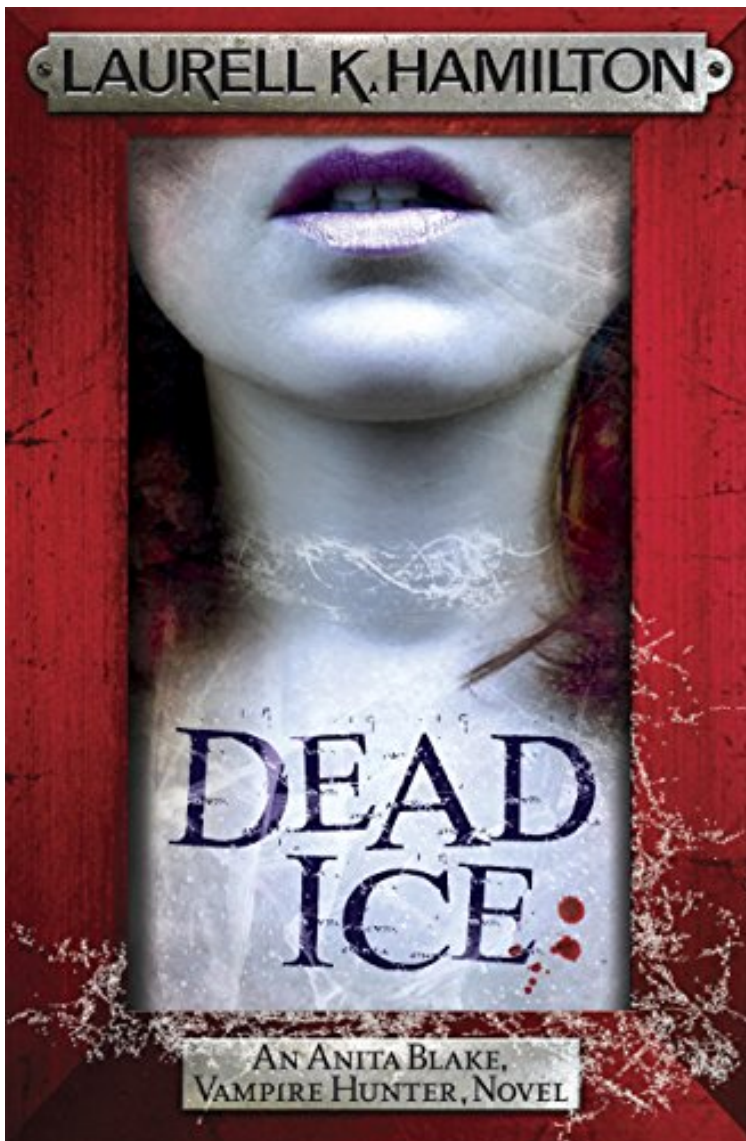


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Dead Ice



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteur Sunday Times and New York Times bestselling author Laurell K. Hamilton returns with another addictive adventure featuring vampire-hunting heroine Anita Blake, to thrill fans of Charlaine Harris and Anne Rice. My name is Anita Blake and I have the highest kill count of any vampire executioner in the country. I'm a U.S. Marshal who can raise zombies with the best of them. But ever since master vampire Jean-Claude and I went public with our engagement, all I am to anyone and everyone is Jean-Claude's fiance. It's wreaking havoc with my reputation as a hard ass - to some extent. Luckily, in professional circles, I'm still the go-to expert for zombie issues. And right now, the FBI is having one hell of a zombie issue. Someone is producing zombie porn. I've seen my share of freaky undead fetishes, so this shouldn't bother me. But the women being victimised aren't just mindless, rotting corpses. Their souls are

trapped behind their eyes, signalling voodoo of the blackest kind. It's the sort of case that can leave a mark on a person. And my own soul may not survive unscathed. . . .

