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MEDICAL  **ROMANCE**

The Challenge of Dr Blake



LILIAN DARCY

'I can't give up dancing, so don't tell me to. I'm sorry, but that's all there is to it.'

'Sorry?' Joel rasped, rising to his full height behind the desk and glaring at her with belligerent brown eyes in which gold flecks sizzled like sparks. 'Sorry? As if you're letting *me* down? Do you think it matters to me one iota whether you go on hoofing across the boards or whether you take up knitting instead? It's hard news, a terrible moment in your life, and I wish I could have said something different. Go on dancing, if two years in a Broadway chorus is that important to you, but if you do I think you're making one of the most foolish decisions I've ever come across in my entire career——'

'Stop!' Susan burst out. 'You've said enough. You can't know what this is like, what I'm feeling, what I've had to do to keep dancing until now. So don't try and tell me what's best.'

'There's a lot we can do with physical therapy. Don't act as if I'm going to chop open your knee and then abandon you. You're not a teenager. Be realistic.'

She ignored him and plunged on. 'I'm sorry. I've made my decision, and your opinion really isn't important to me.'

For a moment she thought he was going to attack her again with more of the angry jeering she had just parried, but then his strong shoulders—held like a beast's when it was about to spring—relaxed, and the rasping in-breath he had drawn came out in a controlled sigh.

I have patients waiting,' he said, quite calmly. 'So you'll excuse me, won't you? Talk to Holly about scheduling the surgery. Try and make it as soon as there's a space available on my list, because you certainly shouldn't go on dancing with that pain.'

Lilian Darcy is Australian, but has recently married and now makes her home in New Jersey. She writes for theatre, film and television as well as her romance fiction work, and her interests include winter sports, music, travel and the study of languages. Hospital volunteer work and friends in the medical profession provide the research background for her novels, which she enjoys writing because of the opportunity they give for creating realistic, modern stories, believable characters and a romance that will stand the test of time.

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THE CHALLENGE OF DR BLAKE

BY
LILIAN DARCY



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CHAPTER ONE

IT WAS sheer, pig-headed defiance that made Susan Taylor walk to her appointment. The late April morning was glorious, and the streets of Manhattan's West Side hummed with fresh life and activity after the end of a long winter. In Central Park the trees were newly green, and a breeze blew just strongly enough to clear the air of its usual urban haze.

Dressed casually in jeans, a softly draped orange top, a tan suede jacket and new white running shoes, Susan was much happier crossing the park to East Seventy-Fifth Street on foot than she would have been stuck in one of New York's infamous yellow taxis, with no doubt a hair-raisingly aggressive driver at the wheel.

There were plenty of people in the park—a school group on an outing to the newly renovated zoo, some young couples hand in hand, a party of businessmen on their way to lunch at Tavern on the Green—and Susan smiled at some of them. New Yorkers had the reputation of being rude and abrupt, and many of them certainly did their best to keep this reputation alive, but on a day like today, with the grass green underfoot and the sky blue overhead, everyone was much more disposed to friendliness.

For no reason at all, Susan did a running dance step: forward, two, three, chasse, step-ball-change, cross, four. She repeated it a couple of times then slowed to a walk again. Her knees hurt. Damn them, they *hurt!* And there was still that horrible feeling in her left knee that

it was going to give way beneath her. Sharp tears of anger, frustration and fear pricked at her brown eyes, threatening to spoil the morning, and she whisked them away with a slim forefinger. Stupid to get upset about it. It meant nothing. And if it *did* mean something she was on her way to curing the problem right now.

As she reached Fifth Avenue, she took a business card from the pocket of her jeans and checked it again—Seventy-Fifth Street, between Park and Lexington Avenues. The street sign opposite said Sixty-Eighth Street, so she turned left and began to walk uptown, past the dignified buildings of pale stone that faced the Park.

'Dr Joel Blake,' the card read in neat, plain black print. He had been recommended to her as one of the best orthopaedic specialists in New York when it came to sports or dance injuries, and if this stupid problem with her knees really did mean something he ought to be able to cure it. He *had* to do so!

With a shudder rippling through her fine, strong dancer's frame, Susan remembered last night's performance, and that awful moment during Act Two's flamboyant finale. Had the audience noticed? Had the other performers, or the stage crew? Jeremy Singleton had. She remembered how he had slipped an arm casually round her shoulders on their way out of the theatre.

'What happened to you at the end of "High Flying"?' he'd asked. 'Forget the steps?'

'No, of course not, I . . .' She had hesitated. Horribly unprofessional to forget the steps, but perhaps the truth was worse. She'd settled for half-truth instead. 'I must have done something to my knee. It just gave way.'

'Better give it a rest whenever you can,' he had said with a shrug. 'Sprains can get nasty, otherwise.'

He had gone on to suggest supper and hadn't mentioned her knee again, but the subject had sat in the back of Susan's mind all through her coffee and chocolate torte. It *wasn't* a sprain. She knew about sprains. She had had all those minor injuries to knees and ankles in the past. This was in both knees, although the left one was worse, and it wasn't something she had done to them suddenly one day.

Jeremy was probably right about one thing, though. She should be resting her knees whenever possible—which was why her walk this morning was pig-headed and defiant. By walking, she was stubbornly declaring her faith that her knees were fundamentally strong and sound. Dancing was something she had always been stubborn about. She had had to be.

Susan had been dancing since she was five. Third child in a family of four, her increasing involvement in classes had been a boon to her busy parents. Her father was a successful London barrister, and her mother worked part-time at an art gallery as well as doing extensive work for charity. Her parents had seemed pleased rather than otherwise, too, when she had begun to do some juvenile modelling and bit-parts in television commercials as well. Long ago her grandfather, a barrister like his son, had defied family convention by marrying a Peruvian opera singer. Both these grandparents had been dead for many years now, but Susan had inherited her grandmother's looks—straight, full-bodied black hair, dark, slightly slanting eyes and an elfin frame of five feet six—and these had made her stand out from the crowd of other girls whenever a talent agency came looking for new faces.

Without ever saying anything about it, Susan had assumed from the age of ten onwards that she would be

a professional dancer. Classical ballet had been her first choice, but she had just missed out on placement at a top ballet school when she was fifteen, which would have led through well-established channels to a career in one of the big prestigious companies. Again, she had never really told her parents how much of a disappointment this was. Instead, she had turned with equal enthusiasm to modern dance and jazz. Classical ballet school was not the only route to professional success. . .

It wasn't until the time came to leave school that she first discussed these plans with her parents. It was almost funny the way the angry scene had come down upon her head, so out of the blue.

'What do you think you'd like to do, darling?' Mrs Taylor had said. They were having supper at the time. Her older brother Marcus and sister Helen were out, and fourteen-year-old Linda was in bed with a bad cold.

'Well,' Susan had begun, 'there are several auditions coming up for different schools and companies. I thought I'd even try a couple of musicals. But the Lewis James Dance Company, in particular, I think I've got a good chance with, since——'

'Auditions? Dance companies?' her father had burst out, his face reddened suddenly by anger. 'You don't mean to tell us you think you're going to be a professional dancer?'

The argument had lasted for hours. It had turned into an ongoing argument that had continued for months. In fact, if she weren't here in New York, while her parents were in London, it might still be going on. Mr and Mrs Taylor, it had turned out, wanted her to train for a steady, secure career. Dancing was out of the question. It was overcrowded, over-glamorised. Did Susan really think she had the talent and the grit. . . ?

'We'll see when I take the auditions, won't we?' had been Susan's angry answer.

But the result was ambiguous. She didn't get into either of the new musicals, nor any of the modern dance ensembles. 'We like your work. . .you just missed out,' she was told twice. 'If we get another opening in the next six months. . .'. Both the dance schools—well-established, with good reputations—accepted her into their full-time courses, but then Susan had listened with anger-flamed cheeks while her parents told her why they were not willing to support her financially while she trained full-time in dance.

'With Marcus doing Law and Helen doing Vet Science. . .' her father said.

'Then there's Linda's schooling to finish,' her mother came in.

'It would be unfair to her if we couldn't afford to send her to a good university because we had spent money on sending you to dancing school.'

'Dance, not dancing,' Susan muttered rebelliously.

'We don't want to dampen your dreams, of course,' Mrs Taylor said. 'What about something like nursing? You'd have a very good professional qualification to fall back on in three years, you'll be paid as you go, and you'll be able to squeeze in some classes part-time. When you've finished your training, then you can pursue the dance idea if you're still interested.'

Mrs Taylor's tone said that she was sure Susan's infatuation with dancing would have passed harmlessly by the time the nursing course was finished.

For several weeks Susan was very stubborn indeed. She would not train as a nurse. She would leave home and find a flat near the dance school, she would dance

full-time, supporting herself with an evening job such as waitressing. . .

Then reality set in. With such a life, she would be run into the ground in six months, and even an optimistic budgeting told her that she would not be able to make ends meet. Modelling, now that she had reached an adult height of only five feet six, was unfortunately no longer possible. Finally, reluctantly, resentfully, she told her parents that she would train as a nurse, live in the nurses' home, and take dance classes part-time, as they had wished.

At seventeen, still adolescent in many ways, she had expected her parents to gloat over their victory, and had hidden her own feelings of defeat and disappointment behind a brittle mask of cynicism. Now she was twenty-three, and things seemed a little different. She understood her parents' need to give each of their children an equal opportunity. She understood their helplessness in the face of an ambition they did not understand, as well as their fears about the insecurity of a dancer's life.

And yet the breach had not really healed. For one thing, there had never been time for such a healing. During four years of training then working as a nurse, Susan had clung to her dance classes even when exhausted with study for nursing exams. Having agreed to do nursing, though, she decided to prove that she could do it well, and by gritting her teeth, knuckling down and abandoning all pretence of a social life she had passed her exams with above-average results, as well as earning excellent reports for her competence in each of the wards she had worked on. Leading this double life, and on an unending treadmill of exhaustion, she hadn't enjoyed one minute of her nursing career.

At family gatherings, both she and her parents had

been careful to talk of other things, as if afraid that even a casual enquiry about nursing or an insignificant anecdote about dancing might escalate into angry words again. Marcus, Helen and Linda, with their varied interests and successful studies, provided a convenient camouflage of other conversation topics.

The still-active controversy had not flared again until early last year. Susan had auditioned for a new musical, *Penny Parade*, had been chosen as a featured chorus dancer, and had given up her job at the big London hospital where she had trained. Rehearsals went from ten o'clock until six, five days a week, and it simply wasn't possible any longer to juggle nursing and dancing. It was time for dance to take first place in her life at last.

Perhaps it had been unwise of her to wait until the thing was finalised before telling her parents. They had been horrified at the *fait accompli*: giving up her job for a role in the chorus of a show that might fold after a week!

This time, though, Susan knew she was right. She was ready to concede now that training as a nurse had given her a valuable safety net, but if she didn't take a risk with dancing at this point in her life she would never take one, and dancing would gradually fizzle into a harmless hobby. She knew that if this happened there would be an underlying thread of bitterness and regret that might fester into a life-long poison. She *had* to give dancing a try!

Penny Parade was an instant success, and after six months in the West End had come the excitement of a transfer to New York. Susan had packed two suitcases and made the move eagerly, in spite of further cautions from her parents. She had no regrets. . .

The tulips were out on Park Avenue. Bright beds of

frenzied red and yellow stretched uptown as far as she could see. Downtown, the skyscrapers formed deep canyons through which impatient streams of traffic flowed. There was an energy to this city that Susan loved, and she loved her life here. Seven months, and she had no desire to go home yet.

She checked the address on the business card again and, yes, here was a brass plate in among several others, beside a discreetly imposing doorway. 'Dr Joel Blake, Orthopedics. . .' spelled in the American way, of course '. . .and Sports Injury.'

Suddenly, Susan felt her palms grow damp. She was more nervous about this appointment than she had admitted to herself before, and she had to remind herself that it was unlikely that the doctor would have anything definite to tell her after today's examination. There would be tests, X-rays. . .

I should have told Jeremy the truth, she thought.

Why hadn't she? It was this question that was uppermost in her mind as she found the glass-panelled door that led to Dr Blake's rooms. She barely noticed the taupe-carpeted waiting-room, nor the nurse-receptionist to whom she murmured her name. Jeremy. . . She was given some forms to fill in, and frowned unseeingly at them for several minutes before quickly printing in the necessary details. Another waiting patient, wearing a heavy neck-brace, smiled at her and she returned the friendliness vaguely.

Jeremy Singleton. He was twenty-nine, and everyone knew he was a rising star in the world of music and musicals. *Penny Parade's* musical director and conductor, he was an important person in the show, and more than one fellow chorus member had been a little wistful or

jealous when he'd started paying such obvious attention to Susan.

In the early days of their relationship, which had begun nearly four months ago now, she had found herself several times in front of the mirror, cocking her head to one side on her slim neck and wondering in a mildly puzzled way, Why me? During rehearsals and the London run he hadn't taken the slightest notice of her, and yet it was in England that her exotic Hispanic looks stood out. Here in New York she could only see herself as one of thousands of dark-eyed, gamine-faced, slim-bodied girls. People told her often, though, that she underrated her own beauty, and, in any case, perhaps his attraction to her had little to do with her looks at all.

Anyway, for whatever reason, the fact was that they were going out together on a regular basis, and he was quite open about it, kissing her in front of other company members, talking in front of anybody and everybody about the supper they had shared the previous night. She knew everyone assumed they were sleeping together, but actually they weren't.

It was a little ironic, really. Two months ago she had worried quite a bit about what she would do if he wanted to take that step before she was ready. Now, as she became increasingly involved emotionally, she was starting to worry more about the fact that he had never suggested it, never created a private, romantic setting where it might be possible.

Most couples did sleep together these days, once they became sure of their commitment to each other. Susan was starting to want a commitment of some kind, and it sometimes seemed as if they would get to that point more quickly if things got deeper between them physically. She knew that this was a dangerous way to think,

that sex wasn't an automatic road to emotional intimacy by any means, but. . . She was confused.

And the fact that she hadn't felt close enough to Jeremy to tell him about her fears last night didn't help this confusion one bit. She thought about the way he had ended their supper date, glancing suddenly at his watch just after midnight and exclaiming, 'Heavens! Is it that late? I'd better put you in a taxi, my love. . .'

Five minutes later they had been standing on the kerb trying to hail one of the yellow devils she had rejected for transportation this morning, and when one had slowed and pulled over he had bundled her into it with just one hurried kiss. She had turned and watched him from the window as the taxi eased into the late-night traffic again.

The evening had chilled down and his shoulders, clad in an expensive brown leather jacket, had been hunched against a stiff breeze. His fair hair had been teased and tousled by the wind and his pale forehead had been pleated into an impatient frown above smoky green eyes as he lifted his arm to hail two taxis in a row without success. When a third one had begun to pull over at last, he'd almost sprinted towards it. Was he so eager to be home to bed? *Penny Parade* came out at eleven, so their supper had lasted less than an hour. Theatre people had to be night owls. It always took time to wind down after a performance. Both of them could sleep in the next morning. Why had he asked her out if he hadn't felt like it? Was he losing interest?

'Miss Taylor? Miss Taylor!'

'Hm? Oh! I'm so sorry!' She jumped up with none of her usual dancer's grace, dropping the forms from her lap in a flutter and almost tripping over the leather strap of her bag.

'Dr Blake will see you now.'

'Will he?' she replied inanely, stooping to pick up the sheets of paper and then flushing as she saw that a tall man stood in the doorway of the adjoining office, surveying her with a wryly amused expression. Dr Blake himself, of course.

Her immediate and only impression was that he was much younger than she was expecting, considering he had been so highly recommended to her. In his mid-thirties, she guessed, whereas she had envisaged a sedate and greying fifty-year-old.

'Come in, Miss Taylor,' he said, his deep voice bland as if all his patients made clumsy entrances like that.

She followed him, still woolly-witted from her immersion in thoughts and doubts about Jeremy. The office was not large, and when she perched herself nervously on the edge of the chair in front of his desk she was only a few feet from him. Instinctively, as a dancer, she noticed his body more than his face. Tall but not strikingly so, strongly built as most orthopaedic surgeons were, efficient and energetic in his way of moving.

He sat down behind his desk, pulled the chair in close, and leaned forward. 'What can I do for you?' His accent, American of course, was not strong or harsh. Perhaps it was the deep, almost gravelly voice that softened it, or perhaps it was the subtle flavour of a native New Yorker's speech, blended with the careful tones of a well-educated professional man.

'I'm worried about my knees,' Susan said.

He looked like a man who would want her to get straight to the point. She had met a lot of doctors during her four years of nursing, and most of them, especially specialists, disliked too much chit-chat from a new

patient, particularly anything that was an attempt at self-diagnosis.

'You see, I'm a professional dancer,' she went on. It still gave her a thrill of pride to use the words.

'Classical?' he demanded suddenly, before she could continue.

'No, mainly modern and jazz these days. Some tap as well. Though I did a lot of classical in the past.'

'You have a classical look,' he put in, lifting his head and studying her with slightly narrowed eyes. She noticed that his lashes were very thick and dark.

'Do I?' she smiled, suddenly pleased. It sounded like a compliment, and she was about to break her rule about chit-chat and tell him a little more about her past when she saw him shift in his seat as if impatient, so she went on as briefly as she could. 'I'm in the chorus of *Penny Parade* and——'

'Oh, yes? Hm. Haven't seen it. Heard of it, of course.'

'A featured dancer.'

If he was impressed, he didn't show it, and his reaction to the name *Penny Parade* had been dismissive, too. Susan felt a little disappointed, but of course to someone outside the business—someone, moreover, with his own busy professional life—one musical was probably much like another. And he couldn't know just how much of a triumph it seemed to her after so many years of frustrated waiting and hard work.

'Anyway, my knees have been aching quite a bit lately, particularly the left one. I think they may even be a bit swollen, too. Often there's a feeling that my leg is going to give way, and last night it did and I missed my step in the middle of a big number.'

'They hurt just when you dance?'

'N-no, lately they hurt. . .well, walking across Central

Park this morning.' She made the admission hesitantly, as if confessing to some personal sin.

'And when did the pain begin?'

'I. . . I really can't say. Because so often there's an ache or pain of some kind with dancing. When it started I might have just thought it was fatigue after a heavy series of classes. . . '

'You take classes as well as doing the show?'

'Yes, I'm so familiar with the routines in *Penny Parade* now that they really aren't stretching my work any more. I'm hoping to——'

But he cut her off. 'Am I the first doctor you've seen?'

'Yes, you are. Why do you ask?' She was a little puzzled at the question, which had been flung at her somewhat accusingly.

'Dancers tend to be stubborn, I've found,' was his drawled response. 'They won't believe an unfavourable diagnosis until they've been told the same thing by seven doctors in a row.'

'Dancers tend to be concerned about their professional future,' she retorted, with a parody of his phrasing and tone. 'It's a risky enough business as it is, without adding the possibility of a mistaken diagnosis.'

'Then you'll seek a second opinion when I've given you my verdict?'

'No. At least, I doubt it. Why should I, when I'm hoping it'll be nothing very serious?'

He rose from behind the desk. 'Let's try and find out, then, shall we? I'll order some X-rays. I send people to a radiology centre in this same building, so it's convenient. Something fairly new, too—an MRI scan. Magnetic Resonance Imaging.'

'I've heard of it.'

'Have you?' He glanced at her, a little surprised, and

seemed to study her for a moment with greater attention.

'But I don't know anything much about it,' she added.

This was true. Her hospital in London had begun to use the new technology, but Susan had never come across it herself in the course of her work. She listened as he explained.

'There's no pain and no risk, no exposure to radiation. The worst thing you might feel is a little claustrophobia, since you'll be slid into a large sort of tube. The equipment uses magnetism to generate a picture of what's going on inside your knees. I'm very keen on it, and I send all my patients to the MRI facility at Wakefield-Lincoln, where I operate. That way I've built up a good rapport with the radiologists and usually the results are very clear. How does that sound?' He smiled disarmingly, and it softened his brisk professional manner.

'It sounds good,' Susan smiled back, then her face fell a little and she could not help confessing, 'I'm nervous about all this. I should have come to you sooner, but I kept hoping it would go away. . .'

'You're afraid it's going to affect your career?'

'Yes,' she nodded bluntly.

There was a tiny silence and she was aware that, again, he was looking at her closely. Then he rose, speaking at the same time in a light, neutral voice. It wasn't dismissive, nor was it overly sympathetic. 'Let's have a look, then. But don't expect any clear answers today.'

'No, I realise it may take time,' Susan acknowledged.

Should she tell him she had trained and worked as a nurse? There didn't seem to be much point in doing so.

She had had little professional experience with orthopaedics or sports injuries, and wouldn't want him to skimp on any explanations because he assumed she knew more than she really did.

He had opened a connecting door that led through to a larger, more brightly lit room in which an examination table, a chair and a stool were the main furnishings. Generally a healthy person, this was the closest Susan had come to the world of medicine since her happy departure from Women's Surgical B at St Morris Hospital in London last year. Surprisingly, she found that she didn't mind the atmosphere in the room. Everything was clean, of course, and a fresh sheet of white paper lay across the examination table where Dr Blake directed her to sit.

He called in his nurse, and Susan studied her for the first time. In the reception area she had simply been a blur to her. Now it became apparent that she was quite young, cheerful, strong. It looked as if she was happy working here, although it also looked as if she wouldn't be working here much longer, since she was clearly in the last trimester of pregnancy. The doctor himself left the room and was gone for several minutes—seeing a second patient, probably—while the nurse did a blood-pressure check and asked a number of questions. . . .

Forty minutes later, Susan emerged into the street again and began to look for a taxi. The X-rays would be sent down to Dr Blake this afternoon, the Magnetic Resonance Imaging was scheduled for next Monday, and the physical tests he had done this morning had been inconclusive, as he had predicted. Or, at least, if a picture of the situation was clarifying in his mind, he wasn't telling her what it was.

He had given her one clear piece of advice: take it

easy. No more Martha Graham classes three afternoons a week; no enrolling in that flamenco class that had caught her eye on a dance studio bulletin-board; no extensive walking through the streets of Manhattan. Those hard, uneven pavements could do damage, and pain in the knees was always a sign to slow down.

Slumped despondently in the taxi—because, in spite of her medical training and her dancer's intuition about her body, she had been hoping foolishly that he would say, 'Nothing wrong. Take this prescription for the pain and it'll be gone in a week'—she thought about how his hands had felt as they had manoeuvred her legs.

'Bend. . .straighten. . . How does that feel? A twinge? Or more of an ache? And this?' His fingers had been cool and dry, and the pressure he'd applied was exact and careful. No small talk at all as he'd worked. His eyes, a dark brown flecked with golden lights, had been totally focused on her legs, the joints and muscles around her knees. One lock of rich brown-black hair fell over his rather craggy forehead but he hadn't seemed to notice.

He inspired confidence. There was no doubt about that.

'Can't you tell me anything more today?' she had said at the end. It had come out almost pleadingly.

'Let's wait till I take a good look at the X-rays and the MRI,' was his answer; neutral, final, but not unkind.

She remembered what he had said about getting a second opinion. In her fear about the future, it was tempting. . .but expensive. Medical costs were very high in the USA, and her health insurance package, arranged through the *Penny Parade* management, didn't completely cover the amount.

She thought of what the theatre manager, Morton

Krantz, had said about Dr Blake to one of the other dancers who had an ankle problem. Relaxing after a costume change during interval last week, and already having made an appointment with Joel Blake after a talk with the company's physiotherapy consultant, Susan had pricked up her ears and listened shamelessly.

'He's an attending orthopaedic surgeon at Wakefield-Lincoln. That's the best hospital for orthopaedics and sports injuries in this city. People come from all over the world to work there, or to be treated. He lives in my condominium building and we're on the condo association committee together. I can tell you he's a terrific doctor and a terrific guy.'

There seemed little point in wasting time and money on another opinion. She knew one dancer in London who had gone to chiropractors, osteopaths, herbalists. . .and it hadn't changed the original problem. Stick with Dr Blake, was her decision.

Would she tell Jeremy about the appointment tonight? Would he ask? The taxi's tyres squealed as the wild-haired driver took the bends in the road that cut across the middle of the park, but Susan was as oblivious to this sound as she was to the spring day she had found so gloriously invigorating an hour and a half ago. She forgot all about Dr Blake, too. His only importance was as an arbiter of her future, and he could easily have been the portly and balding fifty-year-old she had initially expected.

His dark looks and reserved, rather brooding manner faded from her mind, and instead she was thinking only of tonight's show, of the point in the routine where she had stumbled last time. . .and she was thinking of Jeremy.

CHAPTER TWO

BACKSTAGE at the Montgomery Theatre, just off Broadway in mid-town Manhattan, there was the usual pre-show bustle of performers and stage crew hurrying to prepare, the usual smell of dust, grease-paint, hot lights and freshly pressed costumes. Hurrying in after doing a slower and more careful physical warm-up at home than she usually did, Susan encountered Jeremy in the green room.

He sprang to his feet immediately and came towards her. 'Darling!' His hands cupped her elbows then came around to squeeze her more closely, and she was enveloped in his kiss before she had time to greet the three fellow chorus dancers who were lounging in a corner with cigarettes and coffee. His lips expertly coaxed her own into a response, and then he lifted his face to nuzzle the top of her head with his pointed chin, slightly roughened this evening with red-blond stubble, as if he had not shaved today.

'Hello, Jeremy,' she murmured in response, wondering why it was that she didn't really enjoy these frank public displays. The green room wasn't large, and it was scarcely possible for Lesley, Jim and Margot to ignore what was going on.

Jeremy, on the other hand, seemed to enjoy kissing her more in front of others than when there was no one around. He was talented, exuberant, and had a demanding role conducting the live orchestra throughout the

show. Perhaps it was just that he had more energy at times like this, before the performance, than he did afterwards.

He released her, then immediately put a long arm around her shoulders again. 'Coffee, sweetheart? You look in need of a lift.'

'I am, rather,' she confessed. 'It hasn't been an easy day. . .but I'll tell you about that over supper.'

'Yes, don't go into a show preoccupied with other problems,' he answered, sounding rather preoccupied himself.

He had pushed her hands gently away from the coffee-making equipment and was pouring out the rich brew himself, topping it with a generous splash of milk. There was a flash of movement and colour in the doorway and Briony Cosgrove entered, dressed in a deceptively casual scarlet outfit, completed with dangling gold earrings and a fringed scarf expertly draped around her fine shoulders.

Playing the lead female role in the show, she was acknowledged by everyone to be somewhat above the lowly chorus dancers. Some stars didn't want to maintain this hierarchy, but Briony seemed to need it. She smiled vaguely at the three dancers in the corner, trilled a general, 'Hello, all!' then met Susan's eyes with a cold, skating glance.

'No, I don't take sugar, Jeremy,' Susan said quickly, putting a hand on his arm just in time to stop him from emptying a generously rounded teaspoonful into her cup.

He had a bad memory for this sort of detail about her tastes and preferences, even though he had made coffee for her many times over the past few months. It wasn't the first time she had had to rescue her drink from an unpalatable injection of sweetness.

'Excuse me, Jeremy,' Briony Cosgrove said, although in fact it was Susan she was reaching past in order to make coffee for herself. She took the unused spoon of sugar from Jeremy's hand and added it to her own cup, then scooped up another one from the white heap in the glass bowl.

Susan wondered if it was only her own imagination that made her feel as though Briony Cosgrove had a particular dislike for her that went beyond the aloof indifference the star felt for the rest of the chorus. Certainly, she had not even been treated to the cool, vague smile Briony used with chorus and crew—not since the company had come to New York, anyway.

It wasn't something to get upset about. Susan's and Briony's worlds were far apart. The star, originally from America, was excellent in her role, with a strong, uplifting voice, graceful movements and a charismatic stage presence. Beyond her talent as an actress and singer, however, was the fact that she was married to the show's creator, Alec Savill.

With several dramatically successful musicals to his credit, he had been a celebrity for a number of years. He must be at least twenty years older than the vibrant Briony, and was noted more for caustic wit and colourful conversation than for good looks. He was also reputed to be a jealous man with quite a temper, so perhaps life wasn't all plain sailing for the *Penny Parade* star, in spite of the glamorous world in which she moved.

In short, Susan was quickly able to shrug off the snub and took her coffee from Jeremy's hand with an untroubled smile, then went to join the group in the corner.

'See you after the show, darling,' Jeremy whispered—

quite loudly—as she left his side. 'I've got a meeting with Alec in about three minutes, so I can't chat.'

He left the green room moments after Briony did, and Susan heard the murmur of conversation between them as they moved down the dark backstage corridor.

'How are things, Sue?' Lesley said, turning to her as she sat down carefully with her coffee.

Without stopping to think, Susan wrinkled her nose into a things-aren't-so-good face.

'Why, what's up?' Margot leaned forward to ask.

'Trouble with my knees,' Susan answered. It was such a relief to talk about it to other dancers, and she realised that saying nothing about it at all over the past few weeks had built up tension inside her. She went on. 'I saw a specialist this morning, but it's too soon to know what's going on.'

'You're afraid it's something chronic?' Margot asked.

'Yes, it definitely wasn't a sudden injury.' Susan nodded. 'But. . .we'll see. There's no sense in panicking. I'm taking things easy for a few weeks. No classes, extra-careful warm-ups.'

I hate to suggest this, because I know it's going to sound as though I'm angling for your role,' Lesley said. 'But would you like to drop back to straight chorus work and have me do your two featured spots?'

'I know you're not angling,' Susan said. Lesley, with similar build and colouring to hers, understudied the two brief sections in the performance when Susan danced alone on stage with a male partner. She was a nice girl, originally from Cornwall. 'But those are just half-minute sequences, slow ones, too, with a good breathing-space for me before and after each one, so I don't think they're doing any damage. If anything, it's that lightning-fast stuff at the end of Act Two.'

'Yes, I saw you lose your footing for a moment there last night,' Jim put in.

