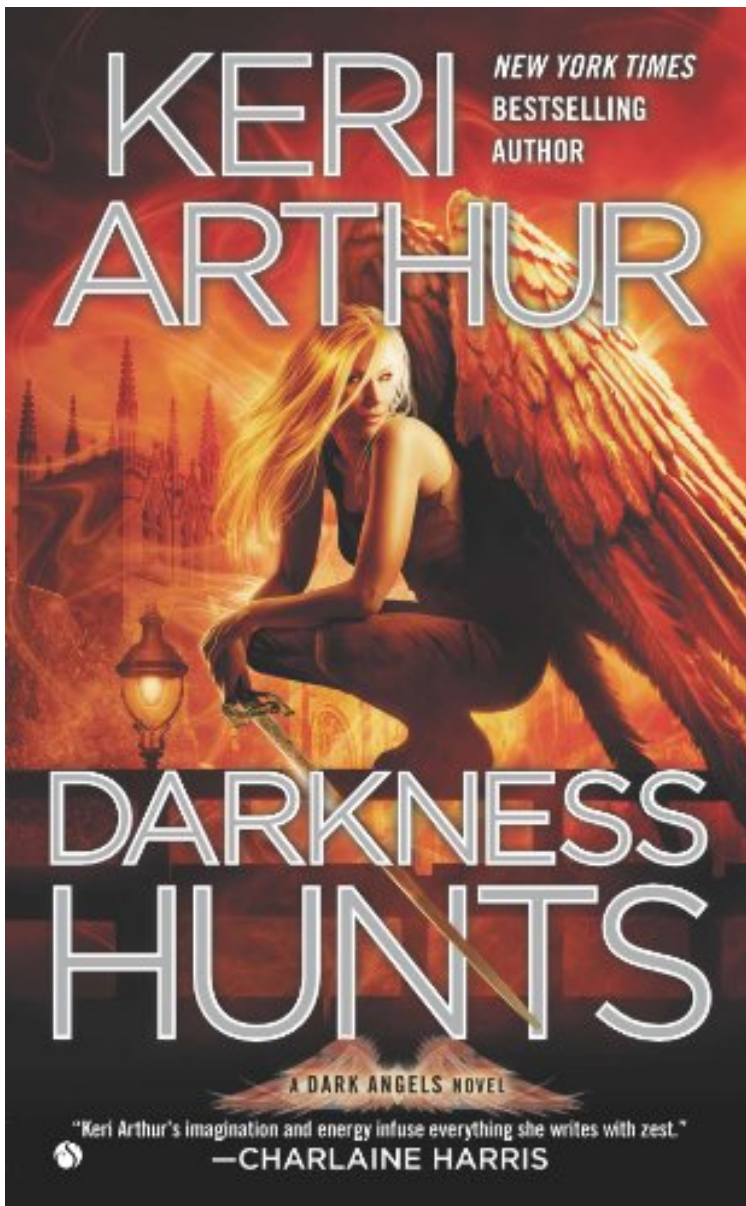


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Darkness Hunts: A Dark Angels Novel



Par Keri Arthur

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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurNew York Times bestselling author Keri Arthur returns to the enthralling Guardian Worldand a twilight realm of danger and desire Risa Jones, half-Aedh/half-werewolf, can enter the realm between life and death. She can speak to the dying and the dead, and she can see the reapers, collectors of souls. What she can not yet see is the identity of a stranger murdering women and draining their blood. Now Risa must summon her gifts to find him, even if it means putting her own life in danger. But Risa neednt look far. The killer knows who she is. He tells her his victims are infected by darkness and hes fated to destroy them. Fascinated by Risa, he engages her in a sinister game: the chance to save the life of his next

victim by deciphering his series of clues. In a race against time, she enlists the help of the reaper Azriel. But as an attraction between them grows, so does the fear that the strangers motives are only part of a larger, more dangerous stratagemone that that has lured Risa and Azriel into the dark.ExtraitChapter 1I need to speak to a ghost.Adeline Greenfield paused in the middle of pouring tea into her expensive china cups and looked at me.I was under the impression you already could. Her voice, like her appearance, was unremarkable. With her short gray hair, lined face, and generous curves, she reminded me of the grandmotherly types often seen on TV sitcoms. It was only her blue eyes or rather, only the power that glowed within them that gave the game away. Adeline Greenfield was a witch, a very powerful and successful one.No. I mean, I can hear them, and sometimes I can see them, but they dont seem to hear or acknowledge me. I grimaced. I thought if I was on the same plane as they are if I astral- traveled to them it might help.Possibly. She set the teapot down and frowned. But didnt you help relocate a ghost that was causing all sorts of mischief at the Brindle?The Brindle was the witch depository located here in Melbourne, and it held within its walls centuries of knowledge, spells, and other witch- related paraphernalia. Yes, but it wasnt really a ghost. It was actually a mischievous soul who was undecided about moving on.Souls are usually incapable of interaction with this world.Yes, but the Brindle is a place of power, and that gave her the ability.She nodded sagely. It is still odd that you cannot speak to them the same way as your mother, because Im sure she said you had the skill.I raised my eyebrows. You knew Mom?She smiled. Those of us truly capable of hearing the dead are few and far between, so yes, I knew her. We had lunch occasionally.That was something I hadnt known. But then, there was probably a whole lot of stuff Id never known about my mother and never would, given shed been murdered. Grief swirled, briefly touching my voice as I said, Well, no matter what she may have believed, the dead wont speak to me.Ghosts can be vexing creatures, she agreed. And they often have no desire to acknowledge their death.So how is ignoring me helping them disregard the fact that theyre dead?She placed a couple of sugars in each cup, then gently stirred the tea. Were talking about the dead here. Their minds are not what they once were, especially those who have been murdered.I didnt say hed been murdered.You didnt have to. Trouble, my dear, darkens your steps, and its not such a leap to think that if you want to speak to a ghost, its because he died before his time. Otherwise, your reaper would have been able to find out whatever you needed. She handed me a cup of tea, then glanced over my right shoulder. I would prefer it, by the way, if youd just show yourself. Its impolite to skulk on the edges of the gray fields like that.Heat shimmered across my skin as Azriel appeared. Of course, he wasnt strictly a reaper, as they