

Chapter One

"It's college summer stock," Peter Thorton explained, stretching out his legs, leaning back in his chair and crossing his hands over his stomach as he addressed his now famous, legally-separated, but-not-yet-divorced wife. "The program is part workshop and part accredited course, offering students practical experience in putting on a major musical."

"Sounds ... delightful, but why me?" Katherine Thorton asked, looking cool and untouchable in beige linen pants, white silk shirt, and a classy navy blazer. A look he intended to ruffle a little today. Although her current sense of style showed significant improvement over the bulky sweater she wore the day her college roommate introduced them.

"I'm hardly the 'teacher-type.'" She continued with a perplexed frown. "What value can I bring to your cozy little mix?"

Well, you won't be working with the crew, that's for sure. Assembling flats and sets had never been Kate's strong suit.

"By doing what you do best," he answered, maintaining a cordial smile. He preferred blunt and direct over sociable, but for today, at least, he'd strive to be--polite. "Sing, dance, act.... I want you to play the female lead, so you can teach the students by example, and share any tips you think would benefit them. Be your delightful, usual self."

Her eyebrows arched delicately. "So, who do you envision playing the male lead in this 'show'?" she asked, derision plain in the tone of her voice.

When he merely smiled, she shook her head and glared at her agent seated safely behind his desk. *Wise man.* "How could you, Don? You know how I feel about playing opposite *him*. Why would you even suggest such a thing?"

Don leaned forward. "Peter asked for you, Kate, and he's willing to pay whatever it takes to get you."

Kate settled in her chair and glowered at her agent for a moment before turning to Peter with a smile as false as the five-carat bit of sparkle she sported on her left hand. *Just what did that gaudy bauble represent?* He wondered, not at all pleased by the implication.

"So, which musical are you doing with the kiddies?" she asked, examining her hundred-dollar manicure and sounding thoroughly bored; a notion Peter found unacceptable. Granted, their marriage had its share of difficulties, but boredom had never made the list. So, he decided to improve his wife's blasé attitude by leaning in closer to her.

"*Kiss me, Kate,*" he murmured in clear invitation. Eyes wide, she inched back and wet her lips. Pleased by her reaction, he retreated and smiled. His leading lady wasn't as unaffected by his presence as she wanted him to think. "Though a little long in the tooth," he added, "the musical has some fun numbers as well as larger-than-life characters. And, you would make a perfect Lilli Vanessi."

Kate took a deep breath and shook her head as if to clear it, causing her chestnut curls to shimmer in the office light. When she glanced over and noticed his grin, she rolled her eyes. Yes, he was teasing her, but he'd meant it as well. Lilli was very much the prima donna, and from what he'd gathered, his darling Kate was toeing the line between professional actress and pain-in-the-ass diva."

She leaned forward again to speak with her agent, so Peter shifted his chair back a few feet to give them some privacy. A gentleman would offer to leave the room, but he wasn't anywhere near that noble. Besides, he needed to keep an eye on his wife. When cornered, little Katie tended to flee, and he refused to let her get away a second time.

Her doubts about acting with him came through loud and clear. He even considered himself somewhat flattered, until her accusations bordered on the ludicrous. Finally, when she argued he was nothing more than a rude, dominating bully, Peter cleared his throat.

She turned to glare at him. "You could play the gentleman for once, and give us a few moments alone, you know?"

Folding his arms over his chest, he shrugged. "Perhaps, but since you accused me of being a boorish, petulant, tyrant, I didn't want to act against type."

"You are a tyrant. But you're petty and controlling, not petulant," she corrected.

His right eyebrow rose slightly. "While you, my dear, are close-minded, shrewish and ... *petulant*. Traits you should recall I neither appreciate nor approve."

She scowled. "What makes you think I need or want your approval? I--"

Leaning closer, he murmured, "You're pressing your luck, Katherine. I'm beginning to think you're in need of a few more acting lessons from me. You appear to have forgotten what I will and won't tolerate."

Her spine straight, she crossed her arms over her chest and glared at him. "Don't even go there, Peter. Those days are long passed." At his raised eyebrow, she added, "You may talk big, but your bullying lacks substance. See what I mean?" she snapped at her agent while jabbing a finger in Peter's direction. "He is impossible to work with."

"Now, Kate," Don said, keeping his voice low and soothing.

Yeah, his little termagant fairly bristled with indignation now, but she was no longer bored. The rumors Peter overheard about Kate's thorny disposition appeared to be true. However, as peeved as she was, her open challenge still surprised him. She'd never been a coward, but she tended to avoid confronting him in public. Especially *after* he'd given her a warning.

Only half listening to Kate's continued harangue, Peter came to realize she'd challenged him because she hadn't believed he'd follow through. Undoubtedly, that was his fault. Ever since they'd lost their second baby, three years after the first, he'd pretty much let her do as she pleased. She'd been devastated, and he'd been so guilt-ridden over nearly losing her, he'd handled her like a delicate porcelain doll. Except, it appeared his Katie didn't want light and gentle. She wanted strong and firm. Well, he was prepared to give her everything she wanted, and needed--right then if necessary.

Peter was still considering how he should handle his nettlesome spouse when her agent asked him a question. Unfortunately, he'd stopped listening.

"Sorry. I was working through an unexpected problem, and my attention wandered."

"Kate wondered if you'd be willing to have someone, other than yourself, perform the male lead."

Peter regarded her in surprise. "Really?" he asked, recalling how she'd once declined to

take part in a class because he'd refused to play opposite her during a memory exercise.

When she met his gaze with one raised eyebrow, he shook his head. *Not a chance, darling. This is a package deal.* Then he recalled hearing Kate had started dating again. Rumors were this gent harked from the halls of justice rather than the boards of Broadway, which made Peter wonder if that emerald-cut monstrosity she sported might be a token of the fellow's admiration, or something more. Like an engagement ring.

"No," he answered finally, refusing to explain further.

Kate regarded him with an even stare. "Don't you think you're being a bit inflexible?"

"If you think my behavior is inflexible," he murmured, leaning in closer to her. "Then you, my darling, are playing the brat."

Her entire body bristled with the accusation. "I am not a brat," she insisted. "I just don't want to play opposite you again. From what I've heard, your temper has grown worse, not better, over the years, and if you're trying to direct as well as act.... Well, experience has taught me your fuse gets shorter and shorter as the pressure increases. I'd simply like to lengthen the cord to keep things from blowing up. You need to direct, so why not let someone else play the lead, rather than *over exert* yourself?"

"What? And let you stomp your sharp little heels all over a student? I think not, darling. I am here because you, my lovely lady, are a draw. Audiences adore you. But then, they don't know you as intimately as I do, so they are taken in by your sweetness and light act. The deal remains as is. You either agree to play opposite me while I'm directing, or...."

"Or?" she prompted, regarding him warily.

"Or, I will have to find an actress who is less contentious and more eager to work with me."

Kate stiffened slightly, then smiled. "I'm sure that won't be at all difficult for you--*darling.*"

He grinned at her emphasis on the last word. Though she said it with a smile gracing her lips, he suspected she was silently substituting "shithead." Suddenly, he looked forward to the challenge this prickly Kate represented. Another reason he wanted to do this play with her was because he'd missed her teasing and warm companionship. Despite her brittleness toward him now, he knew how to soften her. The sex hadn't been bad either, and he wanted her back.

