

A BED OF ROSES

Chapter One

Dana felt like a defenseless animal about to walk into a trap as she stood in the open doorway of East Ridge Hospital's Physical Therapy Center Monday afternoon. She gripped the walker she needed for support, aware of the throbbing in her left knee. The equipment along the off-white walls gleamed at her. The small room's low ceiling and worn bottle-green carpet was a far cry from the enormous facility she'd grown accustomed to at St. Jude Hospital in southwest Portland. Hardly the place where a specialist in sports injuries – the best Oregon has to offer, according to her doctor – would choose to work, she thought with apprehension. But then she suspected Dr. Stewart would have told her just about anything to get her back into therapy after the last of three operations four days ago.

She stared at her dismal reflection in the mirrored wall across the room from her. Enormous dark glasses dwarfed her too-pale face, and her wide, full mouth compressed into a harsh line. The thick raven hair that once fell down her back in a mass of natural waves now hung dull and lifeless, making her look older than her twenty-nine years. She had lost a lot of weight since the accident and the turquoise sweats she wore sagged on her five-foot-seven frame. Suppressing a groan, she looked away.

In the center of the room a young amputee learned to walk with his new prosthesis to the low, insistent beat of pop music on the sound system. A petite, auburn-haired woman, dressed casually in a pink-striped jumpsuit and looking not much older than her patient, coached and encouraged him to take another step. Dana saw the determination on the boy's face, the beads of sweat as he struggled

with the seemingly impossible. Despair and pity swept through her and again she averted her gaze.

Her attention was drawn to a low platform at the end of the room where a tall, athletically built man helped an elderly woman into a wheelchair. The corded muscles in his tanned arms flexed taut beneath the short sleeves of his white cotton shirt as they supported the woman's weight. Khaki slacks hugged lean-looking thighs. He towered over the frail woman, yet his touch appeared gentle, his dark eyes compassionate in the hard planes of his face. A full moustache, a shade darker than his deep chestnut hair, partially concealed his mouth as he spoke to the woman, then lifted at one corner in a crooked, almost roguish, smile. As if he were flirting with his patient to put her at ease, Dana mused.

Without warning, his gaze shifted and she found herself the target of his smile. It did little to put *her* at ease. "I'll be with you in a moment," he said.

Dana gave what she hoped was a convincing smile in return. She had met and interviewed a lot of men in her six years as a journalist and wasn't easily intimidated. But she knew by Dr. Stewart's description that the man watching her now was to be her new physical therapist and a lump of fear lodged in her throat.

She watched him wheel his patient from the room. With a heavy sigh, she closed her eyes and allowed her shoulders to droop. Her outward charade of courage drained her, but she was determined to let no one see just how frightened she was. She wanted no one's pity.

"Are you all right?" The deep masculine voice came from above her.

Dana brought her head up sharply. The dark-haired man stood looking down at her. He seemed taller, more intimidating up close. She had to tip her head back far to meet his eyes.

"I'm fine," she lied, forcing another smile. "It's just a headache."

"Is that why you're wearing the dark glasses?"

"The lights hurt my eyes," she lied a second time.

"I see."

His voice was low. Noncommittal. Dana had the feeling he was studying her and it made her uncomfortable that she couldn't tell what he was thinking.

Then his mouth curved into a smile that transformed the rugged lines of his face into an expression that startled her with its charming good looks.

"I'm Michael Gordon," he said, extending his right hand, "director of the PT Center."

Dana shifted her weight to her left arm and took his hand in hers. His grip was firm and warm and electric. She immediately released it and said, "I'm Dana Whitaker. I have a two o'clock appointment."

"Yes. I've already spoken with your doctor. If you'll follow me, I have a few questions to ask before we get started."

He moved to the first of three desks that extended from the wall to his left, his stride smooth and unhurried. With excruciating slowness, Dana followed. She eased herself into the chair at the end of the desk and clasped her hands in her lap to still their trembling.

