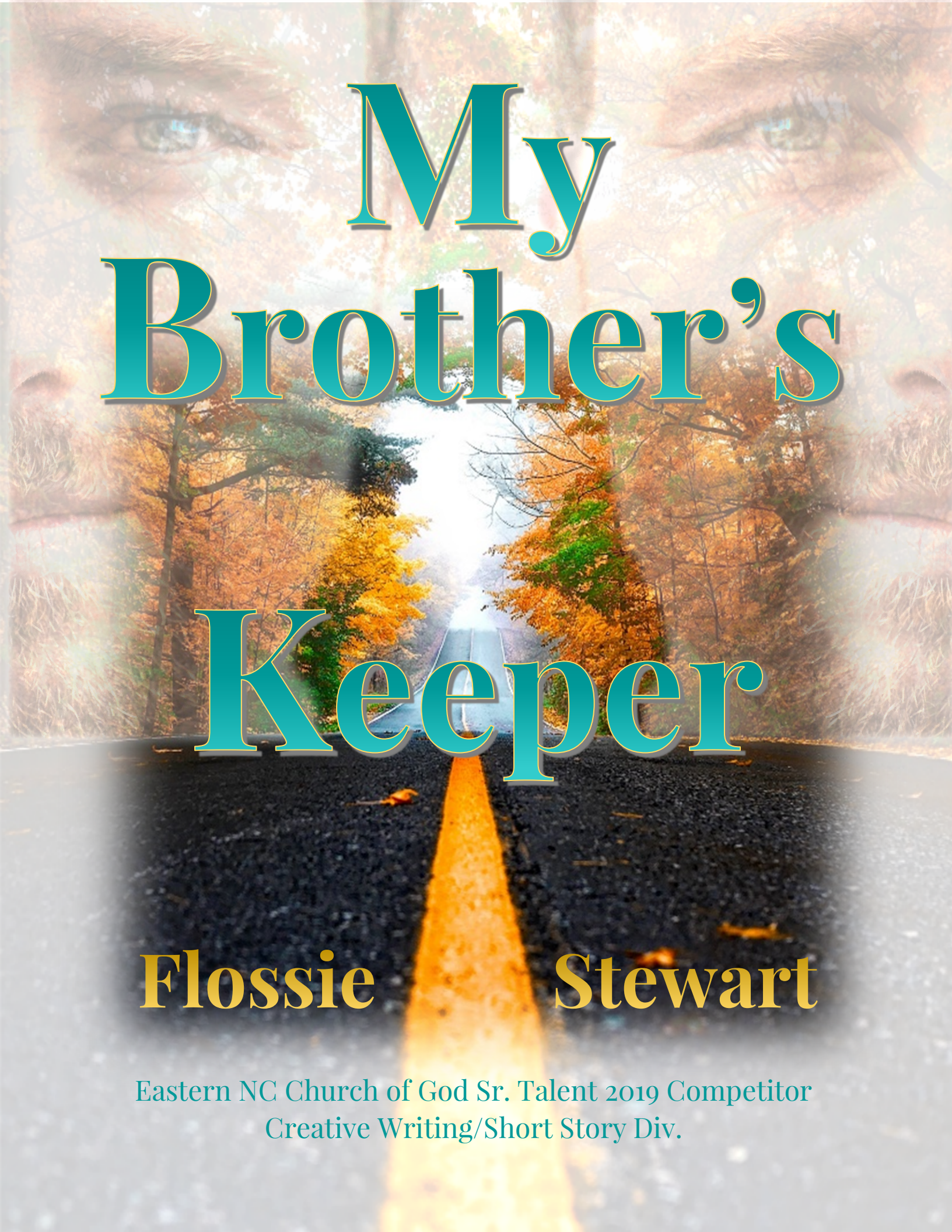




My Brother's Keeper

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Eastern NC Church of God Sr. Talent 2019 Competitor
Creative Writing/Short Story Div.

*P*erfect view. I can see it all from right here in my secret hiding place, here in the park. They don't even see it coming. He was always the smart one, the goody-two-shoes, gonna be a preacher someday one of us. Yeah, we're twins, but he was always the favorite. Well, this oughta fix that. He'll get the blame. Finally, I'll get justice. They'll all just think both babies are his, that he cheated on Francine. We'll see how he squirms out of this one. Let him go crying back to Mom and Dad.

That was all he'd written on that first entry. He'd abandoned the truck and fled the scene. A passing driver had stopped and found her and called it in. He was still out there somewhere. He couldn't have gone far. The hunt was on.

I'm Caleb Gibbman. I was a senior at Crossview High School that year. A quiet, somber atmosphere was all over the school that Thursday morning. Earlier, as we'd all gathered around the flag pole out front, people were crying, praying it wasn't her. Everybody knew of her, but nobody had taken the time to talk to her, or try to befriend her. We all knew she was pregnant, but nobody knew her situation. We'd all shunned her, whether we wanted to admit it or not. If you ask me, it's called judging, and we knew every last one of us was guilty.