So Jeremy wasn't the only one to see! Susan's heart sank. Chorus members were very expendable, especially here in New York, where literally thousands of hopeful and talented young dancers came to try for their bite of the Big Apple. If the show's director and manager decided that Susan's performance was falling off, a competent replacement could be trained for the most insignificant chorus role in a few days, and one of the more experienced dancers in the show—probably Lesley—would be moved up to fill Susan's position. It was a precarious professional existence, and you were only as good as your last week's performances.

'Swap places with Lesley for that number, then,' Margot was suggesting now. 'She's less conspicuous than you.'

'You mean, no one ever sees me at all?' Lesley queried with a hint of mock bitterness.

'Frankly, no, not in that number,' Margot said. 'You're a swish of fabric and a pair of arms.'

'Talk about it to Bob, anyway,' Jim advised. Bob was the show's dance captain, a role that resembled a shop-floor foreman, and he was the link in the chain of hierarchy through which any lowly chorus problem had to pass. Fortunately, he was approachable and sympathetic.

'Not today,' Susan decided weakly. 'I'll see how tonight's show goes, and perhaps we could do the change for tomorrow's matinee. There's no time to even walk it through now.'

'True,' Jim conceded. 'In fact. . .' he got to his feet and the others followed suit. . . time for us to get ready.'

'Worried about something?' Jeremy asked, ending a silence that had fallen between himself and Susan.

They were at supper again the following Wednesday, and Susan was due to return to Dr Blake tomorrow to hear his verdict on the X-rays and MRI. It was this, of course, that she was thinking about, and she was surprised and a little hurt to find that Jeremy hadn't guessed the fact.

'My knees,' she explained briefly. She had told him all about it last week, realising that honesty felt better than half-truth, and needing his sympathy, which he had given almost too lavishly.

Now he nodded and said, 'Of course. It must be difficult,' and just as she was resigning herself to the task of cheering her face up and talking about something else, since he didn't seem to want to start a medical discussion, he suddenly leaned forward, took her hands in his and looked into the depths of her dark eyes. 'Promise me you won't worry about it too much, darling.'

'Well, it's hard not to,' she said, a bit surprised at his sudden fervour. 'If I had to drop out of the show. . .'

'My God, yes!' This possibility didn't seem to have struck him before. 'Oh, heavens! That would be terrible!'

'Oh, Jeremy,' she answered him helplessly.

He looked devastatingly handsome at the moment, with his well-chiselled face falling into planes that breathed concern and empathy, and tears had come into her eyes against her will. His manner was breaking down her defences, and in another moment she would be crying in earnest.

Two people paused beside their table and saved her from the danger of losing control.

'Hello, Jeremy,' a creamy voice said behind Susan's right shoulder. Turning slightly, ready to smile, she found it was Briony Cosgrove. As usual the star performer merely gave her a cool glance, softened for politeness' sake by an icy curve of her lips. 'I didn't expect to see you here.'

'I could say the same thing,' Jeremy returned flippantly.

'Alec had arranged to meet some people here for supper and he wanted me along too,' Briony said.

Her husband took a cue from his name and said gruffly, 'Hello Singleton.'

'Evening, Alec. These are the people from Los Angeles you were telling me about?'

'Yes, perhaps you should join us. I was planning to set up a more formal meeting, but. . .'

'Darling?' Jeremy turned questioningly to Susan.

She nodded. 'I'd love to.' Jeremy was caressing her hand, his fingers making snake-like ripples of sensory awareness.

'We haven't ordered yet,' he said, glancing around in search of a waiter. The place was getting rather full.

'I have a table reserved over there.' Alec Savill gestured with short stumpy fingers. 'Come straight over. They can re-set this.' He looked down at the table and Susan saw with a start of mild horror that it was only her own place setting that was disarranged.

Until Jeremy had taken possession of her hands she had been fiddling with cutlery, plate and table-napkin, and the latter was now crumpled and crookedly pleated as a result of her absent, nervous fingers. It wasn't something she usually did, and she could only put it down to her tension about tomorrow's appointment with Dr Joel Blake.

Rising, with Jeremy's touch beneath her elbow to guide her, she felt uncomfortable, too, about her appearance. A plain dark red skirt and silky cream blouse were no match for Briony Cosgrove's glittering off-the-shoulder cocktail dress in stiff black taffeta, sheer gauze and patterned beading.

The casual outfit had been a deliberate choice on Susan's part. Once or twice in the past she had dressed up lavishly for supper with Jeremy, but he had seemed displeased about it and impatient about the time it took. She knew that plain, simple outfits like the one she now wore looked good with her skin, her graceful dancer's build and her full, bouncing bob of black hair. Perhaps Jeremy didn't like glamorous dress and heavy make-up. After the thick grease-paint she had to wear under the harsh stage lighting during the show, a skin freshly cleansed with toner and a mouth sketched with lipstick were really what she preferred herself, so suiting his taste came as no hardship.

There was no doubt, though, that tonight she was under-dressed. Alec Savill had only nodded briefly and politely at her as if she were a total stranger. Although she had met him several times and knew that he was already aware of her connection with Jeremy, she realised that to him she simply didn't count, and beside Briony Cosgrove she suddenly felt terribly insignificant.

At Alec Savill's table, two men were just taking their seats. Older, gruffer and more portly than their host himself, they greeted Briony with gallant deference, lavished a token compliment or two on Susan and then took no further notice of her.

Jeremy's behaviour was a little odd. Usually he ordered only coffee or wine when they had supper together. Tonight, however, he had soup, Caesar salad,

garlic bread and dessert. The other three men each chose pasta courses, and Briony had a lobster salad so that Susan, who had been the first to order, felt out of place—again!—with her black espresso coffee and creme brulee. She ended up having her white cup filled repeatedly, simply in order to have something to sip on while the others ate.

She wished that Jeremy had managed to take her aside and warn her that this might turn into a business meeting—because this was clearly what it was. The two men were film producers, and they were talking about plans for a lavish film musical in classic Hollywood tradition. Alec Savill was already contracted to do lyrics and story-line, and it seemed that Jeremy was very much a front-runner for composer of the score with Alec's collaboration.

Briony knew all about the project, and was able to contribute intelligent comments with an energetic toss of her frosted-blond head, but Susan, who knew nothing at all about this side of the musical business, could say nothing of value, and knew she must not jeopardise Jeremy's future by trying. This could be a very big break for him. It was exciting, and she felt thrilled on his behalf, very warm towards him and slightly disbelieving about the fact that she was known throughout the *Penny Parade* company as his girlfriend.

Was it only a year and a half ago that she had been a weary nurse, trudging off to dance classes after an early shift, with dwindling hopes of a professional dance career? Now she was sitting in a glittering restaurant, surrounded by late-night Manhattan crowds, and had a handsome and successful man beside her, and every ten minutes or so that man would give her a squeeze, a caress or a light kiss.

In between making these gestures, though, Jeremy ignored her, and she had to remind herself again that it was right for his career to take precedence over their relationship this evening. She wasn't the kind of girl who expected slavish devotion from a man.

Actually, her relationship with Jeremy, ambiguous though it sometimes seemed, was the most serious involvement she had ever had, and she really didn't know how to feel or behave much of the time. With years of hectic dashing back and forth between study and dance classes, there simply hadn't been time for boyfriends or social life. Having the leisure to sit up late at a restaurant, studying the beautifully dressed women, listening to the mellow, rippling notes of a grand piano being played just yards from where she was. . . All this was almost unheard of in her life, and brought with it a magic that dazzled and blinded her.

The meeting-cum supper went on. The after-theatre crowds began to thin out. The piano player began to choose quieter, sleepier melodies, and suddenly Susan wished that the evening was over. It was nearly two o'clock now, and her appointment with Dr Blake was at nine in the morning. But, in the hope of being alone with Jeremy eventually, she stayed on at his side.

The two film producers were talking in very definite terms about a contract for him now. Perhaps it was his uncertainty about this important career break that had kept him from thinking about their relationship and from moving it on to a more serious footing. From what people had been saying tonight, the project had already been in the wind for two months, and Jeremy had not known until just now where he stood when it came to securing the important role of composer.

He hadn't shared his uncertainty with her. . .but,

then, she had kept herself from telling him about her knee problems until just last week. They would have to learn to be more open with each other if a real base of trust was to develop. . .

She concealed a yawn behind the back of her slim smooth-skinned hand. The white and gold and green of the restaurant was beginning to swim before her tired eyes, and her limbs felt heavier and heavier by the minute. The possibility of feeling fresh tomorrow at her appointment was already gone, and if she didn't leave here and get some sleep soon she would be positively haggard in appearance by nine a.m.

Reluctantly she concluded that time alone with Jeremy was out of the question tonight. It was half an hour, now, since he had turned to her with a touch and he seemed completely absorbed in what Briony Cosgrove was saying about her husband's ideas for the film.

Alec Savill himself didn't look happy about Jeremy's attentiveness, and again Susan remembered his reputation for jealousy. Briony, with her charismatic gestures, her wide, sensuous mouth, brilliant blue eyes and spun-gold hair, would certainly turn a lot of men's heads. It couldn't be an easy marriage for either of them, by any means.

Taking advantage of a tiny pause in their talk while fresh cigarettes were lit, Susan rose unobtrusively and murmured to Jeremy, 'I have to go, I really do. With Dr Blake in the morning. . .'

He turned to her. His smoky green eyes seemed glazed for a moment then he focused them and smiled up at her intently. 'See you tomorrow, then, darling. . .'. He squeezed her hands and coaxed her lips into a supple kiss.

'I'll call you tomorrow morning, shall I? To tell you the news?' This was more important to her at the moment than his kiss—to know that he shared her concern about what Dr Blake would say.

'News?' He frowned. 'Oh, yes, the specialist. Yes, phone me.' He squeezed her hands tightly again. 'Not too early, though. About noon, if you can.'

'All right.'

'I'll be waiting to hear,' he said.

Behind him, Briony Cosgrove blew out a thick coil of smoke with a thin whooshing sound and leant across to her husband. 'We should be going soon, sweetheart,' she said, and took no notice of Susan's murmured thanks and goodbyes.

The two film men nodded politely and said how wonderful it had been to meet her, and then, after a final squeeze and kiss from Jeremy, Susan left the almost-deserted restaurant alone.

The weather was glorious again the next morning, as it had been for her first appointment last week, and again Susan walked across Central Park. Since taking Dr Blake's advice to go easy on exercise, the nagging pain in her knees had ebbed a little during day-to-day activity. While dancing in *Penny Parade*, however, it was just as bad, and twice she had narrowly missed losing her footing when a sharp twinge and sudden weakness in her left leg had taken her by surprise. Since Saturday's matinee she had danced in Lesley's place in the Act Two finale.

Today she did not stride jauntily or try a dance step as she had done last week during this walk. Instead, she allowed more time for the trip and took it at a stroll, again wearing the rubber-soled running shoes that

cushioned her feet and joints against the hardness of the asphalt pathways and concrete pavements.

In spite of her tiredness last night, she had slept badly—all that coffee, probably—and had woken at seven this morning, too nervous about what Dr Blake would say to sleep any longer. Perhaps it was foolish to be so wound up about it. Very probably there would be no clear diagnosis, just a series of cautions and exercises and hedged explanations of the problem: 'Do these exercises six times a day, take these precautions, wait and see, come back in three months.' From her nursing experience she knew that even the best doctors didn't always have the answers.

This time, as she sat in the waiting-room, she wasn't preoccupied with thoughts of Jeremy as she had been last week. Instead, she was thinking only of Dr Blake. She was to be his third patient of the day. The first two patients were already with him. No one else was waiting yet, and no doubt her file was already prepared.

Behind the waiting-room desk, ash-blond Holly Evans, the nurse-receptionist, stretched, winced and rubbed her lower back. In a low-waisted plain jersey dress she looked very pregnant this week and was obviously feeling the strain. With the physical work sometimes required of an orthopaedic nurse—even an office-based one, whose duties were also secretarial—she wouldn't be able to keep her position here much longer.

Another patient entered the waiting-room as a tall black man, who looked like a basketball player, emerged from the examination-room that adjoined the doctor's office. The latter went to the front desk to make another appointment. An older woman with auburn hair and sturdy hips entered from the building's lobby, let herself

into the reception area and put down bag and scarf. Dr Blake must employ a part-time receptionist as well.

Just as Susan was concluding this, the doctor himself appeared in the doorway. 'Holly, take John to Room One,' he said, in the direction of the desk, and then, 'Miss Taylor, I'll see you now.'

For a moment she was too nervous to stand. With her mind focused and alert in a way it had not been last week as she had waited, he seemed a much more imposing presence this morning. Dressed as he was in dark tailored trousers and an open-necked white shirt, there ought to be nothing so very striking in his appearance, but somehow there was. Perhaps it was the way his dark eyes met hers so steadily, or the way his strong hands, their fingers spread, were silhouetted, one against the pale wood of the door, the other against the dark fabric of his trousers.

The bridge of his roughly chiselled nose was slightly crooked so that it seemed to divide his face into two unequal halves, and the sculptured appearance of his head was enhanced by the fact that he didn't seem to have shaved this morning. The dark pattern of stubble on chin and jaw strengthened an already formidable profile.

He raised his brows slightly and she realised that she was keeping him waiting. Quickly she jumped up, and for an appalling second her legs gave way beneath her. Perhaps it was the sleepless night, or perhaps it was the walk across the Park on a breakfast of nothing but orange juice. Perhaps it was the shoes—in the lobby, like a typical New York businesswoman, she had changed out of her running shoes and had slipped on heeled Italian leather court shoes that matched the forest-green suit she had teamed with a cream blouse.

Or perhaps it was her knees that had let her down. Whatever the answer, her elfin features lost their fey, exotic look and froze into planes of fear and panic. He saw this and took a long step towards her, but then she recovered her balance and her strength and was able to cross the room with the dancer's grace that usually came so naturally to her. Last week, she remembered, her journey across the room had been almost as clumsy. What must he think? She set her jaw firmly, not wanting words of reassurance, and it was a relief when he stepped back to let her pass, his face relaxing, and said nothing about her near-miss.

It wasn't until they were seated in his wood-panelled office that he spoke. In her suit, waiting for him to begin, Susan felt as if she were at a job interview, but she did not regret the impulse to dress more formally than last week. If she needed to show a stoical face, good clothing would help. He wasted no time with preliminaries.

'I'd like you to have some surgery,' he said.

'Then it'll be all right?' she burst out eagerly. 'With surgery, the problem will——?' She broke off as he held out a restraining hand.

'Only the surgery will complete the diagnosis, so what I'm saying now isn't the definitive answer. I'm. . .let's say. . .ninety-eight per cent certain, though.' He pulled out the stiff sheets of her X-ray film from a large white envelope and slid them on to a panel on the wall that was lit from the rear. 'There are signs of damage here and here. This is the left knee, which you felt was worse, and that's what these scans seem to indicate. Now, here's the MRI. This is the patella of the left knee. See the dark area beneath?'

'Yes,' she nodded.

'And see the paler areas within that?'

'Yes.'

'It suggests a meniscal tear, which in turn points to cruciate ligament damage.' He slid the sheets of film into his hands again and switched off the light. 'It'll make more sense to you if I use a model.'

There was one on his desk—a plastic contraption with parts that moved in and out, showing knee joints, patella, and various ligaments. He took a pencil and began to point as he talked, and Susan nodded mechanically, the medical terms coming to her ear with a familiarity that none the less had an edge of oddness because they weren't being drily studied in a nursing textbook. Instead they applied to her, to her body, and to her dancing.

'This is the cruciate ligament down the centre.' He flipped the patella aside to reveal a strong-looking sinew. 'Surgery on that is fairly major, but that's not what I'm proposing. We can work on counteracting the effect of the damage with physical therapy.'

He told her that past injuries and general wear, tear and stress over the eighteen years she had been dancing had resulted in the damage that could be seen. It was the cruciate ligament in her more seriously injured left knee that gave the sensation that it was going to give way, and it was tearing in the meniscus and roughening of the underside of the patella that created most of the pain.

'I want to put you in for an arthroscopy,' he said. 'It's not a major operation. You won't even need an overnight stay, and it may not be done under general. We'll discuss that later, and it's partly up to you. I'll be using fibre optics to see inside your left knee—we'll leave the right for the moment and perhaps tackle that

in the future if necessary—and I expect to find pieces of torn material. . . floating freely, as it were. Those will be removed and the area will be tidied up generally—like pruning a garden shrub, almost, with a bit of vacuuming thrown in. Debriding is the medical term.'

'And then I'll be able to——?' She had listened calmly for as long as she could, but again he restrained her from speech and went on,

'The pain should disappear, and recovery from the surgery should be rapid, with about six weeks of physical therapy. Perhaps longer, perhaps less, depending on your commitment and your physical make-up.'

He paused and put the pencil back on his desk. It made a high, drily wooden sound that punctuated the silence with an odd significance. Susan watched his fingers, waiting, not daring to speak. Her heart was thudding.

'After that,' he said, 'it's up to you.'

She looked up at him quickly. What did he mean? 'Are you saying. . .?'

'You'll be able to dance without significant pain. Perhaps for two years, perhaps longer. That would depend on all sorts of intangibles that I can't really comment on—the demands of performance, the commitment you bring to certain muscle-strengthening exercises, your own temperament and attitude, luck. . . And I'd recommend using a brace.'

'A brace?' Susan's breath was coming in shallow heaves inside her chest, and she felt a rising impatience. He seemed to be saying she could dance, and yet. . .

'*But. . .*' the word was heavily emphasised '. . . I want to warn and advise you in the strongest possible terms *not* to keep dancing professionally—to give it up as soon as possible.'

'For good?' Her voice was hoarse and dry.

'For good.'

'Why?'

'Because ligaments and cartilage don't grow back. Those joints at the knee—perhaps the least efficient in the human body in the first place—are already seriously and irrevocably weakened. If you go on dancing you'll put added strain on the support mechanisms that remain. That will result in further injury, further weakening, further stress. Then more major cruciate ligament surgery would be necessary. It would take a year to return your legs to full range of motion and strength after that, and even so. . . It's a downward spiral. Within ten years, you would be unable to walk normally.'

'But for two years I can dance with no pain? I couldn't wear a brace during the show, of course. . .'

'Two years? Three? Or perhaps six months. There are no guarantees. Remember, there's the right knee as well, and as for the brace. . .'

Susan lifted her finely moulded chin. She was sizzling inside and her old stubbornness about dancing had suddenly filled her with a new strength. 'If I can keep dancing for two or three years with no pain, that's all I want to know,' she said, rising to her feet and straightening the skirt of her slim, tailored suit. 'Now, do I arrange for the surgery with your nurse?'

'You don't mean to tell me you're going to go on with it, after what I've just said?'

The words were propelled from him with violence, his voice deeper and more gravelly than usual. Susan had been expecting the explosion. She wanted it, in fact, because his news was not something she had the power, at the moment, to take calmly. Even ten minutes ago, if

someone had asked her, she would have said that she was prepared to hear the terrible verdict, 'No more dancing.' Now she knew that it was impossible to be prepared for such a thing. Hope, naivete, 'It can't happen to *me*'—these were the attitudes and feelings that went on flourishing beneath the surface in spite of everything.

She wanted a battle, a struggle. She wanted to remain defiant, and he had given her a toe-hold on defiance. He had given her a choice—she could keep dancing for two or three years, and she was going to do just that.

'I can't give up dancing,' was her answer to him, delivered, with pink cheeks, in as bold a tone as his own aggressive question had been. 'So don't tell me to. I'm sorry, but that's all there is to it.'

'Sorry?' he rasped, rising to his full height behind the desk and glaring at her with belligerent brown eyes in which gold flecks sizzled like sparks. 'Sorry? As if you're letting *me* down? Do you think it matters to me one iota whether you go on hoofing across the boards or whether you take up knitting instead? I'm the one who should be saying sorry. I'm sorry about what I've had to tell you. It's hard news, a terrible moment in your life, and I wish I could have said something different. Go on dancing, if two years in a Broadway chorus is that important to you, but if you do I think you're making one of the most foolish decisions I've ever come across in my entire career——'

'Stop!' Susan burst out. 'You've said enough. What I decide is none of your business. You'll get your fee for consultation and surgery no matter what, and——'

'That is scarcely the issue at hand,' he sniped icily.

She ignored him. 'You can't know what this is like,

what I'm feeling, what I've had to do to keep dancing until now. So don't try and tell me what's best.'

'Look, don't take that all-or-nothing attitude. You're behaving like the dying heroine of some opera.'

'Opera? Don't you think it's——?'

'There's a lot we can do with physical therapy. Don't act as if I'm going to chop open your knee and then abandon you. You're not a teenager. Be realistic'

'Realistic?' she challenged hotly.

'Miss Taylor, I believe very strongly——'

Again, she ignored him and plunged on. 'I'm sorry. I've made my decision, and your opinion really isn't important to me.'

For a moment she thought he was going to attack her again with more of the angry jeering she had just parried, but then his strong shoulders—held like a beast's when it was about to spring—relaxed, and the rasping in-breath he had drawn came out in a controlled sigh.

'I have patients waiting,' he said, quite calmly. 'So you'll excuse me, won't you? Talk to Holly about scheduling the surgery. Try and make it as soon as there's space available on my list, because you certainly shouldn't go on dancing with that pain. You'll have to get some time off from *Tuppence Halfpenny*, or whatever the silly damn thing's called.'

'The show is *Penny Parade*," she corrected him coldly. 'It's not silly and it's doing very well.'

'Yes, British musicals in New York always do, these days,' he said absently, then the door that led to his first examination-room closed with a quiet click and he was gone.

In the reception area Susan managed to hold her control until she had arranged the arthroscopy as well

as preliminary and follow-up appointments here and at the hospital. Then, when she was out in the marble-floored lobby, a flood of wild, angry, and despairing tears broke loose.

CHAPTER THREE

THE landscape shown on the black and white television screen was weird. It was more like a seascape, really—an underwater world revealed by a scuba-diving camera crew.

Odd, torn shapes like tropical coral or camouflaged fish floated in liquid as if in slow motion, and then, unexpectedly, a hard, probing shape—a predator—would enter the picture, there would be some neat, clipped movements, and one of the torn pieces would be carried away, like prey to a crocodile's lair. Susan watched the screen intently, wondering what would happen next, yet strangely distanced from the drama being played before her.

She was looking at the inside of her own left knee, but that fact was so much like something out of science fiction that it was scarcely believable, and she felt none of the squeamishness she had initially feared. Drapes dropping at her middle concealed the surgical team working on her lower limbs, and epidural anaesthesia deadened and paralysed her completely from the waist down. A new, short-acting anti-anxiety drug, midazolam, took any lingering fear away.

She had been given a choice. General anaesthesia was a possibility, if she was too nervous about the idea of being a conscious presence during her own surgery. At the opposite extreme, a local anaesthetic would be sufficient, as long as she kept utterly still, and did not flinch at the feeling of having her legs manoeuvred

around to permit the insertion of the delicate and highly complex fibre optics equipment.

In the end, she had chosen the middle course of an epidural. From her three months on an obstetrical ward during her training in London, she remembered women in labour receiving this form of pain relief, and she knew most of them had been pleased with it. Never having been overly squeamish about needles, she hadn't dreaded the insertion of cannula and catheter into the epidural space, between her third and fourth lumbar vertebrae, and had adopted the foetal 'scrunch' position without fear, lying on her side at the anaesthetist's instruction.

'Here comes that hammerhead shark again,' he now murmured, just behind her head, as another instrument entered the picture on the screen.

Susan giggled. So she wasn't the only one who thought it looked like an underwater nature documentary!

At the far end of her body—and it seemed like a far end today; it seemed miles away—she heard Joel Blake murmur something, then someone else moved. Perhaps it was the scrub nurse passing him an instrument. There was quite a crowd gathered around her legs: circulating nurse in the background—a role Susan herself had played for three months during training—scrub nurse, two assistant surgeons, and three more junior observers who were increasing their understanding of this new technology.

Time passed. The lights overhead were hot, like stage lights. Theatre lights. This *was* a theatre, of a very different kind. Susan felt a pang of emotional pain as she made the casual connection, and she quickly shifted her mind to other thoughts. It must be nearly lunch time.

Probably Dr Blake would only have one more patient on this morning's list after herself.

'Suture. . .' Susan heard the murmured word. The television screen had gone blank now. There was a sigh and a shifting from one of the observers, although Dr Blake's concentration still seemed to be utterly focused. The operation must be nearly over. . .

Fifteen minutes later she was being wheeled into Out-patient Recovery, where she would spend a few hours before being allowed to go home. Now that it was finished she felt drowsy, although it was the middle of the day, and the hospital bed, with its cool, clean sheets and light-weave blanket, looked inviting.

For half an hour she dozed, then woke to the sight of a lunch tray containing a cup of vegetable-filled soup, sandwiches, two sweet biscuits, and tea. Sitting up in bed was a little awkward, and her knee was beginning to feel slightly tender and sore now that the epidural was wearing off, but it was difficult to believe in those probing instruments she had been looking at so recently.

It was just as she finished her tea and biscuits that a tall figure appeared beside the bed, clad in everyday clothes now, instead of the blue scrub suit he had worn during surgery.

'How are you doing?' Joel Blake asked.

'Oh, fine,' Susan said, struggling to sit up a little higher in the bed.

She was horribly aware that she was blushing. A preliminary session here at the hospital yesterday afternoon to measure her blood values had been done by a technician, and a junior resident had been the one to ask a series of questions this morning. The different choices about anaesthesia had been discussed by the anaesthetist himself.

In short, she and Dr Blake had not encountered each other face to face since their angry scene and awkward parting in his office, and that was now two weeks ago. Since then, a lot had changed.

He was looking down at her, and she began to feel the inadequacy of the lemon-yellow cotton hospital gown, although he would have seen hundreds of figures of all shapes and sizes dressed like this before.

'It went well in there,' he said with the neutral friendliness he would use to any post-operative patient. Perhaps he had forgotten all about their mutual display of anger. 'The underlying problem was just as I thought—the cruciate ligament, and we'll work on that later with physical therapy, but when it comes to the elimination of the pain you've been having and the strengthening of the muscles. . .you might be back in *Penny Parade* sooner than I thought.'

It was the moment Susan had been dreading, and she had known it would come. As if to make it harder for her, he had remembered the name of the show and spoken of it in a friendly way, not seeming to belittle it as he had done before. She took a deep breath and felt her throat tighten.

'I won't be back in *Penny Parade*,' she said. 'I'm going to give up dancing.'

Two other recovering patients in the small day-ward had been chatting in low voices on the other side of the room. Now, as if on cue, they fell silent, and the room suddenly seemed very still.

'Are you?' His voice cut lightly across the quiet air. I think that's the best decision. Is it final?'

'Yes,' she nodded, trying to imitate his own light, calm manner. I danced my last performance on Tuesday night.'

'If I'd known,' he said, 'I would have got tickets.'

'Nonsense!' Surely this was just polite pretence on his part, the sort of thing people said without meaning it in the least. The fact that the show was such a trivial part of his and any outsider's life—the sort of thing you 'might get tickets for'—seemed to underline its importance for Susan, and she felt her chest tighten with pain.

Penny Parade had been her first professional show and now, already, it had been her last. She added dismissively, 'It's not important.'

'Don't say that,' he said gently, pulling the chair beside the bed towards him and lowering his long body into it with a smooth movement.

Level with him now, Susan felt very drained suddenly and knew that she could cry if he gave her the least opportunity. To shake off the feeling she sat up higher in the bed, then felt dizzy as her knee began to throb. She made herself speak, not caring if her voice came out harshly.

'Now that I've left the show,' she said, 'my perspective has changed. A dancing career is really rather trivial when you think about it. It's probably a good thing that this has happened.'

She didn't mean a word of it, of course, but she hated the idea of crying in front of a comparative stranger, and needed to create a distance between them. Those brown eyes of his, which she had seen both cynical and angry, could also be disarmingly warm and concerned. He didn't try to contradict what she had just said, but simply nodded slowly, then asked, 'Holly's booked you in for a check next week?'

'Yes. Next Tuesday.'

'Well, I'll see you then. Meanwhile, take it easy.'

'Is that all?'

'No. . .but I wasn't sure that you were ready to hear anything else yet.'

'Go ahead,' she said carefully. 'You must have other people to see.'

'It's pretty simple, really. Don't shower until Sunday, and leave the dressing in place till then. When you do shower, remove the dressing completely—don't worry if you see a bit of blood and staining on it—stay under the water briefly, and blot the wounds dry. Put a Band-aid over each puncture site and then put the Ace bandage back on. If the dressing is saturated with blood, though, call me straight away.'

'Is that likely?'

'No, not likely at all. As for pain and sleeping medication, they'll be given to you, with instructions, when you're ready to leave. You'll be given a lesson on crutches as well. Is that all clear?'

'Very clear.' She nodded, managing a smile. A lot of it sounded like the kind of thing she had told patients in London before their discharge.

He rose quickly, hesitated for a moment, then reached down and touched her very briefly on the shoulder, the edge of one finger just contacting her bare skin where the round neck-opening of the gown began. 'That's about it, then. Look after yourself.'

Since the rest of his patients this morning were all in for overnight stays, he did not have anyone else to see in Out-patient Recovery, and a moment later he was gone from the room, his pace crisp and businesslike down the polished floor of the corridor.

For some reason, perhaps because it was a little too warm in here for her English metabolism and because his hand was cool, his touch seemed to remain on her shoulder like a coloured imprint, lasting several minutes

before it faded. Pushing aside any thoughts of him, of dancing, or anything else, Susan put her empty teacup at the corner of the tray-table, picked up a magazine from the table beside her bed, and began to read. It was one way to fill the questioning void of her future for a little while. . .

Her changed decision had not come about suddenly. For two days she had continued in her brittle mood of anger and defiance, suppressing the despair that had bubbled up as she'd left Dr Blake's office. She hadn't called Jeremy as she had promised, and finally, at two in the afternoon, he had called her.

'I'm having some surgery which should get rid of the pain, and I can keep dancing,' she had told him, her voice high and strained. His delighted response had washed over her without leaving any impression.

