A photograph of a person from the waist down, wearing an orange jumpsuit. Their hands are cuffed together in front of them with metal handcuffs. The background is dark with a blueish tint, suggesting a prison cell with a window or bars.

THE
LAST PLEA
BARGAIN

"[SINGER] IS EVERY BIT AS ENJOYABLE AS JOHN GRISHAM."

—PUBLISHERS WEEKLY—

RANDY
SINGER

PRAISE FOR RANDY SINGER

“A solid, well-crafted legal thriller.”

BOOKLIST

ON *FATAL CONVICTIONS*

“Intricately plotted, *Fatal Convictions* is . . . an exciting legal thriller with international overtones. In addition to the action and rich cultural information, realistic characters carry the action to its exciting conclusion.”

FAITHFULREADER.COM

“Singer’s legal knowledge is well matched by his stellar storytelling. Again, he brings us to the brink and lets us hang before skillfully pulling us back.”

ROMANTIC TIMES

ON *FATAL CONVICTIONS*

“Get ready to wrestle with larger themes of truth, justice, and courage. Between the legal tension in the courtroom scenes and the emotional tension between the characters, readers will be riveted to the final few chapters.”

CROSSWALK.COM

ON *FATAL CONVICTIONS*

“Great suspense; gritty, believable action . . . make [*False Witness*] Singer’s best yet.”

BOOKLIST

STARRED REVIEW

“Randy Singer never disappoints, [and] *False Witness* is not just your typical legal thriller. Singer expertly combines elements of suspense, action, and intrigue into an explosive combination that really delivers.”

FICTIONADDICT.COM

“Randy Singer is masterful at combining the action and suspense aspects of the novel with the scenes of legal maneuvering.”

CBA RETAILERS + RESOURCES

ON *FALSE WITNESS*

“A book that will entertain readers and make them think—
what more can one ask?”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

ON *THE JUSTICE GAME*

“Singer artfully crafts a novel that is the perfect mix of faith
and suspense. . . . [*The Justice Game* is] fast-paced from
the start to the surprising conclusion.”

ROMANTIC TIMES

“At the center of the heart-pounding action are the moral dilemmas that
have become Singer’s stock-in-trade. . . . An exciting thriller.”

BOOKLIST

ON *BY REASON OF INSANITY*

“Readers will be left on the edge of their seats by
Singer’s latest suspense-filled thriller.”

CHRISTIAN RETAILING

ON *BY REASON OF INSANITY*

“Singer hooks readers from the opening courtroom scene of
this tasty thriller, then spurs them through a fast trot across
a story line that just keeps delivering.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

ON *BY REASON OF INSANITY*

“[A] legal thriller that matches up easily with the best of Grisham.”

