)*

“Do you swear to tell the truth and nothing but the truth?”

 ***The truth? Nothing but the truth? What is the truth?***

 I raised my hand, my right hand, in the hushed courtroom, and as I did that, my senses began to reel, to reel back to the beginning. The very beginning.

\* \* \*

 I had been sleeping, a restless sleep, and then the clear ring of the telephone cut into me. My eyes slowly opened, and I looked about the silent shadowy room, listening to the cold, insistent ring.

 I was alone in the dark house. Completely alone. My uncle, with whom I lived, had gone off on a fishing trip near the state border.

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 “If the fishing is fine, I’ll stay awhile. If it’s bad, real bad, I’ll come on home. Anyway, I’ll be back before you go on to college.”

 I nodded silently.

 “I’ll drive you up there. See you settled in.”

 “You don’t have to Harry. I’ll manage.”

 “I know you can. But I want to do it.”

 *Ted’s away in his fantasy world, and I’m all you have left*, I thought.

 “Okay,” I said. “You’ll take me up there.”

 The man smiled and started up the motor. Then he waved his lean, tanned hand and was gone.

 I was alone.

\* \* \*

 And now the phone was ringing. I reached over to the night table and picked up the dark, gleaming receiver. The summer curtain rustled noiselessly. Then I heard a voice.

 “Jamie?”

 A slight chill went through me, and I was silent.

 “Jamie?”

 It was my brother. My only brother.

 “You alone?”

 “Yes,” I said.

 “Uncle Harry?”

 “He’s gone fishing.”

 I waited for my older brother to tell me.

 “I’m in trouble, Jamie.”

 *And you need me to bail you out*, I thought bitterly. *I’m your kid brother. Five long years younger than you are, and all the time, all through the years, I had to act like I was the older brother.* My hand tightened on the receiver.

 “What have you done, Ted?”

 “I want to come over and talk.”

 “You slugged somebody in a bar? A guy came over to get your autograph, and he got nasty, and you were with a girl and you . . .”

 “It’s not that,” Ted cut in.

 “Then what?”

 “It . . . it’s hard to explain.”

 My voice grew harsh. “Nothing’s hard to explain. Tell me now.”

 “Let me see you. I have to.”

 I breathed out and looked over at the clock on the night table. The clock Ted had given me as a birthday present along with a thousand-dollar check.

 “It’s three in the morning,” I said. “Let it wait.”

 “It can’t wait. I’m coming over. Whether you want me to or not. I need you.” There was a slight break in his voice.

 And I thought to myself bleakly, *this time it must be bad – really bad*.

 “Okay,” I said. “Come on over.”

 “Thanks, Jamie. I’ll never forget it.”

I was silent. *You will, Ted, you will. You always do.* Then I slowly put the receiver back onto its hook. I sat there in the dark, narrow room a long time, thinking, ever thinking.

\* \* \*

 I let the doorbell ring three times; then I slowly went down the carpeted stairs and walked slowly through the dimly lit corridor to the front door. My big brother stood big and large against the night – a menacing figure. But the face was pale and gentle and the eyes haunting.

 “Jamie.”

 My brother reached out with his large, muscular arms and drew me close, so very close.

I was tall but my head barely reached Ted’s shoulder. I felt a deep tremor of love for the big man, and then the tremor was gone. The bleak feeling was back within me.

“I need you. Need you a lot,” Ted murmured.

I slowly drew away.

“Let’s go into the kitchen and have a cup of coffee, Ted. You look like you could use one.”

“Sure, whatever you say.”

Ted followed me into the neat, yellow kitchen, lifted a heavy wooden chair, swung it about, set it down without a sound and slid into it gracefully. It was all done in one smooth, flowing motion. And, watching him, I thought of the times I had watched Ted weave and run and evade tacklers with an effortless grace. The crowd in the packed stands roaring. His teammates on the sidelines jumping with their hands raised high against a cold autumn sky. And I thought how on the football field, Ted loomed large, so very large. In full control of himself. So very well put together. So finely disciplined. Rarely making a wrong move. Every inch a rounded, mature man. But once he stepped off the field and took off his uniform, he became a child – a huge, gentle child, who got himself into scrapes and had to be bailed out, again and again.

I lighted the jet under the coffeepot.

“What’s it this time?”

