

**THE
TRAITOR**

STEPHEN COONTS



St. Martin's Paperbacks

NOTE: If you purchased this book without a cover you should be aware that this book is stolen property. It was reported as "unsold and destroyed" to the publisher, and neither the author nor the publisher has received any payment for this "stripped book."

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

THE TRAITOR

Copyright © 2006 by Stephen Coonts.

Cover photo © Pete Garceau

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews. For information address St. Martin's Press, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2006042505

ISBN: 0-312-99447-8

EAN: 978-0-312-99447-1

Printed in the United States of America

St. Martin's Press hardcover edition / July 2006

St. Martin's Paperbacks edition / March 2007

St. Martin's Paperbacks are published by St. Martin's Press, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

Tangle within tangle, plot and counter-plot, ruse and treachery, cross and double-cross, true agent, false agent, double agent, gold and steel, the bomb, the dagger and the firing party, were interwoven in many a texture so intricate and yet true. The Chief and High Officers of the Secret Service reveled in these subterranean labyrinths, and pursued their task with cold and silent passion.

— WINSTON S. CHURCHILL

PROLOGUE

She was on the other side of the room when she fastened her eyes on me and made a little kissing motion with her lips. There must have been forty people crammed into the space, which was the living/dining room of a rather opulent Georgetown apartment. The place was hopping with hot jazz and loud, lively conversation. Ooh yeah, Friday night, a party, people drinking and laughing, and this really foxy chick across the room had the hots for me.

Yes, it *was* me she was zeroed in on. I casually glanced left and right just to make sure.

I know what you're thinking: *That Carmellini is bragging again*, but I'm not. I'm telling it exactly the way it went down. Truth is not one of my major virtues, yet I promise I won't lie to you too much.

I was chatting up a Georgetown law student when the hot chick gave me the come hither, so I finished my remarks, got the future counselor's phone number, just in case, then sort of circulated on, which meant I squeezed between people while trying not to spill my drink, a club soda with a twist.

The hot woman was in her mid- to late twenties—it was difficult to say with any certainty—with dark brown hair brushed over, exposing her right ear. She watched me drift toward her, lifting her cocktail glass occasionally to take a sip without taking her eyes off me. High cheekbones, brown eyes set wide apart, all this above a dress with a neckline that plunged almost to her navel.

"Hi," she said when I cruised up.

That wasn't an American accent, or my name isn't Tommy Carmellini. "Hi, yourself," I said as I looked over the situation.

"You look bored," she said, as if that were the most interesting of the seven deadly sins.

"I don't really know anyone except the host."

"Oh, Jacques." Actually his name was Jack, but it sounded like Jacques when she said it.

"Is that a French accent?"

"Yes. I am Marisa Lamoureux."

"Travis Crockett," I told her, holding out my hand to shake. "From Manor, Texas." I pronounced it the Texas way, as if it were spelled Maynor.

"You don't have a Texas accent."

"I have a set of cowboy boots. Will that do?"

She glanced down at my feet and saw that I was lying, and we laughed together. Soon we were getting along fine. And yeah, I lied to her about my name, but it was okay because she lied to me about hers.

Her real name was Marisa Petrou. Lamoureux was her maiden name; she was the daughter of a big mucky-muck in the French embassy, one Georges Lamoureux. She was still legally married to a Jean Petrou, the dirty-rich son of a filthy-rich French financier, but estranged, and was here in Washington for a few weeks visiting her father. Several years ago she spent a couple of semesters at Harvard studying medieval art, then moved on. She didn't tell me any of this, of course; I had gotten it from her file earlier that afternoon.

What else? She liked white wine and champagne, had ended a relationship with a French heart surgeon several months ago and was now having a fling with the director of the French intelligence service, one Henri Rodet, who was twenty-five or thirty years her senior. A note in her file said she liked kinky sex. Where that tidbit came from I have no idea; I seriously doubted that I would get to know her well enough to prove or disprove it.

On the other hand, standing there looking down into those

gorgeous brown eyes, I was acutely aware of the ripe state of her health. And everything else.