Then gradually, over several days, her feelings had changed. She became aware of walking and running as she had never been before. Moving around her tiny studio apartment, hurrying to catch the lift, crossing the road. . . Walking itself was a dance, yet was something everyone took so much for granted. She could feel herself favouring her left leg now, almost limping.

One morning Susan had noticed an elderly woman wearing callipers and using a cane as she'd made her slow painful progress towards the subway entrance. Another day, enjoying a solitary brunch at a cafe near her apartment building, she could not help overhearing two older dancers talking.

'That tour was a joke. We were told it was a bona fide show, a proper compilation of Broadway hits, and we rehearsed it really hard, although we thought the choreography was pretty weak. Then when we saw the

costumes——! It was practically a strip-show. I broke my contract and dropped out after three weeks.'

'Dropped out? Are you crazy? It was work!'

'You mean you would have kept on with it?'

'It was dancing, wasn't it?'

'Some people called it that.'

'Going to the audition this afternoon?'

'Of course. Although someone told me they're really only looking for two dancers.'

'It says sixteen.'

'But they already know who they want.'

The conversation had gone on in this vein, but Susan had stopped listening quite soon and become lost in her own thoughts. Perhaps it was then that her decision was truly made, but, if so, she had not recognised the fact until three days later.

She wasn't absolutely sure that she was going to say it until she was face to face with Bob, the dance captain, and then it had come out: 'Bob, I'm leaving the show.'

The week between that day and the arthroscopy had been lived in a kind of limbo. Each performance had taken on a magic and importance that was precious, and the surgery had loomed as a watershed, after which nothing would be the same again.

Now the surgery was over, and life had to go on. Where? How? Susan had no idea. She had told Jeremy, finally, six days ago, that her knee injuries were chronic and that she was leaving *Penny Parade* and giving up her professional dance career. He had been warm, understanding, and had kissed and caressed her more than usual. Even so, the full significance of what she was saying didn't seem to dawn on him.

With no show to perform in, she had no reason to stay in New York. Jeremy was to be here for the next

six months at least, even if *Penny Parade* closed tomorrow. If Susan returned to England, would this mean the end of their relationship?

In a world that had changed too rapidly for her emotions to cope with, the end of Jeremy on top of everything else seemed just too hard. Even though she often felt unsure about his true place in her life, and wished he weren't quite such a busy man so that they could spend more time together, her emotional involvement with him was increasing. She couldn't drop everything here and return to England.

It was all this that she did not want to think about as she lay back against the pillows of the hospital bed with her magazine, but somehow the printed words on the page would not make sense and began to blur before her eyes as thoughts took hold. Impatient with herself, she dropped the magazine on to the covers in a flutter of pages and began to look idly round the ward.

A red-headed nurse bent over another patient's bed, evidently calming his fears about something. Susan could hear the lilt of an Irish voice, although she could not catch the words beyond an initial, 'Now then, Mr Drywa, what're ye callin' me for this time?' A few minutes later the Irish girl, who looked about Susan's own age, returned to her desk and went on with her paperwork.

Apparently there were a lot of non-American nurses working in hospitals, clinics and offices here in New York and elsewhere in the country—Irish, Filipino, Australian, English. . . There was a nursing shortage in the United States, and it was one profession in which it was easy for a foreigner to obtain a work permit.

This was the answer! It had crept up on Susan without her noticing, and now stood staring her in the

face. She would and could stay in New York. This wasn't the end of everything. She would work here as a nurse!

An hour later, when Jeremy came to help her home, she met him with a smile that lit up her whole face and brought a ripple of surprised laughter from his wide, thin lips.

'I thought I'd find you in tears.' He bent down to kiss her briefly on the cheek.

'Tears?' she returned. 'When the surgery's over and you've come to look after me?' She had been very tentative about asking a few days ago if he would, and was secretly very pleased when he had checked his diary and then agreed. It was in many ways the most intimate and personal thing he had ever done for her. He waited while the Irish nurse curtained Susan's bed and helped her to dress, and while she received her prescriptions for medication, then walked slowly along the corridor to the lift beside her as she tried to get used to the awkward aluminium crutches.

Twisting a little so that she could look across at him, Susan said, 'The reason I'm so much happier than you thought I'd be—and than I thought I'd be!—is that I've had the most perfect idea. I'm going to stay on in New York and get a job as a nurse.'

'Stay on?' He hesitated for a tiny moment, then said, 'But that's marvellous! I didn't want to ask. . . I was afraid you'd go back to London. I really didn't know what you'd do.'

'Yes, actually, I've been feeling that we don't talk enough, Jeremy,' she said tentatively, wishing not for the first time that she had had boyfriends in her teens, as other girls had, so she would have a better idea about

what was reasonable in a relationship and what was not.

'I know. I'm sorry. I've been busy,' he said briefly. 'This film possibility. . .'

He raked long fingers through the blond hair that fell in fashionable waves on top of his head. Susan's back was getting sore from twisting, and she felt unsteady on the crutches, so she faced forward again. Beside her, he continued to speak. They had reached the lift now. Not the most private place for this sort of discussion, but that couldn't be helped. New Yorkers were notorious for carrying on personal conversations in public places, so no doubt no one would think anything of it. Over a loudspeaker came a bland female voice. 'Dr Grossman, extension three-seven-three. Dr Grossman, extension three-seven-three, please.'

'But if you're staying in New York,' Jeremy was saying, 'that's excellent. . . wonderful. You can come to the theatre to meet me after the show, see a performance every couple of weeks—'

'Oh, Jeremy, no!' she exclaimed fervently at once. 'Please! The theatre is the last place I want to be, and if I do see the show again it won't be for months. It would be. . . too painful for me, now that I can't dance. . . ' She choked over the word and broke off.

'Really?' he went on. 'Yes, of course. . . I suppose so. That's inconvenient. I'm sorry, I. . . ' He stopped.

The lift arrived at street level and its other three occupants stood back to let Susan manoeuvre herself out first. A taxi pulled up immediately at the kerb beyond the hospital entrance, and there was some awkward work involved in getting Susan safely inside and laying the crutches on the seat beside her, while still leaving room for Jeremy.

When the taxi was moving, he resumed the conversation as if there had been no interruption. 'But you'll keep in touch with some of the other dancers, won't you? Where will you see them?'

'Anywhere but the theatre,' Susan returned. It seemed an odd question. New York, of all places, contained a huge variety of meeting spots—cafes, restaurants, galleries, cinemas.

Jeremy was silent for a moment, then, unexpectedly, he reached out and ran his fingers softly along the fine line of her jaw. 'You really are lovely, you know,' he said gently, with a hesitant note in his voice that almost sounded like an apology.

Susan's skin tingled under his caress. She was surprised at how tentative his gesture had been. Surely after all this time he was not doubtful about her response?

He spent two hours at her tiny apartment, and they were very pleasant ones, with radio music mellow in the background as they talked about travel, his work, her new nursing plans. After he had gone, Susan wondered if this would be the beginning of a new phase in their relationship.

Perhaps a barrier—which she had not quite known was there—had broken down this afternoon, and they would spend more time like this in future. Perhaps their involvement in the show together had made him want to be more distant at other times. Would this be her first reason to be glad that dancing was no longer a part of her life.

The following days were necessarily quiet ones, and not particularly easy, although visits from several *Penny Parade* performers and daily telephone calls or brief

visits from Jeremy relieved the monotony. Dr Blake telephoned the first night as well, which came as a surprise.

'I wasn't sure you'd remember everything I said,' he'd explained lightly. 'You were in a bit of a post-operative daze. Quite normal, of course.'

Their chat had been brief and to the point as he'd gone over what he had told her in the recovery-room, and the loneliness she'd felt when she replaced the phone was probably more to do with the fact that her clock had shown eight-seventeen p.m.—the exact time when she had made her first entrance in *Penny Parade*. . .

In only a few days Susan was able to move about her apartment almost normally, although Dr Blake had advised her to be very careful about putting weight on her left leg, and to continue with the crutches for two weeks after the surgery. Making use of the prescribed analgesics, she wasn't in much pain—physically, that was.

Emotionally, the wound made by her lost dancing and relinquished hopes would take a long time to heal, but this pain was not acute, it was simply a background. Meanwhile she began to make enquiries about nursing and about the paperwork involved in getting a new work permit, since her current one was tied to her role in *Penny Parade*.

Then Tuesday's nine o'clock appointment with Dr Blake came. After waiting only a few minutes, she was ushered into the first examination-room, where Holly Evans made some routine checks before Joel Blake made his appearance.

The weather was warming up towards summer today, and Susan wore a bright, simple cotton-knit dress and matching jacket in a turquoise edged with black that

contrasted with and emphasised her exotic colouring. Her legs, smooth and quickly tanned from the two afternoons she had spent lazing in the park since her surgery, were bare, and the orthopaedic surgeon went to examine her swollen left knee at once, after flinging only a token greeting to the owner of the said knee.

'This new fibre optics surgery is miraculous,' he said. 'A few years ago you would have been in hospital for days and incapacitated for weeks. We'd have had to open up the whole area in a major way. No, this, though. . . You're doing very well.'

He tested her range of motion, examined the healing of the tiny incisions through which the different probes and instruments had passed, and questioned her about pain. It was over in a few minutes, and he was clearly about to leave her again when Holly Evans entered.

Susan felt an odd wave of disappointment wash over her as he turned to his nurse. Was that it? No doubt there would be several follow-up appointments over the next few months, at greater and greater intervals, and of course tomorrow would begin the three-times-weekly physiotherapy in a clinic in this same building. But her most intense association with Dr Blake was at an end, and somehow it felt too soon. It had been his professional advice and his surgery that had changed the course of her life, and now she was on her own, one of his many routine follow-up patients.

'Room Two waiting?' he asked his nurse.

'No, I'm afraid not,' she said to him with a wince. 'We shouldn't schedule early appointments for Ben because he's always late for them. Mrs Klein hasn't turned up yet, either.'

'So there's nobody waiting?'

'No, there isn't.'

'Today, of all days. I've got a very tight schedule, and I can't afford to end the day late.' He sighed impatiently.

Holly Evans left the room and Dr Blake circled restlessly, his hand rumpling his thick dark hair and his brown eyes casting about as if he was looking for a way to fill these unwanted free moments. Bending to put on her black shoes, Susan became aware that his gaze had fallen on her. He didn't speak, though, and she straightened and swung over on her crutches to pick up her bag, intending to say goodbye quickly then return to the reception area.

But at the last second his words forestalled her. 'This hasn't been an easy few weeks for you.' It was a statement, not a question.

'No, it hasn't.' She took her hand from the doorknob and faced him, waiting.

'You'll still be able to enjoy sport and movement,' he said. 'Holly will tell you about that, and will give you more detailed information. And of course David in Physical Therapy as well. Give yourself a good rest for a few months, apart from the specific exercises, then try one dance class a week, if you want to, with a brace. I'll have one for you next time you come. Nothing too advanced or technical, though; something recreational like Creative Movement. Go skating once in a while, skiing, cycling, if those things interest you. But again, not on an intensive level, and remember there is always the risk of further injury.'

'That's better than I thought, though,' Susan confessed on a sigh.

'Yes, sorry. I meant to talk to you about it before,' he answered. 'But that consultation we had three weeks ago before the surgery, ended—er—rather abruptly.'

Susan flushed and murmured, 'Yes, it did.' The last few weeks flashed before her memory again and suddenly she felt drained and on the verge of tears. Without stopping to think that perhaps it would be wiser to try and maintain control, she let herself continue. 'I was so upset. I. . . I really still haven't. . . It may be a while before I can face anything to do with dance.' She choked on the word.

'So. . .what are your plans?' he asked, studying her quite intently now. It must be obvious that she was upset, but his tone was brisk and cool, as it had not been a moment ago; almost abrupt, in fact. 'Career plans, I mean. Secretarial Studies? You'll go back to England, of course?'

'Actually, no,' Susan said, lifting her head a little. Her imminent tears had been chilled and dried by his tone. It came as a relief. 'I'm not planning to go back just yet. I like New York. I like the atmosphere.' Deliberately, she decided not to mention Jeremy. 'I'm going to stay here and find work.'

He frowned, looking down at her from his superior height—he must be at least six feet three—and she felt small and young in contrast. He was in the top bracket of professional success, and she began to regret having told him anything about her plans, and having let her feelings show as she had.

'Work? What sort of work?' he asked, with a growing hint of. . .was it impatience?

'Well, I——' Her voice came out squeaky and childish.

He did not let her finish. 'Surely your work permit is tied into the show? Don't tell me you're going to try and stay here illegally? A fine kind of job you'll end up with that way! Washing dishes in the back of a restaurant

kitchen for three dollars an hour.' His tone was derisive and he had turned from her again, crushing the paper sheet she had lain on while he had examined her and tossing it into a bin, although it had scarcely even looked creased. 'Now, where the heck does she keep these things?' Susan heard him murmur to himself in annoyance.

'Actually,' she said, forcing a new firmness and confidence into her tone, and forcing his attention back to what she was saying, 'I won't be staying here illegally at all. I'm a fully trained nurse. I'm told they are much in demand here, and foreigners like me can get jobs and work permits with no trouble.'

She couldn't have said what response she had expected from him, but it certainly wasn't the one he gave. Accompanied by a sound that was almost a snort, it came in clipped, blunt tones.

'So you have managed to do one sensible thing with your life! Nursing. . . I wonder if you're any good?' His tone made it clear that he strongly doubted it.

Before she could begin to attack his rude and outrageous words, he had gone from the roomn, leaving her open-mouthed and almost winded for quite some time. What an utterly ghastly man! To think that a few minutes ago she had been on the edge of tears and on the point of unburdening some of her deepest feelings to him! How dared he speak to her like that? And why had his manner undergone so abrupt a change, leaving her so unprepared? Scarcely a successful bedside manner, one would have thought. If he spoke like that often, she was surprised that he had any patients left at all!

Tingling with anger and forgetting the earlier part of their conversation, she was concerned only with two things. Firstly, to demand an apology from him, and

secondly to prove to him that of course she was a good nurse. It was unfortunate that this second task was impossible. Instead all she could do was prove it to herself, and prove it she would. Suddenly, it seemed quite important.

Beneath her sizzling anger of the moment, she did not fully realise that this was the first time she had ever thought of nursing in this way, the first time she had ever brought to it the grit and positive thinking that she had automatically applied to dance for so many years.

Meanwhile, with an energy she had not shown or felt since her first visit to Dr Blake, she pulled open the door of the examination-room to enter the surgeon's office, her breath drawn in ready to demand his apology. Her cheeks were hot and her anger was exhilarating and forceful.

The office was empty. Her angry gesture checked, she hesitated for a moment, balanced precariously on her crutches, then went out into the corridor and heard his voice coming from the second examination-room just opposite. Another patient must have arrived—perhaps one of the two late-comers—and he had wasted no time in getting to work with them.

Of course Susan could scarcely interrupt, and reluctantly, her immediate anger beginning to quieten a little, she realised that she had lost any chance of continuing their encounter. It was absurdly disappointing. The only thing to do instead was to see Holly Evans and fix up the bill. Was his remark enough of a reason to look for another specialist to follow up her treatment? It was tempting; something to think about over the next few days. Perhaps she could write him a curt, pointed letter. If she did switch doctors, she would be unlikely ever to see him face to face again. . .

Wrong! *Very* wrong! When he telephoned it was a Thursday, only two days later. At first, the name announced at the other end of the line in his gravelly voice didn't even make sense.

'I'm sorry?' she questioned automatically.

'Joel. . . Blake!' he repeated with clear emphasis.

She felt a strong tang of satisfaction as the name registered. He could only be calling to apologise. Her anger had ebbed, of course, but this didn't mean she had forgotten the incident. She waited.

'Listen,' he said. 'I have a proposal you may be interested in.' It wasn't what she was expecting to hear, and she almost took the phone from her ear in surprise. 'Holly stops work at the end of this week for three months' maternity leave. I had a replacement lined up, of course, but I've just heard that she's not available after all, and my part-timer doesn't want to increase her hours. You said you were a nurse, and that you were looking for work?'

'Yes, that's right. I've——'

'With that leg, you wouldn't be ready for strenuous work on a hospital ward yet, on your feet most of the day. Have you done any office work before?'

'I did some typing and book-keeping at school. . .'

'Good.' He paused.

Susan was still speechless. Before she had even begun to consider the idea, she heard his voice again, deep and impatient.

'Well, are you interested?' he demanded bluntly.

CHAPTER FOUR

'No, I'M afraid Dr Blake is in surgery today,' Susan said into the telephone. 'Can I have him call you tomorrow?'

She was beginning to lose count of the number of times she had said this sort of thing today. Even without Joel Blake's presence, the office was a hectic place. Jessie Duncan, the part-timer who was mainly responsible for billing, had agreed to spend this first week in the office full-time to help Susan learn the ropes. Now, as Susan replaced the receiver after scribbling down a message, the older woman smiled across at her.

'You're beginning to sound very professional.'

'Am I?' Susan returned. 'How does a professional sound?'

'In a doctor's office—friendly, encouraging, not too distant.'

'The way any receptionist should sound. . .'

This office was a pleasant place, and Jessie had been friendly and helpful all day, but Susan still had moments of rebellion against her changed status. Could she really be happy in a life with no dancing? But Jessie was saying something. 'You'd be surprised what a difference a doctor's office staff can make. We had a patient come to us a few months ago who had changed from another orthopaedist mainly because he didn't like the nurse-receptionist. You'll develop quite strong relationships with some of our patients. I think you'll find that one of

the most satisfying parts of the job—the contact with people.'

'Oh, I'm sure I will,' Susan said.

The telephone rang again, then the two women returned to their detailed tour of the filing system. In the back of her mind, Susan had time to think about what Jessie Duncan had said. Contact with people. That was no novelty, was it? As a dancer she had had plenty of opportunity for camaraderie, and during her training, all those patients and fellow staff members she had come across. . . . Susan had a sudden inkling, though, that this was going to be different. She didn't yet quite know how.

It was three o'clock when Dr Blake put in an unexpected appearance. 'Just wanted to see how you were getting along,' he said, flinging a bag on to the desk and a light jacket on to the back of one of the wheeled office chairs, then sitting down in it. 'Actually, you look a little tired,' he added, eyeing her narrowly.

'I'm not really,' Susan said, trying to look more energetic. It was her brain that felt fogged, not her body, after hours of trying to come to grips with the complicated paperwork made necessary by America's diverse array of private health insurance systems.

'We'll have some coffee, shall we?' Jessie suggested, standing and moving towards the door. 'Are you staying, Dr Blake?'

'For a while, yes, since I've dropped in. Anything I should know about? Any calls I should make?'

Quickly, Susan reached for the sheaf of phone messages and passed them to him, wincing a little as she half stood and put too much weight on her left leg. It wasn't in quite the right position beneath her. She had brought her crutches today as a precaution, but Dr Blake had

advised her to try and do without them gradually as her leg healed, and she hadn't actually used them much since arriving at the office. She had been able to sit down for most of the day.

He saw her grimace and rose quickly to meet her outstretched arm. Taking the bundle of message sheets in one hand, he put the other lightly on her shoulder and coaxed her back into the chair. It was a gentle, expert movement.

'Careful,' he said. 'You've got to remember to think about what you're doing with that leg at this stage. You're off the pain medication?'

'Yes, you said only as long as I needed it, and I don't, really. It's still a bit sore, but dancers are usually pretty stoical.' She stopped suddenly and clamped her mouth shut over clenched teeth, but he did not react to her changed manner.

'How's the physical therapy?'

'Good,' she nodded quickly. 'I have my next session tomorrow at half-past four, after I finish here.'

'Make sure you do the work at home, too,' he answered. 'Or perhaps there's no need to stress that in your case. Perhaps you're more likely to do the opposite and work on it too hard.'

'Perhaps,' she responded briefly, wishing that Jessie would return with their coffee. It seemed odd to have to relate to this man as both patient and employee, particularly when she wasn't even sure yet that she liked him. Jessie had been full of praise for him this morning, saying how generous he was with his time to each patient, and how thoroughly he followed up their problems.

'But of course you'd know that from your own experience,' the older woman had finished. Susan had nodded

politely but she wasn't sure that she did know it, thinking of the two times he had been so blunt and rude with her.

Silence had fallen between them now, after her brief response to his earlier comment, and he was leafing through his messages, putting some aside and paying more attention to others. Then he reached for the phone, saying to Susan as he picked it up, 'Find Patrick Leachy's file for me, would you?'

It seemed that personal conversation was at an end for the moment, and Susan had time to wonder, not for the first time, whether she had been wise to accept his offer of a job. It wasn't that he had been insistent about it on the phone the other day, in spite of that first abrupt, 'Are you interested?' After sketching out a brief picture of what her duties would be, and answering some of her rather hazy and hesitant questions, he had suggested that she meet him in his office at five the next day, after his Friday afternoon clinic at Vernon University Hospital.

'Think it over,' he had said, 'and if you decide not to take the job ring me at the clinic and let me know.'

Thinking it over hadn't taken very long. Having a job just fall into her lap like that eased some of the stress she felt after the sudden changes that had taken place in her life over the past few weeks. The fact that it was temporary was an added attraction. If she wasn't happy, or if things with Jeremy reached a clearer state and began to affect her plans for the future. . .

Dr Blake's personality hadn't entered into her reasoning at all, and it was only after she had replaced the phone that she'd remembered how, on first hearing his name, she had been waiting for an apology.

It was after she had definitely accepted his offer on

Friday that she began to have qualms, and they came back to her again now. Why did she feel uneasy in his presence? Was it just the combining of the two relationships of doctor-patient and employer-employee? Was it his dominating physical form—those dark eyes, the craggy face, the active shoulders, the intelligent mouth? Or was it that she never seemed to have any idea what he would do next?

The phone rang seconds after he had replaced its receiver, and he spoke for a few minutes to someone who was clearly a patient, then hung up and dialled another number. Jessie brought in the coffee, freshly filter-dripped and steaming hot, and he reached for his at once while he waited on the telephone, narrowing his eyes with pleasure as the rich flavour of the brew caught at his taste buds. Seconds later, he seemed to forget all about the coffee and sat up with sudden energy as he spoke.

'Hello, Michael? Yes, how are you doing? Look, I'm sending a patient in. He's complaining of pain and swelling in the calf. Possibly phlebitis. Yes, Dr Ridgeway did a scope on him last Friday. Could you have a look at him? I'll be over myself later, but for the moment. . . Yes, sure. Yes, Ridgeway's at a conference, and since he's my associate. . .

Susan had recognised the name of the orthopaedist who had rooms adjoining these ones, and with whom Dr Blake had a close professional relationship. Exactly what was going on at the other end of the phone was less clear to her, but no doubt it would begin to make sense soon.

She remembered how she had been so keen to know everything there was to know about the world of large-scale musicals when she first joined the *Penny Parade*

company, and how closely she had studied bulletin-boards, how insistently she had asked questions of the more experienced company members. There had been a hunger in her to understand, and now, as she filled her mouth with the rich, milky coffee, she felt that same hunger again.

After making three more calls, which Susan listened to carefully, Dr Blake finally put down the phone and paid attention to the last half of his coffee, and to Susan and Jessie as well. 'Is it all making sense, Susan?' he said.

'It's beginning to.' She nodded, noting that it was the first time he had used her Christian name. It sounded softer when he said it than it did in her own clipped English tones.

'She's been very quick,' Jessie put in. 'But I think we've done enough for today. There's a limit.'

'Yes,' Dr Blake agreed. 'Your eyes are starting to glaze over a little.'

'Oh, are they?'

He laughed at her rather guilty attempt to look more energetic and again she had the feeling that she wasn't on solid ground with him.

'If you don't mind, Dr Blake,' Jessie said, 'I'd like to go fairly soon. My daughter wants to shop for her Junior Prom dress tonight and I promised I'd try to be early.'

'Go now, if you like,' he answered, taking a quick look round. 'And you too, Susan. We might as well close up, I think.' He glanced at his watch, an expensive Swiss kind that was solid on his muscular wrist. 'It's getting on for four.'

Jessie began to collect the coffee-mugs, but Susan forestalled her. 'I'll do that. You go, if your daughter's waiting.'

The older woman agreed gratefully, and had said her goodbyes and left before Susan had reached the tiny kitchen area, juggling one crutch and three coffee-mugs in what she hoped wasn't too clumsy a way. This first week was going to be difficult with her knee, but Dr Blake had said that she should be walking without crutches and almost normally by next Monday.

He was on the phone again—'One last call,' he had said—and Susan listened to it above the sound of the gushing taps as she rinsed the mugs and stacked them in the plastic draining-basket. She caught a woman's name—Maggie—and heard a rich chuckle, then the sound of the water plunging into the sink drowned the doctor's words. Perhaps that was a good thing. It sounded like a personal conversation.

She switched off the coffee machine and looked uncertainly at the inch of brew left in it. It was enough for a full mug and smelled too good to pour down the sink. Instead, feeling that she was probably being over-thrifty, she found a clean, empty jam-jar in the cupboard beneath the sink and poured the coffee into that. It would do for herself tomorrow morning, if not for Dr Blake.

Then, as she put the jar into the small fridge, she heard his laugh behind her. 'Saving money for me on my coffee supplies?'

'It still smelled so fresh,' she answered a little sheepishly, although she found his smile contagious. It was unexpected in that craggy face, she decided, not smooth and symmetrical like Jeremy's smile, but somewhat crooked, as if he didn't quite have time to give it the proper shape.

Actually, the smile was already gone, and he was looking at his watch. 'I've got to get to that clinic,' he

said, largely to himself. Susan gave a token murmur of acknowledgement. 'Get your things, will you,' he went on, 'so I can lock up?'

But when she reached her bag and balanced on the crutches to lean forward and collect it, he brushed past her and took it himself.

'Get going,' he said. 'I'll drop you somewhere. My car's in that underground garage on the corner. You've seen it?'

'Yes, the one to the left after you leave this building.'

'Yes.'

'But if you want to go straight to the clinic. . .'

He only shrugged and she didn't want to go on making inane protests. She would get him to drop her at some corner and would then take a taxi the rest of the way.

'On second thoughts, wait outside,' he said. 'I'll bring the car round and collect you. No sense in having you struggle down the car park stairs.'

Five minutes later she was ensconced in the low, figure-hugging seat of an expensive European car, wondering where the Vernon University Hospital clinic was, and where she could get Dr Blake to deposit her. He drove, though, as if he didn't intend to consult her about his route at all. Still, this was a one-way street, so there was little choice at the moment.

'Got something on this evening?' he asked as they approached the corner of Park Avenue. Rush-hour traffic had not yet reached its peak, but, as always, the long avenue was crowded as it stretched back towards the tall, aggressive skyscrapers of mid-town.

'No, nothing,' she answered him a little bleakly, then let herself confess, 'I'm not used to having to plan my evenings.'

He didn't reply, and she heard the words over again in her mind. They must have sounded pathetic, like those of a little girl playing for sympathy and pity. No wonder he had said nothing! She felt hot with discomfort and opened the window a few inches, using the silently smooth automatic control. A breeze would cool her cheeks. . .but, stuck at this traffic-light waiting to turn, there was no breeze.

'In that case,' he said finally, his tone casual as if there had been no pause between her words and his answer, 'would you be interested in having a look at the hospital clinic?'

'Thank you, yes, that would be lovely,' she blurted stupidly, as if the invitation had been to dinner or a film. Even more stupidly she looked down at the crimson skirt and cream blouse she was wearing, to make sure they didn't look too limp and creased after her day at the office. The leather upholstery of his car was cream, and the bodywork was crimson, so at least she matched!

'What sort of work—er—takes place at the clinic?' she asked politely, after a long silence had brought it home to her that perhaps she should say something more. Then she caught a sideways glance from him and it was definitely irritated.

His reply, though, was civil. 'Well, the patients are very different from those you'll see at the office,' he said, 'and from the patients I treat at Wakefield-Lincoln.'

'You spend just the one afternoon a week at Vernon?'

'As well as Thursday nights on call for surgery. It's a teaching hospital, and it takes a lot of patients who have no health insurance and couldn't afford private consultation or surgery at Wakefield-Lincoln. It's also a major trauma centre, and flies accident victims in by helicopter from all over the city. Not just car accidents, either. . .'

'You mean industrial accidents?'

'Those, yes. Also gunshot wounds, knifing injuries. This is New York, you see. . .'

Susan nodded. Her breath had caught a little at his calm statement, and there didn't seem to be an obvious reply. Silence fell again. Their trip uptown was slow. It wasn't an area that Susan had yet explored, so she was happy to occupy herself with looking out of the window while Joel Blake drove. He was a good driver—cool, calm, efficient, but unhurried, alert to the likelihood of recklessness, impatience and mistakes among the other traffic on the crowded streets.

The expensive facades of the streets parallel to Central Park began to give way to dingier or more garish buildings, and there were more people lounging in doorways or on pavements as if they didn't have much else to do. Shopfront signs were in Spanish more often than English, and the ugly silhouettes of public housing high-rises started to appear. Then Susan saw a sign reading 'Vernon University Hospital' and a moment later Dr Blake had swung into a tiered car park building.

'So. . . ' he said, as they walked past cement pillars and found the metal doors of a large lift. 'I won't be here long today. Time for you to meet a couple of people and take a look round. You won't have much to do with my work at the clinic, but occasionally you'll get messages and phone calls relating to it. It might help if you have some idea of what I do here.'

'Oh, I'm sure it will,' Susan murmured.

'Stick close to me,' he advised. 'With those crutches, they'll think you're a patient.'

'I still feel like one,' she confessed, as the lift surged smoothly towards the ground floor.

He frowned. 'Yes, I suppose you do.'

It was all he said, but she was aware as they left the lift that his eyes were on her and it made her uncomfortable. To shorten the journey—they were in a wide, long corridor now, and signs of different colours directed the way to different departments—she concentrated on using her crutches as rapidly as she could. Silly, of course, because she almost slipped and had to stop as he put a hand out to steady her. It seemed she was always making herself clumsy in his presence like this. Starting off more slowly and sensibly again, she was relieved to see the blue 'Orthopedics Clinic' sign not far ahead.

