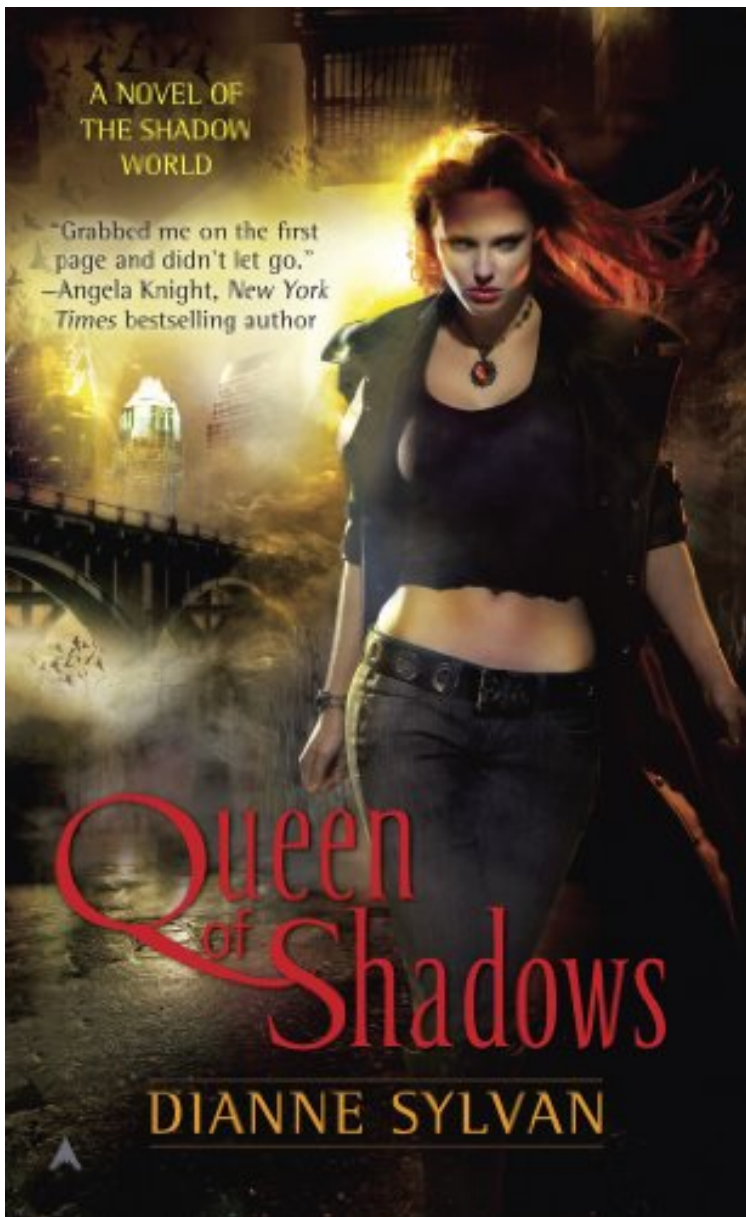


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Queen of Shadows



Par Dianne Sylvan
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurView our feature on Dianne Sylvan's Queen of ShadowsMeet Miranda Greymusic and magic are in her blood. Overwhelmed by her uncanny ability to manipulate people's emotions through her music, Miranda Grey comes to the attention of vampire lord David Solomon. Believing he can help bring her magic under control, David discovers that Miranda's powers may affect the vampire world too...ExtraitChapter OneThe guy next to her in the checkout line looked kind of like a vampire.Miranda didn't look at people. She kept her eyes averted, even while negotiating the chaos of the Austin city streets. She slipped into the empty spaces between bodies and went unnoticed, a messy ponytail bobbing in and out

of focus, a pale heart-shaped face drawn with years of insomnia. If anyone remarked on her presence it was probably to say something about her hair; unconfined her dark red curls spilled haphazardly down over her shoulders, a jeweled tone that caught fire on the rare occasion sunlight touched it. If they thought anything about her at all, it was probably that her hair was fake. They certainly wouldn't remember her eyes, for no one ever saw them. She was very careful about that. A woman walking down Sixth Street carrying a guitar case was hardly news in Austin, which had at some point proclaimed itself the "Live Music Capital of the World." Musicians here were like actors in Los Angeles, plentiful and mostly working in restaurants. A woman standing in line at the mini mart with a guitar case was a little more interesting, mostly because she should have been bumping into people, but Miranda knew every inch of space around her, could feel the individual people on all sides, and she knew not to get too close. Don't look up, don't touch. They'll regret it. You'll regret it. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other, shifting the red plastic basket in her hands, looking down, as always, at her purchases. Allergy medicine, hummus, pita, a small block of Cheddar carefully selected from the pile, oranges, six bottles of Shiner. She could have been anyone in Austin. There were only a handful of people in the store, which was why she was there after midnight. The crowd at the club had been dense and restless from the heat, and she wanted nothing more than to sprint home with her guitar bouncing on her back and gain the safe silence of her tiny apartment off Lamar, scald the night off her body in the shower, wash down a couple of Benadryl with a Shiner, and fall into a short but welcome coma. But her fridge was empty. She had been eating less and less, drinking more and more. Her hands shook with hunger on the neck of her twelve-string and nearly missed every other chord. Not that it mattered. She could bang two sticks together, and still they would come. She twisted one hand free of the basket handles and impatiently shoved a loose curl back behind her ear. She wasn't going to think about that. Not now. If it started, it wouldn't stop, and she'd never make it home. There was only one more person in front of her in line, and then it was two blocks from here to the bus stop, ten minutes to the