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## **BOOK ONE**

**Wednesday, July 13, 1977**

**New York**

Costa Zennocotti stared at the girl sitting across from him, his ornate carved wood desk separating them. She spoke rapidly, gesticulating wildly, making faces to emphasize a point. Christ! He hated himself for having such thoughts, but she was the most sensual woman he had ever laid eyes on....

"Costa?" the girl questioned sharply. "Are you *listening* to me?"

"Of course, Lucky," he replied quickly, embarrassed because she was only a slip of a girl—what was she now, twenty-seven or -eight?—and yet she was so bright and knowing. She probably *knew* what he was thinking.

Lucky Santangelo. Daughter of his lifelong best friend, Gino.

Bitch. Child. Liberated lady. Temptress. Costa knew her as all of those things.

"So you see"—she fumbled in an oversized Gucci bag and produced a pack of cigarettes—"no way is it the right time for my father to come back into the country. *No way*. You must stop him."

He shrugged. Sometimes she could be so stupid. How could she expect *anyone* to stop Gino doing exactly what he wanted? As his daughter, she above all others should know that. After all, Gino and Lucky, they were two of a kind, they were as alike as two separate people could ever hope to be. Even physically she looked just like her father. The same aggressively sexual face, olive-skinned, with deep-set smoldering black eyes and wide sensual lips. The only difference being the nose: Gino's was masculine and prominent; hers was smaller, more suited to her femininity. They both had jet-black curly hair. Lucky wore hers shoulder length in a tangled mass of curls, and Gino, at seventy-plus, still had a fine head of hair.

Ruefully Costa reached up and touched his own bald spot—it was more than a spot, a desert, a barren expanse of scalp that no amount of hair arrangement could conceal. Still, he was sixty-eight years old. What else could you expect at that age?

"Are you going to *tell* him?" she demanded. "Well? Are you?" Costa thought it best not to mention that at that very moment Gino was in a jet circling the city. Soon he would be landing. Soon he would be back. Lucky would just have to face the fact that her father would be taking over again.

Christ! The shit was going to hit the fan, and he, Costa, was going to be right on target.

Three floors above, Steven Berkely worked industriously away in the quietness of his friend Jerry Meyerson's office. They had a deal going where if Steven wanted total privacy he could use the place after normal working hours. It was great. No phones. No people tracking him down. His own office was always a madhouse, whatever time of the day or night it was. And even in his apartment the phone never stopped.

He stretched, glanced at his watch, and, seeing it was nearly nine thirty, swore softly under his breath. The time just seemed to have slipped by. He thought

quickly of Aileen and wondered if he should call her. He had blown their theater date, but that's what he liked about Aileen—nothing fazed her, she took everything calmly, whether it be a missed theater date or a proposal of marriage. He had proposed three weeks previously, and she had said yes. Steven had not been surprised, there were no surprises in Aileen, but after Zizi, his ex-wife, who needed them?

Steven was thirty-eight years old and he wanted a settled life. Aileen was twenty-three and she would give him one.

Steven Berkely was a highly successful prosecuting attorney. When black first became beautiful he was right in there with a college education, four years of law school, and plenty of enthusiasm. With his knowledge, wit, and sharp intelligence, getting where he wanted to go had been comparatively easy. His exceptional good looks had not gone against him either. Over six feet tall, with the body of an athlete, very direct green eyes, black curly hair, and skin the color of milk chocolate, he had the disarming quality of not really being aware of just how good looking he was. It knocked people off balance. Expecting conceit they found courtesy. Expecting arrogance they found a man concerned with people's thoughts and feelings.

Methodically he sorted through his papers, placing them in tidy sections in his worn leather briefcase. Then he glanced around the office, switched off the desk lamp, and went to the door. He had been working flat out on a special investigation, and things were coming to a head. He felt tired but it was a good tired, born out of hard work—his favorite pastime. It beat sex any day for sheer enjoyment. Not that he didn't enjoy sex; with the right woman it was great, but with Zizi it had been such an obsession. Gimme, Gimme, Gimme. Foxy little Zizi had wanted it every moment of the day—and the moments he wasn't around... well, she had found her own ways of filling time. He should have listened to his mother and never married her in the first place. But who listened to mothers when your cock was on fire?

With Aileen things were different. She was a nice old-fashioned girl, and his mother approved wholeheartedly. "Marry her," she had advised, and that's exactly what he intended to do.