Inside there were several patients waiting among rows of uncompromising grey plastic chairs, and a nurse rolled her black eyes at Dr Blake. 'You're not supposed to be here,' she said, 'but I'm glad you are. We're busy today. Couple of last-minute people sent over from Emergency.'

'I've come to see Al Costanzo. Dr Lucas was going to look at him for me.'

Susan listened to the practical medical talk and took in the notices and posters on the walls—boldly designed illustrations of the human frame, warnings about the danger of drug and alcohol abuse, instructions to patients about hospital procedures. The waiting patients were a motley group, many of whom looked unhealthy apart from their orthopaedic injuries.

The faces were mainly dark or olive-complexioned, reflecting her own Hispanic looks. If she sat among them with her crutches, she could easily blend in. This realisation gave her a surge of empathy for these people, and added to her somewhat confused feelings about Dr Blake. He had a successful private practice. He didn't exactly exude compassion and saintliness. . .but he

didn't *have* to work here, and for much of what he did at the clinic he would receive no payment at all. Why did it seem so hard for her to get a grip on who he was?

This reverie was interrupted by Joel Blake himself, and Susan realised, almost too late for politeness, that she was being introduced to the nurse, Terri Saunders.

'This is my new nurse-receptionist, Terri,' he said to the smiling black woman. 'She wanted to get an idea of what goes on here.'

'Well, she'll get an idea this afternoon,' Terri Saunders replied, then turned to Susan. 'Usually we're almost finished by now, honey. I might have to ask you to pitch in and help.'

'I'd be happy to——' Susan began, but the other woman slapped her playfully on the forearm.

'Just joking. You stick with Dr Blake.'

She led the way down a corridor bordered on either side with small consultation and examining rooms. 'Mr Costanzo is in here. Dr Lucas has already seen him as you asked, Dr Blake, and thinks there's nothing to worry about.'

From the room opposite, another voice broke loudly over her words—male, angry, yet not assertive or confident. 'I ain't waiting no longer!'

Dr Blake disappeared into the room where Mr Costanzo waited, leaving Susan in the corridor with Terri Saunders. In the doorway behind her, the owner of the angry voice appeared, balancing on crutches identical to Susan's own. She started to give him a smile of comradeship, an acknowledgement of their shared status as invalids, but then checked her expression as the man, black and in his twenties, spoke again.

'I can't stay,' he said. 'I got stuff to do.'

Terri turned to him and put a restraining hand on his

arm. 'Honey, you've got to stay. You haven't been seen yet.'

'Well, I can't get seen. I've got stuff to do.'

'I'll come and see you now. Please go back and sit down,' Terri said, half as an order, half coaxingly. The man shrugged and turned reluctantly back into the room.

'Terri?' Another voice called from the next room along.

'Oh, my lord! That's Dr Gerstle,' Terri murmured. 'I know what he wants. . . Susan, honey, could you possibly start on Mr Thompson in there? His chart's on the desk. Take his blood-pressure and put the new X-rays up on the wall. You know what to do. Do you mind?'

'Of course not,' Susan said, but glanced reflexively at Dr Blake through the open door of the opposite room. He was examining Al Costanzo and didn't seem to need her.

Kevin Thompson was lying back on the examination bench looking angry and unhappy when she entered. Susan propped her crutches beside his, uncomfortable again about her blurred status, and took his X-rays out of the large envelope that sat beneath the rest of his file. She slid them on to the light-box on the wall and flicked a switch, without thinking about what she expected to see.

What she *did* see, therefore, came as a slight shock. The metal rod and screws in the femur came within the range of her experience, but that flurry of shattered bone chips, like a handful of pale grit flung against the darker shadows in the picture. . . Clearly, the leg had been shattered by a gunshot wound in the past.

Leaving the X-rays on the light-box and sitting at the desk, Susan began to ask some routine questions about

Mr Thompson's state of health and medical history.
'Any allergies to medication?'

'No.'

The man's complete file wasn't on the desk, and neither were any X-rays taken at the time of his original injury. Feeling like a trespasser, Susan asked as casually as she could about the earlier accident to his leg. Kevin Thompson had a pleasant face, apart from its current gloomy cast, but there was a long scar near his temple that could mean past violence. . .or perhaps merely a domestic accident that anyone might have.

'Er—when was it that you got shot?' she said.

The answer wasn't as bad as she had feared—she had been thinking of drug gang wars, or a police chase—and she was able to nod as if she encountered gunshot wounds every day as part of her nursing routine. He had been mugged by a young teenager seven months ago in a particularly unsavoury part of the city, and had refused to hand over his money. Turning to walk away, he had been shot in the right thigh and was left with a shattered bone. The chips and splinters that had splashed out into his muscles could not be removed, and the bone had been reconstructed using grafts from his spine as well as the metal rod and screws. Now, it seemed, he had fallen down some steps and injured the leg again, although Susan did not have enough knowledge to judge from the new X-rays taken this afternoon whether a new fracture was present.

She took a blood-pressure cuff and fastened it around his right arm then pumped it several times and watched the silver liquid rise in the gauge bracketed to the wall behind the examining table. One hundred and ninety over. . .the silver began to fall again. . .one hundred and thirty. Good heavens! That was a dreadful result—

almost unbelievable, since the man was quite young. Without saying anything, she switched the cuff to his other arm and took the reading again. One hundred and ninety over one hundred and thirty. Alarmingly, dangerously high.

'You went to Emergency, didn't you?' she said to him. 'And they sent you over here?'

'That's right. I was there for hours.'

'I know. It can get crowded.' Susan nodded, thinking of England's hospital casualty departments as well. 'But I'm afraid you'll have to go back there after you've finished here. Your blood-pressure is very, very high and you need to get some medication for it as soon as possible.'

'Go back there?' he snorted. 'I'm not doing that. I've got stuff I have to do.'

'Yes, I know, but. . .'

Susan broke off and turned thankfully as Terri Saunders appeared in the doorway, with Joel Blake behind her.

'Thanks, honey,' the other nurse said, and Susan began to get up from her seat to make room for Dr Blake.

'Stay,' he said. 'Just pass me the chart.'

'It's not all here,' Susan answered.

'No, we asked for his old X-rays, but they can't find them at the moment.' Terri made a face and picked up the phone. 'I'll try them again. He's Dr Rolf's patient, but Rolf won't be in till Wednesday.'

'We may have to ask Mr Thompson to come back then, in that case,' Dr Blake said.

The patient threw his head back and groaned, then began to complain half under his breath again about

how he couldn't stay any longer. Susan took the opportunity to say quietly to Dr Blake, 'His b.p. was one hundred and ninety over one hundred and thirty.'

The black eyebrows were raised and for a moment Susan thought she detected a flint of scepticism in his eyes. 'That high?'

I took it twice to make sure of the reading.'

Terri turned from the phone. 'The X-rays aren't lost, but they just can't find them. They'll be hunted up for Dr Rolf on Wednesday.'

'Great!' Dr Blake muttered.

Terri left to bring another patient into the examining-room opposite, pulling the curtain across this one to screen the patient from sight of the corridor.

'About time,' Kevin Thompson said as Dr Blake went to him at the table and began to manipulate the leg.

Susan shifted quickly to the chair that was further from the desk, leaving the desk chair free so that afterwards Dr Blake could make notes. He was lifting the injured leg now, bending the knee and pressing it firmly towards Kevin's chest.

'Relax. . .don't resist. That hurts, does it?'

Clearly it did. Tears oozed on to rough cheeks from eyes screwed up with pain. Dr Blake asked some more questions, precise and neutral in his manner, then stifled a sigh as he explained, 'It looks as though you've re-fractured that femur. Without the original X-rays, I can't tell exactly what's going on.' He stopped.

'This is too much, man!' Kevin Thompson had his hand flung across his eyes now to try and hide his emotion, but it wasn't an adequate defence. I was five months in this hospital with this thing already.'

Joel's hand came down and touched him on the shoulder, and his voice this time was gentle though still

very masculine. 'It's not back to square one,' he said. 'The new X-ray shows that the rod hasn't moved. We won't need to admit you, but you must keep all weight off that leg. The pain won't last more than a few days and I'll give you something for that.'

He named a drug and Kevin answered quickly, 'Makes me throw up.'

Susan saw Dr Blake glance down to where she had filled in the form: 'Allergies to medication—none.' His eyes skated quickly to her own and she shrugged. She had only written down the patient's own response.

'We'll try something else, then,' he said to Mr Thompson. 'It's no problem.'

'So I can go, then?'

'Not with that blood-pressure, I'm afraid.'

'I gotta go. I've got to get to the welfare office. I've got this problem with my apartment. . . .' His voice thinned and he was on the edge of tears again.

'The welfare office would be closed, Mr Thompson,' Joel Blake said gently. 'It's after five and they close at four. If you've got a problem, could you see the social worker here? Because we can't let you go till someone in Emergency has seen you about that blood-pressure——'

I don't care about the blood-pressure.'

'It might make you care. It's high enough to give you the real risk of a stroke or a heart attack, both of which could be fatal.'

'Maybe that'd be the best thing for me,' he said in a hopeless voice. 'I've been thrown out of my apartment, I've got——'

'See the social worker,' Joel put in persuasively again. 'Then someone must take you back to Emergency. Apart from any concern about your own safety, we're

legally obliged to make sure you are able to receive treatment for it.'

Kevin Thompson shrugged, defeated, and began to struggle to his feet from the examining table as Dr Blake picked up the phone and dialled a number.

'Could we have someone down here to Orthopaedics Clinic to see a patient? Yes, straight away, if that's possible.' As he spoke, he anticipated Kevin's move towards the crutches propped against the wall and strode two paces across the room to reach them with his spare hand and pass them to their owner. Susan, imprisoned by her own temporary lack of mobility, felt useless and out of place.

'Guess I go back to the waiting-room till the social worker gets here,' Kevin said, receiving a nod from Dr Blake in reply.

Susan couldn't find a moment to give the support and encouragement she wanted to, and now it was too late. The sound of crutches and one soft-soled running shoe faded down the corridor.

'Well,' Joel Blake said on a gusty breath, 'we can get going at last. Sorry it's taken longer than I thought.'

'That's fine,' Susan answered. 'It's been interesting. . .'

'If a little disturbing?' he suggested.

'Yes. It's hard to stand by and see people falling through the system like that. He hasn't been coming to physical therapy lately, apparently, he seems to have a drinking problem, and with the blood-pressure. . .'

'We do what we can do,' Dr Blake answered. 'We have to leave it at that and not start worrying about what we can't do, or we'd all burn out in no time.'

'I know, but——'

'No one says it's easy. Let's go, shall we?'

Suddenly he seemed abrupt and impatient, and Susan struggled to her feet, lagging behind already, since he was out of the door and on his way down the corridor almost before he had finished speaking. It seemed that he thought her concern over patients like Kevin Thompson self-indulgent and over-sentimental, and she felt angry about it. Surely what she felt was only human compassion?

As they passed through the waiting-room, she saw Kevin slouched uncomfortably in one of the hard plastic chairs. Only one other patient was waiting now. Dr Blake was already out of the door that led out into the main concourse, but defiantly Susan did not hurry to follow him. Instead, she went up to the injured black man, knowing that anything she could say would only be inane and weak, but wanting to make contact all the same.

'Bye, Kevin,' she said. 'Good luck with everything. You'll get through this bad patch.'

He mumbled something and did not meet her eyes, but she reached out a hand to give his shoulder a squeeze anyway. Hobbling towards the exit door, she found that Dr Blake was holding it open for her, and he was following her with his gaze. He must have seen her attempt at reaching out to Kevin, but his face expressed neither approval nor criticism and he said nothing. Instead, he let the door slip shut and paced himself to her slower walk as they went down the corridor, past a cafeteria and a boutique that sold the usual hospital gifts. One of the bland announcements that came frequently over hospital public address systems in America echoed around them—'Dr Korman, six-zero-nine-one, Dr Korman, six-zero-nine-one,'—and it was only when it had died away that Joel Blake spoke again.

'How about some dinner?' he said.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE restaurant was quiet, panelled in dark wood and decorated in forest-green. Soft golden lights and creamy-coloured candles on the tables began to give the place a rich, warm glow as shadows lengthened and daylight faded from the street outside. They sat at the bar and drank cocktails first, as it was still early.

Joel chose a gin and tonic, while Susan opted frivolously and impulsively for a strawberry daiquiri. Jeremy had introduced her to the concoction a few months ago, and she wondered suddenly, and not for the first time, how he was spending his evening.

On Monday nights there was no performance of *Penny Parade*, but when they had talked on the phone yesterday afternoon he hadn't suggested spending tonight with her. Earlier, she had been tempted to decline Dr Blake's unexpected invitation and had accepted it mainly because she refused to fall into the classic trap of sitting at home alone in case a man should call.

It seemed that Joel Blake could read her thoughts. He took a long mouthful of his dry, icy drink then said, 'Did you want to call anyone to tell them where you are? Since I sprang this meal on you at such short notice. . . I suppose you have a boyfriend?'

'Yes, I do.' Susan nodded calmly. 'But I don't need to call him.'

'Yes, I had the feeling you were the independent type,' he drawled, making her bristle a little.

'It's not that,' she retorted. 'It's just that we hadn't

made any plans to see each other tonight. If he rings and I'm not there. . .well, he won't think anything of it.'

'I suppose Monday night is your busy night socially, if most of your friends are in the dance world, and performing in shows.'

'All my friends in New York are in *Penny Parade*,' she answered, 'since I came over with the show and haven't had a lot of time to develop other interests.'

'Until now.'

'Until now,' she agreed neutrally. If he realised what a huge statement this was for her, he didn't acknowledge the fact.

'And your boyfriend—is he in the show as well?'

'Not in it. Involved with it. Jeremy is the conductor and musical director. He composes too,' she added, unable to stop herself from sounding proud about the fact, because she was associated with him.

'Composes. . . Jeremy Singleton?'

'You know him!'

'We've met,' he said, then amended, 'No, not even that. He's been pointed out to me across a crowded room, so to speak. I do some work for the Pony Dancer Company, and——'

'Really?' Automatically, she was interested.

'Yes. Some orthopaedists have a football team as clients, whereas I treat the members of Pony Dancer. Actually, there's a college basketball team that always comes to me as well, so I shouldn't speak as if I'm not involved in team sports injuries.'

'Does it involve much of your time? Pony Dancer, I mean.' She had heard of them—they were very modern and experimental, and apparently talented and interesting.

'Not much. It's perhaps. . .three or four per cent of

what I do. I get free tickets to their shows, though, which is nice.'

'It must be.'

Something inside her clamped tightly shut after these last words. She didn't want to see any dance performances at the moment, shouldn't even have let herself talk about dance, should change the subject straight away before her thoughts became hopelessly bogged in regret.

Regret. . . She squared her jaw and told herself firmly that she would not waste time on useless emotions of that kind. 'What about you?' she asked desperately. 'Do you have a girlfriend. . .a fiancée?'

He was old enough to be married and the father of several children, but, oddly enough, the reasons she had for feeling distant and uneasy with him had nothing to do with the dozen-year disparity in their ages.

If he resented the directness of her question, he didn't show it, and, after all, he had asked the same thing of her. 'No, I don't,' he said, quite civilly, but that was all.

She almost asked him why not, since his brief answer came as a bit of a surprise, but realised in time that this would be taking things unforgivably far. There must be women who would be more than happy to fill the position of love interest in Joel Blake's life, if only because a successful orthopaedist in New York City would be a millionaire by the time he was forty.

And it wouldn't only be for that reason, she realised. Although he was not classically, smoothly handsome in the way that Jeremy Singleton was, his dark craggy looks and tall dynamic frame would be considered very appealing by some women. As for the attraction of his personality, she hadn't yet been able to draw any firm conclusions about that, and it wasn't really important

to try. As long as she found the right way to get on well with him in the office, got over this feeling of uneasiness and distance, that was all that mattered.

'Shall we go and eat?' he said a few minutes later, when they had both finished their drinks.

The menu was varied and fashionable, with an adventurous Italian flavour provided by several unusual pasta dishes. Susan chose artichokes in a vinaigrette dressing, followed by taglia telle with a sauce of salmon and richly savoury cream. Joel Blake decided on corn chowder and filet mignon, but when he asked for a dry white Chardonnay to accompany the meal Susan protested.

'You should have red to go with your steak.'

'What about white to go with your salmon?' he countered, and nodded decisively to the wine waiter to show that the order would stand.

'Honestly, though. . .' Susan began pleadingly as the young waiter, who looked like one of New York's many handsome and hopeful actors waiting for his big break, melted away.

'Don't go on about it,' Joel put in crisply. 'It's not fashionable these days to be so insistent on matching wine with meat. I like white well enough, and thought you'd definitely prefer it, so let's leave it, shall we?'

'Of course,' she murmured. Once again, the abruptly cool manner of his words was disconcerting and unexpected.

She stared at her place-setting and had to resist the temptation to fiddle with the cutlery. He broke the silence a few minutes later. 'I'm sorry. I was too abrupt. I don't like it when people act as if I've done them some kind of favour. It's ungracious, I know.'

She looked up at him and saw that he was frowning and leaning towards her. 'Then why don't you pretend

it *isn't* a favour?' she suggested, not yet quite ready to forgive him. 'You should have said you didn't like to drink red wine after a long day in surgery, or something.'

'I *do* pretend, when I can think of a pretence,' he said coolly. 'This time I didn't. . .but I'll remember your suggestion for a future repetition of this same situation. It's quite a good one.'

'Now you're being ridiculous!' she exclaimed.

He shrugged. 'The whole subject is ridiculous.'

'Well, don't say that as if it's *my* fault! Give up doing favours altogether if it's so difficult. Do you do so many of them? Is it really a problem that crops up so often that you have to get this wound up about it?'

He opened his mouth on a sharp in-breath, ready to make another retort, then stopped, threw back his head and laughed. For a moment Susan bristled and was bewildered. What on earth was this about? Was he laughing at her? Then, as he managed to speak, she began to see the humour in the situation herself.

'What on earth are we arguing like this for?' he said, a crooked grin on his face.

'I don't know,' she returned with a silvery trill of laughter. 'But at least it makes conversation.'

'Still, if it's simply conversation we're after, I'm sure we can do better than that,' he said.

And for the next two and a half hours they did, talking about New York life, her family in England, the progress of his career—all sorts of things which blurred together in her mind afterwards and became part of a general impression of good food and wine, laughter at their own table and around them, and soft background music.

It was half-past ten when his low-slung car pulled up outside her apartment building.

'Just drop me off here,' she said quickly, suddenly uncomfortable again about being with him in a way she hadn't been for most of the evening. Wine, coffee and delicious food were wonderful ways to smooth relationships between people for an hour or two. Saying good-bye at the end of the evening was a different matter, particularly when she had to spend the whole of tomorrow with Joel Blake as his nurse-receptionist!

'I'll see you up to your apartment,' he was saying now.

'No, please don't——'

'I'm not letting you go up alone with those crutches. This is New York, don't forget!'

'I've done it before. There's a doorman on duty. It's perfectly safe. Anyway, you'll never find a parking space.'

'Actually, there's one right here.'

'It must be next to a fire hydrant.'

'But it's not,' he answered lightly, as he made an expert kerbside park.

'Well, you have the devil's own luck, don't you?' she broke out, and heard his laugh.

'It's a rare find, I must say,' he answered, then swung his legs out of the vehicle and came round to help her.

The doorman waved and opened the front door by remote control, recognising Susan and her crutches, then the lift gave a clunk and a whine and made its way up to the fifth floor. Outside her door, Joel gently took her crutches while she searched in her bag for her keys and opened the two sturdy locks. Turning to him, she found a standard phrase.

'It's been a lovely evening,' she said, 'and thank you

so much for showing me the clinic too. I feel I've got a much better idea of your work now, after what you were telling me over dinner as well, and I'm sure that'll help enormously at the office.'

'Don't be silly,' he answered, his voice deep and gruff. 'I thought the English weren't supposed to gush. I asked you to dinner for my benefit, not yours. There was some difficult surgery today, and if I'd spent the evening alone at home I'd have been likely to go over it again and again in my mind to no purpose. I needed a distraction.'

'Well, in that case, I'm glad to have been of use,' she retorted crisply.

'No, don't arch your back like a cross cat,' he said, taking her arm suddenly in a powerful grip. 'You know damn well I enjoyed the evening.'

'Then why belittle it?'

I wasn't. I was simply saying——Anyway, this is pointless.'

He stopped abruptly and Susan found that somehow he was standing very close to her, silhouetted against the fluted glass ceiling-light further back along the corridor so that his dark eyes were black pools that could not be read at all. His grip softened on her arm and his fingers slid down to hold her own, making the silk of her blouse slip caressingly against her skin. She opened her mouth to say a final goodnight, not wanting to linger in this moment that had all at once become a little alarming for some reason, but he spoke first.

His voice was soft, neutral, thoughtful. 'I suppose. . . I should kiss you,' he said, as if speaking his thoughts out loud.

It was so far from what she'd expected that for a moment it didn't even provoke a response in her. Then,

as the meaning of his attitude hit home, she forgot about the sensation of his fingers entwining her own and pulled sharply away.

'Don't put yourself to any trouble, will you?' she said tartly.

'Oh, it's no trouble. . .'

She didn't believe he was really going to do it, didn't believe that she was really in this situation at all, and was still searching for some lightly dismissive reply when his head bent towards her and his arms closed around her back, warm and strong. His kiss began as a searching nuzzle, as if he wasn't quite sure where her lips would be found, and the soft, teasing touch against her nose, cheeks and mouth melted her more quickly than anything hard and forceful could have done.

The pleasure of it swept over her so unexpectedly that her only possible response was to return his exploring touch, tasting the musky sweetness of his mouth and feeling the slight roughness around it. It must be nearly a day since he had shaved, and the roughness was a texture that contrasted magically with the softness of their joined lips.

At first she was not holding him, but with her weakened leg it was soon necessary to cling to him for support, and the hard strength and bulk of his body inside her circling arms felt warm and alive. His hand slid up her tautly arched back and his fingers began to thread through her thick bob of hair, making her spine tingle. Her dancer's body, with its sensitivity and awareness schooled over years of work, could feel each point at which their flesh met and pressed together.

With eyes closed, Susan began to lose her sense of space and time. Seconds melted into minutes. Her whole universe was centred on their two bodies, her own

sensations, her exploration of his scent and the varied textures of his skin. Without thinking, she leaned back against the wall and began to pull him more closely towards her, but her shoulder nudged the leaning crutches and they fell with a metallic clatter.

It broke the moment. Her eyes flew open and met the corridor light over his shoulder so that she had to blink and squint against the sudden brightness. He had already stepped back and was bending down to pick the crutches up. She could only stand there and wait, feeling a breathless thudding in her heart and a tingling in every part of her.

He gave the crutches to her and she positioned them beneath her arms automatically, although she did not need them for the short journey into her small studio apartment. It was a safe and distancing activity, though. Neither of them had spoken, and Susan's mind was blank. What could she possibly say except a tremulous goodnight?

In the silence between them, she heard the electronic pip of the telephone answering-machine inside the apartment. Two pips. Who had called? One of her dancer friends? Jeremy? The sound was instantly both disturbing and irritating, but then Joel Blake's voice cut across it.

'That was originally intended to be a very small goodnight kiss,' he said. 'Should I apologise?'

T. . . I don't know.'

I think I should. I don't believe in office romances, or whatever they're called. And you're. . . otherwise engaged.'

'I suppose it was the wine,' Susan managed weakly.

'Must have been,' he said neutrally. 'Don't worry. It won't happen again.'

'I think that would be best.'

'Absolutely. . . Goodnight.'

'Goodnight.'

He turned from her and strode down the corridor, disappearing around a corner in moments. She heard his footsteps stop in front of the lift, and a minute later came the clack and sigh of its door's opening and closing. Feeling the strength ebbing out of her, Susan sagged into the apartment, closed the door and latched locks and safety-chain.

The studio was quiet, neat, clean, a haven from emotion. Pressing the message-play button on the answering-machine on her way past, she reached the blue-grey couch and dropped her body into it, releasing a heavy sigh. Behind her, the tape whirled as it rewound.

There was no reason to think of this evening as a disaster. She and Joel had both agreed that the kiss was a mistake that would not be repeated. Probably it was a good thing that they had got it over and done with so early in their working relationship. It was the kind of thing that happened to a lot of people, and the fact that the sensation of him still burned and tingled on her lips and in every part of her meant nothing. It would fade, and fade soon. By tomorrow morning, she hoped.

Trying to brush it from her mind, she heard the tape click and start forward; then came an electronic tone and the sound of Jeremy Singleton's voice: 'Hello, Susan, sweetheart. . .'

The telephone was ringing—again—when Susan returned to the office after ushering a patient into Dr Blake's second examining-room and placing new X-rays and patient chart in the plastic holder fastened to the

door. Jessie Duncan was about to pick up the instrument, having stretched across from the adjoining desk where she was involved in the paperwork of patient billing.

'I'll get it,' Susan said quickly, and reached it first. She wanted to try and handle as much as she could without the older woman's help, so that when she was alone here for the first time next week it would not all seem too daunting. 'Yes, Dr Carter? Yes, he asked me to put you straight through when you called, but he's with a patient at the moment, so I'll have to go and get him. Will you hold, or should he call you straight back? Call you back? All right, then.' She put down the phone and went to Room One.

Inside, she could hear the low whine of the cast-cutter as Dr Blake removed the plaster from a teenage boy's broken wrist. It was mid-afternoon, and she had been up and down this short corridor all day. She had found that using one crutch—the left-hand one—gave her enough support for her leg, while also leaving her right hand free for carrying charts, opening doors, picking up telephones. . . The time had passed quickly—surprisingly so.

The hardest moments were ones like the one she was facing now—the moment when she had to open an examining-room door and encounter Joel Blake face to face, in order to report some bland message. But she must not give way to this reluctance. Firmly, she gripped the door-handle and twisted it.

'Dr Blake, I'm sorry to bother you. . .'

The buzz of the cast-cutter slowed and died away. 'Yes?' His voice was as neutral as her own, and he met her gaze steadily. It was hard for Susan to do the same.

'That call you were waiting for from Dr Carter

came. . . I told him you were with a patient and he asked if you could call back as soon as possible.'

'I'll be finished with this in thirty seconds.'

'I'm sure that's fine.'

'If you could go across and collect this lad's X-rays. . . They should be ready by now.'

She nodded and left, passing through the waiting-room, across the foyer and into the reception area of the adjoining radiology practice. Jessie had introduced her to the two radiologists, Lisa and Paul, yesterday—Paul remembered that she had come to them for her own X-rays—as well as Anita, their receptionist.

The latter smiled at her as Susan entered now. 'You'll be so good with that one-crutch technique, you won't want to let go of it,' she said.

'Oh, yes, I will!' Susan retorted fervently. 'It's the most annoying piece of equipment I've ever had to deal with in my life!'

'Still, you're very graceful with it. You'll have to start giving lessons to Dr Blake's patients.'

'I don't think the physical therapists would like that much,' Susan answered. 'Teaching the use of crutches is their territory.'

'True,' Anita conceded, pushing up the sleeves of her patterned blouse. 'I suppose you've come for these?'

She held up Todd Rensselaer's X-rays and Susan took the buff envelope, careful not to crease it. 'Yes, thanks,' she said.

'He seems a nice lad,' Anita mused. 'One of the longest and skinniest kids I've ever seen.'

'Well, he broke his wrist "slam-dunking" a basketball—whatever that means,' Susan said. 'Perhaps he has a future in the game. All the players are long and skinny, from what I've seen.'

After sharing another laugh with Anita, Susan left the radiology centre and returned to the young athlete and his mother, noting as she passed his office that Dr Blake was still on the phone. His voice came clearly through the open door, brisk, friendly, tossing off long medical terms to his colleague that Susan herself could not hope to understand without considerable reading.

This professional manner of his was completely different from how he had been last night, but she knew that this side of him was the one she would see from now on. That was how it should be, of course, and she should be grateful that the world of medicine was so full of efficient activity. It meant that there was really no time for disturbing sensual memories to intrude.

Re-entering the examining-room, she slid Todd's X-rays on to the light-box. His mother sat waiting on the padded examining bench where she had been while the boy's cast was removed, and fourteen-year-old Todd himself was at the sink, running tepid water rather ineffectually over the newly revealed skin of his hand, wrist and forearm.

'It smells,' Mrs Rensselaer said.

'Yes, they often do,' Susan nodded, aware of the stale, slightly yeasty scent. 'It's nothing to worry about.'

'There's no soap,' the boy put in.

Susan reached across to the liquid soap-dispenser and found that it was empty. She looked in the cupboard beneath the sink but this wasn't where new ones were kept, it seemed.

'What are you looking for?' Joel had appeared in the doorway, nearly filling the frame.

'Soap,' Susan said.

'Hm, yes.' He wrinkled his nose. 'Do you want to wash it before I take a look, Todd?'

'It feels *blechy*,' the teenager said.

'Soap should be in the main store-cupboard, Susan,' Dr Blake said, already on his way back to his office.

He didn't seem to waste a moment during the course of the day, Susan had found. At lunchtime he had sent her out to buy a thick sandwich of corned beef and salad on rye bread, and had eaten it at his desk while dictating case-notes into a tiny portable cassette-player. He had picked it up again now and was describing the last patient he had seen: 'A twenty-four-year-old female. Three months ago she was involved in a motor vehicle accident as a pedestrian and spent eleven days in hospital. . .'

He had told Susan that if he didn't keep continuously up to date with these notes, he risked blurring important details in his mind. The tapes were sent out to a medical typing service and the sheaf of notes that came back was used for his own records.

Susan found a new container of liquid soap and returned to Todd and his mother. The boy squeezed a lavish pool of white liquid on to his arm and began to lather it, treating the stiffened wrist and fingers with exaggerated care, and rinsing and drying meticulously.

