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## Chapter 1

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**T**here is something cathartic about cooking; for Mandy Arden, the art of combining simple ingredients to turn them into something new and delicious that would feed people she loved was a special form of magic. Food brought people together and had the ability to bring out the best in people. There were not many things Mandy was confident about, but she knew she was a good cook.

She was less skilled at the serving of food than at the preparation of it. Some people had the ability to set dishes onto plates so that they looked as good as they tasted; Mandy was not one of those people. Pork chops are particularly unattractive. She wished her husband's favorite dinner were roast chicken, or salmon, or even lasagna; she could have made those presentable. Pork chops, on the other hand, insisted on looking like greasy bricks no matter what she did. She had set out a basket of rolls and had a plate of roasted asparagus resting in the kitchen's warming drawer. The table was set and dinner was technically ready to be served as soon as her husband walked in, but she was still waging war against the ugly entrees before her.

Normally she would not have cared about how ugly the food

looked, or whether it was ready when her husband came home or not; Matthew certainly did not care. He was thrilled simply to have someone cook for him. They had been married for five months, and though he had never expected his wife to prepare homemade meals, he was delightfully surprised to learn that Mandy loved to cook. She was glad to have someone to cook for, as she had previously gobbled most of her meals as she walked from one job to the other, the ‘meal’ typically coming in the form of granola bars, or as she sat alone in her childhood bedroom, while her mother was out. Her marriage to Matthew allowed her to embrace her dream of preparing family meals, and to try out new recipes. Matthew was happy to serve as her taste tester.

A hand on her shoulder as she chewed her lip and attempted yet another arrangement for the meat made her jump out of her skin as she shrieked. She spun around to face her husband, who stood looking at her with his eyebrows raised. “Matthew, don’t do that!”

“Do what?” he asked, his hand still resting on her shoulder.

“Sneak up on me. You nearly gave me a heart attack.” Mandy tried to regain control of her breath as she spoke. “I didn’t even hear you come in.”

Matthew’s brows remained high on his forehead. “Exactly. What would you have done if it hadn’t been me? The front door was unlocked, Amanda. Anyone could have come in.”

Mandy rolled her eyes. He called her by her full name when he was trying to let her know he was serious, which only added to her distaste for hearing it. “Nothing that exciting happens here. Besides, isn’t the point of a doorman in the building to have some sort of security guard?”

“I’m serious, Amanda. You cannot be so cavalier about your safety,” Matthew explained. His British accent seemed to thicken when he was being stern. “Besides, Marcus is a lovely doorman, but he would break a hip trying to take down any potential intruders. Do you really want that on your conscience?”

Mandy bit back a smile at this mental image of the kind, elderly man who insisted on holding the door for her each time she entered or exited the marble lobby of their New York apartment building, even though Mandy had told him repeatedly that she could manage on her own. She was still not accustomed to living in a place where the simplest of tasks were taken care of for her. “Fair point. But even so, if this potential intruder did get past the doorman, how likely is it he would just happen to go to the 38th floor, come to our door at the end of the hall, and check to see if it was unlocked?”

“If someone knew where to look for you, it would have been far too easy for them to get to you.”

“Ah, so we’re dealing with a psychic intruder now,” Mandy said, raising her eyebrows as she looked up at her husband. Matthew was significantly taller than she was, her head only coming to his chest. This height discrepancy worked well for Mandy when she would lie against him and find safety as he enveloped her. Even in her highest of heels, the top of her head only came to his chin, but Matthew said it was the perfect height for him to kiss the top of her head, and she loved the smell of his aftershave lingering on his neck. Their difference in stature was only really an issue when Matthew would look at her with his Death Stare and while he seemed to grow, Mandy felt herself shrink. As Mandy realized her snark would be considered disrespectful in this case, rather than adorable, as she had been aiming for, she watched the Death Stare settle on Matthew’s face, and she gave him her best innocent smile. “I mean, yes, sir, I will be more careful and do exactly as you say because I am always the picture of obedience and respect.”

Matthew bit his lip, but Mandy could see the smile he was holding back. “Just be more careful, darling. Keep the door locked and be aware of your surroundings. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

Matthew gave a slight shake of his head and pulled her close.

“Just because you’re adorable does not mean I won’t spank you if you don’t start taking better care of yourself.”

Mandy sighed. “I know.” Her big eyes and sweet smile had yet to suffice to get her out of a punishment. “I guess I was just distracted when I came in.”

“What’s distracting you?” Matthew asked, not releasing the embrace.

