



DYING
DECLARATION

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RANDY
SINGER

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Dying Declaration

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AND OTHER NOVELS BY RANDY SINGER

“[Singer] delivers a fresh approach to the legal thriller, with subtle characterizations and nuanced presentations of ethical issues. And he’s no slouch with a plot.”

BOOKLIST

STARRED REVIEW, ON *DYING DECLARATION*

“Singer hits pay dirt again with this taut, intelligent thriller. . . . [He] is clearly an up-and-coming novelist to watch.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

ON *DYING DECLARATION*

“Singer gets better with each subsequent novel, and he excels in *Dying Declaration*. . . .”

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PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

ON *FALSE WITNESS*

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PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

ON *BY REASON OF INSANITY*

*For Keith and Jody.
At the heart of this book is a special relationship
between a brother and sister.*

Writing it has made me even more grateful for ours.

1

SHE LOOKED PITIFUL.

She was a plain woman with a prominent nose and an everyday face, made even less memorable by her refusal to wear makeup. She had stringy black hair, puffy eyes, and skin blotched with red marks where she had nervously clawed at her neck. She made no effort to stop the tears from running down her cheeks and dripping on Joshie's head. She hugged him closer to her chest, rocking gently in the recliner and humming softly, stopping the motion only to wipe her child's forehead with a cool, damp washcloth.

She placed the washcloth back on the arm of the worn recliner and kissed Joshie on the cheek. She felt his little body twitch back and forth in a way that mimicked the rocking of the recliner. She resumed her rocking. The twitching stopped.

The little guy was so hot. Motionless, almost lifeless, except for a quiet moaning. His pain was her pain. And it was doubled by her helplessness, her inability to stop the relentless march of the fever or to combat its devastating effect.

She could no longer bring herself to take the temperature of her youngest child, still four months shy of his second birthday. The last reading, taken two hours ago, registered 103. It was probably higher now. It would make no difference because she couldn't do anything about it. And so she cried. And rocked. And prayed.



Thomas Hammond had not left his knees for half an hour. He formed an odd picture, this burly man with the round scruffy face, bulging forearms, and callused hands slumped meekly on his knees—the posture of humility. This was spiritual warfare, and it was a battle that Thomas intended to win.

He prayed in the master bedroom at the other end of the double-wide trailer from Theresa, next to his bed, his head buried in his massive hands.

“Take this fever from us. Spare my son, Jesus.” He said the words aloud, barely audible but soaked with intensity. Over and over again the same simple requests. The story of the persistent widow filling his thoughts. *If I pray long enough. Hard enough.* “Increase my faith. Save my son. Don’t punish him for my mistakes.” He tried bargaining with God—he’d promise *anything*. “I’ll go anywhere, Jesus. Do whatever You want. Serve You with all my heart. Just gimme this one thing. Don’t punish Josh—”

“Dad!” It was five-year-old John Paul, his oldest son, the one that Thomas had nicknamed “Tiger.” The boy called from his bedroom down the hall.

“Your Word says You are slow to anger, abounding in love, full of grace and mercy.” Thomas stopped, the whispered words sticking in his throat. At this moment, it didn’t feel like he served a God of mercy. He felt the anger rising, the frustration of unanswered prayer. And then he felt the guilt. Could his anger be the one thing holding back God’s healing hand? “Show Josh Your mercy—”

“Hey, Dad!” The call grew louder now. Persistent.

“Just a minute, Tiger.” Thomas ran his hand through thinning hair and reluctantly rose. He trudged down the hall to the boys’ room and wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. It was important to be brave.

He opened the door and let the hall light illuminate the cramped quarters that Tiger proudly called his own room, though he shared it with Josh. Tiger sat straight up in bed, clinging to his tattered blankie, his bright blue eyes wide open.

“Keep it down, Son. You’ll wake up Stinky.”

“Stinky” was Tiger’s seven-year-old sister. She had earned her nickname when she was still in diapers. Thomas would talk to her while he changed her, wrinkle up his nose, and pronounce her “Stinky.” The name stuck, and Stinky became a term of endearment. But it was a name that only family used and only around the house. Others called her Hannah.

“I can’t sweep, Daddy. I got some bad dreams . . . again.”

