

The Kill Room

Also by Jeffery Deaver

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JEFFERY
DEAVER
THE KILL ROOM


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For Judy, Fred and Dax

I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.

Evelyn Beatrice Hall, *The Friends of Voltaire*, 1906

TUESDAY, 9 MAY



THE POISONWOOD TREE

1

The flash of light troubled him.

A glint, white or pale yellow, in the distance.

From the water? From the strip of land across the peaceful turquoise bay?

But here, there could be no danger. Here, he was in a beautiful and isolated resort. Here, he was out of the glare of media and the gaze of enemies.

Roberto Moreno squinted out of the window. He was merely in his late thirties but his eyes were not good: he pushed the frames higher on his nose and scanned the vista – the garden outside the suite's window, the narrow white beach, the pulsing blue-green sea. Beautiful, isolated . . . and protected. No vessels bobbed within sight. And even if an enemy with a rifle could have learned he was here and made his way unseen through the industrial plants on that spit of land a mile away across the water, the distance and the pollution clouding the view would have made a shot impossible.

No more flashes, no more glints.

You're safe. Of course you are.

But still Moreno remained wary. Like Martin Luther King, like Gandhi, he was always at risk. This was the way of his life. He wasn't afraid of death. But he was afraid of dying before his work was done. And at his young age he still had much to do. For instance, the event he'd just finished organizing an hour or so ago – a significant one, sure to get a lot of people's attention – was merely one of a dozen planned for the next year.

And beyond, an abundant future loomed.

Dressed in a modest tan suit, a white shirt and royal blue tie – oh, so Caribbean – the stocky man now filled two cups from the coffeepot that room service had just delivered and returned to the couch. He handed one to the reporter, who was setting up a tape recorder.

‘Señor de la Rúa. Some milk? Sugar?’

‘No, thank you.’

They were speaking in Spanish, in which Moreno was fluent. He hated English and only spoke it when he needed to. He’d never quite shucked the New Jersey accent when he was speaking in his native tongue, ‘hehr’ for ‘her’, ‘mirrah’ for ‘mirror’, ‘gun’ for ‘gone’. The tones of his own voice took him right back to his early days in the States – his father working long hours and living life sober, his mother spending long hours not. Bleak landscapes, bullies from a nearby high school. Until salvation: the family’s move to a place far kinder than South Hills, a place where even the language was softer and more elegant.

The reporter said, ‘But call me Eduardo. Please.’

‘And I’m Roberto.’

The name was really ‘Robert’ but that smacked of lawyers on Wall Street, politicians in Washington and generals on the battlefields sowing foreign ground with the bodies of the locals, like cheap seeds.

Hence, *Roberto*.

‘You live in Argentina,’ Moreno said to the journalist, who was a slight man, balding and dressed in a blue shirt, no tie, and a threadbare black suit. ‘Buenos Aires?’

‘That’s right.’

‘Do you know about the name of the city?’

De la Rúa said no; he wasn’t a native.

‘The meaning is “good air”, of course,’ Moreno said. He read extensively, several books a week, much of it Latin American literature and history. ‘But the air referred to was in *Sardinia*, Italy, not Argentina. So called after a settlement on top of a hill in Cagliari. The settlement was above the . . . let us say *pungent* smells of the old city, and was accordingly named *Buen Ayre*. The Spanish explorers who discovered what became Buenos Aires named it after that settlement. Of course that was the *first* settlement of the city. They were wiped out by the natives, who didn’t enjoy European exploitation.’

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De la Rúa said, 'Even your anecdotes have a decidedly anti-colonial flavor.'

Moreno laughed. But the humor vanished and he looked quickly out of the window again.

That damn glint. Still, though, he could see nothing but trees and plants in the garden and that hazy line of land a mile away. The inn was on the largely deserted south-west coast of New Providence, the island in the Bahamas where Nassau was located. The grounds were fenced and guarded, and the garden was reserved for this suite alone, protected by a high fence to the north and south, with the beach to the west.

No one was there. No one could be there.

A bird, perhaps. The flutter of a leaf.

