

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



L.U.C.I. in the Sky
Chris Fox

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About the Author

Chris Fox was a partner in a New York strategy consulting company. He worked around the world with clients such as Citicorp, JVC, and Heineken, and then decided to become a fiction writer. To combat writer's block, he sometimes dogfights in a World War II era USAF Trainer and takes his NSX onto the skidpad at various racetracks. He is currently working on his second novel.

L.U.C.I. in the Sky

Chris Fox



To Carolyn

TO MY CREW

COMBAT:

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PART I

Maria's Game

ONE

IN MY DREAMS, I performed nightly as Lucretia Borgia's wine-taster.

A dream analyst might call it the 'day residue' from a stressful job. Anyway, my Lucretia dream repeated the same story every night.

I sat in the court of the Borgias in sixteenth-century Florence, facing that poisonous ruling family around the banquet table. The server would hand me the wine goblet. Lucretia always watched me carefully, her dark eyes soaked with Mediterranean cunning. Her courtesans wore dark beards and ermine hats. And they rattled their gold utensils. I was their Monday Night Football. Lucretia's brother Cesare Borgia and his adviser Niccolo Machiavelli sat together. They stared at my wine goblet, nudging each other and smirking.

I always raised Lucretia's goblet with a casual flip. Then I would sip her wine and swallow.

All conversation stopped. The Borgias and their guests sucked in their breath. A wine-taster develops a sense of timing. After a long pause, I would lick my lips.

'Scratchy for a Brunello, but it won't kill you,' I would say to Lucretia, or something like that.

Then I would press the goblet into her jeweled hand. The courtesans exploded into lilting Italian. But some around the great table always looked happier than others.

Every night I had that dream. And every night, I managed to survive the wine-tasting - until the fifteenth of March. In the dark hours of that Sunday morning, I dreamt that I sipped from Lucretia's wine goblet and the ritual became mortal.

At the first taste, I knew. A sovereign's job is to survive. A wine-taster's is to do the opposite when necessary.

The poison speared my tongue with needles. It was an odd taste, like liquid cactus. My throat turned to flame. I coughed to stop it, but the sly juice trickled down to scorch my lungs. Slipping down in my chair, I clutched at my chest.

I was jolted rudely awake.

My ribs felt squeezed by a huge pair of tongs. My heart hammered wildly. Pain ripped open my body. I oozed sweat and I couldn't breathe. Could this be my first heart attack a decade or two early? My eyelids burst open, breaking a sleepy crust.

Then I blinked several times. Somebody sat on top of me in bed.

I knew the woman on my stomach couldn't be Lucretia Borgia. Her legs felt too strong, locking tight over my abdomen. No sixteenth-century woman could be that pumped.

I saw a leather and lace dress. A Gaultier contraption, making fashion angles around her trim body. Her long hair was a mass of pillow-ready curls. Only one feature civilized her untamed goddess look. Tortoiseshell glasses of the sort that people who stare compulsively at computer screens wear, perched halfway down her nose.

She tapped me on the shoulder with a flashlight, shiny and black.

'Good morning, Terry,' she purred.

I was pinned down in my bed by this intense, almost painfully hot young woman. She straddled my stomach with legs like pistons. I caught a whiff of something unsavory. From my own body? Yes. I still wore the clothes I had on the evening before. As I stirred, her heat and energy rushed under the wool of my suit and over my skin.

'Good *morning*, Terry,' she repeated, not quite as warmly.

I struggled to answer her. This sort of thing happened to me infrequently. Well, never. I just didn't throw those heat-

seeking pheromones around. My work always came first.

Now my heart, denied for so long, almost skipped with infatuation. I studied the woman on top of me, yearning to believe that I had just gotten lucky. But all my instincts told me the opposite. I had actually gotten very unlucky. I just couldn't figure out exactly how.

My mind felt glued to the floor.

Tunnel vision, Terry. Focus.

I chipped away. Slowly, I could see the broken shards of the previous evening. Midnight, after dinner with a client. I sat in this same now-rank suit, then fresh and razor-pressed, in an oversized leather chair.