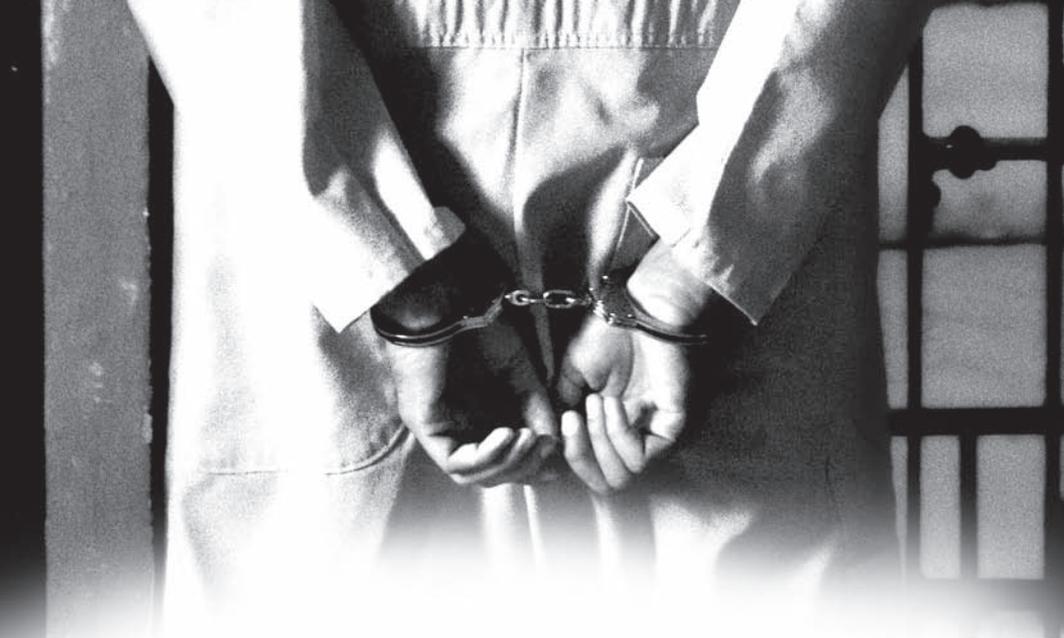
CHRISTIAN FICTION REVIEW

ON *IRREPARABLE HARM*

“*Directed Verdict* is a well-crafted courtroom drama with strong
characters, surprising twists, and a compelling theme.”

RANDY ALCORN

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *SAFELY HOME*



THE
LAST PLEA
BARGAIN

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*To the Somerville girls—Ginger, Alita, and Sara—
whose unrelenting pursuit of justice inspired this book.
Your father was a good man.*

PROLOGUE

THE PARAMEDICS ARRIVED with a speed that surprised Caleb Tate. He met them at the front door of his seventy-five-hundred-square-foot mansion, a house on a large hill in the middle of Atlanta's illustrious Buckhead area. His friends called it "the house that murder built." Caleb Tate was, after all, one of the most notorious defense attorneys in the city of Atlanta—a reputation he had carefully nurtured his entire professional career.

He let the team in and breathlessly provided them with details as they followed him up the winding staircase, two steps at a time. The paramedics struggled to keep up, dragging their oxygen masks and defibrillators and other life-sustaining equipment. Adrenaline pumped through Caleb's body, and he felt as if this whole thing were a nightmare, a scene from a horror movie.

He rushed through the door of the bedroom and stepped aside, his body trembling as he took in the scene as if seeing it for the first time. His wife was sprawled in the middle of the floor, a scoop-neck sleepshirt twisted around her body.

He had lifted her from the bed, placed her on the carpet, and started CPR, tilting her head back and blowing in a breath. She had gurgled and vomited, the night's supper spilling down her cheek and matting her brown hair. He had cleaned her face with her sleepshirt, moved her head to the side, and used two fingers to clear out her throat. Then he'd tilted her head back again and resumed CPR, frantically pumping her chest with the heels of his hands and blowing deep breaths into her lungs. He'd counted out loud, slowing himself down. He kept checking for a pulse. He fought the urge to panic.

When his efforts proved unavailing, he had called 911. He knew it would be too late.

“You might want to step out in the hallway,” an older paramedic said. He was kneeling next to Rikki and had a calm and efficient way about him, as if he might simply be putting a splint on a broken leg.

The team hooked up the defibrillator, but the readout said, “No shock advised.” They stuck a tube down Rikki’s throat, and a machine began pumping breath into her.

“You really need to wait outside.” The man was more emphatic this time. He was a big guy with receding gray hair.

But Caleb *couldn’t* move. His feet were in concrete, and the room was starting to spin.

“I need to stay,” he insisted, his voice soft and distant. He could hear the sirens from other vehicles pulling into the driveway. Blue strobe lights pulsed through the windows. Police officers rushed up the stairs, and another set of paramedics arrived. Before Caleb knew what was happening, the house was swarming with rescue personnel. Somebody gently led him into the hallway, and the questions started flying. When did you find her? Has she had any health problems? What medications was she taking? How long were you gone?

Haltingly, Caleb explained that he had been at a friend’s house to watch a couple of March Madness games. He had crawled into bed next to Rikki and asked her a question, jostling her when he received no answer. He had reached over and touched her again and realized that her skin was cold and she wasn’t breathing. From there it was all a blur—jumping out of bed, doing CPR, calling for help.