He took one last look around the office and headed for the elevator.

Dario Santangelo bit down hard on his lip to stop himself from crying out. Above him the thin dark-haired boy pumped solidly away. Pain. Pleasure. Exquisite pain. Almost unbearable pleasure. Not quite.... Not yet.... He could silence himself no longer. He screamed, his body shuddering uncontrollably as he climaxed.

The dark boy withdrew his still erect penis at once. Dario rolled over and sighed. The boy stood up and stared down at him.

Dario realized that he didn't even know his name. Another nameless dark-haired youth. So what? He never bothered to see them more than once. Screw it. Screw them. He couldn't help giggling. That was the name of the game, wasn't it?

As he got off the bed and headed for the bathroom, the boy stood silently watching him. Let him watch, let him stare, he wasn't having *him* again.

In the bathroom he locked the door and ran warm water into the bidet. He always liked to wash immediately. It was bliss while it was happening, but after... well, he liked to forget about it, shut it out until the next dark-haired boy appeared

on the horizon. He squatted over the bidet and soaped himself, turning the shower attachment to cold, allowing the icy spray to shrivel up his balls in an invigorating way. It had been so hot all day, so sticky and humid. He hoped the dark-haired boy wouldn't want to stay. Maybe he should give him some money to see him on his way. Twenty dollars usually did the trick.

He put on a terry-cloth bathrobe and glanced at himself in the mirror. He was twenty-six, but no one would ever guess. He looked nineteen, nicely slim, tall, with Teutonic blue eyes and straight blond hair. He looked exactly like his mother; any relationship to father Gino and bitch sister Lucky was purely nonphysical.

He unlocked the bathroom door and walked back into the bedroom. The boy had slid into his dirty jeans and T-shirt and stood with his back to the room looking out the window.

Dario went over to the dresser and selected two ten-dollar bills from a small pile of notes. He never kept much money in the apartment—it wouldn't do to tempt his casual pickups.

He cleared his throat to let the boy know he was there. *Turn around, take your money, and go*, he silently instructed.

The boy turned around slowly. From the bulge in his jeans it looked like he still had an erection.

Dario held up two ten-dollar bills. "Carfare," he said pleasantly.

"Fuck you," the boy replied unpleasantly, and held up a bunch of keys which he jangled threateningly.

Dario felt a tremor of sudden fear. He hated any kind of trouble or violence. This one was going to be trouble; he had somehow known it all along from the very moment the boy had sidled up to him uninvited in the street. Usually it was Dario who made the first approach, for in spite of his blond hair and blue eyes he didn't look like a fag, he looked very straight, and he was always careful to wear the butchest of clothes, walk with a purposeful masculine stride. He had always been ultra careful. With a father like his he couldn't afford not to be.

Slowly he backed toward the door. In his desk in the living room lay his insurance, a small snub-nosed .25-caliber pistol. Guaranteed to frighten the shit out of any casual pickup.

The dark-haired boy laughed. "Where you goin'?" His voice had a peculiar nasal whine.

Dario was nearly at the door.

"Forget the piece," the boy said. "I took care of that, an' these here keys, man, these are *your* keys. You get it? *Your* keys. You know what that means, dontcha? Means we're shut in this here apartment tighter than President Carter's ass. And I bet he's got a tight one—like tight, man."

Slowly the boy reached into the waistband of his jeans and produced a lethal-looking knife. Ten inches of glinting steel.

"You wanted a screwing fagtime," he mocked, "an' I'm gonna give you a good one—a real heavy screwin' you ain't gonna forget in a hurry."

Dario stood perfectly still by the door. His mind was racing. Who was this boy? What did he want from him? What did he have to bribe him with?

And, finally, had Lucky sent him? Had the bitch decided to get rid of him once and for all?

For a woman in her early sixties Carrie Berkely looked sensational; two sets of tennis a day kept her body slim and athletic. Black hair pulled severely back and held with two diamond clips emphasized her facial structure: high cheekbones, slanted eyes, heavy lips. Carrie had never been a pretty woman, when young—hers had been a wild erotic look—but now with the drawn-back hair, understated makeup, and elegant clothes she was a handsome woman. Respectable. Affluent. Controlled. A black lady who had it made all the way to the top in whitey's world.

