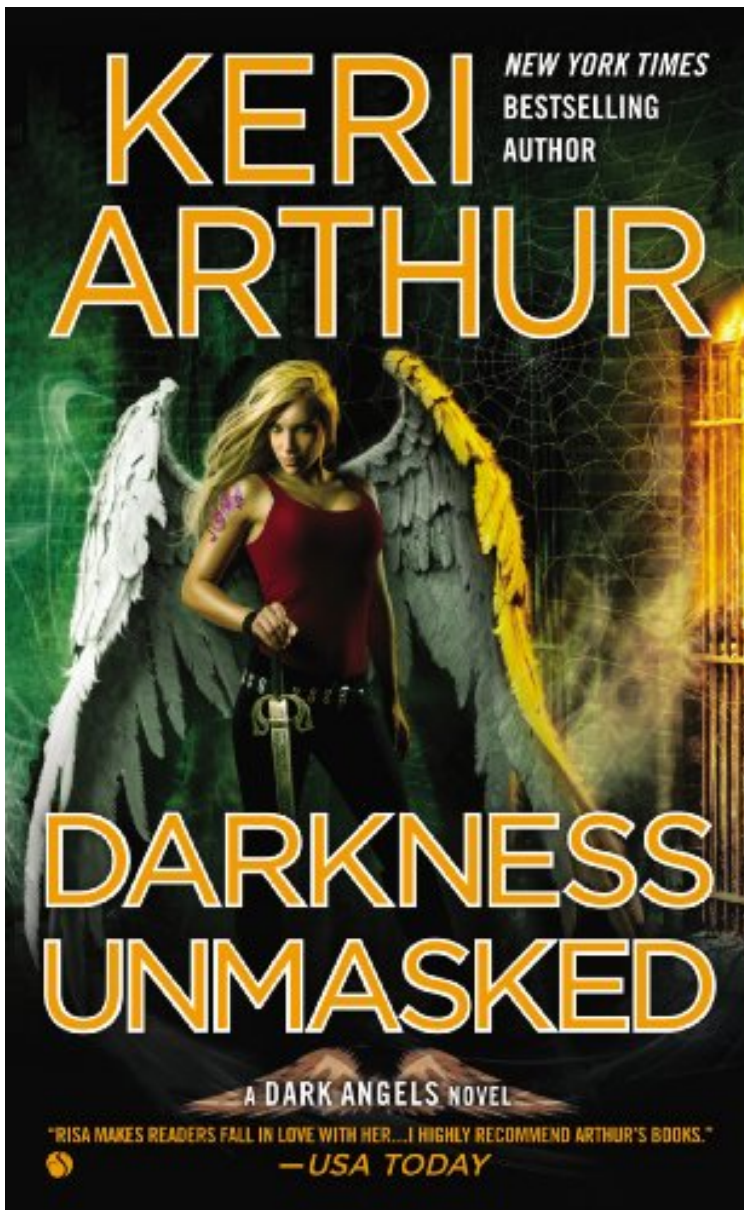


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Darkness Unmasked: A Dark Angels Novel



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurHalf-werewolf, half-Aedh Risa Jones is beginning to believe that the only way to find the keys shes been searching for and save her friends is by dying. And when Wolfgang Schmidt, the lover of her boss at the vampire council, is found dead, her worst fears are confirmed. With the first portal of hell permanently open, the energies of the dark path are leaching into the world.Searching for Schmidts killer and the keys at the same time, Risa and reaper Azriel track a shape-shifting spider spirit capable of changing her form into a seductive woman. But when they finally find the second key, the Aedh Lucian snatches it and disappears.Risa is intent on finding Lucian and fighting him to the deathfor in her mind, she knows that