'It feels as if it's going to snap just like that,' he said, clicking the finger and thumb of his good hand.

'It's not, though,' Joel Blake said, entering again. He clicked on the light-box switch and studied the X-rays.

Susan was cleaning up the powdered fragments of plaster left by the cast-cutter and wiping down the sink, which Todd had left in rather a mess. She listened as the orthopaedist explained what he could see.

'It's looking very good,' he said. 'You won't need another cast, just a brace, and I'll be able to give you some strengthening exercises straight away. See here

where the break was? Look how nicely that's healed compared to the old X-ray!'

Susan finished at the sink and went to bring in the next patient, still thinking about Dr Blake's discussion of the X-rays. Not all doctors did this. Some simply looked at the shadowy pictures and grunted to themselves, leaving the patient in doubt for some moments about what those odd shapes and tones meant, and then simply announcing, 'You'll need a brace,' without letting the owner of the injured limb know if this meant good progress or a too-slow recovery.

Joel Blake, on the other hand, involved and explained to each patient as much as he could, and it seemed like the best approach. From her own experience Susan knew that she was more motivated in physical therapy because she knew exactly what she was trying to achieve.

She was at her desk when Todd Rensselaer and his mother were ready to leave. There were two more patients waiting, the last ones of the day, and when the teenager took a look at one of them his voice cracked with excitement.

'Hey! Aren't you. . .?' He hesitated. 'Are you Ace Washington? You are, aren't you?'

Susan looked up from the pad she was doodling on while waiting on 'hold' on the phone, and saw an extremely tall and lanky black man grin broadly at the young man who had accosted him.

'I guess I am,' he answered.

'The basketball player!'

'I guess that's true, too.'

'Could I. . .have your autograph?'

'Now, Todd, this man probably wants to——' Mrs Rensselaer began.

'But, Mum, it's Ace Washington from the New York Wildcats. They're top of the table in college basketball this year and he's got a game point average of——'

'No, Todd.'

'Don't worry, ma'am,' the player said politely, 'I don't mind at all.' He took a pen from his pocket, while Todd scrabbled wildly in his own for some paper, and came up finally with a torn publicity flyer advertising fast food. His mother produced a neat spiral-bound notebook and found a blank page, and the well-known player signed that instead.

'Oh, wow!' Todd's voice was reverent and breathless.

'Put it there, man,' Ace Washington said, holding out his hands and doing a ritual pattern of palm-slapping with his young admirer, who was somewhat handicapped in the procedure by his new brace. 'We've got solidarity. We're fellow sideliners at the moment, aren't we, my man? Out of action, due to injury. We gotta work hard at our therapy. Get back in the game.'

'That's right, man!' Todd exclaimed, imitating his hero's rap-talk with a rather squeaky intonation. He left Dr Blake's office with both feet about six inches off the ground.

Susan and Jessie exchanged a covert smile.

'What a lovely moment!' Susan said.

'Yes, it was,' Jessie nodded. 'And we get quite a few of them in this office. Dr Blake tries to make it as cheerful a place as he can.'

'Yes, his bedside manner seems to bring a good response from almost everyone.'

'Not just that, though. He actually encourages meetings like that one you just saw. He knows which are our star athletes and dancers—we have several of them, in the team and dance company he works with, as well as

individuals—and he suggested to Holly last year that she schedule kids like Todd so that they could meet up with their heroes. It's not always possible, of course, and you can't twist the schedule around so it gets inconvenient in other ways, but if it happens it creates a good feeling.'

'That's an unusual idea, though, isn't it?'

'Yes, most doctors wouldn't have the care or the imagination to think of it, but Dr Blake mulls over things and comes up with some surprises of that kind.'

'That's. . . lovely,' Susan said inanely. For some reason, she felt uncomfortable hearing so much enthusiasm about her employer.

But Jessie was continuing. 'We had a little girl in here a few months ago—a car-accident victim—and she was very discouraged and unhappy. She had a long, slow recovery period and thought it was never going to end. She was losing interest in her therapy. Then while she was waiting to see the doctor, Mercedes Sanchez came in. She's a principal dancer with the New York Metropolitan Ballet, I don't know if you—'

'I've seen her,' Susan put in briefly. 'She's wonderful.'

'Well, little Talia had seen her too, just a few weeks earlier in the *Nutcracker Suite*. Dr Blake was running a bit late so they had time to chat for a while. Miss Sanchez was charming about it, too, and the little girl got a whole new spurt of energy for her physical therapy and her progress afterwards that surprised even the doctor himself.'

'That's delightful.' Susan smiled, nodding a little too vigorously at the anecdote so that the silver and tortoiseshell comb she wore in her hair slipped out and clattered on to the desk in front of her.

Her hair swung forward, hiding her face with a silky

curtain, and before she could pick up the comb and replace it Joel Blake had come up beside her, taking it in his strong fingers.

'Here,' he said.

Susan tossed her head back and felt the thick hair bounce into place; then she reached for the comb, her fingers just brushing his own as he held it out. He watched her as she fiddled clumsily with it. For some reason, it didn't want to slide into its proper position today. Ah! At last!

'It suits you like that,' he said, and then immediately began to ask her about one of tomorrow's patients, so that she couldn't thank him or even acknowledge the mild compliment.

She didn't see him again until he was ready to leave the building, and then only very briefly as he collected some things he had left in the office store-cupboard during the day. It was probably a good thing that she and Jessie were discussing her plans for the evening at the time.

'I've got physical therapy as soon as I leave here,' she said.

'And then a quiet evening at home?' the older woman asked.

'No, actually I'm going out to supper later on.'

For a moment, she caught Joel Blake's brown eyes fixed on her. They were bland and neutral. He knows I'm going out with Jeremy, Susan thought, and wondered why she felt uncomfortable about it. If there was any danger of last night's kiss getting in the way of their relationship as doctor and nurse, Joel Blake's awareness of Jeremy in her life was surely the best antidote for any difficulty.

The orthopaedist slipped past her, already jangling

his car keys as if impatient to be on his way. 'See you tomorrow, Jessie,' he said. 'And, Susan. . .enjoy your evening.'

'I will.' The feeble response came just as he closed the door behind him.

CHAPTER SIX

'I'D BETTER not keep you out too late, darling,' Jeremy Singleton said. 'Now that you're up with the lark and typing away at your neat office desk by nine in the morning.'

Susan swallowed the inaccurate description of her work at Dr Blake's, excusing Jeremy with the thought that a creative mind like his couldn't be expected to keep up with the difference between an office-typist and a nurse-receptionist.

Instead, she wanted to protest at his viewpoint about keeping her out late. 'You're acting as if I'm turning into a little old lady who nods off straight after dinner,' she said, trying to keep it light and not plaintive. Her laugh was a little wobbly, however.

It was a Monday night. Last Tuesday's supper had been short and sweet—a scant hour over coffee and cake at a small restaurant-cafe just across from the theatre after the performance of *Penny Parade*. When he had said, 'Meet me at the theatre,' she hadn't dared to remind him about what she had asked of him earlier—that they meet elsewhere because anything connected with *Penny Parade*, the theatre, or dancing brought up too many difficult feelings for her.

The supper arrangement had been made quickly over the phone when she'd returned his call, and his voice had been almost as clipped and businesslike in person as it had been in the recorded message he had left. She had heard noises in the background and had wondered,

with a spurt of jealousy that was only dulled by her burning and regretful memory of Joel Blake's kiss still on her lips, if Jeremy had had someone else with him.

The whole thing seemed like a mess. Was Jeremy losing interest? If she had been with him on Monday night as she had wistfully hoped, the dinner with Joel—and, more importantly, his kiss—could never have happened. She didn't spend enough time with Jeremy. . .

And so when he'd suggested meeting at the theatre and then going to Truby's for supper she had agreed straight away, had dressed up carefully in teal-blue taffeta and had arrived in the red velvet and gold theatre lobby half an hour before the performance ended.

The house manager smiled at her as he crossed the thickly carpeted space, and in the kitchen area behind the theatre bar she could hear a faint clinking as the last glasses were washed, dried and stacked away. The noise wasn't nearly strong enough to drown the sounds of the performance.

'Waiting for Jeremy?' the house manager said, crossing back through the lobby again. 'Go in, if you like. There are a couple of spare seats up the back on either side.'

'No, I'll wait here, thanks,' she answered. 'It'll end soon.'

He looked at his watch and shrugged. 'Twenty-five minutes.' Then he disappeared through a door behind the box office and she didn't see him again. If only she had brought a book, at least! But the house manager's easy acknowledgement of her relationship with Jeremy had put her on a firmer emotional footing for the moment.

When the final music swelled—it would be Jeremy's

baton and arms orchestrating that exciting volume of sound—she stood up and swung restlessly on her crutches towards the door. It would soon be over, thank goodness, and they could get away together. . .

He hadn't given a reason for ending their supper early that night. Perhaps he hadn't thought it *was* early when he'd risen at midnight and pulled her to her feet with a smile.

'My leg. . .my crutches,' she had said, since his manner had been too exuberant and had threatened to overbalance her and cause her pain.

'You'll be off those soon, won't you?' he had asked, frowning.

And now, the following Monday, she *was* off them and it felt wonderful. The stitches were gone, the swelling was going, and her range of motion had drawn a pleased response from David, the physical therapist, this afternoon. Her first day alone in the office had gone well too—literally alone, since Jessie wasn't coming in and Joel had surgery. At three o'clock, on an impulse about which she was a little nervous, Susan had taken a break from appointment schedules and paperwork and had called Jeremy.

'It's my first day off crutches, and your free day from the show,' she'd said. I thought we could celebrate with dinner.'

There had been a tiny pause, then, 'That sounds wonderful. Just a minute, though, I'll look in my diary.'

A hollow sound at the other end of the phone had told her that he had pressed the 'hold' button, and she'd felt a moment of irritated yet fond amusement. Silly Jeremy! Surely he must know at three in the afternoon if he was free that same night? The pace of New York, where so many people wanted to be seen to have busy,

important lives, must be affecting him. Or perhaps it was the glamour of the new film.

His voice had come back on the line. 'I'm free, which is great. Shall we say seven-thirty? I'll drop in to your flat and we'll wander along Columbus Avenue and find something on the spur of the moment.'

'Perfect!' she'd answered, although in fact she had been hoping he would suggest something more special, somewhere that required making a booking in advance.

Now it was ten o'clock, he had waved away the waiter's query about coffee and liqueurs, and was suggesting that it was her bedtime. Her mild protest about the little old lady only drew a teasing laugh from him. 'Still, I'm sure your Dr Blake wouldn't like to see you yawning at your desk.'

'He's not *my* Dr Blake!' The response was unnecessarily sharp and he flicked a finger gently under her chin.

'See,' he said, 'you are tired. You're getting cross. I'll ask for the bill. . .or the "check" as they say here, and walk you home and tuck you into bed.'

Suddenly, at the last word, Susan grew hot. Was *that* what he meant? Her heart started to pound and she lost track of what she was feeling, allowing herself to be pulled from her chair and helped into the light jacket that was all she needed on this warm May evening. Did she want to? Was she ready? Aware of his graceful form beside her as they walked down the street, she didn't know the answer.

Light from shop windows, street lamps, apartment buildings, caught on the sweep of blond hair that so often fell across his forehead; his suede jacket was square-shouldered and elegant; his legs were firm and capable and rhythmic in their stride. . . But Susan's capacity for sensual response seemed frozen tonight, the

way a small animal froze in the middle of a road at night before oncoming headlights.

They reached the apartment building and she stopped with her hand on the wide glass door, waiting for the doorman to release the catch. He did so, but then Jeremy's hand came down on her own.

I won't come up, sweetheart,' he said, in a gentle, sorrowful tone as if he were telling a little girl that she couldn't go to the zoo today after all. 'You'll be all right by yourself, won't you?'

'Of course.' She lifted her chin steadily and nodded. 'Now that I'm off the crutches. ...'

'Thank you for the evening,' he whispered, close to her ear. Then his lips travelled across her cheek and touched her mouth with a few expert movements.

A moment later he had released her and, having caught sight of a taxi cruising down the street, was already racing after it, his arm stretched out as fiercely and imperatively as if it were the last taxi left in New York.

Beyond confusion, beyond pain, beyond a desperate wish that she knew more about men and about lovers, Susan felt relief and knew that, in spite of her need to get closer to Jeremy, she hadn't been ready for the intimacy of a night spent together. Gropingly she wondered if he knew this, and if that was why he was content to go so slowly. But if that was the case, why didn't he find a way for them to talk about it together? Was it her own fault that she sometimes felt she didn't know Jeremy at all?

Unanswerable questions, but of course this didn't stop her from trying to answer them, tossing restlessly in a bed that felt too hot and a room that felt too stuffy, until finally, at two, she got up, made herself tea and sat

up in bed with a book until at last she felt her eyes grow heavy and her tightly wound body relax. Her last conscious thought before she slept was of Joel Blake. . . 'I *am* going to be tired tomorrow. I hope he doesn't notice. . .'

He wasn't there when she arrived at the office the next morning. This wasn't a surprise. Yesterday she had had to unlock the premises by herself, since he was in surgery, and on non-surgery days he often called in at the hospital to check on a patient or two on his way to the office, which could sometimes result in an unexpected delay, either for medical reasons or due to traffic snarls.

She got out the typed list of the day's patients and put the coffee machine on, knowing by this time that he liked a cup on first arriving. Actually, it would be good to have one herself. She had slept until the last minute this morning, had taken a bus across the park and was now more than ready for the orange juice, banana and Danish pastry she had bought for her breakfast at the delicatessen on the corner. The rich brew that Joel Blake favoured would be an ideal pick-me-up to accompany this meal.

Their first patient was due at nine, and as Susan prepared the office and examining-room for the day ahead she listened each moment for Dr Blake's arrival. His desk was neat, last week's typed notes had come back from the typing service in the form of a neat white bundle of pages, fresh paper was spread on each examining bench, there was soap at each sink, and the coffee was beginning to drip into its glass pot, filling the whole place with a tantalising aroma.

Susan was starting to find that it was a very pleasant place in which to work. Here, alone in the quiet,

confident that everything was in order and feeling good in the new dress she had bought at the weekend—softly draped folds of apricot jersey that hugged her figure closely and showed off the creamy tan of her neck and collarbone with its rounded open neck—she felt a surge of satisfaction that took her by surprise. This wasn't dancing. It was about as different from dancing as anything could possibly be, but it was. . .yes, it was good.

A patient—a young, sturdily built man who walked with a slight limp—entered, and Susan just had time to give him a smile of greeting when the phone rang.

'Hello, it's me,' said a deep voice, sounding harried.

'Dr Blake?' It had taken her a second or two to realise that it couldn't be anyone else.

'I'm still in surgery.'

'But. . .' she was confused '. . .surgery was yesterday.'

'I've been here all day and all night and we're still going. Since ten o'clock yesterday morning on one patient. I can't talk. I'll be another hour in here, then I'll call again. Doubt I'll make it to the office before eleven.' There was a click as he rang off and Susan was left holding the phone, wondering what on earth could be keeping him so long over one patient.

No doubt she would soon hear. Meanwhile, there would be two hours' worth of patients to deal with. A second one had already arrived. They would be behind schedule all day.

'I'm afraid the doctor's going to be rather late,' she announced.

An hour later, when she had managed to re-schedule three patients, contact a couple at home and convince the rest to wait, she heard his weary voice on the phone again.

'We're done,' he said. 'I'm calling from the car, so you can tell people I'm on my way. But I'm stopping off at home to shower and change, or I won't be human.'

'Successful?'

'She'll be fine. It's a miracle. I've never seen anything like it. . .but I'll tell you when I get there. See you!'

'Bye.'

He appeared forty-five minutes later, his black hair still curling damply around his temples and his weary face freshly shaven. His eyes looked hollow and heavy and his smile seemed to crease his face as if it were made of pale, brittle cardboard.

'Go and get me a muffin or a Danish and some fruit, will you?' he said, tossing her a crumpled note.

'There's coffee ready.'

'You're a life-saver. Who's waiting?'

She showed him the list. 'I knew Peter Maskie needed X-rays, so I've sent him across.'

'Good.'

'The others I wasn't sure of.'

'Let's see.' He hovered over the typed sheet while Susan anchored it on the desk with neat, splayed fingers. His hand, freshly smooth and scrubbed, made a pencil mark by two names. 'Those. May as well send them over now, since they're waiting. . . Are they?' He looked up and checked the occupants of the waiting-room, finding time for a brief general smile and hello. 'Yes, they are. Well, I won't get to either of them for at least half an hour.'

'They've all been very patient,' Susan said, 'since I told them about your surgical marathon.'

'It was a car accident,' he said. 'A sixteen-year-old girl—no seatbelt, needless to say. Multiple fractures in all four limbs. We had Carter on her top half and me

down below. Both femurs, hip dislocation, split femoral head, fractured mid-humerus and proximal humerus, ankle fracture, pelvic fracture. . .and that's not the end of the list yet.'

'Did you get a break at all?'

'Two. Very short. For pizza. The miracle is that there's no organ damage, no brain damage, and minimal spinal cord injury—a pinched sciatic nerve, which we think we've relieved with the pelvic surgery. We kept ourselves going through sheer disbelief at the situation. Made me wish I had my own scrub nurse, because the girl that was on always rubs me up the wrong way. Not her fault. She tries, but. . . Anyway, give me a minute in my office, then send Mr Bradley in to Room One. Shunt those other two off to X-ray, then bring me my coffee and muffin!'

He left, passing through the waiting-room briefly to fling out a, 'Sorry about this, everyone.'

Susan watched him until he disappeared into his office. He was very on edge, keeping afloat on adrenalin, and she hoped she would find the right ways to help him get through the day. It was the first time she had seen him like this, of course, and she was aware of how little she still knew about his moods and preferences. Would she 'rub him up the wrong way' as the scrub nurse had unwittingly done?

Worrying about it, she brought John Bradley to Room One and put his file in the holder on the door, then sent the next two patients across to the radiologist's. Making a quick call to the answering service, she said to the woman on the other end of the line, 'Could you pick up for two minutes?' then she took her bag and left the office, wishing the walk to the delicatessen on the corner wasn't slowed by her leg.

Perhaps it was silly—in fact, she didn't fully understand the feeling—but she knew that it was very important to her to do everything she could for Joel Blake today. There had been nothing like this in her dance career. The creative satisfaction of dance was wonderful and vitally important, but perhaps there was a necessary selfishness involved.

She and her fellow dancers had been concerned only with their own injuries, their own progress, their own roles. It was hard to be otherwise in a field where competition was so fierce. When someone had a successful audition, everyone was pleased, but they were all thinking too, 'Could that be me one day?'

The world of medicine was different, and in her hectic and reluctant period of training Susan hadn't realised it. The qualities it demanded of you were related to those in the world of dance, but they weren't the same. You needed the tenacity and drive, but you had to use those things for other people, not for yourself. Today, she had to use her drive to help Joel. . .

'Your typing service called,' the woman at the answering service reported when Susan got back. 'She says it's important.'

The news wasn't good. The service was small, run by two women with school-age children. One of them was away on holiday at the moment, and now the other one had a seriously ill mother in California, and wanted to fly out to her at once. She suggested an alternative service to Susan, but when she dialled the number she found it had been disconnected.

With Dr Blake trying to catch up on his backlog, Susan decided it simply wasn't a problem she had time to solve right now. The phone was ringing again. There

were some pamphlets on plantar fasciitis and lower-back disorders to hunt up and go through with the two patients concerned, to make sure they understood everything. A woman in a navy blue business suit—a new patient—didn't want to wait any longer and was proving very difficult to re-schedule. ..

The day was over at last.

'We caught up. I don't believe it,' Joel said, sinking into a chair near Susan's desk and reaching for the coffee she had just made him. The fourth cup that day. It was only ten minutes later than the time they had been scheduled to finish.

'So you'll go home and get some sleep?' Susan asked.

'After my rounds,' he answered drily.

'And something more substantial to eat than you've had here today,' she put in sternly.

'It's always the same,' he sighed, rolling his dark eyes to heaven in mock resignation. 'My nurses feel that I'm one of their patients and start prescribing treatment for me.'

'Well, you do look as if you need nursing care this afternoon,' she answered. 'I'd prescribe bed-rest.'

'Actually, you look tired yourself,' he said, eyeing her with greater alertness all of a sudden. 'I wouldn't insult you by saying you've got seven bags under each eye, as I have—your dress is very pretty, by the way—but there's something. . . Been burning the candle at both ends with that theatrical man of yours?'

She didn't know how to answer, and suddenly the relaxed banter between them had become a more dangerous thing. 'Yes, we—er—went out. . .for a while last night,' she said.

He didn't pursue the subject and neither did she, but he had probably drawn his own conclusions. Why had

she paused before saying that they had gone out? It sounded very much as if she really meant that they had stayed in, with all that that could imply in a modern relationship. Still, if that was what he thought, so much the better, she told herself. It would probably be true soon in any case, along with a deeper commitment generally in the relationship. Perhaps in the not too distant future, Joel Blake would be a guest at her wedding. . .

Hold on, was she deciding already that she wanted to marry Jeremy? Tiredly she concluded that she just didn't know, and was distracted from these thoughts by the sound of Joel's china coffee-mug being set firmly on the desk, and the squeak of the black swivel chair as he stood up.

'Can I leave you to lock the place?' he said.

'Of course. Please go.' She nodded.

'And could you drop the tape of my notes round at the typing service?' He turned from her and picked up a rough-textured sports jacket, whose square shoulders defined his strong silhouette and matched the rough thatch of his hair and the craginess of his profile.

Susan, remembering with horror that she hadn't done anything about the problem with the typing service, opened her mouth to say something about it, then stopped with the breath caught in her throat. It was the last thing he would want to worry about now! She would do the typing herself and say nothing about it.

The office seemed very quiet once he had gone, and Susan settled straight to work. She was familiar now with the up-to-date electric typewriter, having typed appointment lists and sundry other small things on it, but nevertheless it took a long time to get organised. She had to find the right paper, work out how to use the

cassette recorder, and come to grips with Joel Blake's style of dictation.

Starting and stopping the little machine every few words was a nuisance, and she guessed that the typing service would have a proper dictaphone in which to play back the tape. At least she had a familiarity with the medical terms, both from her training as a nurse and from studying these same patients' charts and files today.

It was after eight by the time she finally finished, and she wondered later, as she moved wearily around her small apartment making cheese on toast and a hearty tinned soup for her evening meal, if Joel Blake was asleep yet. For a moment she felt lonely, and wondered if staying here in New York had been the right thing to do. Her life was so different from Jeremy's now. He would certainly *not* be asleep. He was in the middle of conducting the orchestra in *Penny Parade*. Perhaps his comment last night about getting her home to bed did point to a truth about their lives now—they existed on radically different timetables and in radically different worlds.

We have to talk about it, she decided. This weekend. I've been putting it off for too long.

But, as it happened, she saw Jeremy Singleton before the weekend. It came about quite by chance on Thursday, which started off awkwardly in the office.

'These notes look different,' Joel Blake said, coming up to Susan's desk and tapping a typed page with an absent frown.

'Do they?' She saw at once that the two pages he held in his hand were among the ones she had laboured over on Tuesday night. She had tried to copy the style and

layout that the typing service used as closely as possible, but of course, there were differences, particularly with the ones she had done at the end, when she'd been tired. 'Is there a problem with them?'

'Not really. It just struck me, that's all. I suppose they've got someone new, or a new machine.'

'Actually,' she said, 'I did them.'

'You did? Why? When?'

'Our usual service is out of action this week,' Jessie stepped in. 'We've fixed something else up now, but Susan hadn't had a chance to do that on Tuesday, so she ran through them herself.' She tossed the last words easily over her shoulder as she went along the corridor to put on the morning coffee.

'Ran through them? It must have taken you hours! Tuesday? After I left? What time did you finish?'

'About eight,' she admitted. 'Or a bit after.'

'Good heavens!' He sounded impatient and annoyed. 'It wasn't that urgent. Why didn't you tell me? I could have done without them for a day or two.'

I didn't want to trouble you with it, after your surgical marathon,' Susan answered thinly. She had been trying to help, trying to save him trouble, and now he seemed to be angry with her. It hardly seemed fair, and was very unexpected.

'Just because I run myself into the ground at times,' he was saying, 'there's no need for you to do the same, girl! Next time——'

'You were far too tired,' she retorted, needing to defend herself.

'I'm used to it. Next time, if there's an office problem that affects me, tell me about it, all right?'

'All right. Of course. I'm sorry.'

'Now you're acting like a scared rabbit.'

'Well, I didn't expect to be attacked for trying to do my job a little better than average,' Susan hissed, lowering her voice a little since their first patient had just arrived. 'I didn't intend to tell you about it at all, since the problem has been solved now, but I thought if you did find out you might thank me for putting in extra time, instead of berating me!'

'Susan. . .' His face lapsed suddenly into a wry, apologetic smile. 'I *am* thanking you, in my obscure and rather illogical way. Sorry. You could be forgiven for not realising it. I still haven't quite caught up on sleep yet, and things have——Oh, good grief!' He interrupted himself suddenly and clapped a hand to his craggy forehead. 'The car! I knew I'd got here too early this morning. I was meant to take it to the garage today for a brake check and servicing. That's the second time I've missed an appointment for it in the past couple of weeks. Do you drive?'

'Yes.'

'On the right-hand side of the road?'

'I have done, twice, in France on holidays with my family,' she answered, trying to catch up with his sudden change of mood and subject.

'If I give you directions, could you possibly take it in for me?'

'Your Mercedes? Now? What if I. . .?' She broke off.

'I trust you. It's insured. Just watch out for the other maniacs on the road.'

He was already pulling the keys from his pocket, and Susan didn't dare to say how daunted she was at the thought of negotiating Manhattan's snarled and aggressive traffic. Then she noticed his appraising glance—those dark eyes fixed upon her with a look of challenge and speculation. He knew darned well she

was nervous! Well, she wasn't going to let him see it any longer. In fact, she was going to squash those butterflies in her stomach right now.

She lifted her neatly moulded chin as she took the keys. 'Is it manual? Or automatic?' she said.

'Automatic,' he answered. 'So you won't need to use your left leg. And it's quite straightforward. Fiddle about a bit before you start off and make sure you know where everything is. Hand-brake and so forth.'

'I'll be fine, I'm sure,' she said, very firmly.

'It's parked on Level "C", to the left of the elevator.'

'Right.'

'Here.' He threw some notes into her hand. 'Take a taxi back, and tell the garage I'll pick it up about six. I think they're open till seven, but if you could check on that. . . They know what I want done to it.'

He explained the directions to her and scribbled the name, address and phone number of the garage on a yellow memo pad, then tore off the sheet and gave it to her.

'Good.' She nodded, putting it in her handbag. 'Anything else?'

'Not that I can think of.'

'See you later, then.'

'Good luck. . .'

He turned from her and went to the desk to pick up the appointment list, but the hand that came to his mouth, ostensibly to shield a brief cough, was not quick enough to conceal the smile that hovered on his lips.

He's happy about this! Susan realised indignantly. He wanted to challenge me! She had no idea why. Did he want her to fail the challenge? Or to succeed? She didn't know that, either.

Outside, the air was warm and contained the beginnings of the humidity that made New York summers draining and difficult in July and August. In a neatly tailored linen dress of pale Nile-green, Susan was cool at the moment, but had to fight to stay that way. Around her the traffic roared and idled, while horns tooted impatiently.

At least there's no chance I'll be booked for speeding, she thought. So stay calm, Susan Taylor!

The first half of the journey proceeded uneventfully. It could only be a few miles as the crow flew, but with tangled traffic, pot-holed streets, traffic-lights, trucks and one-way signs, it felt like a lengthy adventure. Susan changed lanes, avoided the tail-ends of taxis, braked behind delivery vans that stopped without warning, and began to feel the satisfaction that came with a difficult task successfully managed. It was getting hot in the car, though, in spite of the cool cream leather upholstery and slightly tinted window glass.

Since it seemed that she was stuck semi-permanently at this particular traffic-light, Susan had time to look at the dashboard controls and find the air-conditioning, which she switched to a medium setting that gave forth a quiet hum. She closed the window so that the cool air would not escape, checked the traffic situation and waited, idly studying her surroundings and the passers-by.

The neighbourhood she was passing through seemed to be in transition between low-rent and chic. Below several floors of apartments, fronted with the black zig-zags of fire-escape stairs, family-owned grocery stores, hardware stores and other small businesses stood side by side with newly decorated restaurants offering the latest in fashionable fare and ambience.

'Brunch specials daily,' one place advertised, and she guessed that within its pink walls people would still be lazing over coffee and croissants, or discussing business over eggs Benedict and orange juice.

Susan checked the lights again. Green for 'go', but, with that taxi determined to turn left and the delivery van evidently planning to unload in the middle of the street, it was clear she wouldn't be going anywhere just yet. Two cars in front of her honked their horns at van and taxi repeatedly and impatiently, but Susan didn't bother and continued to watch the side of the street instead.

It was then that she saw Jeremy. It took her a moment to realise that he was not alone, and another moment to realise that his companion was Briony Cosgrove. She had plenty of time to study them, and ran no risk of their seeing her. She was just another anonymous driver, a silhouette behind the wheel of a dark-crimson Mercedes with tinted windows.

Briony was dressed in a floral figure-hugging dress of polished cotton that left her tanned shoulders bare so that they highlighted the blonde mass of her hair above. She wore spiky black heels and seemed to be protesting to Jeremy that she had already walked far enough in them. His arm was around her waist so that at first Susan might have thought he was only helping her tired feet along, but then he ran his hand caressingly up her back, Briony stopped and turned into his arms, and they kissed, unmistakably as lovers.

They had stopped in front of the pink restaurant, and when they finally slid apart, arms still entwined, they began to study the menu posted in the window and eventually decided to go in.