They'd left things undone. She believed he'd been unfaithful, which he hadn't, but she'd never bothered to ask. She'd just assumed. At the time he'd been so hurt by her unspoken condemnation, he didn't have the presence of mind to examine the reasons behind her cold mandate for a divorce. And, when he finally thought about it, he realized she'd never questioned why he was kissing another woman, because in her mind she already knew the answer.

So, why had she concluded he'd stopped loving her? What had changed? And, at that moment, he understood. He had. She'd wanted him to reassure her of his love the way he'd demonstrated the night she'd shown up uninvited at his apartment. Or the night he informed her they were getting married. Instead, he'd handled her like a fragile crystal vase that might shatter if he so much as frowned. He'd been wrong not to challenge her at the time, but he couldn't turn back the clock. All he could do was move forward by getting her to accept his proposition. Once he got her back, he'd begin testing his hypotheses. Still, if his obstinate wife required proof of his intentions today, he wouldn't hesitate to oblige her.

"No," he agreed, "it shouldn't be at all difficult for me to find another beautiful actress to play the role." He smiled when her nostrils flared in angry response. "However," he said softly, his gaze intent on her face, "that is not what I want. If you refuse my offer, I shall be forced to

examine those options, but I would much rather work with you. I thought we made an excellent team."

The charming blush he loved causing, once again bloomed across her cheeks. But the slight lift of her chin accentuated how much thinner and sharper her features were from six months ago. And, though her make-up was artfully applied, he could see the faint outline of dark circles forming under her eyes. She wasn't taking proper care of herself, and her new boyfriend wasn't observant enough to insist upon it--or didn't care enough to bring Kate to heel. Another mistake Peter intended to rectify today.

He knew all too well how to get his Katie to eat and rest when she was being stubborn, and he would do whatever was necessary to return her to top form. Even if it meant his darling brat of a wife went around with a sore bottom for a few days. But first, he needed her to agree to do the show.

"He is offering excellent terms, Kate, and it's only for three months. Right now, I have nothing else to give you. So, as your agent, I advise you to seriously consider his proposal."

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Narrowing her eyes, Kate crossed her arms and sat back. Peter grinned at her like the cat that had devoured the canary and lapped up a saucer of cream as a chaser. She didn't trust that look. More to the point, though, she didn't trust herself--not when she was with him. She'd never forgiven him for cheating on her, but she'd never stopped loving him, either. However, he loved another woman, so why was he coming to her with an offer?

He wanted something. Something he wasn't ready to reveal, yet. And, he'd changed. He seemed more commanding and insistent, like he'd been in the early days of their relationship.

Back then, he hadn't let her get away with much. He insisted she do things the way he wanted. If she dared argue the point, she'd find herself panties down, draped over his knees, regretting her obstinacy.

She hadn't forgotten the burn of his iron palm when it descended with displeasure. But what she remembered most about those days was the way he'd kissed and hugged her once she'd promised to do what he wanted. And, more often than not, what he wanted would only help her become a better person or actress.

During those moments when she curled up on his lap seeking the reassurance he all too willingly gave, he surrounded her with security, love and protection. She missed those days, but they bore little similarity to his attitude toward the end of their marriage.

"Where is this summer stock theater anyway?" she asked, neither caring about the location, nor ready to commit to the venture.

"Upper New York State. In the Adirondacks."

"So, what else, if anything, is around there?"

"Nothing much. The college provides the primary source of entertainment for the locals. This program is meant to give students a realistic appreciation for working in a regional theater, which I am confident your knowledge and experience will prove of immense benefit."

"Flatterer," she murmured under her breath. "If I agree to this, I would need you to agree to certain stipulations as well."

"And they would be?"

"One: I get my own room."

"Not a problem," he conceded with a nod for Don to add her request. "What else?"

"Two: I may want to invite a guest to stay with me for a time. If I choose to do so, I will need at least two beds."

His eyebrow arched slightly, but he gave another nod. "Easily seen to. What else?"

Surprised by his swift agreement, she added the one stipulation she suspected he would shoot down without blinking first. "Three: you respect any boundaries I establish."

"How so?"

"If I say there is to be no touching between us, you have to honor my request."

"Darling. This is *Kiss Me Kate*. Are you familiar at all with the show?"

"I've heard of it. I've never seen the musical, but I believe it was originally produced in the 50s."

"Correct. It is also about a divorced couple who are actors putting on *The Taming of the Shrew*. You have at least seen *that* play, I presume?"

"Yes," she answered, giving him and his superior attitude a sharp nod. "In addition to the Taylor-Burton film."

"Good. So, you should also realize there will be lots of 'touching' between us whether you want it or not. Furthermore, I will not allow you to put up artificial barriers in order to keep me at bay. We may no longer live under the same roof, but we do have a past, and I intend to draw upon those memories from time to time. However, if giving my word will ease your mind, I vow not to violate the sanctity of your bed unless you invite me to do so. But other than that--I make no promises about keeping my hands to myself."

Kate frowned. Nothing he said offered her mind ease. Worried about what he didn't say, she straightened her shoulders and met his calculating gaze. "What if I disagree?"

His smile turned wicked. "You are always welcome to disagree with anything I say or do, although I warn you now there will be consequences for such action, and I assume you recall which form they'll take?"

Sitting back, Kate crossed her arms over her chest, creating a non-verbal barrier. "Those days have long passed, Peter. We're both too older and wiser now to play silly games of dominance and submission. Wouldn't you agree?"

One eyebrow arched. "No, I don't. Despite what your sharp words intimate, they weren't games, Kate. Not ever. You may not believe me now, but I *will* put you over my knee if you continue to act the spoiled dilettante."

Kate's entire body went on instant alert. "Try it and I'll have you arrested," she warned, inching her chair out of his reach.

"I doubt it, but whether you will or won't makes little difference, since your threats can't stop me from doing what I feel needs to be done."

"Go to hell."

Though she spoke the words softly, his eyebrows snapped together as if she'd shouted them. With a subtle shift in his position, he leaned forward and scowled. A reminder. Peter had a rule against swearing.

Kate's mouth grew dry with uncertainty as an apology hovered on the tip of her tongue. Then, with a silent curse at herself for playing into his hand, she surged to her feet and glared at her agent. "I won't--"

She didn't get one word further before Peter grabbed her arm and yanked her face down over his knees.

"No!" she cried out, beating, pushing and kicking as hard as she could in an effort to get free. "Let me go, you oaf," she screamed. "You have no right to--"

His palm descended, cutting off her complaint. Since the swat had been applied over several layers of clothing it hadn't hurt, but she still shrieked to let everyone know how

strenuously she objected to the mishandling. "Don, help me. Call the police!"

"Quiet, Kate," Peter warned, his tone demanding her obedience, however, she wasn't about to give in so easily. Shoving her fingers under his thigh, she dug in with her nails. He let out a sharp exclamation, then giving her a quick shift, trapped both her wrists in one hand. From experience, Kate knew Peter was about to get serious. He intended to spank her in front of her agent of all people, and she thought he'd been bluffing.

