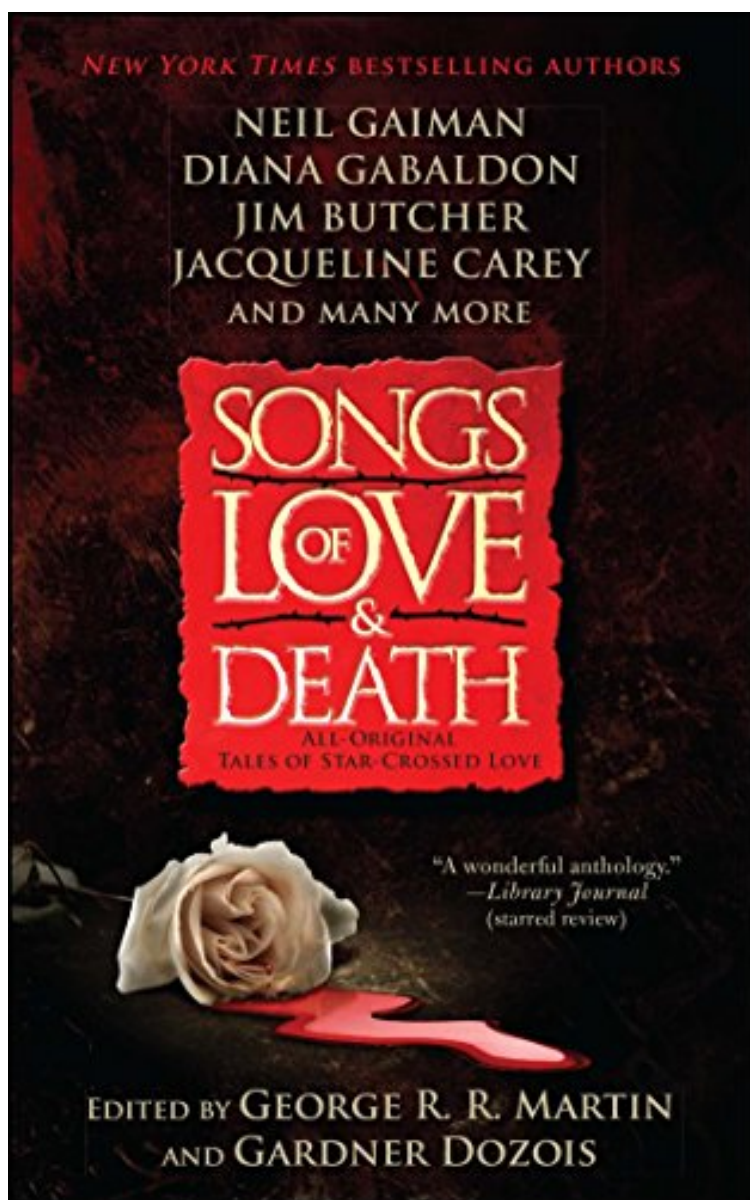


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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurIN this star-studded cross-genre anthology, seventeen of the greatest modern authors of fantasy, science fiction, and romance explore the borderlands of their genres with brand-new tales of ill-fated love. From zombie-infested woods in a postapocalyptic America to faery-haunted rural fields in eighteenth-century England, from the kingdoms of high fantasy to the alien world of a galaxy-spanning empire, these are stories of lovers who must struggle against the forces of magic and fate. Award-winning, bestselling

author Neil Gaiman demonstrates why hes one of the hottest stars in literature today with *The Thing About Cassandra*, a subtle but chilling story of a man who meets an old girlfriend he had never expected to see.

International blockbuster bestselling author Diana Gabaldon sends a World War II RAF pilot through a stone circle to the time of her *Outlander* series in *A Leaf on the Winds of All Hallows*. Torn from all he knows, Jerry MacKenzie determinedly survives hardship and danger, intent on his goal of returning home to his wife and baby no matter the cost. New York Times bestselling author Jim Butcher presents *Love Hurts*, in which Harry Dresden takes on one of his deadliest adversaries and in the process is forced to confront the secret desires of his own heart. Just the smallest sampling promises unearthly delights, but look also for stories by New York Times bestselling romance authors Jo Beverley and Mary Jo Putney, and by such legends of the fantasy genre as Peter S. Beagle and Tanith Lee, as well as many other popular and beloved writers, including Marjorie M. Liu, Jacqueline Carey, Carrie Vaughn, and Robin Hobb. This exquisite anthology, crafted by the peerless editing team of George R. R. Martin and Gardner Dozois, is sure to leave you under its spell. Discover the many realms of the heart with this extraordinary cast of acclaimed authors:

PETER S. BEAGLE JO BEVERLEY JIM BUTCHER JACQUELINE CAREY DIANA GABALDON
NEIL GAIMAN YASMINE GALENORN M.L.N. HANOVER ROBIN HOBB CECELIA HOLLAND
TANITH LEE MARJORIE M. LIU MARY JO PUTNEY LINNEA SINCLAIR MELINDA SNODGRASS
LISA TUTTLE CARRIE VAUGHN

Love Hurts

Murphy gestured at the bodies and said, Love hurts. I ducked under the crime scene tape and entered the Wrigleyville apartment. The smell of blood and death was thick. It made gallows humor inevitable. Murphy stood there looking at me. She wasn't offering explanations. That meant she wanted an unbiased opinion from CPDs Special Investigations consultant who is me, Harry Dresden. As far as I know, I am the only wizard on the planet earning a significant portion of his income working for a law enforcement agency. I stopped and looked around, taking inventory. Two bodies, naked, male and female, still intertwined in the act. One little pistol, illegal in Chicago, lying upon the limp fingers of the woman. Two gunshot wounds to the temples, one each. There were two overlapping fan-shaped splatters of blood, and more had soaked into the carpet. The bodies stank like hell. Some very unromantic things had happened to them after death. I walked a little farther into the room and looked around. Somewhere in the apartment, an old vinyl was playing Queen. Freddie wondered who wanted to live forever. As I listened, the song ended and began again a few seconds later, popping and scratching nostalgically. The walls were covered in photographs. I don't mean that there were a lot of pictures on the wall, like at great-grandmas house. I mean covered in photographs. Entirely. Completely papered. I glanced up. So was the ceiling. I took a moment to walk slowly around, looking at pictures. All of them, every single one of them, featured the two dead people together, posed somewhere and looking deliriously happy. I walked and peered. Plenty of the pictures were near-duplicates in most details, except that the subjects wore different sets of clothing generally cutesy matching T-shirts. Most of the sites were tourist spots within