neither can remain while the other lives....ExtraitChapter OneThe office phone rang with a sharpness that jolted me instantly awake. I jerked upright, peeled a wayward bit of paper from my nose, and stared at the phone blankly. Then the caller ID registered and I groaned. The call was coming from Madeline Hunter, the bitch who was not only in charge of the Directorate of Other Races, but was a leading member of the high vampire council, too. She was also the very last person in this worldor the nextwho I wanted to hear from right now.Unfortunately, given that she was now my boss, she was not someone I couldor shouldignore.I hit the vid-phones ANSWER button and said in a less-than-polite voice, What?She paused, and something flashed in the green of her eyes. A darkness that spoke of anger. But all she said was, I have a task for you.A curse rose in my throat, but I somehow managed to leash it. What sort of task?But even as I asked the question, I knew. There was only one reason for her to be ringing me, and that was to track down an escapee from hell. She not only had the Directorate at her command, but a stableful of Cazadorsthe high councils elite killing forceand they dealt with all manner of murderers and madmen on an everyday basis.I even had one following me around astrally, reporting my every move back to Hunter. Trust was not high on her list of good traits.Not that I think she had all that many good traits.A close friend of mine was murdered last night. Her voice held very little emotion, and she was scarier because of it. I want you to investigate.Hunter had friends. Imagine that. I scrubbed a hand across my eyes and said somewhat wearily, Look, as much as I absolutely adore working for you, the reality is the Directorate is far better equipped to handle this sort of murderer.The Directorate hasnt your experience with the denizens of hell, she snapped. Nor do they have a reaper at their beck and call.So Id been rightit was an escapee from hell. Not great news, but I guess it was my fault that these things were about in the world. It might have become my task to find the three lost keys that controlled the gates to heaven and hell, but the only one Id managed to find so far had almost immediately been stolen from me. As a result, the first gate to hell had been permanently opened by person or persons unknown, and the stronger demons were now coming through. Not in great numbersnot yetbut that was thanks only to the fact that the remaining gates were still shut.Of course, given the choice, Id rather not find the other keys. After all, if no one knew where they were, then they couldnt be used to either permanently open or close the gates. But it wasnt like I had a choice, not anymore. It was either find them or die. Or, when it came to the choice given to me by my fatherwho was one of the Raziq, the rogue Aedh priests whod helped create the keys, and also the man responsible for having them stolenwatch my friends die.Azriel isnt at my beck and call, I said, unable to hide the annoyance in my voice. He just wants the keys, the same as you and the council.Not to mention the Raziq and my goddamn father.Tisi takes priority over finding the keys.I snorted. Since when?That darkness in her eyes got stronger. Since I walked into my lovers house and discovered his corpse.I stared at her for a moment, seeing little in the way of true emotion in either her expression or her voice. And yet her need for revenge, to rend and tear, was so strong that even through the vid-phone I could almost taste it. That sort of fury, I thought with a shiver, was not something I ever wanted aimed my way.Yet, despite knowing it wasnt sensible, I couldnt help saying, Im betting the rest of the council wouldnt actually agree with that assessment.I think if she could have jumped down the phone line and throttled me, she would have. As it was, she bared her teeth, her canines elongating just a little, and said in a soft voice, You should not be worried about what the rest of the council is thinking right now.The only time Id stop worrying about the rest of the council was when she achieved her goal of supreme control over the lot of them. Until then, they were as big a threat to me as she was.But I wasnt stupid enough to actually come out and say that to her. Hunting for your friends killer is going to steal precious time away from the search forAnd, she cut in coolly, just where, exactly, is your search for the keys?Nowhere, thats where. My father might have given me clues for the next keys location, but deciphering those was another matter entirely. We figured it was somewhere in the middle of Victorias famous golden triangle, but given that particular region encompassed more than nine thousand square kilometers of land, that left us with a vast area to explore. It was fucking frustrating, but all Azriel and I could do was keep on searching and hope that sooner or later fate gave us a goddamn break.Its probably in the same place as your search for my mothers killer.The minute the words left my mouth, I regretted them. Hunter really wasnt someone I needed to antagonize, and yet it was her damn promise to help find my mothers killer that had made me agree to work for her and the council in the first place. And while Id kept my end of the bargain, she hadnt.For several very long seconds, she didnt reply. She simply stared at me, her expression remote and her eyes colder than the Antarctic. Then she said, voice so soft it was barely audible, Tread warily, Risa dearest.I gulped. I couldnt help it. Death glared at me through the phones screen, and she scared the hell out of me.I took a slow, deep breath, but it really didnt help ease the sense of dread or the sudden desire to just give it all