Yes. The martini bar on Irving Place.

I sat admiring a post-modern-style painting. It was a bug's-eye view of a very plump, naked woman lying in the grass, shadows framing her body.

As I studied the painting, the woman now crunching my stomach appeared on the periphery of my vision.

I have excellent situational awareness, especially for those rare moments when beauty and grace hover nearby.

I watched this woman without letting her know.

She wore the sensuous Gaultier dress, but not the heavy tortoiseshell glasses. Her nose was on the small side, with nostrils that quivered very slightly like a rabbit's. Under the sleek lights of the martini bar, her dark curls tumbled over her shoulders. I could feel her eyes as a sunlamp's glow against my face.

'Massimo Colla,' she said, with her eyes on the painting.

A soft drink?

No. She was telling me the name of the artist who had painted the naked woman in the grass.

'He works in Siena,' she said, still focused on the painting.

I finally turned to her. Her uncanny face pointed toward me, tilted up and smirking. Her skin had the uniformly warm-toned moist glow of spoiled youth, and almost animal-

alert turquoise eyes that sparkled like the Caribbean. Her trim body shifted with languid little moves.

'That's my favorite part of Italy,' I told her. I could see from her pleased look that my face must have lit up for her. I did love Siena, a medieval town in Tuscany rich in art and porcini mushrooms the size of hubcaps.

'Why did you leave?' she asked.

'You never leave Tuscany,' I vaguely remember answering. She told me her name was Maria Haymeyer.

We soon moved to a small couch in the bar, to sit close and talk. She spoke so softly, drawing me out like a gopher dying to burrow out of its hole to bask in her sun. I felt such a rush of euphoria, confiding feelings that seldom shake loose.

I told her my plan to retire in one year at age thirty-six. After my workaholic frenzy of a business career, I desperately wanted to find the soulmate I had denied myself. A woman of fire and subtle intelligence who I could share my life with, except for a few historical details. She would be the other half of my couple. She would help me begin my real life. We would marry in Montalcino, a medieval hill town, in the courtyard of a stone church on the hill. Shafts of light would break through the morning mist, painting the meadows green and gold as we spoke our vows.

I told Maria Haymeyer I had no idea what my wife would look like yet, but I could hear her laugh. Maria gave me a soft and cozy smile then.

Now she wasn't smiling. She was using her buffed legs to pin me to my bed and giving me the expression a biology student gives a dead frog.

I closed my eyes. What else had I told this woman when I was swollen with euphoria?

Not much. Just how I wanted to raise our children in the pastoral sanity of Italy's meadows and cypress trees. And why I dreamt about showing them the skies that inspired

Renaissance artists. And where I would teach them how to fly a plane because we needed to soar with the birds to taste the sweetness of earth.

Believe me, I never talk that way. Especially to a woman I've just met.

The longer she and I spoke at the martini bar, the more stupid euphoria I felt. Then my view of Maria began needing serious adjustment on my part to remain level. Suddenly, the whole room became blurry and diagonal. I must have passed out.

And I only drank one glass of wine.

So how did she get me to my place? I huffed as her taut leg muscles almost crushed my abdomen.

'I'm interested,' I told Maria Haymeyer. 'Just let me breathe for a minute.'

'Forget about sex, Terry,' she said. 'This is a business meeting. I need you to do something for me.'

Her voice meant it, not at all intimate. Now it was rapid and high-strung, like the kids who come to fix your computer. With her sultry, defined body, and that wired voice, Maria could only be described as a hot nerd. Her eyes were much sharper now. They burned through her lenses. I thought I could feel a space just over my nose getting hot, like I was a bug under a magnifying glass on a sunny day.

Focus!

I glanced at the dark outlines of my own bedroom. The sixteenth-century Florentine wall frescos reassured me. Funny how your mind lets shadows of your past successes prop you up, even when they're irrelevant to the situation at hand. Growing used to the dark, I looked out my window. A few lights burned in other highrise buildings, a friendly constellation. I started to think semi-clearly.

Business meeting?