He didn’t know how long the paramedics worked on her before the older gentleman came into the hallway with a grim look. “I’m sorry,” he said. “We’ve done everything we can.”

Caleb felt his legs start to buckle, and he grabbed a police officer’s arm. They helped him to the floor, and he placed his head between his knees to catch his breath.

“This can’t be happening,” he said.

“I’m sorry,” one of the officers mumbled.

After a few moments, Caleb managed to rise slowly to his feet and regain some semblance of the composure that made him such a formi-

dable force in the courtroom. He glanced toward the bedroom door and headed for it.

A female officer stepped in front of him. “I don’t think you should go in there,” she said.

He pushed her gently aside. “It’s my house.”

He stopped at the door—the room was littered with medical equipment. Police officers were taking pictures and milling around as if it were a crime scene. At least a half-dozen people froze and looked at him.

“I need a moment alone with my wife.”

The officers and paramedics looked at each other, and a senior officer nodded. “Please don’t disturb anything,” the man said. “It’s just routine, but we need to have things exactly as we found them.” The officers and paramedics left without shutting the door. Two of them stood next to the doorway, engaged in casual conversation. Caleb knew they were watching.

He walked to his wife and straightened her sleepshirt, covering more of her exposed body. He pulled the comforter from the bed and laid it over her, tucking it in around her shoulders and underneath her heels. He pushed her hair out of her face and was shocked at how much she had already changed. The pallor of her skin. The lifeless stare of her eyes. Her mouth open in what seemed like an awkward gasp for a final breath. The paramedics had already removed the tubes.

He thought about the pictures the police had taken, and he knew that the pictures would be leaked and would make their rounds on the Internet. But there was nothing he could do about that now.

Rikki Tate, wife of infamous criminal-defense attorney Caleb Tate. A showgirl in life. She would also be a showgirl in death.

Caleb felt a hand on his shoulder. “I’m sorry, Mr. Tate, but we need to ask you a few more questions.”

Caleb stood and met the officer’s stare. He couldn’t remember the guy’s name, but he had cross-examined this man at least once or twice. Now the shoe would be on the other foot.

Caleb was a realist. He knew he had enemies at every level of law enforcement in the city of Atlanta. And he also knew that as soon as the autopsy results came in, he would be their first and only suspect.

Caleb would cooperate fully. He followed the officer into the hallway and down the stairs to the dining room. He answered every question, fighting off the numbness and fatigue as the reality of the night's events began to sink in. Rikki was dead, and she was never coming back. So young. So much potential. So relentlessly determined to make something of her life. So committed to her newfound faith.

None of that would matter now. It would all be lost in the swirl of rumors surrounding the drugs they would find in her body. It was an American tragedy, plain and simple.

Marilyn Monroe. Anna Nicole Smith. And now, Rikki Tate.

1

FOR THE FOURTH STRAIGHT DAY, I walked through the winding corridors of Piedmont Hospital, heels clicking on the tile floor. I had grown accustomed to the smell of antiseptics and the slow, lumbering elevators that carried me to the third floor. Outside my father's room, I squirted some disinfectant on my hands, just as I had done a few minutes earlier when I first entered the hospital. It had become something of a ritual.

There was no nurse in my father's room, no sign of anything that resembled life.

My name is Jamie Brock. Assistant DA for Milton County. Single and hardworking, with no time in my life for males other than my father, my black Lab, and the eighty-three defendants I am trying to put behind bars.

But at that moment, as I pulled a chair to the side of my father's bed and placed a hand on his forearm, I was also Jamie Brock, daddy's girl.

And at the age of twenty-eight, I would soon be an orphan.