"Behave," he commanded, delivering a second swat firmer than the first when she continued to struggle. Fighting him was a losing battle. It only made him more determined to prove his point. With both hands captured, she squeezed her eyes shut to check the tears of impotent rage flowing down her cheeks, clamped her lips together and stilled.

"Don, would you mind giving us a few minutes? I have a couple of things I'd like to say to my leading lady in private."

"I didn't agree--" she protested, cutting off her own words when his fingers tightened in preparation for another swat.

"Silence." His third strike was a bit firmer yet, but all three had been mere warnings compared to what Peter could and would dispense if he decided she wasn't heeding him.

Despite her desire to lay into him, Kate forced herself to go limp and lowered her head. Submitting galled her, but the consequences if she didn't would hurt a lot more than her wounded pride pained her at the moment.

"Kate?" Don questioned uncertainly.

"She's fine," Peter assured. "I won't harm her; I only want her to listen."

Kate opened her mouth to retort that her ears were a fair distance from her butt, but remained silent when Don shifted his chair back. The coward was deserting her to her beast of an ex-husband.

"Ah, sure. I'll go get these changes added. Um, call me when you're both ready to discuss things further, okay?"

"Of course," Peter replied civilly, as though he conducted a polite business meeting rather than a discipline session with his former wife. When Peter eased his grip on her wrists, Kate suspected the reprieve was temporary. So, at the sound of the door opening and closing, she tightened her fists in preparation for what would happen next.

"Unh uh," he murmured in warning. "Just relax, Kate, so I won't feel compelled to point out how you are currently positioned for a purpose I have yet to properly fulfill."

She arched back to glare at him. "Lay off the caveman tactics and let me up."

His gaze resolute, she grimaced at the sight of his palm rising a fourth time. Ruing her inability to keep her mouth shut, she tensed as this swat fell with a force that had her kicking out in response. "Oww. You bastard. Stop that."

"Not until you learn to keep a civil tongue in your head, young lady," he warned giving her two more swats that were even harder.

"Oww! I'm sorry."

"Not yet, you're not, but you will be if you don't start behaving. The next time you swear, both your pants and panties are coming down. Understand?"

Before she could reply, another sharp, stinging sensation caused Kate to yelp out in pain. Lesson learned, she gritted her teeth to keep from making a third scathing comment and panted until the pain subsided.

"Better. Now, I told you to be silent, and I meant it. All you have to do is lie still for a moment and listen while I tell you how things are going to change between us."

"My arms hurt," she complained, furious she couldn't suppress the tears of frustration and defeat spilling from her eyes.

"Then stop struggling," he scolded, his words emerging like a gentle caress as he released her wrists and lightly rubbed her arms to return the circulation. "You only tense up when you fight me, and you won't win, you know?"

Kate refused to concede, but she wasn't foolish enough to rise simply because he'd loosened his hold. Though she did pull her hands forward once he'd finished his massage.

"I asked you a question, so I expect an answer, Kate," he insisted, his voice firm with warning as he stroked her still-clothed backside. In the past, he'd always delivered his punishments on the bare, but her agent's office didn't provide much privacy. All the same, he'd warned her, which meant he would lower her pants in a nanosecond if he deemed it necessary.

Despite his gentle stroking, she could tell by his tone of voice he wasn't going to let her up, yet. So, she'd say whatever she must to get him to release her, then she'd have his ass thrown in jail for abusing her.

"Yes, I know I can't win," she answered finally. "You are much stronger than I, so in a physical contest I am no match against your superior force and will."

He sighed, then firming his hold; he brought his hand down again for the seventh time.

"What was that for?" she yelped, arching back in protest.

"Do you think I can't tell when you are only pretending to agree in order to placate me?" When she didn't answer, he said, "I can keep this up all afternoon, Kate. So, you'd best decide how long it's going to take before you're convinced I'm serious."

She ground her teeth together. Admittedly, she had goaded him with her jabs, but then she hadn't believed he'd carry out his threat. He certainly hadn't followed through during the last years of their marriage, although he seemed different today. More adamant, yet concerned, too. And, even though his arms restrained her, the firm touch of his hand sliding along her backside and thighs soothed her. So, despite the precariousness of her position, she perversely enjoyed the attention. She felt secure--and she hadn't been this content in a man's arms for a long time.

None of that changed the fact she was still inwardly furious with him for spanking her in front of another person, but she had difficulty reconciling her righteous anger with the part of her that purred in response to his dominant and possessive posture. Her emotions were so jumbled and opposite each other, she no longer knew what she wanted.

Unwilling to fall into the trap of mistaking comfort for love, she turned her attention to gaining her release without the total loss of her pride. Not an easy task by far.

"Kate?"

He expected a verbal reply to his question, but she didn't remember what he'd asked, so she posed a query of her own. "Why are you doing this, Peter?"

"Because I want you to hear me out, and your head was too full of arguments to listen. I get your attention far more quickly when you're positioned this way."

"I'll listen now," she answered on a sigh.

"Yes, you will. Because you understand the consequences if you don't. But I'm still not letting you up."

Fighting against tears and her own desire to be loved by this man again, Kate asked coolly, "So, what must I do to get you to let me go?"

"Has it really been that long, Katie?"

Chapter Two

A sudden tightness grew in Kate's throat and chest, so she bit her lip to hold her emotions in check. He was the only man she'd ever been with, the only one who'd ever spanked her, and the only man she'd ever loved. And, here she was, draped over his knees again as if they were newlyweds. Despite her valiant efforts to restrain them, tears started to fall, and once Kate lowered the flood barrier, she was powerless to stem the flow.

He hadn't hurt her, yet before long she was bawling like a heartbroken little girl. Seconds later, Peter shifted her so she sat on his lap. Unable to face him, Kate pressed her nose to his chest and sobbed as he soothed her with soft, reassurances.

"It's all right, darling. I've got you. You're safe."

They were nonsense words, but Kate soaked them up like a dry sponge. A woody fragrance enveloped her. He smelled so good, she realized. So familiar. So comforting.

He continued to run his hand along her hair and back in soft even strokes, giving her time to collect herself. When her tears finally abated, he handed her a tissue.

Kate started to rise off his lap to clean up, but he clamped a firm hand on her thigh.

"No. I want you to stay where you are for right now."

She glowered at him as she dried her eyes and blew her nose while he rubbed her back. He didn't say anything, but kept handing her tissues until she no longer needed them. Once her inner storm calmed, she felt ashamed and averted her gaze. "I'm sorry. I never meant to--"

"Kate," he warned, gripping her chin as he turned her to face him. "If you even attempt to apologize for showing some honest emotion, I'm going to turn you back over my knee and give you the proper spanking you appear to need."

Kate's lower lip trembled as she gazed at her husband's stern expression. His demeanor unchanging, he curved his fingers around the nape of her neck, bent forward, and kissed her.

She made no effort to resist him. She couldn't. Instead, she parted her lips and gave herself over to his tender domination. With her mask of pretense swept away, she had no shields left to hide how deeply wounded she was. How badly she needed him.

His kiss awakened a dormant desire she'd forgotten existed. His arms offered a warm haven of security she'd craved for years. His lap cradled and supported her as if she belonged with him and no one else.