were soul guides. He was something much more or, if you believed him, something much less and that was a Mijai, a dark angel who hunted and killed the things that broke free from hell.But what he hunted now wasnt an escapee demon, daemon, or even a spirit although we certainly had been hunting one of those. Wed gotten it, too, but not before the fucking thing had almost killed me. Which was why I was moving like an old woman right now everything still hurt. I might be half werewolf, but fast healing was one of the gifts I hadnt inherited enough of. In fact, I couldnt shift into wolf shape at all, and the full moon held no sway over me.Of course, I could heal myself via my Aedh heritage, but shifting in and out of Aedh form required energy, and I didnt have enough of that, either.Thats better, Adeline said, satisfaction in her voice. Now, would you like a cup of tea, young man?No, thank you.There was a hint of amusement in Azriels mellow tones, and it played through my being like the caress of gentle fingers. Longing shivered through me.Adeline picked up her own cup, a frown once again marring her homely features. Why do you wear a sword, reaper? There is no threat in this house.No, there is not, he agreed.When it became obvious he didnt intend to say anything else, Adeline turned her expectant gaze to me.He wears a sword because hes helping me hunt down some I hesitated. For safety's sake I couldnt tell her everything, yet I couldnt not explain, either. Not if I wanted her help. rogue priests who seek the keys to the gates of heaven and hell so they can permanently close them.That raised her eyebrows. Why on earth would anyone want that?Because theyre not of earth. They were Aedh, energy beings who lived on the gray fields the area that divided earth from heaven and hell. Or the light and dark portals, as the reapers tended to say. While the reaper community had flourished, the Aedh had not. Theyd all but died out, and only the Raziq a breakaway group of priests were left in any great numbers. And theyve decided it would be easier to permanently shut the gates to all souls than to keep guarding against the occasional demon breakout.She frowned. But that would mean no soul could move on and be reborn.Yes, but they dont care about that. They just see the bigger picture.But surely the number of demons who break out of hell is minor when compared to the chaos that closing the gates permanently would cause.As I said, I dont think the priests care. Not about the human race in general, and certainly not about babies being born without souls and ending up as little more than

inanimate lumps of flesh. They just want their life of servitude to the gates ended. Which is how I'd gotten involved in this whole mess in the first place. The Raziq had developed three keys that would permanently open or close the gates. The only trouble was, my father, who was one of the Raziq responsible for making the keys, had not only stolen the keys but had arranged to have them hidden so well that even he knew only a general location. And as he could no longer take on flesh form, he now needed me to do his footwork, since only someone of his bloodline could detect the hidden keys. In fact, everyone needed me the Raziq, the reapers, the high vampire council. And all of them wanted the keys for very different reasons. Adeline said, "And this is why you wish to speak so urgently to this ghost? He knows of the keys?" I hesitated. No. But he might have some information about a dark sorcerer who could be tied up in all this mess. We questioned our ghost when he was alive, but someone very powerful had blocked sections of his memories. We were hoping death might have removed those blocks. It's a rather vague hope. Which is still better than no hope. I took a sip of tea, then shuddered at the almost bitter taste and put the cup down. Tea had never been a favorite beverage of mine. "When do you wish to start?" Adeline asked. "Now, if possible." She frowned again. "Your energy levels feel extremely low. It's generally not considered