It was just as they disappeared that the traffic began

to move again. In a daze of disbelief and dawning comprehension, Susan tried to focus her attention on the road. At first, car movements and street signs made no sense, and it was only after she had had to brake with all her strength to avoid an accident that she realised that she had to pull herself together, and was able to do so.

Five minutes later—and it seemed, as she was living through it, the longest five minutes of her life—she saw the garage, turned into it, brought the car to a shuddering stop and sat behind the wheel, giving way to a trembling she could not control for several moments.

'Can I help you, doll?' a voice said, accompanied by a tap at the car window. It was a mechanic, dressed in blue overalls.

'Oh. . . Yes,' she managed, lowering the window with the press of a button. 'I've brought this car in for Dr Joel Blake.'

Soon, thankfully, she was able to leave the garage, and a taxi came along the busy street only seconds later. A taxi. . . She remembered all those times after Jeremy had said goodnight, and the way he had been so keen to hail a taxi as soon as he possibly could. It all made sense now. This thing with Briony Cosgrove that she had just witnessed wasn't new. It had been going on for months, and was the only reason why Susan had been important to Jeremy at all.

As the pieces of the puzzle fell into place, she stared unseeingly from the taxi window, oblivious to the driver's aggressive lane-changing up busy Eighth Avenue, and unaware of how beautiful the Park looked today as they passed its south side, with bright spring-green foliage on all the trees and the horses and carriages that took tourists and lovers for drives lively and shining.

Jeremy and Briony were having an affair, and, in order to hide that affair from the gossiping company members, and, more importantly, from Alec Savill with his reputation for jealousy, Jeremy had used Susan as a blind. The evidence was clear: the way he had never tried to move their relationship forward to a deeper physical or emotional footing, the way he had been most attentive and loving to her when other company members were watching, and the way, when not at the theatre, he had made all their outings short—slight things so that he had had as much time as possible for Briony.

Little things, too, such as the times he had tried to put sugar in her coffee, when it was Briony who liked the sweetness, and the way he had wanted to go on meeting Susan at the theatre after she had left the show. Those taxis. .. He hadn't been going home; he'd been going to a late-night rendezvous with Briony.

Susan passed no judgements on the Savill-Cosgrove marriage. That was their business. And she didn't know or care what lies Briony had had to tell Alec about how she spent her time when she was really with Jeremy. What was wrong, what made Susan feel angry, bitter, miserable in a numb, bewildered way, was the fact that she had been so callously used. Wearily she became aware that she was almost back at Dr Blake's. It was only half-past ten. Getting Joel's money out of her bag ready to pay, she steeled herself to the task of getting through the day.

CHAPTER SEVEN

'MAGGIE WINTERS phoned,' Susan reported to Joel Blake. It was the last of the morning's messages.

'Not about tonight, I hope?' he said, looking up, a frown etched on his craggy forehead.

'Yes, I'm afraid so,' Susan nodded. 'She says she has to cancel. She's got the flu,. . . She *did* sound terrible on the phone,' she added, since he was so clearly disappointed.

'Well, I'm not surprised,' he said on a sigh. 'She's been working too hard and she's just passed an important set of surgical exams. That's why we were celebrating. I might have known she'd let go and fall prey to the first bug that came along.'

'It often happens, doesn't it?' Susan agreed neutrally. She was beginning to wonder about Maggie Winters. Dr Blake had said he had no romantic involvement, but he and the more junior orthopaedist were clearly good friends at the very least.

It was Friday, just a day after her discovery about Jeremy. She hadn't heard from him, didn't want to ring him, and didn't know what she would do and say when they did meet up. At the moment she was simply taking life a minute at a time.

Joel wasn't supposed to be in today, but he had 'dropped by for half an hour to catch up on some paperwork' at ten o'clock, and now, after noon, he was still here, having taken numerous phone calls and seen three patients who had telephoned with unexpected

problems. Finally, at half-past twelve, he had said, 'No more calls.' Hence the list of messages she was now delivering, along with his sandwich lunch.

She left his office and returned to her own desk, since the phone was already ringing again. The busyness of this practice was a sheer blessing today.

'Hello? This is Mercedes Sanchez,' an accented voice said rapidly. 'Is the doctor there today?'

'Yes, he is at the moment, but——' Susan began.

She was cut off. 'I am on my way to see him now. I will be there in ten minutes. It is very important.'

'But Miss Sanchez. . . Miss Sanchez?'

Too late. There was a click at the other end of the line and the volatile South American ballerina had rung off before Susan could explain that Dr Blake would be leaving for his afternoon clinic at Vernon within half an hour.

He appeared in the doorway, half a sandwich in one hand as if he had forgotten about it, and the other hand stretched to touch the door-frame high up near the top. It was a pose he often adopted, Susan had noticed, and it made him seem even taller and larger than he actually was.

'Was that Mercedes?' he said.

'Yes, she says she's on her way in. She hung up before I could tell her you were due at the clinic soon. Shall I call her back and——?'

'No, if I know Mercedes, she'll already be out the door,' he said quite cheerfully. 'She probably had her keys in her hand when she picked up the phone. I'll see her.'

'But——'

'I know. I might be late at Vernon. Can't be helped.' He shrugged as if Mercedes Sanchez came first with no

question. He turned, as though about to go back to his *office*, then stopped and turned back again. 'Could you help me out with something?'

'Tidy up Room One? Yes, I know. It's a bit of a mess after that cast problem this morning,' she said quickly. It was something the telephone had prevented her from getting to.

'No, not Room One.' He smiled crookedly, seeming amused at her hasty response. 'This evening. Now that Maggie has stood me up. I have a reservation for dinner and supper at Le Miracle, and tickets for this year's Tony Award winner for Best Play. Both of those things are rather hard to get and it seems a pity to have them go to waste. Could you bear to be Maggie's stand-in at such short notice? If there were more time I wouldn't bother you with it. I'd rustle up someone else.'

'Mercedes Sanchez, perhaps,' Susan put in drily. She didn't know what had made her say it.

'She's performing,' was his terse answer, as if that was the only reason he *hadn't* asked her, and Susan wondered if she had hit the mark somehow.

The dancer was world-famous in her field and was very attractive as well. Perhaps Joel Blake was interested in her as more than just a medical case. Susan hadn't looked at Miss Sanchez's file yet, since she hadn't needed to, and didn't know what treatment the dancer was receiving.

'So, are you interested?' Joel demanded impatiently. 'Or are you booked up to the gills with other offers?'

I think I can manage to shake off my other engagements,' Susan retorted drily, then added more warmly, 'I'd love to come.'

It was nice of him to think of her, even if it was, as he said, mainly due to lack of other options, and it would

help, she thought, to assuage the pain of the knowledge that she wouldn't be seeing Jeremy tonight. . .or any other night.

Seconds later Joel had squashed her momentary warmth towards him by saying, 'It'll do you good, I'm sure,' in a doctor-knows-best tone that had her fuming.

'I'll go and clean up Room One,' was all she said. Why was it that, just as she was starting to feel comfortable with him and relaxed as they talked with casual efficiency about patients and office problems, he always seemed to deliberately bruise her with something brusque and unnecessarily blunt?

And Room One was a mess! He had had to re-do a wrist cast unexpectedly this morning after a patient had damaged it, displacing the set bone and endangering the healing process. Plaster dust had settled on sink, examining bench and floor, the old cast filled the wastebin along with crumpled paper towelling, and scraps from the new cast had overflowed on to the floor.

The cast-cutter needed a good clean, and was sitting on the bench like a dirty kitchen appliance. Boxes of plaster bandage and cast-reinforcing resin hadn't been put away, either, and there was soap and splashed water spilled on the laminated bench beside the sink. Joel wasn't usually this untidy. He hadn't expected to see any patients at all, but still, was that an excuse to treat her like a cleaning lady?

Venting an anger that she didn't completely understand, Susan banged and bustled about the room, sweeping up plaster dust, wiping down the sink, putting boxes away. She heard Mercedes Sanchez arrive, but couldn't hear what went on in Room Two. When the South American dancer left again, Susan was just finishing her work. She heard the confident, accented

voice, 'And you'll come very soon to see my performance?'

'I'd love to.'

'It is a truly fantastic *Giselle*! The sets and costumes! And Paul Filbert as Albrecht is perfect. You must come when he dances, because Alain Beaumont isn't quite so good. The orchestra, too. ...'

Her voice faded as Joel ushered her out to the lobby.

Standing in the middle of the room, holding the plastic bag of rubbish from the bin in one hand and some hard, irregular shapes of new plaster in the other, Susan felt her busy anger ebb with dangerous suddenness and leave a more painful, heart-tearing emotion that brought dry, choking sobs to her throat before she could control them.

Albrecht. . . *Giselle*. . . She had danced the part of the ill-fated maiden four times during a Christmas season presentation at her ballet school seven years ago, sharing the role on alternate nights with another girl. The orchestra. . . live music. . . a conductor's baton. . . Jeremy. It was a double loss that at the moment seemed overwhelming and unbearable.

Dropping the plastic bag, Susan sank into a miserable crouch on the wheeled stool that Joel used when examining patients, and gave way to her tears. She crushed the pieces of plaster tightly in her hand, feeling them dig into her skin so that later they would leave red marks of pressure. It took her a moment to realise that the door to the room had opened, but when she did she sprang to her feet. . . only to precipitate herself straight into Joel Blake's arms.

They were held out to reach for her, as if he had almost expected to find her like this, and they enclosed her at once so that her hot, tear-salted cheek was pressed

against the rough weave of his dark sports jacket. At first he rocked her, then began to press his lips against the top of her head, nuzzling her hair so that it fell forward on to her face.

Then with gentle, curled fingers—the sensitive, strong fingers of a surgeon—he brushed the hair away again and found her lips, using the tip of his tongue to lick away a salty tear that had stopped at the corner of her mouth, then parting her lips and pressing them tightly with his own as if to dam the pressure of her quietening sobs with a force that he knew was very different and far stronger.

Susan lost herself in his caresses. They offered a haven from her painful thoughts, and soon her tears were gone, replaced by an electric physical awareness that tingled and swelled in her most sensitive places. She was wearing the apricot jersey dress again today, and its soft folds offered no shield against the hard length of his torso and thighs. The wide neck, too, gave no protection. Instead, it slipped to one side so that it fell off her shoulder, and a moment later his lips had travelled there, setting her on fire from jaw to neck to collarbone.

His hands explored the neat curves of her dancer's shape—the firmness at her hips, the compact planes of her thighs and waist, and the soft, supple circles of her breasts. Her own touch found that his body consisted of harder, more chiselled and sculpted shapes—rippling back muscles, a musk-scented column of neck, a hard wall that was his chest.

At last his hold loosened, at the point where, if they did not stop at once, it would be difficult to stop at all. His hands still rested lightly on her waist as he kissed

her stained eyelids one last time and whispered, 'Better now?'

'Yes,' she nodded tremulously. How could it not be better?

'Good.' His hands moved to hers and he brought them to his face and kissed them lightly, then saw how one was still closed into a fist. 'What's this?'

'Oh. . . plaster scraps,' she said, feeling a little foolish as she allowed him to uncurl her fingers and see the red indentations left in her palm by the small, hard shapes. 'I was just about to throw them away.. .'

She turned and found the plastic rubbish-bag she had dropped on the floor. Fortunately it had not spilled its contents, since she had knotted it at the top earlier before remembering about the plaster scraps she had left in a little pile on the bench. She unknotted the bag and dropped the pieces in. They rattled brittlely against the sliced-open shell of the old cast, and she was aware, in the quiet room, that both she and Dr Blake were listening to the spattering of sound.

'Is it something you'd be interested in doing?' he asked quietly. 'Cast-cutting? And soft bandages? I could teach you. . .'

She hesitated, not knowing quite why he had asked. Was it to help him out? Or for her own benefit and experience at the expense of his time and efficiency? Aware of how busy he was, and how little free time he allowed himself, she didn't want this kind of favour from him.

But before she could reply he had spoken again, this time with an energy that brooked no denial. 'Yes,' he said. 'We'll do it. You're not sure. . . But I'm sure you'll find you can manage it.' He laid a hand on her shoulder and she felt, suddenly, that he was patronising her.

'I'm sure I can,' she answered with new firmness. 'It won't be the hardest thing I've had to do as a nurse, I'm positive about that.'

'No?' His question hung in the air as a challenge for a moment, then, 'I suppose not. We'll see. We'll start on it next week. I've got a few casts coming off then.' He moved briskly towards the door, then spoke again. 'So I'll. . . what? Meet you at the restaurant?'

'That sounds fine,' she agreed, although for a second she had forgotten about tonight's outing with him.

'I booked early. Six o'clock, so we wouldn't be rushed before the theatre. Fortunately, it's not far between the two. Do you know it? Le Miracle?'

'Yes,' she nodded. 'On Forty-Sixth Street.' It wasn't far from the *Penny Parade* theatre, but was the kind of place Alec Savill and Briony Cosgrove would dine in, not a lowly chorus dancer like herself. Ex-chorus dancer. And perhaps not Briony and Alec, but Briony and Jeremy. She winced.

'So you know they expect you to dress up?'

Joel Blake's sudden, flatly worded question jolted her back to the present, and she retorted crisply, 'Well, I wasn't planning on jeans.' Was he blunt like this deliberately? It often seemed that way. She had no idea why he should be, though.

'I'll look forward to it,' he said, flinging it back through the open door as he departed, so that it was clearly a token statement.

Angrily she wondered why she was going out with him at all. She wondered even more why there was a perverse part of her that *did* look forward to tonight as he had said. She wondered most of all about that kiss, and the burning, turbulent pleasure it had given her.

Perhaps the answer to all three questions was encapsulated in one name and her need to forget it—Jeremy Singleton.

Locking up the office at four-thirty, Susan realised that she had cut things rather fine if she wanted to arrive at the restaurant on time—and she could just imagine some goading comment coming from Joel Blake if she was late! She took a bus across the Park and fretted at its slowness and frequent stops, then plunged into the shower, followed by a frenzy of blow-drying, make-up application and dress selection.

As to the latter, after what Joel had said about dressing up, there was really only one choice: a plain black cocktail dress which was cut with deceptive simplicity so that it clung to her neat figure and revealed just the right amount of tanned back, shoulders, collarbone and arms. Sheer black stockings patterned with a saucy bow at the back of each ankle, Italian leather court shoes, and matching necklace, bracelet and earrings in garnet and silver completed the outfit.

Lipstick that echoed the warm rust-red of the garnets brought a slash of colour to her full mouth, and a frivolous streak of fine silver eyeliner, in addition to muted tones of shadow and mascara, gave her dark eyes an exotic glow.

Without even time for a gulped glass of water, Susan was in the street and looking for a taxi at a quarter to six, hoping desperately that she hadn't overlooked anything—a loose strand of hair, a run in her stockings, a mark on her skirt. She arrived at the restaurant with less than a minute to spare, threw too much money at the taxi driver, tripped on the kerb, recovered her balance, dashed into the luxurious entrance, then stopped breathlessly to compose herself.

Joel Blake came forward with a crooked, amused smile. He had seen the whole performance, and she was beginning to lose count of the times he had witnessed similar moments of clumsiness on her part.

'Our table is ready, I think,' he murmured, still smiling.

'Really, Joel!' she burst out, not willing to accept his pretence of politeness. 'You might as well say something. Yes, I *did* over-tip the driver, I *did* trip in the street, I *did* pretend to be utterly elegant and poised as soon as I stepped in the door. Please share a laugh about it with me, instead of. . .' she hesitated '... *smirking* about it like that!'

'Smirking?' he echoed teasingly. 'Was I?'

'Yes, you were!'

'Sorry.'

'You're not sorry a bit.'

Fortunately at that point they were ushered to their table, which was placed in one of the restaurant's three bay windows overlooking the street.

It was ironic, she thought, that it should have been yesterday that she had seen Jeremy and Briony in that obscure part of town on the way to the service garage. The street she could see now was much more their kind of territory, full of theatre-goers and theatre professionals. . . But of course, she realised now, that was exactly why she *hadn't* seen them together around here. With the need to keep their affair a secret, they chose the most unlikely places they could find. She still hadn't decided what she was going to say to Jeremy about what she knew. . .

Joel Blake's hand reached across the table and his cool dry palm and fingers smoothed the tight frown away from her brow before she could avoid his gesture.

Then he slid his hand down her cheek and along the line of her jaw in a slow caress.

'I didn't come here with you to watch the changing weather patterns on your forehead,' he said.

'No, of course you didn't. I'm sorry,' she managed. He didn't ask her what was wrong, thank goodness, but he went on watching her and she searched feverishly for something to say, finally settling on the safety of a medical topic. 'How is the girl with the multiple fractures?'

'She's doing fine. She'll be discharged in ten days, I'd say, though of course she'll need a lot of follow-up care.' He spoke casually, his eyes wandering a little, as if it wasn't something he wanted to discuss at the moment.

'Is there a medical library here where anyone could go and do some reading?' It was something she had been meaning to ask for several days, and now seemed as good a time as any, before she made an effort to get away from shop talk, as he clearly wanted to.

'You mean yourself?' He was suddenly more alert, and sat back to study her with narrowed eyes.

'Yes.' She nodded.

'Why?'

The demanding word took her by surprise, and she felt a little foolish. 'Oh, because I felt. . . I feel I need to know more, in order to do the job properly.'

'You're only staying for three months. You don't have to try and impress me.'

'I wasn't,' she answered crisply.

He was infuriating! He sat opposite, eyeing her carefully and holding up the menu as if he would really much rather be thinking about that. One dark eyebrow was raised, and his lips were twisted into an impatient curve that couldn't be called a smile.

'Save your reading for whatever area you ultimately go into. It's not likely to be orthopaedics, is it?'

'Why not?' she retorted. 'If I'm going to learn how to cut casts——'

'That was a whim on my part.' He shrugged. 'It really isn't necessary if you don't want to.'

'But I *do* want to!' This discussion was making no sense.

'OK.' He shrugged. 'But that's enough shop for now, don't you think? Let's get ready to order.'

His eyes fell to the menu and he studied it carefully, raising it so that she could see only his chiselled forehead and the rough waves of almost-black hair that threatened to spill on to it. What on earth had all that been about? It almost sounded as if he didn't want her to be interested in his speciality. Or as if he didn't believe in her interest, and dismissed it as a passing fad.

Well, he was wrong, she decided suddenly. It was a realisation that took her slightly by surprise, but it seemed quite clear. She had been working with him for two weeks now, and each day she enjoyed the work more. It didn't involve quite enough practical nursing, but, as he said, it was only for three months, and at the end of that time she might just surprise him by getting a permanent job on an orthopaedic ward.

Wickedly she allowed herself a little fantasy about encountering him at Wakefield-Lincoln on his rounds, skimming towards him in a white uniform, holding a file he had requested. . .

It wasn't until the silly scene had thoroughly played itself out in her mind that she realised it for the first time—there was no need to stay in New York now, after the three months had gone by. With Jeremy vanished from her life in a way that had shattered her illusions

about love so that she was still numb from the blow, her reason for being here was gone. If she did find work on an orthopaedics ward, it would be in England.

'Madam?' Patiently the waiter repeated his question. 'Your order?'

With a start, Susan took her first real look at the menu that had been propped up, just a blur, in front of her. 'Oh, um. . . soup of the day, and the veal veronique,' she said quickly, as if she had made up her mind minutes ago.

'I'll have the garlic prawns, and this chicken,' Joel said, pointing at the menu.

The waiter nodded and left, and a moment later the sommelier came and Susan listened to a reverent discussion about wine that she didn't understand in the least.

'That sounds very good, doesn't it, Susan?' Joel said, turning to her after several moments.

She saw the twinkle in his dark eyes just in time and murmured fervently, 'A perfect complement to our meal.'

It set their conversation on a lighter note until their first course arrived, but when her soup was set down in front of her Susan eyed it in dismay. It looked beautiful—perfectly presented with a swirl of cream in the middle and a garnish of crisp green parsley. The only problem was. . . mushrooms.

'What's wrong?' Joel Blake demanded. He had seen her face before she'd managed to compose it.

'It's got mushrooms in it' she said inelegantly.

'Yes,' he nodded patiently. 'It's cream of mushroom soup, as you ordered.'

'Oh, yes, I suppose it is,' she answered lamely.

'You don't like mushrooms, I take it.'

'No.'

'Then it seems a strange thing for you to have chosen.'

'I didn't realise.'

'He showed us the blackboard with the daily specials quite clearly.'

'I suppose I wasn't listening. It's my fault,' she admitted humbly.

'Clearly it is,' he agreed drily.

She looked up, crimson-cheeked, and felt like an eight-year-old who was trying the patience of a very sensible adult, saw the twinkle in his eyes again and relaxed a little.

'I'd offer to swap with you,' he said, glancing down at his own garlic prawns, which looked quite delicious, 'but unfortunately I can't stand mushrooms either!'

The admission, made in very bland, dry tones, broke any awkwardness between them and ended in an open, shared laugh. They shared the garlic prawns as well, although Susan protested that it was a dreadfully improper thing to do at a restaurant of this class.

'I'm always doing dreadfully improper things,' Joel said. 'And I'm afraid I sometimes don't care quite enough about what other people think. This place, like a few places in New York that I know of, takes itself just a little bit too seriously.. .'

Their plates were taken away at that moment, and seconds later a waiter bustled forward with a tiny vacuum sweeper and proceeded to run it carefully—almost reverently—over their tablecloth to remove three tiny fragments of breadcrumb that had fallen from their crisp hot rolls. Joel raised an eyebrow with an exaggerated air of weary patience, then moved his plate and pointed to a crumb the man had missed. It was promptly dealt with. Susan, nearly choking with laughter, had to hide her mouth behind her hand. When the

waiter had gone, Joel continued as if there had been no interruption.

' . . . and, since I'm an interfering type, I feel it's up to me to do something about it.'

'Interfering?'

'Yes. Haven't you noticed?'

'Not really. Give me an example.'

He opened his mouth ready to speak, then closed it again and shook his head. 'No,' he pronounced. 'Not wise.' Then he looked around the room with an air of dismissing the subject for good and said, gesturing discreetly, 'Is that woman wearing a dress, do you think? Or did she get tangled up in a stray parachute without noticing?'

He kept her laughing at comments such as this until they were seated in the theatre, so that she had no time to think that this was the first live performance she had been to since her own final appearance in *Penny Parade*. This was a play, of course, with no music and definitely no dancing, but the rising burble of the audience, the steep tiers of plush-covered seating, the tantalising fall of velvet and tasselled curtain between audience and players. . . It was all part of the atmosphere of her stage life; she had loved it, and now it was gone.

Before she could sink into useless regret, the house-lights dimmed, the curtain rose, Joel squeezed her arm once with a firm, reassuring grip, as if he knew how she felt, and the play began. They were still discussing it over supper two and a half hours later.

Supper. . . The meal she used to share with Jeremy after *Penny Parade*, and yet Joel's ideas about the play were so absorbing that she scarcely had time to make the connection. They lingered over chocolate torte, coffee and liqueurs until well after midnight, and when

they finally rose Susan's head was swimming a little, and Jeremy Singleton didn't seem important at all.

I don't love him, she decided vaguely. I never did.

Even her anger and her sense of being used were fuzzy emotions. No doubt he had chosen her for his deception in the first place because he had sensed she was naive about love. Well, she wasn't planning to be naive any longer! She had learnt some valuable lessons from Jeremy—perhaps she should thank him!

She should certainly thank Joel Blake. Once again, he ushered her up to her door, having paid off the taxi in the street and saying he would flag down a second one for his own journey home across the Park, to his very modern high-rise condominium on the Upper East Side.

'It's been a perfect evening, Joel.'

'I'm glad you enjoyed it. The play deserved its Tony Award.'

'Yes, it did. The only jarring note was the soup.'

'The soup? There was nothing in the play about——'
He broke off, then chuckled. 'You changed horses in mid-stream. . .or subjects in mid-sentence.'

'Sorry,' she smiled.

He was standing very close to her and she was sure he was planning to kiss her. Suddenly, today's startling kiss in the examining-room came back to her, and she knew she wanted him to set her on fire like that again. It wouldn't mean anything of course, but she told herself cynically that she had no use for meaning at the moment, after Jeremy.

She swayed forward a little and he caught her, his hands cupping her elbows. She slid her own hands around his back, aching to explore those sculptured muscles again through the delightful roughness of the

raw silk shirt he was wearing, and expecting his grasp on her to tighten and become the caressing hold of passion. But. ..

'No, Susan.' His voice was gentle and his hands slid to her small waist, almost able to enclose it. 'I don't think this is the right idea, do you?'

'I. . .' She stared at him and saw distant kindness, not the darkened expression of need she had expected and wanted to find.

'You haven't been yourself today,' he said. 'You've been upset- Things aren't going so well with your boyfriend, I guess, a bad patch, but this isn't the way to solve that. You need to talk to him. I've got no part in it, and I don't want to have. What I did today. . .what we did. . .at the office was meant to help, but I don't think it did. It was a mistake. So. . .go to bed, sleep in, and enjoy your weekend.'

'Joel. - .'

'Talk to Jeremy about it, not me,'

He was already backing away from her, as if afraid that she would press into his arms again, and she felt humiliated and ashamed. Could she go after him with a babbled account of the reality of Jeremy? No. Impossible. Then it would seem as if she wanted to launch straight into a new, full-on relationship, and her bewildered perception insisted that Joel would reject that. A kind rejection, no doubt, but one that would leave her nakedly exposed all the same.

As for what she felt about him, beyond her physical awareness of him and her weak need to distract herself from Jeremy, she had no idea. It wasn't important to find out, either. With a last wave and a faint, twisted smile that could mean anything, or nothing, Joel Blake

disappeared around the corner of the corridor, and Susan was left standing there.

Outside, the night was broken by a howl of a siren. As it faded, she heard the clack of the lift doors open, and voices came closer towards her. Joel must have taken the stairs. Before the new arrivals—probably the couple in the larger apartment opposite her own—could round the corner, Susan had quickly let herself inside her small studio.

CHAPTER EIGHT

'JOEL . . . Dr Blake. . . tells me you used to dance yourself?' Mercedes Sanchez said,

'Yes,' Susan nodded. 'But it was very minor compared with what you do. Professionally, I only did musical chorus work, but I trained in classical as well, and hoped——'

'You've seen my *Giselle*?' Mercedes asked, interrupting.

'No, I'm afraid I haven't,' Susan answered neutrally.

It was nearly two months since her outing to the theatre with Joel Blake. She had seen one more play since then, as well as several films—three of them with Joel himself—but was not yet ready to go to a ballet or musical performance.

While the South American ballerina consulted a glossy diary, trying to find a time for her next appointment, Susan thought back on how things had finally finished up with Jeremy. It was slightly ironic, really. He had telephoned her the morning after that terrible evening with Joel.

'Gordon Grey is conducting tonight,' he had said, breezily unaware of the cold brevity of Susan's replies to his casual greeting and smatter of small talk. Her brevity hadn't been a game—she was fighting to swallow a lump in her throat, and couldn't manage anything more. 'He'll be taking over permanently in a few months so he wants to keep his hand in.'

Gordon was the show's assistant music director. It

was the first Susan had heard about Jeremy leaving *Penny Parade* but she didn't query it.

'So I have a free evening,' Jeremy was continuing. 'I thought you'd like to see some dance. This new *Giselle* is being talked about all over town, and after it we can pop back to the theatre to make sure Gordon had no problems.'

'No, Jeremy.' She said it with a calm finality that penetrated his casual insensitivity at once.

'Susan?'

'I'm sure it's disappointing that Briony has to perform when you've got a night off, but I'm afraid I'm not available as a substitute. Tonight or any other night.'

There was a silence at the other end of the phone, and then, 'How did you find out? *Nobody* knows. . .do they?' His obvious fear that Alec Savill had found out as well was almost comical.

She gave him a brief explanation of what she had seen from the tinted windows of Joel Blake's car and then, as Jeremy began to try and make excuses—Susan was very dear to him. . .he hadn't slept with her so she couldn't really complain of deception. . .he had been going to let her in on the plot, but. . .she had quietly replaced the receiver. He hadn't called back—then or since.

The whole thing faded gradually as time went by. The humiliating scene outside her door with Joel faded, too. Actually, it was Joel himself who had helped this fading process in more than one way.

He had begun to teach her about cast-cutting the following week, gradually getting her to do the more complicated angles, at first under his close supervision, and then on her own. After her first fear that she would slip and draw blood—in spite of knowing that the circular, saw-toothed blade was specially designed to

cut only the brittle texture of plaster, even if she did slip—she began to enjoy the practical task and the more complete contact it gave her with many of Dr Blake's patients.

She also began to work on bandages, splints and braces, as well as suture removal. One day, without anything being said, several textbooks on orthopaedics appeared on her desk, including one specially written for nurses working in the field, and she devoured them thoroughly in her spare time. The reading gave her a broader spectrum of understanding about what went on in this area, and when, a few weeks later, Dr Blake said casually at lunch one day, 'Oh, by the way, you can hang on to those-books. I don't need them,' she had nodded, pleased.

Of course, the office half of her duties didn't decrease simply because she was now involved more closely in nursing work. It meant that she often stayed until six or later in the evenings to finish off necessary paperwork. No one knew about it at first. Jessie wasn't in every day, and Dr Blake usually left early to make his hospital rounds.

One day, though, he came back unexpectedly to collect some notes and found her there. Their argument about it had been brief.

'If the nursing work is too much and means you have to stay late in the office like this, I won't have you doing it any more,' he said shortly.

'But I like the nursing work,' she countered.

'Then we'll get another part-timer for the office.'

'No, you employed me to do that side of it, and if I've chosen to take on extra, it's my problem.' Oddly, she was starting to enjoy these fast, sharp exchanges with him. It wasn't the first one they had had, by any means.

'But you're working long hours several times a week,' he objected.

'You work long hours all week and do rounds both days of the weekend.'

'Have it your own way,' he said with a shrug after a short pause, leaving the office again with an impatient stride and a deep frown.