When he drew back to stroke her jaw, Kate feared he'd make a snide comment about how her current boyfriend must be lacking for her to react the way she did, but he merely gazed at her with open concern for a moment. "Better now?"

At her nod, he pressed her cheek back against his chest. "I am serious about you doing this show with me, Katie girl. So, what do I have to do to convince you?"

After awhile, Kate asked in a near whisper, "When do you want my decision?"

"I'd like to hear you say yes, right now. But, if you're not quite ready, I'll need your response no later than tomorrow morning. If you refuse, I'll have to start searching for your replacement. And, if you're even thinking of accepting, I'd like to have dinner with you tonight."

Her heart skipped a beat as she drew back to gaze into his eyes. "Tonight? Why?"

"So, we can start to plan. We need to be at the camp early next week, and I want to make sure you've got everything you'll require."

Kate shook her head and attempted to rise again, but a simple press of his fingers kept her in place more firmly than a show of strength ever could. Although her heart and body urged her to stay where she was, her mind warned her she'd be making a mistake to give in so easily.

Staring at him, she shook her head again, this time with more determination. "Sorry, but I have other plans for tonight and tomorrow. So, you'll need to wait until Friday for us to get together."

"Cancel your plans," he suggested, though not as a request.

Kate hesitated for a second. She didn't want to argue, but he was giving orders again without any thought to her situation. "No, Peter. I am not going to rearrange my schedule simply because you pop in out of nowhere and snap your fingers. I have a dance class tonight, and I'm going whether you like it or not."

He frowned, not saying anything, until Kate feared he'd insist, or flip her back over his knee for being stubborn, when he said, "What time is your class?"

"Eight o'clock. Why?"

"Why?" he asked, his surprise clear. At her slight nod, he added, "Because I find it difficult to schedule around something if I don't know when it's taking place. Go to your class; I'll pick you up afterward."

She let out a soft sigh. "Why tonight?" she complained, knowing she sounded like a thwarted child.

"Because we need to get some specifics out of the way. I don't enjoy quarreling with you, Katie, but I absolutely refuse to let you play the brat any longer, so several things are going to need to change between us. That means coming to a new working arrangement we can both accept."

When she glared at him, he regarded her with one arched eyebrow, and further words weren't necessary. She recognized the familiar expression to mean, "You're already on my lap, so don't think I won't flip you over on your stomach if you continue to thwart me on this."

"Fine," she answered with a trace of petulance.

He gave her chin a light tap. "Attitude."

Kate drew back from the reprimand. Well, he was right about one thing. If they planned to work together again, things would need to change. She refused to bend over in docile submission every time he flexed a little muscle. Though at six foot three, the man had more than a little muscle. "You can't just turn me over your knee whenever you think I'm being difficult, Peter. I have a right to my own opinion, which may not be in concert with yours. Besides, we tried the spanking routine before, remember? It didn't work."

"I recall differently. As a matter of fact, I believe our discussions had a marvelous way of improving your attitude."

"My attitude? It wasn't *my* attitude that needed improving."

"Are you really going to challenge me on this now, Katie girl?"

She paused, then shook her head. Even she wasn't that foolish.

After kissing away a tear with a brush of his lips, Peter drew her close with a hug. "I

made a serious mistake by allowing you to go your own way during the last two years of our marriage. Despite your insistence to the contrary, you want and need my guidance, Katie. You are still my wife, and I will not let you continue along the dangerously rutted path you're headed any longer. If you do not believe I mean what I say, I am more than willing and able to prove my words to you on a daily basis."

She sighed, realizing it was pointless to argue. Peter always did what he thought was best whether she agreed or not. Her feminist side might rankle at his dominant posturing, but her inner woman wanted to curl up like a kitten in his lap and purr with satisfaction. However, her broken heart warned her to be cautious. "You honestly think we should work together again?"

"Yes. I do. If I didn't, I wouldn't have approached you." When she nodded, he asked, "Is that a yes? Will you agree to do it?"

She grimaced at him. "Are you going to give me a choice?"

"No, but you can still refuse."

"Let me think about it," she answered softly as she started to rise from his lap, stopping when he firmed his hold on her thigh.

"I meant what I said earlier. You aren't taking proper care of yourself, Kate. You're exhausted. The mere fact you cried so quickly over my scolding is a testament to your fragile emotional state and fatigue, along with the circles under your eyes you're trying to hide."

She raised her hands to her face. "You noticed?"

"Did you think I wouldn't? What's worse is you've lost weight. I worked hard to get you up to a nice, comfortable range with a touch of padding on your bones, and you ruined all my years of effort in a little over a month. Needless to say, I'm not happy about that."

When she just stared at him, he added. "And it ends tonight."

She frowned, uncertain about his intentions. "What? I mean how do you plan to change things?"

"By taking care of you, Katherine, since you have difficulty doing it yourself."

Kate considered his words. Working with Peter had its downside. He liked to manage down to the smallest detail, so no matter how much she insisted on autonomy, he would override her objections when it came to her health and safety. Fighting Peter was like yelling at the sea during a raging tempest. She could rail and protest all she wanted, but he would pound away at every one of her mountainous objections until they were minute grains of sand. Sometimes through logic, most often through other means.

If she agreed to do this, Kate would be subject to his authority whether she liked it or not.

"I refuse to be bullied," she whispered under her breath.

"Do you consider what I do bullying?" His voice almost as soft as hers.

"Occasionally."

He tilted her chin so she had to look at him. "I may not always say the right thing or play the smitten suitor, but I never want you to feel bullied or threatened by my words or actions. I want to take care of you, Kate. Make sure you eat properly, and go to bed at a reasonable hour. Surely that's not being too despotic."

"It's not the time I go to bed that's the problem," she admitted, then winced at her confession. She'd always been a worrier, and would occasionally work herself up until she abandoned any pretense of sleep. In their early years together, Peter would insist she talk to him, and based on her issue, he'd find ways to distract her. That changed at the end of their marriage when rather than demand, he'd inquire politely whether he could do anything. She'd wanted to yell at him to treat her the way he used to. Be firm with her, talk to her, make love to her, but

she'd shake her head, so he'd go back to bed and leave her alone.

"Are you having trouble sleeping again?" he asked with concern.

She regarded him carefully. "Sometimes."

He pushed a strand of hair behind her ear. "We'll discuss this later. Once we uncover what's keeping you awake, I'll determine the best way to calm and relax you and you will start getting proper rest. Understood?"

She'd missed him so much, but she couldn't face such terrible heartache again. Tears stinging her eyes, she shook her head. "This is a mistake, Peter. We had our chance, and blew it. You should--"

Peter grasped her chin and pressed his firm, warm lips to hers, effectively cutting off her words of protest. Though Kate welcomed the kiss, she suspected working with him would only complicate their already rocky relationship. Then his fingers stroked her jaw, and she gave a soft moan that was part desire and part denial. He drew back and regarded her through dark brown eyes edged with worry. "I know you don't trust me, yet, Katie, but things will be better between us. I promise. You are going to be my leading lady, and I'm going to make sure you take proper care of yourself. That's it."