the fuck away. To let fate deal her cards and accept whatever might come my way maybe that death at Hunters hand or someone else's. I was sick of it. Sick of the threats, sick of the fighting, sick of a search that seemed to have no end and no possibility of our winning. Death is not a solution of any kind, Azriel said, his mind voice sharp. I looked up from the phone's screen. He appeared in front of my desk, the heat of his presence playing gently through my being, a sensation as intimate as the caress of fingers against skin. Longing shivered through me. Reapers, like the Aedh, weren't actually flesh beings although they could certainly attain that form whenever they wished but rather beings made of energy who lived on the gray fields, the area that divided earth from heaven and hell. Or the light and dark portals, as they preferred to call them. Although I had no idea whether his reaper form would be considered handsome or even how reapers defined handsome his human form certainly was. His face was chiseled, almost classical in its beauty, but possessed the hard edge of a man who'd fought many battles. His body held a similar hardness, though his build was more that of an athlete than a weight lifter. Distinctive black tats that resembled the left half of a wing swept around his ribs from underneath his arm, the tips brushing across the left side of his neck. Only it wasn't a tat.

It was a Duana darker, more stylized brother to the lilac one that resided on my left arm and had been designed to protect us when we walked the gray fields. We had no idea who'd sent them to us, but Azriel suspected it was my father. He was apparently one of the few left in this world or the next who had the power to make them. Of course, Azriel wasn't just a reaper, but something far more. He was one of the Mijai, the dark angels who hunted and killed the things that broke free from hell. And they had more than their fair share of work now that the first gate had been opened. If you ask me, death is looking more and more the perfect solution when it comes to the keys. My mental voice sounded as weary as my physical one. I wasn't actually telepathic, but that didn't matter when it came to my reaper. He could hear my thoughts as clearly as the spoken word. Unfortunately, it wasn't always a two-way street. Most of the time I heard his thoughts only when it was a deliberate act on his part. If I'm not here to find the damn things, then the world and my friends remain safe. He crossed his arms, an action that only emphasized the muscles in his arms and shoulders.

Death is no solution. Not for you. Not now. And what the hell is that supposed to mean? His gaze met mine, his blue eyes one as vivid and bright as a sapphire, the other as dark as a storm-driven sea giving little away.

It means exactly what it says. Great. More riddles. Another thing I really needed right now. I returned my attention to Hunter's deathlike stare. How did your friend die? He was restrained, then drained. Drained? As in, a vampire-style, all-the-blood-from-the-body draining, or something else? She hesitated, and just for a second I saw something close to grief in her eyes. Whoever her friend was, they'd been a lot closer than mere lovers. Have you ever seen the husk of a fly after a spider has finished with it? she said. That's what he looked like. There was nothing left but the dried remains of outer skin. Everything else had been sucked away. I

stared at her for a moment, wondering whether I'd heard her right, then swallowed heavily and said, Everything? As in, blood, bone. Blood, bone, muscle, intestines, brain. Everything. Her voice was suddenly fierce. As I said, all that remained was the shell of hardened outer skin. A shudder ran through me. I did not want to meet, let alone chase, something that could do that to a body. How can human skin be hardened into a shell? Or the entire innards of a body be sucked away? It had to be one hell of a wound. On the contrary, the wound was quite small two slashes on either side of his abdomen. She hesitated. He did not appear to die in agony. Quite the opposite, in fact. I guess that's some comfort. He's dead, she cut in harshly. How is that ever going to be a comfort? I should have known I'd get my head bitten off if I tried sympathy on the bitch. Where