She was driving a dark green Cadillac Seville, driving slowly and hugging the side of the street looking for a place. Her lips were set in a thin angry line, and that's exactly how she felt—angry. So many years had passed, and all that time her secret had been safe. And now, an unidentifiable voice on the telephone and here she was driving through the New York streets at night—heading for Harlem, heading for a past she had thought was long behind her.

Blackmail was the name of the game. Pure and simple blackmail.

She pulled up at a stoplight and closed her eyes. Briefly she thought of her son, Steven, so successful, so respected. God, if he should ever know the truth.... It did not bear thinking about.

A car blasted her from behind, and she jerked away from the light. She patted her purse lying reassuringly on the seat beside her. It was a nice purse, a Christmas present from Steven. He had impeccable taste. The only slip he had ever made in his entire life was that tramp he had married—Zizi. And now she was out of his life and would not be coming back. Money.... What sweet power it held.

Carrie sighed and slipped her hand inside her purse. The small gun felt cold beneath her palm. More power. The glint of metal, the ultimate deterrent.

She hoped it was not going to be necessary for her to use it. She knew it was. And once more she sighed....

Gino Santangelo was tired. It had been a long flight, and the final ten minutes were dragging. He had fastened his seat belt, extinguished his cigar, and now all he wanted was to plant his feet firmly on good old American soil. He had been away too long. Now he was coming home, and it was a good feeling.

One of the stewardesses whisked past his seat, smiling brightly. "Everything O.K., Mr. Santangelo?" she asked. Every ten minutes it had been the same thing: "Everything all right?" "Can I get you a drink, Mr. Santangelo?" "A pillow?" "A blanket, Mr. Santangelo?" "A magazine?" "Some food, Mr. Santangelo?" The President couldn't have been treated with more consideration.

"I'm fine," Gino said to the girl. She was pretty but a tramp; he had an eye for such things.

"Oh, well"—she giggled—"soon be there."

Yes, they would soon be there. New York. His city. His territory. His *home*. Israel had been pleasant. A restful interlude. But he would sooner have spent his seven-year absence in Italy.

He consulted his watch, a jeweled gold creation given to him by a famous blond movie star ten years earlier. He sighed. Soon he would be home.... Soon he

would have to deal with Lucky and Dario. A little fatherly advice was just what those two needed.

"Can I get you anything, Mr. Santangelo?" Another stewardess was bobbing past. He shook his head.

Soon.... Soon....

Lucky left Costa's office and stopped by the ladies' room in the corridor. She studied her face in the mirror and was not happy with what she saw. She looked tired and drawn, with dark circles under her eyes. What she needed was a vacation and a suntan, but that's not what she would get, not until things were settled.

Carefully she applied more makeup: blusher, lip gloss, eye shadow. Then she shook her tangled mass of jet curls and placed it with her fingers.

She was wearing jeans, tucked into boots, and a pale blue silk shirt with most of the buttons casually undone. Her breasts were clearly visible through the material. She took some gold chains from her shoulder bag and slung them around her neck; then she added two thick gold bangles and a pair of large hoop earrings.

She was now ready to go out on the town. The last thing she needed was to go home to an empty apartment.

She left the ladies' room and buzzed for the elevator impatiently. Her mobile face was creased in a frown. She tapped the heel of her two-hundred-dollar canvas boots in a nervous rhythm. Costa was getting old. And where the hell did his loyalties lie anyway? Certainly not with her—much as he might insist they did. She had been a fool not to see it earlier.

She glanced at her Cartier tank watch. Nine thirty. Two wasted hours with a senile old man. "Shit!" The word slipped from between her lips, and she looked around to see if anyone had heard. But of course it was too late for anyone to be there. The huge office building was deserted.

The elevator arrived and she stepped inside. Her mind was racing. If Dear Daddy actually *was* on his way home, what would happen? Could she work things out with him? Would he be prepared to listen to her? Maybe.... After all, she was a Santangelo, wasn't she, and the only one of Gino's two children with any balls? In seven years she had managed to achieve so very much. It had not been easy. Costa had been a great help. But would he continue to be on her side with the imminent return of Gino?

Lucky frowned even more deeply. Fuck it. Gino. Her father. The only man alive who had ever told her what to do and got away with it. But she wasn't a little girl any more, and Gino was just going to have to realize the fact that he was no longer boss, No sirree. She wasn't about to give it all up. Power—the ultimate aphrodisiac. She was in control. She planned to stay in control. And he was just going to have to accept that fact.