I struggled to recall everything I could about what Maria had said the night before.

I thought of nothing to help me puzzle out her intentions.

In the best case, she could be the world's most assertive young entrepreneur. I was a venture capitalist. A lot of people with fledgling companies wanted money from Starcross-Voyager Venture Capital, the fund I ran with four partners that invested in new businesses.

In the worst case, of course, she could be some Manhattan variety of designer succubus. She surprised men in their beds. Then she killed them.

'If sex is off the table, Maria, maybe . . .'

'Shut up, Terry,' she explained. 'For the record, I apologize for drugging your wine. But I had to talk to you here in private.'

Her apology sounded sincere.

'That would have been easier than you thought,' I told her. When I tried to sit up, my chest tingled in an uncomfortable way.

'Don't move,' she said. 'I don't want to jolt you again.'

She tapped hard on my breastbone with the black flashlight. I recognized it for the first time as a stun gun. It looked like it could throw a real industrial-strength jolt to paralyze me. My nerve endings seared.

'Did you just shoot me with that?' I started to get irate, then eased off as her finger tightened on the trigger.

'You're a sound sleeper,' she explained, 'and we don't have much time.'

'We don't?' Not good. 'So how about some coffee? I'll make it.'

'No, Terry. First we need to clarify our business relationship. I'll tell you exactly what I need from you. Frankly, your own options are limited.'

'I'm all ears.'

'A defense contractor named Ted Devlin stole something from me. You already know who he is. I need you to get evidence of his theft.'

'Teflon Ted Devlin? I only know what I read in the *Wall Street Journal*.'

Ted Devlin was a major player in military contracting. He headed Linnet/TVR, one of three big aerospace companies competing to win the new Joint Strike Fighter contract from the Pentagon. The other two were Lockheed and Boeing. It would be the biggest Pentagon contract in history, worth a trillion dollars in revenues over time to the company that won it. That was a 'T' with a dozen zeros behind it.

'So what do you think Ted Devlin stole from you?'

'An intelligent chip for a warplane. I call it LUCI. He stole it to use for his Joint Strike Fighter prototype to win the Pentagon contract.'

I needed to keep calm while I wrapped my mind around this claim. Flaky didn't touch it. Military aircraft are designed by huge teams of aeronautical engineers and weapons specialists. They work in places like California and Texas. They're not single women living in Manhattan who know what a Gaultier dress is. And they don't slink around martini bars on Irving Place to drug and torture innocent men. Maria's claim made me laugh out loud. Or it would have, if she wasn't holding a stun gun to my neck.

'You designed an intelligent chip. Ted Devlin stole it for his new plane.' I bit my lip as if mulling it over.

'Yes.' I could see her eyes behind the thick lenses ferreting out my skepticism. She spoke more slowly as though explaining a dense concept to a small child. 'I was studying to be a game designer. I created an advanced microchip for a Joint Strike Fighter computer game. It was just a *game*, Terry.' Her wide eyes behind the glasses didn't budge from mine or blink. 'Ted Devlin stole my microchip because he could see it would make his real fighter a lot smarter. So he would win the contract.'

'I see.' *Psycho*. Her thigh muscles tightened on my ribcage as I merely thought that. 'So you did it all by yourself?'

'That's right. I kept up with the JSF competition.' She used the acronym for the Joint Strike Fighter. I hated those. 'The prototype Ted Devlin was building was barely working. He

would have lost. So I showed him how he could use my microchip to turn his dumb prototype into an invisible fighter with non-lethal weapons.'

Oh, sweet freaking Jesus. My mind didn't boggle. No, it just blew out to the stratosphere and I had to snap it back. Non-lethal weapons? Where to begin?

'Don't you see a marketing problem with a non-lethal fighter?' I decided to ask first. A fangless jet fighter would be about as useful as a sixty-million-dollar lawn dwarf.

Her nostrils quivered. 'That's just your age and testosterone speaking, Terry. Do you know that most of the ultra-top-secret projects in the Pentagon right now are exploring non-lethal weaponry?'

'If they're ultra-top-secret, how would I know about them?'