Chicago. It was as if the couple had gone on the same vacation tour every day, over and over again, collecting the same general batch of pictures each time. Matching T-shirts, I said. Creepy. Murphys smile was unpleasant. She was a tiny, compactly muscular woman with blond hair and a button nose. I'd say that she was so cute I just wanted to put her in my pocket, but if I tried to do it, she'd break my arm. Murphy knows martial arts. She waited and said nothing. Another suicide pact. That's the third one this month. I gestured at the pictures. Though the others weren't quite so cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs. Or, ah, in medias res. I shrugged and gestured at the obsessive photographs. This is just crazy. Murphy lifted one pale eyebrow ever so slightly. Remind me: How much do we pay you to give us advice, Sherlock? I grimaced. Yeah, yeah. I know.

I was quiet for a while and then said, What were their names? Greg and Cindy Bardalacki, Murphy said. Seemingly unconnected dead people, but they share similar patterns of death. Now were upgrading to irrational and obsessive behavior as a precursor I frowned. I checked several of the pictures and went over to eye the bodies. Oh, I said. Oh, hell's bells. Murphy arched an eyebrow. No wedding rings anywhere, I said. No wedding pictures. And I finally found a framed family picture, which looked to have been there for a while, among all the snapshots. Greg and Cindy were both in it, along with an older couple and a younger man. Jesus, Murphy, I said. They weren't a married couple. They were brother and sister. Murphy eyed the intertwined bodies. There were no signs of struggle. Clothes, champagne flutes, and an empty bubbly bottle lay scattered. Married, no, she said. Couple, yes. She was unruffled. She'd already worked that out for herself. Ick, I said. But that explains it. Explains what? These two. They were together and they went insane doing it. This has the earmarks of someone tampering with their minds. Murphy squinted at me. Why? I spread my hands. Lets say Greg and Cindy bump into Bad Guy X. Bad Guy X gets into their heads and

makes them fall wildly in love and lust with each other. There's nothing they can do about the feelings which seem perfectly natural but on some level they're aware that what they're doing is not what they want, and dementedly wrong besides. Their compromised conscious minds clash with their subconscious and I gestured at pictures. And it escalates until they can't handle it anymore, and bang. I shot Murphy with my thumb and forefinger. If you're right, they aren't the deceased, Murphy said. They're the victims. Big difference. Which is it? Wish I could say, I told her. But the only evidence that could prove it one way or another is leaking out onto the floor. If we get a survivor, maybe I could take a peek and see, but barring that, we're stuck with legwork. Murphy sighed and looked down. Two suicide pacts could technically be a coincidence. Three of them, no way it's natural. This feels more like something's MO. Could it be another one of those Skavis vampires? They gun for loners, I said, shaking my head. These deaths don't fit their profile. So. You're telling me that we need to turn up a common denominator to link the victims? Gosh, I wish I could have thought of that on my own. I winced. Yeah. I glanced over at a couple of other SI detectives in the room, taking pictures of the bodies and documenting the walls and so on. Forensics wasn't on site. They don't like to waste their time on the suicides of the emotionally disturbed, regardless of how bizarre they might be. That was crap work, and as such had been dutifully passed to SI. I lowered my voice. If someone is playing mind games, the Council might know something. I'll try to pick up the trail on that end. You start from here. Hopefully, I'll earn my pay and we'll meet in the middle. Right. Murph stared at the bodies and her eyes were haunted. She knew what it was like to be the victim of mental manipulation. I didn't reach out to support her. She hated showing vulnerability, and I didn't want to point out to her that I'd noticed. Freddie reached a crescendo, which told us that love must die. Murphy sighed and called, For the love of God, someone turn off that damned record. I'M SORRY, HARRY, Captain Luccio said. We don't exactly have orbital satellites for detecting black magic. I waited a second to be sure that she was finished. The presence of so much magical talent on the far end of the call meant that at times the lag could stretch out between Chicago and Edinburgh, the headquarters of the White Council of Wizardry. Anastasia Luccio, Captain of the Wardens, my ex-girlfriend, had been readily forthcoming with the information the Council had on any shenanigans going on in Chicago which was exactly nothing. Too bad we don't, eh? I asked. Unofficially is there anyone who might know anything? The Gatekeeper, perhaps. He has a gift for sensing problem areas. But no one has seen him for weeks, which is hardly unusual. And frankly, Warden Dresden, you're supposed to be the one giving us this kind of information. Her voice was half teasing, half deadly serious. What do you think is happening? Three couples, apparently lovey-dovey as hell, have committed dual suicide in the past two weeks, I told her. The last two were brother and sister. There were some seriously irrational components to their behavior. You suspect mental tampering, she said. Her voice was hard. Luccio had been a victim, too. I found myself smiling somewhat bitterly at no one. She had been, among other things, mindboinked into going out with me. Which was apparently the only way anyone would date me, lately. It seems a reasonable suspicion. I'll let you know what I turn up. Use caution, she said. Don't enter any suspect situation without backup on hand. There's too much chance that you could be compromised. Compromised? I asked. Of the two people having this conversation, which one of them exposed the last guy rearranging people's heads? Touch, Luccio said. But he got away with it because we were overconfident. So use caution anyway. Planning on it, I said. There was a moment of awkward silence, and then Anastasia said, How have you been, Harry? Keeping busy, I said. She had already apologized to me, sort of, for abruptly walking out of my personal life. She'd never intended to be there in the first place. There had been a real emotional tsunami around the events of last year, and I wasn't the one who had gotten the most hurt by them. You? Keeping busy. She was quiet for a moment and then said, I know it's over. But I'm glad for the time we had together. It made me happy. Sometimes I miss feeling that, I thought, completing the sentence. My throat felt tight. Nothing wrong with happy. No, there isn't. When it's real. Her voice softened. Be careful, Harry. Please. I will, I said. I STARTED COMBINING the supernatural world for answers and got almost nothing. The Little Folk, who could usually be relied on to provide some kind of information, had nothing for me. Their memory for detail is very short, and the deaths had happened too long ago to get me anything but conflicting gibberish. I made several mental nighttime sweeps through the city using the scale model of Chicago in my basement, and got nothing but a headache for my trouble. I called around the Paranet, the organization of folk with only modest magical gifts, the kind who often found themselves being preyed upon by more powerful supernatural beings. They worked together now, sharing information, communicating successful techniques, and generally overcoming their lack of raw magical muscle with mutually supportive teamwork. They didn't have anything for me, either. I hit McAnnallys, a hub of the

