

CHAPTER ONE

Anita Santisi locked her car with her remote and juggled her packages as she strode toward her condo loft in an upscale suburb of Philadelphia. With the street lights illuminating her way in the darkness, she struggled to hold onto her packages and picked her way up the steep steps in her stiletto boots.

“Why the heck did I buy so many Christmas gifts?” she muttered. But she knew. She loved buying baby clothes and toys for her cousins’ babies. And as honorary aunt, it was her duty to spoil them.

She got to her front door and let out a small cry. Her insides shook. The packages fell from her hands to land in a pile by her feet. Her front door hung open on its hinges with a huge hole at the bottom as if someone had kicked it in with heavy boots.

She did a quick scan of the area. No one else was around. Forcing air into lungs that felt ready to burst, she turned and ran down the steps, stumbling in her haste. Grabbing the handrail, she caught herself. On unsteady legs, she gripped the railing and hurried the rest of the way down. Near the bottom, she lost her balance and almost fell, but strong arms grabbed her and kept her upright.

“What’s wrong?” a male voice asked.

She screamed and tore loose from the stranger. When she looked up into deep brown eyes, almost black in their intensity, her heart rate kicked up a notch. Had he been walking along the sidewalk, or did he follow her from her house?

Gulping breaths, she backed away. Her attention on the stranger, she pulled her phone out of her purse. With shaking fingers, she dialed 911. When the operator answered, Anita said, “My home’s been broken into. The intruder might still be inside.”

With a promise the police were on their way and an admonition from the operator not to go into her house, Anita disconnected. Still clutching her phone, she put more distance between her and the tall stranger.

“Your house was broken into?” he asked. “I’m sorry. I’ll stay with you and wait for the police.”

“They’ll be here any minute. I’m fine now. You can leave.” She licked her lips, and not taking her eyes off the stranger, she fished in her purse for her car’s remote. It had a panic button. If he dared move toward her, she’d set it off.

He nodded toward the adjoining condos. “I don’t see how I can leave since I live here.”

She swallowed. “Live here?”

“I’m your new neighbor. I thought this was a safe neighborhood.”

“Neighbor?” Trying to wrap her mind around that surprising information, words failed her and she could only continue to stare up at him. Her loft, in a restored warehouse, was one of two condos that shared a common wall. Each had a private entrance, the doors a few feet from each other. The loft next to hers had stood empty the

past year since the owner transferred to Japan for his work. She'd heard someone rented it recently.

Her alleged new neighbor furrowed his brow. "You okay?"

Fairly sure he wasn't her intruder or an ax murderer, Anita still had to be cautious. She put her finger over the panic button on her remote.

"I'm Luke Corrado." He held out his hand. "This is a hell of a way to meet."

"It sure is. I'm Anita Santisi." She decided caution trumped politeness and didn't take the proffered hand. Still on guard in case he made a movement toward her, she looked more closely at him. He was easy on the eyes, with his short black hair and those dark eyes that watched her as if he thought her the most fascinating woman he'd ever met. She'd noticed a dimple in his cheek when he smiled. Nice lips, not too thin, not too full, just right for kissing. Smooth olive skin stretched taut over high cheekbones, inviting her to touch.

"Like what you see?" he asked, showing that dimple again.

Heat suffused her face. He might be eye candy, but he was arrogant. Anita didn't tolerate arrogant men. And she still didn't trust him. She sent him a look she'd perfected, one that usually sent grown men scrambling for cover. Apparently, it wasn't sending this man anywhere. He looked contrite, or tried to look contrite.

"I'm sorry," he said. "That didn't come out right. I sounded like a jerk."

"Yeah, you did."

He gave her that dimpled smile that made warmth swirl through her despite her anxiety and the late November chill.

His magnetism tempted her to scan the rest of him. His black leather jacket and black sweater didn't disguise the width of his shoulders or the breadth of his chest. Close-fitting jeans hugged long legs that seemed to go on forever. All in all, one hot package.

"Let's start over. I'm your new neighbor, Luke Corrado."

Before she could respond, lights flashed in the darkness as three police cars pulled up to the curb.

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