Mandy appreciated having Matthew’s arms tightly wrapped around her, both because she loved the feeling of being close, and because it was easier to say what she was thinking without watching him watch her. “I was just thinking about something I saw when I was on my way home. There was an ad for one of the community colleges in the area. If I apply now, I could start as a freshman in January, and if I take four or five classes at a time, which really isn’t that much, I could get my nursing license in a year.”

Matthew made a ‘hmm’ sound, which Mandy knew was a precursor to ‘I will think about it’, which was halfway to ‘No’. She would be damned if she let him get there. She looked up at him with the brightest, cheeriest smile she could muster. “Come on, let me show you the brochure.”

Matthew allowed himself to be led to the dining table, where Mandy directed him to sit in his usual chair at the head of the table. Though Mandy had little chance of truly pulling him anywhere he did not want to go, he adored watching her try. Her face was lit up like a child leading a grown-up into a candy store.

“This is the program,” she explained, handing him a three-fold brochure with the picture of a smiling woman in blue scrubs on the front. She bit her lip as Matthew began to read.

He looked up at her from the pamphlet. “Hovering over me will not make me read any faster, little duck.”

“Right,” Mandy said. “I’ll go get the food.” She turned on her heel and walked back to the kitchen. Matthew had christened her with the nickname of ‘little duck’ on the night they had

gotten engaged. He explained that whenever he saw Mandy being still and quiet, he knew that inside, her mind was racing; it reminded him of a duck sitting still on the water, while its little feet flapped away below the water's surface. His use of this nickname subtly let her know he saw her holding something back. Though they had only been married for five months, Matthew knew his wife well and Mandy could never decide if she loved or hated this fact.

Mandy gave up on trying to make the pork chops look pretty and carried the serving tray they were set on to the table. She tried to glance over the top of the pamphlet, just to see what part Matthew was up to, but at his raised eyebrow she hurried back to the kitchen. She returned a minute later to set a plate of asparagus on the table. She looked over at Matthew and he met her eyes.

"Sit down, sweetheart," said Matthew. He noticed her biting her lip as she sat in the chair beside his. "What are the chances of us being able to talk about anything other than this school issue right now?"

"Slim to none."

With a soft shake of his head Matthew said, "I thought as much." He folded his hands on the table in front of him and looked Mandy in the eye. "I have some reservations."

"What are they?"

"This is an LPN program, which is different from an RN degree."

Mandy raised her eyebrows, her defenses rising as she did so. "Yeah, so?"

"So, do you understand that the LPN is a lower ranking degree?"

"Yes, but the RN takes longer and it has more chemistry courses," Mandy said.

"And with this program, you would only take courses in nursing, correct?"

Mandy nodded.

“No English, history, or language courses?”

Mandy shrugged. “I took all of those in high school.”

“Ah, so you’ve mastered them?” Matthew asked.

“I don’t need them. I just want to be a nurse; it’s all I’ve ever wanted, so it doesn’t make sense to take any other classes. I’m not going to be a historian so I don’t need to waste my time in a history class.” Mandy said as she looked away from Matthew’s gaze to pick a roll out of the basket. It was taking far too long to get to the ‘yes’ she wanted to hear from Matthew, and she needed a distraction to help her hold on to her patience.

“There is value in learning simply for learning’s sake,” Matthew said. “And five nursing courses at once is a lot.”

Mandy fixed him with a look that was harder than she intended. “I can handle it.”

“I’m not saying you cannot handle it, but it is a tremendous time commitment. I would see even less of you than I already do,” said Matthew.

“I would be home in the evenings,” Mandy said, as she buttered her roll.

“Not every evening. Part of the program is an internship, which would involve evening hours.”

“Well, you’re not here every evening either!” Mandy said, as a petulant tone crept its way into her voice.

“That is true, which only adds to my fear of losing some of the preciously small amount of time we have together.”

Mandy pursed her lips. “So you get to have your dream job and I don’t?”

Matthew raised his eyebrows. “Watch your tone, Amanda.”

“Sorry.” She took a deep breath, trying to rein her temper back in. “It just doesn’t seem fair.”

Matthew placed his hand on hers, and when she turned to look at him he beckoned her towards him. She stood and walked to him, allowing herself to be guided to sit on his lap. Typically,

Mandy adored sitting on her husband's lap, with his arms wrapped around her, closing out the rest of the world. On this occasion, however, she resented the way this position made it difficult to maintain her righteous indignation and annoyance with him.

"It isn't fair," Matthew said. "But sometimes what is right is not entirely fair. And in this case, both of us being bogged down by work and over-packed schedules is not what is best for our marriage."

"So you don't even care what I think or what I want?" Mandy said, more to her shoes than to Matthew.