supernatural social scene, and asked a lot of questions. No one had any answers. Then I started contacting the people I knew in the scene, starting with the ones I thought most likely to provide information. I worked my way methodically down the list, crossing out names, until I got to ask random people on the street. There are days when I don't feel like much of a wizard. Or an investigator. Or a wizard investigator. Ordinary PIs have a lot of days like that, where you look and look and look for information and find nothing. I get fewer of those days than most, on account of the whole wizard thing giving me a lot more options but sometimes I come up goose eggs anyway. I just hate doing it when lives may be in danger. Four days later, all I knew was that nobody knew about any black magic happening in Chicago, and the only traces of it I did find were the miniscule amounts of residue left from black magic wrought by those without enough power to be a threat.

(Warden Ramirez had coined the phrase dim magic to describe that kind of petty, essentially harmless malice.) There were also the usual traces of dim magic performed subconsciously from a bed of dark emotions, probably by someone who might not even know they had a gift. In other words, goose eggs. Fortunately, Murphy got the job done. Sometimes hard work is way better than magic. MURPHYS SATURN HAD gotten a little blown up a couple of years back, sort of my fault, and what with her demotion and all, it would be a while before she'd be able to afford something besides her old Harley. For some reason, she didn't want to take the motorcycle, so that left my car, the ever-trusty (almost always) Blue Beetle. It's an old-school VW Bug which had seen me through one nasty scrape after another. More than once, it had been pounded badly, but always it had risen to do battle once more if by battle one means driving somewhere at a sedate speed, without much acceleration and only middling gas mileage. Don't start. It's paid for. I stopped outside Murphys little white house, with its little pink rose garden, and rolled down the window on the passenger side. Make like the Dukes of Hazzard, I said. Doors stuck. Murphy gave me a narrow look. Then she tried the door. It opened easily. She slid into the passenger seat with a smug smile, closed the door, and didn't say anything. Police work has made you cynical, I said. If you want to ogle my butt, you'll just have to work for it like everyone else, Harry. I snorted and put the car in gear. Where we going? Nowhere until you buckle up, she said, putting her own seat belt on. It's my car, I said. It's the law. You want to get cited? Cause I can do that. I debated whether or not it was worth it while she gave me her cop look. And produced a ballpoint pen. I buckled up. Murphy beamed at me. Springfield. Head for I-55. I grunted. Kind of out of your jurisdiction. If we were investigating something, Murphy said. Were not. Were going to the fair. I eyed her sidelong. On a date? Sure, if someone asks, she said, offhand. Then she froze for a second, and added, It's a reasonable cover story. Right, I said. Her cheeks looked a little pink. Neither of us said anything for a little while. I merged onto the highway, always fun in a car originally designed to rocket down the autobahn at a blistering one hundred kilometers an hour, and asked Murphy, Springfield? State fair, she said. That was the common denominator. I frowned, going over the dates in my head. State fair only runs, what? Ten days? Murphy nodded. They shut down tonight. But the first couple died twelve days ago. They were both volunteer staff for the fair, and they were down there on the grounds setting up. Murphy lifted a foot to rest her heel on the edge of the passenger seat, frowning out the window. I found skee-ball tickets and one of those chintzy stuffed animals in the second couples apartment. And the Bardalackis got pulled over for speeding on I-55, five minutes out of Springfield and bound for Chicago. So maybe they went to the fair, I said. Or maybe they were just taking a road trip or something. Murphy shrugged. Possibly. But if I assume that it's a coincidence, it doesn't get me anywhere and we've got nothing. If I assume that there's a connection, we've got a possible answer. I beamed at her. I thought you didn't like reading Parker. She eyed me. That doesn't mean his logic isn't sound. Oh. Right. She exhaled heavily. It's the best I've got. I just hope that if I get you into the general area, you can pick up on whatever is going on. Yeah, I said, thinking of walls papered in photographs. Me too. THE THING I enjoy the most about places like the state fair is the smells. You get combinations of smells at such events like none found anywhere else. Popcorn, roast nuts, and fast food predominate, and you can get anything you want to clog your arteries or burn out your stomach lining there. Chili dogs, funnel cakes, fried bread, majorly greasy pizza, candy apples, ye gods. Evil food smells amazing which is either proof that there is a Satan or some equivalent out there, or that the Almighty doesn't actually want everyone to eat organic tofu all the time. I can't decide. Other smells are a cross section, depending on where you're standing. Disinfectant and filth walking by the Porta Potties, exhaust and burnt oil and sun-baked asphalt and gravel in the parking lots, sunlight on warm bodies, suntan lotion, cigarette smoke and beer near some of the attendees, the pungent, honest smell of livestock near the animal shows, stock contests, or pony rides all of it charging right up your nose. I like indulging my sense of smell. Smell is the hardest sense to lie to. Murphy and I got started midmorning, walking around the fair in a methodical

