

**LAST DANCE**

WITH

**DEATH**



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DUNCAN OTHEN

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PRESS

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ECCLESIASTES: 3:1 “There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens.”



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BOOK ONE:

# **A TIME TO MEND**

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# CHAPTER ONE

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**T**od Harding was wishing he could bring his wife back from the dead when he heard a woman scream. He wasn't sure where it came from so he lowered the window of his SUV, letting in the brisk night air while he listened intently. A few seconds later he heard her scream again in the distance and felt an uneasy churning sensation in his stomach.

He opened the door and stepped down onto the asphalt pavement of the empty parking lot, staring into the darkness in the direction the screams had come from. Across an open field, he could see the dim outline of a darkened office building. It was one of the many buildings and warehouses located along the industrial parkway that he knew was usually deserted in the middle of the night. He was sure the sounds had come from somewhere outside that building.

He hesitated and wondered if the woman was actually in trouble, he'd feel foolish if he rushed over and discovered it was just a few teenagers sitting around drinking and laughing. But her screams sounded genuine, and he reminded himself that his past experiences had made him an expert on fear.

He walked quickly to the edge of the parking lot and began to jog across the field towards the office building, stumbling as he stepped

into a small hole in the ground, hidden by foot-high weeds and the enveloping darkness. He continued to run at a steady pace, the night silent now except for the weeds swishing against his pants. Adrenaline-powered images flashed in his mind like a kaleidoscope of unforgettable horrors. Crossing a field at night with his team, no one making a sound, staccato gunfire suddenly erupting, screams piercing the air, sounding eerily similar to the woman he had just heard. Pleas for help from the unseen wounded all around him. No sounds coming from those who were already dead.

As he reached the end of the field, he remembered he had no weapon with him. He stopped when he reached the parking lot on the side of the building, allowing his eyes to continue adjusting to the dark. He saw there was only one car in the parking lot. Its lights were off, but the windows were open, and he could hear the sounds of a struggle.

He hurried over, making as little noise on the pavement as possible. It was a mid-size car, and as he approached the driver's side, he saw the silhouette of a man in the front seat, his head and back were turned away from the open window. Tod crouched down next to the window and looked inside the car. A man dressed in a sweatshirt and jeans was on top of a woman and had his hands around her throat. She was struggling to push him off, but he was too strong.

"Answer me or die," the man demanded in a raspy voice and then loosened his grip on her throat in expectation of a response.

Tod saw the woman tilt her head to the side from underneath the man and notice him outside the window. Even in the dim light he could see her long disheveled hair and sense her panic. "Help me!" she cried out to him. "Please help me!"

Tod grabbed the back of the man's sweatshirt and pulled him off the woman, shaking him as hard as he could, the man's head rolling around like a bobble-head doll. The woman slipped out from underneath the man, opened the passenger door and fell out of the car. Tod noticed the gun on the dashboard as soon as the man reached for it. He let go of the sweatshirt, and as the man's hand closed around the handgun, he grabbed the man's wrist and yanked his arm out through the open window. He then quickly pivoted to the side and banged the man's arm back against the windowpane with such force that it bent his arm

backwards at a grotesque angle. The man grunted in pain, and the gun dropped from his hand, clattering onto the pavement below.

Tod dropped to his knees to look for the gun, and it took a few precious seconds to find it behind the front tire. He finally grasped it by the handle and stood up and saw that the man had gone out the passenger door and was sprinting away in the direction he'd just come from, a fast moving shadow blending into the dark field.

The man paused in the middle of the field and turned back to him. "Hey, Hero!" the man shouted. "You'll be sorry! We'll find out who you are and track you down! You're a dead man!"

He quickly turned around and disappeared into the darkness.

Tod went around the front of the car and saw the woman sitting on the ground. "How bad did he hurt you?" he asked, crouching down beside her.

"Bad enough," she said, looking up at him, a little dazed. "But he didn't kill me. Thanks to you."

"My phone's back at my car. Do you have one?"

She hesitated before answering. "No."

"Okay, I'll go and call some paramedics and the police."

"No, please don't call anyone. I've got to get out of here."

Tod stared at her for a few seconds. "What are you talking about? You're injured. You need a doctor. And we have to call the police before that guy gets away."

She struggled to get up and he reached out and helped her to stand, noticing she was a tall slender woman with long dark hair.

"Thank you for saving my life," she said, pausing to study him as much as it was possible in the dark. "I guess it's a good thing you're a big guy. Where did you come from anyway?"

He gestured towards the distant building. "I was parked over there. I heard your screams."

"What are you doing out here alone in the middle of the night?"

He cleared his throat and shrugged. "Uh, actually it's a long story."

"That's all right, it's none of my business. I'm just glad you were here."

"Me, too."

"What's your name?"

"Tod."

“Well, Tod, it was wonderful to meet you, and I don’t want to seem ungrateful, but I really have to leave now.”

“Leave? You can’t leave. The only med center in town is closed for the night. But I’ll drive you to a hospital.”