We mingled socially. I told her one lie after another about myself—all a part of my Travis Crockett, dude from Manor, Texas, identity—and we replenished our drinks when a waiter bearing a tray hovered into the neighborhood. Marisa was drinking white wine. I stuck to club soda since there was a faint possibility that I might need a wit or two later in the evening.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw our host, Jack Zarb, glance my way. He was a young lawyer who inherited a pile from his grandparents and liked to party. His little black book of hip, trendy women was legendary. I knew him through the friend of a friend. I told him I wanted to come to his party under a nom de guerre and meet a certain woman who might or might not show up. He thought it over, asked no questions and said he understood.

He didn't know I worked for the CIA, or any government agency, for that matter. He must have thought I was a ding-dong or a predator, yet if he ratted me out, no big deal. I doubted if Marisa Petrou was going to think I was as cool as I pretend to be. Still, it was worth a try. With women, one never knows. An evening or two was a small investment, and if it didn't work, I could always try something else.

We ended up on Jack's small balcony looking at the traffic on the street three floors down. Somehow the crowd got so numerous that she was pressed up against me. It was a pleasant sensation. I grinned at her and she grinned back.

We continued to tell each other lies, mixing and mingling, and finally she suggested we leave. A capital idea.

She didn't mention how she arrived at the party. I didn't ask. My old red '64 Mercedes 280SL was parked in the next block, so we took that. I put the top down and she didn't whimper, just climbed right in, which was a plus for her.

Rolling along the streets of Washington with the wind in her hair, she looked pretty good, let me tell you. "You dance?" I asked.

"Oui."

I love it when they talk dirty.

"I know a place," I told her, and aimed the car in that direction.

Since it didn't look like rain, I left the top down when we got to the club in Alexandria and tossed the key at the valet. We danced fast and we danced slow. She knew how to do it. Her body seemed to mold itself to mine. Fate—that was what it was. I began thinking I was living a dream, and it was a chick flick. Actually I was wishing that I was on my own time, not Uncle Sugar's.

Finally she whispered, "Your place or mine?"

I had a little story all prepared about why it couldn't be my pad, and now I didn't need it. "Yours," I said.

"Let's go."

It was that simple. We were past the lying stage.

Now I know what you're thinking: *That Carmellini must be the most conceited bastard alive, going to a party expecting to be picked up by the girl who did indeed pick him up*, but I beg to differ. Men and women do it every day. Besides, it wasn't an expectation, it was merely a hope. Hope is the reason people buy lottery tickets and condoms. Let's make a happy noise for hope.

I drove and she gave me directions—right to her father's house, which was an old mansion in the northwest section of town, a few blocks from the French embassy. She hadn't mentioned what her pop did for a living and I didn't ask. I parked on the street in front of the joint, put the lid on and locked 'er up. There was a guard standing near the door. It looked to me like he was packing heat, but I couldn't be sure.

"Wow," I remarked to Marisa as we walked toward the door. "Quite a pad! Does this belong to a friend of yours?"

"Of course."

I gave the guard my best innocent smile, while he maintained a professional diffidence. He made eye contact with Marisa as he opened the door to let us pass. I wondered if he and Marissa had ever . . . Oh, well. Better luck next time, buddy.

Inside, surveillance cameras were mounted high in every

corner. I suspected the floor had pressure-sensitive pads mounted under it, but I could see no evidence. Then I stepped on a place in the hallway that seemed to give just a fraction of an inch. Yep.

Marisa led me along the hallway to a large door that opened into a spacious library with a ten-foot ceiling. Two men were sitting in the chairs reading, even though it was almost three o'clock on Saturday morning. "My father, Monsieur Lamoureux. Travis Crockett, Father, from Texas. He has the boots."

Georges Lamoureux smiled, stood and shook my hand.

"Alain Frechon," he said, nodding toward the other man. Frechon didn't rise from his chair, merely stuck out his hand for a limp-wrist waggle.

Lamoureux had fashionably gray hair and a trim figure, no doubt because he worked out four times a week. That was in his dossier. When I told you he was a high mucky-muck, I should have been more precise. He was the number two in the embassy, the guy who actually did the paperwork while the ambassador fretted policy issues and went to cocktail parties with Washington's society mavens.

I had never seen any mention of Frechon in the files so knew nothing about him. He was of average height, late fifties perhaps, with a face that looked as if it would crack if he smiled. He didn't bother flashing the chompers at me, just glanced at Marisa and me and went back to looking sour.

If Lamoureux thought it unusual that his married daughter was bringing a man home at three in the A.M., he hid it well. These modern Europeans . . . We chatted as if I were merely taking a tour of a historic home.

