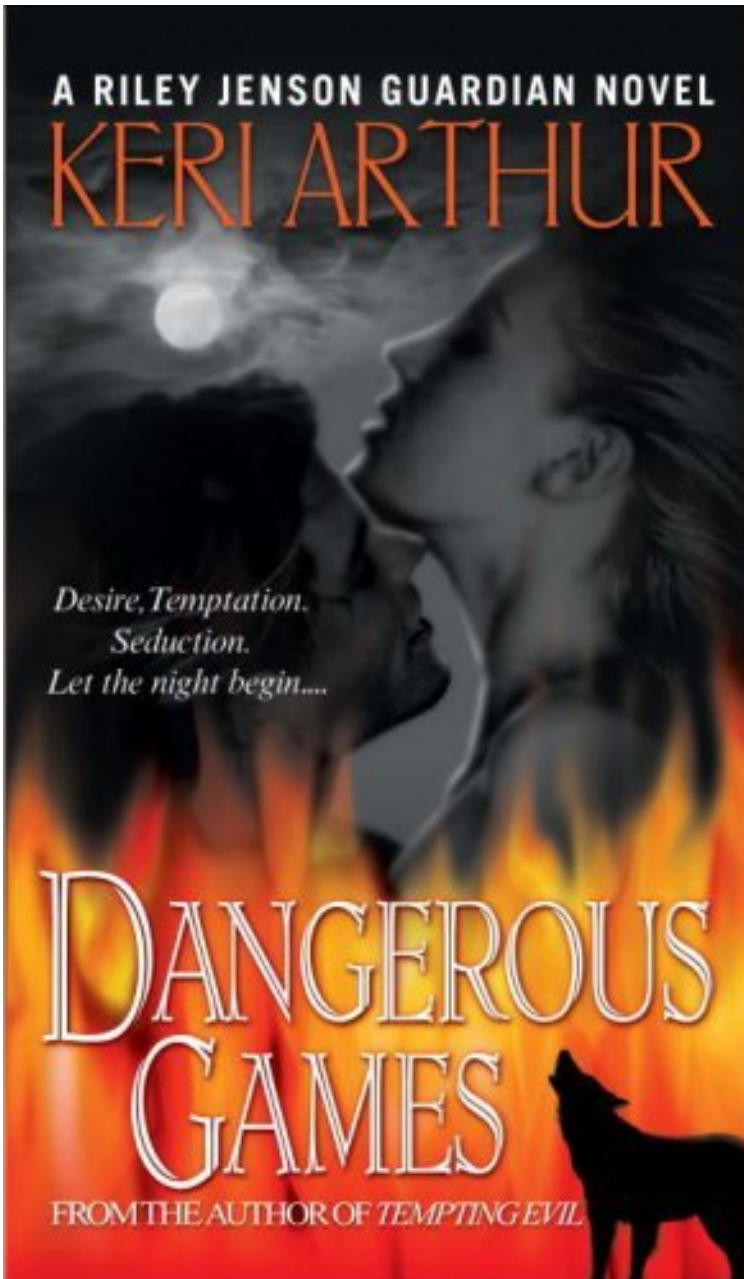


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Dangerous Games (Riley Jensen, Guardian, Book 4)



Par Keri Arthur

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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurIn Melbournes urban underworld, theres a nightclub for every fantasy and desire. But for Riley Jensen, one such club has become an obsession. Riley, a rare hybrid of vampire and werewolf, hasnt come in pursuit of pleasure but of an unknown killer whos been using the steamy nightspot as his

hunting grounds. Leave it to Riley to find the only ticket into the heavily guarded club: Jin, a deliciously hot-bodied bartender who might just provide the key to unmasking a killer unlike any other in the Directorate's experience. Taunted by a former colleague turned rogue, distracted by an ex-lover's attentions, Riley follows Jin into a realm of pleasure she could never have imagined. And as danger and passion ignite, a shocking mystery begins to unravel one where Riley herself becomes the ultimate object of desire....