"I care very much, but we have agreed that I am the head of this family, and that means I have to make the decision that is in the best interest of our relationship. In this case, this program is not in our best interest, so my answer is no. Do you understand?" Matthew asked, his tone soft. He was tolerating more attitude from her than he normally would out of consideration for her disappointment. Being the dominant partner in the relationship was not easy and he was slowly learning the nuances involved in enforcing rules without being overly forceful.

Mandy shrugged. "I guess."

"That's not a real answer, little duck," he said, as he tucked a piece of her hair behind her ear.

"I just need a minute to process," Mandy said.

Matthew kissed her temple. "I understand. Maybe eating will help you think." He patted her thigh and she managed a half smile as she stood and returned to her own chair.

Matthew served himself a helping from each of the dishes laid on the table, allowing Mandy a few moments to think. He knew she was disappointed, and she was one who often needed space to process her feelings. He took a bite of the pork chops and gave a soft moan. "This is divine," he said, looking at Mandy. "Thank you, sweetheart."

“You’re welcome,” she replied, taking a bite from the remaining half of her roll while avoiding Matthew’s eyes.

“How was work today?” Matthew asked. The ‘work’ he was referencing was volunteer work at The Annex, a shelter in Manhattan for women and children. Mandy had initially volunteered in the daycare and had fallen in love with the families and the program, but after a month and many incredible meals, she had learned of their desperate need for help in the kitchen, and she quickly threw on an apron. Matthew had been thrilled to see her embrace the work and adored the sparkle in her eyes whenever she talked about it.

“It was good,” Mandy said, shrugging her shoulders and finishing the rest of her roll.

Matthew raised his eyebrows and asked, “Good?” Typically when he asked her this question she would tell him at least one funny anecdote from the day and a story or two to describe how the residents were or were not progressing. Her brief response now was not a good sign. She might need a moment to sort through her thoughts and disappointment, and he wanted to respect that. There was, however, a fine line between thinking and brooding.

“It was fine,” Mandy said. Her eyes were firmly fixed on the new roll she had picked from the basket and was eating slowly.

Matthew watched her while taking bites from his own plate. He had finished a large pork chop and moved on to bites of the asparagus while Mandy was still holding the roll. “How do you make asparagus so uniquely delicious?” he asked.

Mandy gave another shrug. “I just seasoned it.”

“Well, it’s excellent. You should have some.”

The flowers printed on the linen table runner were apparently so engrossing that Mandy had lost her ability to hear. After a moment, Matthew spoke again. “You need to eat something besides bread.”

“There’s butter on it.”



As Mandy had once tried to convince him that peanut butter cups counted as a balanced meal (chocolate had calcium, and peanuts had protein, so, she reasoned, the combination meant that the candy was basically the equivalent of green juice) her dismissal of his concern was not surprising; it was her tone that he was troubled by. She knew too well that snapping at him in such a brusque way was not acceptable.

“Care to try that answer again?”

At this, Mandy’s head turned to him. “No. I don’t want asparagus. I am capable of knowing what I do and don’t want, and what is best for me.”

“Amanda...”

“No!” She slammed her hands on the table as she said this. “I know what is right for me, I’ve been making my own decisions and taking care of myself for a long time and I’ve done a damn good job. So it doesn’t seem fair for you to now be in control of what I do and what is best for me.” She saw his eyes widen and his Death Stare emerge but she was too fired up to care. “Just admit it, you think I can’t handle college, that I’m too stupid to do this, and that’s why you’re saying no!”

She was on her feet now. She didn’t quite remember standing up or how her chair had gotten knocked over, and she did not remember consciously deciding to raise her voice, but these things had all somehow happened and she knew she had gone too far. Sheepishly, she turned to Matthew, who sat studying her with his arms folded across his chest.

Matthew’s face remained flat. “Are you quite through?”

She nodded.

“Good,” Matthew said, putting his napkin back on the table as he stood, then walked to Mandy, took her by the upper arm, and firmly led her to the corner in the bedroom. Mandy whimpered but said nothing.

“Do not move,” Matthew said, as he positioned her to face the empty corner. It was the only corner in the bedroom that was

left unobstructed. To anyone else, the corner was simply a space where the two walls converged. Mandy and Matthew knew differently. Mandy despised it.

Matthew, however, considered it fundamental to their relationship. In Mandy's case, it was especially important. She often needed the time and space to reflect, and often to calm down. Her pensive nature meant she benefitted from time alone with her thoughts, a fact that they both knew, Mandy hated and Matthew embraced.

And, if he were being entirely honest, he loved watching her from this angle.