Three polite platitudes later, he bussed his daughter on the cheek, and she took me by the hand and led me out of the library. We stopped in the kitchen for a glass of wine. I really needed every last wit I had, yet I accepted a glass and even took a sip. It was delicious.

"Do you know wine?" Marisa asked.

"Red with meat and white with fish." I smiled. "In other words, no."

“Nor I,” she confided, leaning closer and lowering her voice. “I drink what I like, and the label . . .” She flipped a hand in dismissal. I was ready to classify her as a dangerous subversive until I reflected that Marisa Petrou probably hadn’t been served a glass of poor wine in her life.

As she turned toward me, I gathered her into my arms for a serious kiss. She smelled delicious. She put her glass on the counter and used both hands to hold me. That was when I slipped the little pill into her wineglass. I held the kiss for another fifteen seconds, which was more than enough time for the drug to dissolve.

“Well!” she said, when we finally broke for air. “Texas must be a wonderful place.”

“I was thinking the same about France.”

She reached for the glass and took a healthy sip as she eyed me.

“You want me, yes?” she whispered huskily.

“Un-huh.” That was the only absolutely true thing I had said all evening. My old heart was pounding and I had a sheen of perspiration on my forehead. I took another tiny sip from my glass. It was the high-dollar stuff, all right, smooth as wine can get.

Marisa took a swig from her glass, then seized my hand. “Come,” she said. She brought her glass along.

Her bedroom was on the second floor. Tiny night-lights glowed on the staircase and along the hallway. There were the usual surveillance cameras in the hallway, but none in her room. That was a relief. I wondered if the cameras could function properly at those low light levels.

In her bedroom, she skinned out of her clothes and helped me out of mine. Two minutes after she locked the door, we were in bed.

Of course I wondered if she had had enough of the drug to put her under—she had drunk about a third of the glass—and if so, how long we had before she went to sleep. The answer was yes, she had ingested enough, and the time was six minutes. She merely went to sleep in my arms.

How long she was going to remain asleep was another

question. Just to be on the safe side, I removed a small patch from the pocket of my trousers, which were heaped on the floor. I peeled the paper off the sticky side and pressed the patch against the back of one of her hands. The drug would be absorbed through her skin and would keep her under. With a little luck, she wouldn't even know it had been on her.

I looked at my watch. The guards—there were two—made rounds hourly, and unless I stayed in bed with Marisa, they would find me on one of them. I had to find what I was after and get out. I tossed my clothes on, draped my tie around my neck, left my shirt sleeves unbuttoned.

After making sure Marisa was comfortably arranged in the bed, I turned out the lights and opened the door to the hallway.

I stood there listening. The old house was silent. The night-lights were glowing comfortably.

I hoped her father and his guest were still in the library. I went to the head of the stairs and looked. The lights in the library were still on.

His room should be the one at the end of this hallway. Fortunately he slept alone. I tried the knob. Locked. I put a small stethoscope up to the door and listened. Nothing.

Lamoureux might come upstairs at any time, and I wanted into that room. I picked the lock. That took a long four minutes. I could have done it faster if I hadn't been trying to keep quiet and wondering if the surveillance cameras were getting all this. As dark as the hallway was, I doubted it. I would certainly find out soon if they were.

When the lock opened, I stepped into the room and locked the door behind me. It would be nice if I could find another exit. Two night-lights illuminated the room. A thick carpet covered the floor, and thick drapes obscured the windows. Cool air came from vents high in the walls. I pulled the drapes aside and inspected the windows. The paint on the sills and sashes revealed that they hadn't been opened since the building was erected.

The closet was a walk-in. Yes. It went through to a spare bedroom, which was set up as an office. This was my escape hatch if I needed it.

I flipped on my flashlight and began searching—and quickly found what I was looking for: books. Lamoureux had perhaps two dozen in his bedroom, all in French. One of them, one here or one in the library or perhaps one in his desk or locked up in a safe, he used as a key for a cipher. Since it was based on a random word that appeared somewhere in the text of the book, and that word probably changed with every message, the cipher was essentially unbreakable. Oh, sure, with a big enough computer and years to watch it work, eventually a cryptographer would find which of the billions of possible letter combinations would unlock a message. Then the code breakers could do the drill all over again on another message, and so on.