From the Paperback edition. Excerpt Chapter 1 I stood in the shadows and watched the dead man. The night was bitterly cold, and rain fell in a heavy, constant stream. Water sluiced down the vampire's long nose, leaping to the square thrust of his jaw before joining the mad rush down the front of his yellow raincoat. The puddle around his bare feet had reached his ankles and was slowly beginning to creep up his hairy legs. Like most of the newly risen, he was little more than flesh stretched tautly over bone. But his skin possessed a rosy glow that suggested he'd eaten well and often. Even if his pale eyes were sunken. Haunted. Which in itself wasn't really surprising. Thanks to the willingness of both Hollywood and literature to romanticize vampirism, far too many humans seemed to think that by becoming a vampire they'd instantly gain all the power, sex, and wealth they could ever want. It wasn't until after the change that they began to realize that being undead wasn't the fun time often depicted. That wealth, sex, and popularity might come, but only if they survived the horrendous first few years when a vampire was all instinct and blood need. And of course, if they did survive, they then learned that endless loneliness—never feeling the full warmth of the sun again, never being able to savor the taste of food, and being feared or ostracized by a good percentage of the population—was also part of the equation. Yeah, there were laws in place to stop discrimination against vampires and other nonhumans, but the laws were only a recent development. And while there might now be vampire groupies, they were also a recent phenomenon and only a small portion of the population. Hatred and fear of vamps had been around for centuries, and I had no doubt it would take centuries for it to abate. If it ever did. And the bloody rampages of vamps like the one ahead weren't helping any. A total of twelve people had disappeared over the last month, and we were pretty sure this vamp was responsible for nine of them. But there were enough differences in method of killing between this vamp's nine and the remaining three to suggest we had a second psycho on the loose. For a start, nine had met their death as a result of a vamp feeding frenzy. The other three had been meticulously sliced open neck to knee with a knife and their innards carefully removed—something the newly turned were generally capable of. When presented with the opportunity for a feed, they fed. There was nothing neat or meticulous about it. Then there were the multiple, barely healed scars marring the backs of the three anomalous women, the missing pinky on their left hands, and the odd, almost satisfied smiles that seemed frozen on their dead lips. Women who were the victims of a vamp's frenzy didn't die with that sort of smile, as the souls of the dead nine could probably attest if they were still hanging about. And I seriously hoped that they weren't. I'd seen more than enough souls rising in recent times—I certainly didn't want to make a habit of it. But dealing with two psychos on top of coping with the usual guardian patrols had the Directorate stretched to the limit, and that meant everyone had been pulling extra shifts. Which explained why Rhoads and I were out hunting rogue suckers on this bitch of a night after working all day trying to find some leads on what Jack's boss, and the vamp who ran the whole guardian division at the Directorate of Other Races—charmingly called The Cleaver. I yawned and leaned a shoulder against the concrete wall lining one side of the small alleyway I was hiding in. The wall, which was part of the massive factory complex that dominated a good part of the old West Footscray area, protected me from the worst of the wind, but it didn't do a whole lot against the goddamn rain. If the vamp felt any discomfort about standing in a pothole in the middle of a storm-drenched night, he certainly wasn't showing it. But then, the dead rarely cared about such things. I might have vampire blood running through my veins, but I wasn't dead and I hated it. Winter in Melbourne was never a joy, but this year we'd had so much rain I was beginning to forget what sunshine looked like. Most wolves were immune to the cold, but I was a half-breed and obviously lacked that particular gene. My feet were icy and I was beginning to lose feeling in several toes. And this despite the fact I was wearing two pairs of thick woolen socks underneath my rubber-heeled shoes. Which were not waterproof, no matter what the makers claimed. I should have worn stilettos. My feet would have been no worse off, and I would have felt more at home. And hey, if he happened to spot me, I could have pretended to be nothing more than a bedraggled, desperate hooker. But Jack kept insisting that high heels and my job just didn't go together. Personally, I think he was a little afraid of my shoes. Not so much because of the color—which, admittedly, was often outrageous—but because of the nifty wooden heels. Wood and vamps were never an easy mix. I flicked up the collar of my leather jacket and tried to ignore the fat drops of water dribbling down my spine. What I really needed more than decent-