Simon had checked the grounds not long ago. Moreno glanced at him now, a large, quiet Brazilian, dark-complexioned, wearing a nice suit – Moreno's guard dressed better than his boss did, though not flashy. Simon, in his thirties, looked appropriately dangerous, as one would expect and want in his profession, but he wasn't a thug. He'd been an officer in the army, before going civilian as a security expert.

He was also very good at his job. Simon's head swiveled: he'd become aware of his boss's gaze and immediately stepped to the window, looking out.

'Just a flash of light,' Moreno explained.

The bodyguard suggested drawing the shades.

'I think not.'

Moreno had decided that Eduardo de la Rúa, who'd flown here coach class at his own expense from the City of Good Air, deserved to enjoy the beautiful view. He wouldn't get to experience much luxury, as a hard-working journalist known for reporting the truth, rather than producing puff pieces for corporate officials and politicians. Moreno had also decided to take the man for a very nice lunch at the South Cove Inn's fine restaurant.

Simon gazed outside once more, returned to his chair and picked up a magazine.

De la Rúa clicked on the tape recorder. 'Now, may I?'

'Please.' Moreno turned his full attention to the journalist.

'Mr Moreno, your Local Empowerment Movement has just opened an office in Argentina, the first in the country. Could you tell me how you conceived the idea? And what your group does?'

Moreno had given this lecture dozens of times. It varied, based on the particular journalist or audience, but the core was simple: to encourage indigenous people to reject US government and corporate influence by becoming self-sufficient, notably through microlending, microagriculture and microbusiness.

He now told the reporter, 'We resist American corporate development. And the government's aid and social programs, whose purpose, after all, is simply to addict us to their values. We are not viewed as human beings: we are viewed as a source of cheap labor and a market for American goods. Do you see the vicious cycle? Our people are exploited in American-owned factories, then seduced into buying products from those same companies.'

The journalist said, 'I've written much about business investment in Argentina and other South American countries, and I know about your movement, which also makes such investments. One could argue that you rail against capitalism yet embrace it.'

Moreno brushed his longish hair, black and prematurely gray. 'No, I rail against the *misuse* of capitalism – the *American* misuse of capitalism in particular. I am using business as a weapon. Only fools rely on ideology exclusively for change. Ideas are the rudder. Money is the propeller.'

The reporter smiled. 'I'll use that as my lead. Now, some people say, I've read some people say you're a revolutionary.'

'Ha, I'm a loudmouth, that's all!' The smile faded. 'But, mark my words, while the world is focusing on the Middle East, everyone has missed the birth of a far more powerful force: Latin America. That's what I represent. The new order. We can't be ignored any longer.'

Roberto Moreno rose and stepped to the window.

Crowning the garden was a poisonwood tree, about forty feet tall. He stayed in this suite often and he liked the tree very much. Indeed, he felt a camaraderie with it. Poisonwoods are formidable, resourceful and starkly beautiful. They are also, as the name suggests, toxic. The pollen or smoke from burning the wood and leaves could slip into the lungs and sear them, causing agony, yet the tree nourishes the beautiful Bahamian swallowtail butterfly, and white-crowned pigeons live off the fruit.

I'm like that tree, Moreno thought. A good image for the article, perhaps. I'll mention this too—

The glint again.

In a tiny splinter of a second: a flicker of movement disturbed the tree's sparse leaves, and the tall window in front of him exploded. Glass turned to a million crystals of blowing snow. Fire blossomed in his chest.

Moreno found himself lying on the couch, which had been five feet behind him.

But . . . but what's happened? What is this? I'm fainting, I'm fainting. I can't breathe.

He stared at the tree, now clearer, so much clearer, without the window glass filtering the view. The branches waved in the sweet wind off the water. Leaves swelling, receding. It was breathing for him. Because he couldn't, not with his chest on fire. Not with the pain.

Shouts, cries for help around him.

Blood, blood everywhere.

Sun setting, sky going darker and darker. But isn't it morning? Moreno had images of his wife, his teenage son and daughter. His thoughts dissolved until he was aware of only one thing: the tree.

Poison and strength, poison and strength.

The fire within him was easing, vanishing. Tearful relief.

Darkness becoming darker.

The poisonwood tree.

Poisonwood . . .

Poison . . .