That method of cracking the cipher being unfeasible, the wizards had asked for help. I was the help. I was supposed to photograph the title of every book Lamoureux had routine access to and, if possible, figure out which one was *the* one.

Since I wasn't anywhere near as smart as Sherlock Holmes, I decided to photograph all the books. I turned on the room lights, all of them, and began clicking away with my camera. Back in the good old days spies snapped away with Minox cameras, but we were digital now. I used a Sony Cyber-shot. When I had photographed all the books, I opened and closed drawers. No books in the drawers.

He had a desk in the room, and I attacked it. In seconds I knew the drawers were empty. I turned off the lights, then went through the closet to the office. More books. I snapped on the lights and got busy with the camera. On a bottom shelf, lying on its back as if it had just been tossed there, was a well-thumbed paperback, *The Sum of All Fears* by Tom Clancy, the only book in English I had seen.

I picked it up. The light wasn't good enough. I turned on the desk lamp, held the pages under it and flipped quickly through them. I was looking for pencil or ink marks. Didn't see anything.

I put the book back on the shelf and looked at it again. The spine was crazed, completely broken down. The pages refused to close neatly. This book had been read and reread.

Of course the wizards hadn't bothered to tell me how Lamoureux sent his messages, or to whom, or how frequently. I didn't know if he sent letters, postcards, or e-mail, or whether his missives went out in the diplomatic pouch or via snail mail. All I knew was that I was looking for a book that was used as the key to a code.

Maybe Lamoureux was a Clancy fan. And maybe—

I heard a noise.

I had the lights off in a twinkling and strode for the closet. I heard the door opening in the bedroom. That told me which way to jump.

I went over to the office door and carefully turned the knob. It was locked, naturally, with a Yale that took a key on both sides.

I immediately looked for a place to hide, just in case the old monsieur decided that right this very minute was a good time to send a coded letter to his mistress in gay Paree.

There was just enough room behind a large padded leather chair. I hunkered down behind it and tried to control my breathing and heart rate.

He knocked around in the closet, then went to the bathroom beside the closet—I had forgotten to look in there for books. When the door closed and the water started running, I hopped out from behind the chair and scooted through the closet, past the bathroom door and across the bedroom. The door was locked, but there was a knob to unlock it. I twisted the knob, slipped out into the empty hallway, and eased the door closed behind me.

Marisa was still sound asleep. I stayed just long enough to remove the patch from the back of her hand. The drug should wear off in about an hour, and with luck she should sleep soundly for the rest of the night. "Au revoir, baby," I whispered, and gave her a kiss.

I sidled along the dark hallway, pausing at the head of the stairs. No one in sight. Down the stairs I went, trying desperately to be quiet.

The lights in the library were off. Three small night-lights were the only illumination, and they certainly didn't give

enough light for photographs. I looked at the entrance from the hallway. There were two large oak doors, but closing them would probably wake the dead. No curtains on the windows. I looked out. The lawn was there, quite spacious for Washington, with a few trees and shrubs, bounded by a high masonry fence topped with barbed wire. Beyond the fence was another building. I could see windows.

If Lamoureux encoded his messages in here, anyone in the yard could look in the window and watch him do it. If he did it in the chair he was sitting in when Marisa introduced me, anyone in the window of that building across the way could see him with binoculars.

No, he didn't encrypt messages in here. He did it at the embassy or upstairs in his bedroom or office.

I glanced at my watch. I had been in the building for sixty-seven minutes—far too long—and I was going to have to turn on every light in this library if I were going to photograph all the book spines. I scanned the shelves. A good many American and British authors, even a few German, but the works were in French.

The Sum of All Fears. That might be it.

As I walked out of the library I almost bumped into a guard. My heart nearly leaped from my chest. At least, I assumed he was a guard; he was a fit man wearing a suit and he looked quite capable.

"Ah, I wonder if you could show me the way out," I said thickly, as if I had had a bit too much to drink. "I seem to be a little lost."

"Of course, sir," the guard said in good English. "Right this way."

Four minutes later I unlocked the Mercedes and climbed in. The sky was getting light to the east.

On Monday at headquarters I gave the digital camera to the wizards and told them about the Clancy paperback. They thanked me and that was that.