“I’ll be fine, really.” She moved towards the driver’s side of the car limping slightly.

He followed her, shaking his head in disbelief. “Why don’t you want me to call the police?”

“They can’t help me.”

“But that guy was going to kill you. Who is he?”

“I don’t know his name.” She stopped by the open door on the driver’s side. “I knew he was following me, but I thought I’d lost him. I made the mistake of stopping at a gas station about a mile from here and went inside to get some food. When I got back in my car, he popped up from the back seat and put his gun to my head and made me drive here.”

“You’re not making any sense; you must have a concussion. You can’t let someone kidnap you at gunpoint and get away with it. He could be a serial killer or a rapist. He’ll do the same thing to other women that he did to you.”

She sat down in the front seat, closed the door, and looked up at him through the open window. “He wasn’t interested in raping me. Well, maybe he would have later, but that wasn’t his main goal.”

“What was his goal, robbery?”

“No, but it’s too complicated to explain.” She reached down to the floor and picked up the car keys and brought them up towards the ignition. He quickly reached out through the open window and took the keys from her.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“What are you doing?”

“I can’t let you drive away like this.”

“Give me my keys!”

He took a step backward. “No, you’re injured. You’re not thinking clearly.”

“Yes, I am. I can recite the multiplication tables, the Gettysburg Address, or anything else to prove it to you. The problem is we don’t have time.”

“Why not?”

“Because you’re endangering both of our lives with every passing second. Please, Tod, give me the keys.”

“Okay, I will. After you answer a few questions.”

“I told you there’s no time!”

“Calm down.”

“Please, I have to leave now. Others will be coming.”

He folded his arms. “First, we talk.”

She leaned forward and put her forehead on the steering wheel and sighed loudly. After a few seconds she looked up at him again. “All right, I’ll answer three quick questions. Anything you want to know. And I promise I’ll tell you the truth.”

“That’s better.”

“And then you will immediately give me back my keys.”

“You have my word.”

“Can I trust you?”

“Absolutely. I just rescued you didn’t I?”

“But then you took my keys from me.” She shook her head. “All right, hurry up. Ask me three questions.”

“Good. Why don’t you want to turn that guy into the police?”

“I already told you. Because they can’t protect me.”

“From who?”

“From the ones who sent him. That was two questions. You only have one more left.”

“Great.” He jangled the keys and frowned at her. “Okay, you said this guy kidnapped you because he had some type of goal. What was it?”

“He wanted information from me.” She paused for a moment. “Something that will change the world.”

“Change the world? How?”

“You’re out of questions, and I’m out of time.” She put her hand out the window. “You said I could trust you.”

He reluctantly put the keys in her hand. “You haven’t even told me your name.”

“I’m Lea.” She turned the ignition and the engine started up with an ominous rattling noise. She looked up at him with sincere gratitude.

“Thank you again for helping me. Now you need to forget you ever saw me.” She paused and shivered. “And pray they don’t find you.”

He watched her drive out of the parking lot with tires squealing and wondered who was so dangerous that he should pray they’d never find him.

He began walking back towards his SUV, and when he was halfway across the field, he thought he saw movement in the trees to his right. He paused and studied the trees carefully and decided it must have been an animal, probably a deer. The man who had fled would be foolish to be hiding there, he no longer had a gun and when the police arrived they would search the surrounding area. He touched the gun that he had stuck into the waistband of his jeans. It was a .44 Magnum, a type often used by professionals. The logical thing for that man to do would be to go back to his car, which was probably parked near the gas station where he had kidnapped the woman.

There was only one nearby gas station in the small town of Hudson, Ohio, and it was over a mile away, which meant it would be a long run to get there. Tod told himself he should simply call the police to pick him up. Let them handle the situation and just walk away. The problem was he didn’t want to. Instead he’d rather drive over and capture the guy himself. He could question him and find out exactly what had just happened and then turn him over to the police. Which was certainly an irrational thing to do, but he didn’t care. He was too curious and even a little angry.

He resumed walking across the field and clenched his jaw as he visualized the man choking Lea. It was sickening to have seen her attacked, and he was confused by what she’d told him. She said her assailant would have eventually killed her, which must be true, the man would have shot him, too, if he hadn’t disarmed him. But she also said he’d been sent to find her and others were searching for her, too. Why? And why couldn’t the police help her? And why did the man shout at him that he was a dead man now? He felt flushed and took a few deep breaths to calm down. He reminded himself that emotion usually caused mistakes, especially anger.

It seemed like he was always tempted to give in to anger, and when he did, it usually only made things worse. A painful fact he first learned

when he was six years old. He remembered the fateful morning when he was struggling to read a comic book out loud to his father and his younger brother in a futile attempt to cheer them up. His father was sitting in a battered metal chair in their front yard wearing a sleeveless T-shirt, reeking of cheap booze and drunk again like he had been most of the time since their mother had died the year before. His younger brother was sitting cross-legged on the ground, silent as usual. He felt the same grief and emptiness they did, but he always tried to disguise it for their sake. He figured if he kept pretending to be cheerful it might make them feel better again.