Chapter 1 So, you're engaged, Special Agent Brenda Manning said. She wore a black pantsuit with a heavy belt that could wrap around her waist and hold the gun at her side. She was FBI and didn't have to worry about concealed carry, so the fact that her gun flashed when her suit jacket flared out, which was every time she moved, wasn't an issue. The gun looked very stark against her white button-down shirt. Yep, I said. My own gun was at the small of my back, underneath a suit jacket made to hide the gun from the clients at my other job. I'd also started getting belt loops added to my skirts so I could wear a belt that could stand up to the weight of a gun and holster. I'd come straight from Animators Inc., where the motto was, Where the Living Raise the Dead for a Killing. Bert, our business manager, didn't believe in hiding the fact that raising the dead was a rare talent, and you paid for talent. But lately my job as a U.S. Marshal for the Preternatural Branch had been taking more and more of my time. Like today. The other very special agent, Mark Brent, tall, thin, and looking barely old enough to be out of college, was bent over the portable computer they'd brought with them, which was sitting on the room's only desk. He was dressed in a suit almost identical to Manning's except his was brown to match his holster, but his gun was still a black bump, stark against his white shirt. We were in the office of our head honcho, Lieutenant Rudolph Storr. Dolph was currently somewhere else, which left me alone with the FBI and Sergeant Zerbrowski. I wasn't sure which was more dangerous to my peace of mind, but I knew Zerbrowski would mouth off more. He was my partner, my friend, he was entitled. I'd just met Special Agent Manning, and I didn't owe her my life story. The article I read made the proposal sound amazing, like something out of a fairy tale, Manning said. She smoothed her shoulder-length hair back behind one ear and it stayed put, because it was straight as a board. My own curls would never have behaved that well. I fought the urge to sigh. If you're a cop and a woman, never date a celebrity; it ruins your reputation for being a hardass. I was a U.S. Marshal, but ever since we'd gone public with our engagement I'd become Jean-Claude's fiancée, not Marshal Blake, to most of the women I met, and a lot of the men. I'd really had hopes that the FBI would be above such things in the middle of crime-fighting, but apparently not. The real problem for me was that the story we told publicly was both true and a lie. Jean-Claude had done the big gesture, but only after he'd proposed in the middle of shower sex. It had been spontaneous and wonderful and messy, and very real. I'd said yes, which had surprised him, and me. I'd figured I just wasn't the marrying kind of girl. He'd told me then that we'd need to do something to live up to his reputation for the media and the other vampires. They expected their king/president to have a certain flair, and the real proposal was too mundane. I hadn't understood that flair would include a horse-drawn carriage; yeah, you heard me; he'd actually picked me up in a freaking horse-drawn carriage. If I hadn't already said yes, and loved him to pieces, I'd have told him not only no, but hell no. Only true love had gotten me to play along with a proposal so grand that trying to imagine a wedding that topped it sort of scared me. Oh, yeah, Anita is all into that princess stuff, aren't you, Anita? Zerbrowski called from the chair he was half-tipping against the wall. He looked like he'd slept in his suit, complete with a stain on his crooked tie. I knew he'd left his home freshly washed and tidy, but he was like Pig-Pen from the Peanuts comic: Dirt and mess just seemed to be attracted to him within minutes of his walking out of his house. His salt-and-pepper hair was getting more salt and less pepper, and had grown out enough to be all messy curls, which he kept running his hands through. Only his silver-framed glasses were clean, square and gleaming around his brown eyes. Yeah, I'm all about that princess shit, Zerbrowski, I said. Agent Manning frowned at both of us. I'm getting the idea that I stepped in something. I was just trying to be friendly. No, you were wanting the princess to talk about how wonderful the prince is, and how he swept her off her feet, Zerbrowski said, but Anita is going to disappoint you like she's disappointed the last dozen women to ask questions about the big romantic gesture. I wanted to say, it wasn't a big romantic gesture, it was a freaking epic romantic gesture and I had hated it. Jean-Claude had loved being able to finally pull out all the stops and just do what, apparently, he'd wanted to do for years while we dated the whole princely sweep-you-off-your-feet shit. I liked to keep my feet firmly on the ground unless sex was involved, and you can't really have sex in a horse-drawn carriage; it scares the horses. No, we didn't try, because we were on freaking camera the whole time. Apparently, there are now engagement coordinators just like there are wedding coordinators, so of course we had a videographer. It had been all I could do to keep from scowling through all of it, so I'd smiled for the camera and so I wouldn't hurt Jean-Claude's feelings, but it's not my real smile, and my eyes in a few frames have that wait until we're alone, mister, we are so talking about this look. I decided to appeal to Manning's sisterhood of the badge and said, Sorry, Agent Manning, but ever since the story went live I'm getting treated more like Jean-Claude's girlfriend than a