is his body? And is the Directorate being called in on this? If they were, it could get tricky. Uncle Rhoan worked for them he was, in fact, second in charge of the guardian division these days but he had no idea I was working for Hunter and the council. And I wanted to keep it that way, because the shit would really hit the fan if he and Aunt Riley ever found out. They'd always considered me one of their pack, but that

protectiveness had increased when Mom had died. They'd kill me if they knew I'd agreed to work with Hunter although I now suspected I couldn't have actually refused to work with her and once they'd dealt with me, they'd track her down and confront her. And that was a situation that could never end nicely. I'd already endangered the lives of too many people I cared about by dragging them into this mad quest for the keys. I didn't want to make the situation worse in any way. Yes, they are, she said, But Jack has been made aware of my wishes in this and will ensure you get first bite at the crime scene. Amusement briefly ran through me, although I doubted her pun had been intentional. That really doesn't help with the problem. Rhoan Jenson will not get in the way of this. You are a consultant, nothing more, as far as he is concerned. I snorted. A consultant you're using to hunt and kill. Yes. And you would do well to remember that you remain alive only as long as the council and I agree on your usefulness. And, Azriel said, suddenly standing behind me. His

closeness had desire stirring, even though I had little enough energy to spare. You would do well to remember that any attempt to harm her would be met with even more deadly force. Hunter smiled, but there was nothing pleasant about it. We both know you cannot take a life without just cause, reaper, so do not make your meaningless threats to me. What I have done once, I can do again, he said, his voice stony. And in this case, as in the last, I would revel in a death taken before its time. Azriel, stop poking the bear. I've already antagonized her enough. That is a somewhat absurd statement, given she is clearly vampire not bear. Amusement slithered through me again, as he'd no doubt intended. He'd grown something of a sense of humor of late which was, according to him, a consequence of spending far too much time in flesh form. Whether that was true or not, I had no idea, but I certainly preferred this more human version to the remote starchiness that had been present when he'd first appeared. You know what I mean. Surprisingly, I do. He touched my shoulder, the contact light but somehow possessive. But her threats grow tedious. She must be made aware it gains her nothing. Hunter laughed. The sound was harsh, cold, and sent another round of chills down my spine. Reaper, you amuse me. One of these days, when I'm tired of this life, I might just be tempted to take you on. And she was crazy enough to do it, too. However, she continued, that time is not now. I will send you my friend's address, Risa. The Directorate will arrive at his home at four. Please be finished with your initial investigation before then, and report your impressions immediately. I glanced at my watch. He'd given me a whole hour. Whoop-de-do. Where does he live, and what sort of security system has he got in place? I've just sent you all his details. My cell phone beeped almost immediately. I picked it up and glanced at the message. Hunter's friend who went by the very German-sounding name of Wolfgang Schmidt lived in Brighton, a very upmarket suburb near the beach. No surprise there, I guess. I certainly couldn't imagine