apartment complex. She could make it. Edging closer to the register, she snatched a pair of Snickers bars from the display and dropped them in the basket. "I prefer Milky Way, myself," came a low voice alarmingly close to her left shoulder. Miranda held back a scream and spun around, for once lifting her head and looking. A young man had somehow come up right behind her and was standing only a couple of feet away, watching her with detached curiosity. He was oddly pale in the bright fluorescent lights and wore a long black coat that covered him from neck to ankles. In Texas, in August. She stared at him, heart pounding in her chest at the shock of being sneaked up on. No one ever came into or out of her presence without her feeling it. She could feel a pigeon blink at fifty paces. She relied on the knowledge even as she hated it. He seemed unaffected by her reaction and simply stood watching her; that was when she realized how insanely blue his eyes were. They were dark, almost the color of blueberries, an impossible shade she'd never seen before. They had to be contacts; nobody had eyes that color. If she hadn't been so rattled she might have smiled to herself; she was thinking the same thing about his eyes most people did about her hair. "Are you all right?" he asked. There was something musical and compelling in his voice, almost soothing, and it contained an apology for frightening her. She wanted to sob, No, I'm pretty fucking far from all right, but all that would come out of her mouth was a strangled half-whimper. She took a step back involuntarily, and the strap of her guitar case started to slide off her shoulder. She groped after it, but it was either grab the instrument or hold the basket; no contest, really. She started to let go of the handles and a pale, long-fingered hand shot out and took the basket from her smoothly, holding it out in front of her at a careful distance while she got herself back together. It was a strong hand, neatly manicured, and she couldn't help but compare it to her own, constantly trembling with nails bitten to the quick. Her right hand had decent nails so she could play, but she'd nibbled off the left for years. Shaking, she took the basket back and mumbled her thanks, returning her eyes to the ground where they belonged. The cashier was giving her a pointed look, and she realized she was next. She stumbled forward and hoisted the basket onto the conveyor belt, turning to slide through the lane without whacking the guitar on the sides, simultaneously digging her wallet out of the blue embroidered purse she'd bought at a street fair back when; back when. This was not how things were supposed to go. No one was supposed to notice her. The bored-looking blonde ringing up her food wouldn't even remember she'd been there. The only people who ever paid any attention to her were the ones who paid the fifteen-dollar cover charge and stood before and below her line of sight every Wednesday and Friday night at Mel's. They saw her, and they listened. Random strangers didn't do that. She glanced back behind her, almost sure he would be gone, but he was still waiting patiently, no longer watching her. She dared take a second to size him up, just in case he came after her on the street. Taller than her, which didn't mean much to a five-four woman.

