



Scar Tissue

Debra MacDonald

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This uniquely action-packed look at the grieving process is a twist on the medical thriller.

Not for the faint of heart, *Scar Tissue* explores the highs and lows of life after tragedy strikes. Setting her novel amid a compelling hospital backdrop, Debra MacDonald is more than qualified to chronicle the work of a cardiac surgeon. MacDonald is the pen name of husband and wife team Donald and Debra Jansen. Donald's experience as a heart transplant specialist, combined with Debra's vivid writing and sharpened by her work as a photographer, results in an edgy medical drama.

Dr. Phil Graham is still mourning the loss of his wife, Joan, a year after her death in a tragic car accident. Left with a painful burn scar on his leg, Phil embarks on a journey of self-discovery in an effort to erase the invisible scars left on his heart. A brilliant surgeon, Phil's downward spiral of self-destruction quickly escalates, putting lives at risk, including his own. When his erratic behavior results in a suspension from St. Mary's Hospital, Phil decides to tackle his childhood demons to better understand his pain. *Scar Tissue* chronicles Phil's journey to accept life without Joan.

The opening scene sets a fast, gritty pace, with Phil's mind wandering while he performs open heart surgery: "I reach in Dorothy's filleted chest and feel the crunchy calcium inside the aortic arch, looking for a smooth place to puncture." MacDonald excels at creating an intense, exhilarating operating room. The technical terms and procedures are explained in such a way that doctors, nurses, and laymen alike can appreciate the situation without tedious overexplaining. Phil literally holds the lives of his patients in his hands every day.

Prone to unexpected rages and alcohol-fueled bouts of depression, Phil escapes through flings and meaningless hookups until he meets Amanda, the sister of a patient. In contrast to the realistic and exciting surgeries, the relationship between Phil and Amanda seems a bit contrived. The dialogue is peppered with an overabundance of exclamation points that make even serious conversations seem awkward and louder than necessary. There are no real surprises here as Phil knows from the start that Amanda is different and special. Soon after meeting her, he confides to a friend, "She gives me hope that everything is going to get better."

Phil is a complex character who is in turns sweetly thoughtful, selfish, hopeless, and hopeful. In other words, he is human. Phil ruminates on the reasons behind his destructive behavior, and he frequently shares his breakthroughs with close friends and, eventually, a psychologist. These heart-to-hearts reveal the gradual emotional change Phil undergoes while hitting rock bottom and climbing back out again.

Scar Tissue offers a uniquely action-packed look at the grieving process, complete with heart transplants, road trips, friendships, family, romance, and a pinch of faith. Followers of Robin Cook's novels will appreciate MacDonald's twist on the medical thriller.

PALLAS GATES MCCORQUODALE (June 3, 2014)

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