search pattern. It took us all day. The state fair is not a rinky-dink event. Dammit, she said. We've been here for hours. You sure you haven't sniffed out anything? Nothing like what we were looking for, I said. I was afraid of this. Of what? A lot of times, magic like this complex, long-lasting, subtle, dark doesn't thrive well in sunlight. I glanced at the lengthening shadows. Give it another half an hour and we'll try again. Murphy frowned at me. I thought you always said magic isn't about good and evil. Neither is sunshine. Murphy exhaled, her displeasure plain. You might have mentioned it to me before. No way to know until we tried, I said. Think of it this way: maybe we were just looking in the exact wrong place. She sighed and squinted around at the nearby food trailers and concession stands. Ugh. Think there's anything here that won't make me split my jeans at the seams? I beamed. Probably not. How about dogs and a funnel cake? Bastard, Murphy growled. Then, Okay. I REALIZED WE were being followed halfway through my second hot dog. I kept myself from reacting, took another bite, and said, Maybe this is the place after all. Murphy had found a place selling turkey drumsticks. She had cut the meat from the bone and onto a paper plate, and was eating it with a plastic fork. She didn't stop chewing or look up. Whatcha got? Guy in a maroon tee and tan BDU pants, about twenty feet away off your right shoulder. I've seen him at least two other times today. Doesn't necessarily mean he's following us. He's been busy doing nothing in particular all three times. Murphy nodded. Five-eight or so, long hair? Little soul tuft under his mouth? Yeah. He was sitting on a bench when I came out of the Porta-Potty, Murphy said. Also doing nothing. She shrugged and went back to eating. How do you want to play it? We're here with a zillion people, Harry. She deepened her voice and blocked out any hint of a nasal tone. You want I should whack him until he talks? I grunted and finished my hot dog. Doesn't necessarily mean anything. Maybe he's got a crush on you. Murphy snorted. Maybe he's got a crush on you. I covered a respectable belch with my hand and reached for my funnel cake. Who could blame him? I took a bite and nodded. All right. We'll see what happens, then. Murphy nodded and sipped at her Diet Coke. Will says you and Anastasia broke up a while back. Will talks too much, I said darkly. She glanced a little bit away. He's your friend. He worries about you. I studied her averted face for a moment and then nodded. Well, I said, tell Will he doesn't need to worry. It sucked. It sucks less now. I'll be fine. Fish in the sea, never meant to be, et cetera. I paused over another bite of funnel cake and asked, How's Kincaid? The way he always is, Murphy said. You get to be a few centuries old, you get a little set in your ways. She shook her head. It's his type. He'd be that way if he was twenty. He walks his own road and doesn't let anyone make him do differently. Like she stopped before she could say who Kincaid was like. She ate her turkey leg. A shiver passed over the fair, a tactile sensation to my wizard's senses. Sundown. Twilight would go on for a while yet, but the light left in the sky would no longer hold the creatures of the night at bay. Murphy glanced up at me, sensing the change in my level of tension. She finished off her drink while I stuffed the last of the funnel cake into my mouth, and we stood up together. THE WESTERN SKY was still a little bit orange when I finally sensed magic at work. We were near the carnival, a section of the fair full of garishly lit rides, heavily slanted games of chance, and chintzy attractions of every kind. It was full of screaming, excited little kids, parents with frayed patience, and fashion-enslaved teenagers. Music tinkled and brayed tinny tunes. Lights flashed and danced. Barkers bleated out cajolment, encouragement, and condolences in almost-equal measures. We drifted through the merry chaos, our maroon-shirted tail following along ten to twenty yards behind. I walked with my eyes half closed, giving no more heed to my vision than a bloodhound on a trail. Murphy stayed beside me, her expression calm, her blue eyes alert for physical danger. Then I felt it a quiver in the air, no more noticeable than the fading hum from a gently plucked guitar string. I noted its direction and walked several more paces before checking again, in an attempt to triangulate the source of the disturbance. I got a rough fix on it in under a minute, and realized that I had stopped and was staring. Harry? Murphy asked. What is it? Something down there, I said, nodding to the midway. It's faint. But it's something. Murph inhaled sharply. This must be the place. There goes our tail. We didn't have to communicate the decision to each other. If the tail belonged to whoever was behind this, we couldn't let him get away to give the culprit forewarning and odds were excellent that the man in maroon's sudden rabbit impersonation would result in him leading us somewhere interesting. We turned and gave pursuit. A footrace on open ground is one thing. Running through a crowded carnival is something else entirely. You can't sprint, unless you want to wind up falling down a lot and attracting attention. You have to hurry along, hopping between clusters of people, never really getting the chance to pour on the gas. The danger in a chase like this isn't that the quarry will outrun you, but that you'll lose him in the crowd. I had a huge advantage. I'm freakishly tall. I could see over everyone and spot Mr. Maroon bobbing and weaving his way through the crowd. I took the lead and Murphy followed. I got within a couple of long steps of Maroon, but was