Slender. Pale. Black hair that was shiny in the lights like a raven's feathers. No visible tattoos or piercings. Coat buttoned all the way up to the neck, almost clerical. She could see black leather boots. He was holding one item: a pint of Ben Jerry's Cherry Garcia. Something about that struck her as exceptionally weird. She handed the cashier her debit card and waited, knowing when to take it back without looking up. Two plastic bags, and she all but bolted from the store. She was sweating bullets as she climbed on the bus, and not from the brief run to catch it before it sped away. Don't freak out, girl. Focus. You're almost home. She brought her mind forcibly back to the present, away from the store, and concentrated. Music. In her head she rehearsed her latest cover song, and her fingers squeezed her thigh lightly, miming the chords. She wasn't satisfied with the bridge. The minor fall, the major lift; the baffled king composing Hallelujah; her own thoughts and Leonard Cohen's blended together as the bus bounced all over the road. Hallelujah; five more minutes; hallelujah; three more blocks; hallelujah; She gathered up her bags and her guitar and disembarked, ignoring honking horns and shouted insults as she ran across the street against the light to her building, keys already in her hand. Home was a first-floor one-bedroom in the corner by the pool. Home was small but comfortable, furnishings pulled together piece by piece in a kinder time, an eclectic sort of mix that went for comfort over unity of style. Home had a fantastic sound system that was worth more than all the furniture combined. Home had no plants or pets, nothing to demand her affection or attention. She let her guitar slide onto the floor, along with her purse, and shoved the grocery bags into the fridge without unpacking them. The only thing she removed was a beer. Miranda flung herself onto the couch, the desire to wash the stale cigarette smell and sweat off her body taking second place to the desire to get wasted as quickly as possible. Her apartment, barricaded and blocked from the world through years of unvoiced prayer and desperation, was the one place she could think in silence, the one place nothing could touch her. For how much longer? Her eyes, so used to sticking to the ground, lifted up the wall, following a crack in the paint that had been here as long as she had. It was comforting, that crack, always there, able to tease her gaze upward, to remind her there was a world above her waist. Not that there was much of one below her waist. Even her once-trusty vibrator, a powerful Hitachi she called Shaky, lay gathering dust beneath the bed, as day by day life contracted and the thought of ever caring about orgasms seemed laughably far away. Cold. She was cold again. She reached sideways for the quilt that was always on the couch and pulled it around her. People who didn't eat got cold. She should eat. Her last boyfriend had been Mike. Five years ago. They'd met at the insurance company where she clerked while she made her halfhearted attempt at college. The university had swallowed her, her freshman class larger than her hometown, and she had gotten lost, foreshadowing perhaps of her life now. Mike had helped her move into this very apartment, and they'd had sex on the living room floor before she bought the couch. Six months later he'd proposed. She'd said no. It wasn't until that moment she realized she didn't love him, and really never had. Boyfriends were like the Freshman Fifteen; you were supposed to obtain them in college. She'd gained the fifteen, too, but those pounds were long gone. She looked a bit gaunt, now, even more so than her mystery guy at the grocery store. She shuddered. Blue eyes and a raven's feathers. He hadn't been gaunt, though. Really quite nicely built, just. She drank the rest of the beer without tasting it and immediately opened another. By the time she fell asleep on the couch, still fully clothed with her shoes on, she'd had four, and her mind was blissfully numb. She was famous, and she was insane. Her voice soared out over the audience, holding them spellbound and enraptured, delivering their hopes and fears tangled in chords and rhythm. They called her an angel, her voice a gift. She was famous, and she was a liar. They had no idea where her talent came from. Critics and journalists and experts of the industry postulated that she'd had a musical family, that she'd started in a gospel choir, that she had taught herself to sing. They were all stupid and blind. Her extraordinary talent, as they called it, depended on them; and it was killing her. Miranda had been playing guitar for only six years, but she had taken to it as if she'd been born with one in her hands, and it came as naturally as breathing. She taught herself out of books and a drive to do something, anything useful with her life. A friend of a friend had been dicked over by his roommates, left holding a three-bedroom apartment and a lease, so he'd sold off all their possessions. She'd bought a pair of speakers, and he'd thrown in the guitar for free just so he didn't have to look at it anymore. In less than a month she hadn't wanted to look at it either. It was a piece of shit suited for a rank amateur. She gave it up on Craigslist and took an entire paycheck down to Strait Music for something real. When she told the salesman how long she'd been playing, he blinked at her as if she were speaking Farsi. She'd picked up a five-thousand-dollar Martin and shown him she was very, very serious. Then, while he was ringing up her (considerably less expensive) purchase, out of curiosity she'd sat down at a piano. "Are you sure you've never played before?" the salesman kept asking. Oh, she hadn't been an instant virtuoso, but she'd made her way