"I've studied your file," Michael Gordon said, sitting. "You've been through physical therapy before, so you know what it's all about."

"Yes." She was unable to keep the harshness from her voice. Her knee felt as if it were made of hot wires and broken glass, a pain as constant as her heartbeat. Physical therapy meant more pain – endless sessions of torture that left her feeling weak and helpless.

He nodded, his smile rueful, and said, "The torture chamber."

Dana frowned. "Pardon me?"

"That's what you call it, isn't it?"

The look in his dark eyes dared her to deny it. Dana found his arrogance annoying. "It would seem that you and Dr. Stewart have discussed more than my medical record."

"Your mental attitude is as important to me as your physical condition," he explained.

"Then I don't have to tell you I think this is all a waste of time."

"Yet you're here."

His voice remained calm, his eyes steady, and again Dana got the feeling he was challenging her. The muscles in her jaw tightened and tears of frustration threatened to humiliate her. "I don't see that I had much choice."

"There are always choices," he told her. "You could use your disability to get sympathy and attention. It's easier to say 'I can't' than to confront your pain."

Dana drew her shoulders back. "I'm not about to give up," she said tersely, "and I certainly don't want anyone's sympathy."

"What *do* you want?"

His softly spoken question brought her up short. The tears she'd thought under control pressed at the corners of her eyes. She was thankful for the concealment of her shaded glasses. She looked down at the dark, curly hair on his

forearms folded across the desk in front of him. Strong arms. As were his hands. Broad, the fingers blunt. If he'd been anything but a physical therapist, she might have found them appealing.

She lifted her gaze to meet his. "I want my leg – my life – to be the way it was before the accident," she stated, her low, even tone presenting him with a challenge of her own.

He shook his head. "That's not possible. You're not the same person you were then."

Dana glared at his uncompromising features. "You have the tact of a grenade."

Some unidentifiable emotion flashed across his expression, but his gaze remained steady. "I'm trying to be honest with you, Dana. Your life has been changed by your experience. You can use that experience in a positive way, or you can let it make your life miserable."

"What could I possibly find *positive* about having my knee mangled?"

"That's a question only you can answer."

How she hated him at that moment. It was easy for him to sit there, healthy and strong, and preach to her. It wasn't his life that had been turned upside down by someone else's carelessness. She had suffered with this wretched knee for five months, for God's sake!

She looked at the walker beside her, the steel frame that allowed her mobility yet held her prisoner. "All I want," she told him, "is to be able to walk without that damn thing."

He nodded and pushed away from the desk. "That's all I wanted to hear." Standing, he glanced down at her sweatpants and said, "I'll need to examine your knee. Have you got a pair of shorts to change into? If I try pushing that elastic cuff up, it's going to cut off your circulation."

Without a word, Dana slid her thumbs into the waistband of her pants, and by shifting her weight from one side to the other, was able to work them down over her hips, revealing the matching turquoise shorts she wore underneath.

"Will these do?" she asked, looking up. She'd hoped to shock him a little with her boldness. What she hadn't counted on was the amusement that glinted in his dark eyes, or the wave of heat that swept through her.

"Good," he commented with a crooked smile, "you've come prepared."

On the contrary, Dana thought. She had come prepared for more pain, not the annoying way her body temperature kept fluctuating. "You're forgetting I've had a lot of practice," she replied, her voice lacking any attempt at humor.

"No, Dana, I haven't forgotten."

There it was again. That fleeting expression in his eyes, as if the door to his emotions had blown open for a fraction of a second. What was he feeling? Dana wondered. Pity? Kindness? She wanted neither from him.

Anger. Now there was a good, solid emotion. It took her mind off the pain.

"Let me help you with those," he said. He knelt in front of her and slipped the canvas shoes from her feet, then eased her sweatpants down and off. Dana clenched her teeth, humiliated at not being able to do a simple thing like undress herself without a great deal of effort. She focused her gaze on the top of her physical therapist's head and the way his dark chestnut hair, cut short at the sides, curled invitingly over the collar of his shirt.