My father had not spoken since his second stroke four days ago. The first stroke turned him into a man I did not recognize. The sharp mind and acid wit gave way to a tender and confused man who looked like my father but fumbled with complex ideas. Sometimes he didn't even recognize his family and friends. The second stroke left him comatose. He had been lying here in this same bed, hooked up to these same machines, attended by the same nurses and doctors, for the past four days. His primary physician, a competent Indian doctor named Kumar Gupta, told me that my dad would never recover. Never give

me another reassuring hug. His eyes would never open and sparkle at the sight of his only daughter. He would never again tell me that he loved me.

Despite Guptara's pessimism, which was shared by every other doctor we consulted, I half expected my father to someday wake up, unhook the machines, change out of his hospital gown, and walk out of the room even as the nurses called after him to stop. My father was a fighter. It was a trait I had inherited.

My brother wanted to pull the plug. But my dad, like most lawyers, had taken care of his clients' affairs and not his own. Even after his first stroke, he'd refused to consider his own mortality and sign a living will. Now the doctors were unwilling to cut the umbilical cord to the machines when there was a stalemate among the children. Especially when one of the children was a lawyer.

And so I rubbed his forearm and tried to ignore the fact that he was wasting away in front of me, losing weight even as nutrition was pumped into his body, the hairy arms becoming drier and more brittle every day.

"Hey, Dad, it's Jamie. They say you can't hear me, but who really knows—right?" The room was still, machines pulsating, my father's chest slowly rising and falling.

I lowered my voice. "Four more days, Dad. Can you hang in there for four more days?"

After eleven years of appeals, the experts said that this time the date would stick. Antoine Marshall, the man who broke into our home and killed my mother three months after my sixteenth birthday, was scheduled to get the needle. That same night, he'd shot my father and left him for dead. My dad had lost three pints of blood but lived to testify. How could I let him die now?

"We expect the lab results to be back on Rikki Tate tomorrow," I told my dad. I had been delivering reports on the Tate case every day. Rikki's death had occurred before my father's second stroke, and we both knew there was foul play. "Caleb Tate is already making excuses. Says that he knew Rikki was addicted to narcotics, but he couldn't stop her."

I leaned closer to my dad's ear. "You were right, Dad. He poisoned her. I can feel it in my bones."

Caleb Tate had represented Antoine Marshall at his trial. I would never forget the day he cross-examined my father, the only eyewitness to the crime. Dad was a great lawyer, but it's true what they say about the best lawyers making the worst witnesses. It was painful to watch Tate dissect my father's testimony piece by piece. If it hadn't been for Judge Snowden, the jury might have set Marshall free.

I took one of my father's hands in both of mine. "I'm going to nail Caleb Tate," I promised him. Antoine Marshall and Caleb Tate were responsible for putting my father in this bed. He had survived the shooting but never fully recovered emotionally. They were also the reason I had been working for three years in the district attorney's office and had never plea-bargained a case. Even now, as I looked at my father's pallid face and brushed his gray hair off his forehead, the bitterness ate at my soul like a cancer. My dream was to indict Caleb Tate within thirty days of his former client's execution.

My father would not be around to see his daughter avenge the memory of a woman we both loved. But I would do it to honor my father's memory. And I would swear to it on my mother's grave.



At home that night, I waited for the latest news report about Antoine Marshall's appeal with a mixture of apprehension and disgust. A friend from the DA's office had alerted me to the story on WDKX. "Shows how desperate he is," my friend had said.

The story had run at six and was scheduled to air again at eleven. An anchor teased the report just before a commercial break, and my palms began to sweat. I braced myself, knowing that Marshall's defense team would stop at nothing.

After the break, the station cut to an interview with Professor Mason James from Southeastern Law School, Antoine Marshall's lead appellate lawyer.

The interview took place in James's cramped law school office. The man looked more like a UFC fighter than a professor. He wore a tight black T-shirt that showed off a bodybuilder's physique—thick neck, trapezius muscles that stood out like cables, huge biceps, and tattoo sleeves covering both arms. He was completely bald with a dark

complexion, square chin, and broad nose that had been on the wrong end of too many fists.

