

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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WRITING AS

ROBB

HOLIDAY IN DEATH



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Table of Contents

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

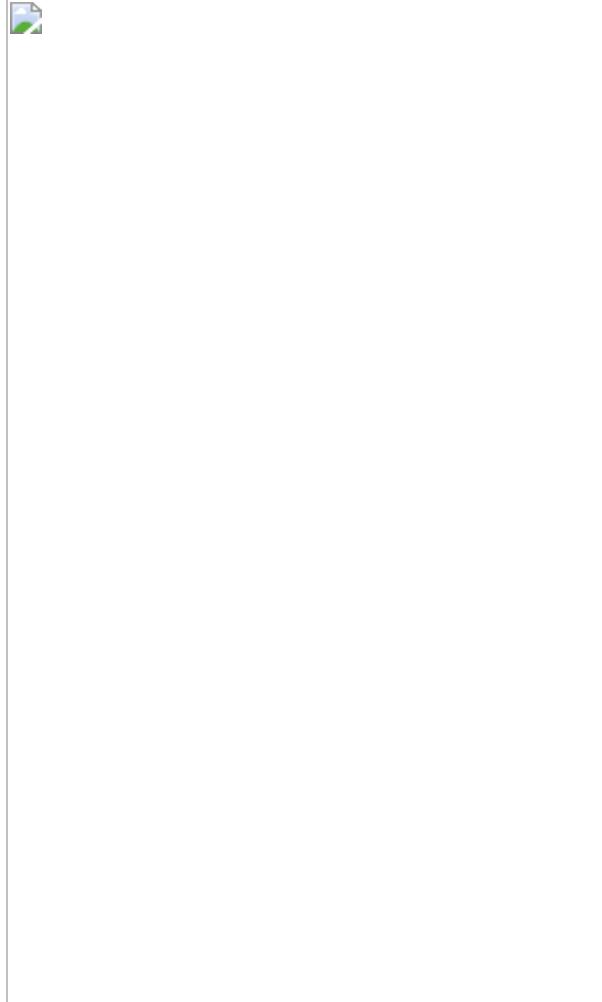
[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty.](#)



And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?

—Yeats

Nobody shoots at Santa Claus.

—Alfred Emanuel Smith

Chapter One

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20

She dreamed of death.

The dirty red light from the neon sign pulsed against the grimy window like an angry heart. Its flash turned the pools of blood glistening on the floor from dark to bright, dark to bright, slicing the filthy little room into sharp relief, then damning it to shadows.

She huddled in the corner, a bony girl with a tangle of brown hair and huge eyes the color of the whiskey he drank when he had the money for it. Pain and shock had turned those eyes glassy and blind and her skin the waxy gray of corpses. She stared, hypnotized by the blinking light, the way it blipped over the walls, over the floor. Over him.

Him, sprawled on the scarred floor, swimming in his own blood.

Small, feral sounds rumbled in her throat.

And in her hand the knife was gored to the hilt.

He was dead. She knew he was dead. She could smell the ripe, hot stink of it pouring out of him to foul the air. She was a child, only a child, but the animal inside her recognized the scent—both feared it and rejoiced over it.

Her arm was screaming where he'd snapped the bone. The place between her legs burned and wept from this last rape. Not all the blood splattered over her was his.

But he was dead. It was over. She was safe.

Then he turned his head, slowly, like a puppet on a string, and pain washed away in terror.

His eyes fixed on hers as she babbled, scrambled back deeper into the corner where she'd crawled to escape him. And the dead mouth grinned.

You'll never be rid of me, little girl. I'm part of you. Always. Inside you. Forever. Now Daddy's going to have to punish you again.

He pushed to his hands and knees. Blood fell in fat, noisy drops from his face, from his back, slid obscenely from the rips in his arms. When he gained his feet and began to shamble through the flow of blood toward her, she screamed.

And screaming, woke.

Eve covered her face with her hands, held one tight over her mouth to hold back the mindless shrieks that tore at her throat like shards of hot glass. Her breath heaved so painfully in her chest she winced with every exhale.