interdicted by a gaggle of seniors in Shriners caps. He caught a break at the same time, a stretch of open ground beyond the Shriners, and by the time I got through, I saw Maroon handing tickets to a carnie. He hopped up onto a platform, got into a little roller-coaster style car, and vanished into an attraction. Dammit! Murphy said, panting. What now? Behind the attraction, advertised as the Tunnel of Terror, there was an empty space, the interior of a circle of several similar rides and games. There wouldnt be anyone to hide behind in there. You take the back. Ill watch the front. Whoever spots him gives a shout. Got it. Murphy hurried off around the Tunnel of Terror. She frowned at a little plastic barrier with an Authorized Personnel Only notice on it, then calmly ignored it and went on over. Anarchist, I muttered, and settled down to wait for Maroon to figure out hed been treed. He didnt appear. The dingy little roller coaster car came wheezing slowly out of the opposite side of the platform, empty. The carnie, an old fellow with a scruffy white beard, didnt notice he was dozing in his chair. Murphy returned a few seconds later. There are two doors on the back, she reported, both of them chained and locked from the outside. He didnt come out that way. I inhaled and nodded at the empty car. Not here, either. Look, we cant just stand around. Maybe hes running through a tunnel or something. Weve got to know if hes inside. Ill go flush him out, she said. You pick him up when he shows. No way, I said. We stay with our wing. I glanced at Murphy. The power I sensed came from somewhere nearby. If we split up, were about a million times more vulnerable to mental manipulation. And if this guy is more than he appears, neither of us wants to take him solo. She grimaced, nodded, and we started toward the Tunnel of Terror together. The old carnie woke up as we came up the ramp, let out a wheezing cough, and pointed to a sign that required us to give him three tickets each for the ride. I hadnt bought any, and the ticket counter was more than far enough away for Maroon to scamper if we stopped to follow the rules. Sir, Murphy said, a man were looking for just went into your attraction, but he didnt come out again. We need to go in and look for him. He blinked gummy eyes at Murphy and said, Three tickets. You dont understand, she said. A fugitive may be hiding inside the Tunnel of Terror. We need to check and see if hes there. The carnie snorted. Three tickets, missy. Though it aint the nicest room you two could rent. Murphys jaw muscles flexed. I stepped forward. Hey, man, I said. Harry Dresden, PI. If you wouldnt mind, all we need to do is get inside for five minutes. He eyed me. PI, huh? I produced my license and showed it to him. He eyed it and then me. You dont look like no private investigator I ever saw. Wheres your hat? In the shop, I said. Transmission gave out. I winked at him and held up a folded twenty between my first and second finger. Five minutes? He yawned. Naw. Cant let nobody run around loose in there. He reached out and took the twenty. Then again, what you and your lady friend mutually consent to do once youre inside aint my affair. He rose, pulled a lever, and gestured at the car. Mount up, he leered. And keep your, ah, extremities inside the car at all times. We got in, and I was nearly scalded by the steam coming out of Murphys ears. You just had to play along with that one. We needed to get inside, I said. Just doing my job, Sergeant. She snorted. Hey, Murph, look, I said, holding up a strap of old, worn leather. Seat belts. She gave me a look that could have scoured steel. Then, with a stubborn set of her jaw, secured the flimsy thing. Her expression dared me to object. I grinned and relaxed. It isnt easy to really get Murphys goat and get away with it. On the other side of the platform, the carnie pulled another lever, and a moment later the little cart started rolling forward at the blazing speed of one, maybe even two miles an hour. A dark curtain parted ahead of us and we rolled into the Tunnel of Terror. Murphy promptly drew her gun. It was dark, but I heard the scratch of its barrel on plastic as she drew it from its holster. She snapped a small LED flashlight into its holster beneath the gun barrel and flicked it on. We were in a cramped little tunnel, every surface painted black, and there was absolutely nowhere for Maroon to be hiding. I shook out the charm bracelet on my left wrist, preparing defensive energies in case they were needed. Murph and I had been working together long enough to know our roles. If trouble came, I would defend us. Murphy and her Sig would reply. A door opened at the end of the little hallway and we rolled forward into an open set dressed to look like a rustic farmhouse, with a lot of subtle details meant to be scary. Severed fingers at the base of the chicken-chopping stump, just below the bloody ax, glowing eyes appearing in an upstairs window of the farmhouse, that kind of thing. There was no sign of Maroon and precious little place for him to hide. Better get that seat belt off, I told her. We want to be able to move fast if it comes to that. Yeah, she said, and reached down, just as something huge and terrifying dropped onto the car from the shadows above us, screaming. Adrenaline hit my system like a runaway bus, and I looked up to see a decidedly demonic scarecrow hanging a few feet above our heads, bouncing on its wires and playing a recording of cackling, mad laughter. Jesus Christ, Murphy breathed, lowering her gun. She was a little white around the eyes. We looked at each other and both burst into high, nervous laughs. Tunnel of Terror, Murphy said. We are so cool. Total badassess, I said, grinning. The car