A car pulled up in front of their house, parked at the curb, and two social workers from Children's Services got out. His father just sat there, slumped over in resigned silence as they told him they had come for his two boys. His younger brother, Michael, had meekly gone with one social worker to their car. But he had desperately pleaded with his father to do something and refused to go until the other social worker finally picked him up bodily and carried him. For the first time in his life, he felt a wave of righteous anger engulf him. He fought ferociously against the man with a fierce rage that he had never felt before, punching and kicking and screaming as the man grimly held him tight against his chest. The man finally dropped him into the back seat of the car with a grunt, where his brother Michael sat staring at him with concern.

He had quickly patted Michael on the shoulder and said a few encouraging words to him and then turned to look out the back window of the car as it pulled away from their small ranch house with ancient white paint peeling off the sides. His father remained motionless, still seated in the chair in the front yard. He waved at him frantically to get out of his chair and rescue them from these men. But his father just stared straight ahead without any expression, his figure becoming smaller as the car traveled further down the street. His father didn't even wave goodbye.

They were placed at the Denton Boys Home, just outside Indianapolis, and he had only bad memories of his years there. He realized now that growing up in that hostile environment had made anger a permanent part of his life.

Tod arrived at the parking lot, opened the door of his SUV, and picked up his phone from the dashboard. If he called the police now they could easily catch Lea's attacker. But then he might not ever find out what had happened tonight.

He looked up and saw the headlights of a vehicle driving down the main road of the industrial parkway. It was traveling well over the speed limit and coming in his direction. Few people had good reasons to be driving in the middle of the night. He wondered if someone was actually coming for him as Lea had warned, so he took out the gun he had taken from her assailant. The car's tires screeched as it made a sharp turn into the parking lot where he stood waiting, and then it roared straight towards him.

Tod recognized the mid-size car as it sped across the parking lot as the one Lea had driven away in. It stopped abruptly next to him and the window went down and the interior lights came on as she leaned towards him. "Get in, Tod!"

"Why?"

"You have to leave right now!"

"You came back to tell me that?"

"I came back to save your life, just like you saved mine. I couldn't drive off wondering if they'll find you. If they do, I'll never forgive myself."

"I don't know who 'they' are, but believe it or not, I can take care of myself."

"He had a phone with him. By now he's already called for help. Others will be coming any minute."

Tod shrugged. "Then I'm calling the police."

"That would be a big mistake."

"And after I call them, I'm driving over to that gas station to find the guy who attacked you."

"You don't understand." Lea glanced back at the road, which was dark, without any headlights moving in either direction. He noticed she seemed a little relieved when she looked back at him. "He ran away in this direction. He probably memorized your license plate number and he'll have you checked out. Then they'll track you down and capture you and torture you to see if I told you anything." She paused and stared at him. "Then they'll kill you."



“Who?”

“Come with me. Leave your SUV here.”

“And where would we go?”

“Someplace where we can hide from them.”

He shook his head in amazement. “This is crazy. We’re wasting time talking while that guy runs back to his car.”

“You’re right, we are wasting time. While you argue with me they get closer every second.”

He moved towards the car and leaned into the window. With the interior light on, he could see her clearly for the first time and was surprised at how attractive she was. Large luminous blue eyes stared at him with genuine concern. She had a fashion model’s high cheekbones and straight nose and an ivory-pale complexion that complemented her long dark hair. He guessed she was in her late twenties, just like he was. From her earlier struggle she had a few scratches and an eye that was getting puffy and would be discolored by morning. He reminded himself that sometimes beauty was a trap, one he didn’t intend to fall into at this stage of his life. “Lea, you need to calm down. When the police get here you’ll be safe.”

“I’ve already told you they can’t protect us.”

“Why? Are you in some kind of trouble with them?”

“No. You’ll just have to trust me.”

“Trust you? I’ve known you for all of five minutes.”

“I don’t want them to kill you.”

“Well, I appreciate your concern. But I’m going to take that risk anyway.” He moved away from her car and pulled out his car keys.

“Unless, of course, you tell me a few things.”

“Like what?”

“Like what happened to you tonight? And who’s after you and why? And what do you know that they’re so desperate to find?”

“It’s too long of a story.”

“I have plenty of time.”

“No, you don’t.”

“If you won’t tell me, then I’m going after that guy.” He turned toward his SUV.

“All right!”

He paused. "All right, what?"

She groaned and brushed back a long strand of hair from her face.

"If you come with me I'll tell you some things."

"Everything I want to know?"

"Things that will be safe for you to know."

"That's not good enough."

"Then I will tell you something right now. It's the most important thing for you to know." She glanced again at the dark road behind her.

"Millions of lives are at stake."

"Why?"

She stared at him for a few seconds with searing intensity. "Come with me and find out."

He put his keys back in his pocket and opened the passenger door of her car and got in.