She raised one eyebrow in what she hoped was an elegant arch. "So, you don't expect to.... I mean, you're not going to...."

"What? Make love to you? Give you baths and massages when you're tense, and the occasional spanking when you're not paying proper heed to your loving husband?"

Kate couldn't decide whether to groan or laugh at his blatant display of chauvinism. So, instead, she nodded and shrugged, secretly pleased when he bent forward to give her another quick kiss.

"I intend to do whatever is necessary to keep you happy and healthy, my stubborn wife. But you know I would never force you to do anything against your consent. Don't you?"

When she gave another small nod, he put a warm hand on each side of her face. "I want to try again, Katie. It won't be easy, and I suspect we'll have more than one 'go round' together, however, I'm not going to give up so easily this time. So, are you willing to let me back into your life, for this summer if not longer?"

"It's probably a mistake, but I'll agree to do the show with you."

"The only mistake you could make right now is to piss me off. That would get you in a lot of trouble." He eased her off his lap and back into her chair. "Call Don and sign the contract, then I'll take you to your class. Afterward, I'm taking you to Smitty's and feeding you."

* * * *

When Kate continued to stare him with a glazed expression, Peter called, "Don...." While they waited, he regarded Kate intently. Her blush returned and she angled her face away. His little lesson must have made more of an impression than he thought. Not wanting to press her, he extended his hand. Her gaze met his for a moment before she laid her fingers on his palm. With a nod, he enfolded her hand in his grasp and gave it a gentle squeeze.

"Good girl," he praised with quiet softness, pleased when she blushed again. "I assume you're going to the same studio as before." At her nod, he glanced at her left knee. "You aren't overdoing things, are you?"

"No. I keep it wrapped when I practice, and it hasn't been giving me any problems."

"Good to know. I expect you to pay heed and sit down if it starts bothering you again. I don't want to risk another tear. Understood?"

When she nodded, he drew his brows together in a frown. His orders deserved the

respect of a verbal acknowledgment. Finally, she answered in a near whisper, "Yes, sir."

He gave another nod of approval. "Good. So we understand each other, if I think you're putting too much stress on that joint, you and I will be having a different private discussion. And that one won't be nearly as enjoyable as this last one was."

"I don't have to agree," she challenged, attempting to pull her hand away, but he tightened his grasp

"That is true, you don't. However, you will. Won't you?"

When Kate shook her head, Peter started to dispute her response, but reconsidered when her agent chose that moment to return with the revised contract.

"All set?" Don inquired.

Peter let Kate answer. Despite his unsubtle pressuring, the decision was ultimately hers.

"I'll sign," Kate announced, drawing her hand from his.

"Great!" Don pushed the contract toward her. "You want to read it first?"

Kate glanced at Peter. "Would it do me any good?"

"Probably not," he replied with a slight waggle of his eyebrows.

Kate laughed, and Peter realized that was the first time he'd heard her laugh all afternoon. Yeah, he still loved her, and was confident she loved him as well. He'd know in a matter of days whether she would be willing to get back together with him. The judge had given them six months to change their minds about the divorce, which gave Peter three days to change hers.

* * * *

The moment they stepped into the studio's foyer, Kate grimaced with embarrassment. The building was in dire need of a paint job. Like a lady past her prime, On Your Toes had lost the cheerful, energetic ambiance it once possessed, but the floors were still well maintained, and the mirrors remained highly polished. All the same, she knew her dance studio lacked the sophistication Peter had grown used to, and for some reason she wanted to impress him tonight. However, Peter's expression gave no indication to his thoughts when he escorted Kate to the door of the women's dressing room and informed her he'd wait in the visitors' area.

"You don't have to stay. Why don't you come back and pick me up later?" she offered, preferring he not see how out of practice she was. When they were together, she'd worked out in their private studio a couple of hours a day. Now, she was lucky to get in one hour a week. Not because she didn't have the time, she just couldn't summon the energy needed to do more.

"I will be in the visitors' area," he repeated, expecting her agreement, so Kate gave him a reluctant nod. She turned to walk into the dressing room when Christine Walker stepped out and spotted Peter. Giving a happy cry, the other woman flew over to him like a hawk pouncing on its evening meal. Except the type of eating this hawk did was pure pleasure for her chosen victims.

"Peter, darling," Christine crooned as she poured herself over the man Kate had married. Kate's fingers curled into fists as a part of her wanted to slap the she-devil silly, while another part urged her to walk away and leave the couple to their own devices, but her feet remained rooted where she stood.

Peter gave the clutching woman a peck on the cheek before firmly setting her aside. "Good to see you, Christine," he said politely.

Christine smacked his shoulder. "You rascal. I hear you're going upstate to work with some college kids in a summer stock production. Got a role for an old friend?"

Peter's smile was brittle. "Sorry. All non-student parts have been cast. Maybe next year."

"Pity," Christine groused as she took a step back to eye him over. "Well you look good. Good enough to eat, actually." Then the she-hawk moved in and started running her talons along the front of Peter's shirt. "You doing anything later?"

Peter clasped his fingers around Christine's wrists and drew her hands down. "As a matter of fact I am. I'm here with Kate tonight," he informed her, indicating Kate with a gesture.

Christine turned and smiled. "Katherine, darling. I didn't notice you earlier. I must say you're looking ... quite fashionably thin. Although I believe the pinched, wasted look is a bit retro for this year's designs."

Kate's returning smile didn't reach her eyes as she glanced back at Peter, twirled on her heel, and marched into the dressing room.

* * * *

Peter groaned.

"Oh. Did I step where I shouldn't have?" Christine asked with a moue of innocence. "I understood you two had gotten divorced. I haven't seen you with Kate for ages. Don't tell me you're back together again?"

"Yes," Peter said simply. "Yes, we are." Let Christine spread that rumor around. As far as he was concerned, it would be true soon enough.

"That's a shame. I always thought you were ill-matched. Oh, she has talent, and looks wonderful on stage, but in person she's still awfully mousy, don't you think?"

Kate stepped back out and glowered at him. She wore a black leotard, pink tights and no bandage. He frowned, his displeasure deepening when he spotted her toe shoes. His little Katie was deliberately thumbing her nose at him. After she'd hurt her knee during a strenuous work out *en pointe*, he'd forbidden her to wear toe shoes again. He saw no need for her to risk another injury unless a role required her to be a ballerina. And to date, that hadn't been the case.

"Not at all," he replied to Christine, then said, "Excuse me." Marching over to Kate, he grabbed her ballet shoes right out of her hand. "No." When she tried to snatch them back, he kept them out of her reach. "Did you hear me? I said, no."

"It's my decision," she protested with a slap at his chest.

He held her gaze until she lowered her arms to her sides. "Not tonight, it isn't. Now, go back inside, put on your regular dancing slippers, and wrap your knee like a good girl, so I won't feel required to prove how much I dislike your current attitude."

"Peter, you can't just--"

"Kate," he interrupted firmly, "if you're going to argue with me, I suggest we do it in a place that isn't quite so public, because I will take action if you press me."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Fine. Whatever." Enjoying the sexy sway of her hips as she stomped back into the dressing room, he tucked her toe shoes under his arm. When she came out wearing black ballet slippers without the knee wrap, he decided not to press the issue, though he wasn't happy about it. Giving her a curt nod, he strode over to the folding metal chairs and sat.