The person who said "Silence is golden" must have worked in the intelligence business. If you pull off a difficult assignment you never hear another word about it. I must have

done okay on this one because no one ragged me about what I should have done. They wouldn't even tell me if one of the books I photographed was the key they were searching for to Lamoureux's codes.

So Marisa Petrou faded into my past. A few weeks later, just as the baseball season got interesting, the trolls in the inner sanctum sent me to Iraq, which is one of the world's hell-holes, let me tell you. It was truly a long hot summer; I couldn't wait to get back to the land of the beer and home of the hot dogs.

CHAPTER ONE

Maurice Marton died of a heart attack thirty-seven thousand feet above the Mediterranean. He did it quietly, the same way he had lived his life. He felt a sudden, severe chest pain, couldn't breathe, and reached for the call light above his seat. As he looked up, gasping, groping for the button, his heart quit beating altogether. Maurice Marton slumped in his first-class airline seat. By chance, he was in a window seat and his head sagged toward the window. Also by chance, the aisle seat beside him was empty.

It was several minutes before the flight attendant noticed Marton. The man was slumped down, facing the window, and although his eyes were open, the attendant couldn't see them and thought he was asleep. As is customary in first class, he let him sleep.

A half hour later as the aircraft began its descent into Amman, the seat-belt light came on. It was then that the flight attendant tried to wake his sleeping passenger. As soon as he saw the open, unfocused, frozen eyes, he knew the man was dead.

An old hand at the business, the attendant felt for Marton's pulse. Finding none, he covered the man with a blanket and turned his head back toward the window.

The plane made a normal landing in Amman, and after the other passengers were off the plane, a doctor and two policemen came aboard. As the senior cabin attendant watched, they loaded the corpse onto a stretcher and carried it off.

With the airplane empty of people, the senior attendant removed Marton's attaché case from the storage compartment over his head and opened it. The case was crammed full, mostly letters and spreadsheets and a few printed statements. Roughly half were in French and half in Arabic. The attendant sat down and began rapidly scanning the documents.

Three weeks after the death of Maurice Marton, a man from the American embassy entered a nondescript building in Tel Aviv and was ushered to a basement room. The walls, floor and ceiling were poured concrete. A naked bulb on a wire hung from the ceiling over the only desk, a small, scarred steel one that at some time in the historic past had been painted a robin's egg blue. Behind the desk was a tanned man with close-cropped brown hair wearing a white short-sleeved shirt. He had a comfortable tummy, and a firm grip when he shook hands.

"Good to see you, Harris. How was Washington?"

"A steam bath," the American said. "With a whole continent to play with, they managed to put the capital in a place that's cold, damp and miserable in the winter, and hot, humid and miserable in the summer."

"I've never been there. Should I make the trip someday?"

"Only if the airfare is free."

The men were seated now. The host said, "I have a story that I thought would interest your colleagues."

"Anything that interests the Mossad will interest my crowd," Harris replied candidly.

"On the twenty-seventh of last month, a French intelligence agent named Maurice Marton died on an Air France flight between Paris and Amman. Had a heart attack, apparently, and quietly expired. In his attaché case were some interesting documents that I would like to share with you." The host picked up a small stack of paper and handed it to his guest.

The American examined the sheets carefully. They were obviously copies. After a few minutes, he remarked, "I understand most of the French, I think—it's been a few years

since college—but my Arabic is a little rusty. It appears someone named Henri Rodet is buying stock in the Bank of Palestine, two million euros' worth."

"I think so, yes," murmured the Israeli. "Do you recognize the name?"

"No."

"Henri Rodet is the head of the DGSE." The *Direction Générale de la Sécurité Extérieure* was the French intelligence agency.

Harris lowered the sheets and stared at his host. He blinked several times. "Really!"

"Indeed."

Harris spent another minute scanning the documents, then raised his head and said, "They'll want to know how you got these."

"As I said, Marton, a career clerk in DGSE headquarters, was on his way to Amman, presumably to do this deal for his boss, Rodet. He died en route. One of our men got his hands on Marton's attaché case, saw that these documents were of interest, and managed to run the originals through a copier and return them to the case."

"Luck," muttered Harris.