She jerked and found herself staring into his eyes.

"Did I hurt you?" he asked.

"No, I...no." She was babbling. What in God's name had come over her? She looked at her sweatpants clutched in his strong hands and swallowed. "I'm fine," she managed with a reasonably stable voice. She grasped her walker and stood. "Where do you want me?"

"One of the exam tables over there," he said.

There were three of them lined up against the far wall, each with a white curtain that could be pulled along a track in the ceiling for privacy. As she maneuvered the walker around and started toward the nearest one, she could feel him watching her. She felt exposed in her shorts, her pale legs ghostly white in the harsh overhead lighting. Her movements were slow and painful. She wanted to scream at him for seeing her awkwardness.

Long, embarrassing seconds later, she managed to pull herself onto the edge of the table, determined not to allow her helplessness to undermine her self-respect a second time. A stab of pain rewarded her effort and she silently cursed her pride.

"Lie down on your back," he instructed.

His broad fingers circled her ankles and helped to lift her legs onto the table. She laid back and stared at the ceiling.

"First I'm going to examine the muscles around your knee," he explained. "Then I'll check your range of motion with a goniometer."

Dana gave a compliant, curt nod. She knew she was committed to going through with the examination, just as she knew that any prodding or manipulation of her leg was going to hurt.

His strong hands began to explore tender muscles and ligaments. He slid one hand under the back of her knee, and placing his other low on her thigh, said, "Press down and count to three."

She tried. The effort brought tears to her eyes. The hand on her thigh shifted to another muscle.

"Again."

She pressed, clenching her teeth against the pain.

"Good. Now roll onto your stomach."

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him produce a protractor-type device with arms extending from its axis. He positioned it against her leg, with the axis at her knee, and instructed her to bring her lower leg back toward her body as far as possible. He measured the flexibility of her injured joint, or the lack of it, her passive and active range of motion and her strength through resistance. The tests didn't take more than a few minutes, but to Dana it was an eternity.

"That should do it," he said at last. "How are you feeling?"

Her entire body trembled in weakness. "Fine," she muttered.

A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "Good."

His smugness irritated her and she started to sit up.

He put a restraining hand on her shoulder. "Relax for a minute while I make some notes in your file."

There was that irksome kindness again. But she didn't argue with him. Instead she laid her head back and closed her eyes.

It was frustrating to be so out of condition. She was used to long hours on her feet, chasing down stories, conducting interviews, endless research, always with a deadline at her heels. Her endurance had been inexhaustible. But now, after months of being sedentary, even the slightest exertion tired her beyond belief.

Realizing she was close to falling asleep, she opened her eyes to see Michael standing at his desk with his back to her. She took advantage of the opportunity to observe him unnoticed.

He had a broad, strong back that tapered to a trim waist and lean hips. His firm buttocks and long, taut legs were indicative of a man who exercised often. A

bicycler perhaps, or a runner. Or maybe he was a weekend jock who tackled men half his size, then guzzled beer in front of the TV, she thought with ill grace.

He turned and approached the exam table with a fluent ease more common in a dancer than a couch jock. He definitely wasn't the latter, she decided.

"The exercises I'm going to start you on are relatively easy," he told her. "You're probably already familiar with most of them. Let's move to one of the mats and I'll go over them with you."

Dana took his hand and scooted off the exam table. Her left foot touched the floor first and a stab of pain greeted her. She gave a soft moan and shifted her weight to her right leg, only to have it buckle beneath her. Michael's arm was around her waist in an instant and she found herself crushed to his chest.

Strong and hard and very masculine, his body radiated heat. The unexpected contact made the breath catch in her throat. She stared at his chin and tried to remind herself that the man she clung to was her PT.

"Are you all right?"