her slumming it with the regular folk in places like Broadmeadows or Dandenong. I read the rest of the text, then looked up at the main phone screen again. Is the security system just key coded? Yes. Wolfgang is a very old-fashioned vampire. He saw no need for anything more than a basic system. And maybe, just maybe, that had gotten him killed. While there was no electronic security system on earth that would actually stop a demon, it wasn't beyond the realms of possibility that something other than a demon had killed her vampire friend. I mean, no one could ever be one hundred percent right all the time. Not even Hunter although I'm sure he'd claim otherwise. And really, what sane person would argue the point with her when she wasn't? Certainly not me. And yet you do, Azriel commented, a trace of amusement in his mental tone. I think we've already established I'm not always sane. To Hunter, I added, You're not going to be there? No. I frowned. Why not? Because I have she hesitated, and an almost predatory gleam touched her gaze a meeting that needs to be attended. If that gleam was any indication, the so-called meeting involved bloodshed of some kind. After all, the council and Hunter considered it perfectly acceptable to punish those who broke the rules by allowing them to be ripped to shreds by younger vampires. Still, it seemed odd that she wasn't hanging around to garner my impressions, especially if she cared for the dead man as much as I suspected. Like many who have lived for centuries, she has strayed from the path of humanity, Azriel commented. For her, emotions are fleeting, tenuous things. But not all those who live so long find that fate. Uncle Quinn's not far off Hunter in age, and he's as emotional as anyone. Although he could also be as stoic and cold as any of them when the urge took him. He is one of the few exceptions. It is very rare to live so long and hang on to humanity. I glanced at him. Does that apply to reapers as well? Reapers are not human, so we can hardly hang on to what we do not have. But you are capable of emotions. Again a smile touched his thoughts, and it shimmered through me like a warm summer breeze. Yes, we are, especially if we are foolish enough to remain in flesh too long. In other words, I wasn't to read too much into what he said or did while he wore flesh, because when all this was over, we'd both go our separate ways and life would return to normal. I wanted that. I really did. But at the same time, it was becoming harder and harder to imagine life without Azriel in it. He made no comment on that particular thought, and I returned my attention to Hunter. Once I've checked out the crime scene, what then? Are you going to tell me more about him, or am I expected to work on this case completely blind? Impressions first, she said, and hung up. Fuck you and the broom you rode in on, I muttered, then leaned back in my chair. Well, this totally sucks. An unfortunate consequence of agreeing to work with someone like Hunter is being at her beck and call. He spun my chair around, then squatted in front of me and took my hands in his. His fingers were warm against mine, his touch comforting. But there is little we can do until your mother's killer is caught. I snorted softly. Even if we do find her killer, do you really think she's going to let me go? We both know the answer to that. But once the killer is caught, we will be in a better position to deny her. Maybe. And maybe not. After all, Hunter wouldn't have any qualms about threatening the lives of my friends if it meant securing long-term obedience. It does not pay to

