

Hot Nanny Next Door

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Chapter One

Anna

My phone pings in my purse but I work to ignore it as I hurry through the busy grocery store. I try to keep my focus, try desperately to keep my eyes on the list crushed in my palm, but I can't stop glancing over my shoulder. Any second now I expect my father's big, burly hand to clamp down on my shoulder—not to hurt me, but to drag me home.

Running away might not have been my smartest move, but being sheltered for eighteen long years, my every movement scrutinized, meant I had no other options available. I needed to act fast if I wanted to stop my family from marrying me off to some guy I've never met and know nothing about, other than his last name is Ivanov. I refuse to be a pawn in their game, a means to bring two powerful mafia families together. That was the line in the sand for me, and what drove me to run away from home, and disappear under the cover of darkness.

It's surprising I wasn't caught. But it's a miracle I'm not going to question. Honestly, how can both my mother and father think feeding me to the wolves is a good idea? Sure, they had an arranged marriage, and they are both heavily involved in the underworld, but it's not for me. I've told them that numerous times. They simply won't listen.

I smooth out the long list in my shaky hand—the items I need scribbled on the finest of stationery—and rush through the produce section. I need half a dozen apples. Green ones, to be precise. I haven't been working for the Castello family long enough to know what kind of wrath they'd bring down upon me if I brought home the wrong color apple for their daughter Sophie, the sweet little girl I've been taking care of for the last week.

I maneuver my big cart through the crowd, find the display of green apples and reach for one. The second I do, my hand connects with warm fingers. Warm fingers that lead to a big hand and thick arm. My gaze slides up from the fingers, noticing the impressive arm attached to a very broad shoulder. My gaze lifts higher, to discover all those body parts belong to a very handsome man who looks like he could command a room without even trying. A man like the men who work for my father. I gasp and jerk my arm back.

His dark eyes narrow in on me, and I try not to shift under his scrutiny. Sweat breaks out on my forehead, despite the air conditioning in the grocery store, and my heart crashes a little harder against my ribs as I give him another once over. Tall. Foreboding. Powerful. He represents everything I've been running from.

Is this one of my father's men? Have they found me already? I'd been so careful, so secretive the last few weeks. Using burner phones each time I called the Practically Perfect Nannies in search of a job. Thanks to my mixed heritage—I can speak English and Italian fluently—I was promptly placed with a Sicilian family who wanted me to teach their daughter English and still be able to communicate with them all in Italian. While Chicago's Gold Coast is gorgeous, I would have preferred a place a little further from my home, but I was desperate, so I jumped on it, being careful to keep a low profile until I can save up enough to get out of Chicago altogether.

Then I can go to college like I want, instead of marrying at eighteen. I have my whole life ahead of me. I want to experience things, to travel, and hopefully someday own my own restaurant. I could have asked my father for college money, but he'd want me married first. Once married, he'd tell me I didn't need an education. In the world I was born into, it's still an old fashioned one, where the men rule the roost. I'm a modern woman and want a life in the modern world.

"Are you okay?" the man asks as he smooths a big hand down his tie. I follow the movement. I take a breath, and then another, working to pull myself together long enough to find my voice.

"Yes, sorry." I point to the apples as I work to figure out if this man is going to drag me from the store by my hair. From the way people are giving him a wide berth, I don't even think they'd try to stop him. "You go ahead."

I size him up again. I've gotten good at reading others over the years. Who is friend and who is foe? Everything about him, from his expensive suit and shoes to his perfectly shaven face and combed hair—that wouldn't dare to tumble out of place—screams wealth and power. He's everything I despise. Guys like him rule the world, telling girls like me what to do and how to do it. I am so over that, and truth be told, I'm a little surprised he's getting his own groceries. You'd think a man in a suit that costs thousands of dollars would have servants, and many of them. Unless, of course, he's one of my father's henchmen, buying groceries under pretense, when he's actually here for me.

"No, you go ahead." He checks his watch. "You seem to be in a rush. I have a few minutes to spare."

I hesitate for a second and narrow my eyes. Is he waiting for backup? As I study his handsome chiseled face, recognition niggles in the back of my brain. Do I know him? Have I met him before? If he's not one of my father's men, he could be from a rival family, keeping his eye

on me. Arianna Milano. Though I've changed it to Miller to keep my identity hidden. The prized little virgin who can bring the Sicilian and Russian mafia together.

My virginity is not for sale, thank you very much.

As I look at this man, take in his gorgeous face and hard body made for sin, a devious thought hits like a lightning bolt. If I gave my virginity away to a stranger, maybe I wouldn't be so valuable to my family, or so coveted by their rivals.