She felt the words vibrate up his chest and brush her forehead. She lifted her gaze and looked into his eyes. They were the color of dark chocolate.

She swallowed and managed a nod.

"Put your arm around my waist," he said.

He's my therapist, she told herself again. But somehow she wasn't quite able to ignore the fact that he was also a very attractive man.

And she was staring at him like an idiot.

She jerked her gaze back down to his chin and slid her arm around his waist. If he drank beer, she thought crazily, it was in definite moderation. She couldn't feel an ounce of fat beneath the crisp fabric of his shirt.

"I imagine you're used to women throwing themselves at you," she commented in an attempt to make light of her embarrassment.

His deep chuckle reverberated through her. "I never looked at it that way before."

Dana met the amusement in his gaze with a wry smile. "You've probably never fallen into your PT's arms before either."

"No," he grinned, "I can't say I have."

She felt the warmth of his gaze clear to her toes and looked away, perturbed.

If he noticed, he didn't show it. He reached out and drew her walker closer. "Let's get started on those exercises."

For the next twenty minutes he supported and guided her leg, explaining the purpose of each movement and how it would help strengthen the muscles around her injured knee. Then he showed her exercises to do at home. They were simple, gentle movements that she had tried before with disappointing results. A feeling of helpless futility seized her and refused to let go. By the time he was finished, she was in a furious struggle with pain and angry frustration.

He brought her sweatpants and shoes over, but before he could help her, she grabbed them from him and stated, "I can manage. Thank you."

He didn't argue. Dana clenched her teeth and fought back the tears as she struggled to dress under his watchful gaze. She felt like a lab rat. A pathetic one, at that. After what seemed like an eternity, she got her shoes on and pulled herself to her feet. She half expected some comment from him on her performance.

Instead, he said, "Exercise your leg as often as you can. It's important to keep those muscles flexible." Then he turned and walked to his desk. "I want to see you in here three days a week, same time, if that's possible."

As if I had anywhere else to be. She was unable to quell her bitterness. She'd been down this road before, too many times. "For how long?" she asked.

"For as long as it takes."

He bent over his desk, writing. His apparent dismissal fueled her frustration and anger. "In other words, you don't know."

He laid his pen down and turned. Dana took small pleasure in the peeved expression etched on his face. She'd managed to breach his calm exterior, but she wasn't sure she liked the way he regarded her, his deep brown eyes narrowed, as if seeing through her dark glasses.

"I don't have the answers you want, Dana. How long this takes is up to you. You just haven't figured that out yet." He moved closer. "Are there any other questions?"

"No."

"Good. I'll escort you to the elevator."

"That won't be necessary." Dana turned her walker toward the door. "I can find my own way out. Good day, Mr. Gordon."

She had almost reached the door when he called her name. She stopped and turned back toward him. He was a striking man, she had to admit, but something in his uncompromising stance made her wary.

"Yes?"

"I expect your headache to be gone by Wednesday," he said. "If not, take a couple of aspirin, but leave the glasses home."

Dana's back stiffened. "Will that be all, Mr. Gordon?"

"We're going to be seeing a lot of each other. I would appreciate it if you would call me Michael."

Dana could think of a lot of things to call him at the moment. *Michael* was not one of them. Without giving him the satisfaction of a reply, she turned and left the room.

Michael watched Dana's painful exit – he could tell by the rigid way she held her back what the effort cost her – before easing into the chair behind his desk. He stared at the open file in front of him and recalled something his friend Adam Stewart had said when he'd phoned last Friday.

"She refuses to go back to the PTs here at St. Jude. She says they're all incompetent."

"She's scared," had been Michael's response. He'd seen it before. According to the history Adam had given him, she'd been through a hell of a lot. Two unsuccessful corrective surgeries and finally a pin implant just last week. And between operations, a lot of physical therapy. She'd spent the last five months in pain, facing one disappointment after another.