a wise—" Adeline, I interrupted softly, "I may not get another chance to do this. Mainly because I'd been ordered by my father to retrieve a note from Southern Cross Station later this morning, and who the hell knew what would happen after that? But if past retrievals were any indication, then hell was likely to break loose at least metaphysically speaking, if not physically." She studied me for several minutes, then said, "If you insist, then I must help you, even if it is against my better judgment. Must?" I raised my eyebrows. "That almost sounds like you've been ordered to help me. Oh, I have, and by Kiandra herself, no less. She eyed me thoughtfully. "You have some very powerful allies, young woman. Surprise rippled through me. Kiandra who was head witch at the Brindle had helped me on several occasions, but only after I'd approached her. That she was now anticipating my needs suggested she knew a lot more about what was going on than I'd guessed. Did she say why? She said only that your quest has grave implications for us all, and that it behooves us to provide assistance where possible. Which suggested that Kiandra did know about the existence of the keys and our effort to retrieve them. And I guess that wasn't really surprising surely you couldn't become the head of all witches without some working knowledge of the fields and the beings that inhabited them. Which is why I need to do this now, Adeline. She continued to study me, her expression concerned. "What do you know of astral traveling?" "Not a lot, though I suspect it won't be that dissimilar to traveling the gray fields. It's not. Astral travel is simply your consciousness or spirit traveling through earth's realm, whereas the gray fields are merely the void through which your soul journeys on its way to heaven or hell. But there are a few rules and dangers you should be aware of before we attempt this. Having traveled through the gray fields many times, I knew they were hardly a void, as they were where the reapers lived. But I simply said, "There usually are when it comes to anything otherworldly." "Yes. She hesitated. "Thought is both your magic carpet and your foe on the astral plane. If you want to go somewhere, think of the precise location and you will be projected there. By the same token, if you become afraid, you can create an instant nightmare." I nodded. She continued. "Be aware that any thought related to your physical body will bring you back to your body. This includes the fear that your physical body may be hurt in some way." I frowned. "If I can't speak or move, how am I going to question my ghost?" "I didn't say you can't move, and you think the questions, the same as you think of the location. Clear?" "As mud." She eyed me for a moment, the concern in her expression deepening. "The astral plane is inhabited by two types of spirits: those who cannot for one reason or another move on spiritually, and other astral travelers. And just like walking down the street, you cannot control who's on the astral fields. But you can be certain that not all will be on the side of the angels. So I should watch my metaphysical ass?" "Yes. At your current energy levels, you could attract energies who are darker in life, and they may cause you problems on the astral plane or follow you onto this one. I can handle unpleasant energies on this plane. And if I can't, Azriel can." I paused. "What of the dangers?" Her expression darkened. "While you cannot die on the fields themselves, it is possible to become trapped there. It is also possible to become so enraptured by whatever illusion surrounds you on the plane that what happens there can echo through your physical being." I frowned. "So if I somehow imagine getting whacked on the plane, my body can be bruised?" "If the illusion is powerful enough, yes. And if you find yourself entrapped there, you risk death. Why?" "Because," Azriel said, before Adeline could, "flesh cannot survive great lengths of time without its soul. And while the astral body is not the entirety of the soul, if you find death when your astral being is not present in your body, then your soul is not complete and cannot move on. You would become one of the lost ones. And here I was thinking it would be a walk in the park. I swept a hand through my short hair and wished, just once, that something