As I sat there in homeroom, I kept glancing at her empty desk. Cell phones were lighting up all around the school, the messages all the same. I could see Tommy Fitzbarger's screen as he sat in front of me, texting his girlfriend.

"Did U hear the news?"

"Yeah. I cried. Do U think it's her?"

"Idk, but I got a bad feeling about it."

"Me too. I can't stop crying."

"Maybe we shoulda tried 2 help her."

"I know. I feel so bad now about the way we all treated her."

"UR right. Gotta go, teacher just walked in."

"K. Call me l8r."

"K. Luv U."

"Luv U 2."

I could tell Mrs. Canley had been crying too when she walked in. Like the rest of us, she couldn't help looking at that empty desk. The town had awakened to the news that a young pregnant woman had been found unconscious in a ditch near the woods on Peacetree Road. For all we knew, she might already be dead; they weren't saying. Now, for all of us, the clock was ticking the hours away until we would find out if it was Margie Silverton...

The enticing aroma of spiced apple cider hung in the crisp, cool air as our Third Annual Fall Outreach Festival got underway at Eternal Life Church of God that Saturday. The well-preserved historic building stands prominently on the side of a mountain in our humble little North Carolina town of Crossview. Viewed from the park, it's like a scene of splendor on a canvas God painted, our little church nestled amidst a canopy of bright orange, red, and yellow leaves. For this reason, Pastor Evan Riverman and his wife, Francine, had put up a huge banner announcing the festival, knowing people around town would see it. With the huge turnout so far, it had worked. It was also the stage God had chosen for a lesson on brotherly love we would never forget.

Pastor Evan had made it an outreach event, rather than selling crafts and things. He firmly believed that if the outreach was there, God would provide the funds we needed. The church membership had really grown since we'd started it. Already, the welcome table out front, with Bible literature and materials about the church's outreach programs, had proven him right. Several visitors had already offered donations or asked about joining the church.

Kids laughed and played, while the elderly members watched them, sipping their cider, munching on homemade cookies, and talking. Pastor Evan smiled, enjoying his cider as he watched people moving cheerfully among the tables. He and Sister Francine were especially proud of the young people's enthusiasm. They were always bringing school friends as visitors.

Penelope Sanders, or "Nell", as everyone called her, was the youth outreach coordinator and the teen girls' Sunday School teacher. Her husband, Derrick, was the youth pastor. The youth had eagerly helped put together the care packages Nell and Martha, the choir director, were handing out to visitors as they approached the table. Kristen and Melanie served candied and caramel apples with gospel tracts attached to them, while Annie and Bernadine painted children's faces. The Women's Bible Group served hot dogs, homemade cupcakes, cotton candy, and treat bags. Carl, Ed, Gabby, and Adrienne helped Derrick with kids' games.

Roland and Savannah Taylor had been coming to the church for about a year. They'd been married for five years, and Davey was their first child. They'd just celebrated his fourth birthday in the fellowship hall two weeks earlier. They'd relocated to Crossview for its quiet, tranquil beauty, and both worked for the county school system. They were caring, faithful members, always ready to help out with youth and church events.

Davey was kind of everybody's kid, always bubbling with joy. He'd probably sat with everyone during church at one time or other, so no one noticed when he'd suddenly slipped out of sight. With everyone's attention on the festivities and serving the visitors, nobody realized he'd wandered off. Oddly

enough, the beautiful, albino German Shepherd that had been hanging around earlier had also disappeared.

He'd appeared out of nowhere, wagging his tail, being friendly with everyone. He just wouldn't leave, as if he knew he was supposed to be there. It hadn't taken us long to realize he was blind, yet he'd seemed unusually adept at finding his way around us by listening to the sound of our voices and a seemingly keen sense of smell. Strange thing is, he seemed especially drawn to Davey.

To us, he was just a stray dog that had wandered into the church yard, drawn by the people and the smell of the food. In God's eyes, he was there for a purpose only He knew. No one even noticed when he wandered off.

About fifteen minutes passed before Savannah realized Davey was missing. A look of worry flooded her face as Roland walked over and asked her where he was.

"You mean he's not with you?"

"He was, just a minute ago!"

I thought you were taking him around to get some treats and play the games!" Her eyes anxiously scanned the church yard.

I figured he'd gone to find you!" Roland began to panic.

It quickly went from fun and games to total chaos as the pastor shut everything down and launched the search for the child. Next thing we knew, there he was, walking back into the church yard, a little scratched up, yet perfectly calm. That was only the beginning.

His eyes wide, he pointed back toward the woods, saying, "Baby...doggie findin' baby..." He wouldn't stop until we followed him to where the dog had led him. There, just inside the woods, at the bottom of the hill, the dog lay curled up around...a baby...keeping it warm! It was a little boy, wrapped in a blanket, crying, shivering, his cord still attached. We could see the shock on the pastor's face as Francine read the note the mother had left:

"Please forgive me! I didn't know what else to do! His name is Moses Ezekiel Riverman. Please take care of him. His daddy is Ethan Riverman. I saw the news. He's killed Audra because she was trying to warn Pastor Evan, now he's after me! Good bye, my son. Mommy loves you."