"Are you okay?" he asks again as I stand there and size up his body and hands, imagining what they'd feel like on my naked body.

Move, Anna. Get what you need and get out.

I snatch up six apples and he stands there, towering over me as I juggle the apples, struggling to open the stupid plastic bag. I am not about to lick my fingers. God knows what kind of germs linger in grocery stores.

"Here let me help you." His big hand once again brushes mine as he takes the bag away from me, and rage wells up inside me. I am not a stupid little girl who can't do things for herself. I was just never allowed the freedom to try anything.

"I've got it," I snap and snatch it back. He frowns at me, and my chest tightens. Why am I getting mad at him? He was only trying to help and if he's not here to collect me and I'm just being paranoid, there is no reason for him to be the brunt of the anger that's been building inside me for years. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't be taking my bad mood out on you."

"You don't have to be sorry. If you want to open your own bag, you should open your own bag." He steps back and waves his hand.

I smile at him as I turn toward the display. "Thanks."

"Grab it by the handles." He leans into me, his breath warm on my neck. "It's easier to open from there."

I do as he suggests and peel the plastic open. "Thanks for the tip." I fill the bag, and once again, I look over my shoulder. Not for my father, but something about this guy draws me in. He's everything I hate in a man, yet I can't seem to stop staring at him. He checks something on his phone as I tie my bag and set it in my cart. He reaches for his own plastic bag, but I get to it first. I rub the plastic together, and open it for him.

He chuckles. "Thanks."

"Can I...uh...ask for another tip?"

He goes quiet, like he's contemplating my request as he picks up a big green apple, sizes it up, and drops it into his bag. "Sure."

"Do you have any tips for buying watermelon? I saw a guy knocking on one for a good solid minute." I laugh. "I was about to tell him I didn't think anyone was home."

He stares at me like I might have two heads, then he bursts out laughing. His deep voice garners the attention of others, but they all avert their gazes when I glance at them. What the hell is that all about? They're acting like they're afraid of me.

His laughter dies down, and he says, "Have you never been to a grocery store before?"

I'm also a little embarrassed to admit it, but this is my first time. We always had servants do the shopping, cleaning, and anything else considered menial labor. Now I'm doing all those things for the Castello family.

"Do you always shop in an expensive suit?" I shoot back, not wanting to answer.

He angles his head, eyes me with a curious grin on his face. "I just flew in. I was away on business. Green apples are my son's favorite. I wanted to bring him home something special."

Oh, so he's married. Not like it matters, and who knew all kids liked green apples so much.

"No chocolate, no junk food?"

He frowns at me, and I lean in conspiratorially, although I have no idea why I'm acting all friendly like this. I don't know who this man is, and he could be the enemy. "When you were a five-year-old boy, what did you like?"

"Five-year-old girls," he says, and I can't help but laugh. He smiles with me.

"Seriously. Did your mother give you apples when you wanted a treat?"

"Okay, fine. What would you suggest?"

I glance around and consider it. "Popsicles."

He nods, like he can get behind that. "Okay. But he really does love green apples. As for popsicles, I used to like those rocket ones. There was this ice cream truck that used to drive down the street in our neighborhood." He grins like he has such fond memories, and to be honest, I'm a bit jealous. "They had three colors. What were they, red, white and green?"

"Not green, blue."

"I'm pretty sure it was green."

"Maybe you're color blind."

“I am not...” He shakes his head and laughs. “Okay, maybe I am a bit.” This time he leans into me conspiratorially. “Are you going to tell me?”

My body stiffens. “Tell you what?” I ask, once again aware that I shouldn’t be talking to strange men who could be under my father’s control.

“Have you never been to a grocery store before?”

“Ah, no. I mean yes,” I say quickly. “I...just, never bought watermelon before.”

There’s a spark of amusement in his dark eyes as the fib spills from my lips. He doesn’t believe me.

You are lying, Anna.

Instead of calling me on it, he says, “It’s to check the water content. Come here I’ll show you how to do it, uh...” He moves toward the bin overflowing with huge watermelon, and lets his words fall off and I get it, he’s waiting for my name.

“Anna.” He arches a brow, waiting for me to continue, and I say. “It’s just Anna.”

“Okay, Anna.” He picks up a watermelon and puts it in my hand. “Knock on it. If it makes a hollow sound, it’s ripe and ready.” As soon as the words leave his mouth, his gaze drops, takes in the V in my t-shirt, and a wave of warmth races through me. Is he wondering if I’m ripe and ready? God, men are so disgusting.