The fear followed her, breathed cold down her spine, but she beat it back. She wasn't a helpless child any longer, she was a grown woman, a cop who knew how to protect and defend. Even when the victim was herself.

She wasn't alone in some horrible little hotel room, but in her own house. Roarke's house. Roarke.

And concentrating on him, on just his name, she began to calm again.

She'd chosen the sleep chair in her home office because he was off planet. She'd never been able to rest in their bed unless he was with her. The dreams came rarely if at all when he slept beside her, and all too often chased her in sleep when he didn't.

She hated that area of weakness, of dependence, almost as much as she'd come to love the man.

Turning in the chair, she comforted herself by gathering up the fat gray cat who curled beside her, watching her out of narrowed, bi-colored eyes. Galahad was accustomed to her nightmares, but he didn't care to be wakened by them at four in the morning.

"Sorry," she muttered as she rubbed her face against his fur. "It's so damn stupid. He's dead, and he's not coming back. The dead don't come back." She sighed and stared into the dark. "I ought to know."

She lived with death, worked with it, waded through it, day after day, night after night. In the final weeks of 2058, guns were banned, and medical science had learned how to prolong life to well beyond the century mark.

And man had yet to stop killing man.

It was her job to stand for the dead.

Rather than risk another trip into nightmares, she ordered the lights on and climbed out of the chair. Her legs were steady enough, and her pulse had leveled to nearly normal. The sick headache that tagged onto the coattails of her nightmares would fade, she reminded herself.

Hoping for an early breakfast, Galahad leaped off behind her, then ribboned through her legs as she moved into the kitchen area.

"Me first, pal." She programmed the AutoChef for coffee, then set a bowl of kibble on the floor. The cat attacked it as if it were his last meal, and left her to brood out the window.

Her view was the long sweep of lawn rather than the street, and the sky was empty of traffic. She might have been alone in the city. Privacy and quiet were gifts a man of Roarke's wealth could easily buy. But she knew beyond the beautiful grounds, over the high stone wall, life pumped. And death followed it greedily.

That was her world, she thought now as she sipped the potent coffee and worked the stiffness of a still-healing wound out of her shoulder. Petty murders, grand schemes, dirty deals, and screaming despair. She knew more

of those than of the colorful swirl of money and power that surrounded her husband.

At times like this, when she was alone, when her spirits were low, she wondered how they had ever come together—the straight-arrow cop who believed unwaveringly in the lines of the law, and the slick Irishman who'd tangled with and over those lines all of his life.

Murder had brought them together, two lost souls who'd taken different escape routes to survive and, despite logic and sense, had found each other.

"Christ, I miss him. It's ridiculous." Annoyed with herself, she turned, intending to shower and dress. The blinking light on her tele-link signaled a muted incoming. Without a doubt who was transmitting, she leaped at it and unblocked the silent code.

Roarke's face popped on screen. Such a face, she thought, watching as he lifted one dark eyebrow. Poetically handsome, with black hair falling long and thick to frame it. The clever, perfectly sculpted mouth, the strong bones, the shocking intensity of brilliant blue eyes.

After nearly a year, just the sight of that face could send her blood humming.

"Darling Eve." His voice was like cream over strong Irish whiskey. "Why aren't you sleeping?"

"Because I'm awake."

She knew what he'd see as he studied her. There was so little she could hide from him. He'd see the shadows of a bad night hounding her eyes, the paleness of her skin. Uncomfortable, she shrugged and pushed a hand through her short, disordered hair. "I'm going into Cop Central early. I've got paperwork to catch up on."

He saw more than she realized. When he looked at her, he saw strength, courage, pain. And a beauty—in those sharp bones, that full

mouth, those steady brandy-colored eyes—she was delightfully oblivious to. Because he also saw weariness, he changed his plans.

"I'll be home tonight."

"I thought you needed a couple of more days up there."

"I'll be home tonight," he repeated and smiled at her. "I miss you, Lieutenant."

"Yeah?" However foolish she considered the warm thrill, she grinned at him. "I guess I'll have to make some time for you when you get here."

"Do that."

"Is that why you were calling—to let me know you'd be back early?"