Peter watched Kate warm up at the barre, the taut line of her spine a clear indication she was royally pissed at him. *Too bad*. He'd much rather her indignant than injured. Ballet was good exercise, so Peter encouraged Kate to practice, however, toe shoes or not it seemed likely she'd pull something tonight if she continued pushing herself. He rose to work with her until she calmed down, but forced himself to sit again when their instructor entered clapping his hands.

"Line up, please, ladies and gentlemen."

The dancers stretched out into a long line across the center of the room. Most of the

women, including Christine, wore toe shoes, which earned him another scowl from Kate. He shrugged to indicate his lack of concern, so, she stuck her tongue out at him.

"Pay attention, please, Miss Thorton. You are here to work, are you not?"

"Yes, Mr. Wilkenson," she answered contritely.

"Very well. Positions, please." Then the instructor put them through their paces. Kate strained to get as much stretch as possible. She tended to punish herself like that when she was angry. Especially, when she was angry with him. She wanted to prove she was equal to any task she undertook, and better than anyone else. But in her efforts to stress her point, he feared she'd strain one fraction of an inch too far.

Even without toe shoes, Kate could injure her knee if she placed too much tension on the joint, and she was pushing as hard as she could. Wanting to put an end to the nonsense before she did herself injury Peter rose to his feet at the same time she yelped out and collapsed to the floor. Concern and anger propelling him forward, he rushed over and helped straighten out her leg. She immediately cried out, then hissed as he ran knowing fingers along her thigh, knee and calf.

"You, my sweet, have just earned yourself a trip to the emergency room." Slipping his hands beneath her arms, he eased her onto her feet, making sure she put no weight on the injured leg.

Ignoring her protests, he warned her three times she was going to the hospital whether she wanted to or not. When she didn't cease her disputes, he gave her one firm swat, right in front of the class. He could hear the collection of indrawn breaths, but kept his attention fixed on Kate. She tried to pull away, so he drew her closer. The tears started to well then. She hated hospitals. Always had as far as he remembered. She didn't even like the college infirmary where he'd insisted she stay when she caught the flu her junior year.

"Stop fighting me," he warned softly, "unless you want me to give you a full-blown spanking right here in front of everyone."

Her lower lip trembled as she scowled at him. "You're a bully."

"Yes, and since you already know that, arguing with me is a rather pointless exercise, don't you think?"

She nodded, and offered no complaint when he picked her up, though she did let out a gasp of pain. Several students in the class scurried about to help. One of the men advised Peter he'd flag a taxi, while one of the women retrieved Kate's clothing, and another fetched a baggie of ice wrapped in a towel for her.

Peter managed to get her settled in the cab with her knee slightly bent and the ice compress wrapped around it. He wanted to hold her on his lap, but feared the position might cause her more pain, so he settled beside her and pulled her up against him as he gave the driver the name of the hospital.

"I don't need to go to the hospital," Kate repeated. "The ice is helping." When he didn't answer, she turned to face him. "I'll only be wasting everyone's time, so, why don't you have the driver take me to my place, or even yours, if you prefer."

That comment proved to Peter just how desperate she was to get him to change his mind, but he refused to take any chances with her health. Bending his head so he could speak directly into her ear, he said, "As much as I would like to take you up on your offer, you'll have to wait to jump my bones until after the doctor has checked you out."

Despite her huff of indignation, Peter knew she was smiling. However, she still surprised him when she pressed her bottom against his thigh and raised her lips to his. "Kiss me."

Supporting her back with one arm, he cupped her chin and gave her what she wanted. A distraction. By the time they reached the hospital, her fingers clutched him close while her throat resonated with sexy little murmurs. His discomfort was a trifle more evident, but if he could keep her calm and relaxed, he didn't care who knew just how badly he desired his wife.

Chapter Three

When they arrived at the hospital, Peter procured a wheelchair and signed Kate in while a couple of the attendants whisked his famous spouse off to an examining room to shelter her from gawkers. He strode into the cubicle a few minutes later to find his darling wife resisting two nurses' efforts to get her into bed.

"No, thank you. I'm perfectly comfortable in the chair."

Though the women were professionals at dealing with recalcitrant patients, Peter opted to spare them by playing the heavy, instead. "Stop arguing, Kate, and do as they ask."

"I want to stay here," she replied, folding her arms and setting her lips in a mutinous line.

"Not an option. Either you move, or I'll do it for you." When she didn't reply, he gave her until the count of ten before he moved in, picked her up, and gently set her in the middle of the bed.

Leaning closer, he whispered, "Behave," then stepped aside so the two women could tend to her. She let them take her temperature and blood pressure, though the entire time she kept her displeased gaze fixed on him while he watched over her with his arms crossed over his chest. All was going fairly well until one of the nurses suggested Kate change into a hospital gown.

Of course, Kate promptly vetoed the suggestion. "No. I'm fine."

"But the doctor will need those tights off to examine your leg."

Kate shook her head again, so Peter said, "Leave the gown on the bed, and I'll help her change once you're done."

Kate scowled at him, but he merely raised an eyebrow. If she gave him trouble, her knee would not be the only part of her body hurting.

She eased back against her pillow with her lips clamped in a straight line.

Next, the nurses asked Kate several questions about her medical history, which Kate answered and the brunette nurse, who introduced herself as Kim, entered into the computer. When they were done, Kim cast a glance at Peter before she turned to Kate. "Once you're changed, we'll start you on an IV, and the doctor should see you shortly after that."

"I don't need an IV," Kate protested with a touch of vehemence. "I need someone to look at my knee and prescribe pain pills."

Kim patted Kate's arm. "The IV is hospital protocol. It's just a saline solution to help keep you hydrated."

"It's my *knee*," Kate objected.

"Yes, we know, but our procedure dictates we put you on fluids, unless you have a medical reason why we shouldn't."

When Kate started to argue again, Peter took a step forward. "Kate," he said warningly.

She jerked around to face him and shook her head.

Giving her fingers a warning squeeze, he turned to the women. "Do you require anything else before she changes?"

"No. We've got all we need at this point," Kim replied. "We'll leave you two alone and return in a few minutes."

He nodded to indicate her suggestion was acceptable to him. When they stepped out, he leaned over his wife until she sunk back against the pillows with a wince. "Are you ready to behave?" he inquired, giving her chin a light pinch.

"I don't want an IV," she said stubbornly.

"So, I gathered. But if you don't do as they say, you'll have an irate husband on your hands. And, of the two, I should think you'd prefer the IV. However, if you persist in being stubborn, I will tend to the job myself, after I give you a spanking for causing trouble."

She shook her head. "This isn't going to work, Peter."

"Yes. It will. Now let's get you out of these clothes." He paused with a frown.

"Actually, I think I'd best cut them off of you."

"Why?"

"To make it less painful." He opened a drawer, found a pair of blunt-tipped scissors, then adjusted her bed so she was lying flat. He expected an argument, but she merely turned her face and let him do as he wished.