through the sheet music on display slowly, with only a few mistakes. The arcane notations on the page made sense to her in a way nothing else ever had. The second time through she played it perfectly. Now, she had a fairly sophisticated digital keyboard; her apartment was too small for a piano. She sat down one night with YouTube and drank in performance videos, staring at hands on keys, and after that it was easy. All of that might have frightened her, but soon she had far more pressing concerns. One night, back when she was still with Mike and had a social life, she was sitting outside Austin Java practicing playing and singing at the same time. She was sad she spent a lot of time sad, so she couldn't remember now what particular sorrow had haunted her that night and she sang quietly, not wanting to disturb the other patrons. The place was crowded with students poring over their textbooks. At one point she paused and looked up. Every single person there was crying. A little scared but fascinated, she'd repeated the situation on another night, in another place, with a different song, to the same effect. Whatever emotion she wanted to call up, all she had to do was put it in the music, and everyone around her felt it. She could take a happy song and use it to make people weep, or have everyone dancing a jig through the most emo crap she could think of. It didn't take long to figure out there was more to it than that. If she concentrated, stretched out toward the people around her, she could feel hints of what they were feeling. She could take that, and amplify it, or change it. Once she knew what they were feeling, it was a lot easier to influence them. At first it was fantastic. She played on the street for tips, and her cup overflowed with dollar bills. Then a guy who owned a bar downtown, Mel, offered her a paid gig on Wednesdays. The crowds had been minuscule at first, but after everyone walked out high as kites on the happiness she pumped into them, they came back, and they brought friends. Soon she was seeing her name in the Austin Chronicle, and Mel recommended she get an agent. And if she had her doubts, if she wondered how ethical it might be to manipulate people's emotions so willfully with this funny little talent of hers, she quickly forgot those doubts in the glare of the stage lights and the adoration of the crowd. Slowly, as the months went by, she noticed her control was slipping. More and more emotion seemed to flow through her head whether she wanted it to or not. She kept picking up on people's feelings at random, and sometimes they were so horrible it left her weeping in despair, fear, hatred, violence, rage, all tore through her when she least expected them. She started to know things about people she didn't want to know, and she couldn't stop it. It was worst when she looked people in the eye. People held all their secrets in their eyes. They could smile and laugh like they hadn't a care in the world, but one look into their eyes and she knew; she knew. She could feel their guilt, their longing, their losses; emotions were clearer than speech if you knew how to listen. The weight of their heart's memories bore down on her own. She knew the preacher on the corner had fucked his nephew. She knew the homeless man on the bus was a Vietnam vet who'd saved ten men and had his leg blown off for his trouble. She knew the crazy cat lady three doors down still talked to her dead husband's photo as if he were there. She knew the gangbanger passing her on the street had nightmares about his childhood dog. All those secrets were in her head. Emotions, and memories bound up in emotions, filled up all the space inside her. If she touched someone, she learned more than whether they had sweaty palms. She learned of the deepest darkness inside them, and it made her want to scream and hide. The only time she could control it was when she played. Then she could moderate the flow of emotions and work with them. Otherwise it was just her and the creeping madness that was eating her alive. The one perk, she supposed, was that going batshit insane paid well. She had her two nights a week at Mel's, and a Monday night at a local caf, and among them the shows netted her enough to live on, especially since she was hardly eating and had no social life. She'd been able to quit the endless round of clerical jobs filing in windowless rooms no more pantyhose, no more burnt coffee smell and paper cuts. There had been a time when the prospect of leaving the nine-to-five world would have thrilled her. The problem with feeling everyone else's emotions was that there was no longer any room for her own. As the ability had gotten stronger, she had become less and less of a presence in her own mind, unable to separate herself completely from other people without drinking herself unconscious. She felt like a thin candy shell over nothing at all, run through with cracks and ready to splinter at any second. On nights like tonight, when the moon was heavy and full and all of Austin seemed ready to collapse under the weight of the hundred-degree summer air, as she stood in the wings waiting for her cue, she knew that time was coming closer and closer. She folded her arms across her body tightly. Cold. Always cold. Her stage clothes, black and tight and made of shiny patent and Lycra, were starting to feel loose if she didn't start eating she was going to look like a bag of antlers. She had always been proud of her body; she wasn't a supermodel by any means, but had a curvaceous figure that filled out a V-neck perfectly and hips that swung when she walked. Men had never been a problem, back when they mattered. Even when she'd been a little chubby in college she'd been lively and popular, known for her razor