Actually, he'd intended to leave a message that he'd be delayed another day or two—and to try to convince her to join him for the weekend on the Olympus Resort. But he only smiled at her. "Just wanted to inform my wife of my travel plans. Go back to sleep, Eve."

"Yeah, maybe." But they both knew she wouldn't. "I'll see you tonight. Uh, Roarke?"

"Yes?"

She still had to take a bracing breath before she said it. "I miss you, too." She cut the transmission even as he smiled at her. Steadier, she took her coffee with her as she went out to prepare for the day.

She didn't exactly sneak out of the house, but she was quiet about it. Maybe it was barely five in the morning, but she didn't doubt Summerset was around somewhere. She preferred, whenever possible, to avoid Roarke's sergeant-major—or whatever term you'd use for a man who knew everything, did everything, and poked his bony nose into what Eve considered her private business entirely too often.

Since her last case had shoved the two of them closer together than either was comfortable with, she suspected he'd been avoiding her as carefully as she had him for the past couple of weeks.

Reminded of it, she rubbed a hand absently just under her shoulder. It still troubled her a bit in the morning, or after a long day. Taking a full blast from her own weapon was an experience she didn't want to repeat in this or any other lifetime. Somehow worse was the way Summerset had poured meds down her throat afterward, when she'd been too weak to knock him on his ass.

She closed the door behind her, took one deep breath of the frigid December air, then cursed viciously.

She'd left her vehicle at the base of the steps mostly because it drove Summerset crazy. And he'd moved it because it pissed her off. Grumbling because she hadn't bothered to bring along the remote for the garage door or her vehicle, she trooped around the house, boots crunching on frosted grass. The tips of her ears began to sting with cold, her nose to run with it.

She bared her teeth and punched in the code with gloveless fingers, then stepped into the pristine and blissfully warm garage.

There were two gleaming levels of cars, bikes, sky-scooters, even a two-passenger mini-copter. Her city-issue vehicle in pea-green looked like a mutt among sleek, glossy hounds. But it was new, she reminded herself as she slid behind the wheel. And everything worked.

It started like a dream. The engine purred. At her command, the heat began to whirl softly through the vents. The cockpit glowed with lights, indicating the initial check run, then the bland voice of the recording assured her all systems were in operational order.

She'd have suffered the tortures of the damned before she would admit she missed the capriciousness and outright crankiness of her old unit.

At a smooth pace, she glided out of the garage and down the curved drive toward the iron gates. They parted smoothly, soundlessly, for her.

The streets in this exclusive neighborhood were quiet, clean. Trees on the verge of the great park were coated in a thin sheen of glittery frost like a skinsuit of diamond dust. Deep inside its shadows, chemi-heads and spine crackers might be finishing up the night's work, but here, there were only polished stone buildings, wide avenues, and the quiet dark before dawn.

She was blocks away before the first billboard loomed up, spitting garish light and motion into the night. Santa, red-cheeked and with a manic grin that made her think of an oversized elf on Zeus, rode through the sky behind his fleet of reindeer and blasted out *ho, ho, hos*, while warning the populace of just how many shopping days they had left before Christmas.

"Yeah, yeah, I hear you. You fat son of a bitch." She scowled over as she braked for a light. She'd never had to worry about the holiday before. It had just been a matter of finding something ridiculous for Mavis, maybe something edible for Feeney.

There'd been no one else in her life to wrap gifts for.

And what the hell did she buy for a man who not only had everything, but owned most of the plants and factories that made it? For a woman who'd prefer a blow with a blunt instrument to shopping for an afternoon, it was a serious dilemma.

Christmas, she decided, as Santa began to tout the variety of stores and selections in the Big Apple Sky Mall, was a pain in the ass.

Still, her mood lifted as she hit the predictably snared traffic on Broadway. Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, there was a party going on. The people glides were jammed with pedestrians, most of whom were drunk, stoned, or both. Glide-cart operators shivered in the cold while their grills smoked. If a vender had a spot on this street, he held it in a tight, ready fist.

She cracked her window a sliver, caught the scent of roasting chestnuts, soy dogs, smoke, and humanity. Someone was singing out in a strident monotone about the end of the world. A cabbie blasted his horn well over noise pollution laws as pedestrians flowed into the street on his