She wasn't listening. 'They have contractors working on weapons like sticky foam to stop aircraft in flight and smart lasers instead of explosives. Think of a laser that can tattoo a US flag on to a terrorist's forehead from five thousand feet. In color.'

'What a fun thought.' It was, admittedly, but I wasn't in the mood.

'We are becoming more civilized, Terry. Americans do not want to turn on CNN and see us killing people any more. Not even enemy soldiers. It makes us feel like bullies and it outrages the international community.'

I gave up. 'I don't want to outrage anybody. How did Ted steal your idea?'

'Two years ago I was a PhD student in computer science at Stanford. I was doing my doctoral thesis on "Advanced Heuristics Through Superconductivity in Game Platforms".'

I almost stifled a yawn, then felt her stun gun prod at the whiskers on my neck and paid attention.

'To keep it simple,' she continued drily, 'Ted Devlin saw how my chip could make his Joint Strike Fighter about one hundred times smarter than Boeing's or Lockheed's.'

'That bastard.' Oh-kay. 'So how did Ted Devlin steal your chip?'

'From my apartment. And my disks. They had the recipe on them.'

'Didn't you patent it?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'I was naive.'

'How did he see your chip in the first place, Maria?'

'Seven months ago, I sent Ted Devlin a sample on disk. I marked it Personal and Confidential. He called me himself a week later. He said he'd already made lunch reservations. I should fly down to Long Beach the next day.'

'And?'

'I came and sat there. He auditioned me in the restaurant in the Long Beach Hyatt. He stared at my body, but managed to ask me a *lot* of questions about my chip at the same time. That's when I showed it to him. He told me he couldn't use it in his Joint Strike Fighter program. It was too risky for the Pentagon people, who were, in his words, suck-ups with stars and bars, and not a testicle among 'em bigger than a snow pea. But he promised to have his project engineers review the disks. He said maybe they could develop my game design for Sega or Nintendo for next Christmas. They want to be in consumer markets because trying to please the Pentagon's driving him crazy, he said.'

'So you just gave him your disks.'

'I just *told* you,' she sounded exasperated, 'it didn't occur to me that the head of Linnet/TVR would steal a student's work.'

'Right. And you didn't have back-up disks?'

Her lips quivered. 'No. I flew back home. The next day when I was at school, my apartment was broken into. All my work was gone. When I called Ted Devlin, his secretary blew me off. He wouldn't even get on the phone.'

‘Didn’t you show your design to anybody else?’ I asked her. ‘Your professors?’

She wagged her head. ‘I was working by myself when Ted Devlin robbed me, and I took a time-out. Perhaps you could call it a nervous breakdown. I had to take a leave of absence from my doctoral program because I couldn’t turn in my thesis. I finally took a grunt job at Intech.’

‘Couldn’t you rewrite your program?’

She sucked in her lower lip. ‘Even after I had it all worked out, it took me six years to write, Terry.’

‘Why did you call it Lucy?’

‘L.U.C.I.,’ she spelled it out. ‘It stands for Light Ultra-Chip Intelligence.’

‘Clever,’ I lied. Another stupid acronym.

She stared hard for a moment. Maria had the eerie perceptions of the acutely aware or insane. I couldn’t fake much with her, but I wondered how much of this story she was faking with me.

‘Okay, how do you know for sure he stole it?’

‘Six months later, I read that he was working on a radical design change for the JSF prototype. Their code name for it was LUCI. Obviously Ted Devlin used my design.’

‘Obviously.’ I managed to nod reassuringly without denting my chin on her stun gun. ‘It sounds like you need a good lawyer.’

‘I already found one.’ She mentioned a firm in Washington that was big, expensive and connected.

‘And?’

‘The lawyer I talked to looked into it. Then he called me and said no thanks. He said he spoke to Ted Devlin himself. Devlin told him he gave me a courtesy interview and didn’t want to pursue my idea. He also said I was just accusing him to be a nuisance and extort money.’

‘Why would that stop your lawyer?’

‘Because the medication I was taking didn’t help.’

‘Medication?’