was. Lets get this done. She glanced past me briefly, then rose. Come with me, then. I followed her out of the living room and down the long hall, my footsteps echoing softly on her wooden floors. Azriel made no sound, although the heat of his presence burned into my spine and chased away the chill of apprehension. Adeline stopped at the last door on the right and opened it. Please take your shoes off. I did so as she stepped to one side and motioned me to enter. The room was dark and smelled faintly of lavender and chamomile, and my bare feet disappeared into a thick layer of mats and silk. Lie down and make yourself comfortable. I glanced over my shoulder at Azriel. Though his face was almost classical in its beauty, it possessed the hard edge of a man who'd won more than his fair share of battles. He was shirtless, his skin a warm, suntanned brown and his abs well defined. The worn leather strap that held his sword in place emphasized the width of his shoulders, and the dark jeans that clung to his legs hinted at their lean strength. His stance was that of a fighter, a warrior one who not only protected me, but had saved me more than once. And would continue to do so, for as long as I was of use to him. Still, I couldn't help mentally asking, You'll be here? I'll be here to protect your physical form, yes. His thought ran like sunshine through my mind. I wasn't telepathic in any way, shape, or form, but that didn't matter when it came to Azriel. He could hear my thoughts as clearly as the spoken word. Unfortunately, the only time I heard his thoughts was at times like now, when it was a deliberate act on his part. But not on the plane. Astral travelers are of this world, not mine, so you are basically little more than a ghost to me. I cannot interact with you in any way. Reaper rules? Reaper rules. He hesitated, and something flashed through the mismatched blue of his eyes. Something so bright and sharp it made my breath hitch. Be careful. It would be most . . . inconvenient . . . if you find death on the astral plane. Inconvenient? I shrugged off my jacket and tossed it to one side with a little more force than necessary. Yeah, I guess it would be. I mean, who else would find the damn keys for you if something happened to me? That, he said, an edge riding his mental tone, is an unfair statement. Yeah, it was. But goddamn it, if I was an inconvenience to him, then he was a vast source of frustration to me. And on more than one level. Was it any wonder that it occasionally got the better of me and resulted in a snippy remark? That frustration is shared by us both, Risa. I glanced at him sharply. His expression was its usual noncommittal self, but the slightest hint of a smile played about his lips. I snorted softly. If he was simplying he was as sexually frustrated as me, then he had only himself to blame. After all, he was the one determined to keep our relationship strictly professional now that desire had been acknowledged and acted upon. Although how he could ignore what still burned between us I had no idea. I was certainly struggling with it. Risa, Adeline said softly, you must lie down before we can proceed. I did as she ordered, and the mats wrapped around me, warm and comforting. Adeline closed the door and the darkness engulfed us. The scents sharpened, slipping in with every breath and easing the tension in my limbs. Now, she said softly, her voice at one with the serenity in the room. To astral-travel, you must achieve a sense of complete and utter relaxation. I closed my eyes and released awareness of everything and everyone else around me, concentrating on nothing more than slowing my breathing. The beat of my heart became more measured, and warmth began to throb at my neck as the