continued its slow grind forward and Murphy unfastened the seat belt. We moved into the next area, meant to be a zombie-infested hospital. It had a zombie mannequin, which burst out of a closet near the track, and plenty of gore. We got out of the car and scouted a couple of spots where he might have been but wasn't. Then we hopped into the car again before it could leave the set. So it went, on through a ghoulish graveyard, a troglodyte-teaming cavern, and a literal Old West ghost town. We came up with nothing, but we moved well as a team, better than I could remember doing with anyone before. Everything felt as smooth and natural as if we'd been moving together our whole lives. We did it in total silence, too, divining what each other would do through pure instinct. Even great teams lose a game here or there, though. We came up with diddly, and emerged from the Tunnel of Terror with neither Maroon nor any idea where he'd gone. Hells bells, I muttered. This week has been an investigative suckfest for me. Murphy tittered again. You said suck. I grinned at her and looked around. Well, I said. We don't know where Maroon went. If they hadn't made us already, they have now. Can you pick up on the signal-what's it again? Energy signature, I said. Maybe. It's pretty vague though. I'm not sure how much more precise I can get. Let's find out, she said. I nodded. Right, then. We started around the suspect circle of attractions, moving slowly and trying to blend into the crowds. When a couple of rowdy kids went by, one chasing the other, I put an arm around her shoulders and drew her into the shelter of my body so that she wouldn't get bowled over. She exhaled slowly and did not step away from me. My heart started beating faster. Harry, she said quietly. Yeah? You and me why haven't we ever? She looked up at me. Why not? The usual, I guess, I said quietly. Trouble. Duty. Other people involved. She shook her head. Why not? she repeated, her eyes direct. All these years have gone by. And something could have happened, but it never did. Why not? I licked my lips. Just like that? We just decide to be together? Her eyelids lowered. Why not? My heart did the drum solo from Wipe Out. Why not? I bent my head down to her mouth, and kissed her, very gently. She turned into the kiss, pressing her body against mine. It was a little bit awkward. I was most of two feet taller than she was. We made up for grace with enthusiasm, her arms twining around my neck as she kissed me, hungry and deep. Whoa, I said, drawing back a moment later. Work. Right? She looked at me for a moment, her cheeks pink, her lips a little swollen from the kiss, and said, Right. She closed her eyes and nodded. Right. Work first. Then dinner? I asked. Dinner. My place. We can order in. My belly trembled in sudden excitement at that proposition. Right. I looked around. So let's find this thing and get it over with. We started moving again. A circuit around the attractions got me no closer to the source of the energy I'd sensed earlier. Dammit, I said when we'd completed the pattern, frustrated. Hey, Murphy said. Don't beat yourself up about it, Harry. Her hand slipped into mine, our fingers intertwining. I've been a cop a long time. You don't always get the bad guy. And if you go around blaming yourself for it, you wind up crawling into a bottle or eating your own gun. Thank you, I said quietly. But Heh, Murphy said. You said, but. We both grinned like fools. I looked down at our twined hands. I like this. So do I, Murphy said. Why didn't we do this a long time ago? Beats me. Are we just that stupid? she asked. I mean, people, in general. Are we really so blind that we miss what's right there in front of us? As a species, we're essentially insane, I said. So, yeah, probably. I lifted our hands and kissed her fingertips. I'm not missing it now, though. Her smile lit up several thousand square feet of the midway. Good. The echo of a thought rattled around in my head: Insane. Oh, I said. Oh, hell's bells. She frowned at me. What? Murph I think we got whammied. She blinked at me. What? No, we didn't. I think we did. I didn't see anything or feel anything. I mean, nothing, Harry. I've felt magic like that before. Look at us, I said, waving our joined hands. We've been friends a long time, Harry, she said. And we've had a couple of near misses before. This time we just didn't screw it up. That's all that's happening, here. What about Kincaid? I asked her. She mulled over that one for a second. Then she said, I doubt hell even notice I'm gone. She frowned at me. Harry, I haven't been this happy in I never thought I could feel this way again. About anyone. My heart continued to go pit-a-pat. I know exactly what you mean, I said. I feel the same way. Her smile warmed even more. Then what's the problem? Isn't that what love is supposed to be like? Effortless? I had to think about that one for a second. And then I said, carefully and slowly, Murph, think about it. What do you mean? You know how good this is? I asked. Yeah. How right it feels? She nodded. Yeah. How easy it was? She nodded energetically, her eyes bright. I leaned down toward her for emphasis. It just isn't fucked up enough to really be you and me. Her smile faltered. My God, she said, her eyes widening. We got whammied.... WE RETURNED TO the Tunnel of Terror. I don't get it, she said. I don't I didn't feel anything happen. I don't feel any different now. I thought being aware of this kind of thing made it go away. No, I said. But it helps sometimes. Do you still? I squeezed her hand once more before letting go. Yeah, I said. I still feel it. Is it going to go away? I didn't answer her. I didn't know. Or maybe I didn't want to know. The old carnie saw us coming and his face flickered with

apprehension as soon as he looked at us. He stood up and looked from the control board for the ride to the entranceway to the interior. Yeah, I muttered. Sneaky bastard. You just try it. He flicked one of the switches and shambled toward the Tunnels entrance. I made a quick effort of will, raised a hand, and swept it in a horizontal arc, snarling, Forzare! Unseen force knocked his legs out from beneath him and tossed him into an involuntary pratfall. Murphy and I hurried up onto the platform before he could get to his feet and run. We neednt have bothered. The carnie was apparently a genuine old guy, not some supernatural being in disguise.

He lay on the platform moaning in pain. I felt kind of bad for beating up a senior citizen. But hey. On the other hand, he did swindle me out of twenty bucks. Murphy stood over him, her blue eyes cold, and said, Wheres the bolt hole? The carnie blinked at her. What? The trap door, she snapped. The secret cabinet. Where is he? I frowned and walked toward the entranceway. Please, the carnie said. I dont know what youre talking about! The hell you dont, Murphy said. She leaned down and grabbed the man by the shirt with both hands and leaned closer, a snarl lifting her lip. The carnie blanched. Murph could be pretty badass for such a tiny thing. I loved that about her. I cant, the carnie said. I cant. I get paid not to see anything. Shell kill me. Shell kill me. I parted the heavy curtain leading into the entry tunnel and spotted it at once a circular hole in the floor about two feet across, the top end of a ladder just visible. A round lid lay rotated to one side, painted as flat black as the rest of the hall. Here, I said to Murph. Thats why we didnt spot anything. By the time you had your light on, it was already behind us. Murphy scowled down at the carnie and said, Give me twenty bucks. The man licked his lips. Then he fished my folded twenty out of his shirt pocket and passed it to Murphy. She nodded and flashed her badge. Get out of here before I realize I witnessed you taking a bribe and endangering lives by letting customers use the attraction in an unsafe manner. The carnie bolted. Murphy handed me the twenty. I pocketed it, and we climbed down the ladder. WE REACHED THE bottom and went silent again. Murphys body language isnt exactly subtle it cant be, when youre her size and working law enforcement. But she could move as quietly as smoke when she needed to. Im gangly. It was more of an effort for me. The ladder took us down to what looked like the interior of a buried railroad car. There were electrical conduits running along the walls. Light came from a doorway at the far end of the car. I moved forward first, shield bracelet at the ready, and Murphy walked a pace behind me and to my right, her Sig in hand. The doorway at the end of the railroad car led us into a large workroom, teeming with computers, file cabinets, microscopes, and at least one deluxe chemistry set. Maroon sat at one of the computers, his profile in view. Dammit, Stu, he snarled. I told you that you cant keep coming down here to use the john. Youll just have to walk to one of the He glanced up at us and froze in midsentence, his eyes wide and locked on Murphys leveled gun. Stu took the rest of the night off, I said amiably. Wheres your boss? A door opened at the far end of the workroom and a young woman of medium height appeared. She wore glasses and a lab coat, and neither of them did anything to make her look less than gorgeous. She looked at us and then at Maroon and said, in a precise, British accent, You idiot. Yeah, I said. Good help is hard to find. The woman in the lab coat looked at me with dark, intense eyes, and I sensed what felt like a phantom pressure against my temples, as if wriggling tadpoles were slithering along the surface of my skin. It was a straightforward attempt at mental invasion, but Id been practicing my defenses for a while now, and I wasnt falling for something that obvious. I pushed the invasive thoughts away with an effort of will and said, Dont meet her eyes, Murph. Shes a vampire. Red Court. Got it, she said, her gun never moving from Maroon. The vampire looked at us both for a moment. Then she said, You need no introduction, Mr. Dresden. I am Baroness LeBlanc. And our nations are not, at the moment, in a state of war. Ive always been a little fuzzy on legal niceties, I said. I had several devices with me that I could use to defend myself. I was ready to use any of them. A vampire in close quarters is nothing to laugh at. LeBlanc could tear three or four limbs off in the time it takes to draw and fire a gun. I watched her closely, ready to act at the slightest resemblance of an attack. We both know that the war is going to start up again eventually. You are out of anything reasonably like your territory, she said, and you are trespassing upon mine. I would be well within my rights under the Accords to kill you and bury your torso and limbs in individual graves. Thats the problem with this ride, I complained to Murphy. Theres nothing thats actually scary in the Tunnel of Terror. You did get your money back, she pointed out. Ah, true. I smiled faintly at LeBlanc. Look, Baroness. You know who I am. Youre doing something to peoples minds, and I want it stopped. If you do not leave, she said, I will consider it an act of war. Hooray, I said in a Ben Stein monotone, spinning one forefinger in the air like a New Years noisemaker. Ive already kicked off one war with the Red Court. And I will cheerfully do it again if that is what is necessary to protect people from you. Thats irrational, LeBlanc said. Completely irrational. Tell her, Murph. Hes completely irrational, Murphy said, her tone wry. LeBlanc regarded me impassively for a