Ted looked at my trim, straight back. I was tall and slender, my fine-featured face with the ever-somber look on it always made me appear older than my eighteen years. Ted fondly called me “Straight Arrow.”

“Tell me, Ted.”

“I . . . I hit a man.”

I stared at the blue jet on the gas range. My voice was low when I spoke. “Another bar fight? You’re not a drinker. How do you get into these things?”

“No, Jamie,” Ted murmured.

“Then what?”

“I was driving on Desmond Street and . . . I hit a man. He was drunk and he walked in front of the car. It was very dark and nobody was around. You know how deserted Desmond Street is. You know, Jamie. Dark and deserted and . . . “ His voice trailed off into the silence.

My hands gripped the top of the white range.

“I was sober. Clean sober. It’s the truth, Jamie. The truth.”

“And?”

“I panicked and left him lying there.”

I swung about sharply. My face white and tense. My voice cold and harsh. “What are you saying? What?”

The tears came into Ted’s eyes, his gentle blue eyes. “I panicked.”

I came swiftly over to him.

“And you left him there?” I shouted. My angry voice filled the narrow room.

Ted shivered. His lips trembled.

“How could you do that?”

The big man looked up to me pleadingly. When he spoke, his voice was low, very low, as if he was talking to himself. “I . . . I lost my head . . . It wasn’t my fault. He walked in front of the car. He was drunk . . . came out of the night. From nowhere. I wasn’t going fast. I wasn’t. I swear to you on Dad’s and Mom’s graves that I . . . “

I fiercely cut into him.

“You left him lying in the street? In the street?”

“There was nobody around. Nobody saw it. That’s all that was in my mind.”

“And you drove off?”

“All I was thinking of was my career, and nobody saw it. I wasn’t myself. You know I’m not like that. You know it. I help everybody. I haven’t a mean feeling in my . . . I wasn’t myself. I got scared.”

I reached down and fiercely grabbed him by the shirt. “But he was a human being. Not a dog. You don’t even leave a dog lying in the street and run off.”

“It all happened so fast. I couldn’t handle it. Just couldn’t.”

I slowly let go of the shirt and drew back.

“Was he dead?” And I felt inside of myself an overwhelming pity for my lost brother.

“No, just hurt.”

“How do you know that?”

“I went back. Walked. And there was an ambulance there. I stood where nobody could see me.”

“He was hurt enough to be taken to a hospital,” I said sharply. My voice rose, “Why didn’t you come out of the dark and go over there and face it?”

“I . . . I just couldn’t.”

“The truth. All you needed was to tell them the truth. The truth.”

“Couldn’t do it. Just . . . “

And I, looking at him, knew that he couldn’t.

*You’re lost, Ted. Lost. Ever since Mom and Dad were killed in that crash. You never got over it, and you turned to me . . . to me.*

When I spoke again, my voice was gentle. “And then what did you do?”

“I went back to the car and drove away. Nobody saw me.”

I went over to the window and stared out into the night, the dark, cloudless night. *He did it this time*, I thought. *He really did it*.

I heard my brother’s voice drift over me.

“I spoke to Carmody.”

“Who is he?”

“The team’s lawyer. He wants to talk to you.”

“To me? Why?”

“He . . . he said he’d explain to you.”

“Explain what to me?”

“I don’t know. I really don’t know.”

The desperate lost look in my brother’s eyes pierced through me.

“Jamie, don’t leave me alone. I can’t make it without you.”

*I know. How well I know it.*

“When does this Carmody want me to talk to me?”

“In the morning. Anytime you choose.”

“Okay,” I murmured desolately. “I’ll see him.”

“Thanks.” That’s all the big man said. And I knew that he was too full of emotion to say anymore.

“Get upstairs,” I suddenly shouted. “Get to bed and try to get some rest. You look like a wreck.”

Ted slowly rose. I watched him turn and go to the stairs. Watched him as he swung on the second step.

“I’m sorry, Jamie,” he said. “I always bring you trouble. I’m sorry.”

Then I watched him go up the steps and out of sight.

\* \* \*

“Ted claims that nobody saw him. Nobody. But soon somebody will come forward and say that he or she did see him in the car. It’s happened before in my practice. And I’ve been a lawyer a long, long time. We must be ready.”

*Ready for what?* I thought bleakly.