wit and gorgeous breasts. Now she was starting to look like she'd wandered off the set of Schindler's List. Mel introduced her, and though she couldn't see the crowd she could feel them. Packed to capacity, the bar held about eighty people, and that was the biggest crowd she could hold at once. Any more than that and the emotions were simply too much, and she fell screaming to the ground with her fists jammed uselessly in her ears. She was a talented musician but not much of a performer. She didn't banter with the audience, didn't show off or try to look sexy. She didn't really need to. When she walked out on stage people stared at her she could feel their eyes on her skin like a sheen of sweat but as soon as she started the first song, she caught them all, and any doubts they had dissolved into dust motes. She hated how easy it was. She hated that she'd let this happen. She just wanted to go home. But there was nothing else, not anymore. She couldn't go back to a normal job, not like this. There was nowhere she could go if she couldn't pay the rent, except back to her father's house or maybe to her sister's in Dallas, and madness seemed a small price to pay to avoid either of those places. Any hope of a real life with friends and aspirations beyond making it through another gig had long ago faded from her worldview. There was only this crowd, this song, this room full of oppressive heat and oppressive emotions. She had to be careful or she was going to depress the audience so much they wouldn't come back. She deliberately shifted the mood for the next song, picking a cover of an old Sheryl Crow screecher that her voice could smooth out and lift up; soon, the crowd was swaying, and in a moment they'd be dancing, smiling. Happy. It was small comfort to know that for at least this one night their troubles would be forgotten and they'd go home to their families and lives in a great mood, ready to take on the world. She didn't want to hurt anyone. She never had. Hard to concentrate tonight. She kept the tone light and airy, feeding energy into the crowd to stoke it without making it burn too hotly; she'd made that mistake once and the happiness had spilled over into restlessness and then into anger. Bar fights weren't good for business, Mel said with a frown after the police had left. She should remember that. About halfway through the set she managed to get enough control back that she could pick out individual energies in the crowd, and she didn't know whether to be pleased or chagrined she recognized at least one. Fuck, fuck, fuck. Kat was here. Miranda had forgotten all about her. She shifted her focus, pulling back from Kat to avoid tampering with her emotions, and swept it around the room, reading everyone else, getting a bead on how the night was going. So far, so good. They were upbeat because she made them that way; except for one. She tried to hone in on the individual presence, but couldn't; every time she got close it felt like her attention slipped on an icy patch and slid off her onto someone else. Frowning, she kept playing, trying to ignore it, but her mind kept coming back to that spot, a scab she couldn't stop picking. All she could say for sure was that whoever it was, they were; dark. Not depressed, not angry, but dark, with a frightening potential for violence. And whoever they were, they were staring right at her. She didn't look. She was afraid to look. She dragged her attention away and finished the set. By the time she came off the stage to another standing ovation, the presence was gone, and she felt like she could let out a breath she hadn't been holding. She left the stage with her guitar in her hands and clomped down the stairs in her platform boots, headed for the tiny space behind the stage that served as a dressing room. Kat was there, waiting for her. "Hey," she said, smiling. "That was awesome." "Hey." It was an effort to speak, but she did her best. Kat hadn't seen her in weeks and was the closest thing to a friend Miranda still had after gradually cutting herself off from her once-broad social circle. They kept up mostly via e-mail—e-mail was safe. It was a lot harder to feel emotions over e-mail; but not impossible. Kat leaned back casually against the table where Miranda did her makeup, looking every inch the Austinite in her faded jeans, sandals, and Indian print halter top. She fit the image of a musician far better than Miranda herself did; she had tattoos on her arms, a stud in her nose, and purple streaks in her blond dreadlocks. Kat did yoga and ate things like burdock and wheatgrass. She was also one of the most well-adjusted people Miranda had ever met. How they'd stayed friends was a mystery to her. "You look like crap, though," Kat was saying as Miranda laid her guitar in its case and snapped it shut, then turned her attention to her clothes. She yanked the curtain across the "dressing room" entrance and bent to unzip her boots. "Do I?" Miranda asked absently. A rubber band of pressure was starting to squeeze around her head. She'd overdone it tonight. "When was the last time you ate? We should go grab a bite or something. Pancakes?" Miranda's hands trembled. A restaurant full of people; God, there was no way. "I can't," she said. "I have to be somewhere." "Come on, Mira, I haven't seen you in forever. What's going on with you? You never come out anymore, except here. You look like a cancer patient. You're shaky." Kat folded her arms. "Is it drugs?" That was Kat, always to the point. Miranda missed her blunt humor and her sharp eye. Beneath her hippie exterior Kat was tough as nails, spending her days working with kids on the East Side, tutoring and mentoring and trying to keep them out of gangs. "No, Kat, it's not drugs," she replied, peeling the Lycra