worry about things that may never happen. No. I leaned forward and rested my forehead against his as I closed my eyes. I guess we'd better get moving. I want to be out of that house before the Directorate gets there. Do you wish me to transport us there? His breath washed across my lips and left them tingling. Half of me wanted to kiss him, and the other half just wanted him to wrap his arms around me and hold me like he never intended to let go. Unfortunately, neither was particularly practical right now. And it was a sad statement about my life when desire gave way to practicality. It'll be faster if you do. While I could shift into my Aedh form and travel there under my own steam, my energy levels were still low and I really didn't want to push it. Not yet, not for something like this. He rose, dragging me up with him, then wrapped his arms around me. Wait. I broke from his grasp and moved around the desk, striding out of my office and down to the storeroom at the other end of the hall. We kept all of RYT's which was the name of the café I owned with two of my best friends, Ilianna and Taonon-perishable items up here, which meant not only things like spare plates, cutlery, and serviettes, but also serving gloves. It was the latter I needed, simply because the last thing I wanted was to be leaving fingerprints around Wolfgang's house for the Directorate and Uncle Rhoads to find. I tore open a box, shoved a couple of the clear latex gloves into the pocket of my jeans, then headed back into the office. I grabbed my cell phone from the desk and let myself be wrapped in the warmth of Azriel's arms again. Okay, go for it. The words had barely left my mouth when his power surged through me, running along every muscle, every fiber, until my whole body sang to its tune. Until it felt like there was no me and no him, just the sum of us energy beings with no flesh to hold us in place. All too quickly, my office was replaced by the gray fields. Once upon a time the fields had been little more than thick veils and shadows—a zone where things not sighted on the living plane gained substance. But the more time I spent in Azriel's company, the more real the fields became. This time, the ethereal, beautiful structures that filled this place somehow seemed more solid, and instead of the reapers being little more than wispy, luminous shapes, I could now pick out faces. They glowed with life and energy, reminding me of the drawings of angels so often seen in scriptures—beautiful and yet somehow alien. Then the fields were gone, and we regained substance. And though it involved no effort on my part, it still left my head spinning. You, he said, expression concerned, are not recovering as quickly as you should. It's been a hard few weeks. I stepped back to study the building in front of us, even though all I really wanted to do was remain in his arms. That, however, was not an option. Not now and certainly not in the future. Not on any long-term, forever-type basis, anyway. Which, if I was being at all honest with myself, totally sucked. But then, I had a very long history of falling for inappropriate men. Take my former Aedh lover, Lucian, for instance. Let's not, Azriel said, voice grim as he touched my back and then lightly waved me forward. Amusement teased my lips. He's out of my life, Azriel, and no longer a threat to whatever plans you have. It is not the threat to me I worry about, he cut in, voice irritated. I raised my eyebrows. Well, he can hardly threaten me, given he and everyone else wants the damn keys. His need for the keys did not stop his attempt to strangle you. Well, no, it hadn't. But I suspected Lucian's actions had been little more than a momentary lapse of control—one he would have snapped out of before he'd actually killed me. Although, to be honest, I hadn't actually been so certain of that when his hands had been around my neck. I opened the ornate metal gate and walked up the brick pathway toward the front door. Wolfgang's house was one of the increasingly rare redbrick Edwardian houses that used to take pride of place in the leafy bayside suburb. The front garden was small but meticulously tended, as was the house itself. I pulled out the gloves as I walked up the brick pathway toward the ornate front door, then said, Lucian is no longer our problem. If you think that, you are a fool. And I wasn't a fool. Not really. I just kept hoping that if I believed something hard enough, it might actually come true. I slipped on the gloves and switched the discussion back to my health. It was far safer ground. You can't expect me to recover instantly, Azriel. In flesh and blood, not you are half Aedh, he cut in again. His voice was still testy. But then, he always did sound that way after a discussion about Lucian, whom he hated with a surprising amount of passion for someone who claimed it was only his flesh form that gave him emotions. More so, given what Malin did to you. Malin was the woman in charge of the Raziq, my father's former lover, and a woman scorned. My father had not only betrayed her trust by stealing the keys from under her nose, but he had also refused to give her the child she'd wanted. Instead, for reasons known only to himself, he'd gone to my mother and produced me. Meaning what? My voice was perhaps sharper than it should have been. You never actually explained what she did. And I certainly couldn't remember she'd made sure of that. He hesitated, his expression giving little away. No. And I have already said more than I should. Because of my father. Because whatever Malin did had somehow altered me and not just by altering the device the Raziq had previously woven into the fabric of my heart, which had been designed to notify them when I was in my father's