A week later, she had noticed a sizeable increase in her pay cheque, and when she'd objected, saying it was *too* sizeable for the extra she did, he'd growled so fiercely about her interrupting while he was busy mulling over a difficult case that she hadn't dared to mention the matter again.

Why was she willing to work long hours like this? Easy to answer. She had always done so, and longer hours than this, too—although in the past it had been dancing that had taken the time. Now her intensive course of physical therapy had ended and she needed only short bursts of careful daily exercise to maintain muscle strength. There was a hole in her life. . .and until she filled it with some new passion, new friends, a new outlook. . .working hard helped a lot.

It helped when Joel Blake asked her out to a film, too. It was all purely platonic—she had no doubts about that. On one occasion they had formed a group with Dr Ridgeway and his wife, Mrs Ridgeway's brother, and Maggie Winters. But the fact that he seemed to occasionally enjoy Susan's company as a friend had made it possible for her to forget his polite rejection of the kiss she had offered him so openly that night in May.

To make quite certain that he knew she only regarded him in the same platonic light, Susan had not told him that her relationship with Jeremy was over. In fact, she

had very deliberately let him think that the 'bad patch' he had referred to between them was well and truly healed.

'I read something about your Jeremy in the paper the other day,' Joel had said one morning.

'Did you?'

'Yes, about the film he'll be working on soon. It sounds interesting.'

'It will be,' Susan had said, with forced confidence.

'He'll be out in California for a while, I gather. Will you go?'

'I'm not sure,' she'd answered, her performance failing a little.

'It'll be after Holly comes back. Perhaps you can delay finding another job.'

'I . . . I don't want to do that,' she'd said. 'I'd like to start something straight away.'

'Would you?' He had seemed interested in this for a moment, then had shrugged dismissively. 'Oh, well, I guess in that case you'll join the jet-set and commute for weekends.'

'Probably.' Her brief answer had ended the discussion. . .

'I can come on Friday the seventeenth,' Mercedes Sanchez announced triumphantly at last.

'I'm afraid Dr Blake doesn't have office hours on Fridays,' Susan answered patiently. This tussle over an appointment happened every time the ballerina came to the office, it seemed. 'What about Tuesday the fourteenth?'

Miss Sanchez shrugged expressively, turning her mouth downwards, and looked at her diary again. 'Very well. At three,' she said, as if this was her final offer and Susan could take it or leave it. Susan took it, knowing it

would mean a re-scheduling of someone else's appointment, but hoping that they would be more flexible than the busy dancer.

Taking the file to put away after Mercedes had left the office, Susan saw that Dr Blake had left several sheets of paper lying on top instead of putting them back in the correct order. He didn't usually do this, and she guessed that Mercedes Sanchez had kept his attention too thoroughly focused on herself.

Since there was a momentary lull in their busy flow of patients, she took a minute to sit down and sort it all out. Somehow, it was the first time she had looked through the file, and there had never been any reason to discuss Mercedes Sanchez's orthopaedic problems with Dr Blake before.

At first, what Susan read as she tried to order the papers correctly was just another series of notes and reports, but gradually some words and phrases began to stand out with particular clarity—'cruciate ligament damage', 'meniscal tearing', 'Magnetic Resonance Imaging', 'arthroscopy of the right knee'. This was what Susan herself had suffered from, these were the tests and treatments Dr Blake had put her through, but it came home to her at once with a cold shock that there was one crucial difference—Mercedes Sanchez was still dancing.

It seemed like some kind of conspiracy or deception. Joel had made Susan believe that to keep dancing was foolish and out of the question. He had deliberately sabotaged her career, while encouraging Mercedes to go on with hers. . . . Not that Susan's thoughts came as clearly as this. They were not really thoughts at all, simply emotions that she could not rationalise and that had her trembling with anger and misery.

Not trying to calm herself and not caring that two patients had entered the waiting-room now, nor that another was ready to be examined in Room One, Susan fought her way along the corridor to Room Two, opening the door with barely a pause after her sharply tattooed knock.

'I'd like to see you after you've finished with Mr Eisenberg, please, Dr Blake.'

He looked up at her, startled for a moment by her suddenly icy manner, then his face fell into neutral lines and he was careful not to betray to the patient that anything was wrong. 'Of course, Susan.' he said. 'I'll only be a minute.'

Deliberately, he turned away from her and back to his manipulation of the older man's leg, and Susan let herself out again and closed the door. In Joel's office she paced restlessly, shaking with anger and still unable to think coherently. Just one thing filled her mind—Mercedes is dancing and I'm not, and she felt a longing in her whole body for the joy of movement that had taken up so much of her life.

Giving up dance had been like losing a beloved parent, sister or friend. It wasn't like losing interest in a casual hobby, and the idea that perhaps it hadn't been necessary after all. . .

'What is it, Susan? You're upset.' The door closed behind him with a click and they were alone,

'Mercedes Sanchez had what I had, the same problem in her knee, and she's still dancing. Why? If she can dance, if you could do something for her, why couldn't you do it for me? You told me I had to give up. You made me believe there was no other choice.'

Hearing her voice rise to hysteria, Susan damped her

teeth shut over the last words and drew a long, shuddering breath. She clenched her fingers around the fabric of the floral skirt she wore, not caring that it would look crushed there for the rest of the day.

'Susan. . .' He came towards her, his face very solemn, and set his hands gently on her shoulders, but she twisted away.

'Don't try and soothe me as if I were a child.'

'But you're behaving like a child,' he said, still gentle.

'I'm not.. .'

'Then listen to me. Mercedes Sanchez is a prima ballerina in the New York Metropolitan Ballet, She has made guest appearances with top ballet companies all over the world——'

'And I was just a fluffy little chorus dancer so it didn't matter,' she finished bitterly for him.

There was a silence, then, If you want to put it like that, yes. But——'

'What right did you have to make that decision for me, to decide that the dancing I did was unimportant? You didn't give me all the facts!'

'Susan, I *did* give you the facts.' He was getting angry now and it came as a relief. With the desk between them, he leaned forward, splaying his strong fingers on its polished wooden surface, and spoke with a forceful conviction that dropped his voice to a rough bass. 'I'll give you some more facts: Mercedes's cruciate ligament damage in the right knee was never as bad as yours, and her left one was virtually undamaged. She came to me in time to forestall all but the most minor meniscal tearing, and we operated last year. Since then, she's been under my constant care and she's worked exceptionally hard——'

I would have worked as hard!' Susan broke in.

'I know,' he said matter-of-fact. 'You would. You have all the necessary grit and determination. That's not in question.'

'Isn't it?'

'Susan, I told Mercedes what I told you—that she ran a heavy risk if she kept dancing and I wasn't going to pretend to her that that risk wasn't there. At one time I *did* think she should give up, but she convinced me otherwise.'

'You told me that same decision would be the most stupid mistake you'd ever come across in your entire career.'

'Did I?'

'You've forgotten, when it's stuck in my mind like. . . like—'

I didn't realise I'd put it so bluntly.' He gave a wry, twisted smile, but Susan was not ready for his humour.

'Well, you should be more careful about what you say.'

He went on as if she had not spoken. 'Mercedes pointed out that a ballerina's career on stage is usually short at the best of times. There are exceptions, of course, such as Margot Fonteyn, but most ballerinas have to start thinking when they turn thirty about a change in direction for the future, and Mercedes is thirty-three. She has it all planned out. She wants to dance for another four years if she can. If she can't, if she finds that the quality of her work is going, she'll stop sooner. All she wants is a few more years so that she can really consolidate her position at the top. By then, she hopes to be married and ready to start a family. And professionally she hopes she'll have enough of a name so that she can freelance as a choreographer

or dance director, or be involved in the artistic management of a top company.'

'How do you know that I didn't have plans? What gave you the right to play God in my life?'

'Please, Susan. . .you must see it. What realistic plans could you have had in dance at twenty-three, with no name, no track record, and worse injuries than Mercedes?'

'You didn't let me make that decision for myself,' she flung at him wildly, knowing it wasn't true, but needing the release of this emotion against all logic and sense.

'You *did* make it,' he answered bleakly. 'I've had enough of this.' He rose and brushed past her, his arm grazing against her own roughly.

'Joel. . .!'

'No, Susan. There's nothing more to say. I'll see the next patient, please. Room One, isn't it?'

She didn't reply, and he didn't wait.

As soon as he had gone she knew she had been foolish and hysterical, but, helplessly, she didn't know how it could have come out differently. She had needed it—both her own anger and his—and she couldn't afford to wonder, now, when it was too late, what he had thought of her performance. He had been both patronising and impatient, and was probably right to be. Underneath, though, did he have an inkling of why she had needed the scene? She didn't know.

Mastering herself, she took an empty coffee-cup from his desk and put it by the sink, then returned to the waiting-room. Jessie Duncan was at work in the office, as if she had already been there for some minutes. Glancing at her watch, Susan saw that it was ten past two. She knew that her cheeks were flushed and her

dark eyes glittering with spent anger, but if the older woman noticed anything unusual she kept it to herself.

'Holly Evans called a few minutes ago,' she said, after Susan had ushered the next patient into Room Two, ready for Joel as soon as he was finished in Room One.

'Oh, yes?'

'She wants to come in next week and talk to Dr Blake about her hours when she comes back to work.'

'That's right,' Susan nodded, feeling a little hollow suddenly. 'She's due to start again in three weeks, isn't she?'

It wasn't something she had been thinking about much lately, and it came as a shock to realise that her three months here were nearly over. She had made no plans for the future at all.

With both this and the angry tussle with Joel nagging at the back of her mind, Susan got through the afternoon, looking forward to its end. Jessie left, as did the last patient, and Susan expected to see Joel's capable form catapult briskly through the waiting-room on his way to rounds at Wakefield-Lincoln, but instead he caught her by surprise.

'Susan. . .'

She looked up from her paperwork and saw him leaning in his usual position in the doorway, as if he had been standing there watching her for several seconds.

'Yes?' She flushed a little at his dark gaze. It was the first time they had really made eye-contact since their scene earlier in the afternoon.

'I wondered if you were busy on Sunday. I thought you might like an outing to the Bronx Zoo and the Botanical Gardens. You probably need to get out of the city at this time of the year. It's so damned hot and humid.'

His tone was casual and matter-of-fact, but she eyed him warily. It seemed a strange invitation, coming after this afternoon's damaging friction between them. Wouldn't it be better if they left each other alone for a while?

'Why are you asking me?' She spoke her mind without thinking whether it was wise.

He shrugged. 'You look as if you need it. You're obviously under a bit of stress.'

'So this is therapy, is it?' She had intended the question as a light, flippant one, but to her surprise he took it seriously.

'Don't be silly!' The response was a brittle snap of words. 'Why would I bother with that?'

The evasive response aroused her suspicions more than a light agreement would have done. 'It *is* therapy!' she burst out accusingly.

'Therapy for both of us, in that case. Why are you turning everything into an opportunity for spitting at each other? You're not usually like that.'

'Do you know me so very well?' she responded in a low voice, weary of this new exchange between them.

'Perhaps I don't,' was his clipped answer. Then, 'So, you're not interested in Sunday?' She opened her mouth to say that no, she was not, when he spoke again. 'For goodness' sake, don't start playing games and refuse because we've both been on edge with each other today!'

'All right.. .' she began reluctantly, and he took it as a firm acceptance.

'We'll leave straight after my morning rounds, but we can work out the exact planning later in the week. . . So, Holly's coming in next Tuesday?'

The abrupt change of subject took Susan by surprise.

'Yes. Jessie didn't ask her exactly what she wanted to talk about.'

'Made any plans of your own yet?'

'I've had a couple of ideas,' she hedged, hoping he wouldn't mention Jeremy.

He didn't, muttering only a non-committal reply as he gathered his things. Then, 'I'm running late,' he said, and was gone.

An enormous black cat-like creature lay sleepily along the wide, smooth branch of a tropical tree. . . monkeys swung themselves through foliage with purposeful energy. . . primitive-looking crocodiles with long pointed snouts broke the water and then sank back into their pool again. . . This was the zoo, and it felt good to be here, out of the city, just as Joel Blake had said it would.

The day was hot and the sky had paled almost to whiteness from the humidity that hung in the air. They had taken the train, 'Since negotiating Manhattan traffic even on a weekend isn't my idea of a rest, and I don't want my car windows forcibly washed on five different Bronx street corners by gangs of boys,' Joel had said.

'Your windows washed?' Susan had queried, puzzled.

'Yes. It's a harmless enough scam, I suppose. If you're stuck at a traffic-light, they come up and do it before you've a chance to say no, then they want payment, of course, and with half a dozen of them hovering in the background. . . it's wiser not to refuse.'

'I can see why they call this city a jungle.'

'You'll see more of the jungle when we pass through on the train—and I don't mean the tropical bird-cages at the zoo.'

She found he was right. 'It's like London after the Blitz,' she said, as the train raced along.

'You were in London after the Blitz? You must be older than you look,' he quipped.

She laughed, then said, 'Haven't you heard of photographs and television documentaries? Why is it like this?'

There was street after street of derelict apartment buildings, many with greenery beginning to smooth and soften their jagged edges of brick now. In a city that elsewhere had such vibrancy, wealth and dynamism, it seemed incredible to see these lifeless streets.

'Tenants who got angry with their slum landlords and wrecked the buildings, landlords who were trying but couldn't make the places pay except by setting fire to them and collecting the insurance. . . It's hard to reclaim an area once this has happened to it, but the city is trying to find a way. Hopefully within the next few years something will be done.'

And just beyond all this was the oasis of the zoo and the botanical gardens. It was crowded today, with families and couples representing every part of New York's international population mix, but there was still room for moments alone—standing, in the shade of a wide old tree watching the bears beyond the wall and ditch that separated them from the public; sitting on a bench in one of the picnic areas, eating the lunch that Joel had brought—cheese and cold meats, containers of exotic salad, crusty bread and sparkling mineral water and fruit juice. . . it all tasted very good out here in the open air.

It was the longest time she had spent with Joel outside of office hours, and the closest she had come to getting out of the city all summer. Perhaps it was this that made

her feel so good. Dressed in a cerise cotton sundress, whose bold tint suited her tanned skin and dark hair, keeping her feet cool with open-toed tan sandals and shading her head with a wide-brimmed natural straw hat, she Could feel the heat as a relaxing thing that caressed her skin and opened her pores.

'Seen enough animals?' Joel said when the remnants of the meal had been packed away.

'Is it time to go already?' She bit her lip at the way it had come out, betraying too clearly, perhaps, how much she was enjoying the day. If he had had enough. . .

'No, I meant, did you want to see the Botanical Gardens as well? They'll be cooler. Less crowded, probably.'

'It sounds lovely.'

They left the zoo and crossed to the adjacent gardens, then strolled at a lazy pace along sanded or gravelled walkways, not worrying about the botanical names of the trees, shrubs and flowers, but content simply to enjoy their beauty. They were content with silence, too, or at least Joel seemed to be. He said nothing for quite a long time, and, since Susan didn't want to fill the gap with inane chatter simply for the sake of it, she remained silent too,

She began to wonder, though, why he had chosen her as a companion today, when there was Maggie Winters, and Mercedes Sanchez too. It was over two months since he had denied having a girlfriend, and things could have changed a lot in that time. Both women would fit the bill for Dr Joel Blake very well—Maggie, with her shared involvement in orthopaedic surgery, or Mercedes, at the top of her own career as Joel was at the top of his. It was awkward working for him. It meant that she didn't have the same chance or the same

right that a friend would have to know the truth about his personal life. For the moment, she didn't question just why it was that she wanted to know. And soon she *wouldn't* be working for him any more.

He spoke at last, and it seemed as if his thoughts must have been running on a parallel track to her own. This wasn't the first time that it had happened.

'I'm not sure that Holly wants to come back full-time after all,' he said, picking up the subject as if they had been talking about it only moments before. 'She's enjoying the baby too much, and I'm sure she's hoping to find a part-time alternative when we talk about it on Tuesday.'

'Would that be possible?' Susan said.

'Actually, it depends on you.'

'On me?'

I wanted to ask you. . . Dr Ridgeway uses his own scrub nurse for all his surgery. . .'

'Yes, I've met her. Barbara Levy. She's nice.'

' . . .and in his office practice she does a lot of what you've been doing—cast-cutting, bandages, talking through some of the exercises with patients, making sure they understand. If Holly was happy just with the office work—appointment scheduling and so forth, and I think she will be—would you like to play the same role with me? Barbara's role? You've worked in theatre before?'

'Yes, during my training.'

'Does it interest you?'

He stopped and turned to her. They were standing beneath a huge shady tree, with the Bronx River on their right. It was quiet at this point. No one else was in sight, and his action—stopping in mid-stride like that—

took on a strange significance. Susan's heart was thudding and she felt a weakness that for the moment she could not explain.

'Yes,' she managed on a thin note. 'I'd be very interested.'

'I thought you might be.' He frowned, as if this didn't altogether please him. 'It's a convenient way for you to stay on in America until you know more about your future plans.'

'You mean, you're thinking of it as a temporary thing until Holly is ready to come back full-time?'

'No, I don't mean that,' he answered edgily, tossing her an impatient glance. 'I meant it would be temporary from your point of view.'

He didn't go on, but she knew, Suddenly, what he was thinking. Jeremy Singleton. And, as a picture of the smoothly handsome composer rose before her mind's eye, she knew something else with a clarity that had her reeling.

I'm in love with him. The words echoed again and again in her head. Not with Jeremy, of course, but Joel. In love with Joel. And she had been in love with him for weeks. . . longer. . . without knowing it. Of course she wanted to be his scrub nurse! It would mean seeing him even more than she saw him already. It would mean working at his side with a closeness and communion that. . . that would be a very poor substitute for love.

He was watching her with what looked like a calm, half-puzzled patience. 'Thinking about it more carefully?' he said.

'Yes,' she answered absently, then looked up at him helplessly. 'You spring job offers on me at the oddest times!'

'Is this an odd time? I thought it was rather appropriate. Shall we sit down?' He gestured towards two smooth slabs of stone that formed part of the low wall on their left and she took up his suggestion, brushing her skirt down behind her and hoping it did not crease. The stone was cool in the shade, and on the water in front of them sun sparkled and dappled.

'Why did you ask me?' she said.

He shrugged, as he often seemed to do at her questions, and his answer was laconic. 'You're good. We work well together. I wanted to help you out.'

'You're always helping me out.'

'Only when it suits me,' he said.

It wasn't true. She remembered what she had said to him the other day—that his behaviour towards her was some kind of therapy—and knew that this was far closer to the mark. She remembered, as well, what he had said over two months ago about doing favours, and how he didn't like to be caught out at it, didn't like to be thanked.

He had been doing favours for her all along, she realised. Even those times when he had been scathing, cynical and angry. He had understood her then better than she understood herself, had seen that she was spoiling for a battle, a challenge, a way to fight against the disappearance of dance from her life, a way to fight for a new life that was equally satisfying.

Each time she had needed a fresh challenge, he had provided it—goading her about her dancing, offering her the job in his office, making it more demanding, and even little things like getting her to drive his car to the garage that time. He had distracted her, too, with dinner, films, and this outing today.

She remembered the insensitivity of Jeremy's suggestion that they go and see *Giselle*. Joel Blake could have free tickets to Mercedes Sanchez's performances any time he wanted to, and to the performances of the Pony Dancer Company, but he had instinctively known that Susan wouldn't want to go to a dance performance yet.

The only thing that didn't make sense to her was...why? He didn't do this for all his patients, clearly. She thought about Peter Steiger, a basketball team-mate of Ace Washington's. After over a year of battling with injuries, he had finally been forced to accept that his college basketball career was over and would never lead to a place in a professional team. Joel had been as supportive as a doctor could be, but only within the bounds of office hours. 1

I must seem like a particularly lame duck, she decided unhappily. He thinks I'm waiting for Jeremy to propose. He must feel sorry for me.

Normally the idea of anyone feeling sorry for her would have aroused her determination at once, but today, with the new knowledge of her love, anger and toughness were not attitudes she could summon at will.

Her thoughts were broken by his touch on her slim arm as he ran gentle fingers down from her bare shoulder to her wrist, then took her hand in his and pulled her to her feet.

'We'll talk about it during the week,' he said. For a moment she didn't even know what he meant, then she remembered—the scrub nurse job. 1

'All right,' she answered.

'Let's walk some more, shall we?'

Again, she could only nod, aware that his hand still held hers and almost frightened at how much power the contact had. When that contact was broken just seconds later, it came as a relief.

CHAPTER NINE

'THAT man's in trouble,' Joel said, dropping Susan's arm so that it felt jerked in its socket.

Ahead of them, she had dimly been aware, was a family group—husband and wife, and a girl and boy of about eight and ten. They had emerged from an exploration beneath the trees to the left of the wall on which Susan and Joel had been sitting, and the children had jumped from the wall to the ground—it was only a couple of feet—and run to catch a better view of the river. Their father had gone to follow them.

His wife had said, 'Careful of your knee, Neil,' but he'd ignored her and jumped as his children had done, then instantly writhed and gasped in pain, bending to the knee and holding it with panicky hisses of breath.

'It did go out! Oh, no!' The wife, a pretty but slightly careworn woman in her late thirties, jumped more carefully from the wall and ran up to him. 'Relax it. Relax, and it'll go back in.'

'I'm trying, I'm trying,' the man gasped, and, just as Joel reached him, he, let out a sigh of relief, trembled for a moment as he massaged the left knee, wiped beads of nervous sweat from his forehead and relaxed.

'What's wrong?' Joel asked quickly.

'It's all right, buddy, just my knee. It clicks out every couple of months like this. . .'

'More often than that, Neil,' his wife put in.

'But it's back in now.'

'Please don't worry, sir,' the woman said politely. 'Once it's gone back in, it's fine.'

Joel paused for a minute, glanced at Susan with a frown as if wanting her to make a decision for him, then said, 'Look, I'm an orthopaedic surgeon. Have you had this looked at?'

'Looked at?' The other man gave a derisive snort. 'It's been going on for twenty years. First happened in Vietnam. I got an early discharge because of it, but then what do they tell me? Exercise, and it'll go away. Well, it hasn't, and I've seen enough doctors and that's all they say. I've given up. Long ago.'

'May I feel it? And ask you a few questions?' Joel asked, still frowning.

Susan stood by, wondering if there was anything she could do. It seemed not. The two children had approached curiously now, and the wife gave Susan a smile as if to say, 'Bringing his work along with him again?' Susan smiled back, although the woman's sympathy for her was misplaced. She wasn't Joel's wife or girlfriend, as the woman obviously thought.

Joel was carefully manipulating the left knee. 'It's the patella that slips sideways, is it?'

'Yes, the kneecap. The patella, right. It goes clean off to the side. ...'

Joel nodded and asked a couple more questions, then pulled a neat white business card from his pocket. 'There's no need for this to go on happening,' he said. 'Those army doctors brushed you aside too quickly. Make an appointment to come and see me. We'll take some X-rays and see what we can do.'

'You mean, it can be fixed?'

'We can certainly try. At least we can stop it slipping to the side like that.'

'Sandra?' The man turned to his wife, seeking her advice with his eyes.

She nodded. 'It's worth it.'

'You wanted a second car.. .'

'It can wait,' she said firmly, then pushed him gently on the arm. 'This is more important.'

Joel had turned tactfully away, while Susan saw the children's eyes grow round and curious as their parents let a lot go by unsaid. As it was for many couples, their budget was clearly tight.

'OK.' Neil turned back to Dr Blake finally, and the agreement came out on a long breath.

'Think it over, anyway,' Joel said.

'No, I'll come. If you can really do something. I'll make an appointment on Monday.'

'Good. I don't think you'll regret it,' Joel answered.

The family went on its way, and Susan heard the little girl say, 'Mommy, is that man going to do something to make Daddy's knee better?'

'Yes, darling.. .'

 Then they were out of earshot.

'I hope I've done the right thing,' Joel said to Susan.

'Why the sudden doubt?'

'I've never drummed up customers in the park before.'

'They sounded very pleased and keen about it.'

'Yes, exactly. I'd like to know just how much the patella is slipping, and if the other knee has problems too. It could be a long haul for him, and it might have been his own impatience that has stopped him getting anywhere with past treatment. If he feels I'm not delivering the goods. . .'

'Afraid of a malpractice suit?' Susan teased.

'It's a problem these days,' he answered seriously.

'But, no. . . I'm more afraid of his bitterness and disappointment if there's no miracle.'

'Could there be a miracle?'

'A slow one, yes, but perhaps he doesn't recognise that kind. Anyway——' he changed his tone suddenly '——this is supposed to be a day off.'

His arm came around her shoulders without warning, squeezing her close to him so that she could feel his warmth against her through the thin cotton fabric of his short-sleeved muted plaid shirt. She expected only a quick squeeze, but the weight of him continued to rest on her and finally, tentatively, hating her own weakness, she slipped her own arm around his firm waist, her heart pounding.

If there had been other people here at this moment, it might not have happened, but there was no one, and when his pace slowed and stopped and he turned her fully into his arms she could not find the emotional strength for resistance...

This kiss was different from those other times. Then it had been the physical response in her that had left her so devastated, so tingling with sensuous life in a way that was outside her experience. Now it was her emotions that were in turmoil and, if anything, this made her physical response even stronger. The heat of the day only intensified the sensitivity of her skin, and in her light cotton dress, with only two silky wisps of underclothing beneath, she could feel the exact pressure of her body against his.

His hands made wide, circling caresses at her hips, twisting her clothing across her skin, and when she arched her back so that she could reach his lips more easily with her own she felt a puff of cooler air against the hints of mound and hollow that were her neat

breasts. With his virile patterning of black hair, Joel's beard grew out quickly, and she could feel the familiar roughness of his cheek and jaw prickling her in a way that gave a tangy contrast to the soft sweetness of their joined mouths. His shirt was unbuttoned at the top, showing dark curling hair, and Susan longed to explore the planes of his chest further, entangle her fingers in the hair and find the places where his brown skin was smooth.

Before she could stop herself a moan of longing broke from deep in her diaphragm, and it was echoed by a groan that was wrenched from him as if he were in pain. She heard a long, low rumble overhead that came ominously as a backdrop to the long moments they had stood together. As Joel pulled away, she realised it was thunder.

'Come on. It's going to rain,' he said. 'We'll head for the station on the far side of the gardens, but I doubt we'll make it.'

He looked up, narrowing his eyes, and Susan followed his gaze. The white sky of this morning was edged now by a long front of cloud that was almost a greenish black in the humid air. Although there was no wind yet at ground level where they stood, the rapid scudding of the storm-clouds told them that it was windy at high altitudes and the summer storm, almost tropical in nature, would be on them in no time.

He seized her hand, not warmly this time, but as if he thought she wouldn't run fast enough without his help. Overhead, the sky growled again and the light gradually turned ghostly and expectant around them. It was exhilarating to run. The breeze had reached them now, cool and refreshing, blowing away any lingering sensual awareness of their kiss, and growing stronger every

minute. Aware of how dangerous the kiss had been to her—more dangerous by far than this storm—Susan was thankful for the sudden change in atmosphere and gave herself with relief to the freedom of running.

They were still a long way from the exit to the gardens and the train station just beyond, when the first drops hit. They were huge ones, cold and refreshing, and escalated in seconds to a dense downpour that drenched Susan completely within the first half-minute. She had taken off her hat, and her hair streamed down her neck, while runnels of water flowed beneath the open neck of her dress and down between her breasts. The dress clung to her, as Joel's shirt and lightweight grey trousers clung to him, impeding movement for both of them. She was breathless now, and as they were so wet that it didn't matter they slowed to a walk, laughing at what had happened.

'Is it dangerous?' she asked Joel.

'No, from the gap between the lightning and thunder I'd say that that part of the storm hasn't reached us yet,' he answered. 'This is just rain.'

'It's glorious!' she exclaimed.

'Not worried about your dress?'

'No, I——' Then she broke off as she glanced down and saw how transparent it had become, revealing the two lacy triangles of her bra. The new chill of wetness had tightened and firmed her body, too, so that its shape was taut and clear. But his own chest showed clearly through his shirt, with its thatched patterning of hair, and she decided that she wasn't going to spoil this mood with embarrassment. She went on firmly, stretching her arms outwards in sensual abandon, 'No, the dress will be fine again when it's dry, and I'm not cold.'

Don't you think it's delightful to get caught in a storm like this?'

'Yes, I do,' he admitted, a lock of wet black hair falling on to his forehead. 'Is this the first time you've run like that since we did your knee?'

She nodded, smiling widely, and they didn't need further words. In fact, they were silent until seated in the train, the fabric of their clothing clinging damply to the vinyl seats, and even then his words were lazy and languid. 'Enjoyed the day?'

'Very much.'

He didn't respond to her open, shining-eyed smile, but frowned suddenly and turned away, spoiling the mood for her and making her wonder angrily and painfully what was wrong to make that expression—it was almost a scowl—cross his face out of the blue. She hugged her arms across her wet torso. Had her response to him been too strong? Had he begun to guess how she felt about him? It couldn't be that, surely, when he was still convinced that she was involved with Jeremy.

Jeremy. . .and now Joel. Two men who had kissed her and cared little for her. The exhilaration brought on by the storm ebbed swiftly and she was suddenly anxious for the day to end. Joel, shifting restlessly in his seat, looked as if he felt that way too. And yet they had to see each other during office hours on Tuesday. If she became his scrub nurse she would see him on Mondays as well, in surgery. Perhaps it wasn't wise to take the job. . .

But, weakly, Susan knew that, wise or not, she was going to do it. If she didn't, Joel Blake would disappear from her life altogether, and that would be far worse than enduring his indifference, or even his dislike.

'Come with me, Mr McMullen,' Susan said, leading the way down the corridor to Room Two and holding the new file and X-rays belonging to Neil McMullen, the Vietnam veteran they had encountered in the gardens three days before.

He had telephoned first thing on Monday morning, sounding eager about seeing Dr Blake professionally, and was anxious to be squeezed in as soon as possible. A cancellation had meant that a Wednesday morning slot was free, and Susan had marked him in for it. Now she listened to his impatient footsteps behind her—his short, stocky build gave him a heavy tread—and wondered what the result of Dr Blake's examination would be.