off her body and replacing it with jeans. God, if only it were drugs! "I'm fine. Really." "We all miss you, you know." "I know. I miss you too." Miranda clamped down on the tears that threatened at the words. She never let herself think about where else she could be right now, the life she could be having. She was twenty-seven and felt like she was ninety. She should be lining up her career and looking for Mr. Right. Kat was her agethey'd met in a psych class and had everything Miranda wished she could, except for Mr. Right, but only because Kat favored Mr. Right This Minute. For just a second Miranda thought about telling her. Everything. Kat had resources, and she was hard to shock. She might be able to help. "Come on, Mira; talk to me. I can help." Miranda started, shrinking back from her friend's sympathetic hand. Had Kat come up with the thought herself, or had Miranda pushed it into her? The thought of doing to Kat what she did to the audience made her feel sick. She pulled a T-shirt over her head and yanked her hair back into a ponytail. "I'm okay, Kat. I am. I'll e-mail you we'll have lunch next week or something. I just; I have to go now." With that she grabbed her guitar and her bag and all but ran out the back door, not looking at her friend's troubled face but knowing what she was thinking. Kat's desire to help was sincere, above and beyond any musical influence, but what could she really do? Even if Kat believed her, who else would? Who in the world would understand what was happening without thinking she was crazy? You are crazy. They're not wrong. They'd commit her. They'd lock her away just like her mama, and poke and prod her and drug her until she was a drooling mass of atrophied muscle and brain. No. Never. She'd die first. Probably. Kat's concern stayed with her, rubbing around the edges of her mind, as she hurried along the four blocks from the club to the bus stop. It was almost one A.M., and for a Friday night downtown Austin was unusually quiet; she didn't realize why until she heard a crash of thunder that shook her out of herself long enough to look up at the billowing dark clouds that had blotted out the moon. "Fantastic," she muttered, and picked up the pace. Her keys and a few loose coins jingled in her purse and her guitar case bumped her butt as she trotted along the sidewalk. A couple of people moved out of her way, avoiding a collision with the instrument by inches. The first few fat drops of rain left dark circles on the still-hot pavement, and she felt them on her hair. The pressure in the atmosphere echoed the pressure building in her mind. She had to hurry, had to get home before every heart in Austin bled into hers and she got lost in their pain and petty grievances. If only positive emotions were as strong as negative ones. They were, in their way, but they were so quiet that the bad stuff drowned them out. Sometimes she felt love, sometimes she felt joy, but they were quickly bogged down in the surrounding fear and anger of everyone around them. The few scraps of beauty she dug out of the dung heap had once been enough to keep her going the potential in people for good was what she drew out when she played but as time went on those small, sweet voices were lost, and the weeping of the world was all she knew. It was starting. Another day in paradise. Wasn't that a song? She started humming, trying desperately to concentrate on something, anything else: Hallelujah; Leonard Cohen understood her tonight. Her own thoughts had already started to submerge under the emotions of the rest of the city. Someone was beating a child tonight; someone wanted steak for dinner and got meat loaf; someone was faking it; someone had "Angel of the Morning" stuck in his head; someone hated her mother; someone was going to pay; someone liked to be tied up; someone forgot to set the DVR to tape Ghost Whisperer; someone someone was following her. Revue de presse "Queen of Shadows pulled me in... Dianne Sylvan's rich, dark, sexy re-imagined Austin is filled with people I want to visit again and again. Dianne Sylvan's got voice, doesn't miss a beat, and rocks it all the way to the last note. Sit down. Shut up. And enjoy the show. It's intense, dark, sexy, with just the right touch of humor. Looking for a new addiction? Go no further." -Devon Monk, author of Magic on the Storm "Queen of Shadows grabbed me on the first page and didn't let go. Miranda, the heroine, is vulnerable and gutsy, with magical abilities even she doesn't suspect. Vampire David Solomon is as powerful and heroic as he is deliciously seductive. Dianne Sylvan has created an original take on vampires that I thoroughly enjoyed, and I'll be looking for her next book with great anticipation. She's a skilled and talented storyteller who definitely knows how to deliver one hell of a book!" -Angela Knight, New York Times Bestselling author of Master of Fire