Matthew walked back to the dining table, stepping over Mandy's chair on the ground.

He hated to disappoint her. There was a part of him that wanted to excuse her behavior out of pity and guilt, but he would not allow himself to do so. Consistency was fundamental to their relationship. The discipline dynamic had been part of their relationship from the beginning, but this was not all that made their marriage unique. They had first met at the wedding of their best friends, but did not speak again until those same friends arranged a meeting six months later, in which Matthew explained that as a British citizen whose American visa was close to expiring, he needed an express line to a Green Card. Mandy had been desperate to leave her life of dead-end jobs and painful isolation in the same North Carolina town she had been born in, and find something – anything – new. Matthew was happy to offer this if she agreed to marry him within a week, pack up her few precious belongings and move to New York City as Mrs. Matthew Arden.

Taking on this role meant embracing life as a wealthy, high society housewife, and submitting to Matthew, allowing him to be head of the household, and accepting both his rules and discipline. She had spent the past five months trying to explain to herself why she loved this dynamic, and as she fidgeted with the

hem of her blouse, knowing she would soon be getting a hard spanking, she was clueless as to why she had ever agreed to this in the first place.

“Hands at your sides, Mandy,” Matthew said, raising his voice slightly. He was in the living room but intended to make it clear she was not out of his sight.

Mandy frowned as she looked over her shoulder. “Well, just come spank me and get it over with!”

Matthew crossed the rooms in only a few strides and had a firm grip on her upper arm before she had a chance to blurt out a meaningless apology. Lowering his voice and speaking slowly, as though to ensure she attended to each word, he said, “You seem to be having difficulty remembering who is in charge in this relationship. I intend to make it quite clear to you. Now, I suggest you face the corner and remain in position until I tell you otherwise, unless you would like to add on to the punishment you are already facing this evening.”

“Yes, sir,” Mandy said, her voice meek in deference to the return of the Scary Voice.

Matthew returned to his seat at the table, keeping watch on her out of the corner of his eye. He answered a few emails from his phone, watching as his wife’s shoulders slowly lowered. He let ten more minutes pass, knowing it felt like an eternity to her. She hated this part, and he knew it. He watched her fingers drum against her hips and knew she was fighting the urge to turn around again. He gave a small smile at her restraint, and walked to stand in the doorway, his arms folded against his chest. He leaned against the doorframe, positioning himself so Mandy would be able to see her overturned chair just beyond where he stood.

“Come here, Mandy.”

Mandy sighed and went slowly to him, her feet barely rising as she walked on the plush carpeting. “I’m sorry, Matthew,” she

said, staring at the floor once she stopped, just out of arm's reach of him.

"Go on."

"I'm sorry I was such a bitch."

Matthew lifted her chin. "Try again."

Whatever logical part of Mandy's brain was left reminded her that rolling her eyes while Matthew was physically requiring her to look at him was not a wise idea. "I'm sorry I was so rude to you."

Matthew nodded as he released her chin and was glad to see she did not immediately return her gaze to the floor. "That's better," he said. "I will not allow anyone to call my wife such names, including you."

Mandy gave a slight smile at this. Only he could be so protective moments before roasting her butt.

"You know I do not tolerate tantrums," Matthew said. "I do not know what has brought on this attitude, but I have had quite enough."

"I just—"

Matthew put a finger firmly to her lips. "No. We will discuss why you are so upset later, but nothing excuses your behavior this evening."

Mandy clasped her hands in front of her as she tried to determine whether the carpet was blue-gray or gray-blue. She could handle this question much more easily than she could think about her own childish behavior.

"Let's start at the beginning. Tell me why you're being punished," Matthew said, keeping his arms folded so as to stop himself from embracing Mandy, and kissing the pained look off her face.

"I yelled at you, and I cursed, and my chair got knocked over," she explained to the floor.

"Those darn chair-fighting-fairies have struck again, have

they?” Matthew asked, pleased to see Mandy biting back a smile. Her snark was starting to wear off on him.

“Fine, I knocked over my chair,” Mandy said, looking back up. “I don’t know what got into me.”

“Neither do I,” Matthew said. “But I am sure we can figure it out.” He tucked a stray lock of Mandy’s honey-colored hair behind her ear.

Mandy nodded, her gaze returning to the floor. “I’m really sorry.”

“For which part?” Matthew knew that if given the choice, she would have taken a longer spanking rather than be forced to discuss and analyze her own behavior, but that was precisely why he insisted upon this; Mandy’s impulsivity and avoidance tactics kept her feelings and anyone who tried to connect with her at arm’s length. Matthew was determined to break the pattern.