I tap on the watermelon, but I can’t tell if it’s making a hollow sound. He fishes around the bin, tapping on melons, and comes out with one. “Listen to the difference.” He taps, and I tap. We repeat this a couple times, and he says, “Now all we need is a guitarist.”

I laugh at his joke and set the watermelon into my basket. “I think this is a good one. Thanks for your help.”

“Anytime, Anna.”

My name rumbles from the depths of his throat, and I’m not sure what it is, but I really like the way it rolls off his tongue, like he’s tasting it, testing the sound in his ears. He turns from me, and the next thing I know, he’s gone from the produce section. I didn’t get his name, but it doesn’t matter. I’ll likely never set eyes on him again. Strange. He’s big and commanding, everything I hate in a guy, yet I have an odd sense of disappointment in my gut that our conversation has ended.

The last thing you need is that type of man in your life, Anna.

I shake my head to clear it, rush around the store to finish my shopping and head to the front to pay. Once done, I make my way outside, the mid-August sun shining down on me. I wheel the cart to my car, load it, and just as I'm about to put it back, the hairs on the back of my neck tingle.

I do a slow sweep of the parking lot. An SUV drives past, the driver a middle-aged woman, singing along to some song on the radio completely ignoring me. As she passes, my gaze lands on a very expensive sports car. I recognize the Maserati because my father owns one. It speeds off before I can see who the driver is, but my gut tells me it was Mr. Hot Produce Guy himself.

Worry once again invades my brain, and I jump into the driver's seat. Mrs. Castello lent me her vehicle. It's not a Maserati, but it's still a very nice sporty BMW.

I hurry back to the house and quickly unload the groceries. The family is out this afternoon, but will expect dinner when they get home. I glance at the clock. If I hurry, I can get a swim in before I have to start cooking.

I dart to my room and grab my bathing suit. I've lost weight I couldn't spare over the last couple of weeks. That's what stress will do to the body. I guess no one is around to see me in my loose bikini anyway. I make my way outside, stand at the end of the pool, and dive in. Coolness washes over me, but once again, I get the strange feeling that I'm being watched. I surface at the far end of the pool, and that's when I notice movement in the window next door. I stand quickly, peering into the neighbor's upstairs window, my heart beating a little faster.

Was that...the guy from the grocery store.

As I puzzle that out, I realize that might not be the worst of my problems. No, the fact that my bikini top shifted, and I might have just flashed Mr. Hot Produce Guy—the Castelllos' neighbor—could end up with me getting fired.

FML.

Chapter Two

Alek

Sweet Jesus.

I try to tear my gaze away, really, I do. But the lush sight before me is so goddamn mouthwatering it makes it hard to remember I'm a gentleman. Which I am. Most times, anyway. Or never.

What the hell is Anna doing in my neighbor's pool? Talk about a coincidence, which I don't believe in. Everything happens for a reason, yet I don't understand the reason behind us bumping into each other at the grocery store, or why she's flashing me from the neighbor's pool. Did they hire help when I was in Atlanta consulting with a client? They talked about it before, but were always too afraid to leave Sophie with anyone, considering she has special needs, and Anna, well she doesn't even look like she's out of high school yet. All the more reason for me to back the fuck away from my window, and the illicit view.

I force my legs to move, and when Chase comes running into the room to show me the paper airplane he just made, I draw the blinds. My five-year-old is not ready for that view, nor am I ready for that conversation.

"Daddy, look what Emma showed me how to make."

He throws it and it crashes to the bed. He dives for it, picks it up and flies it out of the room. I grin as I watch him go. Where the hell does he get all the energy? Doors slam in the driveway next to mine, and little Sophie's voice can be heard in the cul-de-sac as she rushes into her house. I guess the Castelllos are home. Not that it's any of my business, but I might wander over, find out if Anna is the new nanny, or maybe she's a long-lost relative they forgot to mention.

Is that really why you want to go over, dude?

Okay fine. Maybe I'm man enough to admit that I might like another sneak peek, might like to feel her silky skin against mine. Christ, our hands barely touched at the grocery store, and here I am getting a boner as I call on the memory. Seriously though, I might not be the best judge of character when it comes to women, but Anna is far too young for me—far too innocent—and I'm not interested in a relationship with anyone, anyway. Not after Chase's mother said she didn't want the responsibility that came with a child. Then she up and left with half of what was in my savings account, leaving me to care for our son alone. Throw in the law firm I own, and

the conferences I must attend, and I can barely keep my head above water. Don't even get me started on how many nannies we've been through. I have rules in place for a reason. If they can't follow them, they know where the door is.

