



THE ROAD WAS A KILLER, HARDLY WIDER THAN a decent stream of spit and snaking like a cobra between giant bushes loaded with strange flowers that resembled drops of blood.

She had to remind herself that the trip had been her idea—love was another killer—but how could she have known driving in western Ireland meant risking life and limb at every curve?

Rural Ireland, she thought, holding her breath as they zipped around the next turn on the Journey of Death. Where the towns were barely a hiccup on the landscape, and where she was pretty damn sure the cows outnumbered the people. And the sheep outnumbered the cows.

And why didn't that cause anyone concern? she wondered. Didn't people consider what could happen if armies of farm animals united in revolt?

When Murder Road finally carved its way out of the blood-drop bushes, the world opened up into fields and hills, green, green, eerily

green against a sky stacked with clouds that couldn't decide if they wanted to rain or just sit there ominously. And she knew those dots all over the green were sheep and cows.

Probably discussing war strategy.

She'd actually seen them hanging around those weird—and okay, a little bit fascinating—stone ruins. Towering, tumbling places that had maybe been castles or forts. A good place for armies of farm animals to plot their revolt.

Maybe it was beautiful in a hang-the-painting-on-your-wall kind of way, but it just wasn't natural. No, it was too natural, she corrected. That was the deal, too much nature, too much open. Even the houses scattered over the endless landscape insisted on decking themselves out with flowers. Everything blooming, colors smashed against colors, shapes against shapes.

She'd even seen clothes hanging on lines like executed prisoners. It was 2060, for God's sake. Didn't people out here own drying units?

And speaking of that—yeah, speaking of that—where was all the air traffic? She'd barely spotted a handful of airtrams, and not a single ad blimp lumbered overhead blasting out its hype on sales.

No subway, no glide carts, no tourists blissfully providing marks for street thieves, no maxibuses farting, no Rapid Cab drivers cursing.

God, she missed New York.

She couldn't even risk driving to take her mind off it, as for some cruel, inexplicable reason people over here insisted on driving on the wrong side of the road.

Why?

She was a cop, sworn to protect and serve, so she could hardly get behind the wheel on these death-trap roads where she'd probably end up mowing down innocent civilians. And maybe some farm animals while she was at it.

She wondered if they'd ever get where they were going, and what the odds were of getting there in one piece.

Maybe she should run some probabilities.

The road narrowed again, boxed in again, and Lieutenant Eve Dallas, veteran murder cop, pursuer of psychopaths, serial killers, homicidal deviants, fought to hold back a squeal as her side of the car lightly kissed the hedges.

Her husband of two years—and the reason she'd suggested this leg of their vacation—took his hand off the wheel to pat her thigh. "Relax, Lieutenant."

"Watch the road! Don't look at me, look at the road. Except it's not really a road. It's a track. What are these damn bushes, and why are they here?"

"It's fuchsia. Lovely, aren't they?"

They made her think of blood spatter, possibly resulting from a massacre by a battalion of farm animals.

"They ought to move them away from the stupid road."

"I imagine they were here first."

Ireland wound through his voice a lot more appealingly than the road wound through the countryside.

She risked a glance in his direction. He looked happy, she realized. Relaxed, happy, at ease in a thin leather jacket and T-shirt, his black hair swept back from that amazing face (another killer), his eyes so rich a blue it made the heart ache.

She remembered they'd nearly died together a few weeks before, and he'd been badly wounded. She'd thought—she could still remember that breathless instant when she'd thought she'd lost him.

And here he was, alive and whole. So maybe she'd forgive him for being amused at her expense.

Maybe.

Besides, it was her own fault. She'd suggested they take part of their vacation, their anniversary celebration, here so he could visit the family he'd only recently discovered. She'd been here before, after all.

Of course, that trip she'd taken in a jet-copter.

When he slowed as they entered what could very loosely be called a town, she breathed a little easier.

"Nearly there now," he told her. "This is Tulla. Sinead's farm is a few kilometers from the village."