“All of it. I didn’t mean to be disrespectful, I just wanted you to listen to me.”

“You wanted me to listen to you or you wanted me to give in to you?” Matthew asked with a raised eyebrow.

“The latter,” Mandy said softly.

“Do you understand why I take disrespect like this so seriously?”

Mandy nodded. “Because it hurts our relationship. It breaks down communication and trust.”

Matthew smiled as he raised his eyebrows. “Very good.”

Mandy looked back up at him. “I pay attention sometimes,” she said, with a slight smile. They had had this conversation several times, and, despite her difficulty adhering to the rules, she knew Matthew’s words to be true. Communication was not her strong suit, and – though she would never admit it if there were any spanking implements within a mile radius – she was glad Matthew held her accountable in this regard. It was good for her, and good for them.

Matthew could not help himself. He pulled Mandy to him and hugged her tightly. "I love you, Mandy Girl."

"I love you, too," she said, closing her eyes as he held her. She felt him take a deep breath and said nothing as he took her hand and led her to the side of their bed. He sat on the edge and pulled her over his lap, firmly but tenderly. He raised his hand high and brought the first smack down with enough force to make her cry out. She knew the lack of a warm-up was not a good sign. Before the shock could wear off, he brought his hand down again, and then another dozen times, causing Mandy to squirm. He folded the hem of her dress so that it rested on her lower back and pulled her pink lace panties to her knees.

Mandy whimpered as she felt him baring her bottom; they both knew the thin fabric offered almost no protection but being fully exposed this way added a mental element to the physical discipline. Mandy realized he was pausing longer than he typically did when he was removing her clothes, but then cried only harder as she heard the creak of the bedside table drawer.

"Please no, Matthew!"

"Hush," Matthew said solemnly. "You know I do not tolerate tantrums. Perhaps the hairbrush will help remind you of this in the future." With that he slammed the hairbrush down, leaving a crisp red oval in the center of Mandy's already burning butt. He raised the brush again and again, each smack causing her to cry out, until she simply let herself sob.

"Please, no more, sir! I learned my lesson, I swear!"

"No, Amanda. I will decide when we are done." There was no break in his rhythm as he spoke; he simply carried on spanking as though it were second nature. Mandy knew what he said was true, and there was no use fighting it. She let herself go limp against the bed, her tears falling onto the sheets beneath her.

When her bottom was bright red, Matthew helped her to stand. She moved to embrace him but he held her still with his

hands holding her arms. “I don’t ever want to see such a tantrum from you again. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” Mandy said, tears rolling down her cheeks. Her voice was pitiful and Matthew could not force himself to be stern for another second. He pulled her into a tight hug and stroked her back. Immediately he felt a wet spot emerge on his shirt where she laid her head as she began to openly cry.

He settled her to sit on his lap, rubbing her back and arms and softly kissing her head as she cried. He would not rush this part; spankings were often a release for Mandy, as though the smacks wore down her walls, and her tears that followed a punishment were a continuation of this.

He held her tightly for several moments as her breathing slowly returned to normal. He felt her wiggling against him, a sign she was ready to come out of the cocoon she had made against his body. As he stroked her hair he asked, “Are you hungry? You didn’t eat much.”

“A little,” she replied in a soft voice.

“I think there’s some asparagus left,” he said in a teasing tone, and laughed as she playfully nudged him.

“There is an apple pie in the warming drawer,” she said.

Matthew’s eyes went wide with excitement. “You made an apple pie?”

“I should have used that as a bribe when you decided to spank me,” she said, though she knew it never would have worked.

“Do you want to eat it in my study? I have some work to finish up,” Matthew said. He knew she did not like to be alone after a spanking, so she typically curled up on the sofa in his study while he worked. He felt her nod against him and he lifted her into his arms to carry her; she also did not like to walk after a spanking, and they both appreciated the extra moments of closeness.

“Wait, grab my iPad!” she called out as he walked with her towards the bedroom door.

He turned and picked it off of the bedside table, and gave it to her to hold, all while not setting her down. It was in these moments where Mandy struggled most to decide if she loved or hated his upper body strength.

“Are you going to Tweet about being punished?” he asked teasingly as he walked into the study.

She stuck her tongue out at him as he set her down on the sofa. “Some of the staff at the Annex and I are trying to put together a bonfire but firewood is surprisingly expensive, so I want to send an email about an idea I have for something else we could use.”

“What are you thinking?” Matthew asked.

Mandy shrugged and turned her iPad on. “Just simple wooden things we can find, wooden spoons, hairbrushes, things like that.” She looked up at him with an innocent smile and devilish twinkle in her eye.