charm Ilianna my best friend and housemate had made me kicked into action. It was little more than a small piece of petrified wood, to connect me to the earth, and two small stones agate and serpentine for protection, but it had saved my life when a spirit had attacked me on the gray fields, and I'd been wearing it ever since. That it was glowing now meant it would protect me on the astral plane as fiercely as it did on the gray fields, and I was suddenly glad of that. Though why I thought I might need that protection I had no idea. Let your mind be the wind, Adeline intoned. Let it be without thought or direction, free and easy. A sense of peace settled around me. My breathing slowed even further, until I was on the cusp of sleep. A rope hangs above your chest. You cannot see it in the darkness, but it is there. Believe in it. When you are ready, reach for it. Not physically metaphysically. Feel it in your hands, feel the roughness of the fibers against your skin, feel the strength within it. I reached up with imaginary hands and grasped the rope. It felt thick and real, and as strong as steel. Ignore physical sensation and use the rope to pull yourself upright. Imagine yourself rising from your body and stepping free of all constraints. I gripped harder with my imaginary hands and pulled myself upward along the rope. Dizziness swept over me, seeming to come from the center of my chest. I kept pulling myself upright and the pressure grew, until my whole body felt heavy. I ignored it, as ordered, and every inch of me began to vibrate. Then, with a suddenness that surprised me, I was free and floating in the darkness above my prone form. Only it wasn't really dark. Adeline's aura lit the room with a deep violet, and Azriel's was an intense gold. Which surprised me I'd have put money on the fact that his would be the fierce white I saw on the fields. The black tats that decorated his skin the biggest of which resembled half of a dragon, with a wing that swept around his ribs

from underneath his arm and brushed the left side of his neck shimmered in the darkness and seemed to hold no distinct color. Only that half dragon wasn't actually a tat. It was a Duan, a darker, more abstract brother to the one that had crawled onto my left arm and now resided within my flesh. They were originally created to protect the Aedh priests who had once guarded the gates, but we had no idea who'd sent them to us although Azriel suspected it was probably my father's doing. He was one of the few left in this world or the next who had the power to make them. Valdis, the sword at Azriel's back, dripped the same blue fire on the astral field as she did in the real world, and it made me wonder if my own sword, Amaya, would be visible on this plane, given that she was little more than a deadly shadow normally. I shoved the thought aside, then closed my eyes and conjured the image of the area where our ghost Frank Logan had met his doom. In an instant, I was standing in front of the gigantic shed that was the Central Pier function center. On the night Logan had been murdered, this place had been filled with life and sound, and the pavement lined with taxis and limos waiting to pick up passengers. Now it was little more than a vague ghost town figuratively and literally. I looked around. The first thing I saw was a man, watching me. He was tall, with regal features and a body that was as lean as a whip. A fighter, I thought, staring at him. As our gazes met, humor seemed to touch his lips and he bowed slightly. I frowned, and thought, Do I know you? No, but I know you rather well. I've been following you around for weeks. His voice was cool, without inflection but not unpleasant. Why would you I stopped and suddenly realized just who he was. You're the Cazador. Madeline Hunter has been following me? I certainly am, ma'am. I blinked at his politeness, although I wasn't really sure why it surprised me. I had grown up hearing tales about the men and women who formed the ranks of the Cazadors, the high vampire councils' own