Okay, they'd made it this far. Ordering herself to settle down, she scooped a hand through her choppy cap of brown hair.

"Look there. The sun's breaking through."

She studied the miserly opening in the gray, and the watery beam that struggled through. "Wow, the light. It's blinding."

He laughed, reached out to smooth a hand over the hair she'd just ruffled. "We're out of our element, Lieutenant. Maybe it's good for us to be out of the norm now and again."

She knew her norm. Death, investigation, the insanity of a city that ran instead of walked, the smells of a cop shop, the rush and the burden of command.

Some of that had become Roarke's norm in the last couple years, she mused. He juggled that with his own world, which was buying, selling, owning, creating pretty much every freaking thing in the known universe.

His beginnings had been as dark and ugly as hers. Dublin street rat, she thought, thief, conniver, survivor of a brutal, murderous father. The mother he'd never known hadn't been so lucky.

From that, he'd built an empire—not always on the sunny side of the law.

And she, cop to the bone, had fallen for him despite the shadows—

or maybe because of them. But there was more to him than either of them had known, and the more lived on a farm outside of the little village of Tulla in County Clare.

“We could’ve taken a copter from the hotel,” she said to him.

“I like the drive.”

“I know you mean that, so it makes me wonder about you, pal.”

“We’ll take a shuttle when we leave for Florence.”

“No argument.”

“And we’ll have a candlelight dinner in our suite.” He glanced toward her with that relaxed, happy smile. “The best pizza in the city.”

“Now you’re talking.”

“It means a lot to them that we’d come like this—together—for a couple of days.”

“I like them,” she said of his mother’s family. “Sinead, the rest. Vacations are good. I just have to work myself into the mode and stop thinking about what’s going on back at Central. What do people do here, anyway?”

“They work, farm, run shops, tend homes and families, go to the pub for a pint and community. Simple doesn’t mean unfulfilled.”

She let out a little snort. “You’d go crazy here.”

“Oh, within a week. We’re urban creatures, you and I, but I can appreciate those who make this way their own, who value and support community. *Comhar*,” he added, “that’s the Irish word for it. It’s particular to the west counties.”

There were woods now, sort of looming back from the road, and pretty—if you went for that kind of thing—stretches of fields divided by low walls of rock she imagined had been mined from the pretty fields.

She recognized the house when Roarke turned. It managed to be

sprawling and tidy at the same time, fronted with flowers in what Roarke had told her they called a *dooryard*. If buildings sent off an aura, she supposed this one would be content.

Roarke's mother had grown up here before she'd run off to the bright lights of Dublin. There, young, naive, trusting, she'd fallen in love with Patrick Roarke, had borne his child. And had died trying to save that child.

Now her twin sister ran the house, helped run the farm with the man she'd married, with their children and siblings, parents—the whole brood seemed to root here, in the green.

Sinead stepped out of the house, telling Eve she'd been watching for them. Her gilded red hair framed her pretty face where green eyes warmed in welcome.

It wasn't the connection of blood kin that put that affection on her face, or in the arms she stretched out. It was family. Blood, Eve knew, didn't always mean warmth and welcome.

Sinead caught Roarke in a solid, swaying hug, and as her murmured greeting was in Irish, Eve couldn't understand the words. But the emotion translated.

This was love, open and accepting.

When she turned, Eve found herself caught in the same full-on embrace. It widened her eyes, shifted her balance.

"Fáilte abhaile. Welcome home."

"Thanks. Ah . . ."

"Come in, come in. We're all in the kitchen or out the back. We've enough food to feed the army we are, and thought we'd have a picnic, as you've brought such nice weather."

Eve cast a glance up at the sky, and supposed there were degrees of nice weather, depending where you stood on the planet.

"I'll have one of the boys fetch your bags and take them up to

your room. Oh, it's good to see your faces. We're all here now. We're all home."

They were fed and feted, surrounded and questioned. Eve managed the names and faces by imagining them all as suspects on a murder board—even the ones who toddled and crawled.