He was, I knew, Southeastern's poster-boy faculty member—loved by most students but detested by law-and-order alumni like me. A convicted felon who saved a guard's life during a prison riot and was then granted a pardon by Georgia's Pardons and Paroles Board. One of only three former felons licensed to practice law in Georgia, he now headed Southeastern's Innocence Project, a clinic that filed truckloads of appellate motions for convicted felons.

The camera zoomed to a head-and-shoulders shot of James with a dry-erase board visible in the background. *4 more days* was written on it.

"Give me a break," I mumbled.

"You can't be serious," the reporter said. She was referencing James's latest appellate filing.

"Dead serious," James said. "No pun intended. There's a nationwide shortage of sodium thiopental right now—part of the three-drug cocktail used to kill prisoners in Georgia. My sources tell me that the state is getting the drug from some fly-by-night supplier operating out of the back of a driving school in England."

James gave the camera a hard look. "You wouldn't put your dog down with drugs like that," he said. "We're just asking for thirty days to investigate."

I scoffed at the TV. It would be funny if it weren't so heart-breakingly sad. Antoine Marshall had shot my mother in the head without thinking twice, desperate for money to buy meth. And now, twelve years after the shooting, eleven years after his conviction, he was complaining about the pedigree of the drugs they would use to gently end his life.

I couldn't wait for Friday to be over.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

DURING MY YOUNGER and more abrasive days as a lawyer, I once wrote that an opponent's legal brief was "a parade of sentences vainly in search of an idea." I'm afraid that the same might be said of my stories without the help of the literary drum majors listed here.

I'll start with Lee Hough, who is both agent and friend, and who always gives great advice at the concept development stage. Thanks also to Michael Garnier, Mary Hartman, and my wife, Rhonda, who helped work on this story even before Tyndale did the heavy editing. I wouldn't even try to do this without you. On this book, I tapped the expertise of Andrew Hall, one of Georgia's finest criminal defense lawyers, who helped this Virginia attorney fill in the cavernous gaps in his understanding of Georgia criminal procedure. All of that is before the editing magicians at Tyndale take over.

Thank you, Karen Watson, for asking the tough and probing questions at the concept stage. (Have you ever considered law school?) As always, your insights (and encouragement) were invaluable. Thanks to Jeremy Taylor for bringing the story into sharper focus and the characters into another dimension. And thanks to Stephanie Broene, the third member of the Tyndale triumvirate, who provided reams of encouragement with just the right touch of constructive critique.

But that's not all. Sometimes, a book is inspired by real events, by people who are larger than life. That's the case here. And I need to thank them too.

Poison. The suspicious death of a spouse. The loss of a father. The pursuit of justice. These are the themes of *The Last Plea Bargain*. They did not come from thin air.

I am indebted to Ginger Somerville-Grant, Sara Somerville, and Alita Miller for allowing me to represent them in their nine-year quest to avenge their father's death. Your fight for justice inspired many of the themes I tried to capture in these pages. Thanks for never giving up. Sometimes, the good guys win.

"Do not be overcome by evil, but
overcome evil with good."

ROMANS 12:21

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

RANDY SINGER is a critically acclaimed author and veteran trial attorney. He has penned eleven legal thrillers and was recently a finalist with John Grisham and Michael Connelly for the inaugural Harper Lee Prize for Legal Fiction sponsored by the University of Alabama School of Law and the *ABA Journal*. Randy runs his own law practice and has been named to *Virginia Business* magazine's select list of "Legal Elite" litigation attorneys. In addition to his law practice and writing, Randy serves as a teaching pastor for Trinity Church in Virginia Beach, Virginia. He calls it his "Jekyll and Hyde thing"—part lawyer, part pastor. He also teaches classes in advocacy and civil litigation at Regent Law School and, through his church, is involved with ministry opportunities in India. He and his wife, Rhonda, live in Virginia Beach. They have two grown children. Visit his website at www.randysinger.net.

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Irreparable Harm
Dying Declaration
Self Incrimination
The Judge Who Stole Christmas
The Cross Examination of Oliver Finney
False Witness
By Reason of Insanity
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The Cross Examination of Jesus Christ