Putting the X-rays and file in the perspex holder on the door, Susan ushered Mr McMullen in and had him sit on the examination bench while she took blood-pressure and pulse and got a more detailed account of his general medical history. When she had finished, she knocked at the door of Room One, knowing that the patient in with Dr Blake at the moment would be needing a foot taping re-done once the surgeon had finished his examination.

'Ready for me?' she asked, putting her head around the door.

'Yes, just now,' Dr Blake said, standing up. 'Good. Run through the exercises with Mr Davis, here, would you, as well as taping those arches?'

'All right, and I've put Mr McMullen in Room Two.'

'Anything I should know about in his general history?'

'No, nothing that relates to the knees as far as I could tell.'

He nodded and left, and she turned to the keen jogger

who sat waiting. A recreational competitor in last year's New York Marathon, he had ignored dull, intermittent heel pain over the past few months until it became sharp and persistent, and X-rays had shown the growth of spike-like projections of new bone, called heel spurs, which were a result of the initial problem of inflammation and were now contributing to the pain.

Dr Blake hoped that the problem would eventually be relieved by a programme of rest, pain relief, and physical therapy, as well as exercises and the taping of the feet to maintain each arch. Surgery, however, might eventually be necessary in order to remove the heel spurs and release each plantar fascia, the thick fibrous material on the bottom of the foot that acted like a bowstring in maintaining the arch.

Susan, bending low over each foot as she worked, could sense the man's frustration, but there was little she could say. Some people's bodies were just not designed for the intensive training that marathon running required, although most other sports would present no problem, even if the tendency towards plantar fasciitis was a chronic one.

'There!' she said when she had finished, looking up at Jeff Davis. He was a man in his late forties, greying in hair and beard, with the spare, knotted frame of a man who had participated heavily in sports all his life. 'Now the exercises.'

She showed him carefully, taking off her own neat black shoe, and he frowned in concentration and nodded seriously at everything she said. Finally, she slipped out of the room for a moment and took a pamphlet from one of the piles on a shelf in Joel's office, while Mr Davis was putting on his expensive and carefully fitted running shoes.

'Here,' she said. 'This goes over the exercises I've just given you, and I've noted how many times a day they should be done, but do give Dr Blake a call if there's anything you don't understand, or if anything comes up. The physical therapists might want to go over these with you as well, and will probably want to give you some more exercises of their own.'

'Thanks,' the man said briefly, taking the pamphlet and glancing at it before folding it and putting it away.

'And I'll see you out the front to make your next appointment.'

'First, is there a bathroom?'

'Yes, just along the corridor on the left.'

She reached for his file and he slipped past her, then, without warning, the door of Room Two opened and Neil McMullen catapulted out, nearly colliding with Jeff Davis and then with Susan herself. His face was red with anger and he was shouting loudly enough to be heard by everyone in the waiting-room.

'Exercise?' he said, jeering. 'You're all the same! You said this would be different, and I was conned into thinking you'd really do something. What kind of a shyster are you?'

'Mr McMullen. . .' Joel began, following the angry man.

But Neil McMullen only swore violently and pushed at the surgeon's shoulder, forcing him quite roughly against the door-frame. There came the sound of flesh and bone against wood, and Susan winced as the angry man strode towards her. She had turned and was trying to get to the end of the corridor to close the door so that other patients would not hear so clearly if this scene turned really nasty, and didn't know exactly which part of Joel's body had received the blow.

She got to the door just ahead of the angry Vietnam veteran, closed it and leaned against it, facing him, her heart thudding. He barged towards her, then stopped, and she knew that he was reluctant to use force, as he had just done with Dr Blake, against a woman of her petite frame. It was what she had been hoping for, and she met his belligerent glare as calmly as she could.

'I don't think you fully understood what Dr Blake meant,' she said, with a note of firm but sympathetic confidence in her voice.

'It was clear enough, wasn't it?' he growled. 'More damned exercise, like every other crackpot army surgeon told me to do ten, fifteen years ago. "Get exercise."'

'Not *exercise*,' Susan corrected quietly. '*Exercises*, specific controlled ones, physical therapy, under professional supervision with proper equipment. It'll increase your muscle strength around the knee so that after surgery, if it's necessary, you'll recover the full use of the joint as quickly as possible.'

'Surgery? He didn't say that.'

'You didn't give him a chance,' Susan pointed out.

Over the angry man's shoulder, she could see that Dr Blake was there at the corner of the corridor, listening to all this. His face was neutral, and she could only hope that he approved of the way she was tackling it. Still, she had no choice but to go on, now that she had started, and felt a natural sympathy for the man in front of her in spite of the violence of his anger. Hadn't her own reaction to Dr Blake's diagnosis been anger several months ago?

She went on. 'Surgery isn't a miracle, though, so don't expect one. You have to do at least half the work yourself if the surgery's going to have any effect.'

'Half the work? How?' he growled suspiciously.

'Follow up the surgery with consistent physical therapy. Take the programme they give you seriously.'

'And what's the surgery about?'

'That's what Dr Blake needs to explain,' Susan said. 'I'm just a nurse, but I had knee surgery myself a few months ago. See. . .?' She lifted her slim-lined cream linen skirt to show the slight scarring that still remained on each side of her left knee. 'He has a model of the whole knee area in his office and he'll make it very clear to you. . .if you listen.'

She noticed that Joel had silently disappeared again, and guessed that he had gone to wait for Neil McMullen in his office, assuming—probably correctly—that the man would be annoyed or embarrassed to find that his scene with Susan had been witnessed.

'All right,' Neil said. 'I'll hear him out. But I'll make my own decision about whether he's putting one over me or not.'

'That's right.' Susan nodded. 'It should be your own decision. It *has* to be. But you owe it to yourself to make it an informed one.'

'OK, OK,' he muttered, and turned back in the direction of the surgeon's office.

Susan bit her lip. She had almost said too much, and could only hope that Joel would tackle the rest of this difficult appointment in the right way. Jeff Davis, emerging from the bathroom, said a wry, 'Coast clear now?' and Susan answered with a short, careful smile before opening the waiting-room door.

It was another fifteen minutes before Neil McMullen returned, and Susan guessed that he had given Joel a hard time, with a barrage of sceptical and demanding questions, but he came up to the window that separated

the waiting-room from the office and said, with only a trace of his former gruffness, 'I've got to make another appointment, then I have to go across to physical therapy. Where's that?'

When he had gone at last, Susan took the next patient in—they were running late now—and found Joel in his office, dictating some rather hesitant notes into his cassette-player as he stared up at the ceiling, leaning back in his tilting swivel chair.

'Need some coffee?' she said, and he clicked off the tape and resumed an upright position.

'Yes, please!'

'Your foreboding on Sunday was right——Joel! Your cheek! Your eye!'

'I know.' He smiled ruefully. 'It'll be black and blue tomorrow.'

'Talk about malpractice suits! You could have him up for assault.'

'I probably would—if I was in favour of all the litigation that flies around these days. But I'm not. Coffee will do.'

'You don't want me to get you some ice, or a wet cloth?'

'No, don't worry about it.' He frowned and flicked one shoulder dismissively, then went on, 'Mr McMullen should know as much about slipped patellas now as I do, after the explaining I did just then.'

'It worked, though.'

'I think it might have, but we won't know for months if he's really happy. Full recovery from that kind of surgery will be slow.'

'Coffee in here?'

'Yes, please. I'll have to grab a gulp in between each patient.' He looked at his watch and Susan left to

prepare his drink, thinking that she could do with one herself.

Painfully, she was aware of how much she had wanted to go to him when she saw his bruised and reddened face, and his quick rejection of her offered help had hurt her far too much. In two weeks Holly Evans would be back and Susan would be working more closely with Joel Blake than ever before. His forebodings might be centred on Neil McMullen at the moment. Her own were concerned purely with her new role as the surgeon's scrub nurse, and whether she could perform that role successfully for a man she loved so hopelessly.

CHAPTER TEN

'ALL right, that's it, thank you, everybody,' Joel Blake said on a long out-breath.

They were at the end of a long list that had gone over time, and the surgeon strode from the operating-room as if he urgently needed fresh air. The doctors assisting or observing the surgery left too, the patient was wheeled to Recovery, and Susan was left, along with the circulating nurse, to do some very necessary tidying before the final cleaning team came in.

She had been concerned, at first, about what sort of relationships she would develop with the staff who were employed by the hospital. As an adjunct to Joel Blake—his personal assistant in many ways—would she be resented? But she had found straight away that this was not the case, and now she had been here for four weeks.

When Joel had checked on each of this morning's patients—Neil McMullen was one of them—Susan would go to the office with him to make sure that everything was in order there, and then she would be finished for the day, while he would return to the hospital to make his rounds, seeing patients who had been operated on earlier, or who would be undergoing surgery this week.

'I'm pleased with how things went on Neil McMullen,' Joel said later, when they were seated in his car and making their way through the Manhattan traffic. Fortunately, Wakefield-Lincoln was much closer

to the office than Vernon University Hospital, where he was on call every Thursday night.

'Yes, it looked pretty smooth,' Susan agreed.

She had come to enjoy these drives with him. Cocooned in the bucket-seat of the expensive car, she had a chance to be alone with him, and she was painfully aware of how important this was, how much it meant to her.

What it meant to Joel, of course, was another matter. They usually talked about the morning's surgery, sometimes in quite a bit of detail as if he needed to talk to wind down from the stress of surgery, and the atmosphere of tight control that had to prevail in the operating-room—or OR as it was usually called here—most of the time.

'He was so keen to have that surgery,' Joel was saying now.

'He worked hard on the exercise programme beforehand, though, didn't he?'

'Yes, but I think that was in the same vein as a schoolboy concentrating fiercely on his homework for an hour so he'll be allowed to go out and play basketball. He was convinced from the start that surgery was the only answer, and he wanted to get to it as quickly as possible. He knew I wanted to see certain results with the exercises first, so he made sure I got those results as soon as he humanly could. And he was right, of course; surgery was necessary, but I like to be sure. He's a nice fellow——'

'When he's not giving you a black eye.'

'Exactly. But he's probably the kind of guy that tries to fix his car with a sledge-hammer.'

Susan laughed, then said, 'And the re-set on that

cycling accident? Daniel Gross. Were you pleased with that?'

'On the whole, yes. It was ridiculously bad luck for the poor kid, re-fracturing it like that, but the new set should be virtually as good as the old one.'

'As long as he doesn't break that femur again.'

'Nobody could be that unlucky.'

'Touch wood.'

The car turned smoothly into the underground car park, and in another few minutes they had reached the office. While Joel dictated some notes about the day's surgery, Susan heard the list of messages from the answering service that took all Dr Blake's calls when the office was unattended—neither Jessie nor Holly was here this Monday.

Most were unimportant today—a couple of patients wanted to be re-scheduled, a pharmaceutical representative wanted to see the doctor tomorrow about a new product she was promoting, and Dr Carter wanted to talk with Dr Blake some time soon about a three-day conference they would both be attending. Two more urgent calls had been passed on to Dr Ridgeway in the premises next door, and Mercedes Sanchez wanted to know if she could come in this afternoon. It was urgent, but she couldn't go to Dr Ridgeway—it had to be Joel and no one else.

Susan passed this message on straight away, although she took the word 'urgent' with a pinch of salt, knowing by this time that the dynamic ballerina was one patient whom the doctor never fobbed off with a few words on the phone or an appointment the next day.

This knowledge hurt, of course. With the love she felt for Joel, and had been feeling in full awareness for six weeks now, Susan couldn't stop herself from feeling a

painful, suspicious jealousy of Mercedes. And Maggie Winters, too, though she told herself again and again that it was ridiculous. He couldn't be in love with both of them. Red-headed, intelligent, practical Maggie, with her down-to-earth laugh and forceful opinions, was utterly unlike volatile, flamboyantly self-centred, intensely creative and exotically beautiful Mercedes.

Still, was it important to know which one he cared about? It had to be one of them. She thought of the tell-tale signs—those two torn theatre tickets falling out of his pocket, and how he had snatched them up again; the way his office door would close unexpectedly sometimes and she would hear him talking and laughing with someone on the other end of the line; the yawns he would hide behind a strong, sinewy hand as he explained, 'I was out late last night.'

There was also the fact that he hadn't asked Susan out since that drenching trip to the Bronx Zoo and Botanical Gardens, and he certainly hadn't repeated the kiss that had inflamed her so that she'd needed the soaking rain to quench her inner fires.

She went down the corridor to his office and found him packing up ready to leave.

'Mercedes called earlier,' she reported steadily, 'and would like to come in this afternoon, if possible. She said it was urgent.'

'Urgent?' He frowned at Susan as if she were the nuisance and not the South American ballerina. 'Did you call her back?'

'No, I thought you'd want to talk to her directly.'

He nodded, put down his bag and picked up the phone.

'Do you want coffee?' Susan asked.

'If I'm staying. I'll tell you in a minute.'

He waved her away, and she wondered if he would want her to stay. Not quite sure what to do, she returned to the front office and found some tiny, unimportant office tasks to use up the time—the stapler needed refilling, new typewriter ribbons needed to be ordered.

'I will have that coffee, thanks, Susan,' Joel called down the corridor a few minutes later, so she put it on and had just poured out a generous measure of the brew when the waiting-room door opened, and a muttered oath in Spanish told her that it was Mercedes.

Joel reached the waiting-room first, and was beside the angry and tearful dancer just as Susan arrived in the doorway. 'Mercedes, it can't be that bad!'

The dancer reached out to him with her expressive arms, making the gold bangles on her wrists clatter and jangle. In a dress of bold autumn tones, and a light silk shawl flung around her shoulders, she looked attractive in the way a wild creature would, wearing her beauty carelessly. Dressed still in the white uniform she had worn beneath blue surgical scrubs, Susan felt work-stained and unspeakably ordinary by contrast.

Joel had responded at once to the emotion in Mercedes's manner and was cradling her against his chest now as she talked.

'I am so angry, so miserable! This imbecile in the cafe trod straight on my foot in his boots. A huge man. Huge boots. And he laughs. I say I am a dancer. . . I want to sue him, but he went off and I couldn't catch him. He says one "Sorry," like this, with a shrug. . .' She gave an exaggerated but evocative performance of the gesture. 'Look at my foot, Joel! How can I dance tomorrow? What has he done to it? Look at it!'

The neat foot, bare now that Mercedes had kicked off a loose sandal, was badly bruised and swollen, and

Joel's exclamation as she looked down on it showed Susan that he took the injury as seriously now as Mercedes herself did.

'Yes, you were right to come in. When exactly did this happen?'

'Two hours ago.'

'Have you treated it at all?'

'I have lain down with ice on it ever since.'

'Good. We'll get an X-ray done straight away, and then go from there.' For a moment Susan thought he had forgotten about her, and she was wondering whether to go and switch off the coffee percolator when he turned to her. 'You might as well go home, Susan. It's already later than usual for you, and I don't want to keep you.'

'All right.' She nodded. His arm was still held closely around Mercedes, and the dancer rested her head against him as if it was only his concern that could keep her from despair. 'I hope it's nothing serious, Mercedes,' she made herself say. It was sincere, but the lump in her throat made words difficult.

Then, not waiting to make a thorough check of the place, she picked up the light jacket she needed against the slight chill of the September day, slung her bag on to her shoulder, and left Joel and Mercedes alone. . .

Jagged and slivered shards of glass covered the beige laminated bench, spilled into the sink, and had overflowed on to the floor. Susan stood looking at the mess helplessly. The shattered remains had once been the glass jug belonging to the coffee machine, and she could guess what had happened. She had left without switching the machine off last night, Joel and Mercedes had

not noticed, and the thing had boiled dry and then shattered.

The thermostatic control had been just a little too high. Holding a hand over the metal hot-plate where the jug had once stood, she could feel that it was still warm, and must have been turning itself on and off all night, keeping an imaginary pot of coffee hot. She switched it off and began clearing up the mess, picking up the biggest shards gingerly with her fingers, then finding a dustpan and broom to carefully sweep up the rest.

Joel arrived while she was still doing this. 'What happened?'

'I forgot to switch it off last night.'

'Hm.' It was all he said before disappearing into his office.

He wasn't in a good mood that day, and it was, as Tuesdays usually were, a busy one, with both Jessie and Holly in for most of the day. Catching him for a moment between their second and third patients of the morning, Susan managed to ask, 'Is Mercedes all right?'

He eyed her, taking in the autumn-weight burgundy wool suit she wore, before replying briefly, 'Yes, thank goodness. Nothing broken or torn, just heavy bruising.'

'So she'll be dancing again. ...?'

'By next week.'

'I'm glad. It would have been awful if——'

'Yes,' he interrupted. 'Just the kind of freak, trivial accident that dancers fear.'

He disappeared into Room Two, and Susan wondered what was the matter. He hadn't smiled once today, hadn't found time for even a moment of chit-chat as he usually did. Perhaps it was the coffee. She had had to buy some from the delicatessen on the corner' in plastic

cups, and it definitely wasn't as good. On her way home tonight she would have to buy a new jug or he wouldn't be bearable—if the coffee was the problem.

Perhaps it wasn't. Perhaps it was Mercedes. Not noticing that the coffee machine was still on was a mistake that was uncharacteristic of Joel Blake. Had he been involved in some kind of emotional scene with Mercedes when they had left the office? An argument? Or the opposite?

Putting a second cup of coffee on his desk later in the morning, she noticed a cheap but glossy magazine there. Called *All the Rage*, it contained 'inside' news of the world of stage and screen, and was a mixture of genuinely useful listings of up-and-coming projects, auditions and cast lists, interesting articles, and news on famous faces that ran the gamut between plain truth and scurrilous gossip.

Mercedes Sanchez must have left it there. Joel's interest in the stage, although strong and genuine, did not run to reading gossip magazines for theatre people. Susan herself didn't read it any more, either, although in her *Penny Parade* days—they were starting to seem quite distant, somehow—she had passed it around in the green room as had all the other dancers.

It was lying face-down at an untidy angle, some of its pages riffled and creased, so she simply moved it to a neat corner of the desk and left it there. Obviously Mercedes and Joel had left the office together with their minds on other things, and if he wanted to get the magazine back to its owner he could do so himself!

Disliking this spurt of malice she detected within herself, Susan tried to shake it off, and went on with her day. By the end of it she was well and truly ready to go

home, and Jessie and Holly had departed with ill-disguised relief as well. Not that the patients had given them any trouble. It was all Joel.

Many working relationships began with a honeymoon period—perhaps this was the end of hers, Susan thought, and wondered, as she had been wondering increasingly lately, whether she should return to England. Wasn't she being a fool staying on here in this exasperating city, with its vitality and excitement, its expense and traffic, its arts and restaurants, noise and frustration. . . and the love for Joel Blake that had grown too strongly inside her here?

Gropingly, she felt that she might not have fallen so hard for a man in another city. This was a place where needs thrust themselves upwards like the skyscrapers of mid-town and the financial district, where passions shouted themselves at you the way people shouted angrily in the streets when a van or a taxi almost ran them down. And it was a place where you needed someone just so that you didn't feel alone in the crowds.

In England, perhaps, within a week it would seem as if she had never known the orthopaedic surgeon. . .

'Did you switch off the coffee machine?' he asked her with heavy humour, coming into the front office where she sat at her desk at half-past four.

'We didn't have it on today,' she answered. 'There was no jug for the coffee to drip into, remember?'

'That's right. . .' He frowned absently, as if annoyed at his slip, then added irrelevantly, 'You haven't asked about Neil McMullen.'

'We've been so busy, I haven't had a chance,' she replied patiently. 'You saw him this morning?'

'Yes, he's doing fine,' was Joel's answer—so offhand

and brief that she wondered why he had bothered to bring up the subject.

'Anything special for tomorrow?' she began brightly after a pause—false brightness. He was simply standing there, and it was making her increasingly uncomfortable; hot, too, since the wool jacket, *of her neat fashionably cut suit* was a little too warm in this office.

'Susan, I need to talk to you!' The words exploded from him so suddenly that she started and pushed back in the swivel chair, making it squeak.

'Yes? Well, you *are* talking to me!'

It sounded like the prelude to something important, and her response was mere bravado. Suddenly, with her stomach caving in, she wondered if he was unhappy with her new role as his scrub nurse. She had been doing it for four weeks now. A trial period. Perhaps he was about to ask her to leave.

She had been thinking about it herself—those thoughts about England and New York—but she knew now that she had only been playing with such an idea. Even at his moodiest, she still wanted to be with him. This realisation had taken only a moment, then, 'Did you see this?' Joel demanded out of the blue, thrusting Mercedes's stage and screen magazine towards her. It had been rolled in his hand all along but Susan hadn't noticed.

'Yes. I mean, I just tidied it to the corner of your desk. It belongs to Mercedes, doesn't it? Do you want me to get it back to her?'

'You didn't read it?'

'No.'

'Because I want to know what this means, Susan.'

'Means?' She could only echo the word blankly as she

took the magazine and looked at the page five headline article he was pointing to.

Then she flushed darkly as she saw the photograph above it. Jeremy Singleton and Briony Cosgrove. Quickly she skimmed the two columns of print. It was an interview with the pair, in which they both enthused about the film they would start working on next week in California. Both had left *Penny Parade*. Briony had been given the starring role, Jeremy was to do the music. . . There was no mention that Alec Savill had once been contracted as joint composer and lyricist. Somehow he had dropped out—or had he been squeezed out, by Jeremy?

The article went on, however, to talk about Briony's marriage to the creator of *Penny Parade*. 'Alec and I realised mutually that our marriage had died,' the actress and singer was quoted as saying. 'It died a long time ago, and when Jeremy and I fell in love just after we came to New York from the London season, it seemed the most right and natural thing in the world. Jeremy and Alec are good friends, and we have his complete blessing for our future wedding plans.'

Tightening her hands so that they would not shake and make the pages of the magazine rustle in a tell-tale way, Susan passed *All the Rage* back to Joel. He took it, closed it, and tossed it in the bin without a second glance.

'You told me you were involved with Jeremy Singleton,' he said, too quietly.

'Don't ask me about this, Joel,' Susan said, almost pleadingly, then her voice firmed and she got to her feet, picking up her bag and straightening her slim burgundy skirt. 'It's got nothing to do with the office, with you or me and the way we work together, so don't worry about

it. I want to buy a new coffee jug on the way home, so I'd better——'

She broke off as he grasped her arm with a demanding grip. 'Come on. I've got rounds. Come with me, and then——'

'But I never come on rounds!'

'I don't care. Say you're a doctor. A med student. Say anything.'

'But——'

'What, have you got a date? Something else on?'

'No... '

'Then come with me. I need to talk to you properly about this and I'm damned if I'm going to do it in five minutes with my hospital patients hanging over my head.'

'Joel. . .'

'Please, Susan!'

He almost hustled her out of the office and the expression sculpted on to his craggy face was so forbidding and distant that she didn't dare to protest any further, nor to break the silence that emanated from him like cold air from a fridge. They had stopped in the hospital car park before he spoke again.

'Here, take this.' He reached to the back seat with his long arm and picked up a spare white coat that sat there. He was wearing his own already. 'I don't care if it doesn't fit, and I don't care who they think you are. Just tag along behind me.'

They were at the hospital for two hours, and in that time there was no personal exchange between them at all. Most of the patients recognised Susan from office visits, of course, and chatted to her for a minute or two when Dr Blake was talking to the small entourage of junior doctors and ward nurses who had gathered around him.

Neil McMullen seemed particularly cheerful, and very optimistic about the future of his knee, interrupting Joel's comments to his fellow professionals several times to ask about the meaning of a particularly difficult expression, and giving detailed and earnest responses to the instructions and questions that Joel addressed specifically to him.

Torn medial collateral ligament. . .fractured T-twelve vertebra. . .broken acetabulum. . . Eventually it was over and the group of medical professionals dispersed. One junior resident gave an uncertain smile at Susan, and then she and Dr Blake were walking out of the hospital together. His stride was so rapid and impatient that she practically had to skip to keep up.

'Isn't the car park...?' Her question was confused. They had left by the main entrance, while his sleek car was in the doctors' car park at the side of the building.

'We'll get the car later. I can't face driving. Let's take a taxi.'

'Where to?'

'Anywhere. A cafe. Something to eat. I don't care.'

They reached the street. He raised his hand imperatively and a yellow vehicle swerved across one and a half lanes of traffic and screeched to a stop.

'Downtown,' Joel said to the driver. 'Lexington Avenue.'

And then five minutes later, 'This'll do.'

The taxi stopped on a corner and they got out, then Joel pulled at the white coat Susan was still wearing, drawing it off her shoulders and crumpling it into an untidy bundle along with his own. They entered a restaurant-bar, were shown a table, and sat down.

'Now. . .' he said. Susan met his searching gaze warily

with her own dark eyes. 'Are you in love with Jeremy Singleton or not?'

There didn't seem any point in lying or prevaricating now, face to face like this, when he had dragged her halfway across Manhattan and around a large hospital for two hours in order to have the opportunity to ask the question.

'No, I'm not,' she answered simply.

'But you were once?'

'I thought I was, but I wasn't.'

'Never?'

'I found out he was using me as a blind for his relationship with Briony,' Susan said. 'It hurt, but I realised very soon that it was the deception that hurt, not losing Jeremy.'

'When did this happen?'

'About three months ago; a little more.'

'You didn't tell me. Why not?'

'Oh, Joel, I——' she began helplessly, then her words were drowned in his kiss. A waiter, skimming towards them, skimmed discreetly away again.

The kiss went on for a long time, and Susan lost herself in it without really caring what it was about. She had hungered for his touch for weeks now, and the fulfilment of it was even better than she had imagined. His hand reached behind her head to pull her a little closer across the small table, and his fingers threaded through the thick bob of her hair, sending shivers down her spine and along her shoulderblades.

His craggy nose bumped hers gently, and his breath whispered against her mouth each time their lips parted for a moment and then pressed together again. With eyes closed, Susan neither knew nor cared if anyone was watching.

Finally she broke away, and gazed at him with a helpless frown. 'What is this about, Joel?'

'Don't you realise how much I've been wanting you all these months?' he asked.

'Wanting me?'

'Loving you. The only thing that stopped me was your wretched relationship with wretched Jeremy, and then last night—Mercedes left that stupid rag behind and I was just flipping through it, thinking about you—I found out that he was planning a wedding with someone else. I was so angry——'

'Angry? With me?'

'Yes! And with myself. I didn't know what was going on. I battled with it all night—that's why I left the damned coffee on—and all through the day, then I realised the only thing to do was to ask you. Did you *invent* Jeremy to stop me from getting too close?'

'I didn't know you wanted to get close.'

'Didn't that time in the gardens, that time in the office, that time outside your door, rather give it away?'

'Not that you loved me. Only that you kissed me and left me dangling, which is just what Jeremy did. I knew he was dangling me, but I didn't know why, and I didn't know what to do about it. As for you and your reasons. . .'

'Did he kiss you like this?' His lips touched hers again, drawing the sweetness from her mouth with soft, darting caresses.

'No, not nearly as well,' she whispered against his mouth. 'In fact, I can't remember his kisses at all.'

'Good. . . Do me a favour?'

'Anything,' she promised rashly at once.

'Don't invite him to our wedding.'

'Our wedding?' She looked at him in silence, and for several minutes neither of them needed to speak.

'Darling,' he said finally, 'why *didn't* you tell me about Jeremy?'

'I thought if I did, you'd guess how I felt about you.'

'I *did* guess, sometimes, but I thought it was wishful thinking. Would it have been so bad if I had guessed?'

'Yes, because I thought **you were in love** with Mercedes.. .or Maggie.'

'Mercedes or Maggie. Hedging your bets?'

'I didn't know.' She spread her hands helplessly.

'Silly thing.' He touched her gently under the chin, then ran a softly cupped palm along her jaw. 'Mercedes is someone I want to work hard for as an orthopaedist, and of course I want to see her perform. I knew you weren't ready to see any dance yet——'

'Jeremy never understood that.'

'—so I didn't ask you to come. I took Maggie, and Maggie's a friend. Her husband——'

'She's married?'

'She was. He was a good friend of mine, and they had only been married three years when he died. A car accident. Maggie and I had dated for a month or so in college, so we'd been through that, we knew we could never get romantically involved. Since Ron's death—which we don't talk about much—she's needed me as a friend, and I've been happy to be one. I'll go on being one.'

'Of course.' Susan nodded, thinking how foolishly she had added up non-existent evidence about the two women.

'You, on the other hand. . .' Joel said '. . .started to get under my skin as soon as you came to me as a patient, with your pain about dancing, your defiance, your determination, the way you seemed to have no one to help you with it. I didn't know if getting you to work

for me was the right move. It seemed a little underhand, almost unethical, somehow, and that held me back, too. But you intrigued me. I didn't like the idea of treating you on and off for a few months and then losing track of you.'

'So you gave me a more intense form of therapy as your nurse-receptionist.'

'I tried to throw a few challenges your way, yes, since you seem to thrive on them.'

'I suppose I do,' she acknowledged. 'I've always had to.'

'You're small and brave. . .and wonderful,' he whispered, and their lips met again.

Outside the September evening was closing in, and all over the city apartment windows were lighting up with a yellow glow. Billions of dollars had no doubt changed hands on Wall Street that day, decisions had been made in fashion and advertising that would influence ordinary life for months to come, perhaps a new deal on a big musical had been signed, or a new bestseller launched. Did any of it matter? Not to Susan and Joel.

'And are you sure you can stand the biggest challenge of all?' he asked gently, as their lips parted again. 'Being my wife?'

'I think I'm ready for it,' she whispered, and—perhaps in order to hear her better—he bent forward again so that there was nothing they could do but kiss.

The waiter came and went again with an experienced shrug. The place wasn't crowded yet, but he had another table to attend to. These two looked like a nice pair. There was no need to hurry them. He assumed they would be ready to order eventually.