"What makes you think she'll see me?"

"I'll tell her you're the best in your field," Adam replied.

"You think she'll buy that?"

"Why shouldn't she? It's the truth. Why you're hiding your talent at East Ridge, I'll never understand. You were making good money here."

"You know the money doesn't mean anything to me." At thirty-six, Michael had all he needed in material things. Sure, the facilities were limited at East Ridge – it was a small, community hospital – but he knew he could do more good here than he ever could in a larger hospital. Working at St. Jude had left him feeling oppressed and overwhelmed by a maze of administration. Los Angeles General all over again. The only good thing to come out of his year at St. Jude was his friendship with Dr. Adam Stewart.

"Mike, if this is going to cause a problem – "

"Don't worry about it. I'll be glad to do what I can."

Michael only hoped that Dana could hold onto her stubbornness in the weeks to follow. If she stopped believing she would ever walk without a crutch of some kind, then it wouldn't matter how well her knee healed or how extensive her therapy. The mind could be as powerful as the most advanced medicine. He thought of her wide, full lips pressed together in determination and the willful tilt of her delicate chin. For some reason, it brought a smile to his face.

"She's one feisty lady."

Michael blinked and looked up at Sally, his young assistant PT, standing beside the desk. She had a funny smirk on her small, round face.

"What did you say?"

Sally pointed at the file. "Your new patient. I said, she's one feisty lady. But what's with the dark glasses?"

"It's a defense mechanism to keep people from seeing how she's really feeling," he explained, "a sign of denial that anything's wrong."

"Mmm...that's a shame. She might be pretty without those awful things hiding half her face."

Michael saw the teasing glint in Sally's hazel eyes. "She's a patient," he reminded her.

An attractive one, he admitted to himself. Though physically and emotionally hurting, but there was a fire in her, a stubbornness of spirit, that he found encouraging. And charming.

Not that that had anything to do with anything. He wasn't looking for involvement. Especially with a patient. He was a professional. He never used the patient-therapist relationship, or the close physical contact necessary in that oftentimes love-hate alliance, to approach or intimidate a person in his care.

Sally perched her bottom on the corner of his desk, dangling her stocking-clad feet next to him. The casual observer might have thought she was flirting with him, but Michael knew better. Sally liked to make herself comfortable wherever she happened to be.

"In the six months you've been here, I've never seen you so much as look twice at a woman," she commented. "Why is that?"

Michael enjoyed the comfortable relationship he had with his co-worker, but their friendship did not extend beyond the hospital. "That's my business," he told her, not unkindly.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be nosy." She chewed at her lower lip for a second, then leaned closer and asked in a subdued voice, "You're not gay, are you?"

The corners of Michael's mouth twitched. "What would you do if I said yes?"

A pitiful expression puckered her face and she replied, "I'd mourn for the women of the world."

Michael threw his head back and laughed.

"Seriously, Michael, if I were ten years older and not happily engaged – "

"Now you're calling me old!" He shook his head in feigned remorse. "I think you'd better see to your next patient before you do any more damage to my ego."

Sally laughed and slid to her feet. But before she moved away, she gave Dana Whitaker's file a flick with her finger. "It can't hurt to look, huh?"

Michael regarded her retreating back with an uncomfortable feeling growing in the pit of his stomach. Dana Whitaker was fragile and vulnerable. She possessed an underlying strength that challenged him. But that wasn't the cause of his unease.

He looked back down at the file. Everything was there – the surgeries, the bouts with depression, the setbacks. But it was his new patient's occupation that caught and held his attention. The feeling in his stomach twisted.

Journalist.

It surprised him how that one word could still stir painful memories.

He closed the file.

He'd dedicated his life to helping people regain the use of their bodies after an injury or illness and he wasn't about to turn his back on that now, any more than he'd let his friend Adam down.

He would treat Dana Whitaker as any other patient, and forget for the time being that a reporter had damn near destroyed his career.