I shrug out of my suit jacket and loosen my tie. Unable to help myself, I lift the blinds and disappointment gathers in my gut when I find the neighbor's pool empty. Did I really think she was going to hang around to give me another show? No, but a guy can hope. I snort as I shed my work clothes and pull on a T-shirt and pair of shorts. It's been a long time since I've been with someone, but messing around with the neighbor's young nanny is not in my best interest.

I head downstairs, and Emma smiles up at me from the kitchen table. She's young, about twenty, but so far, she seems to be working out just fine. She's lasted a whole month, and I have high hopes.

"Why don't you take the rest of the day off, Emma? After a week alone with Chase, I'm sure you could use a break." Her smile wavers, like she fears I'm testing her. "Go," I say. "Go have some fun with your friends."

"Thank you, Mr. Hail," she says, and I shake my head. Christ, I'm thirty-two, not that much older than her, but she refuses to call me Alek. My last name isn't really Hail either. It's short for Mikhail, but I changed it up for a reason. As I think about that reason, my stomach knots. Christ, I love my parents. They spent their whole life caring for me, and while I might not have joined the family business, and they gave me their blessing to find my own way in life, I still feel like I'm letting them down.

They've always wanted to see me married and settled. Now that my ex is gone and I'm a single dad, they're pushing for marriage, insisting Chase needs a mother. They're not wrong. He does need a mother, but I'm not interested in an arranged marriage. As far as I'm concerned, there are two types of women in this world—those who run the other way when they find out where I come from, and those who want to get into my good graces because they want stature and money when they find out where I come from. I'm not interested in either. That's still not stopping my folks from pressuring me, and I have a shit ton of guilt over it.

Emma leaves the room, and I glance at Chase. "You really like Emma, huh?"

"I do." He flies his plane around the room, and my heart pinches. He's been through a lot, too much for a five-year-old. What kind of person just walks out on their child?

"Want to go see Sophie?"

“Yes. I want to show her my airplane.”

I scruff up his hair with my hands. “Maybe she’d like to join us for some chicken nuggets.”

His eyes go wide. “Is it Friday?” he asks.

I laugh. “No, it’s not, but I’ve been away all week, and you were so good for Emma, I thought you deserved some chicken nuggets.”

He throws his arms around my waist. “I missed you, Daddy. You were gone sooooo long.”

Guilt races through my blood, his words hurting my heart. “I know, bud, but I shouldn’t have to go away for a very long time now. Come on, let’s go see what Sophie is up to.”

“Me and Sophie went swimming at her pool, and then my pool. Emma got us ice cream, and Sophie dripped hers all over her bathing suit. Anna had to get her a clean one before she went back in the pool.” Talking a mile a minute, he rushes down the hall, beating me to the front door.

I perk up when he mentions Anna. “Who’s Anna?” I ask. Jesus, what have I become? I’m questioning my five-year-old now.

“She’s Sophie’s nanny. I like her.”

I like her too.

He runs ahead, down our winding walkway, all the while flying his plane. “What do you like about her?”

“She played Marco Polo with me.” I hurry to catch up with him and note his frown.

“What’s up, little man?”

“She got real scared when the wind blew the door closed and it made a big bang.”

“I guess it was loud, huh?” And that Anna spooks easily.

He covers his ears. “Really loud.”

“Did it scare you?”

He lifts his chin an inch. “I’m not afraid of the wind.”

I fight off a chuckle as we reach the neighbor’s driveway. He picks up his speed and runs to the door, and by the time I get there, Chase is already running through their house in search of Sophie, and I stand there for a moment, taking in Anna’s big blue eyes, and the way her mouth is gaping.

“You,” she says, her gaze moving past me. She looks at my house. “It *was* you,” she says, her voice a breathless whisper as she continues to stare at me, and I try not to gawk at her lush cleavage, tucked inside a pink, frilly, sleeveless blouse. Fuck, man, she can’t be this innocent.

She just can't be. Unless she'd been sheltered her entire life. "You...live there?" Her hand lifts, one shaky finger aimed at my place.

"Yeah. What a coincidence, huh?" Once again, I remind myself, in my world, coincidences don't exist. Every move is calculated, and with purpose.

I hold my hand out. "I guess if we're neighbors, an official introduction is in order, don't you think? I'm Alek."

I take her hand in mine, swallowing it whole, and I'm not one-hundred percent sure, but I think I just heard a small gasp catch in her throat.

"Anna," she whispers.

"I know, you told me already."

She shakes her head. "Right. Mr..."

"It's just Alek," I tease, although there is a part of me that wants her to call me Mr. Hail...in the bedroom.

Fuck me.

"Um, okay. Alek, it's nice to meet you." She blinks rapidly, and jerks her thumb over her shoulder. "Um, about the pool—"

I hold both of my hands up, palms out. "It's not what you think."