Steven Berkely did not even look up from his newspaper when Lucky got in the elevator. Eye contact was always a mistake, it led to mundane conversations like "Isn't it hot today" or "Nice weather we're having." Elevator conversations were a total waste of time. Lucky took no notice of him either. She was thinking of the problems that lay ahead.

Steven continued to read the paper, and Lucky was busy with her own thoughts, when, with a sudden stomach-lifting jolt, the elevator ground to a stop mid-floors, and the lights went out, plunging them both into inky blackness.

Dario and the dark-haired boy moved at the same time. But Dario was quicker; he slid out of the bedroom and slammed the door shut in his adversary's face. Fortunately the key was in the lock, and he turned it without hesitation. Now *he* had the boy locked in the bedroom. And the boy had *him* locked in the apartment. Dario cursed his ultra-safe security system. He had only thought in terms of keeping people out. It had never occurred to him that someone would be able to double-lock him into his own apartment. They were both trapped, damn it. What could he do, call the police? That would be a laugh. They would have to break the door down, and then what? The humiliation of having to admit that a crazy transient lay was locked in his bedroom with a knife—and worse, a male lay. They would know he was gay—and oh, God, if it got back to his father....

No. Dario had no plans to call the police.

Of course, Lucky would know exactly what to do in a situation like this. She knew exactly what to do in any situation. But how could he call upon her when she might have planted the boy in the first place? Screw Lucky. Cool. Calm. Assured. More balls than a tennis court. *Screw Lucky.*

A vicious kick against the bedroom door spurred Dario into immediate action. He checked his desk and ascertained with horror that his .25 pistol was indeed missing. So not only did the boy have a knife, he had *his* gun, and it was possible that any second he would shoot the lock off the bedroom door and come walking out.

He felt a shiver of fear run through his body. It was at that precise moment that all the lights in the apartment went off, and darkness enveloped everything. Dario was trapped, locked into deadly blackness with a maniac stranger.

Carrie Berkely felt sure she was lost. The streets of Harlem—once so familiar—seemed harsh and remote. Locked into the air-conditioned comfort of her Cadillac, she looked out into streets of despair. Opened hydrants gushed water onto sweaty sidewalks, and lethargic groups of people slouched against walls or squatted on the steps of broken-down houses.

The Cadillac had been a mistake. She should have taken a cab. But everyone knew cabs would no longer venture into the streets of Harlem—especially not in the midst of a heat wave when the natives were hot, angry, and restless.

She spotted a supermarket and drew into the adjoining parking lot. Leave the car. Walk. After all, there were too many people on the street for it not to be safe. And besides which, she still possessed the best insurance of all—a black face. She could ask directions at the checkout counter. It was best to leave the car anyway, although she *had* taken the precaution of obscuring the plates.

She parked the car and walked into the market. Black or not, she was getting stared at. Too late she realized she just didn't blend in any more. She looked expensive, smelled expensive. The diamond clips in her hair, the diamond earrings, the diamond solitaire ring she had forgotten to remove.

Two youths fell into step behind her. She quickened her pace. There was a girl at the checkout busying herself with picking her teeth.



"Can you tell me—" Carrie began. She never finished her sentence. Before she could, the entire place was plunged into darkness.

Air turbulence had never bothered Gino. In fact he rather enjoyed the feel of being buffeted around. If he shut his eyes he could imagine he was on a motorboat in rough seas or driving a pickup truck over rocky terrain. He could never understand people who were frightened of flying.

He glanced across the aisle at a thin blond woman traveling alone. She was desperately clutching a small hip flask, taking long gulps of whatever alcoholic beverage it held.

He smiled comfortingly. "It's only a summer storm, nothin' to worry about. We'll be landing before you know it."

The woman lowered her flask. She was middle-aged and well dressed. Probably quite a looker in her time. Gino prided himself on being an expert when it came to women's looks—after all, he had had the best, the crème de la crème: movie stars, showgirls, society dames. Yes, he knew a thing or two about women.

"I... I can't take all this bumping about," she confessed. "I absolutely hate it."

"Move over here and I'll hold your hand if it'll make you feel any better," he suggested.

The woman jumped at this chance of reassuring physical contact and undid her seat belt. She hesitated for only a moment, a tentative, "Are you sure?" And without waiting for an answer she was next to him, strapped in, digging long tense fingernails into the palm of his hand.

He didn't mind. Hell—if it made her feel better.