In that moment, my blood ran cold, my eyes scanning the woods as the thought ran through my mind... *Margie. She's out here somewhere...*

I'm sittin' up here, behind this tangled mess of overgrowth— just like my life—watchin' her give birth to our baby, hearin' her soft screams, tears runnin' down my face, knowing she's scared and in pain! She's trying

to stay quiet so they won't hear her. I can't stop crying! What have I done?! It wasn't supposed to happen like this! The one I hit was Audra Taylor, Roland's sister. She could be dead now! I'm a murderer! Knowin' I'd been threatenin' her, she was probably on her way to the church to warn him about me and tell 'em to find Margie. The alcohol, the demons, they're controlling me! I had to stop her! Wasn't really gonna hit her, but my brakes failed! The last thing she saw was my face as my truck barreled straight toward her. Audra's baby isn't mine, but Margie's is. Audra cheated on me. I just wanted to get her back. Then I had to go and get a conscience, started feelin' sorry for Margie. She started talkin' all that Jesus stuff and about gettin' right with God, but I didn't wanna hear it. What a mess I'm in now! What's up with this dog? Looks like a blind albino or something. Just keeps loving on me, such a peaceful feeling...wait, where did he go? It's like he's...gone...

The dog mysteriously disappeared after that. No one could find any trace of him. To this day, there isn't a doubt in our hearts that he was an angel. To tell you the truth, the whole thing still raises the hair on my arms every time I think about it.

The rescue squad got there and took the baby, working to stabilize him while we found Margie, calmed her down, and convinced her to go with them. When the police got there, they found Ethan, still sitting up there crying and mumbling about the dog. Then a peace seemed to come over him. He went willingly, with no resistance. This was the last entry in his little black book they took off him as they handcuffed him.

So, it's a boy. I have a son. I watched her crying as she wrapped him up, wrote the note and left it with him. Now, I'm sittin' up here, watchin' them carry him away, knowin' it's too late for me to ever be a part of his life. Is he even still alive? I wanna make it right, but there's no chance for me now... Jesus, if you're listenin', I'm so sorry for what I've done! I didn't mean to kill Audra... and the baby!...Oh God, please help me! Take all this hate out of me for my brother. Help me turn my life around and I'll live for you! Please, Jesus, save me!

It's been five years. I'm a correctional officer at Rainview River Prison. Margie's my wife now, and she's a wonderful mother to Moses and the new baby sister we just gave him. We named her Lexie Ruth. We just had our five year class reunion. Everyone was overjoyed to see Margie and the pics of our little family.

Audra's baby was delivered by C-section. Roland and Savannah took him in. Her hip was broken, and she was in a coma for four years. The whole town was praying for her. After six months of physical therapy, she's doing great.

Ethan's being released tomorrow after serving five years on a ten year sentence. I'll never forget his face the day she walked into the visitor's center with Ethan Cole Riverman Jr., told him he *was* his, and

that she forgave him and still loved him. They're getting married next Saturday at the church. Ethan Jr.'s gonna be the ring bearer. I still remember the day Pastor Evan first visited Ethan...

"How can you still love me after I tried to destroy you?" He'd asked him, crying.

His simple answer: "Because I AM my brother's keeper, and because there are angels in Crossview."



If you enjoyed this story and know someone who might be uplifted by its message, please feel free to share it with a friend. These short story downloads are absolutely free to share, compliments of K&F Stewart Memorial Ministries, named for my late husband and me, Keith and Flossie Stewart. I give God all the glory, through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, for without Him, I would be nothing (See Christ's words in John 15:5), and Keith and I would have never been able to create these inspirational stories of God's grace. You'll also want to be sure to download Keith's very powerful and inspiring short story, "Pastor John and the Prostitute", which won Runner Up in the 2019 Eastern NC Church of God Senior Talent Competition and was to compete in the Nationals in Gatlinburg, TN in April 2020, although the gathering had to be canceled due to Covid regulations. If you haven't, be sure to download my story, "The Preacher and the Fiddle", which won Runner Up in the 2018 Senior Talent Competition and competed in the Nationals in April/May 2019. I'll have more FREE downloads coming in the near future as well as more inspirational books I will be releasing soon, including *LOGAN Chain of Grace*, which Keith and I worked on together. Go to Riversofgracebooks.com and subscribe so you'll be the first to know! God bless you, and if I can pray for you, please let me know! You can email me at: riversofgracebooks@gmail.com. May we all remember we ARE our brothers' and sisters' keepers, pray for less judging and more of Christ's love, and be His hands reaching out to the hurting around us. And as always, I thank you for your ongoing prayers and support of my ministry in finishing the work we started together as we all continue to work to bring in the harvest until He comes!

In Christ's love and humble service,

Flossie – Phil. 2:13-14 

In loving memory of my husband,

Stacy Keith Stewart,

Sept. 22, 1964 – Aug. 29, 2020