moment. Then she smiled faintly and said, Perhaps a physical confrontation is an inappropriate solution. I frowned. Really? She shrugged. Not all of the Red Court are battle-hungry blood addicts, Dresden. My work here has no malevolent designs. Quite the opposite, in fact. I tilted my head. That's funny. All the corpses piled up say differently. The process does have its side effects, she admitted. But the lessons garnered from them serve only to improve my work and make it safer and more effective. Honestly, you should be supporting me, Dresden. Not trying to shut me down. Supporting you? I smiled a little. Just what is it you think you're doing that's so darned wonderful? I am creating love. I barked out a laugh. LeBlanc's face remained steady, serious. You think that this, this warping people into feeling something they don't want to feel, is love? What is love, LeBlanc said, if not a series of electro-chemical signals in the brain? Signals that can be duplicated, like any other sensation. Love is more than that, I said. Do you love this woman? Yeah, I said. But that isn't anything new. LeBlanc showed her teeth. But your current longing and desire is new, is it not? New and entirely indistinguishable from your genuine emotions? Wouldn't you say, Sergeant Murphy? Murphy swallowed but didn't look at the vampire. LeBlanc's uncomplicated mental attack might be simple for a wizard to defeat, but any normal human being would probably be gone before they realized their mind was under attack. Instead of answering, she asked a question of her own. Why? Why what? Why do this? Why experiment on making people fall in love? LeBlanc arched an eyebrow. Isn't it obvious? I sucked in a short breath, realizing what was happening. The White Court, I said. The Whites were a different breed of vampire than the Reds, feeding on the life essence of their victims, generally through seduction. Genuine love and genuine tokens of love were their kryptonite, their holy water. The love of another human being in an intimate relationship sort of rubbed off on you, making the very touch of your skin anathema to the White Court. LeBlanc smiled at me. Granted, there are some aberrant effects from time to time. But so far, that's been a very small percentage of the test pool. And the survivors are, as you yourself have experienced, perfectly happy. They have a love that most of your kind seldom find and even more infrequently keep. There are no victims here, wizard. Oh, I said. Right. Except for the victims. LeBlanc exhaled. Mortals are like mayflies, wizard. They live a brief time and then they are gone. And those who have died because of my work at least died after days or weeks of perfect bliss. There are many who ended a much longer life with less. What I'm doing here has the potential to protect mortal kind from the White Court forever. It isn't genuine love if it's forced upon someone, Murphy said, her tone harsh. No, LeBlanc said. But I believe that the real thing will very easily grow from such a foundation of companionship and happiness. Gosh, you're noble, I said. LeBlanc's eyes sparkled with something ugly. You're doing this to get rid of the competition, I said. And, hell, maybe to try to increase the world's population. Make more food. The vampire regarded me levelly. There are multiple motivations behind the work, she said. Many of my Court agreed to the logic you cite when they would never have supported the idea of strengthening and defending mortals. Ohhhhh, I said, drawing the word out. You're the vampire with a heart of gold. Florence Nightingale with fangs. I guess that makes it okay, then. LeBlanc stared at me. Then her eyes flicked to Murphy and back. She smiled thinly. There is a special cage reserved for you at the Red Court, Dresden. Its bars are lined with blades and spikes, so that if you fall asleep they will cut and gouge you awake. Shut up, Murphy said. LeBlanc continued in a calmly amused tone. The bottom is a closed bowl nearly a foot deep, so that you will stand in your own waste. And there are three spears with needle-sized tips waiting in a rack beneath the cage, so that any who pass you can pause and take a few moments to participate in your punishment. Shut up, Murphy growled. Eventually, LeBlanc purred, your guts will be torn out and left in a pile at your feet. And when you are dead, your skin will be flayed from your body, tanned, and made into upholstery for one of the chairs in the Red Temple. Shut up! snarled Murphy, and her voice was savage. Her gun whipped over to cover LeBlanc. Shut your mouth, bitch! I realized the danger an instant too late. It was exactly the reaction that LeBlanc had intended to provoke. Murph! No! Once Murphy's Sig was pointing elsewhere, Maroon produced a gun from beneath his desk and raised it. He was pulling the trigger even before he could level it for a shot, blazing away as fast as he could move his finger. He wasn't quite fifteen feet away from Murphy, but the first five shots missed her as I spun and brought the invisible power of my shield bracelet down between the two of them. Bullets hit the shield with flashes of light and sent little concentric blue rings rippling through the air from the point of impact. Murphy, meanwhile, had opened up on LeBlanc. Murph fired almost as quickly as Maroon, but she had the training and discipline necessary for combat. Her bullets smacked into the vampire's torso, tearing through pale flesh and drawing gouts of red-black blood. LeBlanc staggered to one side; she wouldn't be dead, but the shots had probably rung her bell for a second or two. I lowered the shield as Maroon's gun clicked on empty, lifted my right fist, and triggered the braided energy ring on my index finger