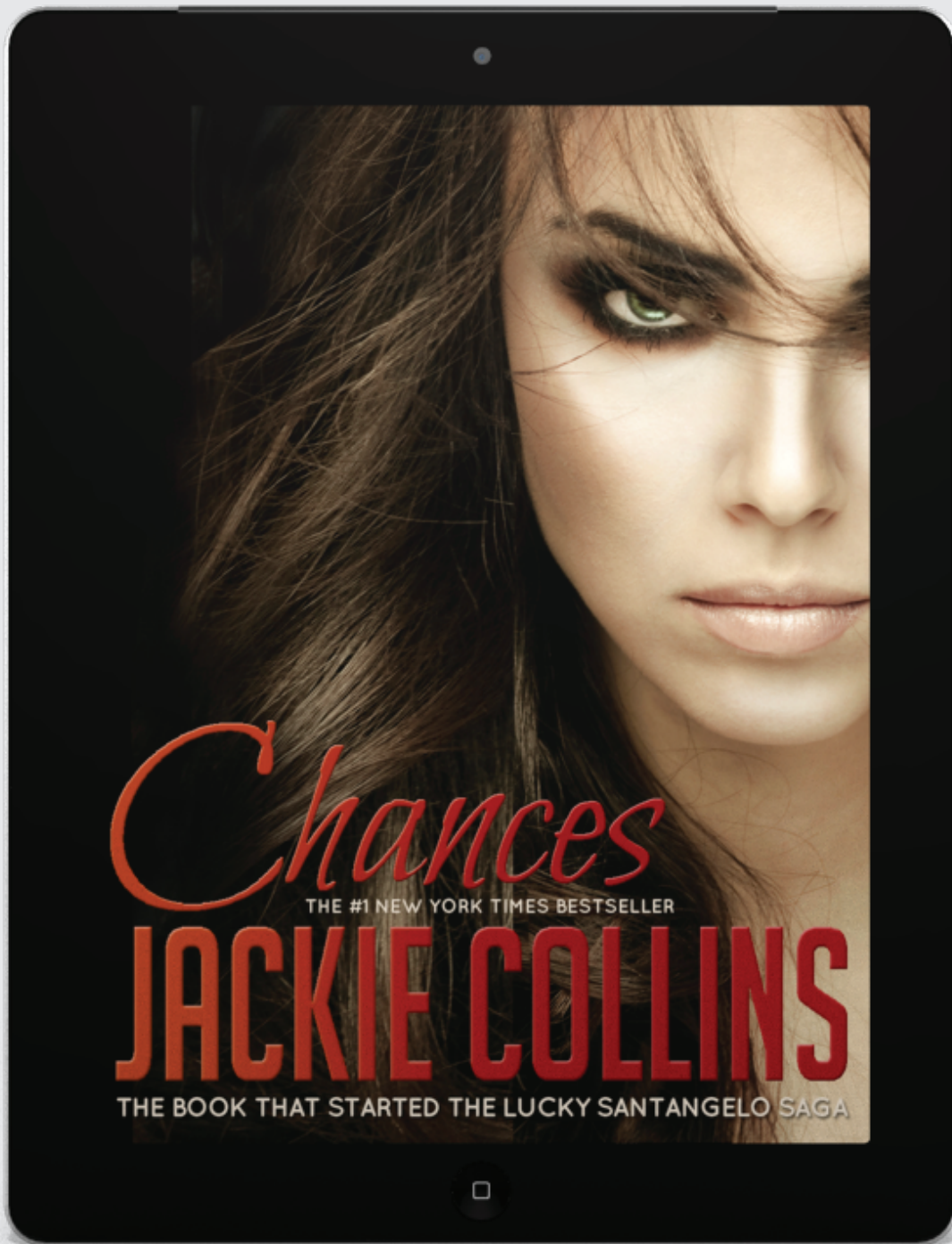
"You must think I'm awfully stupid," she said, "but just holding on to someone makes me feel so much more relaxed."

"Yeh, I know what you mean." He looked out the window at the sea of lights spread out below. New York City. What a beautiful sight. "Hey!" he exclaimed suddenly.

"What?" asked the woman tensely.

"Nothin'." Gino kept his voice nonchalant. He didn't want her any more nervous than she already was. And Christ—would she be nervous if she'd just seen what he had!

New York had vanished before his very eyes. One moment a dazzling fairy city of lights, the next—nothing. A sea of blackness. Jeeze! He had heard of homecomings, but this was ridiculous.



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