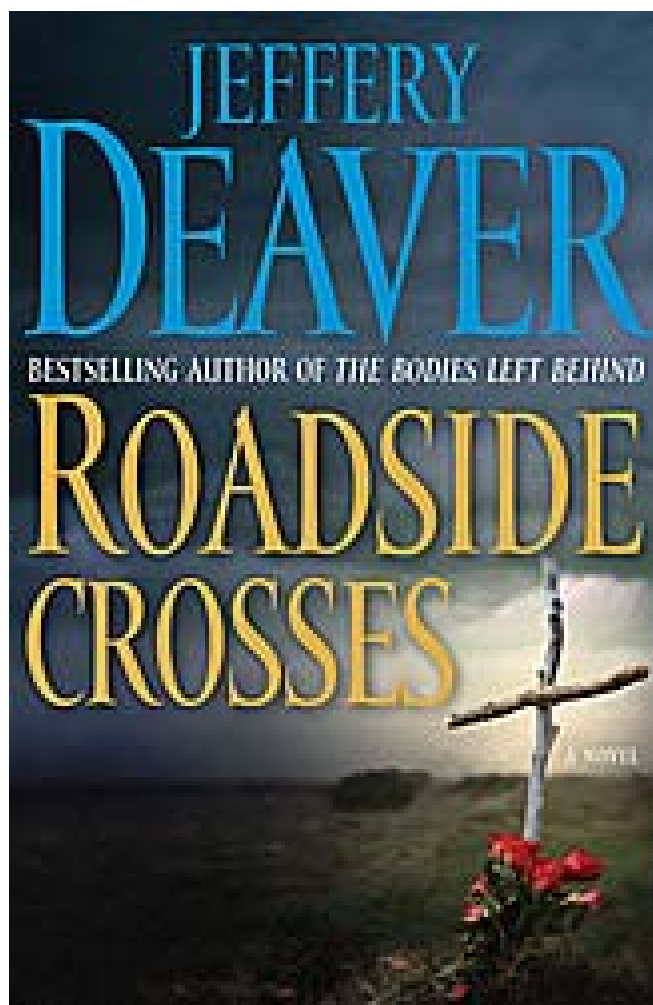


Roadside Crosses: Excerpt

By Jeffery Deaver

Simon & Schuster





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MONDAY

Chapter 1

OUT OF PLACE.

The California Highway Patrol trooper, young with bristly yellow hair beneath his crisp hat, squinted through the windshield of his Crown Victoria Police Interceptor as he cruised south along Highway 1 in Monterey. Dunes to the right, modest commercial sprawl to the left.

Something was out of place. What?

Heading home at 5:00 p.m. after his tour had ended, he surveyed the road. The trooper didn't write a lot of tickets here, leaving that to the county deputies -- professional courtesy -- but he occasionally lit up somebody in a German or Italian car if he was in a mood, and this was the route he often took home at this time of day, so he knew the highway pretty well.

There...that was it. Something colorful, a quarter mile ahead, sat by the side of the road at the base of one of the hills of sand that cut off the view of Monterey Bay.

What could it be?

He hit his light bar -- protocol -- and pulled over onto the right shoulder. He parked with the hood of the Ford pointed leftward toward traffic, so a rear-ender would shove the car away from, not over, him, and climbed out. Stuck in the sand just beyond the shoulder was a cross -- a roadside memorial. It was about eighteen inches high and homemade, cobbled together out of dark, broken-off branches, bound with wire like florists use. Dark red roses lay in a splashy bouquet at the base. A cardboard disk was in the center, the date of the accident written on it in blue ink. There were no names on the front or back.

Officially these memorials to traffic accident victims were discouraged, since people were occasionally injured, even killed, planting a cross or leaving flowers or stuffed animals.

Usually the memorials were tasteful and poignant. This one was spooky.

What was odd, though, was that he couldn't remember any accidents along here. In fact this was one of the safest stretches of Highway 1 in California. The roadway becomes an obstacle course south of Carmel, like that spot of a really sad accident several weeks ago: two girls killed coming back from a graduation party. But here, the highway was three lanes and mostly straight, with occasional lazy bends through the old Fort Ord grounds, now a college, and the shopping districts.

The trooper thought about removing the cross, but the mourners might return to leave another one and endanger themselves again. Best just to leave it. Out of curiosity he'd check with his sergeant in the morning and find out what had happened. He walked back to his car, tossed his hat on the seat and rubbed his crew cut. He pulled back into traffic, his mind no longer on roadside accidents. He was thinking about what his wife would be making for supper, about taking the kids to the pool afterward.

And when was his brother coming to town? He looked at the date window on his watch. He frowned. Was that right? A glance at his cell phone confirmed that, yes, today was June 25.

That was curious. Whoever had left the roadside cross had made a mistake. He remembered that the date crudely written on the cardboard disk was June 26, Tuesday, tomorrow.

Maybe the poor mourners who'd left the memorial had been so upset they'd jotted the date down wrong.

Then the images of the eerie cross faded, though they didn'tvanish completely and, as the officer headed down the highway home, he drove a bit more carefully.

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