personal hit squad, and I suppose I just expected them all to be fierce and fearsome. He gave me another slight bow. Markel Sanchez, at your service. Well, forgive me for saying this, Markel, but you're a pain in my ass, and I'd rather not have you following me around, on this plane or in life. Trust me, ma'am, this is not my desire, either. But it has been ordered, and I must obey. I raised imaginary eyebrows. Meaning even the Cazadors are wary of Hunter? If they are wise and value their lives, yes. Which said a lot about Hunter's power. She might be the head honcho at the Directorate of Other Races, but she was also a high-ranking member of the high vampire council, and, I suspected, plotting to take it over completely. I need to speak to a ghost. You're not going to interfere, are you? I'm here to listen and report. Nothing more, nothing less. I nodded and turned away from him. A grayish figure stood not far away. He was standing side on, looking ahead rather than at me, and he was a big man with well-groomed hair, a Roman nose, and a sharp chin. Frank Logan. I imagined myself standing beside him, and suddenly I was. If only it were this easy to travel in Aedh form. Mr. Logan, I need to speak to you. He jumped, then swung around so violently that tendrils of smoke swirled away from his body. Who the hell are you? He wasn't using thought, and his words were crisp and clear, echoing around me like the clap of thunder. I'm Risa Jones. I was standing nearby when you were murdered. His expression showed a mix of disbelief and confusion. I'm dead? How can I be dead? I can see you. I can see the buildings around me. I can't be dead. Damn it, where's my limo? I want to go home. He was never going home. Never moving on. He'd died before his time, and no reaper had been waiting to collect his soul. He was one of the lost ones doomed to roam the area of death for eternity. But I suspected nothing I could say would ever convince him of this, and I wasn't about to even try that could take far more time than I probably had on this plane. Mr. Logan, I need to speak to you about John Nadler. He frowned. I'm sorry, young woman, but I can't talk to you about clients. Mr. Logan, John Nadler is dead, murdered. I imagined a cop's badge, then showed it to him. We'd appreciate your helping us willingly, Mr. Logan, but we will subpoena you if required. His confusion deepened. When was Nadler murdered? I was talking to him just today. Logan's today had actually been several days ago. Which is why we need to speak to you. We believe you could be the last person to have seen him alive. Or at least, the last person to have seen the face-shifter who'd killed the real Nadler and assumed his identity. The real Nadler had been dead and frozen for many, many years, and that was the body the cops now had. The Nadler Logan had known had used Nadler's money and influence to purchase nearly all the buildings around West Street in Clifton Hill, a street that just happened to cross one of the most powerful ley-line intersections in Melbourne. It was also an intersection that seemed very tied up in the desperate scramble to find the portal keys. According to Azriel, the intersections could be used to manipulate time, reality, or fate, and it was likely that whoever had stolen the first key from us or rather, from me, had used the intersection to access the gray fields and permanently open the first portal. Suggesting that the face-shifter was either a sorcerer himself or worked for someone who was. Only those well-versed in magic could use the ley lines. Of course, why the hell anyone would want to weaken the only thing that stood between us and the hordes of hell, I had no idea. Not even Azriel could

answer that one. But we'd obviously gotten too close to uncovering who the face-shifter was, so he'd stepped out of Nadler's life and into a new one. Unless Logan could reveal something about the man he'd known as Nadler, our search was right back at square one. I'm not sure I can help you, Logan said. He was just a client.

