

**ZONDERVAN™**

*Wounded Healer*

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**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Fleisher, Donna, 1965-

Wounded healer / Donna Fleisher.

p. cm.

ISBN-10: 0-310-26394-8 (softcover)

ISBN-13: 978-0-310-26394-4 (softcover)

I. Title.

PS3606.L454W68 2005

813'.6—dc22

2005002987

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*Interior design by Michelle Espinoza*

*Printed in the United States of America*

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05 06 07 08 09 10 11 12 /❖ DCI/ 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

# ONE

CHRISTINA MCINTYRE. GOOD. SHE STILL knew her own name.

*Arms, legs, fingers, and—* She wiggled her toes. Good. Still intact. She opened her eyes slowly, blinking carefully, trying to focus. *The cabin. Timmons Trail.* She knew where she was.

Why was she on the floor? She started to lift up but froze as a bolt of agony ripped through her front to back, top to bottom. Breath stuck in her throat as her eyes pinched shut; she fell back and for a full minute did not move.

*This . . . is not a dream. I'm really hurt. How? What happened?*  
Cold darkness surrounded her. Night had fallen.

*This . . . is not good. I am so late.*

Her breath came in puffs. Sharp stabs knifed deep through her right side with each new breath, as fear trickled into her blood. Carefully, she brought her hands around to check the damage.

Her hands were bare. Both of them. Where were her gloves? Her fingers ached with cold. It didn't make any sense. So cold, all over. The long-sleeved thermal shirt she wore under her bright red San Juan Search and Rescue jacket usually kept her warm enough, even on the coldest nights.

Her jacket was gone.

Panic swelled inside her, stealing her breath, returning it only in short gasps. Pain split through her with every breath. She reached her left hand around to feel for damage. She winced. If ribs weren't broken inside her, they were cracked. She cautiously lifted her hand and felt the back of her head. The lump she found there triggered a rush of rote emergency procedure through her mind. *Blunt force trauma to the head—loss of consciousness, moderate duration—contusion, severe*

*swelling, possible con—* She forced it all away, silently mumbling, *Yeah, yeah, yeah.* She lowered her hand. *I'll survive. Just . . . breathe.*

Too cold. She needed her gloves, her jacket. How could they possibly be gone? She'd freeze if she didn't find them—she needed them; why would she take them off?

She needed her flashlight. In the deepening darkness, she could tell the door of the cabin was open wide. *Did I come through the door and fall? I tripped over the door stop?* One of the table chairs lay on its side by her feet. Did she knock it over as she fell? Did she fall on top of it? That could explain possible broken ribs. And then she hit her head on the floor and passed out? Had she always been this clumsy?

Closing her eyes, she wanted to sleep. She could have slept, if it wasn't for the nagging stabs in her side.

She needed help. This irritated her. She hated even the thought of it—the rescuer needed rescuing. Because she tripped over her own big feet. The guys would love this. They'd want to haul her out on a litter just to embarrass her. She cringed.

But tonight, and soon, if someone didn't help her down off this mountain, she didn't think she would make it home.

*That's just great. And we were supposed to go out tonight.* Mexican with Travis. Her stomach churned and she groaned. That would be the last straw, throwing up all over the floor of the cabin.

*Get up and get to the radio.* Nothing to it. Every cabin in the San Juan District Three Search and Rescue region had a radio. If she could just stand up. Maybe she should light the kerosene lamp first. She needed to find her jacket.

If she could just stand up.

Grunting, panting, squeezing tears from her eyes, hoping no one was watching or listening to her pathetic display, she forced herself up and steadied herself against the table. That was it for a few minutes; quelling the dizziness and drawing in simple breaths had become all she cared about in the world.

She breathed; the frozen air burned her lungs, then hushed out on clouds of steam. *Light the lamp first, find my jacket and gloves, then call*

*for help.* Easy plan. As she made her way around the table to the other side of the cabin, the plan started to concern her. Maybe not so easy after all. The kerosene lamp hung from a hook that had been screwed into the ceiling. The cabin was small but, at five foot six, Chris would have to stand tiptoe to reach the lamp's metal hanger. As she reached her left hand up, her ribs twisted, and she almost fell to her knees. Grabbing the table, gasping again, the pain swirled around her; her mind seemed to be shutting her body down without her consent.

She waited. She was already late. Another minute or two wouldn't matter.

She tried again. Reached the lamp and lowered it to the table. Now all she needed was a match. Just that morning she had tucked matches safe and dry inside her jacket pocket. Her teeth ground as she carefully felt her way in the darkness to the supply cache along the cabin's back wall. She lugged open a heavy drawer and rummaged. Stumps of candles, string, a potato peeler, a deck of cards, a small plastic sewing kit. Matches had to be there. It was her job to supply them. She had brought up a new pack of fifty boxes wrapped in a Ziploc only the week before last. She couldn't find them.