Especially the one who kept toddling over and trying to claw its way into her lap.

"Our Devin's a lady's man." His mother—Maggie—laughed as she hauled him up, and in the way of some women, lodged him effortlessly on her hip. "Da says you're off to Italy next. Connor and I splurged on our honeymoon and went to Venice. It was brilliant."

The kid on her hip babbled something and bounced.

"All right, my man, since we're having a holiday. I'm after getting him another biscuit. Would you like one?"

"No, thanks. I'm good."

A moment later, Eve felt an itch between her shoulder blades. Shifting, she saw a boy staring at her. She recognized him—the Brody family green eyes, the solar system of freckles—from when the family had come to New York the previous Thanksgiving.

"What's the deal?" she demanded.

"I'm wondering if you've got your stunner."

She hadn't worn the harness, but she'd strapped her clutch piece to her ankle. Old habits die hard, she supposed, just as she supposed Sinead and the rest of the females wouldn't appreciate her showing the kid the weapon at a family picnic.

"Why? Somebody need to go down?"

He grinned at that. "My sister, if you wouldn't mind."

"What's the offense?"

"Being a git. That should be enough."

She knew the gist of the meaning from Roarke's use of the word

when he lapsed into his native slang. “Not in New York, ace. The city’s full of gits.”

“I think I’ll be a cop and blast the bad guys. How many’ve you blasted?”

Bloodthirsty little bastard, Eve thought. She liked him. “No more than my share. Putting them in a cage is more satisfying than blasting them.”

“Why?”

“It lasts longer.”

He considered that. “Well now, I’ll blast them first, then put them in a cage.”

When she laughed, he shot out another grin. “We don’t get bad guys around here, and that’s a pity. Maybe I’ll come to New York again, and you can show me some of yours.”

“Maybe.”

“That’ll be frosted!” he said, and bolted off.

The minute he did, someone plopped down beside her and pushed a fresh pint into her hand. Seamus, she identified, Sinead’s oldest son. She was pretty sure.

“So, how’re you finding Ireland then?”

“We went east from New York. Green,” she added when he chuckled and gave her a friendly elbow in the ribs. “With a lot of sheep. And good beer.”

“Every shepherd deserves a pint of an evening. You’ve made my mother very happy, taking this time to come, be with family. She thinks of Roarke as hers now, in her sister’s place. What you’re doing for her, and for him, it matters.”

“It doesn’t take much effort to sit around and drink good beer.”

He patted her thigh. “It’s a long way to travel for a pint. Added to it, you’ve thrilled my boy to pieces.”

“Sorry?”

“My Sean, who was just here interrogating you.”

“Oh. It’s hard to figure who’s whose.”

“Sure it is. Since we visited you last year, he’s given up his dream of being a space pirate in favor of being a cop and blasting bad guys for his living.”

“He mentioned it.”

“Truth be known he’s wishing desperately for a murder while you’re about. Something gruesome and mysterious.”

“Get a lot of those around here?”

He sat back, took a contemplative sip of beer. “The last I recall was when old Mrs. O’Riley broke her husband’s head with a skillet when he, once again, came home pissed and smelling of another woman’s perfume. I suppose it was gruesome enough, but not altogether mysterious. That would be about a dozen years back.”

“Not much action in the area for a murder cop.”

“Sadly for Sean, no. He likes to follow your cases, searching out tidbits on his computer. This last? The hologames murder gave him endless thrills.”

“Oh.” She glanced over to where Roarke stood with Sinead, her arm around his waist. And thought of the blade slicing into his side.

“We’ve a parental lock on, so he can’t get the juicier details.”

“Yeah, that’s probably a good thing.”

“How bad was he hurt, my cousin? The media didn’t have much on that—which is, I suppose, how he wanted it.”

His blood, warm, sliding through her shaking fingers. “Bad enough.”

Seamus nodded, lips pursed as he studied Roarke. “He’s not at all his father’s son, is he then?”