I didn't know much about him on a personal level. We're not interested in his personal life, but rather his business one. I hesitated. What can you tell me about the deal he made with the heirs of James Trilby and Garvin Appleby? Trilby and Appleby were the two other members of the consortium the fake Nadler had formed to purchase all the land around West Street. Their heirs had decided to sue the consortium and therefore John Nadler, who had, when they died, become sole owner for a bigger piece of the land pie. They'd reached an out-of-court settlement the day before Nadler had pulled the plug on his stolen identity. I'm not sure how that deal went. Please, Mr. Logan, just answer the question. He raked a hand through his hair. The action stirred the ghostly strands, making them whirl into the ether before settling back down. From somewhere in the distance came a gentle vibration, and the sensation crept around me, making the shadowy world surrounding us tremble. It almost felt like the beginnings of a quake, but was that even possible on the astral fields? Even as the thought ran through my mind, the shadows around me began to quiver, and Adeline's warning came back to me. I took a deep breath, imagining calmness. The shadowy world close to us stilled, but the distant vibration continued. It was a weird sensation and it felt like trouble. I forced myself to ignore it and returned my attention to Logan. Nadler agreed to pay them several million dollars each, he said, in exchange for them signing an agreement to accept the wills as they currently stand. And will those payments proceed now that Nadler is dead? He frowned. Of course. The heirs just won't get the payment as quickly, because it'll be tied up until Nadler's estate is sorted. And who is Nadler's heir? He has no children and he divorced his wife a long time ago. A fact, I thought bitterly, that hadn't stopped the fake Nadler from killing her. You know, there's a good percentage of men and women who forget to change their wills even after a second marriage, and it's not unknown for the first partner to get the estate. He paused, eyeing me critically. Have you got a will, young woman? It's never too late to start. I can offer you excellent thanks, I interrupted quickly, and rubbed imaginary arms. That vibration was getting stronger, and it was not pleasant. But I'm good-will-wise. Now, Nadler's heirs? How am I supposed to remember? His tone was cross. I haven't got the paperwork with me, and he's not my only client, you know. I know. Just think back to the agreement. Imagine you have it in your hand. He frowned and a second later ghostly paper began to form between his hands. I didn't move, not wanting to startle him and lose the moment. Who is his heir, Mr. Logan? He's got three: Mr. Harry Bulter, Mr. Jim O'Reilly, and a Ms. Genevieve Sands. A woman? One of Nadler's heirs was a woman? Are any of them related to Mr. Nadler? Not as far as I'm aware. He glanced up. I still can't see why Mr. Nadler was a very wealthy man, I said easily. And it's not unknown for heirs to kill their benefactor to get hold of their money. That, unfortunately, is true. How was Nadler's estate divided among the three? He glanced at the paperwork again. All three have equal shares in everything. I frowned. This wasn't making sense. Why would the shape-shifter go to all the trouble of killing Nadler off, then divide the estate he'd murdered to get control of among three people? When was the will drawn up? His gaze flicked down to the bottom of the paper. The same day he signed the deal with Trilby's and Appleby's heirs. Which suggested an on-the-spot decision, but I very much doubted the man we were chasing ever did anything without forethought. Is there anything else you can tell me about Nadler? Any reason you believe someone might want him dead? He frowned. Not really. I sighed. Logan hadn't actually given us anything we couldn't have found out via a little subversive hacking, so maybe his death had been nothing more than the face-shifter leaving no threads behind, no matter how small. Thank you very much for your assistance, Mr. Logan. You could repay me by finding my limo, you know. It seems to have disappeared. Just use your phone and call it, Mr. Logan. He wouldn't get anywhere with it, but hey, if it made him happy, then what the hell. He made the right motions, and a somewhat fuzzy white limousine popped into existence. As Logan happily climbed in, I turned away. Time to return. The thought was cut short by a scream. A scream that suggested there was a woman on the astral plane in very big trouble. *Revue de presse* Praise for Keri Arthur Keri Arthur's imagination and energy infuse everything she writes with zest. *Charlaine Harris* Sensual and erotic I urge you to pick up Arthur's series. *USA Today* Keri Arthur skillfully mixes her suspenseful plot with heady romance. Sexy vampires, randy werewolves, and unabashed, unapologetic, joyful sexy you've gotta love it. Smart, sexy, and well-conceived. *Kim Harrison* Deliciously sexy [it] pulls you in and won't let go. Keri Arthur knows how to thrill! Buckle up and get ready for a wild, cool ride! *Shana Ab* Must Read! I love, love, love it! [It's] pretty damn hot. Joyfully ed *Risa* is an amazing character, she most certainly kicks butt. *Serendipity's* You will fall hard for [Keri Arthur's] *Dark Angels* series. *CoffeeTimeRomance.com* Everything a fan of Romance and Urban Fantasy

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