"What do I think?"

"I wasn't watching you. I just happened to glance out the window, and you were there."

Her face pales slightly. "Did you see..."

"I didn't see anything," I fib, and while we both know it's not the truth, we're both going to cling to that belief if that's what makes her sleep better at night. It's probably going to keep me up, in numerous ways.

"Thank God." She relaxes slightly, something about her innocence, her vulnerability, fucks with me in the worst ways. Christ, it's all I can do not to bundle her in my arms and take her home with me—protect her from the world. But if I had her home with me, I'm the one she'd need protection from. "I wouldn't want Mrs. Castello to think I flashed you. I *need* this job."

My gaze moves over her pretty face, the worry lingering in the depths of her blue eyes. "I don't think she'd fire you over an accident."

She shrugs. "I'm new. I really want to make a good impression."

She sure made a good impression with me.

“I’m sure they love you.” I lean into her. “The popsicles were a big hit. Thank you.”

She smiles, but it falls quickly, and her eyes go big. “I’m sorry. I didn’t even invite you in.” She backs away and waves her hand. “Mr. and Mrs. Castello are both out at the pool with Sophie. I assume you know the way.”

“I do.” I step inside, and head toward the back of the house, and her quick footsteps sound on the marble floor behind me. I head out back into the sunshine and find Chase flying his plane, and Sophie chasing him.

Gio jumps up. “Alek, how was Atlanta?”

“Hot,” I say and he laughs.

He gestures to a chair. “Let me get you a cold drink.” I glance at Theresa, who is smiling at me. “How are you, Theresa?”

“Better now that you’re here,” she says graciously and flirtatiously as I take her hand in mine and kiss it.

“Theresa, could you at least wait until I’m no longer in earshot before you start flirting with our neighbor,” Gio barks, feigning hurt.

We all laugh at that, and Theresa waves a dismissive hand his way, but Gio has nothing to worry about. The two of them are totally in love, and in a way, I’m envious of what they have.

“Come sit next to me,” Theresa says, and pats the lounge chair next to her. I’m about to drop into it when I notice a movement by the window. I glance up in time to see Anna. She jerks back quickly, and I bite back a grin. Was she trying to listen in? “Tell me everything that has been going on in your life. Have you found yourself a good woman yet?”

“You know I’m not looking.”

“Leave the man alone,” Gio says as he hands me a scotch and soda. I take a big drink and stretch out on the chair.

“I see you’ve hired some help.” I jerk my head toward the door I came out of. “I actually met Anna at the grocery store earlier.”

Theresa’s eyes light up. “She’s lovely, yes?”

I laugh. “Yes, she is lovely.”

“Sadly, she’s only eighteen. Too young for you, Alek.”

“Agreed.” I take another fast drink as Anna steps outside. My gaze rakes over her appreciatively as she picks Sophie’s ladybug towel up off the ground and hangs it over the rail.

She checks on the kids, who are now playing in the treehouse, and smiles at Theresa when she walks back to us. “Dinner will be ready in thirty minutes.”

“Can we set another place for Alek and Chase?” Theresa’s hand falls open as she turns to me. “Alek you will stay, won’t you?”

“I was actually going to ask you if Sophie could join Chase and me for chicken nuggets. I wanted to take him out to make up for being away.”

“You are such a good father.” She shakes her head, and I don’t need to ask to know she’s thinking about Chase’s mother. “I’m sure Sophie would love to go. But would you mind if Anna joined you all as well?”

“Oh...I...” Anna fumbles backward as she stumbles over her words.

“Would you mind, Anna? I think it’s important for you and Sophie to spend some quality time together outside the house.”

I arch my brow and eye Theresa, giving her the look. The one that says she’d better not be matchmaking. Then again, maybe she’s not. She just finished telling me Anna was too young for me. Maybe she’s trying to pull some kind of reverse psychology shit on me.

Theresa leans into me, her eyes serious. “It’s important they bond this first week. Sophie needs special attention, you know.”

I nod. Okay, I guess she’s not trying to matchmake. “We’d love to have Anna join us.” Even though I don’t really know much about communication disorders in children, but if she says they need to stick together, then I’m in total agreement. “How does that sound to you, Anna? Would you like to come with us?” I grin at her. “Don’t worry, we have more than chicken nuggets.”

“Yes, of course,” she agrees, just like I knew she would. She needs this job and is doing her damndest to be obliging. It’s a good goddamn thing she’s not my nanny, though. A real good goddamn thing, because if she was, I might want to push her a little, to see how innocent she really is, and discover just how far she’d go to please me.