Thomas sat down heavily on the bed and rubbed Tiger’s ragged blond hair. “Well, they’re over now, ’cause I’m here.” He knew what Tiger needed to hear, and Thomas took some comfort in the routine that on other nights could be aggravating. “I’ll beat that old bogeyman up one side and down the other,” Thomas growled. He could see the slightest grin beginning to form

on the young boy's face. He tickled Tiger's ribs and watched the grin grow. "Now just lie down and think your happy thoughts."

"I did," Tiger said. "But then I went to sweep. Daaaaddy?" Tiger drew out the name for maximum effect, then looked up with his best puppy-dog eyes.

"Yeah, buddy?"

"Will you lay down wif me?" Tiger scooted over in his small bed to give his dad some room. They had done this many times before. Thomas's large frame would never quite fit on the small portion of the bed unoccupied by Tiger. But Thomas would try. He would balance himself half on the bed and half off, with one hand on the floor propping himself up, telling Bible stories until he heard the heavy breathing of a sleeping boy.

"Not tonight, Son."

"Please, Dad, dus' one story!" Tiger whined. "Tell me 'bout Abe-ham and his son and how God got them a goat."

Thomas grinned. He could hardly resist the little guy even on normal nights. Tonight he craved the comforting routine of telling bedtime stories and watching Tiger's eyelids grow heavy. But tonight he also knew how badly Theresa needed him. And his prayers for Joshie were not yet finished. God had not yet answered.

"I can't right now, Son. I gotta go check on Mom and Josh again. If you're still awake when I come back, I'll tell you the story of Abraham."

"Okay," Tiger said cheerily. The kid obviously had no intention of sleeping.

Thomas kissed him on the forehead, pulled the covers up around his neck, then turned and walked toward the door.

"Daddy?"

"*What?*" The word came out sharper than Thomas expected. He stopped walking, a little ashamed of himself for taking it out on Tiger.

"I'm firsty."



A few minutes later, Thomas joined his wife in the small living room. His stomach churned as he paced the stained carpet, watching helplessly as his wife continued her vigil—rocking, wiping Josh's brow, humming, and praying. She ignored Thomas.

"Is the fever breakin'?" he asked at last.

Theresa shook her head.

"Have you checked in the last few minutes?"

“Why should I?” Her voice was cold, her face etched with worry. The pressure of believing in things unseen was taking its toll.

Thomas walked behind the recliner and began rubbing her shoulders. He felt the gnarled and knotted muscles of her slender back, and he penetrated them with strong fingers, trying to massage out the tension. It didn’t leave.

“When is the last time you checked?” he persisted.

“Two hours ago.”

“Don’tcha think we oughta check again?”

“Only if we intend to take him to the hospital if it’s still high.” She turned her head and looked behind her at Thomas, pleading with large hazel eyes. She stopped rocking. Joshie didn’t move.

Thomas avoided his wife’s eyes, bowed his head, and shook it slowly. He walked from behind the chair and knelt in front of her. He placed his big hands on Theresa’s legs.

“Just have faith,” he said softly. “God’ll heal ’im.”

Theresa snorted at the suggestion. “I’ve got faith, Thomas. I’ve had faith. But he’s getting worse. . . . Don’t you dare lecture me about faith.” Her voice had an edge that Thomas had never heard before.

Joshie moaned. His little body jerked for an instant; then he curled tighter into a ball, snuggling against his mother’s chest.

“You want me to call Pastor Beckham and the elders? They could git over here and anoint him with oil again, pray for him—”

“I want you to call an ambulance,” she demanded, her voice quivering. “God sometimes works through doctors. How can you just kneel there and let your son suffer while you do nothing?”

“Theres—”

“Here.” She sniffed as she thrust little Joshie out toward her husband. She held the child in outstretched arms, like a sacrifice. “You hold him. You look at your son, and you tell him why he has to die just so you can prove to the world how much faith you’ve got.” She held him there for a moment—her youngest, her *baby*—then turned her head away.

Words failed Thomas. He reached out and took his son, pulling him against his own chest. He felt the heat radiate through his son’s pajamas.

Holding the boy gingerly, Thomas rose to his feet. Only then did he notice, out of the corner of his eye, Stinky and Tiger standing in the doorway to the living room. They were dressed in their pajamas, holding hands. Tiger still clung to his blankie; Stinky held her favorite baby doll.

He turned to face the kids, wondering what they had heard. Tiger's bottom lip trembled, and his eyes were moist and big. Stinky looked confused, fighting heavy eyelids, her blonde curls shooting in every direction.

"Is Joshie gonna die?" she asked.