Though her newfound docility concerned him, he cut her leotard down the front, leaving her bra and high-cut panties untouched as he snipped through the tights as well. Next, he sliced the one-piece garment from the inside of both thighs all the way to the center cut he'd made, so the stretchy material drew in on itself and shrank. "Okay, let's get you changed," he murmured, raising her back into a seated position. She continued to avoid his gaze as he tugged the leotard off, but slipped her arms into open-backed gown he held without argument. Next, he worked on carefully removing her tights.

Even with the ice, her knee had swollen to three times its normal size. Though he took care not to hurt her, he noticed her give an occasional wince, but she didn't complain. She was being cooperative, even while she refused to look at him, so when he was done he sat beside her to take her hand in his.

"Everything's going to be all right, Katie. I know you're scared, but I'm here and I won't let anyone hurt you if I can help it." He ran a finger along the edge of her cheek; then leaning forward, he kissed her, surprised when she flung her arms about his neck and pressed her trembling body to his.

"Shhh, love. You're safe," he soothed, running his hands along her back. Recognizing her fear, even if he didn't understand its underlying cause, he held her close and murmured reassurances into her ear until the nurses returned.

When Kate pulled away, her eyelashes sparkled with the remnants of tears, though she was holding it together. Suspecting she'd prefer he remained nearby, he turned to the women. "I realize it isn't usual hospital practice, but would you let me insert the IV?"

"Are you a nurse or a doctor?" the blond asked.

"No, although I have had medical training. My wife suffered a similar injury a few years back, and I helped with her physical therapy, which included giving her shots and an occasional IV. Though I tend to be a bit of a tyrant at times, I think she's more comfortable with me. Would you mind?"

"It's highly irregular. We'd need both of you to sign a waiver absolving the hospital of

responsibility if you make a mistake."

Gazing at Kate, he murmured, "Your call, darling. The professionals or your overbearing husband."

She plucked at his sleeve. "You."

He nodded. "We'll sign."

Once the legal paperwork was out of the way, Peter held Kate's hand while the nurse hung the bag of saline. Accepting the covered needle and catheter, he turned to Kate. "We'll do your right arm. Okay?" When she nodded, he applied a tourniquet and searched for the best vein. She didn't like needles placed in her hand, and the inner elbow was too restrictive, so he examined the length of her forearm while giving her skin a couple of light swats to bring her veins to the surface.

"Relax," he cautioned, the moment he felt her tense beneath his fingers. Locating the type of spongy vein he wanted, he accepted the antiseptic swabs the nurse handed him and cleaned the area. Kate already had her face turned away. Given how much she detested IVs and needles in general, she was behaving quite well

"Stick," he warned, stretching the skin on her arm taut as he carefully inserted the 20-gauge needle. Pleased by the small back flow of blood, which indicated the IV was properly placed; he finished advancing the catheter, withdrew the needle, removed the tourniquet and taped the catheter down.

"Nicely done," Kim complimented with a smile of approval.

"Practice makes perfect," Peter answered as he rose to let the nurses finish attaching the tubing to the catheter and setting the infusion pump to monitor and control the drip's flow. The IV process complete, they assured Kate they'd be back to check on her in a bit.

Though Kate wasn't crying, her fingers fisted and released the sheet and blanket bunched near her hips as she glowered at him. In an effort to distract her, he offered an encouraging smile and asked, "How's the knee?"

She shrugged, but didn't cease squeezing her covers. "It's throbbing a little."

Distraction. Narrowing his eyes, he leaned in toward her. "Really? Well, once we leave here, you and I are going to have a discussion about your tendency to over push yourself."

She wrinkled her nose with a hint of a smile and murmured, "bully" just as Dr. Warner strode into the room. Peter took a step forward and held out his hand in a silent message to the newcomer that he was in charge, not the patient.

Though Warner participated in the greeting ritual, he regarded Peter with a suspicious frown. A young surgeon--mid-to-late twenties, Peter guessed. More youthful than Peter, and only a few years older than Kate. Unfortunately, he was also good-looking enough that when Kate smiled at the younger man, Peter was tempted to smash him in the face, but stepped back to allow the doctor to move in closer to his patient.

"Bob Warner," he said, extended a hand to Kate and giving his first name this time.

Smiling, Kate reciprocated the greeting and replied, "Kate Thorton."

"Yes, I know. I recognize you and your ex. I caught your TV show, and I'm an avid theater-goer." When Kate gave a nod and withdrew her fingers, the doctor bent over to assess her injury. "So, tell me. How did you hurt it?"

At Kate's small hiss of pain, Warner quickly lifted his hands. "Sorry."

"Dance class," she answered with a wince.

He nodded. "I think you may have a bad sprain, but I'll want some x-rays to make sure."

We can do them here, so lie back, relax, and a technician will be with you in a few minutes. Once they're developed, we'll discuss next steps. All right?"

Kate cast a quick worried glance at Peter. "Yes. Thank you."

"No problem." As he turned to leave, Warner offered Peter a curt nod. "Mr. Thorton."

Peter returned the gesture while the nurses rushed in to fluff Kate's pillows and fuss over her a bit.

Bridget, the cute blond nurse, gave Kate a conspiratorial wink. "Dr. Warner's a good surgeon, but it doesn't hurt that he's easy on the eyes, too."

Kate laughed. "No. I guess not."

Kim made sure Kate understood how to operate the bed and call button before she said, "The x-ray technician should be here in about ten minutes or so, but let us know if you need anything in the meantime."

Offering a smile to Peter, they left. Peter remained where he was, back against the wall, arms folded over his chest as he observed Kate. He wanted to be angry with her to release some of his frustration, but she hadn't done anything wrong. Nor had the doctor, although neither thought eased the sharp sting of jealousy piercing his gut. However, when Kate held out her hand, he didn't hesitate to sit beside her and offer the reassurance she sought.

"Do you think it's just a sprain?" she asked quietly.

No, he thought she'd torn her meniscus again, but he shrugged. "Not sure. It's possible, I guess." He gave her fingers a firm squeeze. "I realize you didn't like me confiscating your toe shoes in front of Christine, sprite, but the dangerous gleam in your eye worried me."

She shrugged. "The shoes didn't make any difference though, did they?"

He tapped her nose. "No, but only because you insisted on pushing yourself to prove a point. Not a wise decision by half on your part, pet. You might want to hope your knee is injured enough to admit you tonight. Because a stay in the hospital is the only sure way you're escaping a session over my knee later."

She must have finally accepted he was serious since she scowled back at him this time, but didn't withdraw her hand. "I'm not a child, Peter."

"Trust me, darling, I am well aware you're a full-grown woman. Although, you do tend to act like a brat whenever you're thwarted."

"So, you intend to stop my childish behavior with a spanking?"

"No. I'm just making sure you understand proving a point to your detriment will gain you nothing but a sore backside. You can behave as childishly as you want, as long as you don't do injury to yourself or cause someone grief. It's the fact you persisted after your knee started to throb that's earned you OTK time."

She let out an exasperated sigh. "What? I injure myself, so you respond by hurting me more?"

He raised her knuckles to his lips and kissed them. "Careful, darling. Though my spankings may be painful, hurting you has never been their objective. However, if it takes a little pain and embarrassment to keep you from acting the reckless brat, then yes. That is exactly how I am responding. I'd rather you be more concerned over my reaction to your temper tantrums than permit you to hurt yourself by throwing one."