looking shoes was a hot bath, a seriously large cup of coffee, and a thick steak sandwich. Preferably with onions and ketchup. God, my mouth was salivating just thinking about it. Of course, given we were in the middle of this ghost town of factories, none of those things were likely to appear in my immediate future. I thrust wet hair out of my eyes, and wished, for the umpteenth time, that he would just get on with it. Whatever it was. Following him might be part of my job as a guardian, but that didn't mean I had to be happy about it. I'd never had much choice about joining the guardian ranks, thanks to the experimental drugs several lunatics had forced into my system, and the psychic talents that were developing as a result. It was either stay with the Directorate as a guardian, so my growing abilities could be monitored and harnessed, or be shipped off to the military with the other unfortunates who had received similar doses of ARC1-23. I might not have wanted to be a guardian, but I sure as hell didn't want to be sent to the military. Give me the devil I know any day. I shifted weight from one foot to the other again. What was this piece of dead meat waiting for? He couldn't have sensed me I was far enough away that he wouldn't hear the beat of my heart or the rush of blood through my veins. He hadn't looked over his shoulder, so he couldn't have spotted me with the infrared of his vampire vision, and bloodsuckers generally didn't have a very keen olfactory sense. So why stand in a puddle in the middle of this abandoned factory complex looking like a little lost soul? Part of me itched to shoot the bastard and just get the whole ordeal over with. But we needed to follow this baby vamp home to discover if he had any nasty surprises hidden in his nest. Like other victims, or perhaps even his maker. Because it was unusual for one of the newly turned to survive nine rogue kills without getting himself caught or killed. Not without help, anyway. The vampire suddenly stepped out of the puddle and began walking down the slight incline, his bare feet slapping noisily against the broken road. The shadows and the night hovered all around him, but he didn't bother cloaking his form. Given the whiteness of his hairy legs and the brightness of his yellow raincoat, that was strange. Though we were in the middle of nowhere. Maybe he figured he was safe. I stepped out of the alleyway. The wind hit full force, pushing me sideways for several steps before I regained my balance. I padded across the road and stopped in the shadows again. The rain beat a tattoo against my back and the water seeping through my coat became a river, making me feel colder than I'd ever dreamed possible. Forget the coffee and the sandwich. What I wanted more than anything right now was to get warm. I pressed the small com-link button that had been inserted into my earlobe just over four months ago. It doubled as a two-way communicator and a tracker, and Jack had not only insisted that I keep it, but that all guardians were to have them from now on. He wanted to be able to find his people at all times, even when not on duty. Which smacked of "big brother" syndrome to me, even if I could understand his reasoning. Guardians didn't grow on trees. Finding vamps with just the right mix of killing instinct and moral sensibilities was difficult, which was why guardian numbers at the Directorate still hadn't fully recovered from the eleven we'd lost ten months ago. One of those eleven had been a friend of mine, and on my worst nights, I still dreamed of her death even though the only thing I'd ever witnessed was the bloody patch of sand that had contained her DNA. Like most of the other guardians who had gone missing, her remains had never been found. Of course, the tracking measures had not only come too late for those eleven, but for one other: Gautier. Not that he was dead, however much I might wish otherwise. Four months ago he'd been the Directorate's top guardian. Now he was rogue and on top of the Directorate's hit list. So far he'd escaped every search, every trap. Meaning he was still out there, waiting and watching and plotting his revenge. On me. Goose bumps traveled down my spine and, just for a second, I'd swear his dead scent teased my nostrils. Whether it was real or just imagination I couldn't say, because the gusting wind snatched it away. Even if it wasn't real, it was a reminder that I had to be extra careful. Gautier had never really functioned on the same sane field as the rest of us. Worse still, he liked playing with his prey. Liked watching the pain and fear grow before he killed. He might now consider me his mouse but he'd yet to try any of his games on me. But something told me that all that would change tonight. I grimaced and did my best to ignore the insight. Clairvoyance might have been okay if it had come in a truly useable form like clear glimpses of future scenes and happenings but no, that was apparently asking too much of fate. Instead, I just got these weird feelings of upcoming doom that were frustratingly vague on any sort of concrete detail. And training something like that was nigh on impossible not that that stopped Jack from getting his people to at least try. Whether the elusiveness would change as the talent became more settled was anyone's guess. Personally, I just wished it would go back to being latent. I knew Gautier was out there, somewhere. Knew he was coming after me. I didn't need some half-assed talent sending me spooky little half-warnings every other day. Still, even though I knew Gautier probably wasn't out here tonight, I couldn't help looking around and checking all the shadows as I said, "Brother dearest, I hate this fucking