with a short, uplifting motion. The ring saved back a little energy every time I moved my arm, storing it so that I could unleash it at need. Unseen force flew out from the ring, plucked Maroon out of his chair, and slammed him into the ceiling. He dropped back down, hit his back on the edge of the desk, and fell into a senseless sprawl on the floor. The gun flew from his fingers. Im out! Murphy screamed. I whirled back to find LeBlanc pushing herself off the wall, regaining her balance. She gave Murphy a look of flat hatred, and her eyes flushed pure black, iris and sclera alike. She opened her mouth in an inhuman scream, and then the vampire hiding beneath LeBlancs seemingly human form exploded outward like a racehorse emerging from its gate, leaving shreds of pale, bloodless skin in its wake. It was a hideous thing black and flabby and slimy-looking, with a flaccid belly, a batlike face, and long, spindly limbs. LeBlancs eyes bulged hideously as she flew toward me. I brought my shield up in time to intercept her, and she rebounded from it, to fall back to the section of floor already stained with her blood. Down! Murphy shouted. I dropped down onto my heels and lowered the shield. LeBlanc rose again, even as I heard Murphy take a deep breath, exhale halfway, and hold it. Her gun barked once. The vampire lost about a fifth of her head as the bullet tore into her skull. She staggered back against the wall, limbs thrashing, but she still wasnt dead. She began to claw her way to her feet again. Murphy squeezed off six more shots, methodically. None of them missed. LeBlanc fell to the floor. Murphy took a step closer, aimed, and put another ten or twelve rounds into the fallen vampires head. By the time she was done, the vampires head looked like a smashed gourd. A few seconds later, LeBlanc stopped moving. Murphy reloaded again and kept the gun trained on the corpse. Nice shootin, Tex, I said. I checked out Maroon. He was still breathing. So, Murphy said. Problem solved? Not really, I said. LeBlanc was no practitioner. She cant be the one who was working the whammy. Murphy frowned and eyed Maroon for a second. I went over to the downed man and touched my fingers lightly to his brow. There was no telltale energy signature of a practitioner. Nope. Who, then? I shook my head. This is delicate, difficult magic. There might not be three people on the entire White Council who could pull it off. So its most likely a focus artifact of some kind. A what? An item that has a routine built into it, I said. You pour energy in one end and you get results on the other. Murphy scrunched up her nose. Like those wolf belts the FBI had? Yeah, just like that. I blinked and snapped my fingers. Just like that! I hurried out of the little complex and up the ladder. I went to the tunnel car and took the old leather seat belt out of it. I turned it over and found the back inscribed with nearly invisible sigils and signs. Now that I was looking for it, I could feel the tingle of energy moving within it. Ha, I said. Got it. Murphy frowned back at the entry to the Tunnel of Terror. What do we do about Billy the Kid? Not much we can do, I said. You want to try to explain what happened here to the Springfield cops? She shook her head. Me either, I said. The kid was LeBlancs thrall. I doubt hes a danger to anyone without a vampire to push him into it. Besides. The Reds would probably kill him on general principle anyway, once they found out about LeBlancs death. We were silent for a moment. Then stepped in close to each other and hugged gently. Murphy shivered. You okay? I asked quietly. She leaned her head against my chest. How do we help all the people she screwed with? Burn the belt, I said, and stroked her hair with one hand. That should purify everyone its linked to. Everyone, she said slowly. I blinked twice. Yeah. So once you do it well see what a bad idea this is. And remember that we both have very good reasons to not get together. Yeah. And we wont be feeling this anymore. This happy. This complete. No. We wont. Her voice cracked. Dammit. I hugged her tight. Yeah. I want to tell you to wait a while, she said. I want us to be all noble and virtuous for keeping it intact. I want to tell you that if we destroy the belt, well be destroying the happiness of God knows how many people. Junkies are happy when theyre high, I said quietly, but they dont need to be happy. They need to be free. I put the belt back into the car, turned my right hand palm-up, and murmured a word. A sphere of white-hot fire gathered over my fingers. I flicked a hand, and the sphere arched gently down into the car and began charring the belt to ashes. I felt sick. I didnt watch. I turned to Murphy and kissed her again, hot and urgent, and she returned it frantically. It was as though we thought that we might keep something escaping from our mouths if they were sealed together in a kiss. I felt it when it went away. We both stiffened slightly. We both remembered that we had decided that the two of us couldnt work out. We both remembered that Murphy was already involved with someone else, and that it wasnt in her nature to stray. She stepped back from me, her arms folded across her stomach. Ready? I asked her quietly. She nodded and we started walking. Neither of us said anything until we reached the Blue Beetle. You know what, Harry? she said quietly, from the other side of the car. I know, I told her. Like you said. Love hurts. We got into the Beetle and headed back to Chicago. 2010 George R.R. Martin Revue de

presse "A wonderful anthology." -- Library Journal (starred review)