‘Prozac. I was depressed after Ted stole my game. I went to a psychiatrist. Anyway, the lawyer chose not to believe me.’

‘I wonder why.’

She glared. ‘Because it was my word against Ted Devlin’s. Who would you believe? That’s why I need evidence, Terry. That’s why I need you.’

‘For what?’ I asked her. ‘You’re an appealing victim. And your story makes sense, in a way, because Ted Devlin steals other people’s ideas every day. It’s called Management 101. But I can’t do much about that.’

‘You have to,’ she told me with an urgency I felt through my suit.

‘I don’t know Ted Devlin.’ I wriggled my right leg, which was falling asleep. ‘And even if you found evidence, how could he admit he stole his radical new design from a college student? His career’s on the line.’

‘Not any more. He’ll win. The Pentagon will want my design. Not Boeing’s, not Lockheed’s. My chip will let his plane stop a war before it starts.’

‘Then maybe you should go to the Pentagon yourself,’ I told her with a straight face. ‘State your case, give them enough information to raise suspicions.’

‘Don’t patronize me, Terry.’ She looked tired. ‘Nobody important is going to believe me. So I’m asking you to get into Linnet/TVR and take a good look at their JSF prototype.’

Did I say Maria Haymeyer? Maria Haywire would be more like it.

‘Maria,’ I measured each word, ‘I thought you were going to tell me you had a product and needed money to develop it. Then maybe I could help you. That’s what I do. I’m a venture capitalist. I sit around conference rooms and talk about how start-up companies can get financing. But I can’t go sneaking around top-secret military aircraft, even if I wanted to. I wouldn’t know where to start.’

‘Really? When you were a first lieutenant in the Air Force ten years ago, what was your job?’

I swallowed softly. ‘I flew an F-16 fighter.’

‘And when you were promoted to captain?’ She waited. I felt something like a gas pain. My temples throbbed from wasted mental effort, wondering how she got access to my Air Force records.

‘I flew another fighter during the Gulf War.’

‘Yes. A Darkwing F-118 stealth fighter,’ she chirped. ‘Which happened to be the Linnet/TVR stealth fighter. I selected you very carefully for this job, Terry. For instance, you do know Ted Devlin.’

‘I met him once with a lot of other pilots,’ I admitted. ‘During my Darkwing training. Stealth planes were new then. Nobody knew if they’d really work in combat. Ted came to our base to tell us they would.’

I recalled the feeling of shaking Ted’s hand, the power in his grip. Teflon Ted Devlin wore a buzz cut and had one glass eye. I remember enjoying him more than I’d expected to.

‘Maria, okay. I was a fighter pilot. But I’m not a spy.’

‘I’ll admit you’re no James Bond.’

‘Thank you.’

She pushed the business end of her stun gun firmly into my chest with one hand and reached beside her with the other. I raised my head. Like a true conspiracy nut, she actually had a beat-up accordion file next to her on my bed. She pulled something small and flat out of it.

‘Do you recognize this?’

She dangled a business card in front of my face. I peered at it in the semi-darkness. I could make out the picture of a bird in flight. A stiletto-sleek bird. It was black with a small red sac under its neck. Below the bird, a single line read:

Fragata, 39-6-31-350

'If it's a phone number, the code is for Rome.' I couldn't figure out what she wanted me to say.

'Only about a dozen people in the world have this card,' she told me.

'Really? So what is it?'

'That's a picture of a *fragata* bird, Spanish for frigate, found in the Galapagos Islands, off Ecuador. It's a pirate. It survives by stealing food from other birds in flight. Scientists call that behavior klepto-parasitic.'

'And it interests you because . . .'

'This is the business card of an industrial spy known as Fragata. His little joke. He's klepto-parasitic too.'

Maria put the card down and lifted a piece of paper. It seemed to be a Xerox copy blown up from a news article. I made out *Time* in the margin. It *was* a news article, with a photograph of a business memo that had an airline logo on top.

'Can you read it?' she asked me.

'A light would help.'