job."Rhoan's soft laughter ran into my ear. Just hearing it made me feel better. Safer. "Nights like this are a bitch, aren't they?" "Understatement of the year." I quickly peeked around the corner and saw the vampire turning left. I padded after him, keeping to the wall and well away from the puddles. Though given the state of my feet, it really wouldn't have mattered. "And I feel obligated to point out that I didn't sign up for night work."Rhoan chuckled softly. "And I feel obliged to point out that you weren't actually signed up, but forcibly drafted. Therefore, you can bitch all you want but it isn't going to make a damned bit of difference." "Wasn't that the truth. "Where are you?" "West side, near the old biscuit factory." "Which was practically opposite my position. Between the two of us, we had him penned. Hopefully that meant we wouldn't lose him. I stopped as I neared the corner and carefully peered around. The wind slapped against my face, and the rain on my skin seemed to turn to ice. The vamp had stopped near the far end of the building and was looking around. I ducked back as he looked my way, barely daring to breathe even though common sense suggested there was no way he could have seen me. Not only did I have vampire genes, but I had many of their skills, as well. Like the ability to cloak under the shadow of night, the infrared vision, and their faster-than-a-blink speed. The creak of a door sounded. I risked another look. A metal door stood ajar and the vamp was nowhere in sight. An invitation or a trap? I didn't know, but I sure as hell wasn't going to take a chance. Not alone, anyway. "Rhoan, he's gone inside building number four. Rear entrance, right-hand side." "Wait for me to get there before you go in." "I'm foolhardy, but I'm not stupid." He chuckled again. I slipped around the corner and crept toward the door. The wind caught the edge of it and flung it back against the brick wall, the crash echoing across the night. It was an oddly lonely sound. I froze and concentrated, using the keenness of my wolf hearing to sort through the noises running with the wind. But the howl of it was just too strong, overriding everything else. Nor could I smell anything more than ice, age, and abandonment. If there were such smells and it wasn't just my overactive imagination. Yet a feeling of wrongness was growing deep inside. I rubbed my leather-covered arms and hoped like hell my brother got here fast. "Okay," Rhoan said eventually, the suddenness of his soft voice running through my ear making me jump. "I'm around at the front. The main door is locked, but there's several broken windows. I'm going in." "Can you smell anyone other than our vampire?" "No." He paused. "Can you?" "No. But there's something or someone else here that feels evil." He didn't question my certainty. Over the years, my instincts for trouble had saved us from as many situations as they had gotten us into. The only difference now was the fact that my developing clairvoyance gave us some warning of the type of trouble we were heading into rather than us discovering it the hard way. Which I guess made it of some use, no matter how frustrating it was otherwise. "Use the laser, then," he said. "Better safe than sorry." I reached into my coat pocket and slipped the weapon into my hand. It was the latest in laser technology a palm-sized weapon that packed enough power to blow the shit out of the thickest brick wall. Needless to say, it had a pretty nasty effect on humans and nonhumans alike. "Jack will have our skins if we laser that vamp before he questions him about his maker." Because the maker had the responsibility of care, and by letting his baby go rogue, he'd basically signed his own death warrant. "I'd rather face his wrath than have a dead sister." I grinned. "You just don't want to face doing the laundry by yourself." Presentation de l'diteur In Melbourne's urban underworld, there's a nightclub for every fantasy and desire. But for Riley Jenson, one such club has become an obsession. Riley, a rare hybrid of vampire and werewolf, hasn't come in pursuit of pleasure but of an unknown killer who's been using the steamy nightspot as his hunting grounds. Leave it to Riley to find the only ticket into the heavily guarded club: Jin, a deliciously hot-bodied bartender who might just provide the key to unmasking a killer unlike any other in the Directorates experience. Taunted by a former colleague turned rogue, distracted by an ex-lover's attentions, Riley follows Jin into a realm of pleasure she could never have imagined. And as danger and passion ignite, a shocking mystery begins to unravel one where Riley herself becomes the ultimate object of desire.... From the Paperback edition.