"On rare occasions that sprite does indeed smile," the Israeli said casually. He said that to be polite; the only kind of luck he believed in was the kind you made for yourself. The men and women of the Mossad used every morsel of wit and guile they could muster, and every penny of their budget, to keep agents in place in key positions in Cairo, Amman, Damascus, Beirut, Riyadh and two dozen other places around the globe. Because agents were there, in place, good things could happen. Good things had to happen for Israel. Without timely, accurate, reliable intelligence for its decision makers, the nation would cease to exist.

The American settled himself to study the documents in detail. When he finished he put the sheets back on the desk.

"You may have those," the Israeli said.

Harris folded the sheets carefully. "You are convinced these are genuine?"

"Marton was very dead, right there in a first-class seat. From all appearances, it was a natural death."

"Why first class? Why not coach?"

"The French government bought the ticket. Air France upgraded it because there was room in the front of the plane."

After Harris placed the copies in his trouser pocket, he asked, "Did your man raise any suspicions?"

"He thought not. The attaché case and the dead man's luggage were held by the airline. After his family was notified, a man arrived on the next day's flight and claimed them."

"His name?"

"Claude Bruguiere. We believe he, too, is DGSE."

"And what did he do with the attaché case?"

"This happened in Amman," the Mossad officer explained. He spread his hands. "We have limited assets, as you know."

"So you're not going to share that." It was a statement, not a question.

The Mossad officer smiled.

The American intelligence officer scratched his head, then smoothed his hair. He didn't have much; the motion was an old habit. Finally he stood and stuck out his hand. "Thanks for the information," he said.

"You're welcome," the Israeli replied as he pumped Harris' hand.

"You've opened a whole can of worms, you know."

"The worms were already there, my friend."

"I suppose so," Harris said.

By pure coincidence, the day the American named Harris had his interview with a senior Mossad official, a well-dressed man in his late forties or early fifties joined a group of tourists waiting for a guided tour of the Château de Versailles, the Sun King's palace that is today in the southwestern suburbs of metropolitan Paris.

The man had a dark complexion, as if he spent much of his life in the sun. Of medium height, he was perfectly shaved and barbered, with a lean, spare frame that showcased

the dark gray tailored Italian suit he wore. He wore hand-made leather shoes; on his wrist was an expensive Swiss watch. His deep blue tie was muted and understated, the perfect accent for a wealthy man in the upper echelons of international society, which was, of course, precisely what the man was.

An American college professor on sabbatical spoke to the man in heavily accented French, asking if he had ever before toured the palace. He replied with a hint of a smile, in perfect French, that indeed he had, although many years had passed since his last visit. The professor, a single woman who had always been enthralled by France and all things French, gave the man her absolute best smile.

He answered it by discussing the history of the palace as they waited for the professional guide. He knew so much about the palace that the American asked, "Are you a scholar?"

"A businessman, madame," he said with another hint of a smile. The lady thought him charming. She would have asked more questions, but the guide showed up and launched into a canned speech, and a minute later the group straggled off after her.

The American woman stayed close to the well-dressed man in the dark gray suit. Occasionally, when the guide glossed over some fact that the woman thought might be intriguing, she asked the man, who knew the answers.

The group—there were several dozen tourists, mostly couples—made their way through the palace. They worked their way through the north wing, looking in on l'Opéra, the site of the marriage of the future Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, the Chapelle Royale and the picture galleries, then made their way into the center section of the palace. The guide led the group through the library, the Cabinet du Conseil, and the king's bedroom. From there they went to the queen's bedroom, where the queens of France gave birth to their children as members of the court watched with bated breath.

"That way there could be no question as to who was the

lawful heir to the throne," the man whispered to the American, who was slightly appalled at the public nature of what she considered a very private event.

From there, finally, they entered the Hall of Mirrors, the great room of state for eighteenth-century France. "In fact," the guide intoned in heavily accented English, "this room is still used for great state occasions. For example, in 1919 the Treaty of Versailles that ended World War I was ratified in this room."

It was a huge room, about eighty yards long, with a high, vaulted ceiling covered in gold leaf. The long wall on the exterior side of the building was perforated with tall arched windows, from which one could gaze in awe at the magnificent gardens behind the palace. The opposite wall was lined with mirrors, and the entire room was lit with dozens of dazzling chandeliers.

"Very impressive," the American lady whispered to her fellow tourist.

He nodded in agreement, and stood rooted as the group moved on.

This is the place, the man thought.

They will be here before the cameras, surrounded by television crews, reporters and security guards. The world will be watching.

We will kill them here.