Pressing her stun gun to my Adam's apple, she reached over to turn on the light by my bed. She didn't take her eyes off mine. The sudden light forced me to squint. I saw in her black hair natural traces of golden blonde. I could only guess at her parentage. Definitely Latin, but with some Irish or Scottish in there.

I took the piece of paper from her and peered at the memo, trying to decipher it quickly.

'It looks like a Sunshine Airlines document,' I told her.

'An internal e-mail.' She tossed her curls. 'It's the reason they're out of business now. The industrial spy who calls himself Fragata stole evidence exposing Sunshine Airlines as a stock-market scam. Old planes, bad maintenance, an accident waiting to happen. But also enough earnings to make a killing on Wall Street for the crooks who ran it. Fragata buried the company. Some say he did it to save

lives. But maybe he was just paid by a competitor. Is that cynical of me?’

‘Probably not. Just the way of the world.’

‘Look at the date.’

I anticipated her question. ‘Yes. Sunshine Airlines came to me for financing when they were starting up. I turned them down. I didn’t like their operation. But that doesn’t mean . . .’

‘Shush.’

I glanced unobtrusively at my watch – 5.06 a.m. It would be dawn soon.

‘Have you seen this before?’ Maria held another page in my face. It displayed the logo for Happy Beefburger, a big fast-food chain owned by a French conglomerate.

‘I guess it’s the recipe for Happy Beefburger’s Secret Sauce.’

‘Reportedly stolen by Fragata for two million dollars.’

‘Maria . . .’ I shook my head, exasperated.

She waved a whole handful of papers in my face. ‘I could go on, Terry, but I need to find Fragata right now. Any ideas?’

She waited for me to answer.

The air in my bedroom seemed unbearably dense. I tried to draw it into my nostrils and breathe deeply. Sweat dropped from my forehead into my eyes, a salty sting.

‘You really think I can snap my fingers and produce an industrial spy for you?’

‘Yes.’

‘Look, Maria, a woman should be free to design a warplane without somebody stealing it. But I can’t help you. Yes, I was once an Air Force pilot who would set a rival’s hair on fire for fun. I was young. Now I’m a thirty-five-year-old financial guy with no contacts whatsoever in industrial espionage. I’m sorry.’

‘I need Fragata, Terry.’ Calm. Not listening.

'If you want him so badly, why don't you just call the number on his card?' I moved my arms to test her grip on the stun gun.

Then I heard a snap like a rubber band. A painful jolt inflamed my chest. Shock waves radiated all the way up to my hair and down to my toenails. My body lunged upward. Her legs straddled my bucking ribs like a rodeo rider.

The jolt ended suddenly, but not the awful feeling. My body collapsed on the bed shuddering, drenched with sweat. My fingers clutched at my mattress.

'Don't make me hit you where it's really going to hurt,' she said.

Horrified, I reflexively looked down to my groin. She frowned, then understood and wrinkled her nose in disgust.

'I'm talking about your money.'

She held a color copy in front of my face. It was a picture of a small maroon folder, like a passport.

'This is a Swiss bankbook. It's for account number 311.289.CB, United Bank of Lucerne. Look familiar?'

I bit my tongue to keep from groaning.

TWO

'A WEEK AGO,' Maria said, 'this account recorded a balance of 26,231,673 US dollars.'

'So?' I tried not to move.

'That was what Fragata made during his career as an industrial spy. All hidden away. It's payable to the bearer of this bank book with the password "Gumby". What a wily, urbane spy Fragata turned out to be, choosing a claymation figure for his password. Or maybe it was the name of Fragata's little Scottish terrier when he was a boy.'

She was wrong. Gumby was a Jack Russell terrier.

'Where did you find that bankbook?'

'It was in plain sight under the floor of your Los Angeles apartment. Your bankbook is safe. But there's one little thing.'

She held up another color copy, a more recent shot of my bankbook.

It recorded a withdrawal of \$26,231,000 three days ago, leaving a balance of \$673.

Gas and burning nausea filled my throat. Then a creepy cold sensation lit my nerve endings. I shook. Only my scalp still felt warm. In fact, boiling. I counted down from five.