marshal, and its really beginning to bug me. Her face went serious. Im sorry, I hadnt thought about it like that. Years of being one of the guys and building your rep, and I ask you about your engagement first thing. Ive never seen my partner be so girly about anything as meeting you today, Marshal Blake, Brent said as he unbent from hunching over the computer. He smiled and it made him look even younger. He seemed fresh-faced and less jaded than the rest of us. Ah, to be bright and shiny again, when you thought you could actually win the fight against evil. Manning looked embarrassed, which isnt something you see often in FBI agents, especially not when youve just met them. Knock it off, Brent, she said. He grinned at all of us. Its just that weve worked together for two years, and Ive never seen you squee over anything. Its the horse-drawn carriage, Zerbrowski said. Chicks dig that kind of shit. Not this chick, I said, quietly under my breath. What did you say? Manning asked. Nothing. Is the video ready, Agent Brent? I asked, hopeful we could actually do our jobs and leave my personal life out of it. Yes, he said, but then his smile faded around the edges, and I saw the beginnings of the bright and shiny rubbing off. Though after you see it we may all be game to talk about carriages and pretty, pretty princesses. It was another first, an FBI agent admitting that something bothered him. For them to admit it out loud, it had to be bad. I suddenly didnt want to see it. I didnt want to add another nightmare to the visuals I had in my head. I was a legal vampire executioner and raised zombies as my psychic talent; I had plenty of scary shit in my head and I so didnt need more, but I stayed in my chair. If Manning and Brent were tough enough to watch it multiple times, I could sit through it once. I couldnt let the other badges think that getting proposed to by the vampire of my dreams made me one bit less tough. I couldnt let myself believe it, either, though a part of me did. How could someone who let a man lead her into a Cinderella carriage carry a gun and execute bad guys? It made even my head hurt, thinking about it. Zerbrowski said what I was thinking. I thought the Feds never admitted anything bothered them. Agent Brent shook his head and looked tired. Lines showed around his eyes that I hadnt seen before and made me add between three to five years onto his age. Ive worked in law enforcement for six years. Id thought Id seen it all, until this. I did the math in my head and realized he had to be nearly thirty, which was how old I was, but Id used up my shininess years ago. I thought this was just another big bad preternatural citizen gone wrong, I said. Not exactly, he said. I dont like mysteries, Agent Brent. Im only here on this little information out of courtesy to the FBI, and because Lieutenant Storr requested it. We appreciate that, Marshal, and we wouldnt have had you walk into this blind if we didnt feel that the fewer people who know the details, the better off were going to be, Brent said. Awesome, I said, but the foreplay is getting a little tiresome; theres no one in the room but the four of us, so what is on the video? Are you always this cranky? Manning asked. Zerbrowski laughed out loud and didnt even try to hold it in. Oh, Agent Manning, this isnt even close to cranky for my partner. We heard that about her, and youre right, Blake. I did come in here expecting the proposal to have softened that reputation. I didnt think I had that much girl left in me, and if Im assuming that it softened you up, then your male colleagues must be making your life . . . difficult. It was my turn to laugh. Thats one way of putting it, but honestly its the whole engaged-to-a-vampire thing thats making some of my fellow officers doubt whose side Im on. Vampires are legal citizens now, with all the rights that entails, she said. Legally, yeah, but prejudice doesnt go away just because a law changes. Youre right about that, she said. In fact, some at the bureau thought we shouldnt include you in this case because of your proclivity to date the preternatural. Proclivity, thats polite; so what made you decide to trust me? You still have the highest kill count of any vampire executioner in the United States, and only Denis-Luc St. John has more rogue lycanthrope kills than you. He raises Troll-Hounds; theyre the only breed of dog ever raised specifically to hunt supernatural prey. It makes him the king of tracking through wilderness areas, after shapeshifters. Are you implying that the dogs make him better at the job, or that hes somehow cheating by using them? she asked. I shrugged. Neither, just a statement of fact. Now that Anita has passed muster, and Im included because Im her friend, show us some skin, agents, or stop teasing, Zerbrowski said. Oh, youll see skin, Brent said, and he looked older again, as if this case in particular were rubbing the shine away. What the hell is on the video, Agent Brent? I asked. Zombie porn, Brent said, and hit the arrow in the middle of the screen. *Revue de presse* 'Hamilton remains one of the most inventive and exciting writers in the paranormal field' (Charlaine Harris) 'Anita Blake is one of the most fascinating fictional heroines since Scarlett O'Hara' (Publishers Weekly) 'What The Da Vinci Code did for the religious thriller, the Anita Blake series has done for the vampire novel' (USA Today) 'A hardcore guilty pleasure' (The Times)