presence. My sigh was one of frustration, but I knew better than to argue with Azriel at least when he had that face on. It doesn't alter the fact that a body—even one that is half energy—can run on empty for only so long. A fact he knew well enough: his own lack of energy was the reason he'd been unable to heal me lately. Of course, reapers didn't recharge by eating or sleeping or any of the other things humanity did, but rather by mingling energies—which was the reaper version of sex—with those who possessed a harmonious frequency. Unfortunately for them, such compatibility wasn't widespread, and Azriel's recharge companion had been killed long ago while escorting a soul through the dark portals. The good news was that he could apparently recharge through me, though why he could do this when I wasn't a full-energy being, but rather half werewolf, he refused to say. Just as he'd so far refused to recharge. Up until very recently, he'd been more worried about the threat of assimilation—which was when a reaper became so tuned to a human, their life forces merged and they became as one than the lowering of his ability to heal me. All that had changed when I'd almost died after a fight on the astral plane. Because, as I'd already noted, without me, no one could find the keys. My father's blood had been used in the creation of the keys, and only someone of his blood could find them. Of course, making the decision to recharge and actually doing it were two entirely different things. Especially when I barely had enough energy to function, let alone have sex. Which was another sad statement about the state of my life. I punched the security code into the discreet system sitting to the left of the door frame. The device beeped, and the light flicked from red to green. I opened the door but didn't immediately enter, instead letting the scents within the house flow over me. The most obvious was the smell of death, although it wasn't particularly strong and it certainly didn't hold the decayed-meat aroma that sometimes accompanied the dead. Underneath that rode less-definable scents. The strongest of these was almost musky but had an edge that somehow seemed . . . alien? It was certainly no smell that I'd ever encountered before, although musk was a common enough scent among shifters. Was that what we were dealing with, rather than a demon? I had to hope so, if only because I then had more of a chance of diverting the search to the Directorate. The hallway that stretched before us was surprisingly bright and airy and ran the entire length of the house. Several doorways led off it from either side and, down at the very end, double glass sliding doors led out into a rear yard that contained a pool. Like the front yard, both the hallway and the rear yard were meticulously there didn't appear to be a leaf out of place, and there certainly wasn't even the slightest hint of dust on the richly colored floorboards. Whoever looked after this place be it Wolfgang or hired help was one hell of a housekeeper. I took a cautious step inside, then stopped again, flaring my nostrils to define where the death scent was strongest. The body lies in the living area down at the far end of this hall, Azriel said. He was standing so close that his breath tickled the hairs at the nape of my neck. I eyed the far end of the hall warily. Why, I had no idea. It wasn't like Wolfgang's husked remains would provide any threat. It was just that smell—the oddness of it. Does his soul remain? No. The death was an ordained one. This meant that a reaper had been here to escort him to whichever gate he'd been destined for. It probably would have been comforting news to anyone but Hunter. Does that also mean whatever did this isn't a demon? If this death was meant to be, then surely it can't be an escapee from hell? He touched my back and gently propelled me forward. My footsteps echoed on the polished boards, the sound like gunshots in the silence. Azriel was ghostlike. Whether this death was the result of an attack from a demon has no bearing on it being ordained or not. If death is meant to find you, there is no avoiding it. Which doesn't actually answer the question of whether or not a demon did this. It could be either a malevolent spirit or some kind of demon, thanks to the first portal being open. And it was only open thanks to me. That thanks belongs to us all, he corrected softly. It is a blame that lies with everyone who was involved in that first quest. But in particular, with one. He might not have said the words, but they hung in the air regardless. And while it was now very obvious that Lucian had an agenda all his own when it came to the keys, I didn't think he was responsible for snatching the first one. He'd been as furious as we'd been over its loss. Of course, I'd also been sure that he'd never harm me, and his strangulation attempt had certainly proven that wrong. Yet I still believed he didn't want me dead. Not until the keys were found, anyway. I frowned. I thought you said malevolent spirits were of this world rather than from hell? They are. Then why would the opening of the first gate affect them in any way? Because the dark path is a place filled with dark emotions and, with the first gate open, these emotions have begun to filter into this reality. Meaning what? I slowed as I neared the living area and trepidation flared, though I still had no idea what I feared. Maybe it was simply death itself. Or maybe it was just a hangover from the hell of the last few weeks. Between escapee demons, malevolent spirits, and psycho astral travelers, I'd certainly been kept on my toes. Or flat on my back, bleeding all over the pavement, as was generally the case. Meaning, Azriel said softly, that it feeds the darker souls, be they human or spirit. So, basically, it's the

beginning of hell on earth? Two steps and I'd be in the living room. My stomach began twisting into knots. I flexed my fingers and forced reluctant feet forward. Basically, yes. Great. As if the weight on my shoulders wasn't already enough, I now had the sanity of the masses to worry about. I entered the living room and saw the body. Or rather, the body-shaped parcel. Because Hunter had left out one very important fact when she'd described Wolfgang's death. Not only had he been sucked as dry as a fly caught by a spider, but he'd been entangled in the biggest damn spiderweb I'd ever seen.

Revue de presse Praise for Keri Arthur's novels Keri Arthur's imagination and energy infuse everything she writes with zest. Charlaine Harris Keri Arthur has blown me away again. Her worlds are so complex and real. Risa makes readers fall in love with her. I highly recommend Arthur's books. USA Today Fans of Anita Blake and Charlaine Harris's Sookie Stackhouse vampire series will be rewarded. Publishers Weekly Arthur is positively one of the best urban fantasy authors in print today. Darque s