'I don't see how that affects me,' I said.

'Don't worry. It's in a safe place. And if you do what I ask, you'll get it all back. I'm not in this for the money.'

'Maria, I'm not Fragata. Can I sit up now?'

'Okay.'

Focus. Lose sight, lose the fight.

'I need a shower,' I told her honestly.

'Go ahead. You can think about what I've told you.'

She watched without interest as I padded barefoot in my crumpled suit to the bathroom and closed the door behind me. I stumbled to the toilet, where I collapsed on the marble tile and threw up for several minutes, hugging the cold porcelain. I wondered if a human being could commit suicide using a toilet fixture.

I gazed at the wall feeling oddly detached.

Like my bedroom, the bathroom walls have a topcoat of *intonaco*, a rough plaster found in the Tuscan countryside. I installed it myself for only twice the time and money it would have cost to hire a professional.

Finally, I stood on wobbly legs, grabbing the cool marble of my vanity. I gargled with mouthwash that felt like razor blades, and brushed my teeth to remove the acrid taste in my mouth. It didn't help.

I picked up the wireless phone I kept there for emergencies. Not surprisingly, Maria Haymeyer had already found and disabled it.

Then I stripped off my ripe clothes. Naked and shivering, I stepped into my shower and stood under hot water for thirty seconds. I turned on the cold water to revive myself before getting out and putting on a thick black bathrobe.

I studied myself in the mirror.

What a horrifying reflection of feral panic. The disturbed glint in my eye. The skin drained of a living person's color. Hair lank and damp on my sweating forehead. I sprinkled water on my face and finger-combed my hair back until some of my color returned. I needed to summon intense discipline. First, I would make a threat assessment. Then I could seek information and review my options.

Collecting myself, I first relaxed my haunted face. A face that, if I saw it on another person - and at that moment I wished I could - I would have read clearly as 'Air Force brat born of foreign love affair'.

My dad, a fighter pilot from New York, met my mother while stationed at Aviano Air Force Base in Italy. She was a

fashion model from Milan.

It took all my will to restore the appearance of my father's calm eyes. I'd inherited his eyes and light blonde hair. I had clean features, like his, with some Italian styling from my mother. Most people described me as 'friendly and open'. It always stunned me how easily people trust superficial traits. If I looked like a criminal, I might have been forced to live and die a venture capitalist.

Instead, I had begun moonlighting as an industrial spy seven years before.

Among a handful of people scattered around the world, I built a reputation for honesty, narrowly defined. There were two kinds of people in my business - those who pretended to know a lot more than they did, and those who pretended to know a lot less. I joined group two and became a trusted thief. That was how I had, until very recently, grown comfortably rich.

I managed a harsh, brittle laugh. Maria Haymeyer had pierced my veil of secrecy just when I planned to terminate Fragata's industrial espionage career.

It was my love life. Or lack of one.

I met dynamic businesswomen every day. Gorgeous, vital women full of snap and cunning, sleek in their Armani suits across conference tables. You can't imagine how I longed to fall in love with a woman like that.

But my career prevented me from doing anything about it. Intellectual curiosity in a partner? Please. The lies about my schedule alone, the time unaccounted for, would have collapsed in days under a bright woman's scrutiny.

When I was a twenty-something fighter pilot, I admit to behaving like Pinocchio with a woody loose on Pleasure Island. I didn't care. When I grew up, I cared a lot. But I had already started spying and had to choose between career and soulmate. I could find comfort in women of slower synapses, or I could sleep alone.

Dates depressed me. Sweaty workouts in my gym with women named Kimmie or Stacey. Dinner in noisy restaurants to discourage chat. Double-safe sex. And maybe a movie in my media room, murdering time watching those '90s romantic comedies starring cast members from *Friends*.

By the time I reached my mid-thirties, my soul screamed for a real woman. I wanted children. I wanted conversation. But to retire from my secret life, I needed a nest egg. And I needed one the size of a dinosaur egg because I would never be able to use my special skills again. My cover as a venture capitalist bored me. I let my partners do most of the work and keep practically all the money. In my last year as Fragata, I calculated I would need to earn at least another twenty million. My corporate clients could afford it.