“Not where it counts.”

Irish picnics, Eve discovered, went on for hours, as did the Irish sum-

mer day, and included music, dancing, and general carryings-on till well after the stars winked on.

“We’ve kept you up late.” Sinead walked them upstairs, this time wrapping an arm around Eve’s waist.

Eve never knew exactly what to do when people looped their arms around her—unless it was combat, or Roarke.

“After all your travels, too. Barely giving you time to unpack, and none at all to settle in.”

“It was a nice party.”

“It was, it was, yes. And now my Seamus talked Roarke into going out in the field in the morning.” She gave Eve a little squeeze. At the signal, Eve glanced back at Roarke.

“Seriously. In the field, like farm field?” Eve said.

“I’ll enjoy it. I’ve never driven a tractor.”

“I hope you say the same when we’re dragging you out of bed at half-six.”

“He hardly sleeps anyway,” Eve commented. “He’s like a droid.”

Sinead laughed, opened the door to their bedroom. “Well, I hope you’ll be comfortable for the time you have.” She looked around the room with its simple furniture, its soft colors, and white lace at the windows under the slant of the ceiling.

Flowers, a charm of colors and shapes, stood in a squat pot on the dresser.

“If you need a thing, anything at all, I’m just down the hall.”

“We’ll be fine.” Roarke turned to her, kissed her cheek. “More than.”

“I’ll see you at breakfast then. Sleep well.”

She slipped out, shut the door.

“Why,” Eve asked, “do you want to drive a tractor?”

“I have no idea, but it seems like the thing to do.” Idly, he pulled off

his shoes. "I'll get out of it if you don't want to be left on your own in the morning."

"It's no problem for me. I plan on sleeping off a year's worth of beer anyway."

He came to her smiling, brushed a hand over her hair. "A lot of people for you to deal with at one time."

"They're okay. At least after you figure out what they're talking about. What they talk about, a lot, is you."

"I'm the new element." He kissed her forehead. "We're the new element, as they're fairly fascinated by my cop." He drew her in so they stood holding each other in the center of the pretty farmhouse bedroom with the night breeze wafting through the window to stir the fragrance of the flowers through the air. "It's a different life entirely here. A world away."

"The last murder was about a dozen years ago."

He drew back, shook his head. Just laughed. "Trust you."

"I didn't bring it up. Do you hear that?"

"What?"

"Nothing. See, it's really quiet, and it's really dark," she added with a glance at the window. "Dead quiet, dead dark. So you'd think there'd be more murders."

"Looking for a busman's holiday?"

"I know what that means even though it doesn't make any sense. And no. I'm good with the quiet. Mostly." She ran a hand up his side, laid it on the wound. "Okay?"

"Well enough. In fact . . ." He leaned down, took her mouth with his, and let his own hand roam.

"Okay, hold it. That's just weird."

"It feels very natural to me."

“Your aunt’s just—what is it—down the hall. You know damn well this place isn’t soundproofed.”

“You’ll just have to be quiet.” He gave her ribs a deliberate tickle that made her jump and yelp. “Or not.”

“Didn’t I bang you already today, twice this morning?”

“Darling Eve, you’re a pathetic romantic.” He backed her toward the bed she’d already noted was less than half the size of the one at home.

“At least turn on the screen or something. For cover noise.”

He brushed his lips over her cheek, his hand over the taut muscles of her ass. “There’s no screen in here.”

“No screen?” She nudged him away, scanned the walls. “Seriously? What kind of place is this?”

“The sort where people use bedrooms for sex and sleep, which is exactly what I have in mind.” To prove it, he tumbled her onto the bed.

It squeaked.

“What is that? Did you hear that? Is there a farm animal in here?”

“I’m fairly certain they keep those outside. It’s the bed.” He tugged her shirt over her head.

Testing, she lifted her hips, let them fall. “Oh, for God’s sake. We can’t do this on a talking bed. Everybody in the house will know what’s going on in here.”