She shook her head, but swallowed back a retort when a technician entered with a portable X-Ray machine and asked Peter to wait in the hall. After giving Kate's fingers another kiss, he stepped out of the room. Kate's low threshold of self-preservation bothered him, even though he understood how an anger release could be self-destructive. He'd occasionally punched

a bag until his knuckles were raw and bruised to work off his temper, but he'd vowed to protect his wife, and he intended to keep his promise. The next time, if she realized hurting herself would only earn her a more painful trip over his knee, she might think twice about pushing so hard. At least that was his hope.

The method had been effective before. She hated his spankings, especially when he made her lie bare butt over his lap. She found the position embarrassing and the punishment humiliating. Her dislike was so strong, he'd managed to get her to stop biting her nails and chewing her hair with the threat of one alone. However, as much as she detested the punishment, she thrived on the cuddling afterward.

Holding her close, he offered reassurance and positive reinforcement while he soothed her injured psyche by telling her how much he loved and desired her, which was why he insisted she obey him. She'd start out crying, but end up listening until she even agreed with him. Then, if she wasn't too sore, he'd seduce her, making sure she understood how thoroughly he worshiped, cherished and adored her.

No matter what she'd done, Peter took care not to harm or mark her. He might leave her with a warm, pink posterior, but no welts, bruises, or impressions of any kind that lasted longer than a few minutes. His sole intention was to protect her, not abuse her. And, he restricted his swats to the most padded part of her body, rarely venturing below the luscious curve of her behind to her thighs. Though he subscribed to the theory hands should only be used for loving, not hitting, when he'd applied the theory to reality and took the flat back of his hair brush to her bottom, she'd wailed so hard he vowed never to use anything but the palm of his hand again. A vow he was presently reconsidering.

The painful punishment with a hairbrush had been her very first spanking from him, and she'd earned it by dropping out of college to pursue him, against his wishes, to the open summer theater where he was directing. Insisting she re-register for the following semester, he then made sure she understood how serious he was she stay in school by taking a flat, wooden hairbrush to her bare butt. She'd cried, wailed and begged so hard for him to stop he began to feel a little guilty for being so harsh with her.

However, his grand plans of ensuring she earned her degree fell to the wayside when she sought him out a few months later to tell him she was pregnant. They hadn't used any protection since she'd assured him she was on the pill. Unfortunately, those assurances had been less than truthful. After he'd confronted her over her deception, she admitted to being afraid he wouldn't sleep with her if she wasn't already protected. She'd fully intended to go on oral contraceptives, but given her condition--her plan was moot.

Considering her lie was uncovered less than three months after he'd paddled her with the hairbrush, the punishment for her pill-taking deceit was mild compared to what it should have been. At the time, he'd been more concerned about her physical and mental well-being, since she seemed unable to stop crying even before his first swat fell.

After dispensing a few perfunctory smacks to express his displeasure, he held and soothed her while she pressed her face to his shoulder and sobbed out her apologies for ruining his life. She hadn't ruined anything. Quite the opposite in fact, though he would have been hard-pressed to admit it then. He hadn't been pleased at all by the news since it drastically altered his plans, but he'd intended to marry her, almost from the first day they'd met, just not until after his career had taken off and she'd graduated.

"You may return now, Mr. Thorton," the technician called. With his memories drawn back to their earlier days, the sight of unshed tears in Kate's eyes had Peter rushing forward.

"Did they hurt you?" he asked, sitting beside her.

At her tearful nod, he shifted closer to wrap his arms about her. "Want some kisses?" he teased with a playful wag of his eyebrows.

Relieved by her agreement, he pressed his lips to hers, relishing her soft, throaty moans when Dr. Warner cleared his throat. Kate looked delightfully flushed and more than a little embarrassed by the time Peter pulled away to regard the doctor with an inquiring expression.

"Well, nothing is broken," the handsome, young surgeon informed them. I believe you have a slight tear in your meniscus, Ms. Thorton. I don't recommend surgery, but I do suggest you get an MRI, or an arthroscopic procedure to confirm the diagnosis. Do you have an orthopedist?"

"Yes. I was treated a few years ago for a similar injury."

"Then I recommend you make an appointment with him as soon as possible so he can decide how to proceed next. In the meantime, use the RICE method of rest, ice, compression and elevation. I'll put a cold wrap on for you, and when you get home, keep your knee elevated. If you're in a lot of discomfort I can prescribe something stronger than Ibuprofen."

"We'd appreciate the help, doctor," Peter answered in her stead, knowing his stubborn wife would refuse.

With a nod, Warner stepped out to get the bandage, so Kate lifted her arm. "Can we *please* take this thing out now?"

Peter nodded. "Yes, we will. Be patient awhile longer. Your nurses should be back in a moment to release you.

The doctor returned to wrap Kate's knee and gave her instructions as to its use.

Next, the RNs came in to remove Kate's IV. After that, Peter helped her into the clothes she'd packed in her bag. The same ones she'd worn at the agent's office. No stockings, but the pants were loose enough to fit over her wrapped knee without needing to cut them.

Once Kate was dressed and released, Bridget and Kim returned to shyly request an autograph. While Kate smiled and willingly signed whatever they wanted, Peter called for a cab. Afterwards, he held the crutches while Kim wheeled Kate toward the door as other nurses and orderlies wished her well. By the time Kate had finished saying good-bye, which included signing fifty more autographs for the rest of the staff, their cab was waiting.

After assisting Kate into the car, Peter gave the driver instructions to his place. Though, pleased by Kate's lack of protest, her pallor worried him enough he decided to bring a little color back to her cheeks.

Sitting in the backseat, he wrapped his arms around a tense, stiff and unusually quiet Kate and stroked her. "So, are you still eager to jump my bones when we get home?" he teased, but she didn't move, didn't speak, and he was beginning to suspect didn't even breathe until they'd turned out of the hospital parking lot. Then, with a sigh of relief, she pressed back against him in a way that made him doubt she'd heard his quip. His little Katie really hated hospitals. Smiling at the sight of her lying relaxed in his arms, he placed a kiss on the top of her head.

"That wasn't too bad, I guess," she admitted, giving another sigh that morphed into a groan as she rested against his chest. "Last time, Dr. Purcell had you give me daily shots for a couple of weeks, didn't he?" she asked, sounding disgruntled, but without a trace of unease.

Despite her fear of hospitals and dislike of needles, she trusted him not to hurt her, which pleased Peter greatly. "Yes, he did. A concoction that included at least one anti-inflammatory with some pain relievers and vitamins combined. They did the trick, as I recall. Perhaps I should suggest he prescribe those again."

With a slight turn of her head, Kate rewarded him with a scowl. "You enjoy sticking needles in me far too much, I think."

He kissed her forehead. "No. What I enjoy is having you stretched bare butt across my lap to receive them. I also remember a couple of times when you weren't positioned there only for a shot."

"Yeah. You enjoyed that, too."

He laughed. "Actually, I preferred what we did afterward. As much as you detest spankings, my lovely, disobedient, wife, they also tend to make you affectionate and horny." He leaned forward to whisper,, "And that's the part I like most."