Secure with wheelbarrows full of money, I could find that elusive Eighth Wonder of the World, my soulmate. We would settle in Tuscany, just like I told Maria over my single glass of wine. *In vino veritas*, when you add a little sodium amytal or whatever she did.

I had such dreams.

Now I stood on the stinging cold tiles of my bathroom, broke, still clammy under my bathrobe, outsmarted by a woman I'd never wanted to meet. I felt a wave of bittersweet, short-term nostalgia for my life before Maria.

I opened the door and poked my head out into my bedroom.

She had gone somewhere. I left my bedroom past an oil-painted fresco - a sixteenth-century painting of Florentine bankers. Those merchant princes were the venture capitalists of their day. They looked so full of themselves, smirking gleefully in red capes with adoring angels hovering over their heads telling them how smart they were. All were ruined a few years later when Edward III of England defaulted on all his debts.

I never liked it particularly. But I kept it as a colorful reminder of fortune's whimsy. Now I could take it down.

Maria had made its lesson obsolete.

I found her sitting at my breakfast table.

With her long neck and nicely tilted chin, she stared through my big windows at Central Park. My compact penthouse on Central Park West occupied a corner of a 1930s highrise apartment building called the San Lorenzo.

Maria's lips parted slightly as she studied Central Park through the big window. She seemed to be quietly vibrating. I wondered what thrilled her, Central Park in the first early blush of spring, or how much the apartment may have cost me. I thought neither. Her eyes danced with their own calculations.

I smelled strong coffee brewing in the kitchen.

'I made us espresso,' she said.

As I entered the kitchen, my bare feet felt the sting of the cold marble floor. I seethed at the thought of her using my espresso machine that now gasped and hissed, ready to give up its rich nectar for her. I poured the coffee myself into two cups.

Cesare Borgia would have poisoned her. Not my style. And whoever helped her steal my money must still be lurking. She couldn't have done it alone, any more than she could design a smart chip for a fighter.

She twisted her lemon slice and sipped from the cup. Her pouty lips made a little circle, like a shiny red donut.

I joined her at the table.

'Maria, whatever you think you know about me, here's the truth. I'm not Fragata. The money you stole was my nest egg. I accumulated it over my business career and invested wisely—'

She interrupted with a biting laugh. 'You call that investing? It was earning four per cent in the stingiest bank in Switzerland. I'm making five per cent for you where it's parked now. Some financial guy you are. You could have chosen a more credible cover.'

My eyes went hard and narrow without even trying. 'Are you a pilot yourself, Maria?'

'I am.'

'You know which pilots die the fastest?'

'No.' She waited.

'Gifted amateurs. They get cocky, like the rules don't apply to them. Think hard about what you're doing. If I was really Fragata, maybe I'll . . .'

Her plump lips dropped open in genuine mirth, revealing white teeth and large incisors. 'Kill me? A woman? You'd twist up like a pretzel before you'd hurt a woman, Terry. Please, can we get started now? I want to give you as many facts as I can.'

'I'm not Fragata.'

She ignored me, reaching into the small, shimmering evening bag hanging from her chair. I was expecting more documents. Instead, she took out a round white plastic case about one inch in diameter and screwed open the top. She held it open so I could see.

'Do you know what this is?'

I glanced at the clear liquid inside the case. 'Contact lens solution?'

'No. My microchip. Watch.'

She gently lifted the tiny open case. Squeezing it with her thumb and forefinger, she suddenly yanked the case straight down. A small blob resembling a raindrop slipped out. She blew gently at it, and the liquid flattened into a shape like a triangular contact lens. It drifted an inch in my direction. I blew back at it, very softly, and it floated higher in the air, settled, and hovered midway over the table.

She grinned like a proud parent. 'That's the chip of the future, Terry. Molecular. I used the scanning probe microscope at Stanford to build it molecule by molecule. Like Lego blocks.'

'Liquid's heavier than air.' I gaped at the blob. 'How does it float?'