Enjoying himself, he nuzzled at her throat. “I believe they already suspect we have sex.”

“Maybe, but that’s different than having the bed yell out, ‘Whoopee!’”

Was it any wonder he adored her? he thought.

Watching her face, he trailed a finger over her breast. “We’ll have quiet, dignified sex.”

“If sex is dignified it’s not being done right.”

“There’s a point.” He smiled down at her, cupping her breasts now, laying his lips lightly on hers. “Look at you,” he murmured, “all mine for two more lovely weeks.”

“Now you’re just trying to soften me up.” And softened, she reached out to comb her fingers through his hair.

All hers, she thought in turn.

“It’s good, being here.” She took his shirt by the hem, drew it over his head. Once again laid her palm on the healing wound. “Getting here, we’ll forget all about that. But being here, it’s good.”

“It’s been an interesting journey altogether.”

“I wouldn’t have missed a single mile.” She framed his face now, lifted until their lips met. “Even the rocky ones.”

When he lowered to her, she drew him in, and sighed.

Eyes closed, she ran her hands over the good, strong muscles of his back, let the shape and scent of him seep into those places inside her that always waited. Always opened, always welcomed.

She turned her head, found his lips again. Longer, deeper into a drift as easy and sweet as the night air.

The bed gave another rusty squeak, made her laugh. Then another as she shifted to him. “We should try the floor.”

“Next time,” he suggested, and made her laugh again. Made her sigh again. Made all those waiting, welcoming places warm.

And when they curled together, sated and sleepy, she nuzzled in and said, “Whoopee.”

She woke in the gray, shot straight up in bed.
“What was that? Did you hear that?” Naked, she leaped out of bed to grab the clutch piece she’d left on the little bedside table.

“There! There it is again! What language is that?”

From the bed, Roarke shifted. “I believe it’s known as rooster.”

With the weapon at her side, she stared at him, slack-jawed. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

“Not a bit. It’s morning, more or less, and that’s a cock signaling the dawn.”

“A cock?”

“I’d say. I don’t think Sinead and her man want you to stun their rooster, but I have to say, Lieutenant, you make a fascinating picture.”

She heaved out a breath, set her weapon down. “Jesus Christ, we may as well be on another planet.” She slid back into bed. “And if your cock gets any ideas about signaling the day, remember I’ve got a weapon.”

“As charming an idea as that is, I think that’s my wake-up call. Though I’d rather be riding my wife instead of a tractor, they’re expecting me.”

“Have fun.” Eve rolled over and put the pillow over her head.

Screaming cocks, she thought, squeezing her eyes tight. And, good God, was that a cow? Actually mooing? Just how close were those bastards to the house?

She lifted the pillow an inch, squinted to assure herself her weapon was at hand.

How the hell was a person supposed to sleep with all that mooing and cockadoodledoing, and only God knew what else was going on out there? It was just plain creepy, that’s what it was. What were they saying to each other? And why?

Wasn’t the window open? Maybe she should get up and . . .

The next thing she knew she awoke to yellow sunlight.

She’d slept after all, even if she’d had an unsettling farm animal dream where they were all decked out in military fatigues.

Her first thought was coffee before she remembered where she was

and barely muttered a curse. They drank tea over here, and she didn't know how the hell she was supposed to deal with the day she had ahead of her without a hit.

She dragged herself up, looked blearily around. And spotted the robe at the foot of the bed, and the memo cube sitting on it. She reached for the cube, flicked it on.

“Good morning, Lieutenant. In case you're still half asleep, the shower's straight down the hall to the left. Sinead says to come down for breakfast whenever you're up and about. Apparently I'm to meet you about noon. Sinead will take you wherever we're supposed to be. Take care of my cop.

“No bad guys, remember?”

She put on her robe, and after a moment's deliberation, stuffed her weapon in its pocket. Better on her, she decided, than left in the room.

And mourning coffee, she walked down to wake herself up in the shower.