We were sitting in the high-ceilinged, elaborately furnished office, the three of us – Carmody, Ted, and us. Carmody was a lithe, tanned man with dark alert eyes and a quiet, self-assured voice.

“So far the police have no clues. Not a one. I have some good friends there who will tell me if they come up with any. Such as a license-plate number.”

Carmody turned to me and quietly studied me. He spoke. “I understand you were valedictorian of your graduating class.”

“I was,” I answered.

“And you’ve been accepted to a very prestigious college.”

“Yale.”

“He’s getting a full scholarship. I told you that,” Ted added proudly.

Carmody smiled. “There’s not a blemish on your record, Jamie.”

I knew instantly that I disliked the man, disliked him intensely.

Carmody spoke again. “Your brother needs your help, needs it badly.”

“What does he need?”

“For you to say that he was with you on the night of the accident.”

I stared silently at the man. The room had grown still – very still. Carmody’s voice cut through the stillness.

“Ted was with you all night long. Every minute of it. Never leaving you.”

Ted had risen from his chair, a wild, anguished look on his face. He walked over to the lawyer.

“You didn’t tell me that Jamie would have to do that.”

“We’ve no choice.”

“But it’s against all he stands for. I know him. I don’t want it.”

Slowly and deliberately Carmody responded, “You’ll do as I tell you.”

“No. I won’t hold still for this.”

 “You’ll have to.”

Ted pounded his fist on the desk. “No, no!”

“Keep quiet and sit down.”

Ted’s big hands began to tremble.

“Sit,” Carmody commanded.

The big man slowly turned and shuffled back to his seat.

Carmody’s voice when he spoke was precise and clean. His eyes cold and impassive. “Listen to me. There’s a real world out there. So listen. The two of you.” He paused and then went on. “Ted, you are one of the young stars of pro football today. You made three million dollars your first year. You will make much, much more as you play on. You are sure to become the club’s most valuable property.”

The real world, I thought bitterly. The real world has its own truth.

Carmody was still speaking. “. . . Ted, you did a fool thing. I believe you. It was not your fault. You panicked. But you drove away and left a man lying on the street, not knowing whether he was dead or alive.”

“Lost my head. Lost it,” Ted murmured.

“I know and understand. But you’re going to be called into court. And when that happens, I want to be there at your side with an airtight alibi. And no matter what they come up with, that alibi will pull us through. Do you hear me?”

Ted bowed his head and covered his face with his hands.

Carmody turned to me. “You say you care for your brother.”

“Yes.”

“Then you must do this.”

“Must?”

“Yes. I assure you that nothing will happen to you or him. Nothing.” He paused. “Well, Jamie?”

I looked away to Ted and didn’t answer.

I heard Carmody’s voice. “If you’re thinking of the man who was injured . . . ?”

“I am.”

Carmody smiled. “He’s going to fully recover. And then he’s going to be quietly taken care of. It will turn out to be the best thing that has ever happened to him.”

He leaned forward to me. “Well? Can we count on you?”

I looked from Carmody over to my brother. Ted still sat there, his head bowed, his face still covered by his hands.

I turned back to the lawyer. “You can count on me.”

\* \* \*

The sun was still high and the lake rippled, ripples of gold. Uncle Harry cast his line out again.

“He needs you. He’ll always need you.” Then he said, “I can’t tell you what to do, Jamie. It’s your call.”

“And you think it will work out like the lawyer says?”

Harry nodded. “You’ll end up in court in the witness chair. That’s if you decide to go along with them.”

“You can’t help me decide?”

He shook his head. “I’d give my right arm to help you decide. But I just can’t. It’s your call, Jamie. Yours alone.”

He got up. “I don’t feel like fishing anymore. Let’s pack up and go home.”

He reeled in his line. “It’s getting cloudy anyway.”

But the sun was shining – very brightly.

\* \* \*

The voice pierced the dead silence of the courtroom. “Do you swear to tell the truth and nothing but the truth?”

I raised my right hand and looked over to where Ted sat. The haunted, pleading look in Ted’s eyes. I knew that I would remember that look for the rest of my life.

Within I said: *I can’t do it, Ted. I just can’t*.

And I knew that I could never again be my brother’s keeper. The tears came to my eyes. And *I* bowed *my* head.