Cursing, she gave up on lighting the lamp. She could work the cabin's radio in her sleep. She inched her way to it, feeling for the box, but jerked her hand back when her finger sliced across something sharp. The sudden movement froze the breath in her lungs, and again she waited, sucking at the blood that welled up from the cut.

Broken glass was not a good thing. A sick sense of dread flooded her stomach. The radio was old—vintage Vietnam era—but it worked fine. Once a month she swapped out its battery, replacing old with new. Once a month she put out a radio check. Every month it checked out loud and clear. Encased in a box with a glass top and aligned only to be heard by San Juan District Three radios, it was available to anyone who needed it in an emergency. Carefully avoiding the shards of glass, Chris felt for the radio's microphone. She couldn't find it. Against the side of the radio itself, she felt where the mike's cord came out of the box. The cord was there, and she followed it out until it abruptly ended. It had been cut.

The fear that had been trickling through her gushed into a torrent; she backed away from the smashed radio case so quickly she hit the table, nearly losing her balance and crashing to the floor.

Standing there, steadying herself against the table, gasping for air and wincing at the agony of it, sick to her stomach and weary beyond belief, she tried to focus on what had become her reality.

One more radio. And her flashlight. Out at the snowmobile. And, she hoped, her jacket. And her gloves. She headed outside. Keeping her right arm pinned against her ribs, she eased herself down the stairs and across the slippery snow-packed ground to her snow machine. She clicked on the snowmobile's headlights and winced at the sudden brightness. She reached for the radio microphone. Without tethered resistance, the mike felt weightless. Terror seized her. Her knees gave out, and she turned just in time to sit on the snowmobile's wide seat.

The radio mike cord had been cut. She dropped the useless mike into the snow, then reached back into the storage compartment. The flashlight, flares, and solar blanket—all gone. Even the small chain saw she carried to clear blowdown was gone. The snowmobile's keys were in her jacket pocket. Her jacket was nowhere to be found. She couldn't even find one glove.

She sat still, silent. Eyes wide. *Breathe. Focus. Think!*

Perfect silence filled the night—loud, ear-ringing silence. Faint swirls of fine, floating snowy powder caught her eye as a light breeze carried them across the headlight beams. Mesmerized, she watched. Her eyelids felt laden with sand. She desperately wanted to sleep.

So quiet. So peaceful. Pain and terror and numbing cold cancelled each other out as she simply sat there, watching the night. In the distance, an owl hooted. Her lips almost smiled.

The silence felt oppressive. Nothing moved. Only the breeze. Until she heard a pop. Very faint. The kind of pop a knuckle makes. Or an ankle bone. Her entire being froze, strained to hear more, to see through the shadows.

Someone was out there. Someone was watching her.

She listened, barely breathed. Reached up and clicked the snowmobile's headlights off. Darkness fell so quickly, so completely, it stunned her. *Just wait*, she told herself. *Don't panic*. There was just enough waning twilight left that if she could wait and let her eyes adjust, she would be able to see.

She saw something, to her left; she looked, just as that something exploded with light—the beam of a powerful flashlight pointed directly at her face. She turned away, eyes pinched shut.

“Not how I was hoping this night would go.”

Did she hear the words? A man's voice. And what he said? She almost laughed, thinking, *You can say that again*. Her eyes opened slowly, but she could tell the beam was still pointed directly at her. “Do you mind?” came out before she realized it.

“Oh. Sorry.” The beam of light fell to the snow between them.

Chris turned her head—a man stood about fifty feet away. In the faint light reflecting back over him, she saw the brilliant red of a San Juan Search and Rescue jacket. “Oh, well, sure. That explains it. Thanks a lot.”

“What?” He sounded concerned.

“Fits you well. But I'd like it back.”

“Oh.” The flashlight beam shook as the man shuffled from foot to foot for a second. “Yeah. Well, I needed it more than you did. The stuff I was wearing got wet.”

“Sorry to hear that.”

The man was quiet.

Chris stared at his shadowy form. As the beam of light cut across her view, her headache spiked. She missed what the man said. “What?”

“Back to the cabin. I'll build a fire. We both need to get warm. Right?”

*Well, one of us anyway.* The man was wearing her gloves too.

“Let's go. In the cabin.”

Chris looked up but couldn't summon the strength to move.

“Now. Let's go. In the cabin.” The flashlight's beam swung to point the way.